



# The Love Dose

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** I'm fifty, broke, and stranded with Dr. Handsome—talk about a love emergency!

Between family drama and my best friend moving away, I need a vacation. Stat. Too bad dream getaways cost money I no longer have.

Enter Calvin, aka Dr. Handsome, and his storybook Vermont home. His prescription for R & R is an offer my bruised heart can't refuse. But when a storm hits, stranding us together, even our chemistry won't melt the blizzard of the century.

Trapped in a romantic New England cottage with a man who wants to be more than friends?

Maybe it's just what the doctor ordered.

**Total Pages (Source):** 79

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

## Chapter One

Caroline

Mrs. Page?”

I blink, snapping out of my daydream. For the past three minutes, I’ve been glued to my phone, drooling over a Maui beach house with ocean views. Maybe if I concentrate hard enough, I’ll magically transport myself there. Anything to escape this conversation.

I glance around the office—shiny wood paneling, leather chairs, oil paintings of people who definitely have hefty trust funds. I feel like I’m trapped in an episode of *Law and Order*. I wonder how many hardened criminals or bitter ex-wives have squirmed in this very seat.

Howard Flannery of Flannery and Baker leans back against his ornate desk—the kind of desk that makes you feel like you should be sipping champagne, holding a tiny dog, and plotting a hostile takeover. He’s the best in the business, which is why I’m paying him more per hour than I spend on shoes. And I spend a lot on shoes.

Howard clears his throat. “Caroline, are you with me?”

I sit up a little straighter, feeling the tiniest hint of embarrassment. I’m supposed to be this polished Upper West Side widow, handling things with grace. Instead, I’m zoning out like a teenager in math class. “Sorry. Got a bit distracted. What were you saying?”

Howard gives me a familiar look. It's the "this woman has too much money and not enough common sense" look. I've seen it a hundred times before.

"They found a doctor to back up their claim that Bernard wasn't of sound mind," Howard says, continuing as if I hadn't mentally checked out.

"It's a lie. They paid the doc off," I say, trying to keep the deep resentment for my step kids out of my tone. By the look of Howard's frown, I'm failing miserably. "Bernard was sharp as a tack until the end."

"Maybe we should go over his last moments again."

I hold up a tired hand. "We've been through this ad nauseam. The story doesn't change." I peer at my attorney. "Because it's true."

He nods, and for some reason, that irks me. Maybe it's because the wheels of justice are turning slower than a geriatric turtle. I'm drained, fed up. It's become a battle of attrition, Bernard's kids wearing me down.

Only now do I notice the poinsettia in the corner of the room. Adorned with a sparkly silver bow, the plant is a perfect specimen of red and green holiday cheer. What a crock. I haven't had time to even think about the holidays. At this point, it's going to be a Christmas miracle if anyone gets more than a text with a snowman emoji.

"Would it help if I got another doctor to attest that Bernard was fine?" I ask, trying to sound calm.

Howard sighs. "We already have both his main physicians ready to testify on our behalf, but as we've discussed, it's not enough. The bigger issue is the speed of your marriage and how short it was."

I bristle. “Oh, right. Because apparently, falling in love quickly is a crime.”

Bernard and I didn’t have an affair, but the rumor mill is working overtime. Sure, we tied the knot faster than you can say, “prenup,” but Bernard explained to me how he’d waited his whole life for true love and had no intention of waiting a minute longer to be with me.

What people find incredible is that he never asked me to sign one at all. The truth is, he didn’t care. He wasn’t some clueless old man. He was sharp, charming, and spontaneous. The kind of man who’d sweep you off your feet . . . and then die in the middle of dancing the Lindy. No, seriously. That happened.

Though Bernard was clear on what he wanted, my dead husband’s kids are sure I married their father for his money then killed him off.

Okay, they aren’t explicitly saying that last part but the implication is there. Bernard and I went dancing, jet-setting, eating our way through New York like we were on some high-stakes food tour. How was I to know he had a history of heart disease?

“It’s not your fault,” Howard says, and I appreciate the attempt at reassurance. We now know Bernard kept his heart condition a secret so he could enjoy the time we had. And I don’t blame him. We had eighteen incredible months together.

Until he keeled over at the Fred Astaire Ballroom. We were a shoo-in for second place at the Gotham Dance-Off.

“So what now?” I ask, bracing for more bad news.

Howard takes a breath. “Bernard’s kids are taking this to court.”

I’ve heard this before several times but they never pulled the trigger. Something feels

different this time. The bile rises in my throat. “Of course they are. Why mourn when you can sue?” I mutter, mostly to myself. It’s like a never-ending game of ‘Let’s Torture Caroline.’ I lost my husband and now I need to prepare for battle. The string of incredibly bad luck continues.

Howard sucks in his lips. There's more. He leans forward, looking serious. “There’s another option. They’re offering you the Manhattan apartment and the Mercedes if you forfeit any further claims to the estate.”

I see a crack in his usual confident demeanor. Alarm bells sound off in my head. He slides a piece of paper across the desk as though it’s a live grenade. I lean forward and glance at it. There’s no money offer at all. “Is this a joke?”

Howard shakes his head. “Hardly.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

“Okay, so let me get this straight. They expect me to live in the Dakota, with its astronomical HOA fees, onnothing? Should I start selling lemonade in Central Park to pay the electric bill?”

Not to mention my life coach, psychotherapist, bimonthly massages, regularly scheduled elective surgery?—

I try hard not to hyperventilate. I feel the weight of Howard’s gaze on me as he awaits a reply. I need to maintain my composure, to compartmentalize. I take a deep breath, look at my watch. I have somewhere to be.

He’s eyeing me with that look you give someone who’s teetering on the edge of a breakdown but hasn’t quite gone off the deep end yet. “You’d still have the apartment and the car.”

“Oh, fantastic. I’ll sit in the Mercedes and pretend I’m not broke.” I stand up, needing to move before I completely lose my cool. “Present a counteroffer,” I say, trying to sound fierce, though I’m mostly just frazzled. “But let them think I’m ready for war.”

Howard clears his throat, looking hesitant. “Caroline, can I give you some advice?”

“That’s what I’m paying you for.”

“Settle. Take the offer.”

I freeze mid-step. “Excuse me?”

“Life is short. As you saw with Bernard.” He lowers his voice and I can't tell if it's an act or genuine. He's that good. “I know he loved you. You know he loved you. You've got nothing to prove. You can avoid going through a long, drawn-out court battle and you'll get the apartment and the car. That's not being disputed. Do you really need more than that?”

I'm not accustomed to my lawyer giving me caring life tips. I keep my face steady. What he doesn't get—what no one seems to get—is how much I wish Bernard was still here.

“I'll think about it,” I say though I have no intention of doing so. Bernard left me half his estate. His very large estate and I'm not walking away just because his kids are throwing a temper tantrum.

“You need to decide by Monday, at the latest,” Howard says. That's in three days!

I have one foot out the door when something occurs to me and I'm suddenly near panic. “What about Paul?”

Howard is beside me, placing a comforting hand on my back as he shakes his head. “They don't want to cover the expense of your chauffeur.”

We both know Paul is far more than my chauffeur. He was Bernard's closest confidant and ally. He has become family to me. The thought of him losing his job and me losing his company and dedication is more than I can bear to think about.

I need to keep my emotions in check. At least until after lunch.

Miraculously, I manage to hold my voice steady. “Like I said, I'll think about it.”

Chapter Two

Caroline

An icy blast hits me in the face as I exit the building's turnstile, freezing the tears to my face like tiny, sad icicles. I don't like crying. In a city like this one, a tearful woman is a weak woman. And I am anything but.

I dab my eyes with the edge of my cashmere scarf, careful not to smudge my makeup.

I pick up my pace to keep up with the flow of pedestrians, allowing the bustling scene of Fifth Avenue to distract me.

New York in December is magical. Horse drawn carriages through snow-laden Central Park, the enticing aroma of roasting chestnuts wafting from corner street carts. For a few weeks each year, it's as if a cozy blanket is dropped on the city.

Holiday shoppers, toting bags from Saks, Bergdorf's and Bloomie's, speed-walk past each other. Another reminder that I've fully neglected my holiday shopping. I've had other things to contend with.

A line is forming outside Saks for the window viewing. It feels like yesterday when Bernard and I checked out the magnificent window displays. Since then, my entire world has turned upside down. I decide to get in line, even if it means I'll be a few minutes late.

Cheerful dolls from around the world, clad in their countries' distinct holiday garb, fill the storefront windows, creating a visual story. Faux snowflakes float down from the painted heavens. Santa on his gift-laden sleigh makes a pass every thirty seconds. It's like looking inside a giant snow globe. The crowd is enthralled, many taking photos as they shuffle from window to window.

I'm at the last window when I catch my reflection and cringe. I see my face beside a



cherub-faced doll, dressed in lederhosen, a candy cane spinning in her robotic arm. I look worse than sad. I look lonely. In a borough of 1.6 million souls, that's quite an achievement.

My breath is frozen as I walk past Rockefeller Center, the skaters gliding along the ice, the massive, jeweled spruce in the background. I read somewhere this year's tree hails from North Carolina.

A real-life Santa lumbers by me, jingling a bell in one hand, toting a donation bucket in the other. I find a ten-dollar bill in my pocket and toss it inside.

## Page 3

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By the time I reach the restaurant, my booted toes are frozen pebbles. I take a deep breath, passing beneath the neon sign. Le Marais.

Roger, the owner, stands in the vestibule, assessing the glass display, showcasing perfect cuts of aged meats. I paint a fake smile on my face.

"Hello, Mrs. Page, the others are already here."

Mrs. Page.

I've told Roger to call me Caroline at least a hundred times. He's within five years of my fifty.

For some reason, he's grinning.

"Allof them?" I ask, hopeful.

Before he can respond, I hurry into the dining room and head for the back.

The ladies are giggling at the round table, our table. I count four women. The club is back together. My faux smile magically morphs into a genuine one.

"Evie! What an incredible surprise!"

I offer Evie a kiss on each cheek, overjoyed to see the huge bauble and wedding ring on her left hand. I wasn't expecting my best friend to be here. She lives much of the time in California with her new, much younger husband.

Evie leans in, whispering. "Thought you'd appreciate if I dropped by."

She's a mind reader. Her presence is almost enough to make me fall apart. But I don't. I won't.

I proceed to hug Barbie, Sam, and with mutual reluctance, Mo.

"Hello, gals," I announce, taking the sole empty chair and wave to the waiter. "Bring on the mojitos!"

"You look ten years younger," I say to my best friend, meaning every word. I know Evie doesn't mess with plastic surgery. When I had my eyes done, I suggested we do it together, a BFF version of Nipped and Tucked. She declined. And still looks amazing. I guess happy works.

"How are the boys?" I ask.

Evie has three now. Her two grown sons and her new husband. Come to think of it, it was right here in this dining room that Adam proposed. It rates as one of the most romantic gestures I've ever witnessed, the kiss rivaling Jack and Rose's at the ship's bow in Titanic. It even sparked my own short-lived fantasies, as if love is contagious. I now chalk them up to a bout of temporary insanity.

Evie beams. "Everyone is great. Jeffrey loves his new job in California. Daniel is still figuring things out but he's considering moving out West as well."

My stomach drops. How much more can I bear to lose? "I guess there will be no reason for you to come back here anymore," I say, aiming for levity. It comes out flat.

Evie's green eyes scrutinize me, her gaze cutting to the group sitting at the table. "I can think of at least four reasons."

She means it. Evie will do all she can to keep coming to New York but how long can she sustain that sort of travel? For now at least, I get to see her when she comes for work. She's in-house counsel for several of her husband's firm's subsidiaries.

As if reading my mind once more, she says, "Daniel isn't moving away anytime soon and remember I'm licensed in New York. I need to come here to practice."

Evie is a lawyer though not the same kind I just met with. She would be livid if she knew I spoke with Howard and didn't tell her.

But I choose not to. She's finally found her joy. I will not dampen it with my riches-to-rags sob story.

Instead, I order another mojito.

### Chapter Three

Caroline

The dining room is slowly clearing out with the end of the lunch rush but the five of us are still tackling our various designer salads. My sous vide tenderloin on baby arugula is a masterpiece.

Waiters in starched uniforms carry trays laden with dirty dishes into the kitchen, the hustle-bustle of setting up for the dinner crowd will soon begin. I'm intimately familiar with the routine at Le Marais. Thanks to the days when Roger was sweet on Evie, we have this table in the corner reserved each month.

## Page 4

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The five of us have been coming here nearly every month for years. It's a Herculean achievement given all our varying and hectic schedules but each one of us prioritizes this girl time and I've never been more appreciative than right now.

The ladies go around the table sharing their updates. Mo is waxing poetic about her next trade show in Paris. She's a leading designer at a world-renowned interior design firm. Mo tends to her appearance with the same meticulous attention she devotes to the homes of her celebrity clients. At the moment, she's donning a cream pantsuit that hugs her figure perfectly, paired with a sleek silk tank top. Her hair is swept up in her signature style. I run my usual check for imperfections in her pristine veneer but sadly, I can't find any.

Mo must sense my scrutiny because she says, "Buy any BMWs or Jaguars this week?"

I hold in my exasperation. It's a running joke about how bad I am with money. I like to shop, so what? As far as the car goes, it only happened once that I bought a luxury car on a whim. And it was an Audi SQ8. If I'm not mistaken, it's parked at the beach house in the Hamptons.

Either way, Mo has made it her business to bring it up nearly every time we congregate. She is mocking me and I'm tired of it. Especially given that I frequently cover lunch, hers included.

I point to her mouth. "Is that a piece of spinach between your teeth?" I say, keeping a perfectly straight face.

She blinks rapidly and covers her mouth, sucking on her front teeth before turning to Barbie, whispering, “Did I get it?”

Barbie nods even though there was nothing there to begin with. I only hope Mo will drop a piece of her beet salad into her cream-suited lap.

When it’s Samantha’s turn, she spends it as always on her kids, two teenagers who are giving her a run for her money. That is, if she had any money.

No update is complete until Sam has uttered her ex-husband’s name. She brushes away her limp bangs, offers a slight smile. The lipstick she was wearing when I joined them has rubbed off, leaving her face devoid of any makeup. I would sooner be caught dead.

“Alan stopped by yesterday to drop off a check, can you believe it?”

The rest of us respond in unison. “No.”

The jerk has missed far more child support payments than he’s made. We’ve told her to report the delinquency and request to have the funds garnished from his salary but she won’t do it.

Things don’t come easily to Sam. I’m sure if her kids weren’t used to their lives in the city, she’d move back to Ohio in a New York minute.

While she fills in the, dare I say, boring details—in fairness, we’ve heard this routine before—we all nod, hoping she’s getting the emotional support she desperately needs.

Barbie lifts her glass. “I’d like to make a toast to us. Fifty is the new thirty.”

Barbie is the great equalizer. Ever the peacemaker, she cannot bear conflict of any sort. She and Sam have that in common. Only Barbie has no confidence issues at all.

Evie says, “You realize if we add our ages together, we have two and a half centuries at this table.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Barbie says, and does.

I ask her, “What’s happening with you?”

Barbie twirls the end of her sleek jet black ponytail. Her skin is flawless. Her Asian features are exotic. She turns heads wherever she goes. She’s also the brainiest one of the bunch. Even smarter than Evie though I’ll never say so.

“I’m opening a new office in Queens,” she says.

We all cheer her on.

A graduate of Stanford’s business school, Barbie is career driven to the max. Several years ago, she began her own home care service. She now has over two hundred employees providing therapy services to children around the city.

“I’m also setting a new annual gross revenue goal.” She tells us a number that is impressive even to my ears.

I listen intently to each woman’s life update, keeping my mine to myself. We’re having a lovely time, chatting, imbibing. No one wants to hear about messy lawsuits.

Evie is next in line.

“I already went. And you were all at my wedding. Never been happier but won’t rub

it in too much.”

We chuckle. If anyone’s earned a happily ever after, it’s Evie.

“Caroline’s turn,” she announces.



## Page 5

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The ladies all focus their attention on me.

When I don't offer up any juicy bits, Sam asks, "Any word from Dr. Handsome?"

No one even bothers using his name anymore. It's actually Dr. Calvin Sinclair, MD. Doctor of Emergency Medicine. The physician who treated me when I broke my leg.

"Nope."

I hide my disappointment by perusing the dessert menu but these women know me too well. I order something gooey from a passing waiter.

"He's not good enough for you," Sam says. The irony isn't lost on me that she is the one to say so.

I have no answer for that. The episode with Calvin was confusing and not worth one more brain cell's worth of attention.

After my accident last October, Calvin was extremely attentive to my needs, even after my discharge. When he'd call, asking to stop by my apartment, it was with questions about my rehab. Once we shared a glass of wine and another time he stayed extra late, claiming he was about to start the late shift. Things were casual and easy but never romantic.

When I flew out for Evie and Adam's wedding, Calvin started texting me jokes and funny memes. When I returned, our time together expanded beyond the walls of my apartment. A film at the Tribeca festival, drinks at the pier, a walk in the park.

Weeks, even months, went by between our get-togethers, timed mostly around his hectic schedule but we stayed in touch by messaging.

For a while, I bought into the club's unanimous opinion that Calvin's house calls were personal rather than professional, that he was looking for an excuse to spend more time with me. Well, that proved wrong.

Seems he just felt sorry for a sad, lonely widow.

And I foolishly became attached.

Dessert arrives—a singular chocolate mousse with five spoons which we all share, each taking a spoonful. Evie leans in asking if I'm okay.

I'm sure she doesn't buy my dispassionate, "Yep."

Exactly ninety minutes after we convened, the bill arrives. Roger knows our deal.

Barbie, Sam and Mo have to get back to work. We all stand, preparing to disperse as we always do into different directions, different lives.

We've talked about switching our club meetings to dinnertime to allow us to linger longer but Sam still has kids at home and she wants to be with them.

Evie's phone buzzes and she smiles at the screen.

"See you next month," she says to all, saving the cheek pecking for me alone.

I want more time with her but I can feel her itching to go.

"Can't wait," I say, meaning it profoundly. "Say hi to Adam."

We exchange kisses once more and I leave the restaurant, stepping back into the frozen tundra, deeply grateful for the amazing friends I have.

I walk to the corner of Forty-sixth and Sixth and lift my gloved hand high, regretting not wearing my fur. It's become increasingly unpopular to walk around town wrapped in beaver but even a PETA activist would be tempted in five below.

I'm not one for Ubering. Actually, I never downloaded the app. I'm also not much of a taxi rider but I can't bring myself to call Paul when he's on borrowed time. Thankfully, it's only a couple of minutes before a yellow cab with its roof light on pulls over. I enter the backseat, trying not to look at the grubby interior.

"The Dakota, please."

Thanks to snarled gridlock, the taxi inches toward my street. Still, it's worth it to have the hot air vent blowing on me. I pay the driver and step out onto the sidewalk, enter the lobby, and wave to Larry, the doorman.

"Good evening, Mrs. Page. How's your day going?"

I don't have it in me to fib.

"Eh," I reply, trying to recall if I have any good red wine left in the apartment. I've been going through it faster these days. Especially since Calvin stopped coming by.

Dr. Handsome, as the Fab Fifty ladies refer to him, hasn't been seen or heard from in a long while. It's called ghosting, apparently. An apropos word for vanishing into thin air.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

It's been nearly three weeks and it still hurts. Serves me right for trusting a doctor. I mean, wasn't it a doctor who attested to Bernard's questionable lucidity?

Larry frowns slightly and nods sagely. "Bernard is very missed, Mrs. Page."

If he wasn't a Manhattan doorman, Larry would be an in-demand therapist. He's better than a hairdresser or bartender when it comes to listening and validating. I make a mental note to call my actual therapist. It occurs to me I have no idea if she accepts insurance. I've always paid her out-of-pocket.

For the past several years, I spent on what I needed and wanted without a second thought. If Bernard's kids get their way, that will change fast.

"Thank you, Larry. Happy holidays," I say, reminding myself to drop off a generous check for him.

I note the elevator is descending. 3 . . . 2 . . . lobby. It dings open and Mrs. Reinhold steps out with her teacup ShihTzu. Today's doggie ribbon is bright pink. How such an adorable being can live with this woman is beyond me.

I hear the crotchety old bag grumble as she walks past Larry. Pretty sure she said, "bah humbug."

Despite living down the hall from me, Witch Reinhold never once responded to my greeting. I've long since stopped trying. I have never seen her smile. Maybe she has no teeth. Or has loose dentures. If Scrooge was an ancient woman in a butt-ugly hand-knit wool hat, it would be Mrs. Reinhold.

I have one boot on the elevator when a thought occurs to me. Why am I in such a rush to go home? There's nothing waiting for me upstairs. Except for maybe another drink.

Which is something I can get elsewhere, with company.

The cute bar around the corner attracts a well-heeled clientele of pleasant alcoholics. Works for me. I'll come back home when I'm tired or tipsy.

I hear quick footsteps behind me.

"Caroline? I'm so glad I caught you." The voice is out of breath but I'd recognize it anywhere.

I turn around.

Standing there, looking like a middle-aged, hippy Adonis, is none other than Dr. Stupid Handsome.

## Chapter Four

Calvin

I can't feel my fingers and I'm fairly certain my nose is falling off. But I forget all that the moment I spot her in the lobby. Caroline is as beautiful as the last time I saw her.

She's always put-together, like she's stepped out of some magazine—every detail in place. Her tailored coats, the perfectly styled blond hair, the way she carries herself with this effortless grace—it's refined, polished, like she's got the whole world handled.

But I know better. I picked up the clues after she was brought into the emergency room last year, after wiping out on an icy sidewalk. I happened to be on call that day.

Luck or fate, I don't know but I'm glad it was my shift.

Our friendship started innocently enough. When I did my rounds, we found ourselves discussing topics far afield of healthcare. When she was discharged, I offered to stop by and check on her progress, something I've never done with any other patient, previously or since.

A job that started out professional soon turned into something else. At first, I thought it was friendship. I knew from her chart that she was widowed and didn't let my mind veer beyond that. Or at least I tried.

But these last few weeks have been wild and yet I still thought of her often. Very often.

Caroline intrigues me.

Beneath all that sophistication, there's something she's hiding. I can see it in the way her smile falters in the quiet moments when she thinks no one's watching. There's a vulnerability there, a loneliness she keeps buried deep under all that independence and self-control. And the crazy part? It only makes me care for her more. Even if I'm still not sure what we are. That's what I'm here to figure out.

The joy of seeing her again after the hiatus is marred only by her demeanor. Stiff posture, tight lips, eyes half their usual size. Uh oh.

Caroline looks me up and down, making me feel a tad self-conscious. "Do I know you?"

Yikes. Worse than I thought.

For a moment I consider that she's serious. After all, my graying, scraggly beard and suntanned face are a far cry from how I looked the last time she saw me.

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“Um, it’s me, Calvin.”

Caroline rolls her eyes and keeping a wide berth, glides past me. “On my way out. Sorry I missed you.”

Confused, I say, “You didn’t miss me. I’m right here.”

She turns, meets my eye. “You need a shave,” she says and walks out into the dark, cold city.

If I’m not mistaken, Caroline Page is fuming mad.

### Chapter Five

Caroline

I’m doing all I can to regain my equilibrium.

Calvin has some nerve showing up on my doorstep. I almost didn’t recognize him. The beard, thick parka, beanie.

He looked like a hobo time traveler from the ‘60s.

But his eyes were the same. Deep, soulful. So is that throaty, calming voice. The voice of a dedicated physician. Or serious player.

I turn the corner, trying for the most direct way to the bar. I honestly don’t see how it



can get any colder. While I was hanging around my building lobby, the world turned darker. Night falls early and quickly in New York in December. I pick up my pace. I'm practically stomping.

Why am I so angry? Calvin owes me nothing. If anything, I owe him, big time.

After I took a serious fall last year, I landed in the hospital, preventing me from joining Evie on her birthday trip to Yosemite. Calvin was the sole silver lining. The on-call ER physician, he was gentle, explaining everything that would happen from the surgery to rehab.

He always seemed to be there. After-hours visits to my hospital room became commonplace. It never felt strange or unprofessional, only fun and distracting from my obvious predicament so I never bothered analyzing why.

Since his going AWOL, I've come to terms with the reality that after reading my chart, Calvin felt sorry for me. Childless widow all alone in the hospital. He was being kind, nothing more.

I finally reach the bar and am quickly enveloped by the warmth of The Time Capsule Tavern. The lighting, soothing décor, soft chatter, sweet smell of whiskey. It's like being transported into an Irish pub on the banks of the River Shannon.

I take a seat at the bar next to a balding middle-aged guy, nursing a glass of clear liquid on the rocks. Makes me think of Billy Joel, my all-time favorite performer.

Makin' love to his tonic and gin

The bartender moseys over. "Hey Caroline, haven't seen you here in ages. Mojito?"

"Let's mix it up. How about your strongest Kentucky bourbon?"

The bartender lifts a brow. “That bad, huh?”

“Make it two.”

I hear the familiar deep voice, low and deliberate. Against my will, my heart lurches.

Of all the gin joints . . .

Images of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman fill my mind. I'm expecting to hear As Time Goes By begin to play on the overhead speakers.

I turn to see Calvin, taking the only open seat. Seems Dr. Handsome can't take a hint. The bald guy seated between us is oblivious to the tension surrounding him. He's too busy muttering something unintelligible into his tumbler.

My drink arrives and I take a long swallow, the liquid burning a trail down my throat as I try to focus on anything but Calvin. Out of the corner of my eye, I see he's taking off his coat and beanie. He's planning to stay a while. Just great.

Something catches my attention and I venture a closer look. Beneath his coat, Calvin is wearing a faded t-shirt and what looks like a necklace made of. . . teeth??

Clearly, I don't know this guy as well as I thought. Clearly, weeks of house calls didn't provide enough data.

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Do cannibals hang out in bars on the Upper West Side?

Seriously though, can't a lady get a drink alone in this town?

As I take another swig from my glass, I consider going elsewhere. But why should I allow some guy to determine my plans?

Before I can say as much, the mutterer between us lets out the belch of all belches. Booming, resonant. Like a monster-sized toad. It's enough to pause conversations at the tables nearby.

I'm fighting to hold in my laughter. I'm doing just fine until I make the mistake of glancing at Calvin.

His face is beet red. The guy between us is too sloshed to notice. The bartender steps closer to me, holding up the bottle of Woodford Reserve. "More burping?" he asks, his cheeks turning crimson with the slip of his tongue. "I mean bourbon!"

I lose it. Laughter explodes from my mouth.

The bald guy looks perplexed, downs the last of his drink, nods perfunctorily and lets another one rip, this one offering a blowback of his stenchy breath.

Groans of disgust emanate from those around us as the guy staggers away.

While I'm a complete goner, Calvin is bowled over on his stool, his head somewhere between his knees and the floor.

I haven't laughed this hard in forever. The release is like a pop-up deluge, washing away the grime.

When the tears finally stop, Calvin sidles closer, taking the burper's vacated seat.

"Want to get out of here?" he asks.

We just got here. "And go where?"

"It's a surprise." Calvin's smile lingers on his lips. His eyes are playful, matching his odd choice of clothing.

I don't know what to make of him, showing up as unexpectedly as he left and now asking me to follow him to some unnamed destination. Also, he's wearing teeth.

But Calvin's looking at me with pleading puppy dog eyes, awaiting my reply. I think of the times he was sitting next to my hospital bed when I woke from a nap, ready with a silly joke or a pumpkin spice latte. I feel my resolve weaken and return his smile with one of my own.

"Sure, why not?"

Maybe there are worse ways to go than being eaten by Dr. Handsome.

Calvin plops a twenty onto the bar and grabs my coat, helping me put it on. The closeness stirs something in me I've been trying for weeks to dispel.

I follow him to the door. What's a little more excitement in my life?

Chapter Six

Caroline

Of all the destinations Calvin could have brought me to, this isn't one I would have guessed. We're on the third floor of the iconic toy store on Fifth Avenue, open late, on holiday hours. The place is crowded, everyone toting bags laden with new purchases. Kids are running all over.

Calvin examines a blue and white stuffed elephant like he's inspecting a precious gem. Maybe he has a friend whose grandkid is having a birthday.

He pays for the toy at the checkout and we find the café on the second floor where we're surrounded by tinsel and faux trees with every imaginable decoration and toy-themed ornament.

We order two cappuccinos and a butter croissant to share. When in the Big Apple, even toy stores offer espresso. Calvin sits across from me.

Only now do I realize his face is tanned. I guess I was too angry—or hurt—to notice before.

I take a casual sip of my coffee. "Were you on vacation?"

"Uh, no. Why do you ask?"

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

Answering a question with a question is never a good sign. “You’re three shades darker than the last time I saw you.”

“Oh.” He cuts a chunk off the croissant and downs it.

I’m not into game playing. I’m the quintessential New Yorker. Tell it to me straight. No time for beating around the bush. But the earlier laughter still rings in my head. Which means I’m more vulnerable than usual. Especially after this morning’s meeting with my attorney.

“One day we’re grabbing pizza in Little Italy, and the next, you’re AWOL.”

Calvin frowns, the soft wrinkles around his eyes deepening. “I just got back. You’re my first stop. Even before the hospital.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about.

He rakes his fingers through his sun-kissed hair. The graying temples I recall are less obvious. I sort of miss them.

“Never got my email, huh?”

Frustration builds up but I hold it in. Does he really expect me to buy a lost email line? “No. I didn’t,” I say, abruptly.

I’m ready to tell him it’s time for me to go home. Better yet, he can drop me back off at The Time Capsule Tavern so I can resume my solitary imbibing. I move to a stand

and grab my coffee. Thank goodness it's in a to-go cup.

Calvin's face turns serious. "Okay, why are you mad at me?"

"Who says I'm mad?"

"Please tell me."

It takes me a couple of seconds. I don't want to come across as vulnerable. I put on my professional face. "It would have been courteous to let me know—as your friend—when you plan to go away for an extended period."

A flash of something I can't read crosses his face.

Nerves fill me. Am I coming off as clingy? Controlling?

