



The Surgeon's Secret

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Description: Dr. Lexi Bond is a brilliant neurosurgeon with a heavy secret—she's the unrecognized daughter of the world famous Surgeon Dr. Benjamin Mars, making her the unexpected half-sister to the formidable Dr. Josephine Mars. When Lexi arrives at Phoenix Ridge Hospital, she's determined to earn her place and get acknowledgement from her half- sister and father, but her intense connection with another surgeon complicates everything.

Dr. Catherine Spencer is a skilled surgeon trapped in a cold marriage, feeling unseen next to her globetrotting husband. When Lexi and Catherine meet in the OR, sparks fly from between them from an undeniable attraction that neither expected.

Lexi knows she shouldn't feel this way about her straight colleague, especially when she's trying to navigate family secrets.

Catherine knows she shouldn't feel this way about a woman, especially one who could upend both her career, her marriage and her understanding of herself and her own sexuality.

Will Lexi and Catherine risk their careers—and hearts—to explore what feels so right?

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LEXI

Dr. Lexi Bond looked up at the huge building in front of her: Phoenix Ridge Hospital, the place she'd been anticipating working at for so long. She had researched everything about the hospital—its excellent surgical program, its feminist leadership, and the glowing reviews from people who'd worked there for years. Lexi wondered if she'd fit in. Normally, she wouldn't have worried about that, but under the circumstances...well, she would have to reveal her real identity sooner or later. And while that was something she'd wanted to do for most of her life—since she was ten years old and found out who her father was—now, faced with the knowledge that her sister was working inside this hospital and they were finally about to meet, chills raced through Lexi's body.

Lexi knew she was a highly skilled neurosurgeon. She knew she shouldn't be afraid of anything this hospital had to offer. She knew she should stand with pride in front of her sister and boldly tell her who she was.

Lexi's phone rang. Her mom's name flashed on the screen.

"Mom," Lexi answered.

"Hey, sweetheart, how are you feeling? You must be nervous. I'm thinking of you."

"Thanks for calling, Mom. I'm a little nervous, yeah. I just can't believe I'm going to meet her after all these years. For a while, I thought I'd be okay with never saying

anything, but now that I'm here, I know I have to tell her. I just can't go the rest of my life not knowing her or how she'll react to having a sister."

"Oh, my darling, you're incredible, and she'll be lucky to have you in her life. Have you thought again about meeting him?"

Lexi sighed.Him. Her father. She'd never met him. Her mother had told her wonderful things about him, but no matter how lovely, charming, kind, or generous he'd been, nothing could excuse his actions—abandoning Lexi and her mother. He'd lived his life and chosen a path that didn't involve them.

"I've thought about it so many times. I wish I had an answer, but I don't. I can't stop feeling angry at him. I can't stop hating him for how much he hurt you. And what kind of man never even tries to meet his daughter?"

"Oh, baby, I know. This is something you'll get through in your own time, and only if you want to. For now, meeting your half-sister will be enough."

"Yeah," Lexi replied. "Speaking of that, I'd better go. I don't want to be late."

"Okay, baby. I love you so much. Have a good day, and let me know how it goes. I'll be thinking of you."

"Love you, Mom."

Lexi adored her mom. Rebecca had spent so many years raising Lexi on her own, loving her enough for two parents. Sometimes Lexi found it suffocating, but her mother's support had been invaluable. And today, Lexi was going to meet her sister.

Lexi took a deep breath and walked into the hospital. The corridors smelled sterile in that familiar hospital way. Lexi walked into the elevator and pressed the button for

Floor D. As soon as the doors opened, Lexi let out a deep breath. Entering the surgical wing felt like coming home. Surgery was her comfort zone. Lexi was passionate about her work; she never let a patient down. Real life and relationships were uncomfortable and hard to figure out, but the bustling atmosphere in front of her felt right.

Lexi consulted her phone, where she'd saved the directions to her nine o'clock meeting.

A sweet-looking blonde woman sat at the reception desk, and Lexi approached her. "I have a 9 a.m. meeting with Dr. Mars."

The blonde woman smiled widely. "Of course. Just take a seat over there. I'll ring Dr. Mars to let her know you're here."

Lexi sat on the plastic hospital chair as nervous energy buzzed through her veins. She looked at the office door in front of her, the name plaque reading "Dr. Josephine Mars." Her half-sister.

Lexi had, of course, Googled photos of Dr. Mars before, so her appearance wasn't a surprise. But when the door opened and Dr. Mars beckoned her in, it still felt like a shock. Josephine had sandy hair cut into a bob with gray strands starting to show at her temples. She was a petite woman in an immaculate designer suit, and Lexi couldn't help but notice how smart she looked. Her eyes sparkled with kindness.

"I'm Dr. Josephine Mars. And you must be.... Dr. Alexis Bond," Josephine said, stretching out her hand.

Lexi noticed the pause—Josephine had waited for her to give her own name—but Lexi hadn't reacted quickly enough. Josephine chuckled to herself as she gripped Lexi's hand and shook it enthusiastically. She had a lot of strength for someone so

petite.

“Come in, come in,” Josephine said. Lexi followed her into the office and sat in the chair across from Josephine’s desk.

Lexi noted the similarities between Josephine’s face and her own. It was mostly their eyes that tied them together—those blue eyes that sparkled like she was looking at herself in a mirror. Lexi was taller and broader than Josephine, but she recognized her own grace in her sister’s movements. She had to remind herself that Josephine was twenty years older than her.

“So,” Josephine began, “it’s a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Bond. Your resume is glowing. I’m honored to have you here at Phoenix Ridge Hospital. We’ll just go through some initial paperwork, and then I’ll introduce you to Catherine Spencer, one of our general surgeons. She’ll show you around.”

Lexi crossed her legs under the table, trying to hide her nerves. This was it. This was the moment.

“Do you have any questions?” Josephine asked.

Lexi took a deep breath. “Actually, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

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“Of course, Dr. Bond. What can I help you with?”

Lexi opened her mouth, trying to figure out how to say it.

“It’s...um...well...you’re my half-sister. Doctor Benjamin Mars is alsomyfather.”

Josephine’s eyes widened in shock. She looked lost for words.

Just as Lexi was about to explain further, the pager on Josephine’s desk started vibrating and beeping madly. Josephine’s graceful hand reached out and picked it up.

“Oh, shit,” Josephine muttered.

The words sounded strange coming from her.

“A multi-car collision on Southbridge. Multiple casualties. Trauma One.”

Josephine read out the message from the pager, and Lexi knew exactly what it meant.

“Well, Dr. Bond, welcome to Phoenix Ridge Hospital. Looks like you’re diving into the deep end. Let’s head straight to the ER. All hands on deck.”

When the first ambulance arrived at the ER, Lexi and Josephine were there to meet it. Josephine was talking nonstop on her mobile phone, fielding multiple calls at once. “Yes, yes, Bay One. Yes, we’re ready for that. Hold the line,” she said, tapping the screen. “Becky, yes. Penetrating trauma to the abdomen, female patient, mid-forties. Hold the line.”

Lexi watched as Josephine's assistant made notes every time she spoke. "Where's Maya? Someone find Dr. Maya Munroe. Page her immediately."

The first patient was brought out of the ambulance on a stretcher. This was the one Lexi had been waiting for—complex head trauma, her specialty as a neurosurgeon. The patient was a young woman in her twenties, her blonde hair matted with blood. She was unconscious.

"We need to get her a CT scan immediately, then prep for surgery," Lexi ordered as she examined the patient on the way to the scanner.

"Okay, Doctor," the ER nurse replied, glancing uncertainly at Lexi.

"Bond. Dr. Lexi Bond. The new neuro attending. It's a pleasure to be working with you today. Now let's save this girl's life."

Lexi shined her flashlight into the girl's pupils, performing a quick examination as they hurried down the corridor. It was lucky the nurses knew the way to the CT scanner, because Lexi had no idea where she was in this new hospital.

In the control room, Lexi watched the scan. It was clear: surgery was necessary immediately, or the girl would die. There was no time to waste. Lexi pressed the button to turn on the microphone.

"Get her straight to the OR. Somebody come in here and lead me there because this is my first day in this hospital. Get a surgical team ready."

A young woman—her nametag read Ash Rosen—bustled into the control room. "Follow me, Dr. Bond. I'll take you to the OR. The team is ready for you."

Lexi ran after Ash. There was no time to waste, and she still needed to gown up and

scrub in. This was the high-stakes environment she thrived in. Lexi was excellent in a crisis, the calmest mind for miles around, and she knew she could save this girl's life.

Minutes later, Lexi was gowned, scrubbed, and standing in the OR, ready to begin. "Scalpel, please," she said, her voice calm and measured as she made the first incision.

As she worked, Lexi was focused and methodical. Though time was critical, she knew that in neurosurgery, the motto was "less haste, more speed." The brain was a delicate, complex organ. The skull protected it from most things, but once that protection was breached, things quickly became catastrophic.

Lexi quickly controlled the bleeding. The main work was done, and she knew this girl would live—with no lasting effects, most likely. Lexi allowed herself a small smile under her surgical mask. This was what she lived for. She glanced around at her new OR—her new home—and her new colleagues.

"Thank you, everyone," she said. "We're not done yet, but the hardest part is over. I'm confident this girl will be fine. It's a pleasure to meet you all. I'm sorry I didn't get the chance to introduce myself properly earlier. I'm Dr. Lexi Bond, the new attending neurosurgeon here at Phoenix Ridge Hospital."

"Good to meet you, Dr. Bond." The anesthetist nodded.

"Your work is incredible, Dr. Bond," a younger woman with auburn hair said. "I'm Dr. Sloane, third-year resident. I'm looking forward to learning from you."

Lexi smiled. Teaching was something she loved, and the fact that Phoenix Ridge was a teaching hospital had drawn her here, as well as wanting to meet her sister.

Another thing Lexi loved about this hospital was that the staff were all women. She'd

never seen that before, and she couldn't wait to immerse herself in it. She was tired of working under men who were a constant source of misogyny and harassment. It was exhausting. Lexi couldn't imagine how nice it would be to not be surrounded by men anymore, especially men who thought they were better than her. The world of surgeons was full of arrogant men who looked down on her just because she was a woman. But Lexi knew she was exceptional, and no one could take that away from her.

After finishing the surgery and scrubbing out, Lexi headed to the surgeons' locker room to clean up.

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There was another woman in there, changing out of her scrubs. Lexi's gaze was drawn to her as she shrugged out of her scrub shirt, revealing a black lace bra and smooth brown shoulders. Lexi couldn't help but admire the woman's beauty. It wasn't really the time or place, but sometimes these things struck Lexi at the most unexpected moments. She watched as the woman stripped out of her scrub pants, revealing matching black panties.

Very nice, Lexi thought as she admired the curves of the woman's body.

The woman turned, suddenly aware of Lexi's presence. Her dark hair was pushed behind her ears, and Lexi found herself captivated by the woman's big amber eyes.

"Oh, hi. I didn't hear you come in. I'm Dr. Catherine Spencer," the woman said, smiling.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Spencer," Lexi responded, trying to keep her cool. "I'm Dr. Lexi Bond."

"Please, call me Catherine. You must be the new neurosurgeon?"

"That's me. And please, call me Lexi." Lexi smiled and extended her hand to Catherine.

Catherine's hand was warm in hers, and for a moment Lexi's mind wandered to thoughts of what else might happen between them. But she quickly shook her head, mentally scolding herself. Don't be silly.

Catherine's amber eyes glanced away shyly, which surprised Lexi. How could someone so beautiful be so shy?

Lexi changed out of her scrubs, not bothered at all about undressing in front of someone. It was something she did all the time. Catherine didn't seem shy about her body either; it was more of a general quietness, a gentleness that Lexi found endearing. She watched as Catherine pulled on a fresh set of scrubs, admiring the lovely curves of Catherine's body.

"How did your surgery go?" Lexi asked.

"Abdominal trauma, penetrating metal. Made a bit of a mess, but I think it's all tidied up now," Catherine replied, her voice like a soothing stream of water.

"General surgeon?" Lexi asked.

"Mostly general, also trauma when needed. I know some of it can be routine and predictable, but I love it. That's what traumas are for, right? To sharpen the edges, to bring the excitement," Catherine said, meeting Lexi's gaze. "Is this your first day? Did you have a surgery from the pileup?"

"Yeah, complex head trauma. It was touch-and-go for a while, but I'm confident she'll be fine now. Always a relief."

"Was it always neurosurgery for you?" Catherine asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"Yeah, I've always loved it. I love the precision. I've been fascinated with how brains work since I was a kid, and now...well, I guess I've gotten good at it. I can't imagine doing anything else now. Once you specialize, there's no going back, is there? It seems pointless to change after all the work to get so good at something."

Lexi watched as Catherine tied her dark hair up and ran a brush through the silky waves.

“Yeah, I agree. It was the same for me with general. I had interests in other specialties earlier on, but you know, you end up with one thing, and that’s your thing. Anyway, my husband...he chose cardio early. We met at school, and by the time we were interns, it was clear that even though I was interested in cardio, there wasn’t room for both of us to do that. So general it is, and I’m happy with it.”

Catherine’s voice changed slightly when she mentioned her husband, and Lexi didn’t like it. She didn’t like the idea of Catherine having a husband, or that she’d given up her dream specialty for him.

“Where does he work?” Lexi asked, suddenly more interested than she should be.

“All over the world. He consults on complex cardio cases. He travels a lot these days.” Catherine’s words were robotic, as if she’d rehearsed them.

Lexi had more questions about this husband, but she didn’t want to pry since she’d just met Catherine. They’d talk again soon, she was sure.

2

CATHERINE

As Catherine drove home from the hospital, she was lost in thought about her tough shift picking up the trauma cases from the car accident on Southbridge. The patient she had in the OR had survived, which was a relief, but people had died today, and Catherine felt the weight of that. She wondered if there was anything any of them could have done differently. Could they have been faster and saved more lives? She’d spent the afternoon after the abdominal trauma surgery picking up smaller cases and

comforting a young girl who'd lost her mother. The social workers had taken her away in the end, but her big blue eyes haunted Catherine on her journey home.

Catherine pulled into the driveway of her beautiful home. Her salary was very comfortable, but her husband's was significantly larger, so Catherine and James Spencer lived in luxury.

Catherine opened the door to her quiet house. She'd always wanted a dog, but James had never allowed it. It felt so unfair, because at least fifty percent of the time, James was traveling, leaving Catherine home on her own. She loved dogs—their happy faces and wagging tails—and she couldn't think of anything she'd enjoy more than coming home to a dog who was delighted to see her. She knew she worked long hours, but she wouldn't be unfair to a dog. She would hire a walker or use a doggy daycare, and then spend the evenings and weekends with the dog at home. She'd always imagined a lovely, happy, waggy golden retriever, but once again, she opened the door to a quiet house.

They'd tried for children at one point, but given how infrequently they had sex, it had never really seemed like a priority. It wasn't that Catherine didn't want children; it was just that she was deeply unhappy. How could she bring a child into this home, feeling as unsettled and unhappy as she did?

She heard noise from upstairs—James packing for his next trip. She thought he was due in Paris this week...or was it London? Catherine had forgotten. He had definitely told her. God, I should remember this.

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She went into the kitchen and hung up her bag and coat. She had a beautiful kitchen—a big island, plenty of space for entertaining, a large table with room to seat twelve people, and all the best appliances. It seemed excessive for what she needed, but this was life as the wife of Dr. James Spencer. Semi-regularly, maybe once a month, they hosted large parties for powerful people who were useful to James's career. Of course, Catherine cooked, hosted, and provided a lovely evening for everyone, but that didn't stop her from feeling lonely when nobody else was there.

She heard James's rushed footsteps coming down the stairs, and she tensed slightly. "Evening, honey. How was your day?" Catherine asked in the most positive voice she could muster.

"Terrible. I can't believe it. My flight's been moved up. I wasn't supposed to fly until tomorrow, and now they want me on the night flight. My PA's been fucking useless. I need more efficient people working for me. I can't carry on like this," he said as he rushed around the living room. Catherine could see him from the kitchen.

"Are you missing something, darling?"

"Yes," James snapped. "My bloody phone charger. Have you seen it?"

Catherine hadn't seen it, but she knew how this would go if he didn't find it soon. "Here, take mine," she said, pulling her own phone charger out of the kitchen socket, wrapping the cord around the plug, and handing it to James. Sometimes, she looked at this man—this very good-looking, accomplished man in a suit—and wondered what this stranger was doing in her house. She wished he was more like the man she'd met: sharp and intelligent, but kind. But this was the man he'd become, and

they'd been married a long time now.

He grabbed the charger out of her hand without a thank you, not that Catherine expected one anymore. She just hoped he'd leave soon and take his anger with him.

"Where's your car, James?" Catherine asked, knowing he usually had a driver organized for trips to the airport.

"That's one of my fucking problems," James snapped. "There's no car booked, so I'll need a taxi."

Catherine knew what that meant. She picked up her phone, scrolled to the local taxi firm's number, and dialed.

"Taxi from 1564 Greyingham Place to the airport, please," Catherine said politely.

"Sure, we'll send it right away."

"That would be perfect, thank you," Catherine replied, calm as always.

"Taxi will be here in ten minutes, honey," Catherine told James, who grunted in acknowledgment. What was it with men and grunting? Sometimes men absolutely disgusted her—sometimes, her own husband disgusted her.

It wasn't long before the taxi pulled up in front of the house. Thank God for that, she thought. Let's get him out of here. James had gone back upstairs, but his suitcases were by the door. Catherine opened the door and signaled to the driver to collect the baggage. The driver, a small woman with an eager expression, bounded out of the car and effortlessly lifted the cases into the trunk.

Catherine called upstairs, "The taxi's here!"

There was more grumbling and shouting from upstairs, but it was mostly unintelligible, so Catherine chose to ignore it. He'd be gone soon, thank God.

As she waited, Catherine's mind wandered again. She thought about Grace, the little girl she'd comforted earlier that day. And there was something else that kept flashing into Catherine's mind—someone else. Dr. Lexi Bond, the new neurosurgeon. Those blue eyes—fierce, intriguing, mysterious, and maybe kind, too. There was something about Lexi Bond that Catherine couldn't get out of her head. She'd enjoyed that moment alone in the locker room, admiring Lexi in her sporty underwear. She had long arms and legs, like some kind of athlete. Was she an athlete? When would she even have time to be one with a surgeon's schedule? Catherine resolved to ask about it—those kinds of muscles didn't come from working in the OR.

Catherine was snapped out of her reverie by James storming down the stairs and straight out the front door. He didn't even glance back as he shouted, "Have a good week. I'll be back Friday."

Catherine closed the door behind him and leaned against it for a moment. Peace, at last. She could go back to her daydream.

Catherine sighed in relief and closed her eyes, swimming in her thoughts...and at the forefront of those thoughts was Dr. Lexi Bond and her sparkling blue eyes.

3

LEXI

Lexi stepped out of the elevator and onto the surgical floor for her second day at work. She couldn't believe Josephine hadn't talked to her again yesterday. Then again, there hadn't really been an opportunity, and Lexi hadn't even seen her. What could she do now? She made her way to the reception desk near Josephine's office.

“I was just wondering if Dr. Mars was available,” Lexi said.

“Sorry, love. She’s not in for the next couple of days—she’s working from home.” The receptionist paused. “Do you want me to call her? Is it important?”

Important? Lexi thought. Pretty important—I’m her new sister that she doesn’t know about. Well, she actually does know about me now. Has she spoken to her father? Our father? What do we even call him?

“No, nothing important. It can wait,” Lexi finally said.

The receptionist shuffled some papers and shook her head. “Thing is, Dr. Mars works from home on Tuesdays and Wednesdays now so she can spend more time with her family. She’s got that little girl, Natalie, and her wife, Ember, and it’s really important for her to spend more time being a mom.”

“Of course, I totally understand,” Lexi said. “I’m sure being a mom is a really big job, and I think it’s amazing that she’s spending time at home with her daughter.”

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“But we can contact her if there’s anything urgent or get her to come in if needed.”

“Okay, I’ll bear that in mind, thank you. But this can wait until Thursday,” Lexi said, flashing her most charming smile at the receptionist.

“Great! Have you seen the board for today, Dr. Bond?”

“No, but I’m going to take a look right now.”

“Let me know if you have any questions. I hope you’re doing well so far,” the receptionist said, clicking a couple of things on her computer. Just as Lexi was about to leave, she called out again, “Oh, and Dr. Mars designated Dr. Catherine Spencer to support you as you settle in. If you need anything, just ask her. Have you met yet?”

“Dr. Catherine Spencer?” Lexi definitely remembered her—eyes wide like a deer caught in headlights, smooth skin, and...yes, she remembered Dr. Catherine Spencer, alright.

“Yes, I met her yesterday. I’ll check in with Dr. Spencer if I need anything. Thank you for your help.”

Lexi headed to the surgical board on the wall, where all the surgeries for the day were listed, along with the theaters, notes, and surgeons assigned. She saw her scheduled surgeries and picked up the notes she needed for the patients she’d be operating on. Lexi liked meeting her patients before heading into the OR. She liked building a rapport with them because there were always nerves before a big surgery, especially when it involved the brain. And afterward, she loved checking in with the patients

and their families to share their relief. That was her favorite part of the job.

Well, apart from cutting, of course. What kind of surgeon would she be if she didn't love cutting?

She picked up her first case of the day—removing a tumor. Lexi screwed up her face and took the scans out of the folder to study them more closely. She decided to pull them up on the computer for a better look. It was a straightforward tumor removal, thank God. She didn't need to lose another patient.

She remembered every patient she'd ever lost. It was a hazard of the job—not for everyone, perhaps, but for her. Some surgeons were as cold as their reputations suggested, dead inside, with no heart. But Lexi had a heart. She cared deeply. The patients she lost haunted her. She kept a journal of their names and sometimes looked through it, remembering them. It was her way of reflecting and making herself better. A surgeon had to learn to live with loss quickly, or they didn't last long in the job. Lexi had gotten used to it, but she always reflected on her past cases and wondered if there was anything she could've done differently.

Lexi headed to her patient's room, where the young woman was waiting with her parents. Her name was Sasha Aitchison.

"So, doc, can you fix me?" Sasha asked, her voice skeptical. Lexi took one of the scans from the file and held it up to the light. She smiled her most reassuring smile, the one that always worked on patients.

"Can I call you Sasha?" Lexi asked, and Sasha nodded. "The short answer is yes—I will absolutely fix you. This is a straightforward tumor removal. Let me show you here on your scan." She pointed to the scan and circled the tumor. "This is from this morning, so it's up to date. The good news is that the tumor hasn't grown at all. I'm very confident I can take it out today with no complications. Once it's out, that

should be the end of it. We can't say for sure what the future holds, but this isn't an aggressive tumor. It's not a complicated surgery for me, but it's important. You're my number-one priority this morning, and I don't want you to worry. I know this is tough, especially at your age, but I promise to do my absolute best."

Lexi continued, "We'll cut here, and we'll have this tumor out in no time." Her confidence seemed to work its magic, and Sasha looked reassured and a little less skeptical than before.

"What about radiotherapy?" Sasha asked.

"I can't give you a definite answer on that right now. I need to see what I find when I get in there. We may recommend a short course of radiotherapy, but we'll take it step by step."

"And then, after that...back to normal life?" Sasha asked hopefully, scrunching her face.

"Absolutely. You'll be back to normal quickly, I promise," Lexi said. "Any more questions, or should I see you in the OR?" she asked, gathering her papers.

Lexi headed out to review the file for her next patient, but just as she closed the door, her pager beeped: Cat 1 trauma coming in.

Guess I'd better head to the ER, Lexi thought, setting off for the elevator.

As she rode down, she read the details on her pager—construction site accident. A worker injured by falling debris from a collapsed scaffold, leading to head and abdominal trauma. The patient was unconscious. ETA: five minutes.

Lexi burst through the ER doors, the usual high activity of nurses and doctors filling

the space. She headed toward the ambulance bay doors. As they opened, she stepped outside, enjoying a brief moment of sunshine and taking a deep breath of fresh air. There wasn't much information about the patient's injuries yet, so she'd have to assess them upon arrival.

The ambulance pulled up, lights flashing and sirens blaring. The paramedics opened the doors quickly.

"Patient unconscious, thirty-year-old male. Visible head injuries, signs of abdominal bleeding," the paramedic said. Just as Lexi was about to take charge, the doors behind her opened again. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw none other than Dr. Catherine Spencer, her big amber eyes and dark hair neatly swept up in a ponytail.

"Dr. Bond, I'm here for a general consult on the abdominal injuries. I'm assuming you're taking charge of the head trauma? Let's work together and get this guy sorted out," Catherine said in her usual gentle voice, exactly the kind of calmness Lexi needed.

"With pleasure, Dr. Spencer," Lexi responded. The paramedics repeated the patient's vitals as they wheeled him inside and Catherine quickly examined his abdomen.

"Dr. Bond, I need to get this patient to the OR immediately. Are you ready to collaborate on this?"

"Yes, certainly. I'm concerned about the head injuries. Can we put him through an MRI first so we know exactly what we're dealing with?"

"Yes," Catherine agreed.

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“Take him straight to MRI, and then we’ll meet you in the OR. Let’s get scrubbed in, Dr. Spencer,” Lexi said, taking a deep breath as she jogged alongside the gurney. She spotted an intern nearby and called out, “Get prepped for a craniotomy and laparoscopy. If you do well, you can scrub in with us.”

The intern’s face lit up with excitement, and Lexi was happy to offer the opportunity. Was there anything better than saving lives and teaching at the same time?