Calvin matches my demeanor and nods. "You're right, Caroline. I'm terribly sorry. I should have said something in advance. As your friend."

He offers me the rest of the pastry which I decline and together we walk past a Lego robot that twins Calvin's size.

"I was in the opposite climate," he says, glancing at his watch. "Twenty hours ago. Temps hovering at one hundred. No breeze."

Not what I was expecting to hear. "Where were you?"

"Tanzania . . . Africa."

"What?"

A towheaded boy, shouting “choo-choo!” sprints between us on his way to a holiday-themed train set, puttering on its track.

“It’s one of the few places left on the planet with poor or no internet.”

He must see the confusion on my face, because he adds, “A group of physicians joined a mission to provide medical care to mothers and young children at a local clinic. I was only meant to be there for a week but there were some unexpected matters to tend to.”

“I see.” I definitely do not see.

“The whole thing was a crazy rush. Visas, shots, finding coverage at the hospital.”

Despite my lingering confusion, I can’t think of a better excuse for not hearing from him. Perhaps I should have given him the benefit of the doubt. Calvin is a good man. I knew that but let my insecurities get in the way.

“Can you tell me about the program?” I ask, trying to bring my mindset down from the proverbial ledge.

“You really want to hear it?”



## Page 10

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“Definitely,” I say, as we navigate through a long line waiting for Santa. Calvin has piqued my curiosity. I hope I didn’t come off as a jealous girlfriend. I’m neither jealous nor his girlfriend.

Calvin smiles that killer smile. “Well then, how long have we got?”

### Chapter Seven

Caroline

Calvin rides in the cab with me back to the Dakota. He’s been telling me about his incredible trip. I’m both exhausted and exhilarated. It’s good to be back in Calvin’s company. My earlier angst is gone and without any added alcohol.

We enter the lobby, the warmth a welcome respite. I see Larry, manning his oak console, busy watching the security feed, though I know he’s fully tuned into my presence.

I can’t decide if I should ask Calvin upstairs. We’ve had enough weirdness tonight. I take a seat on one of the velvet sofas. A large electric menorah with two lit bulbs rests on a tinsel table nearby, dwarfed by the enormous Christmas tree.

Calvin sits at the other end of the sofa, seemingly content with chatting where we are.

The curiosity is killing me. “Okay, I need to know. What’s with the teeth necklace?”

He laughs heartily, pulling the strand out from beneath his coat. “Well, the mission

did a stint at an orphanage. The kids were making interesting jewelry for a local sale. And, voila.”

“It's not real, is it?” I ask, carefully reaching for the sharp end of a tooth.

“I sure hope not. Poaching is against the law in most African countries. And probably so is letting kids near lions.”

Right. Stupid question.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’ve been monopolizing the conversation. You never had a chance to tell me what you’ve been up to these last few weeks.”

“Nothing quite as exciting as your trip to Africa. Well, not the same sort of excitement.”

He lifts a curious brow. “I’m intrigued.”

I don’t know what possesses me but I blurt out, “Want to come upstairs?”

So much for avoiding any more weirdness.

Though Calvin has been in my apartment many times, this invitation feels different. My leg is fully healed. Any pretense of a medical check-up won’t fit. Now we’re just friends. I think.

He doesn’t hesitate. “Sure. I could use a strong coffee before heading to the hospital.”

“You’re still going in tonight?”

He nods. “Yep. I’ll grab a cat nap when I can in the doctors’ lounge.”

We head for the elevators, and I nod to Larry. Heaven knows the drama he's witnessed right here in the lavish lobby. I push the up button. When the elevator arrives, I hit my floor and face Calvin. "Bernard's kids are suing me for the inheritance their dad left me. According to my lawyer, I need to make a decision about next steps as soon as possible. I can barely think straight."

The words tumble out of me. Apparently, my filter is completely gone.

Calvin's eyes fill with concern. "I'm so sorry. Sounds like a messy situation."

I unlock my door but don't flick on the lights.

Calvin stays put in the foyer, staring out the curtainless windows. "Wow. This view never gets old."

My apartment faces east, overlooking Central Park, with street lamps glowing and the lights from Fifth Avenue twinkling in the distance. It's stunning.

We walk in the semi-darkness until I reach the kitchen where I turn on the lights, illuminating the fourteen-foot-high ceilings. Shadows angle across the walls. It's not creepy. It's home.

The apartment has six large bedrooms and a butler's pantry. Certainly not the largest in the 140-year-old edifice but its charm and character are undeniable.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

I start up the Lavazza and get the milk from the fridge to froth. I know he takes only one teaspoon of sugar.

“Fire?” Calvin asks.

“Sure.”

Calvin crosses the living room to the hearth, opens the flue and kindles the wood already there. He knows his way around my place.

I walk past the large, framed photo of me and Bernard at our wedding, sitting on the carved mahogany mantel and hand Calvin the mug. “One sugar. Two shots espresso.”

He smiles. “Thanks. Tell me more about this situation. If you want, that is.”

I pour myself a chamomile tea and toss in a slice of lemon. Today wins for most varied beverages. Mojitos, bourbon, cappuccino, and now tea—at this point, I might as well start a support group for indecisive drinkers.

We bring our drinks to the fireside. I yawn loudly, embarrassed. “Sorry. It’s been, for lack of a better term, an excruciating week.”

“Sounds like it. You look almost as tired as I feel.”

“I need a vacation, badly.”

I know I sound entitled. Poor little rich girl. But it’s actually true. I’ve been dealing

with one major hurdle after the next. Now I have to manage the lawsuit and the possibility that I'll soon be facing a drastic change in my financial circumstances. Plus, there's the annual Shining Stars fundraiser that I've neglected. I promised to resume Bernard's signature charitable event after skipping it last year.

"You never did get that time away with your friend in Yosemite," Calvin says.

He's referring to the trip I was meant to take with Evie before I broke my leg. It seems like light years ago.

"That's okay. I met you."

Sheesh. I hope that didn't come off wrong. I don't want to send him mixed signals. For good measure, I add, "My newest friend."

Subtle, right? Because nothing says 'just friends' quite like a clumsy disclaimer.

His face brightens. "I agree." He raises his mug. "Here's to broken bones and enduring friendships."

We clink and drink.

He's sipping from his mug when I see his eyes widen.

"Everything all right?"

"Yep. Had a thought but it probably makes no sense."

"What doesn't?"

"Nothing, all good." He looks at his watch and stands. "Thanks for the coffee. I hope

everything works out for you. Truly.”

I’m not ready for him to leave. But he has an important job.

I stand and escort him to the door, feeling a bit off. I want to ask when I’ll see him again but don’t. It will only send the wrong message.

“Have a good night, Calvin.”

“You too. Thanks for listening.”

“Same.”

He leans in and kisses my cheek. The sensation of his lips brushing my skin sends an unexpected jolt of warmth through me, like a spark igniting a hidden fire. I’m momentarily frozen, caught off guard. I’m fully aware that my calibration is way off. My emotions are all over the place. It’s just a kiss on the cheek and Calvin just happens to be here at a moment of weakness. But tell that to my heart. It’s racing as if he’s just lit a fuse I didn’t even know was there.

As he walks toward the elevator, I keep my voice rock steady. “That’s what friends are for.”

### Chapter Eight

#### Calvin

I'm waiting for the elevator, considering the last few hours with Caroline. The evening turned out to be a fun time. I'm glad to be back in the U.S. even if I haven't actually stepped foot in my apartment yet. After landing, I dropped off my luggage, leaving it with my doorman and stopped by to check on Caroline. I'm exhausted from the long trip but I'm compelled to put in some face time at the hospital.

I can't fully explain why I needed to go see Caroline before doing anything else. I mean, she is my best patient. And by best, I mean favorite. As much as I try to suppress it, I've been attracted to Caroline from day one. But her chart indicated she was widowed so I never let on, never explored those feelings. I'm doing my best to keep things in the friend zone.

Not that she ever expressed an interest in anything more. I mean why would she? She lost her husband and is now facing one challenge after the next. For all I know, she's still grieving. What she needs—what we both need—is a friend.

I take the elevator down, pondering the evening, It started out touch-and-go but once we cleared the air there was not an awkward moment. Unless you count sitting in the lobby before going up to Caroline's apartment. For a few minutes, something felt off. Probably due to the nightmare she's going through being targeted by her step kids. Awful.

Caroline may come across to others as closed off or even aloof but she's actually

quite sensitive. I know because I've seen her when she lets her hair down, laughing at my stupid jokes as a patient in the hospital, or tonight. She's also kind and generous. Like when she covered all the expenses for her friend's birthday trip to Yosemite even when she couldn't go along. Or by keeping tabs on all her friends. Including me.

When I saw her in the lobby after weeks away in Africa, she was a sight for sore eyes even if she was angry with me. If anything, it feels good to have someone care enough to be mad. Years alone makes one appreciate the sentiment.

While I was away, Caroline's face has thinned and she's clearly preoccupied. At least her leg is fully healed, following months of rehab.

After listening to her talk about the lawsuit, I almost made an offer to help. I'm glad I caught myself. She could have taken it the wrong way. I won't risk losing one of my few true friends in this otherwise unfriendly town.

My friendless status is my own doing. I don't have time for socializing. As an emergency room physician, I am on call at all hours. Doesn't make for a robust social life. But Caroline is different. When she gave me the cold shoulder I wasn't simply upset. I was scared.

Occasionally, I play the 'what-if' game, pondering how things would be different if I had decided to move back to Vermont after med school. I would have a good position, less stress, more downtime and likely, many more friends. But I knew I would miss the excitement of a big city ER. It's an adrenaline rush. At least it was during my thirties and forties. These days, pulling all-nighters is like being a zombie with a stethoscope.

The elevator doors open. Heading for the exit, I wave to Larry and nearly run into an older man.



“Excuse me, sir,” I say, trying to get out of his way.

He is stout, gray-haired, sporting a well-fitting dark suit and a wide, crooked nose. Probably was a boxer in his early years.

He’s also not budging. I’m feinting right like I’m Michael Jordan on the court when the man says, “Are you Dr. Calvin Sinclair?”

I take a closer look at the man. Larry is now giving us his full attention.

“That’s right. And you are . . .?”

“I’m Mrs. Page’s chauffeur.”

“Ah, Paul. Nice to meet you. Caroline speaks about you all the time.”

He keeps his face steady but I see a slight glint in his eye. “Why are you here?”

I didn’t realize I needed to explain myself to the help but he is an older gentleman and something tells me he won’t take well to a blow-off.

“I came by to catch up with Caroline.”

He squints at me like I just told a lie and he’s deciding if he should beat the truth out of me. He sucks on his teeth then reaches up as if brushing lint from my coat shoulder. “Don’t mess with her.”

I’m not sure I heard him correctly but he walks past and I make eye contact with Larry who’s looking nervous. I hurry out into the frozen tundra, wondering if I was just threatened by Caroline’s septuagenarian driver.

## Chapter Nine

Caroline

Hi, Paul, is everything all right?" I stand aside, allowing him to walk past me.

Ready to crash, I'm in my nightshirt, my hair wet from the shower. I don't like people seeing me in this condition, even Paul who is as close to family as they come. It's late but I won't leave him out in the hallway, where he may have been waiting for a bit. "I wasn't expecting you."

I don't mention that I've been avoiding him.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

“Just making sure all is well.” Paul walks purposefully into the living room, scanning the place like he’s a guard dog on the prowl.

Paul and my late husband, Bernard, were the closest of friends. They grew up together, served in the army together. They were brothers in arms.

When Bernard collapsed on the dance floor, swing music blaring around us, Paul handled every last detail. When I fell, he drove me to the emergency room, waiting there, hovering nearby. Makes sense he’d be here for this too.

“I guess you heard,” I say, heading to the bar where I pour a finger of Jim Beam, offering it to him.

“Yes. Rachel called me. I’m sorry things are turning ugly.”

Rachel is Bernard’s daughter and one of the plaintiffs against me, along with her brother Josh. “Me too.”

I don’t expect Paul to side with me or get in the middle of this family feud. He’s known Bernard’s kids since they were born.

“They have no right,” he says, downing the drink in one fell swoop.

I’m surprised by the sentiment and plop on the sofa. The first time I met Paul I was flabbergasted. Bernard was so refined while Paul can seem . . . scary. As the story goes, the two met back in grade school in a rough-and-tumble Brooklyn enclave. They remained inseparable even when their lives took them in different directions.

Bernard succeeded in business far beyond anyone's imagination. Long before I came on the scene, Bernard brought Paul on as his driver and quasi bodyguard. But it's far more than that. Paul was Bernard's confidante, the underboss to the don. Figuratively, of course.

I take in a deep breath, readying for what I've been dreading to say. "I may have to let you go."

The words are sour in my mouth.

Paul doesn't react immediately and I wonder if he understands what I'm getting at. Then his gaze breaks from mine and he nods. "I see."

My stomach drops. "It's the last thing I want. But if they get their way, all I'll have left is this apartment and the Mercedes."

His brow lifts. "They want the rest?"

I nod. "Everything."

Paul pauses a beat then says, "I'll be fine. It's probably time I slowed down anyway. I'm no spring chicken."

Paul, always the pragmatist. "I'm sorry," I say and mean it to my core. "Maybe it's best if you take a break from chauffeuring me. I don't know what's coming round the bend but I'll personally see to your severance package."

He sucks in his lips and nods.

"Want some ice cream?" I ask.

I have no clue where the idea came from. It's late and I'm a mile past tired.

Paul gives me a look. "What flavor?"

I scoot over to Paul and put my arms around his thick neck. "I love you, you know that, right?"

"I do."

Paul is not one to emote. We have that in common.

"Come on," I say, standing and taking hold of his hand. "Let's go raid the freezer."

## Chapter Ten

Calvin

I'm standing at the nurse's station, on my third coffee of the night, trying desperately to keep awake as I read my last patient's test results. One of the other ER attending physicians taps me on the shoulder. "You look like you fought a bear and lost."

"Thanks, doc."

My colleague takes the pen light from his lab coat pocket and flashes it in my eyes.

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I shove his hand away. "I'm needed here."

"Not in this condition."

I jog in place, making him chuckle. "I'm fine."

"Listen, I can hold down the fort. Come back after a few hours of shut eye."

I'm about to argue when a loud yawn escapes my mouth.

"Touché," he says.

"Fine," I mumble. "I'll be back in the morning." I glance at the giant clock on the wall. It's already morning.

I grab my coat and he escorts me to the exit. "How was the trip to Tanzania?"

"Incredible."

"Word has it you were very affected by what you saw there."

Hospitals spread information like a virulent virus.

"Yep."

We pause just inside the electric doors.

“When does he arrive?” he asks.

“I’m still working on it.”

“Hope you know what you’re doing, bro,” he says, before offering a fist bump which I return. If I had more time for a social life, he’d be in my friend group. For now there’s only room for one friend. Hopefully, she’s still fast asleep.

I walk outside into the bracing cold and hurry to my car, whispering to myself. “So do I.”

Two miles and thirty minutes later, I park on the street outside my building, my doctor tags displayed on the dash. I drag myself into the lobby, tiptoeing past the dozing doorman. I quietly go to the storage room and grab my suitcase, careful not to wake the man, fully aware anyone could be absconding with my luggage while the man dreamt, peacefully.

Upstairs, I shower, down two ibuprofens, move my guitar off the bed and get under the covers, grabbing my phone. I tap open the photo I adore and enlarge it. A little boy with deep dimples in his ebony cheeks is grinning from ear to ear, a soccer ball on the ground between him and me.

I can hear his giggles all the way across the world. My heart bursts. I simply cannot believe it. If all goes well, before too long, I’m going to be a daddy.

## Chapter Eleven

Caroline

I take the stairs, determined to get my blood flowing and my mindset rebooted. I was hoping to wake up in a better place but no such luck. It’s Saturday at nine-thirty a.m.

and I'm already in a funk.

Samantha is in the lobby chatting with the doorman when I arrive. I only hear a few words and they're in Spanish. They turn to me. Larry nods and Sam comes over. She's back to her frumpy self. No makeup, clothes too big for her frame.

She offers me a tentative look, then stops in her tracks.

"What happened?" she asks.

Whatever she thinks we're going to discuss over brunch is being trumped by whatever she's seeing in my face.

"Nothing." My tone is curt and defensive.

She moves closer, like approaching a wounded tiger. Very carefully. "Then why are your cheeks all red?"

It's a fair question. I'm not sure what came over me but I've been crying on-and-off since I woke up. The reprieve from Calvin's visit was short-lived. Once my solitary early-morning sob fest concluded, I downed a bottle of Evian and applied my makeup as skillfully as I know how. Clearly, I didn't do the best job.



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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

Sam has never seen me cry. My intention is that she never will.

“I’m fine.”

“Okay . . .”

In an attempt to change the subject I say, “Was that Spanish I heard you speaking to Larry?”

She takes the hint and smiles shyly. “I enrolled for free classes at the library. The teacher said it’s best to practice in real life. I gave it a shot.”

I’m strangely proud of her. For a woman with more plates in the air than a professional juggler, she seems to keep taking on more. As they say, when you need a job done, give it to a busy person. Which is what I’m planning to do today.

I’m about to say how impressed I am when Mrs. Reinhold squeezes between me and Sam, her dog taut on the leash, donning a hideous red and green sweater. There is an entire lobby around us and the Witch chooses to interrupt our conversation.

Sam must see the expression on my face and whispers, “Bet she’s lonely.”

“More like starved for attention,” I retort, my tone revealing my strong distaste for the woman. Still, I realize how unkind it sounds.

“Ready?” I ask Sam.

“Yup, let’s go.”

We walkpast the frozen pond in Central Park, me taking a moment to appreciate the sun on my face. It’s the first day this month that I haven’t dreaded being outside. I can’t remember a colder New York December but today is perfect. Chilly but sunny. Kids frolic nearby, their parents seemingly ecstatic to give their pent-up kids a release. Sam and I walk in companionable silence, taking in the joyful vibe.

The Boathouse is buzzing today. Holiday lights and pine garlands lend a festive feel to the elegant dining room. I spot mistletoe, and my mind disturbingly goes straight to Calvin.

After handing over our coats, Sam and I are led to the back next to the window with views of the pond. She glances around with a tight, unsure smile.

It was my idea to come here. Sam needs a bit of pampering. Okay, maybe a lot of pampering. But I need to tread carefully. If she smells a handout she’ll be out the door in a heartbeat. I’ve already planned my reason for footing the bill. “Thanks for meeting me today,” I say.

“Glad it worked out. The kids are with Alan this weekend.”

There it is. Mention of her ex. At least it’s out of the way early. I don’t like waiting for his name to pop up. Next month, I’m going to suggest to the club that we institute a drinking game. Every time Sam mentions the jerk’s name, she’ll need to take a shot. It will either result in stopping the sad habit or earn her the nickname, Slammin’ Sam.

She and I are developing a friendship. While Evie is hands down my bestie, out of the remaining Fab Fifty club, I can see being good friends with Sam. Which is interesting. More than any of the ladies, I have the most in common with Mo. But she grates on my nerves to no end. Not so with Sam. She and I couldn’t be more different

but she's sweet and lovable and I need that around me now more than ever. It's the first time we're meeting alone without any of the other gals.

I catch her eye and she smiles, sheepishly, then removes her hat. I immediately notice her hair. She's sporting an inch of salt and pepper. She pulls out a tube of lipstick, applying it at the table. It's a shade darker than fitting her fair complexion but certainly better than none. Her boho dress, popular in the last decade, hides her figure.

She needs a makeover, stat.

I want desperately to slide her my stylist's card but Evie warned me not to comment on Sam's appearance as she may react poorly, like by bringing any improvements to a screeching halt. Sam is an underratedly complex woman.

"What a gorgeous place," she says.

"It's one of my favorites," I pull a notepad from my D & G purse. "I hope you don't mind but I needed to meet you for a consultation."

"Huh?" she says, barely above a whisper, the lines between her eyes deepening. When I invited her to join me for brunch I omitted that I had an ulterior motive beyond girl time.

A white-gloved waiter comes by, placing menus in our hands, then pulls a piece of parchment from his jacket pocket. "Ladies, our specials for today are gnocchi with candied sweet potatoes and the catch of the day, seared salmon with green bean almonidine."

He speaks like he's reciting the Declaration of Independence. I love it and can tell Sam does, too. After all, she is a tenured professor of English literature. Given her

soft-spoken voice I've wondered more than once how her students stay awake. She would lull me to sleep in seconds.

Sam looks at me and I resist ordering for her. "I'll have the gnocchi," I say.

The waiter turns to Sam who looks flustered. She's staring at the prices.

I speak as casually as I can. "I nearly forgot to tell you. This meeting is covered by the foundation as a tax-deductible expense."

I note the fleeting glint in her eye.

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“Oh. Well, okay, I’ll have a steak, medium rare, a house salad, and glass of cabernet.”

I’m surprised and once again, proud of her. When the waiter leaves, Sam says, “You mentioned the foundation. I assume you’re referring to Bernard’s charitable outfit.”

I nod.

“How can I help you?”

“It’s for The Shining Stars Gala.”

Her face brightens. “I loved that event. It was so elegant.”

Shining Stars was set up years ago with funds designated to help children with special needs. I’m relieved by Sam’s reaction. It makes my imminent pitch easier. “I love it, too,” I say, even as a pit grows in my stomach. Bernard won’t be in attendance, ever again. With everything going down in my life, I allowed the spring event to take the back burner. The gala requires a great deal of planning and I’ve done embarrassingly little.

The wine arrives and I watch with surprise as Sam swirls the fluid in her glass.

“It needs my full attention which I cannot give it.”

“Why not skip it this year? I’m sure people will understand.”

I shake my head. “The schools are counting on us for funding their programs. I can’t

skip it. Besides, it was Bernard's pet project."

This is where Sam comes in. She's the mother of two teenagers, and an outstanding planner and organizer. Just what I need. I tell her so. "I'm going through a challenging time and really need a coordinator."

Sam's lips press together, her telltale sign of discomfort. "I appreciate the vote of confidence, Caroline but I already have a job."

"Don't you get off for winter break?"

She frowns. Maybe I'm pushing too hard. I know she needs the money but she already has a busy life.

"Yes, but I like to spend it with the kids."

I know some things are more important than money. Family, for one. Kids, specifically. I never had children of my own but I've seen the kind of mother Evie is. If Sam is even half as devoted, nothing and no one will take precedence.

But Evie filled me in on the crucial point. I wait.

I see the lightbulb go off and Sam's face falls. She's recalling what Evie already told me. "The kids are going to their dad for two weeks over the holidays. I'm going to miss them terribly."

Evie was the one to suggest I extend the job offer, certain it would be a good distraction for Sam while helping me and the foundation. Win-win.

"Sorry," I say, trying to sound compassionate while wondering why she's not booking a trip to Paris on her own. She'll be a free bird for two weeks. But Sam looks

anything but excited about the prospect. It's hard to relate to the pressures of parenting.

“Maybe the project would keep you occupied. You know, get your mind off things while staying creative. You’ll have a team of volunteers who would follow through on your directions. I can forward you all the material.”

Despite my blatant hardball pitch, I see her doing mental calculations.

“I know this is a lot to ask but the foundation can pay you well.”

I tell her how much and see her brow lift. A pang of guilt hits me. I’m not trying to steamroll her but I know that I am.

I bring it home. “I understand if you can’t take this on. I’ll find someone else.”

“No, I’ll do it.”

I can’t hide my relief. “Really? Thank you!”

“Send me the info and I’ll get on it.”

I’m the one facing a crisis but Sam seems more down in the dumps than I am. When I first met her, she was upbeat and the perpetual optimist. Not anymore. It kills me that one man stole her joy.

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As if reading my mind, she says, “Since the divorce, I don’t know what to do with myself if I’m not in the classroom or with my kids. I’ve completely lost my mojo.”

“Maybe working on a new project will help,” I reiterate.

“Hope so.”

I feel a pull to hug her but don’t. PDAs are not my thing.

The food arrives and we dig in.

Sam takes a slug of her cab. “You said you’re dealing with challenges. What’s going on?”

I don’t want to add to her burden. “It’s a very stressful situation. I’m working on it.”

“I’m a good listener.” She sets down her glass and leans in, a veritable invitation for me to share.

I’m touched.

“I hope you don’t mind my saying so . . .” Sam says, pausing. “You’ve lost quite a bit of weight.”

She’s right. My clothes hang on me. “Not by choice.” I use the opportunity to eat a forkful of my gnocchi. The flavors burst in my mouth but my appetite is poor and I know I won’t finish the delightful dish.



“What’s been happening?” Her face is filled with empathy.

I take a deep breath. “Bernard’s kids are suing for my share of his estate.”

“Oh no.” She reaches for my hand, squeezing it. “As if you haven’t been through enough as it is.”

“We’re the walking wounded, you and I.”

She takes another swallow then grins. It’s the smile of the old Sam. “Maybe we should start a breakaway club.”

I laugh. “Instead of mojitos, our drink of choice will be vodka, straight up.”

“Where do I sign on?”

We let the laughter settle. It feels great. Sam asks a few questions which I answer. Her genuine compassion nearly brings me to tears again. She is a good listener.

“What does this mean for you, practically?”

“Well, first I need to decide if I’ll fight them and take it to court. Then if I lose, I’ll need to look for a job.”

By her slack jaw, the statement is a shocker. Makes sense. For as long as she’s known me I haven’t worked a proper, paying job. Long before Bernard, I dabbled in modeling. It kept me solvent until Bernard came along and the need for gainful employment went out the window.

I say, “The alternative is selling the apartment.”

“Wow. Is that an option?”

“At this point, everything is an option.” I envision my foyer piled to the ceiling with moving boxes, forwarding address unknown. I’m feeling warm. I lift my hand and call over a passing waiter. “Can I have a glass of ice water, please?”

“Of course, madam.”

Will I need to move out of the city? Find new friends? My chest feels tight.

Sam is looking at me with deep concern. “Caroline, are you okay?”

The waiter sets the glass in front of me. For some reason I see two of them. I blink, trying to clear my vision.

I lift the glass to my lips and it slips from my hand, ricocheting off the table. It hits the floor, shattering into a kaleidoscope of sharp shards.

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“Caroline!”

Sam's voice is warbled.

It's the last thing I hear before everything goes dark.

### Chapter Twelve

Caroline

A bright light.

For a split second I wonder if I'm in heaven. At least I hope it's heaven. Not sure I've racked up enough good deeds to warrant it. I squint, looking for Bernard, Mom and Dad. I'm not sad. Actually, it'll be nice to catch up.

A face takes shape.

“Caroline?”

I blink and the light shifts. It's a face I know. Confusion sets in.

“Calvin?” I croak. “What are you doing here?” Maybe we made the celestial voyage together. For some reason I find the notion comforting.

He smiles but it's not his usual smile. “You gave us quite a scare, Mrs. Page.”

With my eyelids at half-mast, I look around at the space. Medical equipment on wheels surrounds me. “Where am I?”

“In the ER. Imagine my surprise when you were brought in.”

“I’m not dead?” I ask, wiggling my toes beneath the flimsy sheet. I’m suddenly freezing and a shiver runs through me.

Before I can say more, Calvin is placing a blanket up to my chin. “Never on my watch,” he says. I can tell he’s trying for light-hearted but it falls flat.

Still, I have no idea what he’s talking about and then it comes back. I was at The Boathouse with Sam. “Is Sam okay?”

His brow is knotted. Also, he’s shaved. The unruly beard is now a few hairs longer than a five o’clock shadow. “She’s fine. She was here for several hours while you slept but needed to go home to her kids. She’s very worried about you.”

Sounds like he’s talking about someone else. “What happened?”

He pales. “You passed out at the restaurant. An ambulance brought you in. Your heart rate was off the charts. We got it down with meds.”

His staccato speech is off-putting, like he’s having trouble catching his breath between sentences.

“Oh.” I have nothing else to add. The whole thing is crazy.

Calvin steps back and taking a deep breath, lifts my chart from the foot of the bed. He proceeds to ask several strange questions like my name, the year, my age.

“None of your business,” I say to the last question though I’m fully aware he has the information right in front of him.

He chuckles, the color returning to his handsome features. “Glad you’re back to yourself.”

I don’t tell him I feel anything but. “What time is it?”

He points to the large clock on the wall.

I sit up, immediately regretting the quick movement. My head is spinning like a merry-go-round on steroids.

Calvin is back at my side, his hand on my shoulder, gently pushing me back into the pillow. “Whoa. Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m supposed to get back to my attorney about the lawsuit if I’m going to settle out of court. I need time to review my strategy.”

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“Not important now.”

I sigh. “Easy for you to say.”

“Actually, it’s not. You need to rest. The stress is going to kill you.”

“Bit dramatic.”

“You came very close, Caroline. Very.”

What?

I see him gearing up for more details when Evie walks through the door, followed by Barbie and to my surprise, Mo. She’s not a fan of mine.

Evie looks like she’s about to cry. I pray not. It will make me teary as well and I can’t risk it. I’m an ugly crier.

She hurries to my side and avoiding the machines and tubes, gives me a careful hug. “You scared the living whatever out of me.”

“Sorry,” I mumble into her hair. “Sam told you?”

She pulls back, sniffing. “Yes. I’m so grateful I was still in town.”

“Me too.” I wish she would never leave but I don’t say so. She’s happy with Adam in Yosemite.

Evie turns to Calvin, giving him the once over. “You’re Doctor Handsome.”

I have no idea how she knows that. I’ve never shown her a picture.

Calvin crinkles his nose. “Huh?”

“Nothing.” To me, she says, “At least you’re in good hands.” She winks at me. Thankfully, Calvin doesn’t see it.

A nurse steps into the room. It’s getting crowded in here.

“Doctor, we need you, now.” Her face is tense and Calvin says to me, “You and I will talk.”

I don't think I've ever heard such a dire tone from him. Before I can ask what else we need to talk about, he hurries after the nurse, leaving me more perplexed than ever.

## Chapter Thirteen

Calvin

I’ve never been more scared in my life. Not because of the kid I’m attending to or because of the scary looking dude hovering nearby with tattooed tears on his face. He looks like Bozo the Clown, Stephen King style.

I’m on auto pilot, suturing the boy’s bullet wound like it’s something I do every day, because it is. Another gang-related visit to the ER.

“Yo, doc. Am I gonna die?”

The patient’s voice cracks like the twelve-year-old he is. I’m amazed he’s holding

back the tears. It's gotta hurt like the devil. Chart says he has no mother. Guess he's seen worse than a bullet graze.

I keep it light. "Not a chance! But you might feel like it when you realize there's no WiFi."

I want to give my practiced speech about starting off in life on the right foot, avoiding things that could take you down the wrong path but I don't. I have yet to see anyone heed my wisdom. Let's just say, in this job, in this city, I have repeat customers. It's when they don't come back that I worry.

Despite the situation in front of me, my thoughts are elsewhere. Namely, when the ambulance pulled into the bay, medics helping the patient out the back. I was finishing some paperwork, considering what I could grab for dinner from the snack dispenser, when I glanced at the gurney whooshing past.

A frazzled soccer mom with a stricken look on her face was keeping pace until someone told her to stay back. Something caught my eye. A red purse jostling beside the patient. My first thought was Caroline has one just like it. It took a couple of seconds to realize it was Caroline.

There's a reason they say doctors should never treat friends and family in dire circumstances. You lose perspective and allow emotions to rule, when what's needed more than anything is to remain calm and collected.



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I wrap the bandage around the boy's arm and tell the nurse what to prescribe. The kid has one foot still in puberty and I'm hesitant to write a script for an opioid that he'll likely sell anyway.

My mind reverts to an unconscious Caroline. As they wheeled her into a room, I said to the nurse, "I know her."

"You want to take her?"

I knew I shouldn't but there was no one else around. All the doctors were treating other patients. I instructed the nurse to take Caroline to the only available room, start an IV, and get the medic's report. Then I approached the soccer mom. "Can you tell me what happened?"

She said, "My friend and I were eating and she got a funny look and face planted into her gnocchi."

It sounded like a comedy sketch but the woman looked stricken. I learned her name is Samantha. I recognized it as one of Caroline's lunch friends. "Was she under stress at the time?"

Sam furrowed her brow. "Yes, but that's normal for her."

"Right. Caroline has been under a lot of pressure lately."

A look of surprise crossed her face. "You know her?"

I nodded. “She's my friend. I better get back there.”

Her eyes widened. “You're Doctor Hand?—”

“Doctor Sinclair.”

As I hurried to the back, Sam asked, “Will she be okay?”

All I could say was, “She'd better be.”

When I got to her, Caroline's pulse was racing like a runaway train, her eyes closed. Thank heavens the measures we took were successful. It wasn't the first time I prayed in the ER but it was the most desperate. By the time we got her heart rate under control, mine was through the roof.

She's stable, I remind myself. Awake and coherent. Even joking. Her friends are with her. I'll run more tests and if things check out, I'll discharge her in the morning. But not before she and I have a serious talk. There's something I've been meaning to suggest. I like the idea a lot but who knows if Caroline will agree. Only one way to find out.

I'm back in the present and gently pat the kid on the back. “Stay safe, kid.”

He eyes me, his expression that of someone who's seen more than he should in his short life. “Yeah.”

With Bozo at his heels, he walks back out onto the New York streets.

Chapter Fourteen

Caroline

Mo says nothing and places a container on the side table beside me. It smells like chicken soup.

“Thanks,” I say, wondering if it's laced with arsenic.

Barbie hands me the latest copy of Vogue. “For your reading pleasure.”

They're standing in a circle around my bed like a coven of witches about to chant.

“Will you please sit down?” I say.

Mo and Barbie sit in the only two available chairs. Evie settles on the edge of the bed. No sign of Paul. Thank heavens. He'd never let me out of his sight again.

I riffle through the magazine's pages, trying to distract myself from the crazy situation I'm currently in. “How long do you think I'm going to be here?”

Barbie says, “Question for the doc.”

Calvin is gone and I realize I didn't properly introduce him to the club gals.

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Evie leans in. “Can I just say, Dr. Handsome was a good name for him.”

Barbie nods. Mo is holding back a grin.

Then we all laugh.

The curtain is pushed aside. Speaking of the devil.

Calvin is standing there as handsome as ever, despite the determined look in his eye. “Ladies, I need to have a chat with the patient.”

His tone is firm and authoritarian, like a school principal about to suspend a student.

The women stand. “We’ll wait outside,” Evie says, shuffling out with the others.

I meet Calvin’s intense gaze. “What’s this about? I feel like I’m in big trouble.”

“You are, Mrs. Page.”

I raise a brow at the formality. “Pretty sure you should be coddling me right now rather than—” I gesture at him. “This.”

Calvin’s face softens, his eyes are watery. He just returned from a crazy long trip. He must be exhausted with jet lag. Lucky him, now he’s dealing with me. “Sorry,” I say. “What’s on your mind?”

He falls back into the chair next to my bed and puts his head in his hands. “I wasn’t

joking earlier. We could have lost you.”

I feel queasy. “That bad?”

He nods. “Your blood pressure and heart rate were so elevated, you’re lucky to not have suffered a stroke.”

I’m stunned speechless.

He says, “The way I see it, you have two choices. Be on regular anti-anxiety meds or cut out all high-stress matters from your life.”

I nearly chuckle but my head is spinning from what he just told me. I nearly died! I swallow hard. I need time to process but Calvin isn’t finished. I’m not sure how much more I can handle.

“That means walking away from litigation and giving yourself some real time off.”

“You’re diagnosing my legal matters now?”

“I’m dead serious, Caroline. You’ve been through the wringer with your husband dying and now with his kids taking you to court over his estate. It’s more than most people could manage.”

I’m dumbfounded. What he’s suggesting would be irresponsible. I’d be giving up my lifestyle, my sole means of support, handing it all to Josh and Rachel on a silver platter.

Calvin must see the shock on my face because he comes closer, taking Evie’s vacated spot and then my hand. I feel a strong, tingly sensation. The good kind. Gently, he squeezes my hand and for a brief moment I forget who he is to me.

“I was really scared,” he says.

It occurs to me his damp eyes are not from fatigue. My heart lurches. “I’m so sorry,” I blurt out. It’s funny to apologize for almost dying but somehow it makes sense.

“So you’ll slow down, give Bernard’s kids what they want and get some R and R?”

“I don’t know.”

He shakes his head, removing his hand. It feels like being unplugged. All my energy drains in an instant. I’m hit with a wave of fatigue.

“We can figure all that out once you’re feeling better. For now your sole priority needs to be your health. I’m going to tell your friends to go home so you can rest.”

I want to argue but I can’t keep my eyes open. “Thanks for saving my life,” I whisper as he walks toward the curtain.

He turns back and as I’m dozing off, I feel his lips on my forehead, a feathery kiss that peacefully escorts me off to dreamland.

### Chapter Fifteen

Calvin

I don't know what possessed me to kiss Caroline. Granted, it was on her forehead but still highly inappropriate for an ER doctor treating a patient.

But she's my friend. My close friend. One of the few people in this city who I know I can count on. The thought of losing her is paralyzing.

I plop down on the sofa in the doctor's mess and lay back, stretching out my legs, trying to clear my mind long enough to grab a thirty-minute power nap. My thoughts are rampant, focused on Caroline's health. If she doesn't minimize the level of stress in her life, she's destined for another cardiac episode.

I have so much more to discuss with her about this and other topics I've been holding onto but haven't found the right time.

I decide to ponder more cheerful things.

Chacha.

I conjure up the sweet boy's angelic face, his tight ebony curls, his small fingers. I can't wait to give him a bear hug. I can't wait to watch his face shine with wonder the first time he sees snow.

When I left for Tanzania with the medical mission, it never entered my mind that I

would adopt a little boy from the local orphanage. It happened so quickly and so perfectly.

I spent morning till night treating everything from malaria to broken bones. On day one, a young boy, no more than five, began following me around. He was very thin and noticeably bright. He spoke both Swahili and a passable English. I learned someone had read to him a story about a kind, funny doctor and it was all I could do to convince him it wasn't me. He never left my side.

When I asked the elders about Chacha's family, I was told there were none. His mother died in childbirth and his father left to work in the city and never returned. His grandmother cared for the child but when her own health declined, she sent Chacha off to the orphanage. The caretaker was informed of my interest and began an all-out campaign for me to adopt the child. There was an obvious connection between us, he said. I could give him a good life.

I literally laughed out loud. I can barely take care of myself. I work all day and most nights. Ergo, no friends.

But as the days passed, I couldn't get the idea out of my mind. Chacha and I were sympatico.

I remember the moment I made the decision. I was walking him back to the orphanage and he put his hand in mine. "Good night, Papa."

I thought I misheard but he repeated it. I wanted to tell him that he used the wrong word but I couldn't. I knew then that if I could work out the details, tackle the mountain of paperwork, I would adopt him and figure out everything else later. It's why I stayed longer in Tanzania than originally intended. If all goes to plan, soon I'm going to be a dad.



It wasn't a thought-out strategy never to mention it to Caroline but I'm glad I didn't. She has enough on her plate without engaging in my personal challenges. I also don't want her to try and change my mind. Becoming a dad is the most exciting adventure I could ever imagine.

The sky out the window is darkening. Short days, long nights.

I was planning to head home for some much needed shut-eye but with Caroline staying the night, I'll stick around. I tried hard to keep a professional distance from her and failed miserably. I'm fairly certain the intake nurse saw my momentary panic when Caroline was wheeled in.

As if on cue, the nurse enters the room, takes a seat in one of the lounge chairs and flips through a magazine. Thankfully, she doesn't say anything about the earlier incident. Actually, she doesn't say anything at all. I must look that exhausted.

I close my eyes and doze off to the sound of flipping pages and a vision of Chacha playing in the snow.

## Chapter Sixteen

Caroline

I can't wait to get out of here. Between the beeping machines and bleary-eyed nurses showing up at every hour of the night, all I want is to go home and pour a glass of wine. Even if it is 7:30 in the morning.

Last night, they admitted me. I'm sure Calvin was very involved in that decision. I haven't seen him since he read me the riot act.

I know I scared him but he doesn't get it. I can't simply walk away from the lawsuit.

The judge will award Bernard's kids everything they're demanding. It's not an option.

Thankfully, the IV is gone and I'm no longer tethered like a bad sci-fi experiment. I get up carefully, relieved to be standing on my own two feet and shuffle forward like a newborn giraffe, learning to use its legs. I rummage through my purse for makeup and a hairbrush and step into the massive wheelchair-accessible bathroom, leaving the door ajar.

"Are you okay?"

I look out to find Bernard's daughter, Rachel, standing in the doorway, wearing a white lab coat and a stethoscope around her neck. If my blood pressure isn't spiking, it's a miracle.

Rachel is an attending physician here. She must have seen my name pop up somewhere.

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“I’ll be fine,” I say, not bothering to mask my distaste. I find my clothes in the small closet in the corner and put on my sweater, working hard to avoid making eye contact with my legal nemesis.

Looking at her, one would never think pretty-and-petite Rachel capable of cutting off a widow’s finances but there you go. It makes my skin crawl. If Calvin’s right, I’m here in large part because of her. Maybe she was hoping I kicked the bucket and can now save all the trouble suing me.

“Why are you here?” I ask.

She frowns, then shakes her head. “Josh told me not to come.”

I ignore the comment. Neither of Bernard’s kids ever took to me. True or not, I’ve been pegged ‘the other woman’ from day one. While I can understand Rachel’s dislike, her brother Josh fashioned a monster out of me in his mind.

For some reason she’s still here. She’s asking for it.

“Why are you trying to ruin me?” I ask.

She furrows her brow. “I . . . we aren’t. We want to protect our father’s legacy.”

“Legacy, my hiney. This is about money and spite.” If I had to guess, their mother’s spite but I keep that to myself.

Rachel’s gaze shifts.

“You do realize I am still spearheading your father’s fundraiser? All the proceeds are going to his beloved charity. Is that the sign of someone who only married him for his money?”

“Yes, I heard. That’s very kind.”

I’m livid. My face is heating up. “It’s more than kind. I believe in the cause.”

I sit, feeling faint.

Rachel takes a step closer and I put up a hand, halting her.

We stare at each other.

I don’t want her to see me like this. Weak, emotional. “I loved him you know. Even if you don’t believe it.” I feel a dampness in my eyes and blink it away.

Rachel is only a couple of feet away but her eyes are now boring into me as if she’s trying to read my soul. Her face registers confusion.

“Rachel?”

We both turn to the doorway. Somehow my room has become Grand Central Station.

Rachel’s demeanor changes immediately to upbeat. “Hi, Uncle Paul. I thought you would be here before me.”

Paul gives me the eye. “I would have been had Mrs. Page told me she was in the hospital.”

Great. More drama.

“How did you find out that I’m here?” I ask him.

“I have my ways. That you didn’t tell me yourself is quite disappointing.”

I know the man and he is more hurt than anything else. Still, it would have been worse for him to get a call that I was taken unconscious to the hospital. He’s received one of those before about Bernard and that one didn’t end well.

I say, “I’m sorry.” Then, “Do you recall our earlier conversation?”

“If you mean that I’m no longer employed by you, I have not forgotten.”

“Wait, what?” Rachel is looking between us.

“What do you think will happen if you cut me off? I’ll be drowning in legal fees. I won’t be able to afford a driver.”

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Rachel appears genuinely stricken. “But you’ll get the apartment.”

I know I’ve been living the high life but clearly, being born with a silver spoon in one’s mouth makes one clueless. “How will the apartment pay Paul’s salary?”

She doesn’t answer because there isn’t one.

An awkward silence stretches between the three of us.

Finally, Rachel says, “I should get back to my rounds.”

I want to say “good riddance” but Paul won’t appreciate that and for better or worse, I care what he thinks.

Rachel plants a kiss on Paul’s cheek telling him she’ll call. To me, she says softly, “Feel better, Caroline.”

I nod and stand back up, grabbing my purse and coat from the closet.

Paul’s expression is strained. “Where are you going?”

### Chapter Seventeen

Caroline

Paul gives me a look that would make anyone else shake in their proverbial boots. His bulbous nose is still red from the cold outside, his gaze iron-willed.

He must have woken up very early to be here. I'm grateful he showed up when he did, acting as a buffer between me and Rachel. He's the most lovable, determined, gangster-looking seventy-year-old on the Upper West Side.

"I'm going home," I say, not bothering to mask my defiance. I had enough of being poked and tested. I've had enough of Rachel and the lawsuit. I am desperate to leave, regroup, and figure things out. Namely, my future. "I don't want to stay anymore."

Paul sucks on his teeth, juts his jaw. "What does Dr. Sinclair have to say about that?"

"Seriously? You know who my doctor is?"

I think of Calvin who is bound to come by soon. He'll insist I stay for more tests.

"Of course. I've been keeping an eye on him. Since he showed up at the Dakota looking like a vagrant."

I almost laugh at the description but I'm not letting Paul off the hook so easily. I wonder how he knows about Calvin's visit. He has eyes everywhere. "So, you're my bodyguard now?"

Apparently, since Paul is no longer chauffeur, he's promoted himself to a better unpaid role.

"I took Bernard's request as a final wish."

I swallow hard with emotion. It is touching how loyal Paul is. Bernard is gone but Paul still heeds his dear friend's request to look after me. "Calvin is a friend. Actually, he was here to treat me when I came in yesterday." I omit the touch-and-go part.

“I’m going to continue looking out for your best interest, Mrs. Page.”

“Do I have any say in this?” I ask, half-heartedly.

He shrugs and I laugh.

We both know this arrangement can't last forever. Nothing lasts forever. Just ask Bernard.

I don't bother asking Paul what he really thinks of Calvin. It may come off like my doctor and I are more than friends and that would be awkward. Still, Calvin has been on my mind since I opened my eyes, seeing his worried face. He's a special man.

“I need to call an Uber,” I announce, pulling out my phone.

Paul frowns at the device. “Please don't insult me.”

“I thought you don't approve of my leaving the hospital.”



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“I also don’t expect you to heed my advice, I have no choice but to . . . aid and abet.”

Once again, his pragmatism is showing.

“You brought my car?”

“Of course.”

I can’t argue. If Paul wants to drive me home, I will accept even if I can’t pay him. Because he’s more than my bodyguard. He’s my guardian angel. My Fairy Godfather. Maybe that will be the title of the next Coppola film.

Paul leans into the hallway and checks both ways as if he’s about to cross a busy highway on foot. “The coast is clear.” His tone is conspiratorial.

Knowing he’s now on my side gives me the guts to go through with the Great Escape.

“Ready?” he asks, taking hold of my purse and bag of clothes. I’m wearing a sweater over a hospital gown. No time for a wardrobe change.

I slip into my shoes and button up my coat, feeling my nerves spark with excitement. Paul is supporting my unauthorized discharge. Bet this isn’t the first time he’s pulled something like this.

“Ready,” I say.

I follow my seventy-year-old ex-driver out of the hospital room and book it down the

hallway, all the way to the elevator, down to the lobby, and out the building. I hope never to come back here.

Paul holds open the back door of the polished Mercedes and I get inside, relief washing over me. As he pulls into traffic, I spot Calvin, standing in the front of the hospital entrance, out of breath, hands on his hips. He looks so painfully handsome in his scrubs and unshaven jaw.

Our eyes meet. My heart melts a little.

I want to shout out a thanks, tell him I'll call soon. But all I can muster is a finger wave just as Paul buzzes up my window and drives me home.

## Chapter Eighteen

Caroline

I'm furious."

The words are far from necessary. If I'm not mistaken, steam is emerging from Calvin's ears.

He's standing in my doorway, his lips pursed. The hint of antiseptic tells me he came over right after his shift. How he got into the building past the doorman without my knowledge is beyond me. My guess is Calvin and Larry are becoming buds.

"What were you thinking leaving like that without telling the nurses . . . or me?"

It's not lost on me that since Calvin resurfaced following his African vanishing act, we've been through the gamut of emotions from vulnerable, scared, simpatico . . . and angry with each other.

“Caroline?”

I’m still getting my bearings. My hair is wet—flat as a pancake—from the shower. When the doorbell rang, I assumed it was Mrs. Reinhold down the hall, armed with a litany of complaints about the out-of-service incinerator. As if I have any control over building maintenance.

I’m trying not to look at Calvin, but it’s impossible. Holding his coat in hand, he looks even better than when I saw him earlier this morning, standing outside the hospital entrance, watching me leave. The beanie over his near-shoulder-length hair. The ridiculous teeth necklace, peeking out from beneath his cashmere sweater. Along with a worn leather bracelet I haven’t seen before, he’s part hippy heartthrob, part guru, and completely disarming.

If you don’t account for the expression on his face. The Zen smile is AWOL, like he’s skipped savasana and went straight into warrior pose.

Still, I can’t help myself. “Now you have a taste of your own medicine.”

I’m pleased with the play on words. After all, he left me—I mean, the States—and didn’t say a word for weeks!

Calvin doesn’t appear to be quite as enamored with my wit. I cinch my robe belt tighter, hoping it shows off my narrowing waistline. Even a day in the hospital is more slimming than ten on the elliptical. But I’m facing Calvin with my clean makeup-free face.

I need to create a diversion away from my appearance. “I have a thirty-year-old bottle of whiskey.” It sounds like a peace offering which I suppose it is.

His brow lifts, the rest of his face softens. I stand aside.

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There's something about the way he moves past me, slow and deliberate, like he's in tune with a rhythm I can't quite hear. He pulls off his hat, the silvering hair reminding me of the sexy actor Sam Elliot, sans mustache.

"I didn't want to risk being told I couldn't go home" I say to his back.

He lets out a dramatic sigh and heads straight to the bar. An image of Bernard standing in that same spot fills my mind. He loved his prized whiskey collection.

Calvin bypasses the Macallan single malt and uncorks a bottle of Merlot. I guess he's not as angry as I thought.

He brings over two glasses of wine and sits beside me on the sofa, closer than expected. His left knee is but an inch from mine. Now, it's all I can think of. Calvin's knee.

I accept the wine and take a swallow, hoping it will cure my temporary insanity.

We drink in amicable silence as I pray for a distraction from my thoughts. It comes in the form of Calvin's soft humming. It's a habit I've come to recognize. Calvin has something more on his mind. I wait.

He says, "I have a house."

"Pardon?"

"Let me start over." He exhales. "When your friend Evie phoned to check on you, I

took the call. The topic of the lawsuit came up.”

I’m floored. “Oh?”

“After our chat, Evie took the liberty of calling your attorney and explained what happened to you. She pushed to have the decision deadline extended. Apparently, Bernard’s daughter, Rachel agreed.”

I think about Rachel showing up at the hospital this morning. Maybe seeing me made her loosen up a bit.

“And Josh, her brother?”

“Seems he is going along with it. So is the judge.”

I’m both relieved and slightly annoyed. “Why am I hearing this from you?”

“Evie planned on discussing it with you but when you flew the coop, I told her I was coming here and . . . now we’re discussing it.”

“What about hearing it from my attorney?”

“Have you checked your messages?” he asks.

“Actually, my phone died. It’s charging in my bedroom.”

Calvin is so close. I don’t want to risk getting up to retrieve it.

Calvin shrugs. “He probably tried to tell you.”

“Okay, this is good news but honestly, it’s only kicking the can down the road. I still

need to decide what to do.”

“True but you have time now for self-care.”

I laugh. Hard. Bordering on the maniacal. I sound like the female version of the Joker.

Calvin waits me out. He must have seen this sort of bizarre reaction from his patients. His psych patients.

“You are running yourself ragged, Caroline. The stress nearly killed you. Which leads me to what I said. I have a house. I’d like to take you there. You can have the place to yourself, regroup. Convalesce, properly.”

“Bymyself?”

He nods. “I checked your test results before coming over. If you relax, avoid stress, you’ll be fine. It will be very restorative. You can read, sleep.” He grins. “Drink red wine.”

It sounds divine. And lonely.

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“I had no idea you owned a house.”

“I don’t use it as often as I should but it’s been well-maintained. All you have to do is show up. I’ll drive you there, show you around and pick you up a few days later. You’ll be as good as new and back home in time for Christmas.”

If only.

Still, maybe time to regroup is not a bad idea. And it’s free.

“Okay, I’m in,” I say before I’ll change my mind. I need this. I owe it to myself. “When should we go?”

“I’m off tomorrow. Pack a bag and I’ll pick you up in the morning.”

Not much time to think it over. “Doctor’s orders?”

The devilish curve of his lips shapes itself into another smile. The Zen version. “Yep.”

He stands and I instantly bemoan the distance. I walk him to the door. “Thanks, Calvin. You’re a wonderful friend.”

Before I know it, Calvin is hugging me. His embrace is strong, warm, and so very comforting. He’s holding on as firmly as I am, clinging to me like I’m his life preserver in a stormy sea. I feel his stubble on my cheek, the sensation igniting a rush of heat that pools low in my stomach, making it hard to think. I don’t want to let go.

He steps back and I'm stunned into silence by my visceral reaction. I would have stayed in his arms for days.

Calvin swallows hard, clearly affected too, his gaze lingering on me as if he's weighing his options. "Eight a.m.?" he asks, his words low and heavy. I nod.

He has one foot out the door when I find my voice. "Wait a second. Where exactly is your house?"

"In Sugarbush Falls."

Calvin notes the confusion on my face and says, "Guess I forgot to mention that minor detail. It's a hidden gem deep in the heart of my home state, Vermont."

## Chapter Nineteen

Calvin

I decide to walk to my place instead of hopping on the subway for one stop. I need to cool off. Where better than on the streets of the Upper West Side in what feels like subzero temps?

The sky is overcast with the threat of snow. I walk past the museum, decorated in cheerful twinkling holiday lights then stop at a cart with hot pretzels, the enticing aroma reminding me I haven't eaten much. I pay the vendor, slather the pretzel with mustard, take a bite, and keep walking.

The snack is not enough to calm my pounding heart. I'm certain Caroline heard it like a cacophony of African drums. It started when I sat beside her on the sofa. Surely, the result of my concerned mindset, the wine glass in my hand, and her gorgeous eyes on me. The proximity of our legs didn't help either.



When I could no longer withstand it, pulling her into my arms, it took all my self-control not to kiss her.

Not on the cheek like in the hospital. Not a friend's kiss. But a deep, lingering, combustible kiss.

As I cross the street, all I can think of are Caroline's pale pink lips. So very kissable.

I came to her place in a huff, storming past the doorman who surprisingly, gave me little more than an amused wave. I'm not ashamed to admit how much it hurt that Caroline took off from the hospital without a word to me. I thought we meant more to each other. Friends don't do that.

But seeing her so vulnerable stripped me of all but one emotion. A fierce need to protect her. It lingers with me even as I reach my building. I can't explain why these feelings are taking over my brain but they are. I'm no shrink but it probably has something to do with nearly losing her. I'm realizing what is truly important. Or more accurately, who.

I head up to my apartment and unlock the door. For a split second, I expect Pedro to come bolting toward me, tail wagging, full of boundless energy. He's gone, of course. Has been for months. Another reason I was eager to go to Tanzania when the opportunity presented itself.

Turned out to be one of the best decisions of my life.

I hang up my coat in the front closet and set my boots on the mat beside the front door. The only sounds are the banging of the radiators, pumping heat like I live in a two-bedroom personal sauna.

Then I hear a ding from the laptop on my desk. I hurry over, excited to find a new

message from the orphanage. I tap it open and scroll down to the attached photo of Chacha. He's holding the soccer ball I gave him, a broad grin on his adorable face.

It's his eyes, though, that always get to me. Huge for his face, dark as coal, revealing a poorly masked melancholy.

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I'm committed to doing everything in my power to remove that sadness for the rest of Chacha's life.

I sit at the desk and read the email. It contains the documents I requested. The ones I need to finalize the adoption.

There's surprisingly little in the way of Chacha's health reports. At least in comparison to children born in the western world who are accompanied by a pile of documents from day one. Other than the midwife who aided Chacha's mother's labor, I'm the sole physician to have ever treated him.

I type my response with information they request about flight times. I'll pay for a chaperone to escort Chacha on the lengthy journey to New York.

I hit send and switch mental channels to tomorrow, reminding myself to fill up the car before picking up Caroline for our impromptu drive to Sugarbush Falls.

I still can't believe I convinced her to go. Maybe I should have told her to pack necessities like boots, gloves, and a warm scarf and to leave the designer handbags at home.

I consider texting her just that but decide against it. Any interaction now could result in her backing out.

I head to my bedroom, strip down and get into the shower, picturing Caroline strolling along Main Street in spiky boots and a mink coat. She's something else.

As I let the hot stream roll down my back, it occurs to me how much I'm counting on the magic of Sugarbush Falls to reduce Caroline's stress and if we're really lucky, even heal her soul.

## Chapter Twenty

Caroline

I stare at my bedside clock. 6:23. The sun isn't even awake yet.

I don't know what I was thinking agreeing to leave town. Especially now, at this point in my life with so much going on.

Granted, Calvin can be extremely persuasive. When he looked me in the eye, his strong presence only inches away, I could do little more than agree to his offer. Sure, having downtime after my health scare would be wonderful but who has the luxury for that?

Is it too late to back out?

Given that he may already be on his way here, the answer is yes.

My phone buzzes with two messages. Evie and Sam.

I know Sam wakes early for work and kids but I wonder why Evie is texting at this hour. She has more flexibility.

Last night, a text came in from Mo. U gd? was all she wrote.

I responded with a thumbs up emoji.

In fairness, her checking up on me is as kind as it is unexpected. We are far from friends. More like rival territories forced to maintain a truce because of shared allies.

I probably should give Sam and Evie an update on how I'm doing. They can pass it along to Barbie.

Since both women are awake, I put in my earbuds, grab my suitcase and set it on the bed, tossing in the flannel pjs I found in the back of my closet. Can't recall where I got them. Probably a gag gift from Evie.

"Hey Siri, call Evie."

There's a lag and then she answers. "How's the fugitive?"

"Funny."

"Seriously, do you take any rules to heart?"

"Sure, legal ones, for example."

Evie chuckles. "Touché. Did Dr. Handsome tell you I got your decision date pushed off?"

"He did. My attorney left me a message as well. Thank you," I say.

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“You’re welcome.” A pause. “You’re not mad that I took your matters into my hands?”

“It was a good idea,” I say, despite having taken pains not to tell her about it. Thanks to a chat with Calvin, she gathered enough details to pull this off. “I never would have had the wherewithal to ask for an extension.”

Evie exhales. “What a relief. Now, please tell me you’ll spend the time taking care of yourself before going into battle. If that’s what you decide to do.”

I must have wavered fifteen times on the subject. Giving up my rightful inheritance is as hard as it sounds. “Actually I’m going on a retreat. Leaving in about an hour.”

“Really?” I hear the skepticism in her tone.

“Yup.”

“I’m so proud of you!”

I’m buoyed by her positivity. “Want to come along?” I know the answer even as I ask the question. The noises in the background confirm what I suspect. “Where are you?”

“At the airport, waiting to board my flight back to Reno.”

My heart sinks. She’s leaving again. I’m thrilled that Evie met the love of her life but devastated that he lives in a national park so far away.

Evie's regular flights have become the equivalent of a bus commute in the sky. Yet, the thought of her coming to New York less often makes me sick to my stomach.

I keep my voice even. "Maybe it's time for Adam to buy you a private plane."

"He did mention it."

"I was joking!"

Evie was never in the poor house but the lifestyle Adam is offering her now is far more lavish. Like mine used to be. We're like Eddie Murphy and Dan Akroyd in *Trading Places* or *The Prince and the Pauper*, switching lives. Me being the pauper.

Evie breaks my derailed train of thought. "Given how our last vacay attempt went, it's probably best that I'm not going with you."

She's referring to our perfectly planned trip to Yosemite for her 50th. That was the first time I ended up in the hospital. Still, if given the choice, I would take my chances and bring Evie along. Being alone in a house in Vermont has the potential to be restorative or achingly lonely.