Catherine stayed at her side, and Lexi couldn’t help but notice how easy it felt to work with Dr. Catherine Spencer, despite barely knowing her. There was something gentle about Catherine that Lexi liked. Surgeons could be many things—intelligent, cold, robotic, sometimes even wild. But Catherine wasn’t any of those things, and Lexi appreciated that.

They reached the OR and quickly scrubbed in. The patient was wheeled in and the anesthesiologist got to work. As always, there were plenty of people in the room—all women except for their patient, which Lexi liked. She thought, Women can be difficult, but at least they’re not arrogant like some men.

Lexi looked at her station to make sure it was ready for the craniotomy. She checked her equipment and was satisfied, then walked to the wall to study the scans as they came up on the computer.

“Just as I thought. I need to relieve some pressure—there’s bleeding on the brain, but it shouldn’t be too serious if I get to it quickly,” Lexi said as she prepared her instruments.

She glanced up to see Catherine studying the abdominal scans.

“Dr. Spencer, what are you seeing?”

“I’m looking at a liver laceration. I’ll need to repair it, and there might be some damage to the bowel, but I won’t know for sure until I get in there. It’ll be a bit of a patch job, but we should be able to work simultaneously,” Catherine responded.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Lexi said, her gaze meeting Catherine’s. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

4

CATHERINE

Catherine had enjoyed that surgery more than any in months. Working with Lexi had been seamless, and it wasn’t always like that with other surgeons. So many times, she was the one to back down, the one to hold herself back. But with Lexi—Dr. Bond—it had been different. Lexi had been encouraging and appreciative and respectful of her expertise, unlike most neurosurgeons, who believed their job was superior just because the brain was the most important organ in the body, or the cardio specialists who looked down on everyone else. Catherine knew better than anyone that abdominal trauma could finish you off just as easily as brain or heart injuries.

Afterward, in the scrub room, Lexi had patted her on the back.

“Hey, you were awesome in there,” Lexi said, her blue eyes sparkling and her smile as charming as ever. Somehow, she already felt like a friend.

Catherine had friends...well, sort of. She got along well with everyone, but she’d never really connected with the other doctors at the hospital. She always seemed to be

James Spencer's wife, hosting the dinner parties for the charming, good-looking, wealthy people in their social circle. But none of it felt real. Not really. Catherine had begun to crave something genuine, and the camaraderie she was developing with Lexi felt like she might finally have her own friend.

Toward the end of her shift, Catherine was finishing up a consult and writing her notes at the desk when Lexi appeared, dressed effortlessly cool in jeans and a casual shirt, her long arms resting on the desk as she closed the space between them.

"I just wanted to say thank you for the surgery earlier. Really, you've helped me feel welcome here. It was a pleasure operating with you," Lexi said.

Something stirred deep in Catherine's stomach that she couldn't quite name. She met Lexi's sparkling blue gaze and felt her heart beat faster, momentarily lost for words.

She finally said, "It was a pleasure, Doctor."

"Please, call me Lexi," Lexi said, her tongue flicking across her lower lip. Catherine suddenly noticed how attractive Lexi was. Not that Catherine regularly found herself thinking about attractive women, but she could see that Lexi was beautiful. She might be straight, but that didn't mean she couldn't appreciate beauty in whatever form it took.

"What are you doing this evening?" Lexi asked. "Would you like to go for a drink? We could celebrate our successful surgery."

Lexi's gaze fixed on her, and Catherine felt like a rabbit caught in the headlights, frozen on the spot. It had been a long time since anyone had invited her for a drink.

"I'd love to," Catherine replied.

“Great!” Lexi said. “I’d better go get my stuff, and I assume you need to finish up here. Should we meet by the main entrance in ten minutes? Is that enough time?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll see you there,” Catherine said. She’d surprised herself by agreeing to go out for a drink. But she figured, where was the harm in it? It might be nice, especially compared to going home to a big empty house.

The one thing Catherine was worried about was that she had no idea what on earth she was going to wear.

Catherine managed to find an outfit in her locker—smart trousers and a blouse with sheer fabric that showed off her bra a little more than she was comfortable with, but she decided not to overthink it. James wasn’t here, so maybe it didn’t matter. Besides, Lexi was wearing jeans, so clearly this wasn’t a fancy place. She let her hair down and brushed it out over her shoulders, added a bit of mascara, and she was good to go.

Lexi drove them to the bar—in a pickup truck, of all things. Catherine couldn’t remember ever being in one before, but she figured there was a first time for everything. Somehow, it suited Lexi.

Catherine sat nervously at a table in the bar. She didn’t usually go to places like this—a quirky lounge bar with posters of musicians on the walls and a small stage where it looked like a singer was setting up. Lexi returned from the bar, carrying two drinks. Catherine’s was a Sauvignon Blanc, but she wasn’t sure what was in Lexi’s glass.

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“What are you drinking?” Catherine asked curiously.

“It’s soda and lime,” Lexi responded. “I like it with fresh lime, not the processed cordial stuff.”

“No alcohol?” Catherine asked, a bit surprised.

“No, I don’t drink. I used to, but it’s not for me anymore. I like being in control, and alcohol...well, it just isn’t good for me.”

“Oh,” Catherine said. “How long have you been sober?”

“Ten years,” Lexi said proudly, flashing that beautiful smile again. Wow. I wasn’t expecting that, but it’s really impressive.

“So why are we in a bar if you don’t drink?” Catherine asked, still curious.

“Just because I don’t drink doesn’t mean I don’t love bars. I love the energy. It was tough at first when I gave up alcohol. But, I found a way to make it work and hang out at bars still. I’ve been wanting to try this one since I moved here. Plus, the singer tonight is going to do some Nina Simone covers as well as her original stuff.”

“Oh, I know Nina Simone—she sang ‘Here Comes the Sun,’ right?” Catherine asked, causing Lexi to smile widely at her.

“Yes, that’s the one,” Lexi said, suddenly serious. “I love Nina Simone. She had such deep, soulful passion in her music. It’s all about love and loss. My mom used to listen

to her a lot, so I'm really looking forward to this."

Lexi's words were filled with genuine emotion, and Catherine thought she'd listen to more Nina Simone after tonight.

"Are you close to your mom?" Catherine asked.

"Yes, very," Lexi said. "I adore my mom. She raised me on her own and did an incredible job. She's given me everything. Sometimes she can be a bit suffocating, though—maybe that's one reason I moved here. But I still speak to her every day."

"And your dad?" Catherine asked, unsure if she was prying too much. Was this too personal a question to ask after only knowing someone for two days?

"Well, that's an interesting story, if you really want to know," Lexi said, her expression both challenging and inviting, as if she wanted to share, but only if Catherine truly cared. And Catherine found she did care—she really wanted to know more about this woman.

"I'd love to, if you're comfortable sharing," Catherine said softly.

"Well, the interesting thing is, I've never actually met my father. But I do know who he is—and so do you, I imagine," Lexi said.

"Really?" Catherine's eyes widened. "I know him?"

"My father is Dr. Benjamin Mars," Lexi said.

"Dr. Josephine Mars's father? The famous surgeon?"

"Yes, the very same."

“Wow, so you’re Josephine’s sister?”

“Sort of,” Lexi said with a wry smile. “Half-sister. Same dad, different moms.”

Catherine tried to process all this new information. It was a lot.

“And does Josephine know?” Catherine asked.

“She does now,” Lexi said sharply. “I told Dr. Mars on my first day here, but before she had a chance to respond, we were pulled into that trauma emergency—the Southbridge car accident. So no, she didn’t really respond. She looked surprised, though, so I don’t think she had any idea I existed. I’m not sure if she believes me or if she thinks I’m crazy. I guess time will tell.”

“And...does your father know?”

“Oh, he’s always known,” Lexi said, her voice tinged with sadness. “He paid for everything—my education, the whole way through med school. But he never wanted to meet me. And that’s really hard. What kind of man doesn’t want to meet his own daughter, even if she was the product of an affair?”

Catherine felt a deep sadness wash over her for Lexi. She’d grown up with two loving parents and couldn’t imagine how difficult it must have been for Lexi, knowing that her father was out there but never getting to meet him.

“You knew who he was, though? I’m assuming yes, given you went into neurosurgery,” Catherine asked gently.

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Lexi nodded. “Yes, I followed him—everything he did, his research papers, his biggest cases. I followed it all online. And yeah, I guess it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that’s why I chose neurosurgery. I wanted to follow in his footsteps. I thought maybe if I made him proud, he might want to meet me.”

Catherine reached across the table and placed her hand on Lexi’s. It was warm and soft beneath hers.

“I’m so sorry, Lexi. You’re an incredible woman. You don’t deserve any of that.”

For a moment, they both looked into each other’s eyes, and Catherine felt something pass between them—something important. Shivers ran through her as she touched Lexi’s hand, a sensation she hadn’t felt before.

Lexi broke the moment with a smile. “Anyway, enough about me. How about you? How’s your home life?”

“Oh, I was lucky. I don’t have anything to complain about—two loving parents, a comfortable upbringing. I wouldn’t say I’m close to them as an adult, but we get along well. They’re both healthy and alive, and I’ve been very fortunate,” Catherine said.

“And now?” Lexi asked. “Do you and your husband have any kids?”

Catherine hesitated. She didn’t want to talk about James. She resented his presence in this conversation, which she’d enjoyed until this moment.

“No.” Catherine sighed deeply. “If I’m honest, I did want kids. Maybe I still do, but it’s never been a priority for us. James’s work is so important, and while he says he wants kids, I guess...I guess I’m just not sure I want to have children with him.”

Catherine gasped, shocked that she’d said it out loud—the words she’d suspected were lurking in the back of her mind for a long time. I don’t want children with him.

Lexi reached across the table again, taking Catherine’s hand. Shivers ran through her body at Lexi’s touch.

“That must be really hard,” Lexi said. Her eyes were a darker blue than usual in the dim light of the bar. There was something magnetic between them, and Catherine felt herself falling under Lexi’s spell. She pulled her hand away and picked up her wineglass, the ice-cold white wine snapping her out of the haze.

“Will you stay with him? With James?” Lexi asked quietly.

“I don’t see any other path,” Catherine replied softly, looking down at the table, unable to trust herself enough to look into those magnetic blue eyes again.

5

LEXI

Lexi had spent her day off thinking about nothing but Catherine—illicit thought after illicit thought. She wanted her so badly, but Catherine was straight and married—and not just married, but married to the very powerful surgeon, Dr. James Spencer. Lexi screwed up her face. This was just a big mess waiting to happen. Sleeping with straight women was never a good idea, especially when things could get complicated. She already had enough on her plate.

Lexi had received an email from Josephine's secretary asking her to meet Josephine in her office at 9 a.m. on Thursday. The email was short and to the point, and Lexi felt like if Josephine had really wanted to welcome her new sister, she would have contacted her directly instead of through her secretary. As much as Lexi wanted to see Josephine and talk about everything, she was worried about how Josephine would react now that she'd had time to process everything over the past couple of days.

But even worrying about her sister couldn't keep her mind off Catherine for long. There had been a moment that night at the bar when Lexi had touched Catherine's hand and their eyes met. Catherine's big amber eyes suddenly looked questioning, curious, and Lexi knew the attraction wasn't just one-sided. But Catherine had pulled away, wisely so, because Lexi wasn't sure she would have been able to.

As Lexi drove to the hospital Thursday morning, ready for her meeting with Josephine, anxiety ran through her. She wanted to see Catherine so badly. She wanted to talk to her about her situation and ask for advice. Suddenly, Catherine was the friend Lexi had always wanted, even though they'd only just met. Could they be friends? Was it possible to be friends with someone you were so drawn to, so attracted to? Lexi had never really tried that before. In the past, she was more inclined to have sex first and deal with the consequences later. But lately, she was trying to take things slower, and was mostly succeeding.

Still, Catherine's allure was strong. Images of her kept flashing through Lexi's mind—big eyes, smooth tan skin, that glossy brown hair falling in waves over her shoulders. Lexi smiled to herself when she thought of Catherine walking to her truck last night, immaculate as ever in smart pants and a sheer blouse that revealed the lace of her bra and the curve of her breasts. When she looked closely, she could even make out the outline of her nipples. It had seemed like a sexier outfit than Catherine would normally wear, but Lexi suspected Catherine hadn't really noticed how sheer the fabric was or how the lights of the bar would highlight it. That top was probably

something she'd usually pair with a suit jacket. But Lexi wasn't about to forget the sight anytime soon.

The office door opened, and suddenly Josephine was there—Dr. Josephine Mars, Lexi's half-sister, the head of the hospital, and an intimidating woman despite her small frame. Even though Josephine was smaller than Lexi, her age and position gave her a lot of authority. This morning, she didn't look happy. She nodded at Lexi.

"Dr. Mars," Lexi said in acknowledgment, standing and walking into the office. She sat down across from Josephine's desk. Josephine's blue eyes were hard and cold today.

"Do you want to tell me what the hell this is all about? This Benjamin is my father nonsense?" Josephine said bluntly.

"Thirty-six years ago, your father had an affair with my mother in New York. By the end of that summer, she was pregnant," Lexi stated, choosing to stick to the facts.

Josephine looked at her quizzically, as if sizing her up and trying to decide if Lexi's face looked enough like her own for this to be the truth.

"Are you sure?" Josephine asked sharply.

"As sure as I can be," Lexi said. "My mother has always told me she's certain, and that's all I have to go on."

"So you're not sure," Josephine snapped. She linked her hands together on the table. Lexi knew it must be stressful for Josephine to discover she had a half-sister at this stage of her life. Lexi wasn't sure how old Josephine was now, but it seemed she might have been a teenager when Lexi was born.

“We’re scientists, Dr. Bond. We go on facts, not what someone’s mother remembers,” Josephine said harshly, almost as if implying Lexi’s mother had been promiscuous and couldn’t be sure who fathered her child. But Lexi knew her mother well, and Rebecca said she hadn’t been seeing other men when she’d gotten pregnant.

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“Have you spoken to Benjamin?” Lexi asked. “He’s been paying my mother all these years. He’s been paying for me, including my education through med school.”

Josephine’s eyes flashed with surprise. Clearly, she hadn’t expected that. Even she knew Benjamin wouldn’t be paying for a child that wasn’t his.

“Have you ever met him?” Josephine asked.

Lexi shook her head.

“So again, you only have your mother’s word to go off, regarding the payments,” Josephine said.

Lexi nodded. It was clear that Josephine was clinging to any shred of hope that Lexi wasn’t actually related to her. It made Lexi uncomfortable.

“I’m not making this up, Doctor,” Lexi said, her voice just as sharp as Josephine’s. “This is a big deal for me. I’ve wanted to meet you my whole life. This isn’t my fault. This is something your father did. I’m sorry it’s such a surprise to you, but this isn’t my fault, and I won’t allow you to accuse me of lying about who I am.”

Anger bubbled up inside Lexi. She stared at Josephine, her expression unyielding.

“Get out, Dr. Bond. Get to work. I don’t have time for this. I have a hospital to run,” Josephine said coldly, standing up and quickly guiding Lexi out the door.

Lexi stormed down the corridors toward the elevator. This was fucking ridiculous.

Josephine was being outrageous. The least she could do was acknowledge her and validate her existence. Lexi was fuming when she rounded the corner and nearly ran right into Catherine. Catherine's eyes softened as she recognized Lexi.

"Lexi, are you okay? What happened?" Catherine asked, placing a gentle hand on Lexi's arm as she noticed her panicked state.

Lexi didn't know what to say. She wanted to crumble into Catherine's arms, and the moment Catherine put her arm around her shoulders, Lexi felt the urge to let go.

"Come with me," Catherine said. Lexi appreciated her taking charge. Catherine guided Lexi through the corridors and into a small staff room with a sofa, soft lighting, a fridge, and a kettle on a small counter.

"Sit down," Catherine said, and Lexi flopped dramatically onto the sofa. Catherine filled a glass of water at the sink and handed it to Lexi. "Take a sip," she said gently. Lexi obeyed.

"What happened?" Catherine asked softly as she sat next to her. Their closeness made Lexi want to reach out and touch Catherine, but she resisted.

"Josephine—Dr. Mars—she basically called me a liar. Denied that Benjamin is my father. She doesn't want to accept it, doesn't want to listen. I knew this was a possibility, but I...I thought maybe we could have something—a friendship, some kind of sisterly connection. But it didn't go that way. And I snapped at her, too. She told me to get out. I don't even know if I'll have a job by the end of the day."

Lexi sighed, feeling defeated. Everything was falling apart. Nothing about this situation was going how she'd hoped.

Suddenly, Catherine's hand was on her leg, just above her knee, and Lexi jumped at

the intensity of the connection. Catherine's touch wasn't hot, but it felt like it burned into her skin.

"Everything will be okay," Catherine said softly. "Think about it from Josephine's point of view. This is a lot for her to take in. If she's defensive, it's probably not because she doesn't believe you—it's because she does, and she's struggling to accept it. She'll need time to get used to this and time to get to know you." Catherine paused, her warm, whiskey-colored eyes locking onto Lexi's. Lexi wanted to dive into them, to devour Catherine. She leaned in, ready to kiss her, to claim her...

But just then, two nurses walked into the room, and the moment was broken. They quickly pulled away from each other.

Lexi leaned her head back against the sofa and closed her eyes. This was too much. She'd nearly kissed Catherine—what the hell was she doing? Preying on James Spencer's wife? That was a really bad idea.

"I've got to go, Catherine. I have a craniotomy to prep for," Lexi said quickly, standing up and rushing out the door without looking back.

6

CATHERINE

It was Friday night, and Catherine had a charity hospital event to attend. She was supposed to be attending with James, but he was still away—his flights had been rescheduled again. That was life with him: unpredictable and lonely. The hospital was hosting the event, and Catherine was just there to play the perfect wife, make small talk with the right people, charm, and entertain. But she really couldn't be bothered. She wanted to stay home and think about Lexi instead.

Lexi had almost kissed her on the sofa. Catherine was sure of it. Lexi had looked into her eyes and tension had bubbled up inside her, sending shivers through her whole body at the thought of Lexi's mouth on hers. What on earth was this curiosity? Catherine wondered. She was straight, wasn't she? And yet here she was, feeling a burning desire for a woman—a very beautiful woman, but still, a woman. Catherine had never looked at women like this before, had never looked at anyone like this before, with this desperate need for them to kiss her.

After leaving the room with the nurses, Catherine had felt flustered, worried that they might have noticed something. Could they see what was happening? Of course not. She was Dr. James Spencer's wife. She hadn't done anything inappropriate...yet. She contemplated skipping the hospital gala, but she knew James would be mad if she didn't go. She had to make an appearance for both of them.

Catherine finished curling her hair in the mirror. It looked good, and her makeup was flawless. She selected a royal blue silk gown. The color reminded her of Lexi's eyes, and the thought made her mind wander to the rest of Lexi's body. Catherine remembered noticing Lexi looking at her nipples through that sheer blouse, and how much she'd liked feeling the other woman's eyes on her.

She slipped into the silk dress. It was floor-length, with a slit up one side that showed off a decent amount of thigh, but not too much. The thing about James was that he liked her to dress classy but sexy, though not too sexy. Other people should find her attractive, but not too attractive. It was a look Catherine naturally pulled off well. Or had it ever really been natural? She'd been living this way ever since she met James in med school—conservative yet alluring.

Catherine slipped into her heels and headed out the door. The car and driver were waiting for her. She was thoughtful on the way to the gala. The event was being held at the Ridgemont Hotel, a five-star luxury skyscraper on the beachfront. It wasn't too far from her house, and soon she was stepping out of the car, smiling and charming as

she walked into the event, surrounded by doctors, benefactors, and sponsors—very wealthy people. This was as much Catherine’s job as surgery itself, but it felt strange being there without James. It wasn’t the first time she’d attended one of these things without him, though.

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She spotted Karl Bill Thorp, a big hospital benefactor—a large, overweight man in his seventies who always seemed to have a cigar in hand, even though he wasn't supposed to smoke indoors. He was pervy and inappropriate, and Catherine hated him. She adjusted her dress slightly to make sure he wouldn't see too much cleavage and plastered on a fake smile.

“Karl, nice to see you,” she said.

“Always a pleasure, Mrs. Spencer,” he grunted, his voice rough. He introduced her to the man he was standing with. “This is Dr. James Spencer's wife—you know, the top cardiothoracic surgeon. World-class.”

Catherine hated that—being reduced to just James Spencer's wife. She was Dr. Spencer in her own right, but people forgot that. They talked about her as if she wasn't even there, and it made her feel sick. She knew what she was supposed to do, though—smile, look pretty, be smart without being too smart, and nod along with these fat old rich men, keeping the peace like women were supposed to. Catherine had become a master at playing that role. She was nodding and smiling as expected, but inside, she was screaming.

Suddenly, she felt a hand on the small of her back. She turned to see Lexi. Her stomach fluttered as Lexi leaned in and kissed her cheek, her voice lyrical and beautiful as she said, “Dr. Spencer, what a surprise! Lovely to see you here.”

Catherine caught a whiff of Lexi's perfume—something citrusy and intoxicating. Or maybe it was Lexi herself who was intoxicating. Her dark, shiny hair was loose around her shoulders, and her blue eyes were piercing. She wore a black tailored

pantsuit, the jacket plunging low, with nothing underneath. Catherine's eyes were drawn to her chest, and she felt weak at the knees. Lexi was absolutely stunning.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Lexi said, flashing her charming smile. "I'm so sorry to interrupt, but I need to borrow Dr. Spencer—there's someone I really need her to meet." Without waiting for a response, Lexi guided Catherine quickly away, wrapping an arm around her waist and leading her into the bathroom. They both leaned against the sink, laughing.

"Thank you for saving me," Catherine said, still catching her breath from their hasty escape.

"No problem," Lexi replied. Catherine leaned back against the basin and Lexi stood close, still holding her. Catherine wanted to collapse into Lexi's arms and be swept away from this shitty event.

"I wasn't expecting to see you here," Catherine said quietly, still surprised that Lexi had shown up. "I didn't think you'd let yourself be dragged into these kinds of events."

"It's your lucky night then," Lexi said, as charming as ever. "You look beautiful, Catherine. The blue really suits you. It brings out the gold in your eyes."

Catherine felt lost in Lexi's blue eyes again. She thought Lexi might kiss her now, and she wanted that more than anything else in the world. But just as quickly, Lexi pulled away, and Catherine felt empty.

"Come with me," Lexi said, taking her hand and leading her out of the bathroom.

Catherine held Lexi's hand tightly as they wove through the crowd and toward the elevators. Lexi pulled her inside and pressed the button for the rooftop.

“Why are we going to the rooftop?” Catherine asked.

“You’ll see,” Lexi said with a grin. “It’ll be much more fun than that event, trust me. I think we could both use a bit of freedom tonight.”

Excitement rushed through her. She had no idea what to expect, but she was thrilled nonetheless. What on earth is happening to me?

The elevator doors opened onto the rooftop, revealing a stunning pool with a view of the ocean.

“Wow,” Catherine whispered as she took it all in. She’d never stayed at this hotel before, but it was known as the best in the city. She turned to see Lexi’s blue eyes glittering dangerously, as dark and inviting as the ocean in the moonlight.

“Care for a dip?” Lexi asked temptingly.

A thrill ran through her. She was both terrified and excited at the idea of getting into the pool with Lexi.

“But we don’t have any swimwear,” Catherine said, suddenly realizing that even if she did want to swim with Lexi, this meant she couldn’t.

Lexi met her gaze and shrugged dramatically as she began to unbutton her jacket. Catherine had already noticed she wasn’t wearing a bra—or anything else—underneath. As Lexi slipped off her jacket, Catherine couldn’t look away. Lexi’s breasts were round and her nipples small and pink. Wow, Catherine thought as Lexi tossed the jacket onto a chair.

Lexi met Catherine’s eyes again as she began to unbutton her pants. She was seductive—completely and effortlessly seductive—and Catherine couldn’t resist

watching in a way she'd never watched a woman before. What on earth is happening between us?

"I...I..." Catherine stammered, suddenly lost for words.

Lexi put her finger to Catherine's lips, silencing her gently. Catherine's skin tingled where the soft pad of Lexi's finger touched her lips. Then, without a word, Lexi dropped her pants to the ground and stepped out of them gracefully, leaving her in just a pair of tiny black panties. Nothing elaborate, nothing too sexy. Lexi didn't need anything extra—her body was more than enough.

Lexi smiled and turned, walking toward the pool. Catherine's eyes were drawn to the delicious curve of Lexi's ass in those small black panties, the muscles of her back and thighs moving fluidly in the moonlight. Oh my God, Catherine thought, overwhelmed by the sight.

Lexi dove into the pool, splashing loudly.

Catherine stood at the edge, torn between running back to the safety of the elevator or diving into the unknown. But when Lexi resurfaced and grinned up at her, Catherine's resolve broke.

"Come on in, the water's perfect," Lexi called from the pool.

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Catherine reached for the straps of her blue silk dress, sliding one off each shoulder. She knew that as soon as she let go, the dress would fall to the floor. She took a deep breath and released it, watching as the dress pooled at her feet.

She stepped out of the silk and folded it neatly on the chair next to Lexi's clothes. The night air felt exhilarating against her bare skin. She hadn't worn a bra tonight, and now she stood in nothing but a lacy thong.

For a moment Catherine hesitated, wondering if she should really go through with this. But something deep inside her craved the experience—the rush, the freedom, the pull of Lexi's energy. It was different from anything she'd ever done. Her skin tingled in the cool night air as she stepped closer to the pool.

She curled her toes around the edge, feeling the tension building in her chest. She glanced up to see Lexi's eyes on her—watching, waiting, dark with desire. Catherine took a deep breath and then dove into the water, feeling the cool rush cascade over her body, washing away any lingering doubts.

When she surfaced in the middle of the pool, Lexi was right there, her blue eyes just inches from Catherine's. The air between them was electric, crackling with anticipation. They were close—too close, or maybe not close enough.

“Is this okay?” Lexi whispered, her voice barely audible as her hand found Catherine's hip, pulling her gently, but unmistakably, closer. Their wet bodies slid together, their breasts brushing, sending shocks through Catherine that made her gasp.

“Yes,” Catherine breathed, feeling the warmth of Lexi's hand against her skin, the

weight of her own desire overwhelming any hesitation. Her mind was spinning, her body trembling with the unfamiliar intensity of it all. She'd never felt anything like this before—not even with James.

Lexi's hands moved up Catherine's sides, caressing her back and shoulders, before gently cupping her face. Catherine shivered, her body alive with anticipation as Lexi closed the space between them, her lips brushing against Catherine's softly at first, then more urgently.

The kiss was deep and filled with longing, and Catherine felt Lexi's hunger as her tongue slipped into her mouth, exploring, tasting. Catherine responded in kind, her lips moving of their own accord, matching Lexi's passion. She tasted the lime on Lexi's tongue—sharp, citrusy, and irresistible. Catherine wanted more, needed more, and her whole body ached for it.

A throbbing need pulsed between her legs, a need she'd never felt this strongly before. This was different than anything she'd felt for another person. This was raw and all-consuming. Catherine wanted Lexi—no, she needed her.

Lexi pulled away first, her breath ragged and her eyes dark with desire. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that," Lexi whispered, though her eyes betrayed her words, filled with longing.

"Please...it's not just you," Catherine reassured her, her voice trembling. "I wanted it, too. I want this." She was breathless, her body still humming with the intensity of the kiss, with the need that hadn't been sated yet. "I promise you, I want this."

Lexi hesitated, looking into Catherine's eyes as if searching for any sign of doubt. "But...aren't you straight?"

"Clearly not." Catherine laughed softly, a mixture of nervousness and exhilaration

making her voice shake. “I always thought I was—until now. Until I looked at you, and I knew...I knew it wasn’t a normal way to look at another woman, not if I was really straight.”

She reached for Lexi’s hand and held it in her own, feeling the warmth, the connection.

“But what about your husband?” Lexi asked, her face contorted slightly with worry, as if she’d messed up everything by giving in to her desire.

But she hadn’t. Catherine wanted this as much—if not more—than Lexi did.

“Shh...” Catherine whispered, raising her finger to Lexi’s lips in the same way Lexi had done earlier. She traced the soft pad of her fingertip against Lexi’s lips tenderly, sensually. She didn’t want to talk about James. She didn’t want to talk about being straight. None of that mattered right now.

All that mattered was Lexi and the way she made her feel—alive, desired, free.

Catherine looked out past Lexi to the ocean stretching out for miles under the moonlight, full of infinite possibilities. She felt bold, wild. She took Lexi’s right hand and guided it between her legs, pressing it tightly against her. She gasped softly, watching as Lexi’s eyes widened with want. She felt Lexi’s fingers begin to move, seeking out her pleasure, teasing her, making her breath hitch in her throat.

“Please...more,” Catherine gasped, her body trembling with anticipation.

Lexi used her other hand to guide Catherine to the edge of the pool, pressing her back gently against the cool tiles. With practiced skill, Lexi’s fingers slipped beneath the soaked fabric of Catherine’s panties, pushing them aside as she teased and played with her, sending waves of pleasure coursing through Catherine’s body.

Catherine's breathing grew heavier, her hips instinctively moving in rhythm with Lexi's touch. She was already on the edge, her body teetering on the brink of something she'd never experienced before.

Lexi kissed her again—deeply, passionately—her tongue exploring Catherine's mouth with a hunger that mirrored the intensity of her fingers as they worked their magic below.

Catherine could barely hold herself together. "Oh God, yes...please, don't stop," she moaned, the words escaping her lips in a breathless rush.

Lexi's voice was a low whisper in her ear, sending shivers down Catherine's spine. "You're so wet for me," she murmured, her fingers moving deeper, more insistent.

Catherine opened her legs wider, giving Lexi full access as she pressed herself harder against the pool's edge. She felt Lexi's fingers push deep inside of her and begin to fuck her. The sensations were overwhelming, her body thrumming with the need for release, for more of this unfamiliar yet intoxicating pleasure.

The world around her faded until all that remained was the feeling of Lexi's fingers moving inside her and her thumb on her clitoris, driving her toward the edge of ecstasy.

"I'm going to come," Catherine whispered, barely able to get the words out.

"Come for me, baby," Lexi urged, her voice hot in Catherine's ear. She pulled Catherine closer, kissing her again, devouring her as if she couldn't get enough.

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Catherine's whole body tightened, and then—release. She cried out, the sound of her orgasm echoing off the tiles and into the night air. Waves of pleasure rolled through her, flooding every inch of her body. She'd never experienced anything like it. Her body shuddered uncontrollably as Lexi held her through the aftershocks, her fingers drawing out every last bit of Catherine's climax until there was nothing left but the delicious hum of satisfaction.

Catherine collapsed into Lexi's arms, her breath ragged and her heart racing. She nuzzled into Lexi's neck, feeling the warmth and comfort of being held and cared for.

Lexi pressed a gentle kiss to the top of Catherine's head. "Good girl," she whispered softly, stroking her back. "Good girl."

Catherine closed her eyes, letting herself sink into the moment, into Lexi's embrace, feeling more at peace than she had in a very long time.

7

LEXI

Lexi tortured herself with guilt over what she'd done with Catherine in the pool. Sleeping with a married woman was one thing, but having sex with her in a rooftop pool at a hotel while they were both supposed to be at a charity hospital gala was another. What on earth had come over her? Lexi had no idea. All she knew was that when she'd seen Catherine in that blue silk dress, nothing else mattered. Nothing was going to come between her and Catherine that night. She had to see her naked, had to have her right then and there. She'd entirely let go, rushing after her desire rather than

thinking rationally.

As perfect as Catherine had been both sexually and in every way, pursuing her was a really, really bad idea. And as Lexi held her afterward, the full weight of what she'd done overwhelmed her. She'd helped Catherine out of the pool, and they both leaned over the barrier separating them from the ocean, looking out over the water in comfortable silence. All kinds of thoughts were whirling through Lexi's head.

What about her husband?

What about her being straight?

What about my massive issues with Josephine?

What about my father, who I still haven't met?

Am I going to get fired? Will anyone find out about this? What if she tells her husband?

Their bodies dried in the warmth of the evening, but Lexi's panties were still soaked, and she imagined Catherine's were as well. She stripped hers off to dry completely, then turned to Catherine.

"Need a hand?" Lexi had asked, and Catherine nodded coyly. Lexi had slowly slid the waistband of Catherine's lacy thong down over her hips, thighs, and off one foot at a time. Oh God, how she'd wanted to go down on her—right there, so close. She wanted to take her again and again, savoring every part of her. But somehow, Lexi had managed to hold back. She knew that was a really, really bad idea.

Lexi had helped her dress, and they both put on their clothes without their panties and returned to the elevator. Lexi had two pairs of soaking wet panties in her bag, and she

couldn't stop thinking about having Catherine's panties with her. She hoped, underneath the chlorine, they would still smell like her.

Lexi had snuck them out of the hotel via a fire escape and called two Ubers. She'd wanted to call just one and take Catherine home with her so badly. But at least part of her had been thinking sensibly, so she put Catherine in a separate car. She wasn't sure how Catherine was feeling after what they'd done in the pool, but she knew the sex had blown Catherine's mind. And while that was a good thing, Lexi worried about where it might lead. Straight women getting their first taste of really good sex—really fucking good sex—often came with a world of drama.

Catherine had been quiet as they looked over the ocean, quiet as they descended the stairwell, and quiet as Lexi helped her into the Uber. There'd been a connection between them in their movements, but also a distance, as if they were both thinking about the reality of what lay ahead.

At work the morning after the gala, Lexi parked her truck in the lot, made her way through the main entrance, and headed up to the surgical floor. This was just another day. She had surgeries to prepare for and patients to deal with, but all she could think about was Catherine. Stupidly—or sensibly—Lexi had Catherine's thong in her pocket. It was dry now. She'd brought it with her under the pretense of giving it back, but now that seemed ridiculous. Handing back a thong at work? She thought about keeping it. She wanted to keep it.

But what was she going to do when she saw Catherine? What would she say? Lexi had no idea. She couldn't continue whatever this was between them. The last thing Lexi needed right now was a secret affair, and as much as she wanted Catherine, that's all it would be. And it was very, very clear to everyone around here that Catherine was Dr. James Spencer's wife. Messing with that was undeniably a bad idea.

Lexi was barely ten minutes into her shift before her pager went off: Neuro consult in the ER. She let the surgical reception know.

“Hey Kate, I’ve got a consult in the ER. I’ll be back as soon as I can, but my morning surgery might be delayed.”

“No worries, Dr. Bond. I’ll have one of the residents inform the patient,” Kate replied, efficient as ever. Lexi appreciated that.

Heading to the ER, she wondered why they needed her for just a consult. Surely anyone from neuro could handle that. When she opened the curtain, she found herself face to face with the patient—and Dr. Catherine Spencer.

Catherine’s hair was tied up in a ponytail, its rich chocolate color gleaming under the harsh lights of the ER. Her face was as beautiful as ever, and her amber eyes flicked up to meet Lexi’s. Lexi’s gaze drifted lower, noticing a faint love bite on Catherine’s neck. Oh fuck, Lexi thought, spotting another one on Catherine’s collarbone as her shirt shifted slightly.

“Dr. Spencer?” Lexi said, her voice carefully neutral.

“Dr. Bond,” Catherine replied smoothly, her voice as silky as ever. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

That’s what I thought last night, Lexi thought to herself, forcing back a grin.

“This is Sophie Ashton, twenty-two. She’s fallen off a horse and has some abdominal bruising. I want to get a scan. She’s also got a cut and bump on her head—I thought you could take a look,” Catherine said. Lexi knew a doctor of her caliber wasn’t really needed for a bump on the head, but with Catherine here, she didn’t mind.

“Right. Sophie, is it? Let me take a look at your head,” Lexi said. “Are you in much pain?”

“Yes,” Sophie replied.

“Can you point to where it hurts and describe the pain?”

Sophie pointed to the area around the cut and bump, and Lexi examined the wound. It would need a few stitches, definitely something she could handle. As she worked, she noticed Catherine’s eyes never left her hands. Lexi couldn’t be one hundred percent sure, but she guessed Catherine was thinking about what those hands had done to her the night before.

After giving Sophie a small painkiller injection, Lexi cleaned the wound and began suturing it. “You’ll be good as new before you know it,” she said as she finished up. “Come back if you have any headaches, dizziness, or if the pain gets worse, but otherwise, you’re good to go. A bit of rest and you’ll be fine. Do you still think she needs an abdominal scan, Dr. Spencer?”

Catherine hesitated, then asked Sophie how she was feeling. Sophie said she was feeling much better, so they both agreed it wasn’t necessary.

“Try not to fall off more horses anytime soon,” Lexi said with a smile. “And please, wear a helmet next time.”

As they left Sophie’s cubicle, Catherine glanced at Lexi, her voice almost playful as she said, “Where are you headed?”

“Back up to surgery,” Lexi replied, her heart starting to beat faster. “How about you?”

“Me too, but I don’t have a surgery scheduled for another hour.” They walked together down the corridor, and Catherine paused by a door to the left, glancing around to make sure no one was nearby. Lexi looked at the name printed on the door: On-Call Room.

Catherine leaned back against the door, her golden eyes warm and inviting. Lexi hesitated. She was only human, and she couldn’t resist. She pushed Catherine gently, opening the door. As they slipped inside, Catherine moved backward until she sat on the bed.

One more time couldn’t hurt, right? Lexi thought.

They didn’t speak, but Catherine’s hands went to the waistband of Lexi’s scrub pants. Lexi caught her hands, stopping her. This wasn’t how it was going to go. Not this time.

“No,” Lexi said, softly but firmly. She gently pulled Catherine’s hands away from her waistband.

“Please, I really want to,” Catherine said, her voice breathy.

“Not today,” Lexi replied, her tone final. She stepped back and locked the door. Then, turning back, she reached for the waistband of Catherine’s skirt, unfastening it and easing it down over her hips. Catherine moved gracefully, slipping out of her heels, leaving her standing in her hold-ups and lace panties.

Fucking hell, Lexi thought, she’s so beautiful.

Lexi pulled the panties down too, and they fell to the floor between Catherine’s legs. She pushed Catherine’s thighs apart with her hands.

“Please,” Catherine gasped, her head tipping back in anticipation.

Lexi’s mouth found her without hesitation, devouring her with an intensity she’d barely contained until now. She licked, sucked, and kissed, overwhelmed by Catherine’s taste. Catherine’s moans grew louder as her breath came in short, desperate pants, her hand tangling into Lexi’s hair and pulling her in tighter.

Lexi’s tongue moved hungrily, exploring every part of her, from her opening to her clit, flicking and sucking. Catherine’s legs spread wider, giving Lexi full access. Lexi’s fingers teased at her entrance, feeling how wet Catherine was. It was overwhelming—the heat, the slickness, the raw desire in every one of Catherine’s moans.

Lexi slid her fingers inside her, feeling Catherine’s body open up for her. Catherine moaned louder as she pushed her hips against Lexi’s hand, desperate for more.

Lexi added another finger, curling them up against Catherine’s G-spot, her tongue still working relentlessly on her clit. Catherine was on the edge, her breaths coming faster, her body trembling as she neared climax.

“Oh my God...oh my fucking God, I’m going to come,” Catherine gasped, her voice strained with need.

Lexi worked faster, her fingers thrusting deep as her tongue swirled in tight, practiced circles over Catherine’s clit. She could feel Catherine’s body tightening around her fingers, the telltale signs of an orgasm building.

“Come for me, baby,” Lexi whispered, her breath hot against Catherine’s skin before she dove back in, sucking her clit into her mouth. The sound of Catherine’s moans filled the room as she reached the peak of her pleasure, her body stiffening and her legs trembling as the orgasm hit.

“Yes, yes, yes...” Catherine’s voice was a barely controlled whisper, but her body said everything Lexi needed to know. Catherine came hard, her entire body shaking as the orgasm tore through her, leaving her gasping. Her hands gripped Lexi’s hair tightly, pulling her closer as she rode the wave of pleasure.

Lexi kept her fingers inside Catherine, gently easing her through the aftershocks, licking every inch of her as her body gradually calmed. She smiled to herself, satisfied as Catherine’s body relaxed, her breath slowing and her legs still slightly trembling.

Catherine collapsed back onto the bed, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she tried to catch her breath. Lexi pulled away slowly, her lips still tingling from the intensity of it all. She looked up at Catherine, at her closed eyes and flushed face.

For a moment, the room was still. The only sound was the faint hum of the air conditioning. Catherine’s legs were still parted, her body spent, her beautiful hair tousled and clinging to her damp skin. Lexi couldn’t tear her eyes away from her. She wanted to kiss her again, wanted to touch her all over, but she knew they had to stop. They’d already gone too far.

Catherine opened her eyes slowly, blinking up at the ceiling. “That was...incredible,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

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“You are incredible,” Lexi said, her voice soft but intense.

But Lexi knew she had to stop this from going any further. The reality of what they’d done was starting to sink in, and the consequences of their actions loomed large in her mind.

“Catherine, we can’t keep doing this,” Lexi said gently, sitting back on her heels. “This is crazy. You have a husband.”

“I don’t care,” Catherine said quickly, her eyes filling with tears. “I don’t care about him anymore.”

Lexi’s heart ached at the sight of Catherine’s vulnerability. She wanted to gather her in her arms, to hold her and tell her everything would be okay, to kiss away her tears. But the truth was, it did matter. They couldn’t keep doing this. It wasn’t just the affair; it was everything it would take to maintain it—the complications, the lies, the hurt that would inevitably follow. Lexi shouldn’t have started this. She certainly didn’t want to be some straight woman’s dirty little secret—she was too old for that. And God only knew what would happen when Josephine found out. She was supposed to be making a good impression, and stealing someone else’s wife was not the way to do it.

Lexi stood up and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Catherine. I can’t do this. I wish I could, but I can’t.”

Catherine watched her, her eyes wide with disbelief, her lips trembling. “Lexi, please...don’t leave,” she whispered, her voice cracking with emotion.

But Lexi forced herself to turn away, to pull herself out of the moment. She had to go. She had to stop this before it spiraled even further out of control.

“I’m sorry,” Lexi said again, her voice barely a whisper as she reached for the door.

As she left the room, the image of Catherine—tearful, vulnerable, and still lying on the bed—haunted her. Walking away from her was the hardest thing Lexi had ever done. But deep down, she knew it was for the best.

8

CATHERINE

When Lexi left the on-call room, Catherine felt like her heart had been torn from her chest. She’d thought there was something different between them, a connection she wanted so badly to be real. But did she truly want a relationship, or was it simply desire? Catherine wanted Lexi desperately—and nervously, yes, because she’d never done this before. But as she sat on her sofa that night, thoughts swirling, she found herself fixating on what it would be like to go down on Lexi, to taste her, to run her tongue along every inch of her body.

Lexi had haunted her mind for the rest of the day, leaving Catherine heartbroken. She wanted to make everything right between them.

That night, Catherine decided she needed advice and headed out to visit her old friend, Dr. Sinead Gallagher, a former residency colleague and the only lesbian Catherine knew well. As she made her way to the bus stop—something she almost never did—she figured tonight was the perfect night to try something different.

Sinead had sounded slightly confused when Catherine asked to meet, but she’d agreed nonetheless. When Catherine finally knocked on her door, it swung open to

reveal Sinead in her usual casual attire: jeans, a T-shirt, messy hair, and bare feet. She had an effortless, scruffy charm that was undeniably her trademark style.

“Come on in. Sorry about the mess,” Sinead said, not bothering to tidy or put on airs. Catherine found a small space on the cluttered sofa and settled in, trying to steady her nerves.

“So what can I help you with?” Sinead asked, a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

“It’s...a bit awkward, really,” Catherine began, feeling heat rise to her cheeks. She took a deep breath and decided to just say it. “I’ve met a woman. And...I like her. I mean, in a romantic way. Well, actually, more than that. In a very...sexual way.” Catherine paused, hoping she didn’t sound as ridiculous as she felt. “She seems to like me too, but she pulled back, and I don’t know what to do. I thought maybe you could help me?”

Sinead raised an eyebrow before bursting into laughter. Catherine blinked, a little stunned.

“What’s so funny?” Catherine asked, slightly embarrassed.

“Oh, it’s just...of all the things you might have needed advice on, I didn’t expect this,” Sinead replied, still chuckling.

“So you don’t think I’m gay?” Catherine asked cautiously.

Sinead shrugged. “Sexuality isn’t that straightforward. It’s a spectrum. Some people are more drawn to one side, others to the opposite, and some float somewhere in-between. Sometimes, all it takes is one person to tip the balance.”

“She’s certainly tipped something,” Catherine muttered, her cheeks heating even

more.

Sinead laughed again. “Don’t get me wrong—I’m not laughing at you, just at the situation. I’m happy to help, really. So who’s the woman?”

“She’s the new neuro attending, Lexi Bond. Have you met her?”

“Oh, yeah. Blue eyes, shiny ponytail—she’s hard to miss. We did a surgery together the other day. She’s sharp, very talented. I’d happily work with her again, and yeah...those eyes are something, if that’s your thing.”

“Well, as it turns out, it is my thing,” Catherine admitted with a wry smile.

“So you and Bond—are you two, you know, doing it?” Sinead asked, raising an eyebrow.

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“We...have, twice,” Catherine said, hesitating. “Mostly, she...well, she’s been the one to do things to me. She doesn’t let me do anything for her, if that makes sense.”

“Ah, a ‘touch-me-not,’” Sinead said knowingly. “Not unusual in the lesbian world, though not super common, either.”

“What do you think that’s about?” Catherine asked, genuinely curious.

“Have you told her you want to touch her?”

“Yes. I really, really want to,” Catherine admitted, almost shyly. “It’s all I can think about.”

“So you’re serious about her, then? This isn’t just curiosity?”

Catherine nodded. “I’ve never felt like this before.”

Sinead regarded her thoughtfully. “Well, sometimes touch-me-nots just aren’t comfortable with it at all. Or maybe they just don’t feel secure enough with someone to let themselves be vulnerable.”

“Why wouldn’t she feel safe with me?” Catherine frowned.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Sinead replied dryly. “Maybe the fact that you’re married. To one of the world’s most famous surgeons, no less. And straight. I’d say that makes you pretty dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” Catherine repeated, surprised.

“Dangerous to her heart, Catherine. Lesbian relationships can get intense. It’s a lot of emotion wrapped up in physical intimacy. Bond’s probably holding back because she’s afraid you’re going to break her heart.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Catherine said with determination.

“So you’re going to leave James?” Sinead asked, her gaze steady.

Catherine considered the question for a long moment. “Are there any other options?” she asked quietly.

“Not really. You either leave him, or you’ll end up hurting her,” Sinead said matter-of-factly. “That’s the thing with straight women, Catherine. They break your heart. Every lesbian knows it. It’s more of a guarantee than a risk when you get into it with a straight woman.”

Catherine mulled over Sinead’s words. Suddenly, it was clear. One minute Lexi looked at her like she was the only thing in the world she wanted, and the next, she was pulling away. Lexi was protecting herself from getting hurt—because straight women, it seemed, were dangerous.

“But does it ever work out?” Catherine asked, a glimmer of hope in her voice. “Do some of them turn out to not be so straight after all?”

“Oh, it works out sometimes. But not as often as you’d hope. Most stay with their husbands because it’s scary to make that leap, or maybe they’re not as into women as they thought. Or maybe they’re too comfortable with the life they already have,” Sinead said, looking pointedly at Catherine.

Catherine felt a pang as Sinead's words hit a nerve. Yes, her life with James was comfortable. Wealthy. Secure. "But I wouldn't be struggling," she said softly. "I'm a surgeon, and so is Lexi. We could make it work if we tried."

"True. But think about what you'd be giving up," Sinead said. "Your house, your lifestyle—it wouldn't be the same."

The thought of leaving her beautiful home didn't bother Catherine as much as she'd thought it would. Lately, it hadn't felt like much of a home anyway.

"I think I want this," Catherine said quietly. "But it's hard to know. Being with James is all I've ever known. We've been together more than twenty years."

Sinead nodded. "Just...remember Lexi's feelings in all of this. If you're not careful, you'll end up breaking her heart."

It was late when James arrived home that night. Catherine was in the living room, having just finished reading *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, a book she'd heard was a lesbian romance. But it hadn't ended happily, and it left Catherine in tears. She lounged on the sofa in her navy blue silk pajamas, thinking about Lexi and all the feelings she'd brought to the surface.

She heard James's footsteps coming down the stairs. This was it. She was going to tell him she couldn't do this anymore. He hadn't spoken a word to her since he'd come home from his trip. He'd just gone straight to the kitchen to heat up the meal she'd prepared for him earlier, fulfilling her duty as the perfect wife, always making sure his needs were met, even though he rarely returned the courtesy.

"James," she called softly. "Can we talk?"

"What about?" he replied sharply from the kitchen.

“Just bring your food in here, and we’ll talk.”

Moments later, James came in with his plate and sat down at the large table, eating silently. The rich aroma of the curry Catherine had made filled the room, but she felt sick to her stomach.

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“I’m not happy,” Catherine said quietly, her voice barely more than a whisper.

James looked up, chewing slowly, his eyes cold. “What does that mean?” he asked, voice laced with irritation. “What more could you possibly want?”

She took a deep breath, steadying herself. She wanted everything she hadn’t found with him—love, connection, passion—but she couldn’t make herself tell him that. “I don’t know,” she replied. “I just...I’m not sure I want this anymore.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” he snapped, glaring at her.

She swallowed, her hands shaking. This was the moment. “I’m not sure I want to be in this marriage anymore.”

James stared at her like she was a stranger. His voice was sharp when he spoke again, as if he was barely restraining himself. “Well, you’d better get fucking sure,” he sneered. “You’re lucky to be with me. I’ve given you everything.” His voice was a blade, cutting deep. “I suggest you think very carefully about what you’re saying,” he added, the words a thinly veiled threat. “Don’t say something you’ll live to regret.”

With that, he got up, grabbed his half-eaten plate off the table, and stormed back into the kitchen. Catherine heard a loud clatter as he tossed the plate into the sink, clearly taking his anger out on the dishes. She stayed seated at the massive dining table, feeling small and alone, surrounded by all the things he’d “given” her that suddenly felt so empty, so meaningless.

James disappeared upstairs without another word, and Catherine found herself

grateful for the solitude. She placed her head in her hands, feeling the weight of the years pressing down on her. She thought she might cry, but the tears wouldn't come. She was too numb, too exhausted from living this life that seemed to demand everything from her while giving nothing in return.

The dark cloud that had been building over her for months—maybe even years—seemed to settle heavily on her shoulders. She knew now that things couldn't continue as they had. She couldn't keep pretending that she was satisfied, that she was fulfilled, that this was the life she wanted.

She sat there for a long time, letting the silence fill her up, thinking about what lay ahead. She thought of Lexi's eyes, the way they'd looked at her with such intensity, such hunger, and something else—something that looked a lot like love. And she thought about her conversation with Sinead, about what it would mean to break away from everything she'd ever known.

One thing was clear: she could no longer ignore the hold Lexi had on her, nor could she ignore the truth that her life with James was no longer where she belonged. It was time to stop lying to herself and to him.

Catherine didn't know exactly what she was going to do next, but she knew her life needed to change.