I won't ask Calvin to stay with me. Not that he offered. He took a great deal of time off from his important job to join the mission in Tanzania. I won't guilt him into babysitting me in Vermont.

I toss my fluffy slippers into the bag followed by a book I found at the local bookstore titled, *Living with Less*. It was thirty-five dollars. Ironic.

"Gotta run," Evie says. "Call me from your retreat. And rest. I need you around, Caroline."

The change in her demeanor makes me choke up. Actually, everything of late gets me this way. My emotions are all over the map. My feelings for Calvin are no exception. Analyzing them is pointless given my screwed up mental state. I'm irrational and know it. All I need is time to return to normal.

"Safe travels," I say. "Love you."

I click off and see I missed a text from Calvin. He'll be here in ten.

I zip up my bag and call Sam.

Before I can say hello, she blurts, "We have an emergency."

I plop down onto the bed, bracing myself.

So much for a few stress-free days.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Calvin

I pull up to the Dakota and hop out, handing the keys to the attendant. "I'll be back down in five," I say, despite knowing it will likely be three times that.



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An elderly woman, wearing a bright purple hat with a well-groomed dog wearing a matching one, exits the building. I've seen her before in the lobby. Caroline's sourpuss neighbor. I offer a greeting and get a shifty-eyed suspicious glance in return. "I don't know you. You live here?"

I shake my head. "Just visiting."

"Whom are you visiting?"

I feel like I'm back in elementary school being admonished by my second grade teacher. "Caroline Page."

She scrunches her nose. "She a friend of yours or?—"

So much for the premium New Yorkers put on privacy. I don't answer her question mostly because I don't know the answer. Instead, I say, "Your dog is adorable, Mrs. . . ."

She looks like she'd rather pass out than tell me her name but she's stuck. "Reinhold," she says, before walking away with a grumble.

In Africa everyone greeted each other warmly. You're not in Tanzania anymore, I tell myself.

I hurry inside and catch a glimpse of my reflection in the ornate wall mirrors. I'm wearing a coat over my t-shirt, a few teeth visible beneath my collar. Though the beard is under control, I need a shave badly. I'm starting to think the old lady was

pretty darn brave to even look me in the eye.

Larry gives me a nod as I cross the grand lobby and head to the elevator. Like last time he doesn't ring up Caroline to inform her of my arrival. I push the up button and the doors pull open. My heart takes a giant leap.

“Hey, Calvin. Beat you to it.”

Caroline's curves are covered in hiking gear, a striking contrast to the elegance I'm used to. Her blond hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, a look I haven't seen on her, ever. Come to think of it, I've never seen her in anything but haute couture or a hospital gown. She's a vision, and the sight of her stirs something deep inside me—a flutter of desire that leaves me momentarily breathless.

I stand back, allowing Caroline to pull her rolling suitcase off the elevator, noting her scuff-free Timberlands. I don't mention that it's actually snow gear that she'll need but I love that she's getting into the right mindset.

A tag is dangling from the waist of her Gore-Tex pants.

I swallow hard. “Turn around.”

“Hmm?”

I move to pull off the tag and she jumps a bit. “Sir, where exactly are your hands?” Her tone is somewhere between shocked and amused.

I chuckle, nervously. Does she actually think I'm going to pat her booty right here in the open?

I snap off the tag.

“Oh,” Caroline says, a fleeting blush tinging her cheeks. “Thanks.”

I hold in my grin. "How and when did you have time to go shopping for outdoor clothes?"

She looks down at her attire, probably as surprised to see herself in them as I am. “They were for my trip to Yosemite that I missed. Do I look okay?”

More like, incredible.

I give her a thumbs up. “Lookin’ good,” I say, inanely. “The trip with your friend, Evie, right?"

She nods. “The wardrobe turned out to be convenient.”

“And here I thought you’d be wearing your high heels and fur stole.”

Caroline lets go of her bag's handle and puts her hands on her waist, her tone sultry. “I’ll have you know, Cal, I can blend into the mountains like a chameleon.”

I'm not used to the flirtatious banter. It’s giving me a high. “Is that so?”

I take hold of the suitcase. “Ready for your relaxing getaway?”

“Yep.”

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The one word reply is said with a measure of skepticism.

“It’s going to be epic,” I say.

Caroline pulls out her phone. “I need to get back to Sam. There’s a crisis with the fundraiser and I left her hanging. One of our major donors is threatening to pull out because of the news leak regarding the court case. They don’t want their name associated with a strife-ridden family drama.”

I open my mouth to tell her that this is precisely why she is getting away and maybe waiting until she’s back in town to manage things would be a better idea. Instead I say, “Fine. But the moment we cross the state line, I don’t want to see that phone again.”

The words come out bossier than intended. She gives me a look and I brace myself for push back. It doesn't come.

“Doctor’s orders,” I add more reasonably.

I watch as Caroline's fingers fly over the device. “I’m telling Sam to manage the crisis herself. I know she can do it.”

I note the strain around her eyes, the tension in her jaw. I have never felt prouder of my friend. She's determined to get better. I hurry with her to the car.

The attendant helps me heave the case into the trunk then opens the passenger door for Caroline. “Madame.”

Caroline hops into my car and off we go.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Caroline

The crunch of gravel under the tires stirs me from a deep sleep and I blink awake, peering out the window of Calvin's SUV. The scene is straight out of a picture book, a stark contrast to the bustling streets of New York. Towering snow-laden evergreens frame the drive, blocking the view of the house. In the distance I see an endless sea of rolling white hills.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Calvin says with a warm smile as he brings the car to a stop.

I yawn and step out. Huge mistake.

The frigid air shocks me into full awake mode, like taking a double shot of Red Bull while standing naked in Iceland. As bitter cold as Manhattan was, this is a whole new level. It has to be twenty below. I jump back into the car to a laughing Calvin and set my hands onto the heating vents.

“There’s an adjustment period to Vermont winters.”

“Now you tell me. I can’t feel my face.”

Calvin reaches into the back seat and hands me a gray wool cap that looks two inches thick. It’s hideous.

“Here,” he says. “Put this on. Most body heat exits from the head.”

“I’d rather turn into a block of ice than put that thing on my head.”

Calvin smirks. “Have it your way but unless you ran track in college and can make it to the front door in under fifteen seconds, that’s exactly what you’ll be.”

I look at him in horror and grab the hat, pulling it over my brow. I know I look a fright but the choice is death or beauty. I guess I’m not so vain, after all.

We step out together and I bolt around the bend, coming to full stop.

The house is pale blue with white shutters. It’s delightfully charming with a wrap-around porch adorned with twinkling lights and a wreath of fir and holly on the door. Icicles hang off the eaves like nature’s chandeliers, glistening in the afternoon sun. Smoke billows upward from the stone chimney. It’s idyllic.

Calvin comes up beside me with my suitcase.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, my breath turning icy as it makes contact with the air.

Calvin leads me up the steps. “Come on, let’s go inside.”

He’s pulling a key from his pocket when the door springs open and I fall back into Calvin. He reacts quickly, one arm around my waist, keeping me vertical.

“Auntie Pearl!” he cries.

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Regrettably, he lets go of me as the elderly woman steps aside. Her rotund shape is wrapped in what looks like a ski outfit. All white, like her hair. If Frosty the Snowman had a granny, this woman would be it.

“Come on in, you two. Get out of the cold. I made a fresh batch of cider.”

We hurry past her, relieved to be inside. The home’s interior is a blend of rustic and cozy. A fire crackles in the stone fireplace, casting a warm glow over the room. The scent of pine mingles with something sweet and homey. Apples and cinnamon. There’s a plush sofa with knitted throws and built-in shelves filled with books.

The woman closes the door and I’m warm once again. Maybe I’ll wait until spring to venture back outside.

Calvin sets my suitcase beside the staircase and bends down, planting a kiss on his aunt’s cheek. “I missed you.”

“Same. Ready to move back home?”

Calvin offers a closed-lip smile. I gather this is a topic nearly as old as the woman.

“Thanks for getting the place up and running,” Calvin says. He turns to me. “Caroline, this is my Aunt Pearl, my grandmother’s sister.”

“Of blessed memory,” Pearl says, then adding, “I’m the younger sister.” She winks. This lady has spunk.

"Auntie, I'll give Caroline the tour, then we'll come down for cider," Calvin says.

We peel off a slew of layers and Calvin leads me into the rustic yet chic kitchen. Copper pots hang from a rack above the island, and a vintage stove takes center stage. The countertops are cluttered with jars of homemade preserves and freshly baked cookies.

"I'm confused. I thought this was your house."

Calvin chuckles. "It is, but when I told Aunt Pearl that I was bringing you here, she decided to take the bull by the horns. Looks like she's been baking." He grabs a cookie and downs it in two bites. "Best in the world," he moans.

"Does she live here?"

"Nope. She lives about a mile up the road. I've suggested a retirement home but she'll hear nothing of it. She's got the energy of a woman half her age and likes her independence."

He opens the fridge and I can see it's fully stocked. Calvin grabs a container of milk and fills two glasses. "You have to dunk the cookies for optimal effect."

I do as I'm told.

The cookie is indeed heavenly. I would ask for the recipe but I don't bake. I can't recall the last time I fired up my oven. Or where it is, precisely.

I am a diehard foodie but only when said food is prepared for me, optimally by the chef of a Michelin-rated restaurant.

Calvin shows me the dining room next, where a large wooden table is set for two and



I wonder why he needs something so big for only him. Lit candles and evergreen branches create a festive centerpiece. “Um, what’s this about?”

“Auntie is a romantic. She probably thinks we’re um . . . together.” Calvin looks away.

“Why would she think that?”

“I suppose when she heard I was bringing a woman up here, she jumped to conclusions.”

Okaaay.

As I follow him up the stairs, I wonder how Aunt Pearl will react when she hears I’ll be staying here alone.

We turn right at the landing and enter a cozy bedroom with a view of the snow-covered landscape. The bed is piled high with quilts, and a reading nook by the window beckons me to curl up with a good book.

"Do you like it?" he asks, his eyes searching mine for any hint of regret.

"I love it. It's so different from what I'm used to, but in the best way." My heart swells with gratitude. Calvin was right. This is exactly what I need. Peace and quiet. "Thank you for bringing me here."

Calvin's eyes soften as he looks at me and he comes closer. Our eyes lock and I forget about all the chaos I left behind. His breath is coming faster, while I can barely breathe. My body tingles from my head to my toes. Like the forceful pull of a magnet, I take a step toward him and?—

"Come and get it!"

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

Aunt Pearl's voice is as resonant as a drill sergeant's. Calvin clears his throat and I swallow hard, unsure of what just happened.

"We should probably go downstairs," Calvin says, sounding hoarse.

We find Aunt Pearl in the kitchen, pouring three glasses of steaming cider. "Storm coming."

Calvin and I look out the window at the same time. Not a cloud in the sky.

But there's no doubt about it. Something in the air is shifting.

Big time.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Calvin

Aunt Pearl is talking. I know because her mouth is moving. But I don't hear a word. My heart is pounding too loudly in my ears.

I have no clue what happened upstairs but Caroline and I had a . . . moment. My body however is behaving like it was an earth-shattering event.

There's no mistaking the attraction between us. Had Aunt Pearl not interrupted us, our forward momentum would have resulted in a lip lock like no other.

Beads of sweat line my brow and I wipe them away. Seriously, who perspires in subzero temps?

“Earth to Calvin!” Aunt Pearl is standing in front of me, shouting, mostly because she’s deaf in one ear. Her robust fingers are snapping but given her diminutive height, they only reach my chin. “What’s going on in that head of yours, Sonny?”

She’s been calling me Sonny since I’m a kid. She never had children of her own. Me and my sister, Kim are the closest she’ll ever get.

“Sorry, tired from the drive, I guess.” I sit, take a sip of the hot drink and it’s as delish as I remember. Two cookies materialize in front of me and I down one of them.

“You okay?” Caroline asks, taking a seat as far away from me as possible. There’s an awkwardness that wasn’t there before our ‘moment.’

That’s what happens when you test the romantic waters with a friend.

“I’m fine. I probably should take a nap and head back to the city.”

Aunt Pearl’s eyes nearly pop out of her head. “You’re leaving?” She’s looking at me like I lost my marbles.

“I have to get back to the hospital.”

“Oh, that’s ridiculous. You just got here.”

Aunt Pearl moves away the plate with the remaining cookie and pushes it over to Caroline who grins at me.

“It’s not like I want to leave. Actually, I’d love nothing more than to stay here with

you.”

I can’t help looking at Caroline whose face is pinker than usual. Same color as her beautiful lips. Someone has to name that particular shade of pink. There’s nothing more alluring in the world.

“What’s Caroline going to do here by herself?” Aunt Pearl scratches her head. “I guess I’ll have to move in to keep her company.”

“No!” Caroline and I say in unison, startling Aunt Pearl. She frowns.

“We mean,” I say, “that’s very kind but no thank you. I brought her up here specifically for solitude. She’s had a rough time of things.”

Aunt Pearl squints at Caroline. “She seems okay to me.”

Caroline says, “Thanks but looks aren’t everything.”

Aunt Pearl nods. “Don’t I know it.”

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The three of us laugh and sip our ciders. The awkwardness is gone between me and Caroline. Thank heavens. I almost made a disastrous mistake. I can't lose her friendship.

"How about this?" I say to Caroline. "I'll drive you through town, show you the sights which shouldn't take long, then we'll come back, rest a bit, and I'll head back to the city."

Caroline says, "Sounds perfect."

The two of us stand.

Aunt Pearl says, "If that's not a signal for me to leave, I don't know what is. I'll leave you two love birds alone."

"We're not?—"

"Yeah, whatever you say. Caroline, call me if you need anything. My number's on the fridge." She points to it. "And while you're in town, pick up some extra batteries and candles."

"What for?"

"The storm," she says, looking at us like we're as dense as a cloud of bees.

The sky is still a perfect winter blue.

“Sound advice,” Caroline says, placating her.

I kiss my aunt goodbye and see her out. I don’t bother offering to drive her home. She’ll never agree. She’s convinced walking—in all temperatures—is what’s keeping her alive.

Caroline and I lock up the house, though merely out of big city habit. The only crime in Sugarbush Falls is taking too long to return a book to the library.

Caroline dons the wool hat I gave her. It brings me inexplicable joy. Teeth chattering, we hurry to my car, laughter mixing with our shivers as the cold air nips at our heels.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Caroline

Sitting beside Calvin in the SUV, I’m pretty sure I entered The Twilight Zone.

It’s me and him but everything else is different. The scene outside is rural, sweet, innocent. The polar opposite to high-strung Manhattan. The car is rugged, seen better days but fits in perfectly with the earthy, bucolic mountain town. Light years from my Mercedes that Paul drives me around town in. Then there’s Aunt Pearl who is straight out of a TV sit-com. The eccentric, doting side character with no filter.

But the most obvious indication of this alternate universe is the palpable attraction between me and Calvin. I was sure it would let up once I got out of Dodge and found myself in a no-stress setting. I guess my brain needs more time to adjust.

My mind keeps going back to the near-kiss in the guest bedroom. My heart races just thinking about it.

My friends have been calling him Dr. Handsome since they heard how he treated me in the ER after the fall that kept me from joining Evie on her birthday getaway to Yosemite. Until now I thought of it as a fun moniker. Not anymore.

Calvin's a hottie. Especially for a guy five years my senior. He's tall and buff. His graying hair, forehead wrinkles, and questionable wardrobe do little to retract from his good looks. I ponder what he looked like twenty years ago. I wouldn't have been able to keep my hands to myself. I mean, it takes every ounce of restraint not to grasp his free hand right now.

He's maybe a foot away from me, one hand firmly on the steering wheel, the other completely available. I can practically feel him without touching him, his presence is so startlingly profound. But actual touching would be a whole lot better.

I tell myself to stop the crazy thoughts.

When did this happen? More importantly, why? Bernard hasn't been gone long. If my therapist was here, she'd remind me that I never completed the grieving process. If Josh were here, he'd probably say I never loved his father to begin with. He would be wrong.

While ours wasn't the heady love affair that comes with youth, I loved Bernard. Despite the age difference or family dynamics. He was a kind, wonderful partner for the short time I had him. I like to think I was the same for him.

"You okay?" We are at a stop sign and Calvin is looking at me. More like studying me. He's been pretty quiet. I'll bet a hundred bucks he's mulling things over, just like I am.

"Yep, just tired." Bold-faced lie. I'm fired up.



“I hear ya. Long day.”

In the distance I see ski trails cut into the mountain. Above it, clouds are gathering.  
Should make for a solid ski day.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

We're entering the downtown. At least that's what the road sign says.

Welcome to Sugarbush Falls Historic Downtown

Founded 1788

Pop. 3,023

Same population as one square block in the city.

Downtown Sugarbush Falls consists of several quaint streets lined with cozy-looking cafés, sundry shops, a steepled church, and ski gear shops. I notice the residual snow on the ground is still white, not the quickly-blackened mess we get in the city. We're in a valley, surrounded by the Green Mountains. It looks like a Norman Rockwell painting.

"This is hopping Main Street," Calvin says with amusement. There are two people outside.

He slows the car down, peering at each individual business. "It's been so long," he says to himself.

I hadn't pegged him as the sentimental type. Of course, I don't know Dr. Handsome for very long. And some of that time he was in Africa. I asked him about the medical mission on the drive up. It sounds like he had an incredible and exhausting experience but I get the feeling he's holding back on something. Just a feeling.

“It’s so quaint here. Is this where you grew up?”

“Not far. Some of these stores are still run by the same families who started them generations ago. Can’t say that for many places.” He’s driving in slo-mo, taking in each establishment, as if we’re rolling down Memory Lane.

“That’s for sure,” I say. “Just last week, I saw the bistro on my corner is now an art gallery. It happened so fast I never even noticed they went out of business.”

“Exactly.”

We roll past someone shoveling the sidewalk. Calvin nods in his direction. “That's Jenny's boy.”

He looks more like a full-grown man. Seems Calvin's falling back into his small-town dialect.

“Who's Jenny?”

“Old friend.”

Hmm. “Did you have a happy childhood?” I ask.

“Wonderful. Peaceful, idyllic.”

“Don’t hear that every day.” Calvin has to be the only New Yorker not paying through the nose for therapy.

“It’s a lucky combination of a loving, supportive family and a great place to grow up.”

“If your aunt has anything to say about it, it’s a great place to grow old, too.”

Calvin laughs, a sound I've begun to crave. “She’s something else, isn’t she?” he says.

“You’re incredibly fortunate to have her.”

We are approaching the end of the commercial area, such as it is. The next block is taken up by a hospital.

Calvin points. “Green Mountain Medical Center. Almost ended up working there. Director of the Emergency Department.”

That surprises me. “Impressive. Why didn’t you?”

“There are fewer than a hundred true emergencies in this area in a given year and most are ski related. May through October is boring as all heck.”

I hear the mixed emotion in his voice. Sounds like there are some unresolved issues. Maybe I’ll hook him up with my therapist, after all.

My stomach growls and to my utter embarrassment he looks over at me once more, this time with a question in his eyes. “Hungry?” he asks.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

“Starving.”

Calvin makes a turn onto a side street lined with evergreens. “I know just the place.”

“Don’t you have to get some shuteye before the long drive home?”

He shakes his head, vigorously. “Nothing comes between me and my Bobby burger.”

“What’s a booby burger?”

“Not a booby burger,” he smirks. “Bobby burger.”

“I stand corrected.”

“You’re about to have the best culinary experience of your lifetime.”

I laugh heartily. He knows I’ve been to several of the world’s top eateries. What are the odds the best burger on the planet has been hiding all this time in tiny Sugarbush Falls?

### Chapter Twenty-Five

Caroline

Calvin and I are perched on scuffed wooden bar stools, like vultures eyeing our prey. If it weren’t for my thick down coat, I’d be concerned about splinters in the hiney.

From our vantage point, I watch the line cook through the hole-like gap in the wall. Actually, the entire place is a hole in the wall. The unshaven cook is straight out of central casting. White paper cap, stained apron, sweating like a hog. The only thing missing is the ash-dripping cigarette for added flavor.

Calvin's eyes are glazing over. "I can't tell you how relieved I am that this place is still here."

I have to admit the smell is intoxicating. My stomach grumbles once more. At this point, I'd eat the beef with the tobacco additive. The only thing I had all day was Aunt Pearl's cookie.

The ding of a bell. "Order up!"

The smell of fried onions is potent. I'm salivating now. I'm Pavlov's dog.

A young waitress with piercings in every possible orifice, brings over the piled-high burgers. Brown goo is oozing out the sides. This will be a ten-napkin meal. Not my usual fare.

The waitress sets the plates in front of us. "Two Bobby burgers. On the house."

Calvin smiles. "Aww, thanks."

I carefully lift the monstrosity to my lips and peer over the bun's edge at Calvin. "What am I missing?"

The cook swipes at his brow. If he could squeeze his forehead, we'd have two glasses of salt water to go with our burgers. He leans through the wall cut-out until his bulk stops him at his shoulders.

“Didn’t he tell you? Bobby was Calvin’s mom. The best teacher Sugarbush Falls ever had. When she passed, we named our most popular item after her.”

I ponder this as my teeth sink into the burger.

My taste buds explode. Smoky, sweet, juicy, just the right amount of heat. I’ve never tasted anything so good in my life.

My eyeballs must be popping out because Calvin says, “Told ya.”

It takes me a full minute to chew, swallow and wipe down my mouth. “How have I never heard about this place?” I say, readying for the next heavenly bite.

“It’s a Vermont secret. People come from as far as Montpelier for a Bobby burger.”

“We need to invest,” I say, around a mouthful of beefy deliciousness.

It dawns on me that I may soon have no money to put where my mouth is.

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Calvin and I delight in our meal. No need for side fries. I want to devote all my calories to this one masterpiece.

When we're finished, there's a mountain of stained napkins between us.

"You missed a spot." Calvin leans over and wipes the edge of my lip. With his thumb.

Every one of my nerve fibers revs up. Right here in the burger joint. I'm a millimeter away from licking his fingers, when the waitress materializes with two colas in old-fashioned glass bottles and snaps off their caps. "Dessert."

I let Calvin finish the lip wiping job without grossing out the waitress.

I refocus all my attention to the cola in front of me. I can't recall the last time I drank one. It's terrible for you. The irony makes me smile. I just downed enough cholesterol to give me an actual coronary.

"Doctor, I believe you just fed me an extremely heart-unhealthy lunch. Seems irresponsible." I'm halfway through my drink.

He leans in, finding something in my expression that tells him I'm not actually annoyed. It feels good to have someone get me again.

"Your episode was stress-induced and while you are correct, eating comfort food—in moderation—can help reduce stress. Tell me, how's your anxiety right now?"



He's so close I can count the black hairs in his short, scruffy beard. I ponder what it would feel like against my neck. Scratchy? Ticklish?

I down the last of my dessert. "What anxiety?"

He laughs and stands, leaving a sizable tip for the waitress, then thanks the cook.

"Come by any time, Calvin."

We're heading to the door. "Where to now?" I ask.

"We need to balance out that meal with some exercise. Build up a sweat." The intensity on his face makes my heart flip.

I follow him outside, ready for whatever kind of exercise my hot doc has in mind.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Calvin

I'm not sure how I did it but I convinced Caroline to take a stroll with me down Main Street. She's a good sport given the frigid weather. When I suggested a sweat-breaking exercise, she jumped right on board. Maybe because that burger had the calorie content of three ice creams sundaes and a bucket of lard.

I'm excited to show her my hometown and not from the inside of my SUV. I hurry to the car and hand her a pair of wool gloves and a scarf to match the hat she's already wearing. They are dreadful, I admit, but they're the warmest things I own. She eyes the offering and with teeth chattering, dons them.

We keep pace, heart-pumping until I slow down, taking hold of Caroline's arm.

There's a patch of ice in our path and I navigate us around it.

"Thanks," she says.

She doesn't pull away from my grasp though we're now on salted, secure pavement. We continue arm-in-arm as I point out Barker's Cleaners, The Doughnut Hole Café, and Vintage Vermont, a second-hand store that's been there forever.

We fall into a comfortable silence, each of us lost in our thoughts. I can see the roof of my high school on the parallel street. If we had more time I'd take Caroline inside and show her the basketball gym where I scored the game-winning points that led to the trophy I'm sure remains behind glass in the long school corridor. I would also show her the lab where I first fell in love with medicine.

So much of Sugarbush Falls looks the same but I've changed. I'm a big city guy now, a soon-to-be Dad. It's an odd feeling.

A mail truck goes by, the driver offering a friendly wave which we return. It occurs to me I've never even seen my New York mail carrier, let alone exchange pleasantries.

We pass the town library and I picture the biography section where I experienced my first kiss. Behind the racks where no one but the occasional librarian ventured. I was fourteen. Thanks to Aunt Pearl's updates, I know Jenny has two grandkids now. Our lives have gone in very different directions since our childhood lip lock.

We arrive at a small, well-maintained park with benches and a tiered fountain, shut off for the season. Holiday music pipes out of speakers hidden in the landscaping. We step into the gazebo, the town's oldest and most beloved landmark. The blue spruce beyond it is a far cry from the one in Rockefeller Center but it's lovely, decked in colorful ornaments and topped with a large silver star.

I turn to Caroline who has been quiet since our walk began. Probably too cold to speak. She's looking around like an astronaut on Mars. She slips her gloved hand in mine.

We stand here, under the gazebo, admiring the tranquil, picturesque scene. It's incredibly tempting to stay right where I am, holding Caroline's hand on Main Street in my hometown.

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But duty calls. I have to get on the road. It's a long drive to Manhattan. "Ready to head back?"

Caroline nods. "Calvin?"

"Hmm?"

"This town, it's perfect," Caroline says, her breath frosty.

For reasons I can't explain, I'm overjoyed that she likes it here.

"Yeah," I say, feeling more sentimental than ever. "I know."

As we step from the gazebo, the familiar notes of Chestnuts roasting on an open fire fill the air, surrounding us. Caroline's eyes light up with wonder. A single snowflake lands on her cheek.

The magic of the moment is too much to withstand. Before my mind can catch up with my body, I twirl her toward me, drawing her closer. I'm powerless to stop what is coming.

I lean down and bring my lips to hers.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Caroline

Fireworks explode behind my eyes. Calvin's lips are on mine, his arms around me and I'm immediately warm. His kiss is slow and deep, tasting of barbecue sauce. Smoky, delicious.

Heat rushes from my face, down my neck, through my entire body. He's like my own personal furnace. The mix of freezing air and the heat coming off Calvin is intoxicatingly sensual.

My mind goes blank until he pulls away. My eyes remain closed as I linger in an alternate universe. One free of lawyers' offices, family drama, fundraiser crises, Evie leaving again?—

I open my eyes, meeting Calvin's. His pupils are dilated, his breath coming out like steam released from a pressure cooker. His expression shows a mix of afterglow and wonder, as if the kiss was as much a surprise to him as to me.

He's also vibrating.

Before I can figure out what is happening. Calvin looks down and steps back, the spell broken.

He clears his throat. "Sorry. I'm being paged."

Only now do I hear a soft, persistent buzz.

Part of my brain is still in the kiss zone. "I didn't know people still used pagers," I say, trying to recalibrate.

He nods, his gaze now shifting away from mine. "Much more reliable form of communication."

Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose

The stark change in music is like a flipped switch, sparking a rush of conflicting emotions that surge within me, uncertainty creeping in. I'm suddenly aware of our surroundings—the faint hum of an idling car, a screeching hawk soaring overhead. The outside world intrudes, reminding me of reality.

My heart races, caught between the thrill of what just happened and the fear of what it might bring. I wonder if we've crossed a line that can't be uncrossed. I think of the complications, the family drama with Bernard's kids, the likelihood that soon I'll be the very definition of house poor. The intensity of the kiss lingers, battling the cold grip of doubt.

As if in a trance, we walk back to the car, an awkward silence settling between us even as my mouth still tingles. The snow is coming down more steadily now. Calvin cranks up the heat but it's blowing out cold and all I want is to be warm once more. In his arms.

I steal a glance at his profile. His jaw is set tight, his hands gripping the steering wheel a little too firmly. What is going through his head? I fidget with the hem of my coat, my mind is a whirlwind of emotions.

The drive back to his house feels endless. Every now and then, he looks my way, his eyes flickering with unspoken questions. I turn to the window, watching the rustic landscape blur past, trying to make sense of what just happened. The tension in the car is palpable, magnifying my confusion.

When we finally pull up to the house, the coziness of the exterior that once felt inviting now feels strange. We're both still entrenched in our singular worlds as we step out, the cold air hitting us like a wake-up call. Without a word, we head inside. The silence stretches on as I take off my coat and boots, the crackle of the dwindling

fire the only sound I hear.

Calvin lingers in the foyer and I catch his eye. For a moment, the awkwardness lifts as a shy smile tugs at his lips. The simple gesture makes my heart flip but the weight of what happened presses down on me once more. Each second that passes without addressing it makes it exponentially worse. I'm about to speak up when Calvin breaks the silence.

“Probably best if I head out now,” he says, his voice gentle but strained.

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Anything I wanted to say is halted. He was going to rest here first. Now, he's leaving. Just like everyone else in my life. I know this is different, that he has to go back to the city, that this was the plan all along. And yet I'm stricken. Everyone leaves eventually.

"Yes, probably," I reply, my own tone emerging distant and unsure.

"I'll see you in a few days. Call if you need anything."

And just like that Calvin walks out the door.

From the window, I offer a wave, watching him get into his car and pull out, the taillights slowly fading away.

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

Calvin

I'm as wound up as a taut guitar string, ready to snap. I take a deep breath, forcing my attention to the road. Okay, most of my attention.

I'm distracted which is not desirable while driving in snowy conditions. Somewhere between kissing Caroline by the gazebo and hopping into my car like a rabbit with Elmer J. Fudd on my tail, the world has turned white. Snow is coming down in droves, the roads turning slick. It's almost as if that kiss triggered something powerful in the universe.