9

LEXI

Lexi hadn't meant to do it again, and yet she had—in the on-call room, enthusiastically. Very enthusiastically. She shook her head, feeling ridiculous. Getting involved with Catherine Spencer was a surefire road to heartbreak. Lexi liked her, and that was the problem. If it was just a sex thing, Lexi could detach and have all the

sex she wanted with Catherine Spencer and her beautiful, beautiful body, but Lexi realized it wasn't just that. Not even remotely.

She liked her. She liked the way Catherine's eyes crinkled when she smiled, the way she was super intelligent but never smug about it, the way she was kind, gentle, and the classiest woman Lexi had ever met. She liked everything about Dr. Catherine Spencer—and that was definitely the problem. She'd broken her own heart by pulling away from Catherine in the on-call room. Lexi wanted nothing more than to go back in and hold her, to just keep going. But she couldn't. She had to end it. She had to get out of this. Yet here she was at home, thinking about Catherine, who was driving her crazy. Sleeping with Catherine was the greatest pleasure Lexi had ever experienced, and she'd been turned on for days now, desperate for her own release.

What the hell am I saving it for? she thought, sliding her hand inside her pajama pants and beginning to lazily touch herself. She was wet, of course she was—ever since the on-call room she'd been right on the edge, desperately wanting release but reluctant to take it from Catherine, because she knew what that would mean. It was too much; it was too close to the woman she was so drawn to, but who was, in the end, still married.

Her fingers circled her clitoris, massaging it in slow circles as tension spread through her whole body. This thing with Catherine was bringing so much tension to her that she needed to let go. Her fingers moved faster, pressing more firmly. She was thinking of Catherine spread open for her, how Catherine tasted when she came on her tongue, how she felt when Lexi's fingers were deep inside her. She remembered Catherine's big eyes as she'd looked up at her, saying, Please, I want to taste you. Catherine had genuinely wanted to, and yet Lexi had walked away, conflicted and full of longing.

Lexi's fingers moved faster, and suddenly, with no warning, her orgasm crashed over her hard and fast, and then was gone as quickly as it had come. It wasn't the

satisfaction Lexi had craved. It was only an end to the buildup, replaced with...well, nothing.

Lexi huffed and pulled her hand out of her pants, frustrated and angry. "I can't even come properly anymore because of her—because of you, Catherine. For fuck's sake," she muttered. She got up and headed to the bathroom for a shower, needing to feel clean again, clean of Catherine. She doubted any water would be hot enough to burn Catherine from her skin, though.

Lexi was back at work the following day. She'd had a long surgery that took her all morning, and though she was pleased with the outcome, she was exhausted. During her break, she headed to the coffee shop across the street from the hospital. It was called Nola, themed around New Orleans. At the counter, she placed her order.

"Double shot espresso, please, with milk on the side," Lexi said, realizing she was starving. Her stomach growled, and she remembered she hadn't eaten all morning. "I'll also have one of those lunchtime special sandwiches and some fries. Definitely fries."

Lexi sat down to wait for her order and let her thoughts drift. She ran through the morning's surgery in her head, feeling satisfied with her work. Sometimes it felt great to be a surgeon, to save lives, to wield that kind of power and capability, almost as if she could change the course of fate. But on other days, when a patient was lost, the sadness was intense, especially if she felt there was something she could've done differently. Surgery wasn't black and white. You had to adapt quickly, to come up with new solutions in the moment, because what you found when you opened someone up wasn't always what you'd seen on the scans.

"May I join you?" a familiar voice asked, as lyrical as a river flowing over rocks.

Startled, Lexi looked up and saw Catherine, her shiny brown hair pulled back in a

wavy ponytail, her eyes warm and inviting. She was the last person Lexi had expected to see, though given that a lot of the doctors frequented this coffee shop, it shouldn't have been surprising.

“Oh, yes, of course,” Lexi stammered, nodding. Any other response would be rude. Catherine hadn't done anything wrong; she didn't deserve Lexi's rejection. Surely they could have a friendship, even if Lexi needed to protect herself from anything more. They were just doctors sharing coffee at a café across the road from the hospital—that was what friends did, right?

Lexi's sandwich arrived at the same time as Catherine's coffee, providing a welcome distraction. Lexi hoped the café's setting would be enough to keep things safe between them. She had food to eat and fries to enjoy, but as she took her first bite, she couldn't help but feel the tension between them.

“Dr. Spencer, will you be eating today?” asked the server.

“Yes, I'll take the salmon salad from the specials board,” Catherine replied confidently, and Lexi liked it. Catherine's decisiveness reassured her—surgeons needed to be sure of themselves.

“How was your surgery this morning?” Catherine asked. “I heard a little about it. It went really well, apparently. You're getting glowing reviews from the other surgeons.” Lexi watched Catherine's beautiful lips as she spoke, captivated by the warmth in her eyes.

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“Yeah, I was really pleased with it. Are they really talking about me like that?”

Catherine laughed. “Have you never worked in a hospital before? We always talk about the new people; you’re fair game for fresh gossip.”

Lexi smirked. “Well, let’s hope they keep the gossip about my surgeries and not about anything else.” She met Catherine’s gaze for a second too long before looking away. The pull between them was so strong it felt overwhelming, even in the cheery atmosphere of the café. She sighed and took another bite of her sandwich, following it with some fries dipped in mayo.

“How’s your morning been?” Lexi asked.

“Pretty uneventful,” Catherine replied. “Just an appendectomy this morning.”

Lexi knew that general surgeons handled many appendectomies. “Do you get bored of that stuff? Can’t you...you know, let a resident handle it?”

“Oh, sure. I had a resident do it, but I oversaw it. You know how it is. Can’t be too careful.”

Lexi nodded, instantly understanding. You couldn’t let anything slip at their level; they were responsible for everyone below them.

“But I’m a bit distracted at the moment,” Catherine admitted, her golden eyes catching the sunlight streaming through the café window.

“Me too,” Lexi said quietly, putting down her sandwich. Catherine’s right hand reached across the table, moving over Lexi’s, and the electricity between them was instant. Every time they touched, it was like this—an intense, undeniable spark. Lexi wanted to pull her hand away, but she couldn’t. She was drawn to Catherine like a magnet.

“This isn’t just a game for me,” Catherine said, her voice calm and measured. “I like you. A lot. I have feelings for you. And...well, I think...I think I’m gay.”

Lexi shook her head, a pang of doubt striking her. “Catherine, you don’t know that. You’ve been married to a man your whole life. You’re unhappy and you’re clinging to the first person who’s given you attention in years, and you’ve convinced yourself there’s more between us than there is.”

“I don’t think it’s that,” Catherine replied, refusing to back down. “I think I’m falling in love with you,” she said, her words hanging in the air like a spell cast between them.

Lexi took a shaky breath. “Catherine, this is a really bad idea,” she said slowly. “I have feelings for you, too, but this isn’t going to end well for either of us. Where do you see this going?”

“What if it does end well? What if we get our happily ever after?”

“That’s not how it goes, Catherine. I’ve seen this a million times. Women like you...” She faltered. “You change your mind, you go back to your husband, to the safety of...of...” She shook her head. “I don’t want to be your test drive into the lesbian world,” Lexi continued, her voice low. “I won’t lie; I’ve enjoyed it. You’re incredible, but I can’t carry on like this. I’m falling for you, too, and it’s...terrifying.”

They held each other’s gazes, a long moment of shared intensity passing between

them. Catherine's hand squeezed Lexi's, linking their fingers. "Please, can we try?" she asked.

Lexi's heart twisted. "I'm scared, Catherine. I like you way too much for this to end badly."

"I know my marriage is over. I tried to talk to him, but he's not making it easy. No matter what happens between me and you, I'm leaving James."

"But what if you lose everything—the house, your status, your lifestyle?"

"That's just stuff, Lexi. Honestly, I don't care. The house is beautiful, but it's far too big. Most of the time, it's just me there by myself, and I feel so lonely," Catherine said softly. Her eyes, the color of whiskey over ice, locked onto Lexi's. Lexi felt her own fingers tighten around Catherine's, entwining them, unable to resist. She looked down at Catherine's long, graceful fingers and her neatly manicured short nails, and all she could think of was feeling them inside of her.

"Please," Catherine whispered again, her voice trembling. "Can we try?"

Lexi took a deep, shuddering breath. "I can't be without you," Catherine continued, her gaze unwavering. "I just can't. I want you more than I've ever wanted anyone."

Catherine reached under the table, took Lexi's other hand in hers, and placed it on her thigh, guiding it higher. Lexi's heart pounded as Catherine pushed her hand up beneath her skirt. She could feel the warmth between Catherine's legs through the thin fabric of her panties, soaked and inviting.

Catherine looked at her, her eyes filled with pure desire. "See what you do to me? I'm so wet for you," she whispered, her voice raw.

Lexi gasped, her fingers tracing the dampness beneath her fingertips, momentarily forgetting they were in a public place. It felt like the whole world had faded away, leaving only Catherine and the fierce intensity between them.

Lexi's fingers toyed with the edge of Catherine's panties. She was barely holding herself back. In this instant, with Catherine's want so palpable, the bustling café, the people around them, and all the outside noise disappeared. Lexi leaned forward, her lips inches from Catherine's ear.

"Alright," she murmured. "We can try."

Catherine's breath hitched and her lips curved in a soft smile that was full of relief and something deeper. Lexi knew this wasn't simple, that there would be risks, pain, and sacrifices in their future. But in this moment, none of that mattered. She would try.

CATHERINE

Catherine woke to the soft glow of morning light filtering through the blinds. For a moment, she simply lay there, eyes half-closed, the world still spinning with the aftershocks of yesterday's revelations. Her body felt heavy, the memory of Lexi—the weight of her touch, the heat of their kiss—lingering in every nerve ending. But as her mind sharpened, guilt cut through the haze. She was in bed with James—her husband, the man she pledged to build a life with—who lay beside her unaware of the storm brewing inside her.

Turning slightly, Catherine studied James, trying to remember what it felt like to be in love with him. He was safe in his predictability, the steady pulse of their life together a comfort she'd relied on for years. But as she looked at him now, there was a hollowness in her chest she couldn't ignore. He was right beside her, yet she couldn't shake the feeling that she was slipping away.

The past few weeks had felt like a constant battle between the life she'd known and the life calling to her. She hadn't meant for this to happen, for the lines between right and wrong to blur so quickly. But she'd crossed them, again and again. Her thoughts always returned to Lexi, the pull of her presence so magnetic it felt like a physical ache. The connection between them felt more real than anything she'd ever experienced.

The sound of James stirring pulled her from her thoughts. His hand found hers, his fingers warm and familiar. The gesture should have been comforting, but all Catherine could feel was the sharp contrast between his touch and Lexi's—intense, burning, alive.

"Morning," James murmured, voice thick with sleep.

Catherine forced a smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Morning," she replied. Her voice sounded like it belonged to someone else.

James rubbed his eyes and stretched. "So what's on the agenda today?" he asked, his tone casual, as if everything was fine. He had no idea that the person lying next to him had already slipped through his fingers.

"I've got rounds this morning," Catherine answered, her voice distant. "I should be free this afternoon, but I'll probably stay for a full day anyway."

James seemed content with her response, rolling over to check his phone for messages. Catherine stared at the ceiling, feeling the weight of a decision looming. Every passing moment brought her closer to a choice she had no idea how to make.

Later that morning, Catherine found herself walking the halls of Phoenix Ridge Hospital, the weight of her professional persona wrapping around her like armor. She'd always been able to compartmentalize—work was work, home was home—but today, that barrier felt thinner than it ever had before. The closer she got to the surgery wing, the more her mind raced. She knew she had to keep up appearances, but with Lexi just around the corner, it felt impossible to focus.

Lexi was one of the brightest surgeons on staff. Catherine had always admired her drive and talent. But what had started as a professional admiration had blossomed into something far more complicated, something Catherine wasn't sure she could control anymore.

When they met in the hallway, their eyes locked for a brief moment, and a jolt of electricity passed between them. It was like nothing else existed, not the crowded hallways, not the other doctors rushing past them—just the two of them. The

unspoken tension crackled, making Catherine feel both alive and deeply ashamed.

“Morning,” Lexi greeted her, her voice low, just loud enough to be heard over the bustle of the hospital.

Catherine forced a smile and tried to keep her voice steady. “Morning. How’s the new patient?”

Lexi’s lips curled into a brief smile. “A bit tricky, but nothing we can’t handle.” She leaned in a little closer, her gaze dropping to Catherine’s lips before quickly returning to her eyes. It was a brief, fleeting moment, but it was enough to make Catherine’s heart rate spike. She couldn’t deny the hunger in Lexi’s gaze.

They stood there for a beat too long, neither of them moving, as if they were both trapped in a shared moment of desire. But then, the sound of footsteps interrupted their silence, and Lexi quickly stepped back, her professional mask snapping back into place.

“We’ll need to adjust the surgical schedule,” Catherine said, trying to steer their attention back to the task at hand.

Lexi nodded, but there was a flicker in her eyes—a silent acknowledgment of what had passed between them. “I’ll take care of it.”

Catherine watched her walk away, the sway of Lexi’s hips only deepening the ache inside her. She should have felt guilty, but she didn’t...at least, not as guilty as she knew she should be. Instead, the heat of desire burned in her chest, the longing for more of what they’d shared.

Catherine barely had time to think until the workday came to an end. Her mind was still buzzing with thoughts of Lexi when she walked through the door of their home.

James stood at the stove with his back to her, not turning around as he spoke.

"You're home," he said flatly. No greeting, no warmth—just an observation.

Catherine shrugged off her coat. "Yeah, I got out a little early tonight."

James didn't respond right away. "Dinner's almost done," he said, still focused on his screen. "You can grab a plate if you want."

The indifference in his voice twisted something inside her. Once upon a time, James would have met her at the door and asked about her day. Now, he didn't even look at her unless he had to.

They ate in silence. James scrolled through his phone, Catherine picked at her food, her appetite nonexistent.

"How was your day?" she finally asked.

"Fine. Same as usual."

She waited for him to ask about hers, but of course he didn't. He'd stopped asking months ago.

"I had a tough case today," she said anyway. "Long surgery, high stakes. It was..." She trailed off, realizing he wasn't listening.

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James finally looked at her, but only for a second. "That's nice," he said distractedly.

That's nice.

Catherine gripped her fork tighter. How had they gotten here? How had their marriage become this hollow thing where neither of them could pretend anymore?

"James," she said, her voice quieter now. "Are we ever going to talk about what's happening between us?"

He set his phone down, sighing as if she'd asked him to do something exhausting. "What's there to talk about?"

"Seriously?" Catherine blinked at him.

"Catherine, we're tired. Sometimes people just drift apart. It happens."

Her stomach twisted. "So that's it? We just let it happen?"

"What do you want me to say? That I'll fight for this? That I'll beg you to love me again?" He shook his head. "I'm too tired for that. If you're unhappy, that's your problem."

Catherine felt the words like a slap. The worst part was that he wasn't even being cruel—just brutally indifferent.

"I don't know if I can keep living like this," she whispered.

James let out a dry chuckle and pushed back from the table. "Then don't."

And with that, he walked out of the room, leaving her sitting at the table alone.

Catherine stood up robotically and walked into the bathroom. The door clicked shut behind her, and she stood for a moment in front of the mirror, breathing in the stillness. She couldn't bring herself to look at her reflection.

Her phone buzzed, and the screen lit up with a message from Lexi: Are you still thinking about me?

The words sent a jolt through her chest. She should have put the phone down, but she couldn't. Lexi's presence, even in a message, had the power to make everything else fade into the background.

Catherine hesitated, then texted back: You've been on my mind all day.

Her phone rang almost immediately. It was Lexi.

Catherine took a deep breath and answered, her voice quieter than she'd intended. "Lexi?"

"Catherine," Lexi said, her tone like a caress. "You've been quiet today. I didn't hear from you after this morning in the hallway."

The sound of Lexi's voice sent a shiver down Catherine's spine. It was like an invisible thread between them had tugged, drawing her in despite every cautionary instinct.

"I was busy," Catherine replied, though even she could hear the lie in her voice.

"I miss you," Lexi said softly. "I've been thinking about you. About what we talked about yesterday."

The mention of their promise to try sent a wave of heat crashing over Catherine.

"I can't stop thinking about you, either," Catherine whispered, her voice cracking as she admitted it out loud.

Lexi exhaled slowly. "I can feel it. You're torn, aren't you? I can hear it in the way you're talking."

"I don't know what to do," Catherine admitted, the words falling into the quiet air like stones.

"You don't have to fix anything right now," Lexi said, her voice like a balm. "Just tell me what you need."

Catherine swallowed hard. "I need you," she whispered. The words were an admission of everything she'd been avoiding.

"Then come to me," Lexi said, her voice soft but firm. "Come to me tonight."

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Catherine's heart skipped a beat. She was standing on the edge of something she couldn't come back from. But in that moment, the pull toward Lexi was stronger than anything else.

"I'll be there," Catherine whispered, and hung up the phone.

When Catherine emerged from the bathroom, she found James sitting on the couch, flipping through a magazine absently. The familiar, mundane sight of him hit her like a punch to the gut.

"You need something?" he asked without looking up.

Catherine shook her head. "No, just...a long day."

James made a vague sound and turned a page.

"I think I'm going to take a walk," Catherine said softly. "Clear my head."

James didn't even look up this time. "Sure. Whatever."

Catherine turned toward the door, her heart pounding. It was the hardest thing she'd ever done—walking out that door knowing she was choosing Lexi, choosing herself, over the life she'd built with James.

She'd made her choice. If she was honest with herself, she'd made it a while ago.

And now, there was no going back.

Catherine couldn't quite remember how she got from her house to Lexi's apartment. Everything had blurred together—the drive, the stoplights flashing by, the weight in her chest growing heavier with every passing minute. But now, as she stood outside the door with the night air cool on her skin, she was fully aware of the choice she was making.

She reached for the doorbell, her finger trembling slightly as she pressed it. The sound of the chime echoed through the hallway, and anticipation pulsed deep in her gut. It was as if the moment she'd been avoiding for weeks, months, maybe even years, had arrived at last.

The door swung open and Lexi stood in the doorway, framed by the soft, warm glow from inside the apartment. Her dark eyes met Catherine's, the unspoken intensity between them growing with each passing second. Lexi was dressed simply in a loose shirt and jeans, but there was a heat to her presence that immediately pulled Catherine closer, even as she stood still, rooted in place by the weight of her own hesitation.

"You came," Lexi said softly, her voice like a promise.

Catherine didn't trust herself to speak. She just nodded, her breath catching as Lexi stepped aside, allowing her to enter. The apartment smelled like fresh coffee and candles—familiar and intimate and completely new. It felt like stepping into another world, one that was separate from the life she had with James, far away from the demands and expectations that had defined her for so long.

Once the door clicked shut behind her, Catherine's chest tightened with a mixture of excitement and guilt. This wasn't just a night. This wasn't just a stolen moment. This was the choice that would decide everything.

Lexi's apartment felt small and cozy, with low lighting and a quiet hum of music playing in the background. There was a calmness to it, a kind of peace that Catherine

hadn't felt in her own home in years. She felt a strange sense of belonging here, though it was laced with the knowledge that this could all be a fleeting delusion.

"Do you want something to drink?" Lexi asked, her voice soft, almost tender. "Wine? Coffee? I can make you something to eat."

Catherine shook her head, her throat dry. "No. Just...I need to be here. With you."

The vulnerability in her voice startled her. It was the first time she'd allowed herself to speak the truth that had been buried under layers of guilt and denial. She needed this. She needed her.

Lexi took a step closer, and Catherine's breath hitched. The space between them closed with a slow inevitability, and before Catherine could process the shift, Lexi's hand was on her cheek, warm and gentle, her fingers grazing the skin as she tipped Catherine's face up toward hers.

"I've been waiting for you," Lexi whispered, and then her lips were on Catherine's, slow and tentative at first, as if testing the waters, but with an intensity that made Catherine's pulse race.

The kiss deepened quickly, the urgency between them building as their bodies instinctively drew together. Catherine's hands found Lexi's waist, her fingers curling into the fabric of Lexi's shirt as she pulled her closer. She felt the heat of Lexi's body against hers, and the pull was so magnetic, so overwhelming, that Catherine could do nothing but give in to it.

Everything else faded—the guilt, the weight of her marriage, her doubts. All that remained was the feeling of Lexi's lips against hers, the pressure of their bodies, the rush of desire that flooded Catherine's veins.

For a moment, there was no past. There was just the way Lexi kissed her, as if she'd been waiting for this moment for years.

Catherine's hands moved to the back of Lexi's neck, pulling her closer still, as if she could merge with her, become part of the very air they were breathing. Lexi responded in kind, her hands moving down Catherine's sides, tracing the curves of her body with a reverence that left Catherine breathless.

There was no room for shame or guilt here. It was swallowed up by the way Lexi touched her, the way their bodies seemed to recognize each other, responding with an urgency that both terrified and thrilled Catherine. She wasn't sure how long they stood there, lips pressed together, lost in the kiss. Time seemed to stretch and bend, pulling them into a space where everything else ceased to matter.

When they finally broke apart, it was only to catch their breath. Lexi's forehead rested against Catherine's, her eyes dark with desire, her lips swollen from their kiss.

"I don't want to stop," Lexi whispered, her voice raw, the words vibrating between them like a promise.

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Catherine's heart thudded painfully. She didn't know how to define what was happening between them. But she knew she couldn't stop, either. She'd already made the choice to be here with Lexi, and there was no turning back.

"I don't want to, either," Catherine breathed, her voice thick with the emotion she could no longer hide.

Lexi's lips ghosted across her neck. It was only the lightest touch, but it sent a shiver down Catherine's spine. The sensations that were overwhelming her felt so foreign, yet so familiar. She'd never known anything like this before—this feeling of being desired in a way that was all-consuming.

"I don't care about anything else right now," Lexi murmured, her hands moving down Catherine's back, pulling her in until there was no space left between them. "Just you. Just this."

Catherine nodded, the weight of her own conflicting emotions all but forgotten in the heat of the moment. The pull toward Lexi was stronger than ever. It wasn't just the physical desire, though that was undeniable. It was the connection between them—the electricity that arced between their bodies, their minds, their hearts.

As Lexi's hands began to explore, as their kisses deepened and their bodies moved together, Catherine knew she'd crossed a line. She'd made the choice. There was no going back, no undoing the tangled mess of emotions, desires, and choices that had led her here.

And for the first time in a long time, Catherine didn't feel like she was pretending.

She felt alive. She felt real.

The world outside seemed to fall away, and all that remained was Lexi, her touch, and the ache in Catherine's chest that could only be soothed by this one thing—being with her, here and now.

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LEXI

Lexi stood by the window, her gaze fixed on the soft glow of the city lights below. Her hand absently traced the rim of her coffee mug, the warmth offering little comfort against the whirlwind of thoughts and emotions spinning inside her. It had been weeks since the conversation with Josephine that had ended with her half-sister calling her a liar. Since then, Josephine had been avoiding her. Lexi had known it would be difficult, but the coldness in her sister's eyes every time they crossed paths cut deeper than she'd expected.

Josephine hadn't said a word about it. The silence between them was deafening, and Lexi hated it. She'd tried to reach out and bridge the gap between them, but Josephine's silence said it all. It was a rejection of everything Lexi had hoped their relationship would be.

And then there was Catherine. The pull toward her had only gotten stronger in the days since their conversation at the café, a magnetism that Lexi couldn't ignore any longer. She'd tried to bury the feelings to save herself from the inevitable mess they would cause. But tonight, she couldn't fight it anymore.

Especially when Catherine was right here in her apartment. Lexi hadn't expected Catherine to come tonight, but she was here.

Silence stretched between them, not uncomfortable, but charged—both of them knowing what was about to happen, knowing the consequences, but neither of them able to stop it.

“Lexi.” Catherine’s voice broke the silence, a whisper of uncertainty in her tone. “Are you sure about this?”

Lexi swallowed hard, the weight of the question settling over her like a heavy blanket. She should have hesitated. She should have told Catherine this was a mistake. But the pull between them and the way her body reacted to Catherine’s drowned out any reason. It was as if her heart had already made the decision for her.

“I don’t know,” Lexi said quietly, her voice thick with something that wasn’t just desire. “But I can’t stop thinking about you. And I can’t stop wanting this.”

Catherine stepped closer, her hand reaching for Lexi’s, and when their fingers touched, it felt like an electric shock sparking a fire in Lexi’s chest. Catherine’s eyes darkened, her breath coming in shallow bursts, and for a moment Lexi thought she might be able to hear the voice of sanity in her head, reminding her of what she was about to risk. But it faded quickly, drowned by her overwhelming need for Catherine.

Before either of them could say another word, Catherine closed the distance between them and pulled Lexi into a kiss. It was urgent, hungry, as though they were both starved for something they’d been denying themselves for far too long. Lexi melted into the kiss, her body responding to Catherine’s touch, each caress igniting something deep within her. Her hands roamed, pulling Catherine closer, and the moment felt like the beginning of something that couldn’t be undone.

They stumbled toward the bedroom, clothes falling away, but neither of them seemed to care. Everything was a blur of passion and urgency. Lexi’s heart raced, the weight of what she was doing setting in with each step. The worry was there, nipping at her

chest, but it was burned away by the fire between her and Catherine.

Catherine's touch was electric against Lexi's skin, sending shocks of heat through her. Lexi gasped as their bodies collided, every inch of her aware of the woman beneath her. They kissed again, harder this time, as though the world might end if they didn't give in completely. It was as if they were both trying to consume each other, their bodies moving together with a desperate urgency that felt right and wrong all at once.