Caroline and I are friends, and that kiss, in an instant, blurred the lines we've drawn. Given how she seemed on the drive back to the house—and even when I left—I have to assume the friendship sustained a hit. Whether it's a lethal one has yet to be determined.

I'm kicking myself. The woman lost her husband. And now she's facing a potentially life-altering lawsuit.

And what did I do? I hit on her. What if she thinks I brought her up here to seduce her? Who could blame her if she never looks at me the same way again. Never speaks to me again. No wonder she was so agreeable when I said I was leaving. She certainly didn't put up a fight.

My mind goes back to her watching me from the window, her smile gone. I did that. The thought delivers a pain deep in my gut.

I slow down along with the other cars and manage to make out the sign beyond the growing swirl of snow. Next exit, I-91 to Brattleboro. I've been on the road for no more than thirty minutes. At this rate, the six-hour drive will turn far longer. I flick on the radio, hoping for cheerful holiday music to boost my mood. Instead, it's an emergency weather alert.

The reporter sounds revved up. Probably getting the largest audience he's had in years. He's calling it the Blizzard of the Century. Seems gratuitously sensationalistic but reminds me of those amazing ice cream sundaes my grade school buddies and I used to get from the shop on Main Street.

The reporter promises regular updates and signs off with, "Stay inside."

Why didn't I heed Aunt Pearl's warning? Yep, distraction. In the form of the beautiful Caroline.

I turn off the broadcast, focusing once more on the exit. Half-mile to go. Warnings to batten down the hatches don't apply to medical personnel needed in hospitals. I'll keep going.

The Bluetooth lights up and I tap the screen. I recognize the number. It's the emergency room nurse back in New York.

"Hello?"

"Dr. Sinclair, where are you?"

"I'm on the road heading back from Vermont. I received your page. Sorry I didn't have a chance to call but I should be there . . . not sure when. Are you short-staffed?"

"Two interns are here and we got another resident to cover for you."

"Cover for me?"

Despite the weather, her voice comes through strong and clear. "It's why I paged you. I saw the notes you left about your trip north. Figured getting back here in time for your shift wasn't going to happen."

"I appreciate your diligence but I never asked you to do that," I say, annoyed. I left Caroline to make my shift.

"I'm sorry, I just listened to the news reports. It's pretty bad here but worse where you are. They're talking about shutting down some of the main roads until the plows can get out there."

"If it's bad, you'll need me. There are always people who disregard the cautionary warnings and end up in the ER."

“I see your point.”

“I’ll get there as soon as I?—”

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A black Honda one lane over loses control and before I can react, I hit a patch of black ice, spinning into a three-sixty. My adrenaline spikes and I grip the wheel with all my might, pump the brakes, and pray.

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

Caroline

I add wood to the hearth, then sink onto the sofa, the room feeling emptier than before. The fire crackles softly, its warmth doing little to chase away the chill that has settled in my heart. I touch my lips, the feel of Calvin's mouth still with me, as my mind races with questions. Have we crossed a line that changes everything?

To keep my mind occupied, I spent the last half hour checking out the house. I like the sound of that better than snooping. But I suppose it's okay if I'm going to be living here for a few days. I found a box of old baseball cards, an ancient guitar patched up with Jimi Hendrix stickers, and an impressive collection of vinyl from the sixties.

Calvin is retro, that's for sure. The biggest score was an old photo album. It's beside me now on the sofa, open to a photo of Calvin dressed like a hippie, with a headband, fringed vest and bell-bottoms. This, despite the fact that he was only a little kid in the heyday of the sixties. For a moment I consider the photo of his father but I'd know that intelligent, amused expression anywhere.

I'm stuck with the weight of uncertainty. I wrap the knitted throw I found in the linen closet around my shoulders and stare into the fire, trying to find clarity in the dancing

flames. The kiss, unexpected and powerful, opened a door I'm not sure I'm ready to walk through. My heart and mind are at war, each pulling me in a different direction.

I sigh, leaning back and close my eyes. For now, I let the warmth of the fire and the memories of the kiss envelop me, hoping that, in time, the answers will become clear.

I must have dozed off. Likely, a food coma from the Bobby burger. I go to the kitchen and pour myself a glass of water, then reach for my phone. I need to call Sam, see if she resolved the crisis she started telling me about.

I sit down and grab a cookie from Aunt Pearl's stash then tap Sam's number. Nothing happens. I try again. Weird. The phone has battery power but the call is not going through. Maybe something is wrong on Sam's end. I type in a text asking her to call but get an error message. I feel a tingle.

Out of the corner of my eye I sense movement near the window and turn my head.

The sill is coated in an inch-and-a-half of snow, swirling flurries quickly padding the piling. I stand up and look outside, stunned at what I'm witnessing. There's a tempest outside.

While I slept, the storm Aunt Pearl warned us about has arrived.

I grab my phone and note the time. I've been sleeping for over an hour. My nerves ratchet up. The problem with the phone service is on my end. The cell towers must be down.

Thank heavens the lights are still working. Hopefully the cables are underground and I'll be okay. I make a mental note to grab all the blankets in the house and put them in my room. Just in case.

I hear the wind howling. The lamppost on the sidewalk casts a heavenly glow as heavy flakes blow horizontally, setting the foundation for sizable drifts. Not a car or human in sight.

It's beautiful. Breathtakingly so. Everything is covered in a blanket of fresh, undriven snow. The stillness is whole.

I'm stranded but not panicky. I'm in Vermont in December, surrounded by a magnificent snowfall. I'm indoors, safe and warm. What's the worst that can happen? Miss Christmas in Manhattan? I have no plans, no one to spend it with.

The movie, *Misery*, comes to mind and I force the thought away. Last thing I need is to fill my own head with Stephen King plots.

I recall the New York Blizzard of 2010. I know how dangerous a white-out can be. Elderly become homebound, sometimes without heat or provisions. The roads become perilous, leading to spinouts and pileups.

Car accidents.

Oh no.

Calvin.

I step back from the window and begin pacing the living room, unsure what to do. Night is falling and I have no way to check on Calvin. And what about Aunt Pearl? I don't know exactly where she lives and couldn't walk there in this weather even if I did. I hope she's all right but suspect she's been through this a few times before. Actually, she predicted this storm.

I consider bundling up and fighting my way to the house up the road to use their

phone to call Calvin and Pearl but nix the idea. Surely, the neighbors use the same cell tower.

I'm beside myself. I let Calvin walk out with that awful strain between us.

"Please keep him safe," I pray, softly, a tear forming in the corner of my eye.

And just like that, the door opens.

Chapter Thirty

Calvin

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

I have one foot in the door when Caroline pounces on me. She's hugging my torso like she's the only thing keeping me grounded.

"Are you okay?" she asks into the crook of my neck. Her voice sounds like she's been crying.

I hold onto her, "I am now."

Snow is blowing inside, the wind something fierce. I'm about to close the door when Caroline looks past me. "Who is that?"

An SUV with snow chains idles in the street. It blinks its headlights and rolls away. The emblem on the side is hard to decipher in the storm.

"Sheriff Benson. He brought me home."

Caroline closes the door, and steps back, her face pained as she touches my cheek. Heat rises to my face and the pull to kiss her rushes through me. I will not make that mistake again.

Her fingers come away with a smear of red. I recognize blood when I see it.

"You're hurt," she says, studying the rest of me. "Where is your first aid kit?"

"Hall bathroom, behind the mirror."

She hurries off.



I pound my feet on the small rug, flakes falling by the wayside. I look like Sasquatch, covered in snow. I peel off my wet coat and hat and untie my boots, leaving them beside the door, grateful to have a warm house for refuge. I'll never complain about summer heat again.

Caroline returns with the first aid kit. "I'll make you some hot tea and you can tell me everything."

I follow her into my kitchen. It's strange coming home to find a woman waiting for me, making me tea.

Minutes later, I'm cupping the mug between my hands, a Band-Aid strip on my cheek. "I spun out. I'm extremely lucky that I wasn't seriously hurt."

Her eyes are like saucers.

"Someone in another car must have called emergency services. When Sheriff Benson arrived on the scene, I was in my SUV on the shoulder of the highway. He gave me a lift. Two other people were taken to the hospital."

I considered asking the sheriff to drive me there as well so I could help the wounded but I recognize my own trauma symptoms. I'm shaken to the core. I'm in no condition to assist anyone. Sheriff Benson agreed to contact the ER nurse back in New York, explaining what happened. Turns out her decision to get coverage for me was the right one.

Caroline is flitting around me. I've never seen her like this. She's brimming with nervous energy, moving back and forth between the kitchen counter and the table. With two hospitalizations in recent months, I have seen her vulnerable but those were rare sightings. She's strong, tough, independent. This behavior is very much out of character.

I tell her more about the ordeal. The Honda losing control, my own car hitting the black ice, sending me into a dizzying spin. She listens intently to every word, shaking her head at times.

I answer Caroline's few questions like about my car which will get towed once it's safe for a truck to venture out there. When she finally sits down across from me, she places her hand on top of mine. "I'm so relieved you're okay." A tear escapes the corner of her eye. My heart clenches.

I squeeze her hand, glancing at the mug. "Can I get something a little stronger?"

She lifts a curious brow. "Coffee, maybe?" She stands, scrutinizing the kitchen, ostensibly in search of a coffee maker.

I chuckle. "A near death experience warrants somethingmuchstronger. Like a shot of my best bourbon. You in?"

"I didn't see a liquor cabinet anywhere. Secret stash, huh?" I can tell she's calmer.

"Never told you about Aunt Pearl's drinking problem?"

Caroline's eyes scrutinize mine and I grin. When she laughs heartily, all I want is to hear that sound for the rest of my natural life.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Caroline

Almost got it open," Calvin says. He's squatting down, sleeves rolled up. He's fiddling with a cabinet at the bottom of a bookshelf at the far end of the room. I'm on the sofa, the blanket over me once more. The room is a perfect temperature, the fire

still burns in the hearth. Snow is coming down in droves.

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I'm still shaking from everything he shared. I can't help but go to a dark place, thinking of Bernard and his heart attack on the dance floor, week-long coma, the call in the middle of the night on the singular time I agreed to get a real night's sleep. As if he couldn't depart while I was by his side.

"Must be a serious addiction, Aunt Pearl has," I say, trying to get out of my own head.

Calvin is still working the combination lock. "You have no idea."

"Maybe we should get her into a twelve-step program."

Calvin looks up, his face straight. "Not a bad idea. I'll let you tell her."

He's funny.

I picture having a heart-to-heart with Aunt Pearl. You know Calvin's liquor cabinet you've been breaking into? Well . . .

Calvin focuses once more on the cabinet. From this vantage point, I have a terrific view of his arm muscles. For a guy in his mid-fifties he has it going on. I close my eyes conjuring up a more delicious image.

"What have you got there?"

While I was daydreaming about Calvin in a snug tank top, working out in my home gym, he snuck up on me.

He's gesturing at the photo album on the sofa beside me.

"I sort of did an extensive tour of your house. Sorry." Though, truthfully I'm not sorry. I unearthed some treasures.

"I've got nothing to hide," he says with an amused smirk. I can't tell if he's flirting with me. After how we both reacted to The Kiss, he'll probably never go for it again. Likely, for the best. It threw me for a loop. In all fairness, how many more emotions can I manage in a single day?

"Then you won't mind if when we're done with this epic photo album, we move onto the vinyl album I found labeled, Cal's Hippie Cover." I point to the 45 on the coffee table. The cover is decorated with what looks like sixties bumper stickers. Flowers, peace signs.

He laughs, downs a shot and pours two more, setting the bottle on a side table. I can't blame him for drinking that down so fast. He just went through a terrifying experience. "Haven't looked at either in decades. I'll do it if you promise not to make fun of me."

"Of course."

He sits beside me, hands me a shot glass with golden liquid "This is my best bourbon. Straight from Kentucky."

He clinks his glass with mine. "To the blizzard of the century."

I sip the drink and grimace. Not my thing. I open the photo album to where I left off.

The first photo is priceless. I take a closer look. It's Calvin in his early twenties, standing on a stage, somewhere with green hills in the background, a tambourine-

toting woman with long blond hair at his side. She only has eyes for him. Calvin's mouth is open mid-song, the mic on a stand between them. It looks like a scene from *A Star is Born*, hippie style.

I can't hold in my laughter.

"What happened to not making fun of me?"

"Oops. But come on."

The next half hour is filled with snort laughs, pricey alcohol, and unbelievable relief.

Things are becoming vividly clear. I suppose that's what happens when confronted with life-and-death occurrences. I lost Bernard. Come hell or high water, I will not lose Calvin, too.

I lean back and sigh, feeling a pleasant warmth from the whiskey and the company. Calvin stands and stretches, his shirt riding up slightly to reveal a sliver of toned abdomen. He catches me looking and grins.

"See something you like?"

I redden. "You wish."

He moves to another cabinet and gets it open with a triumphant click. "Ah, here we go."

"What is it?"

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:02 pm*

He pulls out a dusty old record player. “Thought we could use some music.”

He sets it up and lifts the 45 from the table, carefully placing it on the turnstile. Soon the room fills with the crackling sound of vinyl.

Love the One Your With

But it’s not Crosby, Stills, Nash, or Young.

Calvin extends a hand to me. “Dance with me?”

“Is that you?” I ask, amazed.

He gives me an unsure look. “Maybe.”

I hesitate for a moment, but then I take his hand. He pulls me up and into his arms, holding me close as we sway to the music. The warmth of his body seeps into mine, and I feel a sense of peace I haven’t felt in a long time.

As the song ends, we don’t pull away. Instead, we stand there, holding each other, letting the moment linger. It feels right. It feels like home. And for the first time in a long time I’m not afraid of what comes next.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Calvin

Every cell in my body is on high alert. My breath slows, my heart rate soars. Caroline's eyes are searching mine like she is asking an unspoken question. What is this unexpected thing between us?

I recognize the query because it's the same as mine. The pull to kiss her is intense and I know I'm about to lose the internal battle. Jeopardize years of friendship for a moment of desire?

I'm right back where we were earlier this afternoon. The kiss I've been kicking myself about in the hours since.

My own voice is crooning in the background, the song slowing to its end. Caroline is back in my arms, a default where left to our own devices, we revert to this state of being.

The shouting in my head quickly turns to a whisper and I draw her closer, inch my head lower. Caroline stiffens a bit but rather than move away, she closes her eyes, licks her lips.

Arf!

We pause a beat, neither of us seemingly ready to move away.

"Do you have a dog?" she whispers, her halting breath reaching my lips.

"I don't think so."

Caroline's eyes open. The flicker of a smile touches the corners of her mouth. All I want is to kiss every millimeter of that smile.

Arf!



I step back, take a breath, trying to regain my bearings and bring my heart rate to normal levels. Caroline has that effect on me.

I squint out the window, Caroline at my side. The storm isn't letting up. The sole car on the street is halfway buried by the snow drifts.

Caroline points, the tip of her finger tapping the frosted glass. "What is that?"

I take a closer look and am stunned. Something is moving in the snow a few feet from the window. It has a tail. That's no squirrel.

In a heartbeat I have my boots on.

"Be careful," Caroline says over my shoulder.

I grab my wet coat and lope over the snowbank that accumulated just outside the front door. I trudge across my lawn, leaving foot-deep boot prints in my wake. Caroline is back at the window, gesturing wildly at the space ahead of me.

There, in a self-made snowy den in front of the crawl space beneath the house, sits a puppy, its alabaster fur blending in with the driven snow. Only its dark eyes and nose stand in contrast to the surroundings. It's shivering like a leaf.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

I scoop up the little pup, place it under my coat and hurry back inside.

Caroline is waiting with a blanket. “Oh wow. The poor thing,” she says, swaddling the trembling pup. “Do you recognize him?”

I shake my head. “No tags. Could belong to a neighbor. He must have been hiding under the house when the snow started. It’s a miracle he’s alive.”

I say, “We need to scan him for a chip.”

“Sure it’s a he?”

I turn him over. “Yup, a he.”

“He looks like a Labrador Retriever.”

I find my phone on the sofa, ready to call the nearest vet, then remember there’s no service.

Caroline sits on the floor next to the fireplace and sets the pup in her lap. He’s still shaking.

I go to the kitchen and fill a bowl with water, then find a pack of cheese Aunt Pearl put in the fridge. I cut up a slice of mozzarella into small pieces and bring them and the water to the living room. The pup gobbles up the cheese in an instant and I go to get more. By the time I’m back, the pup’s tail is wagging and he's happily slurping the water.

I shake my head in amazement. “That’s one resilient doggie.”

Caroline gets a funny look on her face. “Resilient.” She pauses. “Until we find his owner, how about we call him Rezy?”

“Love it.”

I sit on the floor next to the pair and pull the throw off the sofa, wrapping all of us beneath it. Caroline cuddles close. The record is playing, *Can't Take My Eyes Off You*. It's the cover I did of the Four Seasons ballad, a very long time ago. It's the last track but I'm not getting up to flip the record because Caroline and Rezy are dozing off. And never in my life have I been this comfortable in my own home.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Caroline

My eyes flutter open to the sound of crackling tinder. We're still on the floor, the embers dying out. Rezy is on my lap, Calvin under the throw beside me, his eyes are closed, his breath coming evenly. He looks so peaceful and painfully handsome.

A shiver runs through me and I worry the dog is cold again. I carefully slip out, toss a couple of logs into the dying fire and it quickly comes back to life. When I turn back, Calvin is watching me, a tired smile on his lips.

“Why did you buy this place?” I ask, softly, hoping Rezy doesn't wake as well. “It's pretty big for one man.” I know how I sound given that I live alone in an apartment that could easily house ten.

Calvin gently strokes Rezy's fur. The pup is knocked out. Getting stuck in a blizzard can have that effect.

“My parents lived a few miles away. When this house came up for sale, I figured it’d be the ideal retreat from the city. But as it happens, I hardly ever get away.”

“Sounds like Aunt Pearl isn’t too happy about that.”

“Understatement.”

“What about your folks?” I ask.

He shakes his head, his eyes downcast. “It’s just my dad now. Mom passed on a few years ago.”

“Bobby burgers.”

He nods.

How did I not know about his mom? “I’m sorry.” And ashamed.

All the time I’ve known Calvin he’s been taking care of me in one way or another. He knows my sob stories and my medical status. But what do I really know about him?

Other than he’s kind, generous, an outstanding doctor. And with the flickering shadows of the flames on his face, much more handsome than I ever realized.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

“After Mom died, Dad moved in with my sister in Burlington. At least Aunt Pearl is still here in Sugarbush Falls.”

“You’re lucky to have her,” I say, selecting another record, then carefully setting the needle in the groove. I recognize the song and begin to hum the notes to Unforgettable. I always loved Nat King Cole's soulful voice.

I sit back down next to Calvin. He scoots a bit closer, placing the throw over my left shoulder. Rezy doesn't stir.

I can tell Calvin is in a talking mood and I won't interrupt him with my singing.

“My family tried to lure me back to Vermont from the day I moved away,” Calvin says. Mom always said I'm her small-town boy.” His expression turns somber and I take his hand in mine, careful not to disturb the snoring pup.

“With my insane schedule, the last time I was back home was for a long weekend two summers ago.”

I wonder if he feels guilty for leaving his parents behind but choose not to ask him. I listen.

“I miss being on skis, riding my snowmobile, the town's camaraderie, even if it does border on nosiness.”

“Then why did you leave? Was it the excitement of the big city that drew you there?”

He looks off as if remembering. “I had a girlfriend.”

My ears perk up and for whatever reason, my hackles rise as well. Something akin to jealousy hits me. It’s absurd. This girlfriend had to be in his life decades ago. “The woman in the photo?”

He nods. “Jenny. When things ended, all I wanted was to get as far from Sugarbush Falls as possible.”

I’ll bet my inheritance that their musical duo ended along with the relationship.

“And now?”

He pours himself another shot. In all the time I’ve known Calvin, I’ve never seen him down more than one or two drinks. I’m losing count tonight.

“Now, I’m getting old,” he says, draining the beverage, his words slurring. “Even if I’m gonna be a dad.”

He leans his head back against the seat of the sofa. He’s tipsy, maybe more than tipsy. His mind is cloudy. Or I misheard him.

Rezy opens an eye and Calvin laughs, the kind of oversaturated laugh that comes with several shots of Kentucky’s finest bourbon. He strokes Rezy and the pup falls back to sleep.

“For a second there I thought you said you’re going to be a dad.”

Calvin shifts his weight and is now facing me, the laughter fading. He glides the back of his fingers along my cheek and I’m certain I’ll melt from the tenderness of the gesture. I look up into his whiskey-filled eyes.

“Caroline.”

My name on his lips sounds like a song. His breath smells sweet. It’s intoxicatingly sexy. “Say it again.”

I’m staring at his lips like they are the perfect instrument.

“Caroline.” His voice is buttery, his eyes at half-mast.

I shift my body closer. And brush my bottom lip against his.

Like a dam bursting open, Calvin’s mouth is on mine, his passion matching my own. A passion that’s been growing in me since I saw him in my lobby, wearing a necklace made of teeth.

I give myself over with a fire I haven’t felt since my youth.

His kisses turn slow, methodical and I seriously can’t get enough. I want to stay in this cocoon for an eternity.

When we break apart, I lean my head on his shoulder.

“I swore I wouldn’t do that again,” Calvin mumbles.

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I know precisely what he means. One kiss could be deemed a mistake but two mind-blowing kisses? Two is no accident.

I sense his chest rise and fall, his breath coming in rhythmic puffs. He's sleeping. Rezy is sleeping. I close my eyes, wondering. If two kisses are no accident, then what exactly are they?

### Chapter Thirty-Four

Caroline

Something is wet. I jerk awake and find a damp spot in my lap. "Rezy!" Eww.

Calvin doesn't stir. He is either knocked out or passed out. Not sure which. Glad I know him well enough to be sure he's no alcoholic.

I carefully stand up and glance out the window. The ambient light from the streetlamp tells me several more inches have fallen while we slept. I glance at the clock. It's shortly after nine p.m.

I go upstairs, grabbing my phone on the way. I shower, grateful for the abundance of hot water and steam rising from the radiators. I dig into my suitcase and pull out the flannel pjs. For some reason, they feel like the best option right now. If Evie could see me now, her jaw would hit the floor. Flannel is not my go-to fabric. But the roomy, plaid green top and pull-tie pants are arguably as soft as a baby blanket.

Not that I've been around babies much. Since I married after my child-bearing years,



I never gave much thought to parenting. That's not to say I don't like children. I've dedicated much of my time to Bernard's charity for kids with special needs. And Evie's and Sam's kids are terrific. But it wasn't in the cards for me and I'm fine with it.

I open my mail app and scroll through the emails that arrived before the storm—ones I hadn't had a chance to read yet. I do so despite knowing how my doctor feels about avoiding stressful situations. But he's passed out on the sofa.

Three emails from Sam. The first one is a long list of issues and questions regarding The Shining Stars Gala. Several of these things can be found in the notes I sent her. I was sure she was capable of managing this. But I can't blame her. Sam has been overwhelmed with her own life and warned me as much.

Still, I believed it was a win-win for her to take the helm on the project. It would keep me from dealing with Bernard's kids while allowing me to manage my stress levels during the lawsuit. In turn, Sam would find distraction from her challenges while earning a hefty paycheck. Perhaps I railroaded her.

I draft a response that will be sent when the WiFi returns. I offer to let her off the hook, that I can find someone who has the time to deal with the high-end event. The truth is, if I can't locate a replacement, I'll have no choice but to cancel. I will not run things this year. It's too much for me right now.

I let out a lungful of air, releasing the anxiety creeping up in my chest. I set down the phone and take a look in the mirror. The pjs top hits my mid-thigh and I wonder if it was part of the joke to whoever gave it to me. It's huge. I shed the pants. Maybe Calvin will think it's sexy.

When did things flip from buddies to something more? I know we're headed for dangerous waters. But if we do get pulled into the maelstrom, one thing is certain. I'm

going to ride the wave as long as I possibly can.

I open the door to the bedroom and hear music but it's different than before. Another Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young song. Yet, this one isn't coming off vinyl. It's live.

Teach your children well

It reminds me of the odd comment Calvin made downstairs about being a dad. Clearly, the musings of a guy with a high blood alcohol level.

The chords, both upbeat and melancholic, reach me. Calvin is awake, beckoning to me with his guitar. I quickly dab on some lipstick and mascara, make up my mind to leave the pjs pants on the bed, and hurry to the stairs. I'm ready for my private concert.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Calvin

I wake up on the sofa, covered with a throw, my head spinning. Which is always better than pounding, a feeling I recall with disdain. I haven't drank this much since college. The room is cooler now without the fire but thankfully the steam is still coming up nicely.

Rezy's tiny body rises and falls on the floor at my feet. Like all babies, he sleeps a lot. Only this one survived a Vermont blizzard.

I hear water running through the pipes, telling me Caroline is upstairs showering. It's an old house but honestly, I like the charm.

I bought it from the previous owner with the furniture which is well-maintained but

dated. Doing so saved me time and money. I analyze the rug, standing lamp and armchairs, relieved that Caroline isn't offended by the lived-in feel of the place. She's used to far more luxury. But this house could be a real familyhome. It may not be glamorous but it will be perfect for a kid to explore. My kid.

I still can't believe I'm going to be a dad.

I stand, at first unsteady, then go down to the basement and find what I'm looking for. My guitar is in remarkably good condition. Using my tuner, I tighten the strings at the headstock and base. I love this instrument. I saved over an entire summer, delivering papers and working at the Dairy Barn, to buy it.

It's true what they say. We cherish the things we work hard for more than those that come easy.

I climb back upstairs and find Rezy gnawing on the wooden leg of the sofa. I lean the guitar against the wall and lift the pup before he can do any real damage. "Had a nice nap, little guy?"

Soon enough I'll have a kid running around, tearing my place apart. At least my place in the city.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

I set Rezy on the rug and sit in one of the chairs, grabbing hold of my guitar and softly play one of my favorite songs.

The last time I strummed my vintage Gibson was 1990. I know that because I put it away the day I walked from the band. The same day Jenny turned down my marriage proposal. It sparked a whole lot of wild pivots in my life.

The song, I've heard, is about a strained father-son relationship. I choose to interpret the lyrics as a ballad of paternal love.

Is it possible to love a child I barely know? My heart is full just thinking about Chacha. He will be arriving in a few weeks. I can't wait.

It occurs to me that this environment would be much easier for Chacha to adapt to than a bustling metropolitan city. He's lived in a tiny village his entire short life. But living here isn't in the cards. My life is in New York.

Rezy stops licking his paws and begins twirling in circles. I think he likes the music. He's proving worthy of the name Caroline bestowed on him.

The creak of the wooden stairs draws my attention and I stop playing. The sight of bare legs and pedicured toes makes me catch my breath. As Caroline descends, I notice her plaid shirt. It reaches her thighs. It's showstopping.

I realize it's a pajama top and my pulse kicks into overdrive. The way the soft fabric clings to her curves has me struggling to remember how to breathe. There's something incredibly sexy about seeing her like this, out of her usual city-perfect,

high-maintenance armor. She still radiates a controlled elegance, but here, in this moment, there's an undeniable earthiness that makes it impossible to look away.

"Why did you stop?" she asks, coming to stand before me. It takes every ounce of restraint to look anywhere but at her shapely legs.

I clear my throat and continue playing, this time adding vocals. It's been a while since I've played for other people. It's been a lifetime since I serenaded a woman.

Caroline sits on the floor, beaming at Rezy who is back in the throes of tail chasing.

"That was lovely. You are so talented. Is there anything you don't do well?"

I chuckle. "Lots of things but none that I'll share with you. I prefer to keep the illusion alive."

She smiles. "Seriously, though. How did you get so accomplished at music?"

"Well, before I decided on medicine I wanted to be the next Bob Dylan."

She raises a brow. "Lofty goals."

I shrug.

"Why the switch to medicine?"

No point in beating around the bush. Despite the many stages that contributed to the shift, I answer in a nutshell. "Got my heart broken."

I don't think I've ever admitted that aloud. You know how people say they are open books? Well, I'm a closed one. Not intentionally so. It's how I'm wired.

“Oh, sorry to hear it,” Caroline says, her frown indicating her sincerity.

I put the guitar aside. “I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“For what?”

I glance at the sofa. “Passing out on you. Not very classy.”

“It’s okay. You dodged a bullet out there.” We both instinctively look outside. The flakes are as thick as ever.

The room turns silent, a strange atmosphere taking its place.

“How about something a bit livelier?” Caroline asks, gesturing to the guitar.

“Any requests?”

She thinks a minute. “How about Uptown Girl?”

I chuckle at the choice of Billy Joel’s ode to Christie Brinkley. I pick up the guitar, think a moment and begin to strum the chords.

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“You know it by heart?” she asks.

“I learned to play by ear.” I don’t mention that following my move to New York I was offered a contract to tour with another up-and-coming performer. While the singer is long gone, I’ve remained in regular touch with the agent who’s gone on to represent some of the world’s top talent.

“Duly impressed.”

I hum the tune. “If you sing along, I’ll match the key.”

“I don’t sing.”

I stop playing. “Then I don’t play.”

She places her hands on her hips. “Hard ball, huh?”

I nod. “Yup.”

Caroline begins singing shyly, a demeanor I haven’t yet observed with this complex woman. “Uptown girl. She’s been living in her uptown world . . .”

I keep my face smiley, as though she’s the next Taylor Swift. Caroline goes along with it, gaining confidence with each lyric. But her hesitation was valid. This beautiful uptown girl is tone deaf. Wildly so. It's like a foghorn and a kazoo had a love child and decided to sing karaoke.

By the time song ends, she's using a fireplace prod as her mic, belting at the top of her lungs. I can only pray for laryngitis to kick in. Mean, I know but—wow.

Caroline makes eye contact with me, making me regret my unkind thoughts. Her cheeks are red with exhilaration, the look on her face one of accomplished satisfaction.

“That was great,” she says, somewhat out of breath.

“Agreed. Want to hear one of my own songs?”

I've never played it for another soul unless you count Pedro. Caroline will be the first. But it will be a win-win. I'll get to share my music with her and since she doesn't know the lyrics, she won't be able to sing along.