They tumbled into the bed, limbs tangled and breathless as they moved together. Lexi's body was on fire, each touch, each kiss, pushing her closer to a breaking point. The need for Catherine was a pull so strong that it consumed her. In this moment with Catherine, she was lost—lost in the passion, lost in the physical connection, lost in the storm of desire that had taken over her.

The fear of this ending badly surged again when Catherine's hands slid lower, but Lexi silenced it, letting the warmth between them take over. It was reckless, and she knew it. It was dangerous, and she knew that, too. But she couldn't stop herself. She grabbed Catherine's wandering hand and kissed her palm before pinning it to the bed.

"Now who told you you could do that?" she teased, looking down at Catherine splayed out beneath her. In the haze that had filled her mind, she'd barely even registered undressing her, and for a fleeting moment was disappointed she hadn't taken her time. But now she would certainly make the most of the beautiful woman on her bed.

She dove down, capturing a perky nipple between her lips and teasing it with her teeth as Catherine squirmed with pleasure.

"Ah ah. Be a good girl for me now."

A petulant whine tore out of Catherine, which Lexi had to tamp down a laugh at. She really was needy.

Her fingers made their way between Catherine's legs.

“Always so wet for me, aren't you?”

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She flicked her fingers across Catherine's clitoris before softly slipping a finger inside her wet folds.

“So good for me. So needy.”

Tonight, Lexi wanted more than just sex. She wanted to pretend like Catherine was hers alone, that she didn't have to share her with anyone else. She wanted her completely.

Sliding down Catherine's body, Lexi positioned herself between her legs, as she began fucking her with her fingers. She pulled herself up onto her elbows and leaned forward. Catherine's pussy tasted divine, so hot and slick. A spike of desire coursed through her as Catherine gasped and wound her hands into Lexi's hair, holding her head in place. She sucked and licked in time with her fingers, driving Catherine right to the edge.

It was overwhelming, and when Catherine finally reached her peak, the rush of release was almost violent in its power. Lexi's chest heaved as she collapsed against Catherine, her skin still tingling with the aftershocks of their connection.

“I love you,” Catherine whispered.

Lexi held her tight. “I love you, too,” she whispered into Catherine's hair.

But as the adrenaline faded and the world slowed around them, the weight of reality crashed back down on Lexi. She lay beside Catherine, trying to catch her breath as her mind spiraled in a thousand directions. The silence in the room was heavy, thick

with the consequences that both of them knew were coming.

Lexi's eyes closed, and for a moment, she let herself pretend that everything was fine, that there would be no fallout, no broken relationships, no wreckage in her wake. But she knew better.

Lexi was still lying in bed beside Catherine, the warmth of their shared moment slowly fading as her mind began to race. Her body still hummed with the echoes of what had just happened, the intensity of their connection clouding her thoughts. But then, a sound shattered the calm—a knock at the door.

At first, Lexi thought it was just the remnants of a dream, but the knock came again, louder this time. It sent a jolt of panic through her. She froze, her heart hammering as reality snapped back into place.

“Who is it?” Catherine asked, her voice thick with confusion.

“I-I don't know,” Lexi stammered, still struggling to regain her bearings.

When Lexi opened the door, Josephine was standing there, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, her expression hard and unreadable. The look on her face stopped Lexi in her tracks—this was not how she'd envisioned speaking to her half-sister again. It was only then that Lexi realized how much she'd been dreading this moment.

“Josephine,” Lexi said, trying to sound calm, though the knot in her stomach only tightened as Josephine frowned at her. “I wasn't expecting?—”

“I wanted to talk somewhere private.” Josephine cut her off, voice cold, eyes flicking past Lexi into the apartment. Her gaze landed on Catherine, still half-dressed, and the air froze.

Josephine looked back at Lexi, her face tightening. “You know, I came here to talk about my father. To admit that I have no idea whether or not he cheated on my mom, and I’ve been distant because I have no idea how to have a sister...but I didn’t expect this.”

There was no anger in her voice—not yet—but the disappointment was evident in every word. Lexi felt her stomach tighten, her thoughts a blur, unable to find the right words.

“You had the audacity to make our father sound like a villain for having an affair,” Josephine continued, her eyes searching Lexi’s face as if trying to make sense of it all. “When you were doing the same thing...with Catherine Spencer?” Her voice wavered slightly, but she quickly regained composure. “I just...I don’t understand, Lexi.”

Lexi’s heart raced. The situation was spiraling, and fast. Her throat felt dry as she looked between Josephine and Catherine, who was now standing behind Lexi, fully aware of what was happening. She wanted to explain, to apologize, but the words seemed to catch in her chest.

“I...this isn’t what you think,” Lexi finally managed to say, her voice shaky. “It’s...complicated.”

Josephine took a step forward, her eyes narrowing. “Complicated?” she repeated, a bitter laugh escaping her lips. “How is it complicated, Lexi? You’re a surgeon, one of the best, and you’re having an affair with another surgeon. A married surgeon, no less.”

Lexi flinched at the accusation, the sting of her sister’s words settling into her bones. Josephine’s disapproval was suffocating, but Lexi couldn’t deny the truth in it—there was no easy way to explain how everything had happened, how one mistake had

led to another. She'd never imagined being in a mess like this. But now that it was here, she didn't know how to fix it.

Josephine stepped closer, her face hardening. "I've been avoiding this conversation, Lexi. I've been avoiding you because I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to handle the fact that you're my half-sister and I never even knew you existed." She paused and took a breath, her gaze shifting to the floor before it returned to Lexi with a coldness that made Lexi's heart sink.

"But now I know. And I'm not going to pretend I understand this...this...whatever it is between you and Catherine." Her voice was quieter now, though the bitterness was still there, lacing every word. "I thought we could have a real conversation. Start over. But now I see what I expected back when I first met you."

Lexi opened her mouth, trying to find the right words to explain, but Josephine raised her hand to stop her.

"No, Lexi. I'm disappointed in you," Josephine said. "I thought you might be different. I thought you might actually care about this family, about what we're building here. But clearly, I was wrong." She shook her head, as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. "This...this is just like him."

Lexi's breath caught in her throat. Josephine's words hit her like a physical blow. Just like him. Her father's affair had destroyed so much of their family, had left Lexi and her mother both fractured in different ways, each of them carrying their own scars from the wreckage. And now Josephine was throwing that same accusation in her face.

"You're just like our father," Josephine spat, her eyes hardening. "Sleeping with a married woman. Running around behind people's backs. I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it?"

The words were venomous, each one more painful than the last. Lexi's heart broke under the weight of them. Hearing this come from Josephine's mouth—the half-sister she'd barely gotten to know, the one she'd hoped to build some kind of relationship with—was like a punch to the gut.

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“I never wanted to be like him,” Lexi whispered shakily. The guilt was suffocating, but the need to explain herself was stronger than ever. “But I don’t know what you want me to say, Josephine. I never expected any of this.”

Josephine’s eyes were hard now, her face tight with anger. “What do you want me to say, Lexi?” she shot back. “You think I don’t know how hard life is? I’ve been running Phoenix Ridge Hospital for years. I’ve been carrying the weight of keeping everything together on my shoulders. I don’t need you making it worse.” Her eyes flicked to Catherine again, the judgment in them sharp. “I certainly don’t need you sleeping with a colleague, let alone one who’s married.”

“I never meant to hurt you,” Lexi said, her voice breaking. “I just wanted to get to know you. I never wanted to cause you any more pain.”

Josephine’s expression softened for a moment, but it was fleeting. She exhaled sharply, her shoulders sagging as if this was too much to carry. “Well, you’ve done a hell of a job so far, haven’t you?”

With one last piercing look, Josephine turned and walked away, her footsteps fading into the distance. Lexi stood frozen, the door still open, the silence between her and Catherine suffocating.

Josephine was gone. Now she believed she was Lexi’s sister, but the damage had been done.

And Lexi didn’t know how to fix it.

CATHERINE

On Friday, Catherine spent the rest of her workday in a state of arousal, her mind replaying the encounter with Lexi at her apartment. She was supposed to be going to a dinner party with James that evening, but as she stirred her hot chocolate in the beautiful, spacious kitchen and waited for her husband to return from his meeting, she confirmed the decision she'd made hours ago: she wasn't going.

Her marriage was over, even if James refused to accept it. She was determined to stand her ground and refuse to go with him. Still, anxiety rose in her chest as she heard James's car pull up outside.

James stormed through the door, clearly in a foul mood. He took one look at Catherine and scowled.

"What the hell are you doing, Catherine? What are you wearing? You need to get dressed—we're going to be late," he said, his voice dripping with anger.

"I'm not going," Catherine replied, her voice shaking slightly. She feared his reaction; she'd never defied him like this before, but she knew she had to now.

"Yes, you are," James snapped, his eyes hard and his voice laced with a barely concealed threat, daring her to challenge him again. "Get upstairs and put on a damn fancy dress right now."

Catherine gripped her spoon tighter and took a deep breath.

"I'm not going," she repeated, her voice stronger this time, bolstered by the thought of Lexi and the future they might have together. She just had to end her marriage.

James stormed farther into the kitchen, grabbed her mug of hot chocolate, and hurled it against the wall. It shattered and the hot liquid streamed down the cabinets, staining them. Catherine jumped at the crash, her heart racing. She wondered if this was it—if he would actually hurt her. He never had before, but then, she'd never given him a reason to.

She was afraid of James, she realized. She always had been. He was powerful, and with power came entitlement. He was a man used to getting exactly what he wanted.

His voice lowered, dripping with menace as he leaned close to her face, his words cutting.

“You are going,” he growled.

Catherine's heart pounded faster and faster. She hadn't planned for this confrontation. It was one thing to decide she didn't want to continue the marriage, but she hadn't thought about how to handle his outright refusal to accept it. She turned and rushed upstairs, grateful for a moment away from him to gather her thoughts. She sat on the luxurious bed, still trembling.

What can I do? How am I going to get out of this?

She reached into the pocket of her silk pajamas and sighed in relief when she found her phone there. It was a long shot, but she couldn't give in to James now. She pulled up Lexi's number in her contacts and pressed “Call.”

Please pick up. Please pick up. Please pick up.

“Catherine?” Lexi sounded surprised.

“I'm so sorry for calling. I...I don't really know what to say, but I need help,”

Catherine whispered, keeping her voice low so that James wouldn't hear her.

"Catherine, are you okay? You sound scared," Lexi said, the concern clear in her tone.

"Not really. Can you...can you come get me? Now? I'll text you my address."

"Of course. I'll be there in five minutes. Sit tight. I'm on my way." Lexi's response was instant, and Catherine felt a wave of relief wash over her.

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When Catherine heard Lexi's pickup truck pull up outside, her heart hammered against her ribs. She was still upstairs, seated on the bed where she'd made the call, feeling terrified but resolute. She barely had time to gather herself when she heard a knock at the front door—a confident, loud knock. Slowly, she opened the bedroom door and peeked outside.

Downstairs, James grumbled as he walked to the door.

“Who the hell are you?” James barked.

“I'm Dr. Alexis Bond. I've come to pick up Catherine,” Lexi replied firmly.

She heard James's surprised, almost mocking laugh. “She's not going anywhere with you. We have a dinner to attend this evening.”

“I don't think so,” Lexi said. “Catherine's coming with me.”

Summoning her courage, Catherine dashed down the stairs. James was the only barrier between her and Lexi. She was still wearing her pajamas, but she didn't care. She reached Lexi's side, needing to be near her for strength.

“And who the hell is this?” James spat, his frustration palpable. His eyes flashed with anger, daring Catherine to go any farther.

“This is my friend, and I'll be leaving with her now,” Catherine said, finding confidence in Lexi's calm presence. Lexi was at the door, wearing her leather jacket and jeans, and Catherine wanted nothing more than to run into her arms. She edged

closer to the door, her heart pounding.

Lexi stepped over the threshold, moving into James's space and into their home. She placed a steadying arm around Catherine, guiding her so that her body was between Catherine and James. Lexi glanced down at Catherine's bare feet.

"Shoes, Catherine?" Lexi asked softly.

Catherine gestured to a small shoe rack nearby, and Lexi picked out a pair of casual clogs, placing them on the floor for Catherine to step into. Catherine felt like a child being guided step by step. She could hardly bring herself to look at James, who seemed momentarily lost for words.

"When will you be back?" His voice was cold and hard.

Before Catherine could respond, Lexi answered for her.

"We'll see about that. Catherine needs time, and she'll be in touch when she's ready."

Lexi's strong hand was on her back, gently guiding her out the door. She helped Catherine into the truck, buckling her seatbelt for her before getting in on the driver's side. The last thing Catherine saw as they pulled away was James's furious glare, framed in the doorway of their house.

It was over now. She'd just needed a little help to get there.

They didn't speak on the drive, but Lexi's warm hand rested on Catherine's thigh, a silent, comforting reminder of her presence. The quiet between them wasn't awkward or tense—it was a blanket of safety wrapped around Catherine's trembling heart. Every few minutes, Catherine's breathing would hitch, and Lexi would respond by gently squeezing her thigh, a wordless reassurance that she wasn't alone.

At a red light, Catherine finally turned to look at Lexi's profile—the strong line of her jaw, the focus in her eyes as she watched the road. Moonlight filtered through the windshield, catching on Lexi's features in a way that made Catherine's chest tighten with something beyond gratitude. When Lexi turned and met her gaze, there was no pity in her eyes, only understanding. Catherine reached down and placed her hand over Lexi's, intertwining their fingers. A single tear slid down her cheek, but for the first time, it wasn't from pain or fear.

Lexi brought their joined hands to her lips and pressed a gentle kiss against Catherine's knuckles—not a gesture of passion, but of promise. Catherine closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the seat, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly. Words weren't necessary. In that moment, their shared silence spoke volumes about the sanctuary they had found in each other.

Once back at Lexi's place, Catherine felt a sense of safety she hadn't experienced in years. Lexi kept her arm around her the whole way in, gently guiding her to sit on the sofa. She slipped off her leather jacket, leaving her in a black T-shirt that fit the lines of her body perfectly. Catherine couldn't take her eyes off her.

"I'm just going to make you a drink. Wait here for a moment." Lexi took a soft blanket from the back of the sofa and wrapped it around Catherine's shoulders, cocooning her in warmth. In that moment, Catherine felt more cared for than she had in a very long time.

She closed her eyes and began to let the stress seep away. Among all the overwhelming emotions she felt for Lexi, the sense of safety and protection stood out most. Lexi's place was modest and slightly messy, though not overwhelmingly so. It was clean, warm, and homey in a way her own house never had been.

Catherine wasn't sure when she'd fallen asleep, but she snapped her eyes open at the soft touch of Lexi's hand on her arm.

“It’s okay, baby, it’s okay. You’re safe with me,” Lexi said gently. “I ran a bath.”

Lexi offered her hand and Catherine took it, letting herself be pulled up from the sofa. She followed Lexi obediently to the bathroom. The space was small, lit by flickering candles and filled with the calming scent of bay rum. The warm, inviting water in the tub shimmered, and Catherine thought it was the most enticing bath she’d ever seen.

Lexi’s face was close, her gaze steady as she raised her hands to the top button of Catherine’s pajama shirt.

“Is this okay? I can leave you alone if you prefer,” Lexi asked softly.

Catherine shook her head, her voice barely above a whisper. “Please don’t leave me.”

She watched as Lexi’s nimble fingers undid each button of her shirt. Lexi pulled the fabric slowly from Catherine’s shoulders, letting it slide down her arms before slipping it off completely. Catherine stood with her bare chest exposed. The moment felt intimate and erotic all at once, but it was Lexi’s quiet, reverent demeanor that steadied her nerves.

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Lexi moved to the waistband of Catherine's pajama pants, and in a few smooth motions, Catherine stepped out of them, fully nude in front of Lexi. Catherine didn't feel awkward—not for a single second. She couldn't imagine feeling this comfortable with anyone else.

Lexi extended her hand again, helping Catherine step into the tub. The warm, bubbly water enveloped her, and as she sank down, she felt her troubles start to melt away.

"This is nice. So, so nice. Thank you for taking care of me," Catherine whispered.

Their hands remained connected, the warmth of Lexi's touch spreading a comfort that Catherine could feel through the water. Lexi knelt beside the tub, picked up a sponge, and poured shower cream onto it. She gestured to the sponge.

"May I?" Lexi asked.

Catherine nodded.

Lexi moved with tender care as she ran the sponge down Catherine's leg, over her foot, and between her toes. Each motion was slow and deliberate, a gentle reassurance in every stroke. When the sponge moved to Catherine's chest, her nipples stiffened involuntarily. Despite everything, her body still responded to Lexi's touch, but Lexi kept her movements respectful and tender. She washed Catherine with no other intentions, her care purely about comfort.

Even when the sponge moved between Catherine's legs and a small flicker of pleasure sparked through her, Lexi's focus remained on cleaning her. Once the

washing was done, Lexi rinsed the soap away, leaving Catherine's skin clean and warm. Then she sat on the floor beside the tub, her presence grounding Catherine.

"How are you feeling?" Lexi asked, her voice soft but steady.

"I feel safe with you," Catherine replied.

"Did he hurt you?" Lexi's question came hesitantly, her voice carrying both concern and restrained anger.

"Not physically," Catherine admitted. The weight of her words hung between them, unspoken pain filling the air.

Lexi traced slow circles on the palm of Catherine's hand with her thumb, her touch as steady as her resolve.

"I won't let him hurt you anymore," Lexi promised.

"I don't want to go back," Catherine said, her voice breaking slightly.

"You don't have to," Lexi replied. "I promise you—you don't have to. I've got you now, baby."

Lexi's hand cupped Catherine's face, her thumb brushing softly against her cheek. Catherine met her gaze, the piercing blue of Lexi's eyes holding her steady. Then Lexi finally closed the distance between them.

Their lips met in a kiss, soft at first, then growing more insistent. Catherine could feel every ounce of Lexi's promise in that kiss—her strength, her care, and the depth of her feelings. She knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Lexi meant every word.

LEXI

Lexi woke up to the soft weight of Catherine's body draped over her. In the dim morning light filtering through the blinds, she could make out the curve of Catherine's shoulder and strands of dark hair fanned out against the pillow. For a moment, there was peace, and a warmth she hadn't realized she was missing.

Then reality settled in.

With a quiet sigh, Lexi shifted carefully, extracting herself from Catherine's embrace. She sat up on the edge of the bed and pressed the heels of her palms against her eyes. Her body ached, not from exhaustion, but from the constant strain of balancing everything—this affair, the tension at work, the fragile line she was walking between what she wanted and what she knew she shouldn't have.

Catherine stirred behind her but didn't wake.

Lexi reached for the hoodie draped over the chair nearby and slipped it on before padding barefoot into the kitchen. The air in her apartment was cool, carrying the faint scent of coffee from the day before. She'd stopped making fresh pots in the mornings, opting instead to grab something from the hospitalcafé on her way in, but ever since Catherine had moved in she'd started making coffee in the mornings again. It was just one of the ways her routine had shifted to accommodate Catherine's presence.

Not that she minded. Not entirely. Having Catherine here, waking up beside her, feeling that stolen intimacy outside of the hospital walls—it was intoxicating. But it was also a weight, one that grew heavier by the day.

She leaned against the counter, arms crossed as she stared out the dark window above the sink. She was stretched thin. Catherine was here because she didn't want to go home and face James. But Lexi had never signed up to be someone's escape. And yet, hadn't she done just that? She'd gone to Catherine that night, pulled her out of the house she no longer felt safe in, and given her a place to land. It had been instinctual. She hadn't even thought twice.

But now, in the stillness of the early morning, Lexi was thinking about it. About all of it. About the way she had to keep so many parts of herself compartmentalized—Catherine, Josephine, work. She wasn't sure how much longer she could keep it up without something breaking.

The sound of footsteps behind her made her tense, but she forced herself to relax as Catherine appeared in the doorway. She was wearing one of Lexi's T-shirts, her hair still sleep-mussed, her expression soft with lingering drowsiness.

"You're up early," Catherine murmured, stepping closer.

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Lexi offered a small smile. “Couldn’t sleep.”

Catherine reached for her hand, brushing her fingers against Lexi’s wrist. It was a simple touch, but it sent a ripple of something sharp and painful through Lexi’s chest. Because Catherine didn’t belong here. Not really.

But she was here. And Lexi had let it happen.

Catherine tilted her head, studying her. “Are you okay?”

Lexi wanted to say yes. Wanted to shove her feelings down like she always did. But the words felt like ash in her mouth. Instead, she exhaled slowly and looked away. “I don’t know.”

Catherine frowned, but before she could press further, Lexi took a step back, gently untangling their fingers. “I need to get ready for work.”

She didn’t look at Catherine as she left the kitchen, knowing that if she did, she might not be able to keep pretending she was fine. And pretending was the only thing holding her together right now.

Turning her thoughts over in her mind, Lexi reached for her phone, her fingers grazing the edge of the screen as she unlocked it, eyes briefly catching on the time. She had to go to work in less than an hour, but a part of her wanted to go back to bed and hide from the reality that was waiting for her.

A quick glance at her messages told her that wasn’t an option.

Josephine: Let's talk later.

That was all. It should have made her feel hopeful, but Lexi didn't know what to say. Their relationship, which had been strained since the beginning with weight of their shared history, had felt like walking on eggshells since Josephine found out about the affair. Josephine had barely acknowledged Lexi since, refusing to look at her in the hallways and offering only sharp, short answers to anything Lexi said. Lexi wasn't sure how to fix it.

She sighed, locking her phone and setting it aside. She couldn't focus on Josephine right now. Not when the memory of Catherine's touch was still fresh in her mind, still pulling at her heart in a way she couldn't explain.

Her mind kept going back to the way Catherine had looked at her—like she was the only person in the room, like they had all the time in the world. But Lexi knew better than anyone that time was a luxury they didn't have. Secrets, after all, had a shelf life.

She couldn't avoid the truth forever.

Lexi moved through her morning routine on autopilot, trying to push away the rising tide of guilt that accompanied her every thought about Josephine. The wall Josephine had built between them was impenetrable.

Lexi had hoped for something more. She'd hoped that the bond of being sisters would be enough to bridge the gap of the years they'd lost. But every time she tried to extend an olive branch, Josephine recoiled. She was cold, distant, like she didn't care about Lexi at all.

And Lexi didn't know how to fix that. How could she fix something that Josephine clearly didn't want to fix?

There had been times when Lexi had wondered if Josephine even cared. Maybe she was fine with being an only child. Maybe she didn't want the complication of another family member, especially one who came with baggage. The realization stung more than Lexi cared to admit, but it also fueled her determination. She wasn't going to give up. She couldn't. Not when she'd already lost so much.

But today, like the days before, Josephine's iciness was deafening.

Lexi's phone buzzed again, pulling her from her thoughts. Another message from Josephine:

I'll be at the hospital early today. Can you meet me in my office at noon?

Lexi stared at the message, her heart skipping a beat. The last thing she wanted right now was to face Josephine with the weight of her secrets hanging over her. Lexi wasn't sure what this conversation would entail—was Josephine finally going to bring up how she felt about having a sister? Or was she going to confront Lexi about the growing tension she'd noticed at work, the distracted glances, the secret relationship?

Lexi clenched her jaw and ran a hand through her hair. This wasn't the time for more conflict, but it felt like it was inevitable. Lexi was terrified of what Josephine might say—or worse, what she might do about the affair.

She had no idea how to balance it all. She had no idea how to reconcile her growing feelings for Catherine with her desire to forge a relationship with Josephine. The weight of the affair—her love for Catherine, their secret moments—felt like a heavy secret she carried everywhere she went.

It wasn't just Catherine and Josephine that she was lying to. It was herself.

Lexi glanced at the clock. There wasn't time to think about it any longer. She had a job to do, and she couldn't let herself drown in the chaos of her emotions. She had to put one foot in front of the other, focus on work, and hope that by the time she got to the hospital, she'd have figured out what to say to Josephine.

But deep down, Lexi knew that nothing would be easy anymore. The web of secrets was tightening around her, and she was running out of time to untangle it all.

The hospital was buzzing as usual with the rhythmic sound of footsteps echoing through the halls, the distant beeping of machines, and the hurried murmur of nurses and doctors attending to their rounds. Lexi moved through it all like a ghost, her body going through the motions but her mind elsewhere. It was difficult to focus with her thoughts constantly drifting back to Catherine and the growing emotional conflict within her.

The affair with Catherine had become something more than just a physical connection. It had seeped into her mind and soul, threading its way through her every thought. But as much as it felt like the most right thing in her life, it also came with a hefty burden—the secrecy, the guilt, the fear of it all falling apart. And today, that burden felt heavier than ever.

Lexi made her way into the surgical wing, trying to push her internal chaos aside as she focused on her first patient of the day. But despite her best efforts, her mind couldn't help but wander. It was as if every patient she passed in the hallway and every colleague she saw was a reminder that she was hiding something monumental from the people she worked with every day.

And then, there was Josephine.

Lexi spotted her half-sister as she entered the break room. Josephine stood with her arms crossed, talking with one of the senior doctors. She looked every bit the hospital's formidable leader—confident, composed, and totally in control. Lexi felt a pang of guilt as she watched her, knowing that what could have been a budding sibling relationship was slipping through her fingers, and she had no idea how to stop it.

As Lexi entered the room, Josephine's eyes flicked to her, but there was no warmth in the glance. It was cold, impersonal, like she was seeing a colleague instead of a long-lost sister. Lexi's chest tightened. Despite their shared bloodline, they were still strangers to each other, and that stung more than she wanted to admit.

Trying to shake off the growing tension, Lexi approached the coffee machine and poured herself a cup. Her hands were shaking slightly, and she cursed herself for it. She needed to keep it together. But Josephine was watching her, her eyes never leaving her as Lexi moved about the room, trying to act casual, as if they weren't both keeping secrets from their coworkers.

The silence between them felt suffocating.

Finally, Josephine spoke, her voice cutting through the quiet like a blade. "You're off today, Lexi," she said, her tone clipped and her expression unreadable. "You've been distracted lately. That's not like you."

Lexi's stomach twisted as her pulse quickened. She wanted to deny it, but the words

caught in her throat. Instead, she settled for a half-hearted shrug. “I’m fine,” she said, even though they both knew it wasn’t true. “Just a lot on my mind.”

Josephine’s gaze remained steady and unimpressed. “That’s not an answer,” she said coolly. “And we both know why.”

Lexi tensed. The argument from weeks ago still lingered between them like an open wound, neither of them willing to touch it again. But Josephine wasn’t going to let this go. Not this time.

Before Lexi could respond, Josephine’s phone buzzed in her pocket, and she excused herself to take the call. Lexi exhaled sharply, but she knew this conversation was far from over.

Lexi’s nerves gnawed at her as she made her way to Josephine’s office for their noon appointment. The weight of the conversation ahead felt almost unbearable—too much to face, too much to explain. She’d hoped for more time and space to make sense of everything, but now it was inevitable. The tension between them had already grown too thick to ignore. Josephine had seen the cracks, and now Lexi was walking straight into the storm. Every step toward the office felt like it pulled her deeper into the mess she’d created, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that no matter how she tried to explain herself, it wouldn’t be enough.

When Lexi knocked on Josephine’s office door, she was greeted with a curt, “Come in.”

Josephine’s office was as pristine and controlled as ever. Not a single file was out of place. Lexi lowered herself into the chair across from her sister, doing her best to mask the exhaustion creeping in.

Josephine folded her hands on the desk, studying Lexi like a puzzle she didn’t have

time to solve. “I’m not going to waste either of our time pretending I don’t know what’s going on and you are putting me in a very awkward position expecting me to keep your secrets.”

Lexi’s jaw tightened. “Then why are we having this conversation?”

Josephine leaned back slightly, exhaling. “Because I need to hear you say it,” she said, her tone almost clinical. “Are you really planning to keep this going? Because whatever you think this is with Catherine, it’s only going to end badly.”

Lexi clenched her fists in her lap. “You don’t know that.”

Josephine arched a brow. “She’s married, Lexi. And not to you.”

Lexi swallowed hard, her throat burning. “I know that,” she muttered. “You think I don’t know that?”

Josephine sighed, rubbing at her temple. “Look, I don’t approve of this. I won’t pretend to. But more than that, I don’t want to watch you get dragged into something that will ruin you.” Her voice was steady, almost detached, but Lexi heard the steel underneath it. “You think she’s going to leave him for you?”

Lexi didn’t respond, because she wasn’t sure she knew the answer. Catherine might be sleeping in her bed, but she certainly hadn’t officially left her husband in any way.

Josephine let the silence stretch for a moment before speaking again. “You’re my employee, and I have to separate that from...whatever family stuff is between us. But you should know that if this starts affecting your work, I won’t look the other way.”

Lexi flinched. “You don’t have to threaten me.”

Josephine's expression didn't change. "I'm being honest. You need to figure out what you're doing before this blows up in your face."

Lexi exhaled sharply, looking away. "And if I don't?"

Josephine studied her for a long moment. "Then that's on you." She paused, her fingers tapping lightly on the desk. "But if you're willing to be smart about this—to put it behind you—I'm willing to move forward. We don't have to keep fighting. We can...try to figure this out."

Lexi's chest tightened. "Figure what out?"

Josephine hesitated for the briefest second before saying, "Being sisters."

Lexi looked up sharply, searching for any sign of softness in Josephine's face. There wasn't one. But the fact that she'd said it at all meant something.

The air between them was still tense, but there was something else there too—an unspoken offer, a line drawn in the sand.

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Lexi swallowed and nodded once. "Okay."

Josephine nodded back, professional as ever. "Good."

As Lexi left Josephine's office, her mind was spinning. The conversation wasn't what she'd expected, and she wasn't sure how she felt about it.

Lexi's phone buzzed again, and she glanced down to see a message from Catherine: Thinking about you. Can't wait to see you tonight.

A smile tugged at her lips, but it was quickly followed by a pang of guilt. How could she keep living in this web of lies?

She wasn't sure she could.

14

CATHERINE

Catherine didn't expect the call. It came in the middle of the afternoon while she was in the operating room, gloves slick with sweat, her focus on the procedure at hand. The voice on the other end was calm, detached, and far too familiar: James.

"I'm coming home earlier than expected," he said, his tone impassive. "There's no point in staying away any longer. I'll be there around six."

There was no warmth, no inquiry into her wellbeing. The truth was, James's voice felt

distant now, a far cry from the man she'd once known. They hadn't spoken since that argument when she'd ended up at Lexi's. She'd stayed there for a few days, but as soon as she knew James had left the country again, she'd returned home. As much as she loved being at Lexi's, she knew it wasn't fair to burden her with the chaos that was her life while she still hadn't really left James.

When the clock finally hit five, Catherine couldn't focus. She wrapped up the last of her notes, practically racing through the final steps of her shift, her mind fixed on the image of James walking through the door—his sharp, calculating gaze, the coldness that had settled between them. The tension in her chest was suffocating.

It was only a few minutes after she reached their house that the front door clicked open, and there he was, standing in the foyer. James was precisely as she remembered him—dressed in a tailored suit, his posture immaculate, his eyes sharp and calculating.

"Home early," she said, trying for casual, but the tightness in her chest betrayed her.

James's eyes swept over her, his gaze lingering for a moment longer than necessary, as if inspecting her for flaws. He didn't smile. "I've got work to do," he said, his tone devoid of warmth. "You know how it is."

Catherine nodded, swallowing hard. She did know. His career was his life, his everything. Catherine's work was a source of pride and passion, but James only tolerated it. She'd long since learned to keep her accomplishments quiet, not because she was ashamed of them, but because he never seemed to see her success as anything but minor compared to his own.

He walked past her, heading straight to the study. "I expect dinner to be ready by six. I've got a conference call, and I'll need you to be...presentable."

Catherine didn't respond immediately. He didn't even notice her hesitation, too focused on his own routine. Her frustration bubbled beneath the surface, but she swallowed it down. The last thing she needed was another argument where he would belittle her accomplishments, treating them as if they were secondary to his.

"I'll make dinner," she said quietly.

Without looking at her, James muttered something about needing quiet, then disappeared into his study. It was as if she wasn't even there.

The house felt cold now, emptier than it ever had before. He was home, yes, but there was no joy in it. No comfort. Just the familiar weight of his dismissiveness.

She moved into the kitchen, trying to find something besides her husband to focus on. But her mind refused to cooperate, constantly pulling her back to the same thought: James was here, but it was as if he wasn't. He was a stranger in their home, occupying space without really being present.

As she prepared the meal, her thoughts drifted to Lexi. Her moments with Lexi were the only times she felt truly alive, seen, and desired in a way James had never been able to offer. With Lexi, everything was different—real, raw, and unfiltered. But with James? She'd become little more than an accessory to his life, an image of the perfect wife who silently followed him around.

Dinner was a quiet affair. James barely acknowledged her presence, too absorbed in his phone as he texted or checked emails between bites. Catherine sat across from him, trying to ignore the frustration clawing at her chest. It was as if she'd become an object in his life, a fixture in the background that needed to be maintained, but never truly engaged with.

"You've been distant lately," James remarked abruptly. His eyes didn't meet hers as

he spoke. "Is something going on, Catherine? Are you too busy with your little surgeries to remember you have a husband?"

Her heart sank. It wasn't the first time he'd made this accusation. The fact that she saved lives every day, that she was a respected surgeon in her own right, meant nothing to him. To James, she was always just a wife—his wife, a woman whose sole purpose was to support him.

"I'm just busy," Catherine said, the words tasting bitter. Would he even notice if she left him, or would he always expect her to come back, like the dutiful wife she'd been for years?

James snorted dismissively. "You always are. Just make sure you're not too busy to remember your place. That's all I ask."

A cold rush of resentment washed over her. But she said nothing, her gaze falling to her plate, her appetite lost.

As the night dragged on, she realized that this—this oppressive silence, this sense of being invisible in her own home—was what her life had become. James was here, but he was as much a stranger to her as anyone else. Maybe the man she'd married was an illusion—either a mask he'd put on or a lie she'd told herself.

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After he finished eating, James disappeared into the study, leaving Catherine to clean up in silence. She stood in the kitchen, washing dishes mechanically, her mind racing with thoughts she could never voice.

In the quiet of the house, Catherine finally allowed herself to acknowledge the truth: her marriage was over. Not because of one betrayal, but because it had never truly existed in the first place. It had always been a shadow of what it could have been, built on the false pretense that she was enough to sustain it. But she wasn't enough—not for James, and not for herself.

The realization hit her hard. She couldn't keep living this lie, pretending that she was content when she was drowning in neglect and loneliness. But the fear of confronting him paralyzed her. What would happen when she finally told him that the love she once had for him had withered away? And what if she told him everything and he didn't even care?

She had tried to tell him a couple of times now. And her feelings had been met with the same cold dismissal. As though he never believed she would actually leave him.

Was he right? Did she really believe she would actually leave him?

Catherine didn't have all the answers. All she knew was that she couldn't keep living this way—not anymore. But for now, all she could do was wait, trapped in the silence of their marriage, holding on to the hope that someday, somehow, she would find the courage to break free.

As the days passed and James continued his absence in their marriage, Catherine's

perspective began to shift. Every time James came home, it was like they were living in parallel lives, only momentarily converging at the edges of their existence. His long hours, his constant traveling, and his lack of attention to anything outside of his own world left Catherine feeling like an afterthought.

When they were together, the silence between them was deafening. He would speak of surgeries, cases, conferences—his world, his universe—and she would nod, pretending to still be part of the life they'd once shared. But with every passing moment, the distance between them grew wider, the gulf that had always been there now too vast to ignore.

Despite her clarity about the state of her marriage, Catherine's guilt about her affair with Lexi was suffocating. Each moment they spent together, each stolen kiss, had further complicated Catherine's feelings, creating a tangle of emotions she couldn't easily unravel.

With Lexi, she didn't feel invisible. She felt seen, heard, and wanted. But as much as she cherished their moments together, she couldn't shake the responsibility she had to James. They were still married, and Catherine couldn't silence the voice that reminded her of the vows she'd made.

Catherine couldn't bear the thought of losing everything—her marriage, her career, her reputation—and yet, she couldn't keep living a lie. Every day felt like a balancing act, each step carefully calculated, every moment weighted with the knowledge that one misstep would bring it all crashing down.

15

LEXI

Lexi sat at the small kitchen table in her apartment, staring blankly at the half-empty

cup of coffee in front of her. The steam rising from it should have been comforting, but it only made her feel more isolated, like she was trapped in a fog of her own emotions. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a peaceful moment, a time when her mind wasn't racing with questions and doubts.

Lately, her whole life felt like it was unraveling. She deeply cared for Catherine, but the constant secrecy of their affair was eating away at her. It was like they were two strangers meeting in dark corners, unable to exist in the light of day. She was always the "other woman," always the one hidden from the world, and it was suffocating. There were moments when she wondered if she would ever get to be more than a fleeting moment in Catherine's life. The pain of it—the constant ache of being kept in the shadows—was wearing her down.

She had known this. She had known in the first place that letting herself get too deeply involved with Catherine was a terrible idea. But, despite everything, she hadn't been able to resist falling in love with her.

Lexi's mind kept drifting to the first time she'd truly felt the depth of her feelings for Catherine. It had been so unexpected, so intense, that she'd barely been able to keep herself together. She hadn't gone into their friendship with any ulterior motive. But the chemistry was undeniable—the way Catherine's touch lingered just a little longer than necessary, the way her eyes softened when they spoke about things that mattered. Over time, that connection had deepened into something more, something she couldn't ignore.

And now it was destroying her. Catherine was still married. Despite saying she would leave him, she still hadn't. The reality of it had settled in after weeks of stolen moments and secret rendezvous. Lexi didn't want to be the other woman. She didn't want to feel like a secret, something Catherine hid away like a shameful indulgence. Lexi didn't mind being the person Catherine turned to when things were bad, when James was gone again or Catherine felt lonely and isolated in her marriage. What she

couldn't stand anymore was the constant reminder that she was nothing more than an escape, someone to be enjoyed in fleeting moments but never in the light of day.

She loved Catherine. But she couldn't keep pretending that was enough.

The guilt gnawed at her, too. Every time she saw Catherine with James, wearing her well-practiced smile as she played the role of the supportive wife, Lexi felt like an intruder in their life. It wasn't supposed to be like this. She wasn't supposed to feel like she was tearing apart someone else's world. But she did, every single day. And it was killing her, piece by piece.

In the beginning, when their connection was still new, she'd convinced herself that Catherine was telling the truth when she said she would leave her husband. How could she not? James was a consultant surgeon, always busy with cases that took him around the world. He was charming, yes, but distant. She was deeply unhappy with him. The marriage seemed to be nothing more than an arrangement—a partnership that worked because they both allowed it to stay that way. Lexi had imagined that Catherine could see that, and then she would choose something real.

But Catherine hadn't. She'd stayed. And as the days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, Lexi started to question if she ever would. It became more and more evident to her that Catherine, for all her dissatisfaction with her marriage, wasn't willing to make the break. She wasn't willing to risk everything for something that felt as unstable and uncertain as their secret relationship. The realization broke something inside of Lexi. She'd been patient and understanding for so long. But she was tired of waiting, tired of watching Catherine's hesitation, tired of feeling like the other woman who would never be enough.

And then came the moment—the breaking point—when Lexi couldn't take it anymore.

She'd tried to talk to Catherine and express how she felt, but the words never came out right. It wasn't just about the affair; it was about her own worth, about feeling like she was worth choosing. She didn't want to live in the shadows anymore.

One night, after Catherine left her apartment, the weight of her frustration became too much. She needed clarity. She needed to know where she stood, once and for all.

The day Lexi decided she couldn't keep hiding anymore started like any other. She was at the hospital, her thoughts constantly drifting to Catherine, to the things they'd shared, the passion that warmed her chest every time she thought about the last time they'd been together. But today, the thoughts weren't pleasant. They were laced with frustration, anger, and hurt. She couldn't help it; they were boiling inside of her, and she knew she needed to act before they consumed her completely.

It wasn't even about the affair itself—it was what the affair symbolized. The lies. The deceit. The constant strain on her own heart as she tried to find some way to make it all work while Catherine remained stuck.

Lexi had been patient and understanding, even though the situation wasn't ideal. But she knew, deep down, that she couldn't keep living like this. The constant waiting, the quiet desperation that gnawed at her when Catherine couldn't—or wouldn't—choose her, was starting to feel like too much. And as much as she loved Catherine, Lexi couldn't keep pouring her heart into something that had no future.

She couldn't hold back anymore.

After a long day at the hospital, Lexi didn't go home right away. She needed to see Catherine and get some answers. Her mind raced with everything she planned to say. It had to be now. No more waiting. No more pretending.

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When Catherine finally arrived in the empty break room, there was already tension in the air. Lexi could see the uncertainty in her eyes, but she didn't waste any time.

"I can't do this anymore, Catherine," Lexi said, her voice quiet but firm.

Catherine froze, her eyes widening. "What do you mean?"

"You need to make a decision," Lexi continued, feeling her heart twist. "I can't keep living this way. Either you leave him, or this...us...ends. I can't keep being the other woman."

Catherine looked shocked, her eyes darting around as if searching for the right words. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out at first. Lexi knew this was the moment—this was where everything would either change for the better or fall apart.

"Lexi...I?—"

"No," Lexi interrupted, shaking her head. "I'm not waiting anymore, Catherine. I can't."

The silence that followed was unbearable. Lexi's heart beat painfully in her chest, every second dragging on, bringing her closer to the possibility of everything falling apart. She loved Catherine, but she couldn't keep giving herself to someone who wouldn't choose her.

"I can't be your secret anymore," Lexi whispered, her voice breaking. "I need you to choose me, or I need you to let me go."

Catherine's eyes softened, but the sadness in them only made Lexi feel more alone.

"I love you, but I just... I just don't know if I can do it," Catherine whispered, her voice thick with guilt.

And that was it. Lexi knew, in that moment, that everything she'd feared was true. Catherine would never leave her husband. And as much as it hurt, Lexi realized that she'd already started pulling away.

With a deep breath, she turned away, leaving Catherine standing in the silence, with nothing but the weight of the ultimatum hanging in the air.

Lexi stumbled into her apartment, the door creaking shut behind her with a chilling finality. The dim light in the kitchen seemed to mock her with its coldness, and she didn't bother turning on the overhead lights. She needed the darkness, the quiet. She kicked off her shoes and slumped down on the couch hugging a pillow to her chest.

Catherine was gone. That chapter of her life was over, and all Lexi had to show for it was the bitter taste of regret.

She felt the tears coming and once they started, they just wouldn't stop.

She'd thought Phoenix Ridge would be the fresh start she needed. It had been a chance to leave everything behind, build something new, and finally meet her half-sister. But instead she was alone, with nothing to show for it but broken dreams and broken promises.

Her sister still didn't want her, and no matter how hard Lexi tried to reach out, it felt like they'd never really get to know each other. It stung more than she cared to admit. Was she that unworthy of love? Was it her fault she couldn't fit into this small town where people seemed to have their lives so perfectly together?

And then there was Catherine—a woman who'd promised her a future, but when it came down to it, couldn't even make the choice to leave her miserable marriage. The woman who'd kissed her like she meant it, only to turn away and leave Lexi standing in the dark. She wasn't enough. She'd never be enough.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. She was supposed to have it all—love, belonging, happiness—but all she had was loneliness, rejection, and a mountain of unresolved feelings.

She wiped her eyes, but the tears kept coming anyway, spilling down her cheeks as the room blurred around her. She felt like she couldn't breathe. The darkness felt like a weight pressing down on her chest, suffocating her with the realization that she was completely and utterly alone. She could call her mom, but she hadn't told her about Catherine—she didn't want to worry her.

She'd moved here for a new beginning, but all she'd found was more of the same: broken promises, unrequited love, and endless regret. The city, the people, even the apartment—it all felt foreign and wrong. Phoenix Ridge hadn't given her anything except the aching reminder of everything she couldn't have.

Lexi leaned her head back against the couch, her eyes closed and her breath shaky. She felt like a stranger in her own life, and every choice she'd made since stepping foot in this town felt like a mistake. All she wanted was someone to tell her she wasn't a failure, that this was just one bad chapter, not the whole book.

But there was no one.

Catherine sat at the kitchen table, staring at the half-empty mug in front of her as her fingers traced the rim absently. The coffee was cold, but she didn't mind. It had been one of those mornings—the kind where nothing seemed to matter, where the weight of everything pressed down on her chest, and even the simple act of drinking a cup of coffee felt like an insurmountable task.

She hadn't slept well the night before. The house had been too quiet without James's presence, and yet when he was home, the silence was even more suffocating. Her mind kept drifting back to Lexi, to the guilt that gnawed at her every time she thought about telling her she couldn't leave James.

Leaving him had felt impossible for so long, but remembering the hurt in Lexi's eyes made her chest ache. Was she really willing to give up the woman who'd made her feel for the first time in years? The idea of staying with James for the rest of her life made Catherine feel physically ill. Confronting him would be horrible, but she had to do it. For herself...and for Lexi. She wasn't sure what she would say, or even if she'd be able to say anything at all, but she knew she had to try.

She grabbed her phone from the counter and dialed James's number, but it went straight to voicemail. She left a message, her voice sounding far steadier than she felt. "James, we need to talk. I don't know when you'll be home, but I'll be here waiting for you." Her words felt hollow as soon as she said them, but there was nothing else to say.

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The rest of the day passed in a blur of empty moments. Catherine went through the motions—checking in on her patients, reading reports, meeting with colleagues—but her mind was elsewhere. Every time she saw a familiar face in the hospital hallway, she felt like she was wearing a mask. She was so used to pretending that she was okay, but today it felt almost impossible to pretend. The weight of her own emotions was suffocating, and the thought of facing James and confronting him about everything that had been eating at her made her feel like she was drowning.

Finally, as the evening approached, James texted her. He would be home in an hour. The message was brief and unemotional, and Catherine felt yet another pang of disappointment that she couldn't quite shake. He was always so distant, so unreachable, and this was no exception. She was used to it by now, but it still hurt. And now, for the first time in years, she was starting to believe that she deserved better than his cold, heartless indifference. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for what was to come. She had to do this.

When James walked through the door, he looked exactly the way he always did—tired but composed, his sharp jawline and perfectly styled hair giving off an air of effortless charm. He barely glanced at her as he set down his bag and shrugged out of his jacket, the same detached indifference that had become so familiar in their marriage hanging in the air between them. Catherine swallowed the lump in her throat.

“James, we need to talk,” she said, her voice trembling despite her best efforts to keep it steady.

James didn't look up as he busied himself with something on the counter. “I've got a

flight in the morning. You know I'm leaving again. Can't this wait?"

Catherine's heart sank. Of course he was more focused on his next trip, his next big case. Of course it could wait—because whatever she had to say didn't matter. She was nothing more than a placeholder in his life, a wife he could check in with when it was convenient for him.

"No, it can't wait," she said, more firmly this time. She wasn't going to back down. She couldn't. "James, we've been living like this for years. We're barely even...us anymore. You're always gone, and when you are here, it's like I don't exist. I need to know where we stand. I need to know if this...if this marriage is something you still want."

James finally looked up, a flicker of annoyance crossing his face. "Catherine, you know I'm busy. You know how important my work is." He sighed, his voice condescending as he continued, "You knew what you were getting into when you married me."

Her chest tightened at his words. She knew what she was getting into? Was that it? Was she just supposed to accept being the neglected wife, always second to his career? Was that all she was worth?

"I know your work is important," she said quietly. "But I'm important, too. I'm not just some...some accessory you bring out when it suits you."

He scoffed and shook his head. "I don't have time for this right now. I'm leaving in the morning. We'll talk when I get back."

The finality in his words was like a slap to her face. He wasn't listening...and he was never going to. He was already checked out and moving on to the next thing, the next case, the next destination. She wasn't even a thought in his mind.

Catherine's world tilted. The realization hit her like a wave as the sharp sting of rejection flooded her chest. She'd given everything to this marriage—her love, her time, her career—but it would never be enough. And now, standing in front of him, the truth was clear: she'd been living a lie. She wasn't loved. Not the way she needed to be, not the way she deserved.

The tears came without warning, hot and bitter as they spilled down her cheeks. She tried to hold them back, but the dam had burst, and there was no stopping it now. The pain was partly because she realized her whole life for so many years had been just a lie. But mostly her tears were for Lexi. She loved Lexi, and yet, just as her friend Sinead had predicted, she had broken Lexi's heart.

James barely reacted to her tears, his face impassive, as though her pain was just another inconvenience in his busy life. She felt herself break inside as she finally passed the point of no return.

"I can't do this anymore," she whispered, her voice cracking. This time, those words felt truer than they ever had.

But James was already walking away, heading upstairs to pack for his next flight. He didn't even look back.

Catherine took a deep breath and finally mustered the courage to say, "Stop."

When James turned to face her, his hands were shoved deep into his pockets, his jaw set in that familiar, tight line. "I don't understand why we have to have this conversation right now, Catherine. Can't you see that I'm busy?" James said, his voice dripping with condescension. He didn't even look at her. He was too busy adjusting his cufflinks. His words struck her like a slap to the face. She'd spent years trying to make herself small enough to fit into his life, but tonight, she was done.

“Busy?” Catherine repeated, her voice barely above a whisper, but the fire in it was unmistakable. “I’m always busy, James. I’m always running on empty, always taking care of everything—my patients, the house, us. And what do I get in return? Nothing. Nothing but your ego and your absence.”

James finally looked at her, his eyes narrowing in annoyance. "What do you want from me, Catherine?" he demanded, his tone sharp, almost mocking. "You knew what you were signing up for when you married me. You knew that my career comes first."

The words hit her like a battering ram. She'd heard them a hundred times before, but tonight, they broke something inside her. She'd spent so many years convincing herself that this marriage was enough. But it wasn't. It never had been.

"You're right," she spat, her voice rising with a sudden intensity that surprised even her. "I did know what I was signing up for. But I didn't sign up for this. I didn't sign up for you treating me like I'm invisible. Like I'm an afterthought in your life. I didn't sign up for a marriage where I'm just here for show."

James's face darkened. "That's not fair," he muttered, though the defensive edge in his voice betrayed him. "You know how much I do for this family. I've made a name for myself in this field. I've worked hard to provide for us. What more do you want from me, Catherine?"

The words sent a bitter laugh bubbling up from her chest. "More? You think I want more from you? I don't want your money, James. I don't want your accolades or awards. I wanted you. I wanted the man I married. I want someone who sees me, who hears me. But all I get from you is the back of your head when you walk out the door and the sound of your voice when you're telling me how busy you are."

James's eyes flashed with irritation and his jaw tightened. He took a step forward, but

Catherine stood her ground. She wasn't going to let him diminish her anymore.

"I've given you everything I have," she continued, "and I've watched you walk away from me every single time. You're so wrapped up in your own world that you can't see what's right in front of you."

James's lips curled into a smirk, laced with contempt. "Oh, so now it's all my fault? You're the perfect wife, the perfect surgeon, the perfect everything, right? Maybe if you weren't so consumed with your own self-righteousness, you'd realize that I've had my hands full, too." His voice dropped, dripping with sarcasm. "It's hard to be a successful consultant when you have to come home to a wife who wants a goddamn parade for every little thing."