I begin and the expression on her face is precious. I realize, in this moment, I could listen to hers all day long. Everyone has imperfections and I'm overjoyed to know what Caroline's are.

Like AC/DC blaring from speakers at full volume, it hits me hard. I'm falling for my friend.

Hook, line, and sinker.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

Caroline

When the road gets tough and the nights are long,

There's a hand to hold, where we all belong.



We may not share blood, but our bond is strong,

In this heart of mine, you're where you belong.

'Cause friends are the family we choose,

With you, there's no way to lose.

Through the highs and the lows, we find our way,

Side by side, come what may.

Laughter and tears, we've seen it all,

Through every stumble, you've answered the call.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

No need for words, 'cause you understand,

In this crazy world, you're my right hand.

We'll write our story, day by day,

With every moment, we'll find our way.

No need for blood, no need for name,

'Cause in my heart, it's all the same.

'Cause friends are the family we choose,

With you, there's nothing we can't pursue.

Through the storms and the calm, we find our way,

Side by side, come what may. Side by side, come what may.

I'm speechless. I swipe a tear from my face. The silence returns to the room.

Calvin is lost in his own world. I'm not sure what the song means to him but to me, it's Grammy-worthy.

I have no blood family. It's precisely what the lyrics said. My friends are my family. Evie, Paul, the other Fab Fifty gals—Barbie, Sam, even Mo. She is the sister I never

get along with. Okay, more like the evil stepsister. But still.

And then there's Calvin.

His mind is off somewhere, giving me a chance to take in his strong jaw line, graying sideburns. strong yet gentle hands.

This man has been there for me from the day we met in the ER. He brought me here to recuperate, cheered me up. Isn't that what family is for?

"So, what did you think?" Calvin asks, putting the guitar aside and coming over to the sofa.

I rise from the floor and join him, swallowing hard. "It was perfect."

The edges of his lips lift skyward, spurring butterflies in my belly.

"It's called Side by Side," he says. Then, "I've been lucky to have loving parents."

I sense there's more. I wait.

"Friends, that's been harder. You know the kind that always have your back."

I want to reinforce that I'm his friend but the words pause on my tongue. The last few days have been both eye-opening and confusing. Calvin is more than a friend. How much more, I don't really know. There's a lot about him I have yet to uncover.

He must sense my increasingly pensive state, and we both linger in our silent reverie. I'm a widow with baggage; Calvin, a bachelor with more going on in his life than I am privy to.

A munching sound startles me and I glance downward.

Rezy is chewing on Calvin's shoe, breaking the mood. Thankfully. What's happening between me and Calvin will become clear one way or another. What I need now is light and airy.

I lift Rezy and explain that I'm taking him outside to do his business. Best to train him even during a snowstorm. His real owners will thank me later.

When I return, I dry off Rezy's feet and find Calvin at the kitchen table, a game of Scrabble open before him.

"Ready for a friendly competition?" he asks, flipping the tiles over.

I'm grateful for the creative tactic to get us back into our comfort zone.

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“Friendly? No way. We need something to wager.” I pause to think. “Whoever loses has to shovel the walkway.”

He smirks. “You’re not going to do it no matter who wins. That’s my job.”

“Old-fashioned gentleman?”

“I’ve been called worse,” he says, smiling.

“Then what should we bet?”

He takes a moment then lifts a finger. “Got it. Loser has to make a snow angel in the front yard.”

“What’s so awful about that?”

“In his or her underwear.”

I look at his face, his game face. “You’re serious.”

“As a frozen *derrière*.” His eyes burn through me.

I clear my throat. I stick out my hand and we shake. “Bring it on!”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Calvin

The game board is filled with tiles. We haven't finished but we're both exhausted. We decide to call it a tie.

Caroline says, "I guess no snow angels, then?"

"I'm okay with that," I say, though I'm devising a plan as we speak.

I stand. "We can finish in the morning. That is, if the roads aren't clear yet."

Outside, the snow is slower than before but still coming at a steady pace. The odds that I'll be able to drive back to New York in the morning are slim.

Caroline yawns and clears away our plates of cookie crumbs and emptied glasses of milk. "Well, I guess I'll call it a night," she says.

"Good night."

We both make for the doorway at the same time, our bodies squeezing closer together.

"Excuse me," I say but neither one of us budes. We look at each other, our gaze lingering. My entire body is on fire. I wait in silent anticipation for her to say something. Something about friendship and family. Something about us. About the song I wrote years before meeting Caroline that proved prophetic.

"See you in the morning," she says, without moving an inch.

"Good night," I say, frozen in place. "Your room or mine?"

Caroline's jaw drops. "W-what?"

The words were not intended as they sound but now that they're out there, I can't help but hope.

Her face is flushed, her eyes wide and . . . curious.

Knowing I need to reel it in, I look away and glance down at our four feet. Rezy is on hind legs, snug in the space between us “I mean, do you want Rezy in your room or mine?”

“Oh.” Caroline's face turns two shades redder.

Rezy lets out a tiny bark. It's both jarring and adorable. He's staring up at us.

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“Hungry,” I groan, not referring to the pup . . . or to food.

“I’ll grab him a slice of bread.”

“I’ll get it.” It takes all my energy to move my legs.

“Your room, if that’s okay,” Caroline says, answering the previous question.

Like a magnet, I return to the same spot and drop a few pieces of bread several feet away. Rezy goes after them, leaving nothing between me and Caroline. I keep my gaze downward, fearing what I’ll do if our eyes meet.

“Sure,” I say, my voice gruff with desire.

“Cal.”

I hold my breath. She tilts her head up.

And she pecks me on the cheek.

I’m shaken, disappointed. Wanting more.

We’ve crossed the friend line not once but twice. She must see the storm in my eyes. Her lips are a hair away.

Finally, our eyes lock. Time slows down. Caroline's pupils are dilated, her breath quick.



One word escapes my lips. “Please.”

Her hands reach up, her fingers digging into my hair. And then?—

Caroline's mouth is on mine. Devouring mine. My arms wrap around her waist and I'm lost once again, completely consumed by the warmth of her body, the taste of her lips, and the undeniable force that is this incredible woman.

The woman I love.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Caroline

I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling. After the socks-blowing kiss in the kitchen, I forced myself upstairs and into my room, knowing if we went any further, I'd surely regret it.

My body is ready for sleep, but my mind has other ideas.

What was I thinking, making the first move to kiss him after getting back on track as Scrabble-playing buddies?

When Calvin asked, “Your room or mine,” I was sure I suffered an actual heart attack. But when our lips met, the passion was all encompassing. And yet it was more than that. Kissing Calvin feels less like lust and more like— that other L word.

How is this happening?

I'm no less confused than I was after our first kiss at the gazebo but I am resigning myself to the fact that something is changing, rapidly. Whether it's good or not is yet

to be determined.

I pull the comforter up to my chin. In the cool room, burrowed beneath the covers, I ponder what Calvin is doing right now. Is he also wide awake or sleeping like a baby, Rezy cuddling next to him?

If only it were me.

Icicles shimmer out my window. I can't see far in the dark but what is visible is pristine and peaceful but not lonely. Calvin is in the next room.

I close my eyes in search of answers. Bernard is there, behind my lids. He's not angry or hurt. He's happy for me. Maybe my mind is simply conjuring up what I want to see. But Bernard was a good man, a generous soul, and to my great fortune, my husband, even if it was only for a short while.

I wait for the guilt to take over but it doesn't come. I'm proud of my subconscious. I was a good wife to Bernard. I mourned him. But I'm still here and deserve happiness.

Still, my life is a mess with so many things still unsure. The lawsuit, my health. There's no way I'm thinking clearly now. It may not feel like it, but my attraction to Calvin may be a human result of grief and loneliness.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

I tell myself to stop going down that rabbit hole, to let in a little bit of joy.

The push-and-pull of my emotions is more than I can bear right now. I came here for respite not more drama.

Calvin has, at most, one day left here. I don't want to spend it mulling over unanswerable questions. As the image of a smiling Bernard fades away, I tumble into a blessedly dreamless slumber.

### Chapter Thirty-Nine

Calvin

Hey, come look!" I say, knocking on Caroline's door. I'm trying to keep my tone upbeat and causal. I'm terrified she will have the same post-kiss reaction as before. Namely, pushing me away.

She opens the bedroom door in her pajama top, hair unbrushed, and sexy as all heck.

"What time is it?" she asks, rubbing her eyes.

"Ten-fifteen."

"What?"

I show her my phone and she blinks rapidly in disbelief. "I never sleep this late."

“It’s the magic of Vermont air. Have you looked outside yet?”

She shakes her head.

I walk past her and note the unmade bed. My bed. I’m using the guest room. Sadly.

Caroline approaches the window. “Wow!”

The ground is cloaked in a thick, untouched layer of snow that sparkles like a field of diamonds under the pale winter sun. The sky is a deep blue, the color of Aunt Pearl's spring cornflowers. Footprints from yesterday have vanished, leaving the world freshly frosted and pristine. Snow-draped trees stand tall and still, their branches heavy with a fresh dusting. Across the road, a lone deer cautiously steps through the drifts, its breath visible in the crisp air. It’s a winter wonderland.

“It’s beautiful,” she says, a look of awe on her face. For some reason, I’m proud. Proud of my hometown for offering this gift to my friend.

We stand in reverential silence until I break it.

“Must be close to two feet with drifts double that.”

She stays quiet, worrying me. I go to the closet and rummage through, finding ski pants and gloves, a pair of thick socks, and my old ski jacket. “Here,” I say, handing them to her. “Put these on.”

She lifts a brow. I can’t tell if it’s disdain for the old attire. At least I pulled her from her thoughts.

“Um, I have clothes.”

“You’ll need these for what we’re doing. Trust me.”

She grins, making my heart leap. “And what exactly are we doing?” she asks.

“Remember our Scrabble wager?”

“Which no one won.”

I nod. “Which means we both have a job to do. I’m feeling generous so I’ll forgo the underwear angels. Get dressed. See you downstairs in five.”

“Five?” she touches her hair subconsciously then nods. “I can do five.”

I’m impressed. She’s going with the flow. I leave her to it, not bothering to hide the skip in my step.

Ten minutes later, we are outside on what was once my lawn. It’s now a trail for cross-country skiing. Each step leaves a crisp imprint, the soft crunch echoing in the serene stillness. Caroline stops to catch snowflakes, drifting from the evergreens, onto her tongue.

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Side by side, we lie on our backs, the sensation strange and delightful as we wave our arms like eagles in flight, both of us laughing like toddlers.

I stand carefully, then help Caroline to her feet. The angels are perfection, the wings wide and deep.

I dig into my coat and pull out my phone. "Smile," I say, taking a selfie of the two of us with our snow angels in the background. Rather than smile, we both make silly faces.

I put the phone away and see my boot has come untied. I bend down to fix it.

"Send me the photo, please." she says.

"Will do."

I stand back up and am instantly met with a snowball in my face.

"Oomph!"

I'm startled and spit out a mouthful of slush. I spot Caroline hiding behind my snow-laden blueberry bush, furiously rearming.

"You have no idea what you just started!" I shout, "I'm the snowball king!"

"Get ready to be dethroned, Doctor Sinclair!" she retorts, pitching two more fast balls at me. One makes contact with the edge of my coat.

I trudge behind a pine tree and get to work, dodging incoming projectiles, most of which miss me. As soon as I'm ready, I race to the side of the house. I crouch behind the bush and with a snowball in each hand, I take aim at the branch above Caroline's head, heavy with inches of snow. Her head pops up and I throw the snowballs, her brow raised in surprise. She glances upward. "No!"

A pile of snow falls on Caroline's head, leaving only her nose visible. She shakes like a dog in the rain and for a moment I'm scared I went too far.

She brushes herself off, flakes steadfastly sticking to every inch of her body. And then she laughs.

Body-quaking guffaws. She's bent over in hysterics.

It's contagious and I too am caught up in the throes of laughter. I come to her, trying to catch my breath. "You look like Frosty the Snowman," I manage to say.

She points to my own frozen nose, tears running down her face. "You're Rudolph's twin."

Once our laughing attack dies down, Caroline leans over and begins rolling a ball.

I scoot away.

"Don't worry," she says. "I concede. Your throne remains intact. But it's been years since I've built a snowman."

Probably more than forty years. But saying so aloud will only earn me another ball in the face.

Instead, I help her, taking the job seriously. Thirty minutes later, we are assessing our

masterpiece. I remove my scarf and put it around the snowman's neck while Caroline finds a sturdy twig for the nose. She tilts her head, studying our work. "He needs a hat . . . and eyes."

I trudge inside, grabbing something from the kitchen and then find an old fedora in the front closet—one my father forgot and left behind years ago. I'm pretty sure he'd be happy with how it's being used.

I set the hat atop the snowman's head, pull two chocolate kisses from my pocket and use them for the eyes. When I'm done, I put my arm around Caroline.

"I'm glad you spun out on the highway," she says, a smirk on her face.

"Me too."

I wouldn't be here, otherwise, enjoying one of the happiest moments of my adult life.

Along with finding Chacha.

I should tell Caroline about him but something is holding me back. Maybe the fear that she'll think I'm off my rocker, adopting a child from Tanzania, becoming a father at my age.

One thing I'm sure of, though. I want more of Caroline in my life. A lot more.



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Chacha will be here soon and I should give her a heads-up. I'm just not in a hurry to do so. Things are perfect now. I can't recall the last time I felt this at peace. Why rock the boat?

### Chapter Forty

Caroline

My head is in the clouds. This morning, playing in the snow with Calvin, was magical. Maybe it's woo-woo, but for a short time I connected with my inner child. I mean, when was the last time I started a snowball fight? Perhaps, never.

The blizzard proved a gift. It's like Calvin and I are on our own island. Despite being outside for over an hour, we didn't see another soul. Not even a car. All we heard were the distant sounds of revving snowblowers. Granted, it's still early and the snow makes for a perfect sleep-in morning.

I'm back upstairs, thawing out after a hot shower. I'm invigorated, ready to take on the world. Exactly what Dr. Handsome prescribed for me.

I need to find a way to thank him. I give it a moment's thought and come up with an idea.

My phone beeps, startling me. Service is back, sparking a sense of disappointment. It was wonderful being completely off the grid for a little while, no one able to reach me, my troubles on pause.

I reach for my phone, seeing several messages have come through. Evie, Paul, Sam.

I shoot a quick text to Evie, telling her I'm fine, that I'll call soon. After a moment's consideration, I do the same for Sam. I'll have to phone Paul or he'll enlist the armed forces to track me down. But not right now.

Before I put the phone down, it rings.

"Hi, Sam."

"Are you crazy!"

"Hello, to you, too." It's the first time I've heard Sam raise her voice. "What's the matter?" I ask, sitting down on the bed.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you not to go places with strangers?"

I'm taken aback. "Calvin is not a stranger."

"Other than having a pretty face, what do you know about him?"

Sam can be a worrier but this seems like an overreaction. "He's my doctor. He works at the hospital. You met him."

"For five minutes! Is he married?"

"No!"

"How do you know that?"

I pause.

I hear her exhale, her tone somewhat softer. “Precisely.”

I’m sure the next question will be if he has dead bodies in his basement. But she’s made her point. Maybe I should have done some due diligence before going off with him to some remote house in the dead of winter.

“Okay, so I don’t know as much as I’d like about him. We’re relatively new friends. Oh wait, he likes animals.”

“Seriously? That’s all you’ve got?”

It feels like I’m on the witness stand, staring down a relentless prosecutor ready to tear me apart. Which could prove to be fine practice for what may soon be in my future.

I know Mama Bear Sam means well. She’s a mom to two teenagers. If she wants to add me to her worry list, I’ll take it.

To be fair, my friends met Calvin only once, at the hospital. But Calvin has been in my home several times, we shared drinks, laughs. I never saw a dark side. At some point, I need to trust my judgment.

I hit the speaker icon and plop backward onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “You do realize if Calvin was going to kill me, he would have done it by now.”

“Not funny.”

“Fine, I’ll make some quiet inquiries,” I say, more to get her off my back than anything else. “I don’t need his life story just that he’s not moonlighting as an axe murderer. Good?”

“How will you do it?”

The answer is obvious. “Paul.” He’s no longer on the payroll but he’s the perfect man for the job.

“What about him?”

In jest, I say, “I’ll have him tail Calvin the minute he gets back to New York.”

“Better than nothing,” Sam says, begrudgingly, taking me seriously.

I hear someone in the background shout, “Mooooom!”

Sam says, “Gotta run.”

Before I can say goodbye, she adds, “Text me the Vermont address. If I don’t hear from you every day, I’m calling the cops.”

My reaction is less appalled than grateful. Who else besides the Fab Fifty Club has my back like this?

Only one person. The suspect himself.

Satisfied that I've managed things, I head downstairs, this time dressed in designer sportswear that fits me like a glove, accentuating my curves and hiding my bulges.

Calvin is nowhere to be seen. Neither is Rezy. Then I hear a loud scraping and peer out the front window.

Calvin is there, shoveling a path from the front door all the way to the street. Rezy is frolicking close by, sticking to the shoveled walkway. The pup survived the Blizzard of the Century, PTSD-free.

I watch Calvin fill the scoop, tossing the payload aside. It's an intensely masculine exercise and I find myself wishing I could see the flex of his muscles. The attraction is visceral.

The first time I met Calvin at the hospital, I was fully aware of his good looks. I even flirted with him, shamelessly. But we quickly fell into a budding friendship, speaking on the phone, meeting for the occasional drink or film. It never crossed my mind that things would morph once more, this time into a potential romance.

For a guy in his late fifties, he's what some would call strapping. He must be building up a sweat because like magic, he unzips his jacket.

I break away from my voyeuristic activity and enter the kitchen. The wood cabinetry has seen better days, the appliances are at least a decade old. But it's a homey kitchen and surprisingly appealing to me. Like if I concentrate hard enough, I'd see my Nana cooking up pancakes on the griddle, her green and pink apron around her ample waist.

That memory hasn't surfaced in years.

In the pantry, I find cocoa powder, sugar, mini marshmallows and by some Aunt Pearl psychic ability, there's spray whipped cream in the fridge. I heat up a pot of milk and make two steaming cups of hot chocolate. I can't recall the last time I turned on a stove. I had people for that.

Calvin may be right about walking away from the litigation for the sake of my health but I can't simply forfeit millions at the drop of a hat. What of all the things I've become accustomed to? The home in the Hamptons, my trips abroad, nightly dinners at the best restaurants. Paul.

Remarkably, the thought doesn't scare me anymore. I'll be okay.

I'm about to beckon Calvin for hot cocoa and to share my epiphany when I hear the front door open followed by the banging of boots on the doormat. My heart flutters. It's so . . . domestic. It feels wonderful.

"Hey," he says, an already-dried Rezy close on his heels. Calvin's cheeks are red from cold, his hair sticking straight up after removing his wool cap.

I'm setting a bowl of water on the floor for the pup when right before my eyes, Calvin slips out of his plaid button-down, revealing a white tank top that's clinging to him, damp with sweat. I now know the true meaning of eye candy.

The muscles I've been fantasizing about for days are now on full display and . . . oh boy.

He's cut. By that I mean, a six pack. I've never seen Calvin without his shirt on. Now I never want to see him without it on.

When did bench pressing become a requirement for practicing medicine? I can practically see him on a calendar—each month showcasing a different version of

Calvin. Lumberjack Calvin. Firefighter Calvin. I'm fairly certain it would be a best seller, sparking a drooling epidemic.

He seems oblivious to my brazen staring and eyes the mugs. “What have we got here?”

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“Your reward for manual labor. Something to warm you up,” I say.

He approaches me, his presence palpable, the air between us charged. He takes the mug from my hand, his fingers brushing mine. “Floating marshmallows?”

I nod, raising my gaze from his chest, my voice stuck in my throat. A tiny smirk reaches his lips before sipping his drink. Okay, maybe he's not completely oblivious.

I swallow hard and we sit by the table, the Scrabble game untouched from last night. My mind whirls, and the silence between us feels thick, like we're both waiting for something. I'm praying he comes up with what to say, or it's going to get real weird, real fast.

“There's something I want to talk to you about,” Calvin finally says, bless him.

His expression is serious, and a ripple of nerves runs up my arms. Is he about to ask for more than friendship? My pulse quickens at the thought. Amazingly, I'm ready for this. I want it too.

“Sure, what's on your mind?” I say, unable to sip my drink. The anticipation builds as he pauses to frame his words.

He moves his chair next to mine, placing his arm around my shoulder. I lean my head into the crook of his neck.

“Aunt Pearl never had kids of her own,” he says, confusing me.



I regroup, quickly. “Like me,” I say, trying to hide my disappointment. Clearly, I misread the situation. Big time.

He plants a soft kiss on my temple, like it’s the most natural thing in the world. No more hesitation in his affections. I’m in seventh heaven once more, my insides turning to mush.

“Did you ever want to be a mom?”

I sit upright. “Not really.”

Calvin averts his eyes. I’m not sure why but I’m suddenly feeling on guard.

He says, “You know that thing that slipped out by the fire yesterday after I had a couple?”

I get a strange feeling in my gut. I know what he means. I haven’t forgotten. “About being a dad soon?” I laugh, awkwardly.

“It’s true.”

No playfulness in his expression.

He takes a sip of his hot chocolate, leaving a thin cocoa mustache along his top lip. “I met someone in Africa.”

“What?”

The air is sucked out of the room. I’m standing now, unsure where to go or what to do. I was certain he was going to declare something meaningful about us, a heartfelt admission, taking our relationship to a new level. Not that he has another woman in

his life!

I'm beside myself. Sam was right. How foolish I've been. A few meaningless kisses and my head went off to the races. I'm pathetic.

I hold back a sob. I need to get away from him but we're stuck in this stupid post-storm prison.

His eyes follow my movement to the door. "Oh, wait. That's not what I mean."

"It's my mistake. I just thought?—"

"Please listen."

I hold up a hand, hoping he'll stop speaking. I won't be able to contain the tears much longer.

He's beside me, gently lifting my chin. "Please, Caroline, hear me out."

A wayward tear escapes, Calvin watching its progression as it streams down my cheek. "I met a young boy named Chacha. I adopted him."

My head is spinning, trying to make sense of what he's saying. "You adopted a child?"

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He nods quickly, seemingly aware of the urgency to explain himself. “The whole thing was fast-tracked. He’ll be here in a couple of weeks.”

This must be a practical joke. Calvin is older than I am by several years. I’m speechless.

Calvin studies my face. “You don’t seem especially happy for me.”

“What were you expecting?” I say, my tone clipped.

“Sorry?”

“You’re a few years from early bird discounts and instead you’re planning playdates? The other parents will think you’re the boy’s grandfather. Won’t it be awfully embarrassing?”

His face pales. “You think I’m making a mistake?”

“That’s an understatement.” The harsh words are tumbling out of my mouth like an avalanche I can’t stop.

I don’t know why I’m so angry. It’s his life. If he wants to ruin it?—

Calvin steps back, averting his eyes. “I can give Chacha a better life.”

The child’s name is Chacha. This is real. I’m floored.

“Have you ever parented anyone?” I ask, sounding like a prosecutor.

“Sort of. Pedro.”

“Who is Pedro?” For all I know Calvin has an apartment filled with kids he never bothered telling me about.

“My late German Shepard.”

“You’re comparing dog ownership with parenting a human? Are you serious?”

Calvin sits back down, rubbing a hand through his hair. He looks distraught. “Listen, this is not how I wanted to tell you. I?—”

“Actually,” I interrupt. “You didn’t tell me. For days. You went to Africa without a word. Now you drop this on me out of the blue.” I’m on the verge of either crying or shouting.

Calvin’s face is pained. “I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Well, you did. You are.”

I feel self-righteous, defensive. Threatened.

He gets to his feet, then slips past me, shaking his head as if realization is dawning on him. Maybe I’m getting through to him about this harebrained notion.

“I don’t know what to say.” He walks to the door, shoves his feet into his wet boots. “You have everything you need. Try to get some rest. Please. I’ll come back to pick you up at the end of the week.”

My anger morphs into fear. “Where are you going?” I squeak.

“Home, Caroline.”

With that, Calvin walks out the door. Moments later, I hear the rumbling of a motor and look outside. Calvin is on his snowmobile, racing away. From me.

## Chapter Forty-One

Calvin

Aunt Pearl is fine.

Watching her stir three teaspoons of sugar into her tea, I can’t remember why I was worried. She’s been through many of these snowstorms. Maybe not as intense but multi-footers, nonetheless. She’s prepared, in better shape than people half her age. But I needed to make sure.

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We're sitting in her kitchen, painted China cups filled with steaming green tea rest on matching saucers before us. There are knick-knacks everywhere I look—an impressive collection of miniature ceramic elephants from far-flung places to enough salt-and-pepper shakers to supply the deli in town. It's cluttered but I love it. It's one of the happy places of my childhood.

I'm ashamed of how long it's been since I've visited and say as much.

Aunt Pearl waves away the comment with her signature harrumph. I've always loved her matter-of-fact, no-drama personality.

"Why so glum, Sonny?" She furrows her brow. "Where is your girlfriend?"

I don't bother explaining the relationship to my aunt. I don't understand it myself. "She's at the house. She'll be there for a few more days." Alone.

After my sudden departure from home, I rode the snowmobile to Aunt Pearl's place. I've replayed the events a hundred times, dissecting where it all went wrong. We were in sync, our chemistry undeniable. Then her head was on my shoulder and I thought I'd found the perfect moment to tell her about Chacha. That's when conversation with Caroline went south faster than a snowbird in winter.

The rapid shift took me by surprise. As soon as I shared my news, Caroline turned hot under the collar. All I wanted was to help her find peace and quiet. Instead, I brought more stress into her life.

Aunt Pearl squints her eyes. Something isn't adding up for her but she lets it go.

“Oh, I nearly forgot to tell you,” she says, a bit too cheerfully. “The hospital in Burlington opened a wing. They’re looking for doctors. I hear the pay is high due to demand.”

Aunt Pearl is sharp as a tack but subtlety isn’t her strong suit. Since I left, years ago, she has been sending me job openings, all in or near Sugarbush Falls.

“I have a job, Auntie.”

She sighs.

Then I sigh.

I’m not sure how she knows but Aunt Pearl says, “Tell me, Sonny.”

I don’t hesitate. I need someone to talk to. “When I met Caroline, there was an instant connection despite how different we are. She’s an uptown girl while I’m . . . a small-town ‘never saw a building over thirty floors till I went to college’ guy.”

Aunt Pearl fiddles with her cup, listening intently. “She’s not excited about the adoption, is she?”

Only she, my dad, and my sister, Kim, know about it. I’ll notify my job once the court hearing is behind me. I’m almost scared to jinx it.

I shake my head. “She thinks I’m making a mistake.”

“I see.” I know Aunt Pearl won’t show her hand. If she has a problem with Caroline’s opinion I won’t ever know.

“It matters to you that she’s on board with your decision.”

She says it like a therapist, leading me to some measure of clarity. I take it as a sign to give her more info, some background.

“I was on call the morning Caroline was brought into the emergency room with a broken leg.”

“Serendipity.”

Possibly. Probably.

I share about the first time I met Caroline. She was sitting in a hospital bed on the phone, telling some lady she would never speak to her again unless she got on a plane. I later learned she was talking to her best friend, Evie. But back then, I marveled that despite Caroline’s discomfort, she stayed fiercely resolute. When it was time for post-op rehab, she did it all with courage.

I’m not sure why I took such a deep interest in my new patient. She wore a wedding band, a very glitzy one. But no husband ever showed up. As I reviewed her file, I noticed her marital status was listed as widowed. After that, I made it a point to visit her room and check in after my shift. By the time of her discharge, something happened. I knew I needed to keep seeing her.

Aunt Pearl is focused on every word. It feels good to unburden myself.

She says, “It’s nice coming home to someone, seeing the lights in the window. Someone waiting.”

I swallow hard and nod.

“We laugh at the same things,” I say. It’s an odd thing to share but I need to.



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Aunt Pearl places her veiny hand on mine. “You’ll do the right thing for everyone, Sonny. Like you always do.”

“You have too much faith in me.”

She pats my hand. “Never.”

I stand. It’s time to go. I need to prep the apartment for Chacha’s arrival.

I lean over and peck my aunt’s cheek. “Thank you.”

“Follow your heart, Calvin. Wherever it leads you.”

As she sees me out, I get a call from the mechanic. My car is functional. He knows I’m a physician and sped up the work. I can get to New York and have the car’s cosmetic repairs done there.

I bid my aunt farewell, promising to visit when I return. I hop on my snowmobile and wave goodbye, her sage words still ringing in my ears.

### Chapter Forty-Two

Caroline

Men keep leaving me. Either by dying or by snowmobile.

I stare out the kitchen window. The snowman is shrunken, Calvin’s father’s hat

askew. It makes me sad. Things are changing too quickly.

I considered leaving, going back to New York but deep down I know I need the time to think. Not just about my reaction to Calvin's news or even all that happened here between us. But about my life.

Things are going to continue to change whether I like it or not.

I tried calling Calvin to apologize, leaving messages when he didn't pick up. My behavior was unforgivable. I was harsh, holier than thou. Calvin is the most giving man I know. He's selfless and generous. Are there any better qualities for a good father than those? I'll let the dust settle then try again to reach him.

I'm in desperate need of a distraction and decide to listen to a voicemail from Sam. She sounds calm—a one-eighty from the previous call—like she phoned moments after her daily yoga class. I'm fairly certain the regular practice is what's keeping my high-strung friend sane.

She tells me that she's brought things under control. The sponsors are on board, crisis averted. The Shining Stars Gala, benefiting children with special needs, is back on track. The charity was Bernard's baby and I'm grateful to hear Sam handled it without me. I'm also extremely relieved that I don't have to fire my friend. She's got this.

She shares an idea for the event, her tone turning excited. Something about a high-ticket auction. It should bring in lots of new donations. She tells me to check my email and signs off with "Namaste."