That hit her like a punch. He'd never once understood the sacrifices she'd made—the hours spent in the operating room, the sleepless nights. He saw her only as an extension of his life, a background character in his grand story.

"You think I want a parade?" Catherine's voice was low now, but the anger behind it burned brightly. "I don't want your praise or your hollow compliments. I want respect. I want to be seen. I want to feel like I matter to someone. But not to you, who can't be bothered to even listen when I'm telling you how I feel."

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The finality in her words hit both of them. James was silent for a moment, his face a mask of indifference, but Catherine could see the flicker of something in his eyes—something between frustration and disbelief.

"I've been pretending for so long, James," she continued, her voice a soft, painful whisper. "Pretending that everything is okay. Pretending that I'm okay. But I'm not okay. I haven't been for a long time."

The confession hung in the air between them, thick and raw. James seemed at a loss for words, as if she'd finally pierced the armor he'd built around himself. But instead of softening, he snapped.

"Well, if you're so unhappy, maybe you should leave." The words were sharp, more of a challenge than an offer. "I'm not going to sit here and listen to you complain about how terrible your life is while I'm making a difference in the world."

Catherine recoiled, the sting of his words cutting deeper than she expected. That was it? After all this, all the years of marriage, of sacrifice, of trying to make it work—this was his response?

Her eyes filled with tears, but she refused to let them fall. No, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her break.

"I'm done," she said, her voice low, firm, and final. "I'm done pretending. Done being your afterthought. I'm so, so done."

Catherine felt the world tilt beneath her feet. It was almost like time slowed down, as

though she could see every fleeting detail in sharp clarity: James's frustrated expression, his hand gripping his briefcase with a tightness that could crack bone, the air growing thick and heavy between them. Then, with a sudden, reckless motion, he stepped toward the door, muttering something about the trip and the unending demands on his time. He was so absorbed in his own frustration that he didn't even bother responding to her, he just pushed her out of his way as though she was no more than an inconvenience as he moved past her. Catherine's body jerked with the unexpected force, her feet slipping from beneath her as she tried to steady herself. Her arms flailed, but it was too late.

The corner of the coffee table loomed before her, too close to avoid, and she felt it—the sickening, sharp crack as the back of her head collided with the edge of the table. It wasn't violent, not in the way that would make her scream out in pain. It was more like a sudden, jolting shock, the kind that made everything go quiet for a heartbeat. The pressure and sudden force of the impact stunned her, and for a split second, everything went dark.

The throbbing pain in her skull was like nothing she'd ever experienced. It wasn't just a headache—it was like something inside her brain was tearing, twisting, and pulsing with every heartbeat. Her vision swam in and out of focus, everything blurring together until she couldn't tell where the walls ended and the floor began.

Catherine's breath hitched and her heart pounded in her chest, racing with fear as panic crept in. She was lying on the floor, her body still, her hands struggling to find something solid to grab onto. But all she could feel was the dizzying sensation of her world spinning, the ache growing sharper in the back of her head and threatening to engulf her completely. Her ears buzzed and her body felt as though it were floating, and the familiar pain of years of neglect and isolation in her marriage suddenly felt like nothing compared to this. The pain in her head was searing, relentless, and terrifying.

Through the haze, she could hear James's voice, frantic but distant. "Catherine—Catherine, Jesus, what the hell?" The words sounded muffled, like they were coming from underwater. She wanted to respond, to scream at him and tell him how much his carelessness had destroyed her, but all she could do was groan. She felt herself slipping further away, her body heavy, her thoughts scattered like smoke in the wind.

"Stay with me, okay? Stay with me," James was saying, but his words barely registered in her mind. She could feel him kneeling beside her, his hands hovering uncertainly over her body, as if unsure whether to touch her or not. But Catherine couldn't find it in herself to care. The world felt too far away, too hazy and distant for her to focus on anything beyond the sharp, insistent pain in her skull.

"Catherine..." His voice trembled, and then there was movement, frantic and rushed. She felt him lifting her, his hands around her shoulders, guiding her body in a way that felt wrong and disorienting. The pain in her head only intensified as she was pulled upright, and she gasped for breath, her body shaking as if it was no longer her own.

The sound of the door opening reached her ears, and she recognized the sense of urgency in James's voice. "I'm calling an ambulance. We need to get you to the hospital." His voice was so thin, so uncertain, that Catherine almost couldn't recognize it as his. But it wasn't comfort that she needed. She didn't need him to apologize or act concerned now, not when it was too late and the damage was already done.

Her head swam again, and she could feel herself slipping, her consciousness fading in and out like a distant, unreachable dream. But she couldn't fully surrender to it. Something in her—the little shred of herself that remained—fought to stay awake, to keep the world in focus, to keep herself from disappearing into the dark.

Catherine was vaguely aware of movement, cool air against her skin, and harsh light overhead as she was rushed through the hospital doors. Her body felt like it was on autopilot, her mind too foggy to make sense of anything. She felt herself being moved, pulled, then laid down on something hard and sterile. The smell of antiseptic was thick in the air, sharp and stinging in her nostrils. There were voices—too many voices—rising in pitch, demanding attention, giving orders. But it was all just a blur to her.

She could hear James's voice now, a low murmur at the edge of her consciousness. "I didn't mean to...she just..." His words trailed off, a string of disconnected sentences that didn't make any sense. Catherine wanted to snap at him and tell him how badly he'd messed up, but she couldn't seem to form the words. Her mouth felt dry, her tongue heavy.

The lights above her were too bright, too harsh. She tried to turn her head, but the pain was too much. A wave of nausea hit her and she gasped, trying to keep the bile in her throat from rising. Her hands curled into fists on the bed, the only thing she could control in the chaos around her.

Someone—she couldn't tell who—placed something cold against her forehead, trying to rouse her, but Catherine could barely focus on it. The rhythmic sound of her heart monitor was the only thing she could hear clearly, the beeps echoing in her ears louder than anything else.

"Stay with us, Catherine," someone said, a doctor or a nurse, though she couldn't place the voice. "Stay with us; you're going to be okay. Just breathe for me, okay?"

But Catherine wasn't sure she could. Everything was slipping away, like she was losing her grip on the world...on her life.

The pain was still there, sharp and insistent, a reminder that this wasn't just some bad

dream she could wake up from. This was real, and it hurt more than she'd ever imagined. The thought of Lexi crossed her mind briefly, her heart aching with the longing she'd tried so hard to suppress. But it felt so distant now, like another life, another world that had no place in this moment.

She closed her eyes, trying to fight the dizziness and keep herself from being swallowed by the darkness. But it was inevitable now. And all she could do was wait...for it to pass, or for it to pull her under.

17

LEXI

Lexi had just finished a late shift when her phone buzzed, its ring sharp in the quiet of the hospital hallways. She looked at the screen—an unknown number. She hesitated before answering, the strange flutter in her chest a mix of instinct and concern.

“Dr. Bond,” she answered.

“Dr. Bond, this is the ER. We have a critical patient coming in—head trauma. We need you in the OR, now.”

Lexi’s stomach dropped. Head trauma. Her mind instantly shot to the worst possible outcome. “What’s the patient’s condition?” she asked, her voice already urgent as she turned and started walking toward the OR.

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“Severe head injury, possible brain swelling. We’re stabilizing her as best we can, but we need you. She’s in bad shape, Dr. Bond. It’s touch and go. Also, she’s one of ours.”

“Who’s the patient?” Lexi’s pulse quickened as her feet moved almost of their own accord toward the nearest elevator.

“Catherine Spencer.”

The name hit her like a punch to the gut. Catherine. Lexi’s breath caught in her throat, her mind flashing to the many nights she’d spent with her—soft laughter, tender touches, the promise of something more than just an affair. Her heart ached as her thoughts immediately spiraled.

She gripped the phone tighter, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ll be right there.”

She hung up, her hands trembling slightly as she made her way toward the OR. A thousand thoughts raced through her mind, none of them making sense. She’d never imagined something like this could happen, that the woman she’d come to care for so deeply would be lying in a hospital bed, fighting for her life. The weight of it pressed on her chest as she tried to steady her breathing.

When Lexi arrived at the ER, the frantic energy of the department was palpable. Nurses and doctors rushed around, their movements a blur as they prepared for the critical surgery ahead. Lexi’s eyes immediately found the trauma bay where Catherine lay, unconscious and pale, a faint beeping from the heart monitor the only indication that she was still alive.

The scene before her was overwhelming. Her mind raced as her body instinctively moved to scrub in and get ready for the surgery she knew she had to perform. But before she could step toward the operating room, a voice stopped her.

“Dr. Bond,” a nurse called to her, “you’re needed in OR Three. Now.”

Lexi nodded, but as she moved toward the door, she caught a glimpse of Josephine in the corner of the hallway, her posture rigid and her gaze locked onto her. Lexi’s heart skipped a beat at the sight of her half-sister, their strained relationship always hanging tensely between them.

Josephine didn’t say anything at first. She just stood there, her arms crossed over her chest, watching Lexi closely. Lexi stopped in front of her, forcing herself to focus on the task ahead.

“Josephine,” Lexi said quietly, her voice strained, “I need to get to the OR. Catherine...she’s in serious condition.”

Josephine’s eyes darkened, her expression unreadable. She stood still for a moment, her gaze unwavering as she spoke. “You can’t operate on her.”

Lexi froze, her pulse picking up at the sudden shift in Josephine’s tone. “What? Josephine, she needs me. I’m the only one who can do this right now. I can’t walk away.”

Josephine took a step closer, lowering her voice. “This is a conflict of interest, Lexi. You’re too close to her—personally. You’re emotionally involved. You’re not in the right frame of mind to make decisions. I can’t let you perform the surgery.”

For a moment, Lexi’s world came to a standstill. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She was the best neurosurgeon available, the only one who could save

Catherine, and her half-sister—someone who knew the bare minimum about their secret—was standing in her way.

“You’re right,” Lexi said, her words tight with frustration. “I am emotionally involved. But right now, that’s irrelevant. Catherine’s life is at risk. I’m the only one here who can help her. If you stop me, she’ll die.”

Josephine’s gaze softened just a little, but her decision was clear. “I know you’re the best at what you do, Lexi. But I’m responsible for the entire hospital. I can’t let personal emotions get in the way of professional judgment.”

Lexi fought to keep the anger from spilling over. This wasn’t about Josephine. It was about Catherine. She was fighting for her life, and Lexi couldn’t let anyone stand in her way.

“I understand why you think you’re making the right decision,” Lexi said, her voice even, though her insides were anything but calm. “But you have to understand something, Josephine. If you don’t let me do this, in my professional opinion, while we wait for another neurosurgeon to get here, Catherine will die. I won’t stand by and let that happen.”

The weight of her words seemed to hang in the air between them, and for a long moment, Josephine said nothing. Lexi could see the conflict in her eyes, the professional responsibility clashing with the truth in Lexi’s words.

Finally, Josephine’s shoulders slumped, her walls coming down just a little. “Fine,” she said softly, her voice carrying a trace of resignation. “You can operate. But I want updates every step of the way. I’m still in charge here, Lexi.”

“I won’t let you down,” Lexi replied, her voice low but determined. She didn’t have the time to argue further. She had a life to save.

Catherine.

“I’ll go now.”

Josephine stepped back, allowing Lexi to pass. As she did, Lexi felt a strange shift in the air between them. The tension of the unresolved issues between them didn’t dissipate, but in that moment, they were aligned in one goal: saving Catherine. The weight of that was greater than any family drama or personal discomfort.

Catherine needed her. And Lexi wasn’t going to let her down.

As Lexi entered the operating room, she quickly scrubbed in and took her place at the head of the table. The surgical team was already in motion, ready to assist. Her hands were steady, but her mind was anything but calm. She glanced at Catherine, lying unconscious, the beeping of the heart monitor a stark reminder of how close to death she was.

“Let’s begin,” Lexi said, her voice steady despite the racing thoughts in her mind. She couldn’t afford to let anything distract her now. Catherine was counting on her. And Lexi wouldn’t fail her.

Catherine lay unconscious, her face pale and her body eerily still. The machines beside her beeped rhythmically, but the numbers on the monitor told Lexi all she needed to know—she was in critical condition, and time was running out.

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As the surgical team made their final preparations, Lexi took a deep breath, steadying herself as she studied the scans of Catherine's brain. Her mind raced with all the things she needed to focus on—intracranial pressure, potential hemorrhage, her instruments, her team. She'd done this a thousand times before, but this time was different. This time it was Catherine on the table, the woman who'd unexpectedly become the center of her world. And Lexi had never felt more helpless.

"Scalpel, please," Lexi said, her voice firm but laced with an edge of unease. She glanced at the monitors, noting the blood pressure and oxygen levels that hovered dangerously close to critical. She couldn't afford to waste time. The clock was ticking.

Her hands moved with practiced precision as she made the first incision. She worked quickly but carefully, knowing every second counted. The head injury was severe, but not necessarily lethal. She would have to drain the excess fluid to relieve the pressure on Catherine's brain, carefully assess and patch up any damage, and hope for the best. The reality of it all seemed distant, like a bad dream she couldn't shake. She forced herself to focus on the procedure at hand, blocking out the chaos in her mind.

A soft beeping from the monitors caused Lexi to pause for a moment. Her hand froze over the surgical site, her fingers brushing the scalp. She glanced at the numbers and immediately saw the subtle change. Catherine's heart rate was dropping dangerously low.

"Pressure's rising," the anesthesiologist called from behind her, her voice strained.

Lexi's pulse quickened, but she didn't let it show. She kept her eyes locked on Catherine's brain, making the incision just below the dura mater, knowing that with each passing second, Catherine's chances of survival were decreasing. Her head spun as the reality of the situation weighed on her, but she forced herself to move, to focus, to stay grounded in the task before her.

"C'mon, Catherine, fight," Lexi whispered under her breath, her words barely audible over the steady sounds of the operating room. She didn't know if it was a prayer, a plea, or just a reflex, but she couldn't stop herself. She couldn't lose her. Not like this.

The pressure in Catherine's brain had increased significantly, and the fluids had begun to pool dangerously. The next few minutes were crucial. Lexi moved quickly, doing everything she could to alleviate the pressure without causing further damage. The clock ticked on, and with each minute, it became harder to push aside the fear gnawing at her chest. What if this was it? What if Catherine didn't wake up? What if their last conversation had been Lexi rejecting her?

"Team, stay focused," Lexi called, her voice steady despite the chaos inside her. "We've got this. We're not letting her go."

The sound of suction filled the room as the fluids drained away, but there was no immediate change in Catherine's condition. The heart monitor still read alarmingly low, the rhythm almost sluggish. Lexi's hands trembled as she adjusted the position of the drain, knowing that if this didn't work, there was little else they could do. She'd reached the limits of her expertise. This was the point where Catherine would either change for the better, or she wouldn't wake up again.

Minutes felt like hours as Lexi carefully navigated the delicate areas of Catherine's brain. Her thoughts blurred, her vision narrowing as she concentrated on nothing but saving Catherine's life. She could barely hear the voices of her team in the

background, their words a haze. Her own pulse pounded in her ears. She could almost feel Catherine with her, urging her to push through, to make it work.

“Vitals are stabilizing!” the anesthesiologist called suddenly, breaking through Lexi’s fog of concentration. Her breath caught in her chest as the beeping from the heart monitor grew stronger and steadier. It wasn’t perfect, but it was enough. The pressure was slowly starting to drop, and the blood flow seemed to be normalizing.

“Good,” Lexi murmured, her hands never stopping their work. “Just a little more.”

The minutes ticked by, each one stretching out longer than the last. Lexi’s mind remained focused on Catherine, blocking out everything else. It was as though the rest of the world had ceased to exist—there was only Catherine, only the surgery, only the need to make sure she made it through this.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Lexi managed to close the wound, carefully stitching Catherine back together. The worst seemed to be over. She could hardly believe it. Catherine was going to make it.

But as the team cleaned up and began to move out of the operating room, Lexi stayed behind for a moment, her hands resting on the edge of the table. She couldn’t bring herself to leave, not yet. She needed a moment to catch her breath and process what had just happened. She’d just saved Catherine’s life, but it didn’t feel like a victory. Not yet.

It wasn’t until the sound of the door opening pulled her from her thoughts that Lexi turned around. Josephine stood in the doorway, her face pale but softening when she saw Lexi.

“How is she?” Josephine asked, her voice low.

“She’s stable,” Lexi replied hoarsely. She swallowed hard, still processing the events. “She’s going to make it.”

As Lexi washed her hands in the sterile sink, the sound of water rushing over her skin was a cold comfort. Her breathing was shallow, her heart racing as if it couldn’t quite catch up with the chaos she’d just experienced. The operating room had become a blur, the intensity of the surgery stretching into what felt like an eternity. But now, standing in the quiet aftermath, Lexi felt the weight of everything press down on her.

For a moment, she allowed herself to close her eyes and let the cool water slide over her hands, the rhythm of her breathing slow and steady. It was done. Catherine was alive. But the questions that had haunted Lexi for weeks were still there, pressing in the back of her mind, refusing to be ignored. She had just saved Catherine’s life, but what came next? Sending her back home so her husband could ignore her while she was healing? Or worse?

The door to the scrub room opened, and Lexi’s thoughts snapped back into focus as Josephine walked in. Her half-sister’s face was pale and her posture stiff, as though she was carrying the weight of the entire hospital on her shoulders. Lexi felt a pang of guilt for the tension she’d brought into Josephine’s life. She’d been so consumed by her own emotions and desires that she hadn’t even stopped to consider the impact all of this would have on Josephine. And now, after everything that had just transpired, Lexi couldn’t help but wonder if Josephine saw her as more of a liability than an ally.

“Is she really going to be okay?” Josephine’s voice broke through the silence, softer than Lexi expected, and for a brief moment, Lexi saw a flicker of concern in her eyes.

Lexi nodded, her throat tight. “She’s stable. I got the pressure down and the bleeding’s controlled. The recovery process might be slow, but...she’s fighting. She’s going to make it.”

Josephine exhaled sharply, her shoulders relaxing as if the tension in her body had loosened. But then she looked at Lexi again, her expression changing as a shadow crossed her face. “You did a good job. You saved her.”

The words were sincere, but Lexi couldn’t help but notice the underlying hesitation in Josephine’s voice. It was a look she’d seen before—the cautious optimism that always followed a crisis when everything had been too close to the edge. It wasn’t just gratitude; it was an acknowledgment of the danger Catherine had been in. And yet, Lexi could feel the undertones of a much more complicated emotion between them, one that neither of them had really confronted.

“I couldn’t just stand by,” Lexi said softly, her voice rough with emotion. “I couldn’t let her die.”

Josephine’s eyes softened for a moment as she crossed her arms over her chest. “I know. But what about everything else, Lexi? What about...everything that’s come before this?”

Lexi’s stomach dropped. She’d known the question was coming, but now that it was here, she didn’t know how to answer. She’d saved Catherine, yes. But the reality of what had been building between them—the affair, the lies—it was all a tangle of emotions that Lexi didn’t know how to unravel, especially now that it was over. In her heart, it didn’t feel over, but she couldn’t go back to Catherine. She couldn’t be a married woman’s dirty little secret anymore.

“I don’t know,” Lexi replied, her voice quieter now, almost tentative. “I broke things off with her, so that shouldn’t be a problem anymore. She’s not going to leave her husband, so there won’t be some big drama in the hospital.” She took a deep breath. “There’s nothing left to do except pretend it never happened.”

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Josephine stepped closer, her eyes searching Lexi's face as if trying to read the truth in her expression. "This wasn't just some fling, Lexi. You can't keep pretending that's all it was. It is clear to me you are in love with her. You need to figure out whether you can keep working alongside her and pretending you don't have feelings for her. Because I won't stand by if this...if this ends up tearing everything apart."

Lexi's heart clenched, and she felt the walls inside her crack open. "I know," she whispered, her throat thick with emotion. "I know."

The words hung between them, unspoken but understood. Lexi had known, deep down, that things had already gone too far to go back. She couldn't undo what had happened with Catherine—no matter how much she tried to pretend it was just a momentary lapse, a short-lived mistake. The connection between them was undeniable, even if it was doomed to never be anything more than a short affair.

For a long moment, the two of them stood there, silence filling the space between them. It wasn't an awkward silence, but it wasn't comfortable, either. It was the kind of silence that existed between two people who'd shared a moment of truth but still weren't ready to face all the issues between them. Lexi had spent so much of her life hiding from her emotions, burying them beneath layers of professionalism and ambition. But now, with everything laid bare, she didn't know how to move forward.

"I'll talk to her when she wakes up," Lexi said, finally breaking the silence. "I'll make sure she's okay."

Josephine nodded, but there was still wariness in her eyes. "And then?"

Lexi took a deep breath, her hands gripping the edge of the sink. “I don’t know,” she admitted, her voice raw. “I have to figure that out, too.”

There was another long pause, and then Josephine exhaled, as if she’d made some internal decision. “I think she loves you too, Lexi,” she said, her voice softer now. “We’re family, Lexi. And no matter what happens with Catherine, you’re still my sister.”

Lexi looked at her, her eyes searching her half-sister’s face. For a moment, she saw the possibility of something different between them—something more than the strained relationship that had existed before. Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance for them to build some sort of family relationship.

“Thanks, Josephine,” Lexi murmured. She wasn’t sure what the future held, but for the first time in a long while, she felt like there might be a way forward. “I appreciate it.”

Josephine gave her a brief, reassuring smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes completely. “Just don’t screw this up.”

Lexi watched her half-sister leave, her footsteps fading down the hallway, and for the first time since this entire ordeal began, Lexi allowed herself to feel something other than fear or anxiety. Maybe things weren’t as broken as they seemed. Maybe they could find a way to make it work.

But as she turned back to the operating room and her gaze drifted back to Catherine’s unconscious body lying on the table, Lexi knew that whatever came next, it would require more than just saving her life. She’d have to face the future they all had to build together at Phoenix Ridge Hospital—whatever that might look like.

CATHERINE

Catherine's eyelids fluttered open, and she found herself lying in a hospital bed. The sterile smell of the room and the soft beeping of machines all felt distant and unreal. The pain in her head pulsed, but there was something else—something she couldn't put her finger on. Her eyes scanned the room until they landed on a familiar face.

There, sitting at her bedside, was Lexi. Beautiful Lexi. Her hair was tied up in a messy bun, and she looked tired, but her gaze softened when their eyes met.

"Lexi?" Catherine's voice was rough. "What happened?"

Lexi's expression faltered for a moment, as though she was holding herself together by a thread. "You had an accident," she said gently. "You hit your head. You're going to be okay. You're alive, Catherine."

Catherine's thoughts scrambled to piece things together. "An accident?" she repeated, her mind still clouded from the effects of anesthesia. "How bad? How long...?"

"Take it easy," Lexi urged as she brushed a stray lock of hair from Catherine's forehead. "It's okay. Just breathe."

Catherine's hand instinctively moved to her head, touching the bandages wrapped around it. The memories of the fight with James surged to the surface. The argument, the chaos—it all felt like a nightmare that couldn't be real.

"James?" Catherine's voice cracked, a sense of panic gripping her chest. "Where is he? Is he here?"

Lexi's jaw tightened, and she swallowed hard before responding. "He's not here. He...he left, said something about needing to catch a flight." Her voice was tight, but

her eyes stayed soft as she gazed down at Catherine. “You’re safe now.”

Catherine blinked as reality sank in. James had left, but the relief she felt was mixed with a strange sadness. Her focus shifted back to Lexi.

“Thank you,” Catherine whispered, her voice trembling slightly. “I don’t know what would have happened without you.”

Lexi gave a small nod and squeezed Catherine’s hand lightly. “You don’t need to thank me. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

As the afternoon sun cast golden rectangles across the hospital room floor, Catherine drifted in and out of sleep. Each time she opened her eyes, Lexi was still there—sometimes reading through patient files, sometimes just watching her with quiet concern. It was during one of these moments of wakefulness that Catherine tried to reach for the water glass on her bedside table, wincing as pain shot through her head with the movement.

"Here, let me," Lexi said, immediately at her side. She gently supported Catherine's head with one hand while holding the glass to her lips with the other. The simple act of care made Catherine's chest tighten with emotion.

"The nurses could help with this," Catherine murmured after taking a sip. "You don't have to stay."

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Lexi set the glass down and adjusted Catherine's pillows, her movements deliberate and gentle. "I want to be here," she said simply. She sat back down, closer to the bed this time. "Besides, I've rearranged my surgeries. I'm all yours today."

Catherine studied Lexi's face—the slight shadows under her eyes, the determined set of her jaw. "You haven't slept, have you?"

Lexi gave a small, dismissive shrug. "I've gone longer without sleep during residency." She reached out and carefully took Catherine's hand, her thumb tracing small circles on her palm. "How's the pain?"

"Bearable," Catherine said, though they both knew it was an understatement. "Lexi, I keep thinking about what happened. About James..." Her voice faltered.

"You don't have to talk about it now," Lexi assured her.

Catherine shook her head slightly, needing to get the words out. "No, I need to say this. When he pushed me, it wasn't intentional—I know that. But it doesn't matter, does it? That's what I keep thinking about. All these years of feeling invisible, of walking on eggshells, and now this." She took a shaky breath. "I told him, you know. I told him I was leaving him... just before this happened." She sighed. "Why did I stay so long?"

Lexi's eyes filled with a tender understanding that made Catherine feel seen in a way James never had. "Because leaving is hard," Lexi said softly. "Because we're taught to fix things, not abandon them. Because you're a doctor who saves people, and somewhere along the way, you thought you could save your marriage too."

A tear slipped down Catherine's cheek. No one had ever articulated her feelings so perfectly before. "You know me better than anyone," she whispered.