There are two attachments in the email. The event invitation is professional and eye catching. A budget breakdown lets me see how she finessed getting low cost advertising on social media. Sam is savvy. I suspect we'll clear more for the charity than in previous years. Nothing about the auction idea though I'm intrigued. I'm sure

she'll keep me posted.

I leave Sam a long, detailed voice note. It beats a conversation that will suck me further into the vortex. I end it with an expression of genuine gratitude.

With that done, I need another diversion. Outside, the roads are clear and the sun's glare blinding. I grab my sunglasses, deciding to take my chances and head into town. I find a worn pair of Calvin's boots in the front closet and put them on. They're old, ugly and a bit big on me but good enough. I then bundle up, check my phone's battery level, and toggle on my phone's GPS.

The air is fresh and invigorating and not as cold as it was when Calvin and I made snow angels. The house seems to sparkle under the clear blue sky like it's auditioning for a holiday movie. My feet create craters with each step. I trudge at a respectable pace, keeping my heart rate steady and body warm, passing evergreens dusted with snow and the blueberry bush where Calvin buried me. I double check my phone's signal. It works just fine.

I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with the pristine air and I venture on to town.

When I arrive, I'm invigorated and proud of myself. If there was an Olympic sport for snow walking, I'd kill it. I note that most of the shops are open. These people are accustomed to brutal winters. I pick up dog food, a few treats, and swing by the Donut Hole Café for a much-needed coffee.

The woman behind the counter is giving me the once over. "You must be Calvin's friend."

She's a couple of years older than I am. Her hair is shorter and more stylish but I recognize her right away from the photo. "Jenny?"

She raises her brow. “You know me?”

“Well,youknowme,” I say. “Sugarbush Falls is a small town, after all.”

She laughs. “Very true. We don’t have many secrets, just lots of snow and gossip. I heard about you from Pearl. Glad Calvin found the right one. I regretted our breakup for years.”

TMI. TMI!

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Jenny must see the look on my face. “Oh, I mean, that was a lifetime ago. I have grown kids and a grandchild on the way. I found my happiness. My only point is that Calvin is a giver and sometimes it’s hard for him to receive. If you love him, don’t let him go. If for no other reason than he needs love. Teach him that it’s okay to be on the receiving end sometimes.”

I’m speechless. Jenny is a total stranger, offering a stream of unsolicited advice about my love life with her ex. And yet, I feel an unexpected sense of appreciation. She’s not being manipulative, only trying to help an old flame find joy.

I thank her and head out, an unplanned bag of donuts in hand. My mind is stuck on Jenny’s words. She called me, ‘the right one.’ Was that Pearl’s take or Calvin’s?

It’s all I can think about on the chilly walk back home.

I spend most of the remaining days following the same routine, adding in the occasional new activity. I even started taking out the snowmobile, impressed with myself for learning how to weave through the forested trails on my own.

I am meeting the friendly locals. Like the helpful librarian who recommended a romance I devoured; and Jenny who sneaks an extra chocolate cream into my order when she thinks I’m not looking. Surely the long walks are beneficial, balancing out the sugar intake but I’ve given up counting calories and by some brain hijack, I don’t care.

Thanks to Aunt Pearl who stopped by, I’m baking for the first time in my life. By some unspoken understanding, neither one of us mentioned Calvin or Chacha.

Instead, we made an apple crumble I'm extremely proud of, even if it looks less like a dessert and more like a crime scene involving fruit.

She suggested I try needlepoint. Now I'm starting a pillow with a canvas I bought in town. Who knew stabbing fabric with a needle could be so therapeutic?

My life went from erratic and fast-paced to slow and meditative. It's almost like the universe is on reset after the storm. Things are blessedly calm.

I now have time to think about what I've neglected for too long. How Bernard's death affected me.

I miss him.

He jokingly called me his trophy wife. Sure, I met him in his twilight years but he was my rock. He was the Michael Douglas to my Catherine Zeta Jones. If I was dark and exotic looking.

Bernard's kids are convinced I married their father for his money, set on fleecing them out of their full inheritance. It's emotional, not logical. In any scenario, they would get the bulk of Bernard's estate. But toss in loyalty to their mom and we have the current powder keg.

I sigh deeply. Tomorrow, my week in Sugarbush Falls will be over. I need to face the music and not only with my attorney.

I park the snowmobile in the driveway, take off the helmet, and immediately spot man-size shoe troughs in the snow in front of the house. Someone is here.

I grab the packages, and excited, trudge across the lawn to the front door. Maybe Calvin is back, maybe he had a change of heart. I let myself in and stop cold.

Sitting on the sofa, holding Rezy in his lap, is my chauffeur.

I don't bother asking Paul how he got inside. I didn't lock up. I peel off my coat, set down the bags and kick off the boots. "Fancy meeting you here."

He smiles.

"Where's the car?"

"Round back."

I take a seat across from him, watching as Rezy snuggles deeper into Paul's lap. "Where's this little guy from?" he asks, petting the pup.

I've tried everything I can think of to find Rezy's owner. No luck. Or better said, my luck. Rezy has won me over, big time.

"I found him outside in the blizzard. His name is Rezy, short for resilient."

We sit quietly for a beat, Paul not filling me in.

"Why are you here?" I prompt.

"To check on you."

He says it as if driving across much of New England is an everyday occurrence.

No use in asking how he found me. Paul is an extremely resourceful man who will never reveal his sources. Besides, I already know. Sam was adamant about knowing my location and having Calvin looked into. The two are in cahoots.

He goes on. “The phones were down . . . and I made a promise.”



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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

“Right, the promise to Bernard.”

Paul has referenced it several times without elaboration. Even so, I understand he feels obligated to look after me. But it’s ridiculous. I’m a grown woman.

I go to the kitchen, put up the kettle and bring a box of assorted teas to the living room, setting them on the coffee table. “I don’t need babysitting.”

“I’ve done some digging,” Paul says, ignoring my comment.

“Digging?”

“Investigating.”

I shake my head in disappointment. Paul is overstepping his bounds, by a mile. I was only joking with Sam about having Paul check into Calvin’s background. Seems she took the reins on this project as well.

I sigh. “Let’s have it.”

“Dr. Sinclair has a stellar reputation.”

The kettle whistles. “You sound surprised,” I say, heading back into the kitchen to let off some steam of my own.

I hear him call out, “Don’t trust, verify.”

I take a deep breath, returning with two mugs of boiling water. “Pretty sure that’s not how the saying goes.”

He shrugs.

I could ask what bits of intel he picked up about Calvin that led to his assessment, but don’t. It feels invasive, somehow. And no longer relevant.

Paul helps himself to a tea bag, dunking it into the mug. “How was it being out here in the boonies?”

“Perfect.”

He nods, sagely.

“You’re here to drive me back, I suppose.”

“Only if you want me to.”

“I’m meeting with my lawyer in two days.”

“Indeed.”

I consider my options. Either leave now or wait for Calvin to pick me up tomorrow. It’s a no-brainer.

I ask Paul to notify Calvin not to come for me. It’s better this way. Sitting in the car for five hours with a man who wants little more to do with me would be torture.

I pack my things, grab the pup and let my chauffeur drive me home.

## Chapter Forty-Three

Caroline

I yawn, shaking away the cobwebs and step out of the car in front of my building. It's like I've landed on another planet. The noise, wet pavement, traffic, shouting, drilling. Smells.

In Manhattan, I have to search out nature. I can't explain why but it makes me sad. I'm a city girl always have been.

I already miss the Vermont house, terribly. Probably because my mind associates it with peace and quiet, the two things I was in dire need of when I went out there. A truck screeches to a halt nearby, spewing soot into the already blackened slush.

I whimper softly and realize Paul is at my side. He sets Rezy down on the ground and hands me the sparkly new leash. He's mine. No chip means he's mine.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“Yes, stop worrying, fairy godfather.”

He furrows his brow then grins. “I like it.”

I kiss his cheek and head for the Dakota.

I’m back in the offices of Flannery and Baker, reviewing the paperwork Howard placed in front of me. He sits behind his desk, frowning. “I’m really sorry, Mrs. Page. I was sure they would make a better counteroffer.”

The terms are ridiculous, as if Bernard’s kids want me to fight them in court.

“According to opposing counsel, the daughter rallied for a better deal for you but her brother would hear nothing of it.”

I think of Rachel’s apologetic demeanor at the hospital and try hard not to let resentment sour me.

Howard leans back in his swivel chair. “We can dispute this. Of course, the legal fees will make a dent in whatever you may walk away with but you’ll still come out ahead, if you win.”

“What are my odds?”

“Their grounds are shaky but the length of your marriage, your age discrepancy,

Bernard's age . . . if you get the wrong judge, they may agree that he wasn't of sound mind when he left you most of his estate. So to answer your question, anyone's guess."

Which means Howard is covering his behind. But my gripe isn't with him. It burns that anyone would think Bernard was not cognitively intact. That his own children are arguing that in order to scam me out of my rightful inheritance, is hurtful and offensive. I think not only of the low brow way Bernard's kids managed this but how they've never accepted me even as I cared for their father.

Howard interrupts my downward spiral. "Your friend Evie pulled strings to get you a deferral but you need to make a decision. Now."

I've made up my mind days ago. I could fight this, should fight this.

I tell Howard what I want him to file. I stand, nod perfunctorily and walk to the door.

He comes up beside me, his hand on the doorknob, a single brow raised. "Are you sure about this?"

I assure him that I am. I walk out without a second thought. The decision is made.

## Chapter Forty-Four

Calvin

My hands are sweating bullets. Arriving passengers push past me, their trolleys laden with bulging suitcases. Africans in colorful kanga dress begin to spill out the doors, speaking in what I recognize as Swahili, and my heart races like a runaway train.

When Chacha exits, I move toward the oncoming crowd like a salmon fighting its

way upstream. I have a Welcome Home balloon in one hand, a child-size puffy coat in the other.

He spots me and races forward. I kneel down, arms spread wide, risking the balloon floating free.

Chacha is in my arms and I'm overcome with emotion. Oh, how I missed this boy.

I kiss his forehead.

"Hi, Daddy," he says, brightly, the name on his tongue bringing me joy, the word rhyming with 'hot toddy.' I miss Papi, but I'll take it.

"I want to be a pilot," he says.

I clear my throat, lifting him up. "I thought you wanted to be a doctor like me."

He furrows his brow. "Both, then."

His English has improved since I saw him last. My guess is he's been following the Anglos around the village, picking up words and phrases.

The escort extends a hand. I put Chacha down and we shake. The man grins broadly, his white teeth bright against his ebony complexion. "Chacha hasn't stopped chattering about you since we got on the plane."

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That would be eighteen hours ago.

I hand the balloon to Chacha. “Hungry?”

“Only for an American hamburger and french fries,” he says, his attention on the helium-filled gift hovering above us.

I laugh. The boy is a hoot. The papers are nearly finalized. We have a court appearance next week and then he’ll officially be mine. Chacha Sinclair.

For someone who gave up on having a family years ago, I feel blessed beyond words.

Chacha kisses my cheek and I hug him fiercely. “Ready for cold?”

I help him into the coat, which he assesses with an adult-like skepticism.

“You’re going to need it,” I say.

He’ll start kindergarten after Christmas break. I already spoke with the school and my boss. I’m still interviewing sitters. It’s slowly coming together.

I hope.

Chapter Forty-Five

Caroline

Sam and I keep a brisk pace down Fifth Avenue, heading in the direction of Tiffany's. The street is crowded with tourists and holiday shoppers. Three days till Christmas. The iconic blue sign makes me think of Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. I love that film. George Peppard was hottie. Come to think of it, Calvin bears a strong resemblance to the actor.

Calvin.

I think of him, a lot.

I also think about Sugarbush Falls, the festive decorations, twinkling lights of the gazebo, the friendly people I met, Aunt Pearl.

I'm nearing the store, wondering if I should be more cost conscious with my holiday shopping.

"How'd the meeting go with your lawyer?" Sam asks.

"I'm taking it," I say.

Sam stops short, her brow hitting the cloudless sky. "You're accepting the settlement offer?"

I nod. "I won't get a moment's peace, even if I win. They'll appeal, make my life miserable."

"But there are millions on the line?—"

"I know I'm crazy but I've had an epiphany—of a quieter, less materialistic life."

People are pushing past us. Stopping mid-block is a Manhattan no-no. We keep



walking, past Tiffany's. It's like going by a Krispy Kreme when on a strict diet.

"That was one week, Caroline. Living like that forever is something different."

"I'm fifty. Forever isn't quite as long as it used to be."

I rarely speak my age aloud but it feels pretty okay. Sam, on the other hand, is blinking rapidly, like she can't compute my decision.

"I will keep the car, apartment and its contents. If I want, I can sell the place for a bundle and live elsewhere like a queen for far less."

Sam's expression is stuck on disbelief. "Maybe a princess."

I shrug. "You'll teach me how to budget, be my advisor."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

She shakes her head. “You’re something else.”

We turn north towards The Plaza.

Sam asks, “Whatever happened to Doctor Handsome?”

My shoulders slump. “We went our separate ways.”

Sam ponders that. “I’m sorry.” We walk for a bit. “Tell me more about Vermont.”

I tell her about Calvin’s small house, the old kitchen, dated furniture. “It was wonderful.”

“Really?” She seems incredulous which makes sense. I have built a certain reputation.

“I fell in love with the place.”

She searches my face, her eyes widening slightly. “And him.”

I sigh. “Is it that obvious?”

Sam’s phone buzzes. While she gets caught up in a flurry of texting, the ache deep in my stomach grows larger. Speaking about Calvin out loud is bringing back the pain that began the moment he left.

I wonder what he is up to. Does he think of me? Is he angry? Did all go well with his

son's arrival?

A son. It's beyond my imagination.

The curiosity is killing me.

What's Chacha like? Did Calvin fall right into parenthood like a fish to water? I'm guessing so. He is a professional caregiver, after all.

Sam and I turn the corner. In front of us is a small shop called Needle and Groove. Retro vinyl records are displayed in the window. I come to a halt.

"What's the matter? Sam asks, pausing her texts.

"How much time have you got left of your lunch break?"

Sam glances at her phone. "Fifteen minutes."

"Come on, then. There's something I need to do."

Larry is manning the security desk when I return home, weighed down with bags. None from Fifth Avenue.

I told Paul to go home. I've given up discouraging him from driving me around town but there's no way I'd let him carry the bags upstairs. He has a bad back.

Larry hurries over to help and I notice his eyes shift to the corner of the ornate lobby.

Mrs. Reinhold is sitting on the velvet sofa, wearing a garish green crotched hat. A glittering pink ribbon sits in her lap.

As I pass, I hear a sob, shocking me. I've never seen her show an ounce of emotion other than agitation.

I'm cautious but I can't simply walk past an elderly woman who's sobbing even if she is the Wicked Witch of the West Side.

I ask Larry to take my bags upstairs and approach Mrs. Reinhold with caution, ready to make a hasty retreat if warranted. "Are you okay?"

"I lost Daphne this morning."

For a moment I think she's talking about a family member I know nothing about. But she's gripping tight to the ribbon. Then it hits me. I recognize it as belonging to her teacup Shih Tzu. And there's no sign of the pup.

"Oh no," I say, horrified. Without thinking, I sit beside Witch Reinhold and put my arm around her.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

The floodgates open and she bawls, a gut-deep cry. We sit like that for several minutes until her chest stops heaving. I picture Rezy gone, knowing I would fall apart.

I'm not sure if it's the right thing to say but it comes out. "I have a dog."

Her eyes widen. "You?"

I want to ask why that's so hard to believe but I don't.

Mrs. Reinhold says, "You don't come across as an animal lover."

It takes all my restraint not to get into it with her but something tells me that Mrs. Reinhold doesn't have a lot of friends. She's alone. And her only friend just crossed the rainbow bridge.

I see Larry is back at his desk, his attention on me.

"I found a sweet puppy in a snowstorm in Vermont. We couldn't locate his owners."

She blinks away her tears. "No chip?"

I shake my head.

She looks past me. "Where is he now?"

"Upstairs. His name is Rezy."

I wait for her to make a snide comment. Instead, she says to herself, “Fine name.”

For some odd reason, I'm pleased by her approval. “Would you like to meet him?”

She pauses. “Well, if it wouldn't be too much trouble.”

I take in her expectant demeanor. She looks different, vulnerable. Like a lonely old woman.

“I'll be happy to bring him by.”

The corners of her mouth lift upward. It's the first smile I've ever seen from this woman. Turns out, she does have a full set of teeth.

“I'm in 8D,” she says.

“Yes I know. You're on my floor.”

“Didn't think you noticed.”

Once again, I hold my tongue.

She stands. “Okay, then. Come by at seven. Punctually.”

“I—”

“I better go up and make some of my famous sweet potato puree. Rezy will never want to eat your food again.”

Without a word goodbye, eyes dry as a bone, she shuffles to the elevator, leaving me behind.

Larry approaches me. “You’re a kind soul, Mrs. Page.”

I offer a flat smile. I’m not so sure everyone would agree. Apparently, I’m satisfactory when it comes to grieving old ladies and stray dogs, but not with a friend, looking to me for support. A friend who did nothing but support me when I needed it.

Here in the lobby of the Dakota, Larry praising me, I feel sick. Like a load of bricks falling off a high-rise onto my thick head, I’m hit with an overwhelming sense of shame.

I need to apologize to Calvin. Not by text or voicemail. I excuse myself and hurry outside. There’s no time to waste.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

Paul is still there when I emerge, waiting in the car as if knowing I would still need him. I hop into the backseat and tell Paul where to go. I have an important and terrifying stop to make.

### Chapter Forty-Six

Calvin

Afrisbee zips past my head, when the intercom buzzes. My life is pure pandemonium. Blissfully so. I'm expecting a delivery of clothes and school supplies for Chacha. Unless I'm forced to go to the mall, I'll rely on online shopping. Figuring out sizes and how much to buy are not part of my skill set. If only I had someone to help with this kind of stuff.

I punch the intercom button and check on Chacha. Having abandoned the frisbee, he's sitting in his pajamas, a foot away from the television screen, his jaw slack, his eyes glazing over, watching old Flintstones cartoons. I'll need to set some limits. I make a mental note to speak with other parents and ask them for advice.

A bowl of cold oatmeal is on the kitchen table, untouched. "Go eat your breakfast, sweetheart."

No reaction. The boy is hypnotized.

The doorbell to my apartment chimes and I fling open the door.

Caroline stands there, her eyes wide, a bag in her hand. "Hi," she says, looking as



stunned as I feel.

“Um, hi.”

She looks beautiful, calmer, the lines around her eyes, softer.

We stand in the doorway for a beat. She says, “May I come in?”

I clear my throat. “Sure, if you’re okay with a tornado.”

My place looks like a boatload of pirates came through, pillaging for hidden treasure.

Caroline steps inside and stops short. Chacha is standing in front of her, his hand extended. “Hullo.”

Apparently, Caroline has the power to break television’s hold on my child.

Caroline shakes Chacha’s hand.

“Who are you?” he asks.

“Caroline Page. And you must be Chacha.”

“Yes, ma’am. Chacha Sinclair. The pleasure is mine.”

He’s been watching too many old movies on the classics channel.

Caroline laughs lightly and my heart leaps. I move Chacha’s blue and white elephant from the sofa and offer her a seat. She glances at the toy. I bought it the day I came back to town, when we stopped at the toy store. So much has happened since then.

“What brings you by?” I sound casual when I feel anything but.

She’s right here, close enough to touch, but it feels like there’s an ocean between us. My heart still races for her, but the cracks in our relationship remind me that love might not be enough to bridge the gap.

Yes, love.

“I found the perfect gift for you.” She hands me the bag and I pull out a record cover.

“Wow.”

It’s a Bob Dylan vinyl collectible. “I don’t have this one.”

“I know.”

“This was very thoughtful,” I say, truly excited to own this musical gem.

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“I’m so glad you like it.”

Chacha must sense something in the air and rather than return to his perch by the television he climbs into my lap, Caroline looking on curiously.

“How are things going?” she asks.

“I’m in over my head,” I say, leaning my chin on Chacha’s head.

She sucks in her lips, pauses a beat. “I’m so sorry, Calvin.”

Chacha looks up at her. “What did you do wrong?”

I set my son down on the floor and tell him to please finish his breakfast and let the adults speak alone. Miraculously, he follows my instructions.

I note a growing anxiety on Caroline’s face.

I say, “I appreciate you coming all the way here to say that. It means a lot.”

She must sense something in my tone. “But not enough.”

“I forgive you.”

She scooches closer. I pick up the scent of her perfume and I nearly lose my resolve. The desire to bring her into my arms is overpowering. I desperately want to tell her that I love her with all my heart. That we’ll figure something out. But I haven’t

succeeded in that endeavor since I saw her last in Sugarbush Falls.

Chacha is here, in my life and I'm his father. Caroline cannot accept that. The writing is on the wall. We need to part ways.

I'm hoping she'll say something—anything—that will allow me to combine my two worlds into one.

Instead, she says, "I thought we were friends."

Disappointment floods me. We're no further along than the last time we saw each other in Sugarbush Falls. "Wewerefriends."

I see the hurt creep across her features. "Caroline, something powerful happened between us and I can't go back. I don't know how to be only friends anymore. You mean more to me than that."

Her silence is deafening. My heart aches as she looks away.

"It's all or nothing, then," she says.

I decide to put it all out there. "I would never expect you to take on parenting at this stage in our lives especially when that was never on your radar."

She chews her lip and I'm fairly certain she's holding back tears. I swallow hard, scared if I take her hand to comfort her, we'll be right back where we started. In a solution-less situation.

Caroline nods, looking down at her feet. "We're at an impasse with no way to bridge it," she says softly, as if explaining it to herself.

“I’m sorry,” I say, depleted. “I wish things could be different.”

Caroline steps into the kitchen and sets a small bag on the table beside Chacha. “Merry Christmas.”

I escort her to the door and watch her walk out. Of my life.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

Caroline

Paul?” I sob into the phone, taking the steps as quickly as I can without tumbling.

He answers on the first ring like he was waiting for it. “I’m here.”

He has always been here. Like Evie, like the Fab Fifty gals. I know I’m blessed but right now I can’t feel it. All my emotions are knotted up in Calvin.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

I step out onto the pavement, deeply relieved to see my car idling in front of Calvin's building.

Paul gets out and rounds the car. "Are you okay, Mrs. Page?" His tone reveals a deep concern, bringing on more tears.

I shake my head, enter the backseat but don't explain. I can't right now.

I text Evie. Obsessed with my own problems, I've neglected the friendship. She shoots me a quick reply. By some miracle, she's in town for a meeting. She's leaving in the morning to be with Adam in Yosemite for the holidays. She insists I come over.

Paul remains quiet for the duration of the drive, dropping me off outside Evie's building.

She's waiting in the lobby and when she sees my face, her own eyes begin to water. I've never been so grateful for our friendship as I am right now. I'm a mess, my eyes red and puffy.

She brings me into a hug and I cry on her shoulder. Literally.

We head up to her place and before I even shed my coat, she hands me a glass of red wine.

Once we're settled on the sofa, the bottle on the coffee table between us, my best friend says, "Tell me everything."

I bring her up to date on all that's transpired from the time I left the hospital. Rachel's visit, the trip to Vermont, the blizzard, the steamy kisses with Calvin. Evie listens intently.

When I finally come up for air, most of the bottle is gone.

Evie sets her legs on my lap and reaches for a bar of Swiss chocolate. "Do you want me to say something to make you feel better or tell you the truth?"

I have a buzz but I don't hesitate. "Truth."

She gives me a laser-eyed look and pops a square of chocolate into her mouth. "You're scared."

I try to make sense of that. "Of losing him?"

"Yes, that too. But I mean, you're scared of Chacha."

"That's ridiculous. He's five years old."

"He represents all that you've gone without. Children, routine, family. Some by choice and some by circumstance."

I sense a prickle in my chest and recognize it as defensiveness. But Evie is right. I felt threatened by a child I had never met. Until I did.

Chacha is a sweet, precocious little boy. He's not scary or threatening. Still, some latent unresolved issues are rearing their pesky heads.

"Go on," I say, taking control of the candy bar.

Evie's brow lifts and I know she's surprised that I'm taking her assessment so well.

"You love Calvin."

She is not asking.

"I do." Desperately. Two squares in the mouth. I savor the heavenly flavors exploding on my taste buds. Coming here was without question the right move.

I pull out my phone and show Evie the photo of me and Calvin, our snow angels behind us. There's no missing the glee on our faces.

Evie taps the screen, her tone soft. "This is what love looks like."

We're both quiet for a beat, then she adds, "I'm not going to sugarcoat it. Rearing a child is a huge undertaking. Your life shifts into a different gear, far from anything that came before it. Your time is not your own, you become everything to a little human, someone whose life literally depends on you, whose moral compass is guided by your own."

I'm listening intently, aware that this is what's terrifying me. I'm not sure I have the necessary qualities. I take a breath and share that with Evie.

She smiles. "None of us are sure of that, sweetie. Not before, during, or after having kids. All I can say is, you are one of the most generous, giving people I know. Those are pretty good parental qualities."



My eyes tear up.

Evie hands me a tissue. “Don’t cry.”

“I miss him so much.” The tears flow down my cheeks and I wipe them away.

Evie’s expression is filled with compassion but she knows me better than to dwell on my compromised state. “My advice? Get to know this newer version of Calvin. Get to know his child, slowly, over time. You might find it’s all pretty wonderful.”

I shake my head, hating in advance what I’m about to say but it needs to be said. “I’m too old.”

Evie squints at me. “In our grandparents’ day, fifty was considered over the hill. These days, it’s the new thirty-five.”

I’m pretty sure Barbie said it was the new thirty. I lost five years in the blink of an eye. I lower my voice in case someone in the next apartment can overhear me through the concrete walls. “Until recently, taking things a bit slower was an admission of aging but now it’s becoming more appealing and not just because I’m fifty. There’s something to be said for stopping and smelling the roses.”

Evie gives me a curious look once more. “Vermont really had an effect on you.”

“It’s a very special place,” I say, wistfully.

We each take another piece of chocolate and think.

Evie asks, “Do you believe in fate?”

“Sometimes.”

“Well, I do. If Calvin is your soulmate, you’ll work it out.”

The vagueness bothers me but I have no choice but to believe her. We’re not going to solve fifty years of issues on my best friend’s couch in one fell swoop. But there is something wecando.

“Got any board games?”

Evie looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“I’m getting into Scrabble,” I say.

She’s eyeing me like I’m pranking her.

“I’m serious.”

She moves her legs off me and stands. “I think it’s in Jeffrey’s room.”

She returns with a box and I go into her pantry where I find chips and salsa.

We’re flipping the tiles when Evie smiles. “Whatever it is that happened to you in Sugarbush Falls, I’m digging it, big time.”

I laugh, lightly. Evie has worked her magic once more.

Now it’s time to play.

And move on.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

Calvin

### THREE MONTHS LATER

Tomorrow is the big day. Gotcha day. When Chacha will legally become my son. I want to get a solid eight hours.

I tuck Chacha into his bed, He's as excited as I am. I turn off the light in his room, head to mine and crawl under the covers.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

Filled with nervous energy, I try to calm my mind but there's too much swirling in my head. Did I remember to manage everything for tomorrow? I've called in for coverage and let Chacha's principal know he will be absent.

From what his teacher tells me, he is taking to school like a fish to water, quickly becoming the most popular kid in the kindergarten class. The other children want him on their soccer team at recess and to sit next to him during story time. It brings me joy knowing he's acclimating so well. Kids, it turns out, are resilient. Far more than us stodgy adults.

It's been a hectic few months with Christmas, New Year's, pop-up visits from the social worker, finding a pediatrician I am happy with, getting Chacha settled in school. Somehow, I did it all.

Satisfied that I'm set for tomorrow, other thoughts infiltrate my mind. Namely, of Caroline.

The time stranded in Sugarbush Falls reminded me of what is truly important, putting things in perspective for the kind of life I want for me and Chacha. Slower, more focused on the important things.

I scroll through my messages, finding the information Aunt Pearl sent me about Burlington General. She mentioned they opened a new wing. I navigate to the website and take a look. I tell myself it's only for research purposes. I have a good job here, a fine apartment. And it would be so far from . . . Caroline.

Seeing her distraught in my home was a swift kick in the gut. But as much as I want

to work out the impasse, I have no way to solve it.

Twice, I've taken the long way home via Central Park West, past the Dakota building, hoping for a glimpse of her. I stopped the day Chacha asked me, "Think we'll see her today?"

"Who?" I'd replied, realizing he was onto me.

Chacha gave me his now signature 'are you kidding' look followed by the 'trying hard to be patient with Dense Dad' voice. "Miss Caroline Page."

I answered with a sheepish, "I hope so," deciding that teaching my son to be a stalker may not be prize-winning parenting.

The incident served as a reality check. I need to focus on the joy in my life, not the heartbreak. My future is as a dad. A single dad.

I reach for the bedside lamp to turn off the light when I hear footsteps.

Chacha is in the doorway, his eyes as big as saucers, his blanket dragging on the floor behind him. The light I left on in the hallway illuminates him from behind.

I sit up. "Are you all right?" I ask.

"I can't sleep."

It's been two-and-a-half minutes since I left his room.

I pat the other side of my bed. He grabs the blanket then climbs up, making himself comfortable, one side of his head resting on my chest, facing me.

It occurs to me that his room must feel enormous, my small Manhattan apartment like a scary mansion.

“I like Caroline Page. She’s pretty.”

“She sure is.”

“You like her too, right?”

“How do you know that?”

He furrows his brow. “I feel your heart beating like a stampeding wildebeest.”

I peer at him. “Lion King?”

Chacha nods then closes his eyes.

“How did you get to be so smart?”

When there's no reply, I realize he has dozed off. Before I know it, so do I.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Caroline

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

O.M.G. It smells amazing in here,” Sam says, setting her briefcase on the stool next to the kitchen island. She’s risking getting flour all over it.

“Making blueberry muffins,” I say, mixing the batter.

She points at something on my face and I use my tongue to lick away the bit of filling.

Sam sticks her finger in bowl, scraping the sides and polishes off the remnants. “Yum,” she moans.

Rezy materializes, waiting for an offering. He’s brandishing a new haircut, doing a doggie strut. I’m fairly sure he knows how gorgeous he is. I toss him a blueberry which he gobbles and then spits out. Lovely.

“You look different,” Sam says and I smile in response.

I feel different. I’m healthier, happier, lighter. My decision to take the settlement offer was, in retrospect, the right one. Only one thing is missing.

I’m slowly coming to accept my future is without Calvin. The pain is still there but I’m strong enough to manage it. Even if I think of him every day. Ten times a day.

I hope he’s juggling parenthood and work well enough. I spotted him once on the opposite side of Seventy-Second Street when I was walking Rezy. Calvin was holding Chacha’s hand, heading to the park. I stood frozen in place, watching them skipping side-by-side. All I wanted to do was run over there and join them. But my

legs wouldn't move.

I remove the first batch of muffins from the oven, letting them cool. Then Sam and I get to work on the fundraiser. Her ideas are terrific and I tell her to go forward with all of them. It's going to be the most epic gala to date. I make a mental note to rummage through my closet for an appropriate dress. Sam, of course, would laugh in my face. She's seen my closets filled with glamorous gowns, the tags still on them. But I've been thinking about downsizing and donating many of the dresses. Okay, maybe selling them on consignment. I need to build up a nest egg. I give myself a mental pat on the back for being budget-minded.

An hour later, Sam is packing up her things. Rezy is lounging lazily on the window seat, fascinated by pigeons perched on the budding tree outside.

"See you at yoga in the morning?" Sam asks, buttoning up her pea coat.

I say I'll be there, pack up three muffins and hand them over for Sam and her kids. "Wish me luck in court."

"Fingers crossed."

Given the substantial amounts in question, my lawyer, Howard, instructed me to show up in court to sign a no-contest in front of the judge. I don't want any surprises, like Josh deciding he now also wants the apartment.

Sam rounds the island and hugs me. "I'm so incredibly proud of you."

"For what?"

"Rolling with the punches and coming out better than before."



I hug her back. These last few months have brought us closer. I still miss Evie terribly but Sam is filling some of the hole in my heart.

Minutes after she leaves, my phone buzzes with a message from Paul.

I type back, I'll be down in thirty.

I shower quickly, and dress in a conservative Gucci business suit, silk white shirt and Manolo heels that shout power woman. I'm going to see my nemeses, dressed to the nines.

The car is idling downstairs and immediately I notice the change in the air. Spring is making a showing. I wonder what Sugarbush Falls looks like this time of year.

Paul is on the phone, speaking more animatedly than I've ever seen. He must sense my approach and ends the call. I slip into the backseat before he can get the door for me. He's no spring chicken anymore.

As Paul pulls into traffic, I have a tingling feeling up my arms. I've always hated courthouses. They scream dispute and discord. We drive past the Museum of Natural History, heading south when something occurs to me.

Today begins a new chapter in my life and I'm at peace with it. I'm ready to welcome a simpler existence, maybe even ready to embrace middle age. Sort of.

Paul catches my smile in the rearview mirror but stays on brand, remaining silent and steadfast.

We drive by the Museum of Ice Cream and I ponder how one goes about preserving mint chip from the 1800s. We are soonmet with block after block of courthouses. Now that we're here, I feel none of the anxiety I expected.

“Ready?” Paul asks, stopping in front of the courthouse on Lafayette St. I tell him I am, thank him and step out onto the sidewalk.

Game on.

## Page 72

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

The entire episode is far less dramatic than anything I've seen on Judge Judy. If you don't count running into Bernard's ex-wife in the ladies' room where she gives me the evil eye. Someone needs to tell the shrew it's impossible to be intimidating when toilet paper is stuck to your shoe.

We ignore each other on our way to a drab room down the hall from the actual courtroom. Howard is there waiting for me, clad in a sharp pin-striped suit. I sit beside him.

The ex-wife joins Rachel and Josh who are seated on the opposite side of the table with their counsel. A woman around my age sits in the middle. The judge.

Rachel meets my eye and nods solemnly. Josh is looking everywhere but at me. I wonder what Bernard would think of this spectacle.

The proceeding goes smoothly enough. Why shouldn't it? I'm not putting up a fight.

Midway through, I'm surprised by a concession they've made—what the paperwork refers to as a stipend. I'll be given a modest lump sum to help with the financial transition. The offer was never discussed before. At least not with me. I've already accepted the fact that if I want to fill the fridge, I'll need to get a job. I've been putting out feelers for weeks. I'm not qualified for much these days but hopefully one of my leads will pan out.

When we're finished, Josh and his mother leave. Rachel wishes me well and exits before I can reply.

Howard asks, “Are you okay, Mrs. Page?”

If ever there was a time to call me Caroline and drop the Page part, this is it. I considered going back to my maiden name but in the end, it’s one of the few things Bernard left me. And it has a nice ring to it.

I tell him I’m fine then ask about the unexpected funds.

Howard raises a brow. “He didn’t tell you?”

I have no idea who Howard is referring to and say as much.

“Your driver gave Bernard’s kids a mouthful this morning, told them their father would be ashamed of their behavior.”

“What?”

Howard nods. “I happened to be standing nearby in the hallway and could hear him shouting through the phone. Ten minutes later, their attorney approached me with the stipend addendum. I scrambled to add it to the settlement.”

I’m flabbergasted. Not only by what he’s telling me Paul accomplished on my behalf—something my own attorney couldn’t pull off—but the fact that in all the time I’ve known him, I never once heard Paul raise his voice. Paul does not shout.

I stand, thanking Howard.

“One more thing you may be interested to know.”

“Yes?”

“Josh offered to employ Paul at his regular salary.”

“I see.” I’m happy for Paul but sad at the same time. I’ll miss him, terribly.

“Thanks for letting me know.” I’m stepping away when Howard adds, “He declined. Said he’d rather work for you for free. You should have seen Josh’s face. Priceless.”

I grin broadly, I can’t help it. The image of Josh in a state of utter shock is a maraschino cherry atop the stipend cake. I thank Howard once more, text Paul, and head to the nearest exit.

Paul is standing by the car, his hand on the back door handle. His gaze reveals concern. “I hope all went well,” he says.

I ignore the car and wrap my arms around him. My trusted friend. “Thank you,” I whisper in his ear.

He pats my upper back, then kisses my temple, like a loving dad. It’s one of the few times he’s shown unfettered affection. I’m loving every second. After a few beats, we break apart and resume our normal places in the car.

We drive for several minutes when I realize we’re not heading north. We’re still in Lower Manhattan.

“Paul, where are we going?”

“A quick detour, madam.”

Paul is up to something. Again.

## Page 73

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

He turns at the next corner. “May I speak freely, Mrs. Page?”

“By all means.”

We arrive at another courthouse and he cuts the engine, pausing as if trying to fit the right words together. It’s strange having a conversation where you can only see the other person’s eyes in the rearview mirror but I suspect Paul prefers things this way.

“I would like to continue driving you where you need to go, paid or not. I’ll keep my promise.”

The car feels like a confessional. Which would make me the priest. I don’t tell him that I already know what happened with Josh. “The promise to Bernard?”

He nods.

Paul has mentioned the infamous promise several times since Bernard’s passing but I sense he has more to share. He’s been acting out-of-character since collecting me this morning.

“The day before you married, Bernard and I had a couple of beers at a pub we frequented.”

“The one in Bensonhurst?”

“That’s right.”

Paul turns his head to the side, looking off into the distance and I see his hard-scrabble profile. “I never saw him happier. As you know, his previous marriage was loveless. Contentious at times.”

I’m riveted. Bernard spoke little about his ex. He simply referred to her as ‘the previous administration.’

Paul says, “He made me swear to look after you, in case something should ever happen to him.”

I feel a warmth in my gut and a tear spring to my eye. I blink it away. “You’ve been keeping that promise since the day he died and I can’t thank you enough. You were a great friend to him. He loved you like a brother.”

The ensuing silence tells me Paul is fighting to contain himself. I know how much the two men meant to each other.

He clears his throat. “The promise is not yet fulfilled.”

I have a feeling I know what he’s about to say. My heart is in my throat.

“You love him,” Paul says, softly.

He is speaking in the present tense. This is no longer about Bernard. He means Calvin.

Paul has never involved himself in my personal life. Yet, in one morning, he’s scored a better settlement for me, dissed Bernard’s son, and is discussing my love life. I’m okay with all of it.

“At first, I was wary of your new beau. But the more I think about it, I’m certain

Bernard would like him . . . for you.”

I sigh. “Calvin and my lives are too different now.”

“Maybe not as much as you think.”

I look out the window at the gray stone building. “Why are we here, Paul?”

“Room 105.”

I feel a prickle of nerves. I can guess what is happening inside the building. “Okay.”

I step out, my suspicions confirmed by the plaque in the lobby.

Room 105 is listed as Family Court. In small letters I find the words that bring a flutter to my belly. I take a deep breath and hurry down the hallway.

To adoption services.

Chapter Fifty



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:03 pm*

Calvin

I've never been so nervous in all my life. That includes taking the medical entrance exams, the boards, and traveling between African cities in a six-seater plane that looked patched together with duct tape.

Standing before the judge who has the power to make me a dad is humbling.

Until now, it's been several minutes of watching him read my paperwork and confirming the information is correct. He's a kindly looking gentleman in his early sixties and I imagine this is one of his more enjoyable roles on the bench.

He looks up from the documents, catching my eye. "Adoption granted."

Those two simple words make my eyes tear up, so much so that the courtroom turns blurry. Chacha jumps into my arms and the judge laughs heartily.

"Congratulations," he says, as I revel in the slobbery kisses my son is planting on my cheeks.

The judge offers to be in a photo with the two of us and we comply, smiling broadly as my attorney takes the shot.

I had heard the proceedings would be anti-climactic but I know I'll remember this moment for the rest of my days.

"Let's celebrate."

We turn toward the benches in the back of the courtroom and I come to an abrupt halt.

Seated in the last row is Caroline. She looks resplendent, almost as if the weight of the world has been lifted off her shoulders. Everything about her seems lighter and I can only wonder why.

“Can I get a photo as well?” she asks.

I’m speechless.

I watch as she stands, approaching us. “Congratulations,” she says, smiling broadly at Chacha. “You got the best daddy in the world.”

I don’t know what to say but Chacha does. “I know. Wanna come get ice cream with us?”

“If it’s okay with your dad.”

Chacha looks up at me questioningly.

Caroline came to my adoption hearing, witnessed one of the most important milestones of my life. I have no idea what she’s doing here. I haven’t seen or heard from her in months. But the butterflies in my stomach remind me that my feelings haven’t faded. I love her still.

“Daddy?”

Now Caroline is studying me, the smile beginning to falter. I don’t ever want to be the cause of that again. Whatever she’s here for, I’m grateful for it. “Of course it is.”

Chacha cheers and as naturally as only a child can do, he takes hold of Caroline's hand. The three of us walk out into the sunshine together.

We're back at my place and I'm glad I thought to clean up before leaving for court. Chacha is in a sugar coma, snoring softly on the couch.

After leaving the courthouse, we went for ice cream, all our attention focused on my son. Caroline seemed at ease, joking and laughing. Chacha was as enamored with her as I was. Now that he's asleep, it's just Caroline and me.

I feel like a teenager on a first date with the prettiest girl in school. I swipe at my damp brow. "How's Rezy?" I ask.

"Great . . . he misses you."

I hope he's not the only one. If I were a betting man, I'd have wagered Caroline would never set foot in my place again. But then she surprised me in the courtroom. I would've lost big—and been perfectly fine with it.

Chacha stirs and I gesture to the balcony. Careful to let my son sleep, Caroline and I tiptoe outside, leaving the door ajar.

It's one of those rare but perfect Manhattan spring days, the air unusually fresh, the sun warming our faces. Trees outside my building are blooming pink, birds chirping happily in their nests. It feels like we're in a Tom Hanks/Meg Ryan rom-com.

Caroline leans against the metal railing, gazing eastward toward the park, now lush and green.

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For months, our only interactions consisted of exchanging texted holiday greetings and a voice note from Chacha thanking her for the gift she gave him.

The plan was to move on, adjust to life without my close friend. Without the woman I love.

Standing here beside her, I know it was a futile exercise. I love her even more now than I did then.

Caroline chews her bottom lip. “How were the holidays?” she asks, keeping her voice down.

“Nice,” I say. “I introduced Chacha to my dad, Aunt Pearl, and my sister’s family.”

“I didn’t realize you went back to Sugarbush Falls.”

I nod, leaving out a few details. Like how my sister was awkward around Chacha. How only Aunt Pearl thought to add my son to the gift list, forcing me to find the sole open toy store in Lamoille County on Christmas eve. How I bought and wrapped a kid-size snowboard and signed Kim and my dad’s names.

“And yours?” I ask.

“Spent it with Sam and her kids. Evie is out west. She invited me but I . . . can’t spend that money right now.”

It’s obvious a lot has happened in Caroline’s life since we saw each other last. I don’t

want to pry but I can't help myself. And my worry meter is rising rapidly. "Things went badly with Bernard's kids?"

"I decided not to fight them."

Caroline must see the confusion on my face because she fills in the blanks. "Life is short and I choose not to spend it in litigation. I'm trying to find a job. So far, no luck. But it's fine."

It doesn't sound fine.

She says, "I'm selling the apartment and moving out of New York."

At first, I'm not sure I heard her correctly but given the look of determination on her face, I know I did.

It's like a shot to the gut. It's been months since we've seen each other but one thing kept it tolerable—knowing she lives only a few blocks away. Knowing there was always a chance we'd bump into each other. Maybe even find a way to stay in each other's lives.

I swallow hard. "Where will you go?"

She looks down at her clasped hands. "That's one of the reasons I'm here."

She's back to chewing on her lip. "Chacha needed a loving home and you stepped up to give it to him. There's nothing more admirable than that."

I'm not ready for the detour in our conversation but I'm getting the sense she's been practicing her speech so I go along for the ride. I peer through the glass door. Amazingly, Chacha hasn't moved a muscle. "I thought you disapproved."

Caroline shakes her head. “More like, didn’t understand. I’ve had the benefit of numerous friends making it their business to reeducate me.” She pauses. “Before coming to your hearing, I was attending my own. I settled for the apartment and car, plus a modest stipend.”

I’m astonished and she sees it on my face. “You walked away from potential millions.”

“My priorities are shifting.”

“Oh?”

Her eyes pin mine. “The stipend isn’t much but combined with the proceeds from the apartment, it’s enough to both live on . . . and renovate an old but charming cottage.”

I’m processing her words, my heart palpitating through my chest. “Where is this cottage?”

“I think you know, Calvin.”

I’m dreaming and wide awake. Excitement rushes through me but I need to be sure I understand. “Are you saying you want to move to Sugarbush Falls?”

She nods.

“What about Chacha?” I can’t keep the hope out of my voice.

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“If I’m honest, I never really considered having kids of my own. But if you’re okay with it, maybe I can try?—”

If I was sitting, I’d be on the edge of my seat. “Try . . .?” I egg her on.

“To be, um, aunt-like.” Her gaze remains downward and I realize I’m once again witnessing Caroline’s uncommon vulnerability.

She must think my silence is skepticism because she adds, “You know, I could be the lady who takes Chacha out for ice cream . . . or helps him with homework . . . or teaches him to make blueberry muffins.”

I’m flabbergasted. My heart sings.

Finally, she meets my eye.

“Muffins?” I say with a grin, and perhaps with a bit of incredulity.

Her lips turn skyward, amusement crossing her lovely features. “A lot has changed since I’ve seen you last.”

She pulls something from her purse and hands it to me. It’s a blue and white pillow embroidered with the words, Super Dad. “I made it.”

I turn it over, admiring it like a work of art. Which it is, to me. “I love it,” I say, suddenly choked up. It’s my turn to look away. “When did you take up needlepoint?”

“Aunt Pearl got me hooked.”

There’s a pregnant pause. The silence seems to be the thing that wakes Chacha. Through the door, I watch my boy open his eyes, squirm, and let out a yawn worthy of a tired lion on the prairie. His gaze meets mine and I can tell in an instant that he is both exhausted and ornery.

“Excuse me a moment,” I say to Caroline and go inside. I scoop Chacha into my arms and carry him to bed. He’ll have a nice nap and be raring to go when he wakes up.

Caroline isn’t where I left her. She’s pacing the living room.

“Where were we?” I say.

“I don’t have any way to prove I can be a good aunt. I have zero experience other than my interactions with Evie and Sam’s kids. I can provide them as references.”

I hold back a laugh. She’s not joking. “Is this an interview?”

She shrugs. There are wrinkles between her brows I’ve never seen before. “I don’t know how else to do . . . this.” She gestures to the space between us.

She looks fearful, anxious. Adorable.

My pulse skips a beat. “What is it exactly that you’re trying to do?”

I need her to say it.

“Find a way we can be together, to be back in each other’s lives, as much as you—and Chacha—will allow.”



A warm flutter rises in my chest. “As friends?” I prod.

She shakes her head. “I’ve had months to think about it and I agree with what you said back then. I can’t go back to being only friends.”

I move toward her and she stops pacing. “You can’t?” I whisper.

She shakes her head, a tear escaping. “I’m scared.”

I reach for her damp cheek. “Of what, my love?”

“That I won’t be good enough for Chacha.”

She’s serious. The only antidote is to lighten things up. “How about me? I’m old enough to be his grandpa.”

She laughs, her eyes brimming with new tears. “And I’m old enough to be his nana.”

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I place my arms around her waist, draw her to me. I'm focused only on her soft, delicious lips. I tilt my head downward and close my eyes.

"Can we get a puppy, Daddy?" There's a tug on the back of my shirt.

Chacha's timing is horrendous but for me the mood is anything but shattered.

My eyes remain glued to my beautiful, complicated Caroline as I answer my son's question. "What do you think about a Labrador Retriever?"

"What's that?"

"A funny doggie who loves to play," I say. "His name is Rezy."

Caroline's eyes widen at my words.

"I'm thinking . . . maybe we can be a family—you, me, Rezy, and . . . Aunt Caroline."

"Yeah!" Chacha cheers, jumping up and down. His battery is back to full power.

Caroline's eyes glisten with unshed tears as she cups my cheek, her voice barely a whisper. "Do you really mean it, Calvin?"

"There's nothing I want more than for us to be together."

Chacha's glee fades to the background as I lean in once more, heart pounding. "I love

you, sweetheart,” I manage, my voice thick with emotion.

“I love you too, Dr. Handsome.”

And then, finally, like releasing a long-held breath, I bring Caroline’s smiling, waiting lips to mine.

## Chapter Fifty-One

Caroline

Isn’t the big fundraiser coming up?” Evie asks, as the Le Marais waiter sets down five pretty mojitos garnished with fresh sprigs of mint. “You seem super relaxed.”

Without skipping a beat, I hand my phone to the waiter and Mo, Barbie, Sam, Evie, and I squeeze in for a photo. I’m still pinching myself that Evie is back in town. She’s sticking to her plan not to miss our club meetings, something I will attempt to adhere to myself.

“That’s because I’m taking a back seat,” I say, then sip my mojito. “Sam is claiming the reins. Maybe for future years too, if she’s willing.”

I mentally slap myself for ever doubting Sam. Her auction idea is bringing in new donations every day. Big money. I tell the other gals about it and they seem intrigued.

Sam, however, is more interested in talking about her new neighbor.

The topic change from her ex—the only man Sameverspeaks about—is unsettling, like we’re witnessing a seismic shift in her personal evolution.

We’re all leaning in, curious.

“He was up mowing the lawn at seven thirty Saturday morning. Can you believe the nerve?”

We alltsk tskin solidarity.

“Did I already say he’s a single dad?”

We shake our heads.

“He’s noisy. Or his kids are. Between the mower and the music blaring?—”

“What kind of music?” Barbie interjects.

I suspect she’s trying to get the conversation back into chill mode. I exchange glances with Evie and can tell she’s thinking what I’m thinking. Sam likes this new, ‘annoying’ neighbor. Though she may not know it yet.

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Before Sam can reply, Mo pipes up. “Maybe he wants to participate in the auction.”

Sam makes a face and I realize all of us are picking up on the same vibe.

“Don’t be silly,” Sam says, nibbling on a slice of French bread. By now, I know Sam and even if she is irritated, she’s soaking in the club’s attention. I’m glad. She deserves it. A bachelor auction where the winner pays five figures to Bernard’s charity for a date with an eligible professional, is her brainchild. So far, an extremely successful one.

Barbie and Mo fill us in on their hectic professional lives. Love hasn’t yet found a way to squeeze into their tight schedules but I’m certain it will. They are amazing, accomplished women. Both of them.

I glance at my watch. “Thanks for lunch, ladies. Gotta skedaddle. I’m meeting Calvin and Chacha in an hour.”

This is the first time I accepted the club’s offer to pay for my lunch. I thought it would feel horrible but once I relented, it was fine. I’m learning it’s not a handout, it’s friendship.

“Where are you going?” Evie asks.

“MSG.”

Barbie lifts a brow. “Is there a show happening there tonight?”

“Actually, I’m not sure. Calvin’s being a bit mysterious.”

I blow kisses across the table and then hug Evie close. She and I are going to get together again early next week, just the two of us, before she has to leave again. That’s when I’ll tell her about my upcoming move to Vermont this summer. All Evie knows is that I’m going to Sugarbush Falls with Calvin and Chacha for the weekend. She has no clue I’m moving there, permanently.

I stepoff the subway at 34th Street and take the escalator up to street level, then make my way outside. It’s a lovely spring afternoon—clear skies, a gentle breeze, and the kind of weather that makes the whole city feel alive. Still, my heart beats faster just thinking about returning to Vermont. It must be stunning this time of year.

I wait for the light and then cross the Seventh Avenue. It’s been a while since I’ve been to this part of the city but Calvin called me before lunch, sounding cryptic and playful. “Meet me at Madison Square Garden,” he’d said.

“Why?”

"I've got a gig," he replied, like it's no big deal.

"Agig? At MSG?"

Calvin had a band back in his twenties, but MSG? No chance.

I pressed him but he stopped answering my questions, leaving off with specific instructions. “I’ll leave a ticket for you at the counter. First row, five p.m. sharp. Don’t be late.” And with that, he hung up.

I spot the marquee outside the Garden. The headliner is some musician I’ve never heard of, one of those names the younger crowd loves but I can’t quite place. The

show starts at eight, three hours from now. Confused, I'm about to call Calvin when a text comes through.

Are you here?

Yep, a bit early

You're right on time. C u inside.

Before I walk in, I pass a couple of makeshift tables lining the sidewalk, selling cheap knockoff merch—bootleg t-shirts, hats, and glow sticks. Teens crowd around, snatching up gear. Is it me, or do these kids look way too young to be here without parental supervision, buying illegal swag?

As promised, a ticket is waiting for me and I make my way inside. The hallway is buzzing with energy. Various staff, toting clipboards and speaking into head mics, scurry past as I make my way forward. There's no sign of Calvin.

I hear the band rehearsing and enter the arena. It's massive, cavernous, the atmosphere electric but not with audience members. The seats are empty.

Someone is testing the lighting, adding to the sensory bombardment. It's surreal and exhilarating.

I head toward the stage, wondering what on Earth Calvin has planned. I've been here before for a Billy Joel concert, but this feels different. The anticipation is ramping up.

I find my seat. Front row, center. The moment I settle, the lights dim, and when the spotlight hits the stage, I see him.

Calvin, with a guitar slung across his chest, looking every bit the musician he once

was.

My heart is racing like a thoroughbred in my chest as I watch him step up to the mic. The band behind him starts playing. I instantly recognize the familiar opening chords of Sweet Caroline. Unless I'm going crazy, the keyboard player is tonight's headliner. He's playing backup to Calvin! Behind me, I hear several people join in, belting out the words, but I'm frozen in place, in shock.



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As the chorus swells, Calvin motions toward me, removing his guitar. "Caroline, come up here!" he calls out as if the place was filled with fifteen thousand fans. The spotlight swings my way. Somehow, my body responds and I make my way to him.

The place is a blur of lights and a handful of cheering voices, but all I can focus on is Calvin, standing there, grinning like he knows exactly what he's doing.

I climb the steps and the second my feet touch the stage, he takes my hand. The music softens, and the entire arena falls silent as if the universe knows something extraordinary is about to happen. Calvin lets go of my hand and pulls a small box from his pocket.

"Caroline," he begins, his voice carrying over the stillness. "Until I found you, my life felt like a melody missing its chorus." He kneels down, steadying himself.

Tears blur my vision, my heart pounding fiercely in my ears.

"I've spent so long making my life about work, keeping everything simple and focused. But then you and Chacha came along, and suddenly, my world is expanding." He pauses. "You're the song I've been longing for, the harmony that completes my life."

The weight of the moment hangs between us. A dazzling ring now glimmers in his hand. His eyes shine with love as he takes a deep breath, "Caroline, will you marry me?"

I can barely breathe. Calvin, my sweet, unassuming doctor-turned-rockstar-for-the-

night, is on one knee, asking me to spend forever with him.

I nod, laughing through my tears. “Yes, my love.” Then, without hesitation, I shout, “Yes!” to the entire arena, to the entire world.

Like magic, Calvin’s lips meet mine. His kiss is electrifying, filled with fervor and tenderness that spreads like wildfire from my head to my toes. I surrender to the moment, to his firm touch. I wrap my arms around his neck and match his intensity with my own.

When we finally pull away, his eyes lock on mine. The band launches back into Sweet Caroline, the staff clapping excitedly, singing along louder than before. Soon, everyone will be back at their jobs, the arena filling with the rock star’s fans. But in this moment, as Calvin slips the ring on my finger, I know it’s a memory I’ll cherish for the rest of my life.

## Epilogue

### Caroline

Almost ready!” Calvin shouts from the other room. Chacha is standing beside me, his dad’s teeth necklace around his neck. Rezy is underfoot, watching his best human lick the wooden spoon clean of batter, hoping for a taste. He’s wearing the butt-ugly—but adorable—sweater Mrs. R. sent him. I make a mental note to stop at the post office to ship her a few muffins in return.

Tomorrow, while Calvin has his first in-person interview at the hospital, I’ll take Chacha and meet Jenny for lunch. Then, we’ll stop by the library, where I plan to volunteer after we move here permanently. I also intend to join the PTA once we find a top-notch preschool. My social calendar has never been fuller.

I pull the blueberry muffins from the oven and tell Chacha to wait until they cool

down before helping himself. “Okay, Aunt Caroline.”

I feel a familiar spark of joy at the moniker. He and I are developing a close, loving relationship and I can see us both happily settling into a new title for me soon. I kiss the top of his head and step into the living room.

Calvin’s favorite vinyl is playing in the background and it’s not the Dylan collectible. That’s been bumped to second place.

The lyrics to Sweet Caroline bring back the best memories from the night Calvin proposed. I’m still amazed how he pulled off the grand gesture, hands down the best night of my life. I guess it helps to know the headliner’s hotshot agent.

Much of the furniture is pushed to the side, several pieces designated for donation. The reno is scheduled to begin in a few weeks and there’s lots of work to do. I’m adding a guest room for Paul to use whenever he likes. Most surprisingly, Mo offered to drive up and share some design ideas. I gladly accepted.

My city apartment is on the market. If all goes as planned, I’ll use the proceeds to help pay for the overhaul and make a sizable donation to the upcoming fundraiser. In the meantime, I’ll keep looking for a paying job. I hope Bernard is happy with my choices.

Calvin is fiddling with an ancient VCR, a device I haven’t seen in decades. If it weren’t for Aunt Pearl who is just shy of being deemed a packrat, it would have been tossed out long ago.

Chacha emerges from the kitchen, a glob of batter on his cheek. He’s got a sweet tooth. Which is why I’ve begun the search for a reputable pediatric dentist in the area. I’m also reading up on healthy meal planning. For now, though, I’m having a blast baking with a little partner.

Chacha pulls the harmonica I gifted him for Christmas from his pocket. He tries valiantly to keep up with the recorded music. He's a people person, smart and sweet but if his current skills are any indication, music won't be his career. I suspect one day he'll follow in Calvin's medical footsteps. But whatever he chooses, it will be just fine.

I reflect on the whirlwind of changes in my life over the past few months. My world has become simpler, filled with fewer material possessions and more quality time with Calvin and Chacha. The three of us are taking our sweet time, adjusting to our new family dynamics. So far, so great.

"Aunt Pearl should be here any minute," I say, turning off the music.

"Fixed!" Calvin announces, standing triumphantly. His tousled hair and casual attire make him look like he just strolled in from a yoga retreat. His magnetic smile gets my heart racing. He has no idea how distracting he is.

The doorbell rings and Rezy goes ballistic. We greet Aunt Pearl, dressed in an eighties-style track suit, holding a bag of freshly picked Macintosh apples. She's going to teach me the Sinclair family recipe for apple pie. She may be old in years but she's young in spirit. I only hope I can stay as active as she is when I'm her age.

Chacha sits on my lap on the floor and Calvin hits play on the VCR, taking the space beside me. Aunt Pearl gets comfortable on the sofa. The screen fills with Calvin during his early hippy phase, toting a guitar, singing Love the One Your With.

The four of us do our best to join in, Rezy howling along, making everyone laugh and I know deep in my soul, there's nowhere in the world I'd rather be.

Calvin's hand finds mine, our fingers entwined. "You've brought so much happiness into my life," he whispers, his voice tender, filled with love.

“Right back at you,” I reply, my heart swelling.

I feel Calvin’s breath brush against my temple. The sensation is electric and I turn to face him. Our lips meet in a kiss that speaks of forever—a promise of love, laughter, and all the wonderful changes yet to come.

What if you had the power to make someone fall in love?

When my best friend and I whip up a special formula for chemistry class, the results are anything but ordinary. Now, I’m falling for Mason Miller, my brother’s best friend and the bane of my existence.

Theories might work in the lab, but I have a trickier equation to solve: Can a potion turn enemies into lovers, or is magic something we make?