"I pay attention," Lexi replied, gently wiping away Catherine's tear. "I see you. I've always seen you, Catherine."

For a long moment, they sat in comfortable silence. The hospital sounds faded into the background—the beeping monitors, the squeaking wheels of meal carts in the hallway, the distant pages over the intercom. In this quiet bubble, Catherine felt something shifting inside her—fear giving way to resolve.

"Would you mind opening the window?" Catherine asked eventually. "I'd like to feel the air."

Lexi nodded and crossed to the window. As she pushed it open, a gentle breeze filled the room, carrying with it the faint scent of the hospital gardens below.

"Better?" Lexi asked.

Catherine nodded, closing her eyes briefly to savor the fresh air on her face. When she opened them again, she found herself struck by the way the afternoon light illuminated Lexi's profile against the window. There was something so steady about her presence, so reassuring.

"Remember when we first met?" Catherine asked suddenly. "I was so flustered by you."

A smile tugged at Lexi's lips. "I remember. You were wearing that black lace bra."

Catherine felt heat rise to her cheeks. "I meant in surgery the next day," she said, though she couldn't help smiling too.

"That too," Lexi said, returning to her chair. "You were brilliant. The way you handled that bowel resection—I'd never seen anything so precise."

"You noticed that?" Catherine asked, genuinely surprised.

"I notice everything about you," Lexi said quietly. She hesitated before adding, "I also remember thinking how sad you looked when you thought no one was watching."

Catherine's breath caught. All those years of carefully constructed walls, and Lexi had seen through them from the very beginning.

"I'm not sad now," Catherine said, and was surprised to find it was true. Despite the pain, despite the uncertainty of what lay ahead, there was a lightness in her chest she hadn't felt in years. A beginning.

Lexi's expression softened. "Good," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "That's all I want."

As the afternoon faded toward evening, they talked about small things—hospital gossip, a journal article Lexi had been reading, a patient Catherine had been worried about. Normal things, everyday things, but each conversation thread weaving them closer together. When a nurse came in to check Catherine's vitals, she found them laughing softly over a story Lexi was telling about her disastrous attempt at making soufflé.

"Your color's better," the nurse observed, checking Catherine's chart. "Dr. Bond must be good medicine."

After the nurse left, Catherine found herself watching Lexi as she straightened the items on the bedside table—arranging the water glass, tissues, and call button within

easy reach. There was something so intimate about these small gestures of care, something that touched Catherine more deeply than grand declarations ever could.

Later that evening, after the hospital had quieted down and the only sound was the faint beeping of the heart monitor, Lexi sat by Catherine's bedside again. She looked more at ease now, her posture relaxed as she glanced up from the notebook in her hands.

Catherine turned her head slowly, her hand resting on the blanket. "I can't believe it's finally over," she said softly, the words coming out like a breath she'd been holding for years. "Ending it. I wanted to. So much. But, I was so afraid."

Lexi looked at her, the soft light from the bedside lamp casting a warm glow on her face. "You made the right choice, Catherine. You deserve to be happy. You've been living for him for too long. You need to start living for yourself."

Catherine swallowed hard, past the lump forming in her throat. "I'm scared, Lexi. I'm scared of being alone. I've never really been on my own. But I can't keep pretending this marriage was anything other than what it was."

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Lexi moved closer, her voice steady and filled with quiet reassurance. “You don’t have to be alone. If you’re really leaving him...you have me. And whatever happens next, you’re not alone.”

Catherine turned her head to meet Lexi’s gaze, and in that moment, she saw the sincerity in her eyes. There was no judgment, no hesitation—only understanding.

“I never thought I’d be here,” Catherine admitted, her voice soft but clear. “With you. After everything. But I don’t want to lose you, Lexi. Not after all this. I love you.”

Lexi’s heart skipped a beat, her breath catching in her throat. She reached for Catherine’s hand and gently caressed it with her thumb. “I love you, too. I always did. Right from the start. You won’t lose me...not unless you decide to. But I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

A wave of gratitude washed over Catherine, and for the first time in what felt like forever, she allowed herself to believe in something beyond the mess she’d made of her life. She could have a future—one where she wasn’t bound to someone who couldn’t see her, where she didn’t have to hide her love.

“I’ve made my decision,” Catherine said, her voice steady as the weight of it settled over her like a shield. “Once I’m out of here, I’m filing for divorce. I’m done with James. I’ve been done for a long time. I just needed to find the courage to say it out loud to him. And now I have.”

Lexi’s eyes softened as she reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind Catherine’s ear. “I’m proud of you,” she said quietly. “You’re stronger than you know.”

Catherine smiled, a genuine, small smile that felt foreign on her face. She hadn't smiled in a long time, not truly. But with Lexi here, with the possibility of a future—there was hope.

The soft hum of the hospital room was comforting in its familiarity. The sterile scent of antiseptic and the quiet beeping of machines had become the soundtrack of Catherine's recovery. She lay in the bed, her head wrapped in bandages, eyes half-lidded as she stared at the ceiling. It wasn't a bad day, but it wasn't good, either. There were moments when the pain in her head was bearable, and others when it felt like a vise, squeezing tighter with every passing second.

A gentle knock on the door pulled her from her thoughts. She blinked, squinting at the figure who entered—Lexi, of course, with that soft, familiar smile, the one that made Catherine's heart skip.

"Hey, how's my favorite patient?" Lexi's voice was light, but there was an undertone of concern that Catherine didn't miss.

"I'm surviving," Catherine answered, trying to keep the sarcasm out of her voice, but it came out a little flat. Her headache was making it hard to be anything but tired.

Lexi gave a soft laugh as she walked over to the side of the bed, holding something behind her back. "You're not allowed to say you're surviving with a frown on your face, like it's a bad thing. Besides, I brought you something."

Catherine raised an eyebrow. "What is it, a cure for my headache?"

"Something better." Lexi revealed a thermos from behind her back, carefully placing it on the bedside table. Catherine blinked in surprise—it wasn't a bouquet of flowers like most people would bring to a hospital room, but it sparked her curiosity.

“I didn’t know if you’d be up for eating, so I figured I’d try this first,” Lexi said, opening the thermos to reveal steaming tea. “Chamomile with a little honey. It’s your favorite, right?”

Catherine’s lips quirked into a smile. “You remember.”

“I remember a lot of things.” Lexi’s gaze softened as she poured the tea, the liquid swirling in the cup with a calming warmth. “Like how you always drink this when you’re stressed, or how you prefer it without the lemon.”

Catherine watched her, her chest tightening a little. She hadn’t realized how much she missed these small details—the way Lexi paid attention to her, the way she knew her preferences without needing to ask. It was a kindness that had always been there, and it suddenly felt like a comfort she couldn’t live without.

Lexi handed her the mug carefully, her fingers brushing against Catherine’s as she did so. “Here,” she said softly. “I know it’s just tea, but I thought it might help.”

Catherine took the mug, savoring the warmth that seeped into her hands. She lifted it to her lips, the soothing steam drifting up to meet her face, and took a slow sip. It was perfect, just the way she liked it—a little sweet, with the hint of chamomile that always seemed to calm her nerves.

“Thank you,” she murmured, meeting Lexi’s gaze over the rim of the mug.

“Of course,” Lexi replied, a faint smile tugging at her lips. She moved to sit in the chair beside the bed, pulling it closer as if settling in for a long visit. “I know you’re probably tired, but I’m not leaving. You’ve got me for the whole evening.”

Catherine raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really? What did I do to deserve such a devoted nurse?”

Lexi's smile widened, a bit of playfulness creeping into her tone. "You're lucky, that's what. But honestly, it's not a bad gig. I've got a front-row seat to your stunning recovery."

Catherine chuckled softly, the sound slightly strained but genuine. "Right. It's a real show."

"Best kind of show," Lexi said warmly. She leaned back in the chair, her eyes never leaving Catherine. "But seriously...how are you feeling?"

Catherine set the mug down on the table, her fingers tracing the rim absentmindedly. "I'm okay," she said, though the words didn't feel quite right. The truth was, she wasn't okay. She hadn't been okay for a long time. "Head hurts a bit, but I'm managing."

Lexi nodded, her expression understanding but quiet, as if she could see through the mask Catherine was wearing. Without another word, she stood and walked to the window, pulling the blinds slightly to let more light into the room. The late afternoon sun bathed the room in a golden glow, the light dancing over the hospital linens and making everything feel a little less sterile, a little more alive.

"There," Lexi said, turning back to Catherine. "I thought you might like some sunlight. You've been cooped up in here for a while."

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Warmth spread through her chest at Lexi's thoughtfulness. She'd never realized how much she wanted such simple gestures—they made her feel like she was the most important person in the room, like everything she did mattered.

"It's nice," Catherine admitted, her voice soft. "It really is."

Lexi sat back down, her chair creaking slightly under the shifting weight. "I know things are complicated, but I want you to know I'm here. Whatever you need, whatever you're feeling—I'm here for you."

Catherine met her gaze, and for a moment, the world seemed to narrow to just the two of them. The chaos of the past—the break-up, the accident, everything—felt like a distant memory. Right now, it was just Lexi, quietly offering her care in the most simple, beautiful ways.

"I know," Catherine whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "And I...I don't know how I could get through this without you."

Lexi's smile softened, her eyes shining with something unspoken. "You're stronger than you think. But I'm not going anywhere, Catherine. Not now. Not ever."

Catherine closed her eyes briefly, her heart swelling in her chest. She didn't know what the future held, but for the first time in a long time, she felt hope for something better—something that was hers, something she didn't have to hide.

"Thank you," she said again, this time with more sincerity, her voice barely above a whisper. "For everything."

Lexi's fingers brushed against Catherine's hand again, this time lingering a little longer. "Always."

19

LEXI

Later that day, Lexi found herself waiting again outside the office with the plaque that read "Dr. Josephine Mars, Head of Hospital." She needed to catch up on the paperwork she'd missed that morning. But would she get the chance to share the secret that had been weighing her down?

As she waited, the office door opened and out came a little girl, about five years old, with reddish-blond curls and freckles across her nose. Behind her was an older man. Lexi's eyes drifted up to his face. He was wearing a dark, immaculate suit. As soon as Lexi saw his face, she felt like she was looking at a ghost.

It was him—Dr. Benjamin Mars, her father.

At the same time, Benjamin spotted her. His eyes focused on her face, and he looked once, twice, narrowing his gaze. Lexi knew what he was seeing. She looked like her mother, Rebecca. But with his eyes. Of course he'd recognize her.

Josephine followed him out of the office and scooped up the little girl, kissing her on the cheek. "Sweetheart, I love you so much. Have a lovely day with Grandpa. I'll see you later. Give Mommy a kiss from me."

"Of course I will, Mama! Can't wait for mud pies later!" The charming little girl giggled and squeezed her mother's hand.

Benjamin was still staring at Lexi. What would he do? He had a choice to make, and

Lexi wasn't sure whether she wanted him to make the right one.

Finally, he approached her and held out his hand. "Alexis?" he asked, looking into her eyes. His eyes were blue like hers and Josephine's, but his other features were unfamiliar. Lexi looked so much like her mother in every other way, it was no wonder he'd recognized her so easily.

Lexi hadn't planned for this. She hesitated, but eventually took his hand and shook it. It was warm, his skin showing the signs of age. These were the hands that had saved countless lives. Lexi wasn't sure if he still practiced, but he'd achieved legendary status in his field, and that had always inspired her. He was the reason she'd chosen neurosurgery, but she'd never told anyone that except Catherine.

"It's me," Lexi said shyly. She released his hand.

"You look so very much like her," he said quietly, and Lexi nodded.

Josephine joined them. "Dad? Have you already met Dr. Bond?"

Lexi wasn't sure what would happen next. Would Benjamin say he was her father? Would Josephine tell him?

Benjamin cleared his throat. "Josephine, can we use your office for a moment?"

Josephine looked surprised, but quickly regained her composure. "Of course. Dr. Bond, Dad...please, come in."

Josephine led them into her office and pulled out an extra chair so they could all sit around her big desk. Lexi noticed the family photos on Josephine's desk—photos of her wife and the little girl. Josephine's wife had the same red hair as their daughter.

“Well, what is it?” Josephine asked, clearly knowing what was coming but not wanting to say it out loud.

Benjamin took a deep breath and began to speak.

“Josephine, I don’t know exactly how to tell you this, but a long time ago...”

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“Thirty-six years,” Lexi interrupted.

“Yes,” Benjamin agreed. “Thirty-six years ago, there were difficulties in my marriage with your mother. I traveled a lot, consulting on very challenging cases. I moved to New York for a time, and while I was there, I met someone. Her name was Rebecca, and she was...well, lovely. A beautiful soul in every way. I spent a summer with her, wandering around Central Park, going on dates to a little Italian restaurant. It was an escape, I guess. But I wasn’t honest with her, and I wasn’t honest with your mother. In the end, I came back home. I chose your mother, and I left Rebecca behind. She was heartbroken, and I was devastated by what I’d done to her. Not to your mom—she never knew—but to Rebecca.”

Benjamin paused, the weight of his words heavy in the air.

“When I found out later that Rebecca had a baby, I felt terribly guilty. A little girl, Alexis.”

He looked at Lexi, and she could see the pain on his face. This wasn’t the heartless man she’d imagined. This was a man who’d made a mistake, driven by love, and it had clearly haunted him.

Josephine’s eyes darted between Benjamin and Lexi. “So you really are her father too?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Benjamin said.

He turned to Lexi. “There hasn’t been a day since you were born that I haven’t

thought about you. The guilt has torn me apart. I sent your mom money, of course, but I wanted to see you so badly. I wanted to be in your life, but I didn't know how. There were enough secrets already. So I took the coward's way out."

Benjamin took Lexi's hand again, and she felt a lump in her throat. He turned to Josephine and took her hand as well.

"My darling, I wish I'd been braver. I wish I'd done the right thing. But I didn't want to break your heart. Well, here I am, and my mistakes have caught up with me. Not that Lexi was a mistake, not at all. I've followed your work from afar, Lexi. I've been so proud of you. Your research paper on dementia? It was brilliant. You have so much exciting work ahead of you, and I'd love to be part of your life, if you'll have me."

Benjamin's face was etched with worry. Lexi didn't know how to feel. She almost felt sorry for him. When he said he was proud of her, those were the words she'd waited her whole life to hear. Now, here they were. And here he was—her father, her sister, both legendary surgeons she'd admired from afar. Where would they go from here? Lexi didn't know, but she was ready to find out.

Lexi's fingers tightened around her father's hand, but she didn't pull away. There was a part of her that still couldn't believe this moment was real. The man she'd spent years building up in her mind as the distant, absent figure who'd abandoned her and her mother was sitting in front of her now, admitting his faults and begging for forgiveness. The words he'd just spoken rang in her ears, a tangled mess of guilt, regret, and a strange, new hope.

Josephine's eyes flickered from Lexi to their father, her face unreadable. She was the first to break the silence, her voice low and measured. "So you've known about Lexi all along, then? You've known about her, and you never told me?"

Benjamin nodded slowly, his face etched with sorrow. “I didn’t want to hurt you, Josephine. I thought it was best to keep it a secret. I thought I could stay away and protect you from the pain, but...I can see now that I’ve only caused more harm by not telling you the truth. I’m desperately sorry for what I have done. To both of you.”

Lexi’s breath caught in her throat as the hurt from her years of unanswered questions bubbled to the surface. She’d spent so much time trying to understand why he hadn’t been there for her. Why had he abandoned her and her mother? Why had he never even tried to reach out? The idea of him being proud of her, watching from afar, felt both comforting and bittersweet.

Josephine’s face softened slightly, though there was still an edge of disbelief in her eyes. “I don’t know how to process all of this. I had no idea.” She let out a shaky breath, her gaze now fixed on Lexi. “But I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad you came.”

Lexi wasn’t sure how to respond. Her emotions were a mess of confusion, anger, relief, and something deeper—something she wasn’t ready to face. She’d imagined this moment a thousand times, but it had never played out like this. She’d expected confrontation, accusations, maybe even rejection. But here she was, sitting between the two people who were supposed to have been her family all along, and she felt was a gnawing emptiness laced with hope.

The quiet lingered until Benjamin’s voice broke through the stillness again. “Lexi, I know I can’t undo the past. But I want to try to make it right. I want to be part of your life, if you’ll let me. It may not be perfect, but...I’ll be here.”

Lexi’s throat tightened, and for the first time in a long while, tears threatened to spill. She’d wanted this. She’d longed for a father who would acknowledge her, who would see her as more than just the product of a mistake. But now that the moment had arrived, it felt impossible to accept him into her life.

“I...I don’t know if I can just let it go,” she whispered, her voice shaky. “All these years, I’ve had to learn to live without you. And now...I don’t know what to do with this.”

Benjamin’s face twisted in pain, but he nodded, as though he’d anticipated this. “I understand. It’s going to take time, Lexi. I won’t rush you. I’ve hurt you, and I can’t make that go away. But I’ll be here...whenever you’re ready. I’ll start making the efforts I should have been making all along.”

Josephine, who’d been silently watching her father and sister, finally spoke up. “I think...I think we need time to figure this out. All of us.” She paused and looked at her father, then back at Lexi. “But I’m glad you’re both here, in this moment, however messy it might be.”

The silence stretched, but this time it wasn’t as oppressive. It was a silence filled with possibility—awkward and uncertain, but there nonetheless.

“I think we should have dinner,” Josephine said. “It won’t fix everything, but...it might be a start. And, Lexi. I would like you to meet my wife Ember and my daughter, Natalie. I want you to be part of our lives.”

Lexi looked at her father again. His eyes were full of something she hadn’t expected—hope, maybe even a little fear. And as much as she wanted to retreat back to her familiar isolation, there was a part of her that wanted to believe him. She didn’t have to forgive him yet, but maybe, just maybe, she could begin to let him in. To let them both in.

“I’d like that,” Lexi said quietly. “Dinner sounds good.”

Benjamin smiled faintly, relief washing over his features. “Thank you, Lexi. That’s all I can ask for.”

Josephine nodded, her expression softening as she turned to both of them. “Okay then. Let’s start with that. Together.”

As they left her office and headed for the hospital’s cafeteria with Josephine’s daughter in tow, the weight of the moment pressed down on Lexi. It wasn’t perfect, far from it, but it was something. Something she hadn’t even dared to hope for. And maybe that was the first step toward healing.

But as they walked side by side, Lexi couldn’t shake the feeling that there was still a lot more to untangle. There were years of hurt to sift through, memories she wasn’t sure she wanted to revisit, and truths she still wasn’t ready to face. But for the first time in a long time, she didn’t feel quite as alone.

LEXI

Lexi sat on the edge of her couch, mindlessly flipping through the pages of a medical journal. Her thoughts kept drifting away from the articles in front of her, drawn to the quiet hum of her apartment. It had been a few weeks since Catherine was discharged from the hospital, and though Catherine had healed physically, Lexi could feel the emotional distance still lingering between them. Catherine had needed space to adjust and rebuild her life after the accident. But Lexi had hoped—no, expected—that they'd find a way to move forward together.

The waiting had worn on Lexi. She'd been patient, supportive, and understanding, but the silence between them had grown unbearable. Every visit and every conversation felt like they were dancing around something they both wanted, but were afraid to claim. Lexi had no intention of pushing Catherine into something before she was ready, but she couldn't help feeling like they were stuck in limbo. Catherine's marriage was over, but Lexi wasn't sure if she was ready to take the leap into something real, something that would bring their relationship out of the shadows.

Lexi sighed and stood up, stretching her arms over her head. The evening was quiet—too quiet. Her thoughts were chaotic, and she couldn't shake the sense of restlessness gnawing at her. Just as she was about to grab her phone and send Catherine a text, there was a knock at the door.

Surprised, Lexi opened it without hesitation, and there stood Catherine. Her face was slightly flushed, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, and she was holding a

small, weathered envelope in her hand. Her gaze met Lexi's with an intensity that made Lexi's heart flutter.

"Catherine?" Lexi said, surprised by the unexpected visit. "What's...what's going on?"

Catherine swallowed hard and looked down at the envelope in her hands. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, clearly gathering her thoughts. There was an energy about her that was different tonight—her usual guardedness seemed to have fallen away. Lexi stepped aside, silently inviting her in. Catherine entered slowly, her eyes scanning the apartment before she looked back at Lexi.

"I..." Catherine began, her voice tight, but she cut herself off. She held out the envelope. "I served the divorce papers. I'm sorry I have been distant. I just wanted to make a totally clean break so we can move on together. It is all over now. I told him about us."

Lexi's heart skipped a beat, her breath catching in her chest. For a moment, she couldn't process what Catherine had said. It took her a moment to fully absorb the gravity of those words. Catherine had left James really and properly. She'd actually done it.

"Wait," Lexi said, her voice shaky as she took the envelope from Catherine's hand. "You...you're serious?"

Catherine nodded, her eyes filled with a quiet resolve. "I'm done with him, Lexi. It's over. It had been for so long. I just needed to take that final step."

Lexi's mind raced, her pulse quickening. Catherine was standing right in front of her, no longer bound to the life she'd lived with James. It was the moment she'd been waiting for, but it was also the moment she'd never believed would happen. She was

relieved, but she couldn't deny the surge of uncertainty that came with it.

"I..." Catherine's voice trembled slightly, as though the weight of the moment had just fully hit her. "I know I hurt you, and I'm sorry for that. I was so confused, and I didn't know what to do. But now...I know what I want. I want you, Lexi. No more lies. No more hiding. I want to be with you."

Lexi's heart swelled with emotion. For the first time, it felt like Catherine wasn't just saying the words to fill the silence, but truly meaning them. Lexi stepped closer, feeling the air between them shift. "Are you sure?" she asked, her voice soft.

Catherine nodded, her gaze steady and sincere. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

Tears welled in Lexi's eyes as she reached out to take Catherine's hand, her fingers trembling from the weight of everything they'd been through. "I'm so glad you're finally free," Lexi whispered, her voice breaking.

They stood there for a long moment, just holding hands and letting the reality of the situation sink in. There was no more waiting, no more wondering. It was just the two of them now, ready to begin again.

"So what now?" Catherine asked softly, her voice carrying a mix of wonder and uncertainty. Her eyes locked on Lexi's, searching for reassurance but also craving something more.

Lexi stepped closer, her fingers brushing against Catherine's in a slow, deliberate motion. "Now...we start over," she said, the words feeling heavier than they should. They were starting anew—not just in their relationship, but in their lives. The weight of Catherine's decision to leave James hadn't settled in fully, but Lexi could already see the difference in her. Catherine's posture was different, more open. The mask

she'd worn for so long was gone, and for the first time, Lexi saw her with nothing left to hide.

"I'm glad you came here tonight," Lexi continued, her voice tender. "I'm glad you're finally free."

Catherine gave her a small, wry smile. "It wasn't easy. I had to make a lot of hard decisions." She shook her head slightly, her fingers curling around Lexi's as if grounding herself in this moment. "But I've realized I spent too long living for other people. I've been hiding, not just from James, but from myself. I don't want to do that anymore. I love you. I always have. Right from the start."

Lexi's heart swelled. Catherine had spent so many years in a marriage that clearly didn't fulfill her, in a life dictated by someone else's expectations. Lexi understood that feeling—of trying to fit into a mold and be something other people wanted, but never fully living in your truth. But now Catherine was here, standing in front of her, ready to embrace who she really was. Ready to embrace them.

"You don't have to hide anymore," Lexi said softly, the words coming from a place deep within her, filled with understanding. "Not from me. Not from anyone."

Catherine's eyes shone with something new, something hopeful. She leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to Lexi's lips, a kiss that felt like a promise. No more secrecy. No more shame. No more lying to themselves or anyone else. Just honesty. Just them.

As they pulled apart, Catherine let out a shaky laugh, her eyes full of emotion. "I never thought I'd be here, Lexi. I spent so many years stuck in a marriage that was never right, and I just...I don't know, I thought I was trapped. I thought that was all I deserved."

Lexi shook her head and brushed a strand of hair out of Catherine's face. "You deserve so much more than that. You deserve love. You deserve someone who sees you, really sees you. Not as some trophy, not as someone to fill a role. You deserve the freedom to be yourself."

Catherine closed her eyes, a soft sigh escaping her lips. "I didn't know what that freedom felt like until I met you," she whispered.

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with the weight of all the things they hadn't said before. A tide of love and relief washed over Lexi. This was what she'd wanted, what she'd dreamed of for so long—Catherine, whole and unapologetic, choosing her, choosing them.

"Then let's make sure we don't waste another second," Lexi said, her voice low and full of intent. She cupped Catherine's face gently, her thumb tracing the curve of her jaw. "We've spent so much time being scared and holding back. But no more."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:03 pm

Catherine nodded, her eyes darkening with the weight of what they were about to embrace. Lexi could feel the intensity between them growing, an unspoken understanding passing between them. This wasn't just about the end of Catherine's marriage. This was about their future, about choosing each other, fully and completely.

Catherine stepped closer, her lips brushing against Lexi's once more, but this time the kiss was different. It was deeper and more urgent, as if everything that had built up over the past months was finally being released. There was no more hesitation. No more holding back.

Lexi's hands moved to Catherine's waist and pulled her closer, their bodies pressing together as the kiss deepened. The electricity between them was undeniable, the connection so intense that it felt as if the world around them had disappeared. All that mattered in that moment was them.

When they finally broke apart, gasping for air, Lexi looked into Catherine's eyes, her heart racing. "Are you sure?" she asked, her voice trembling with the intensity of the moment.

Catherine nodded, her eyes wide with emotion. "I've never been more sure of anything."

Without another word, Lexi took Catherine's hand and led her into the bedroom, the space between them charged with anticipation. Tonight, there would be no more guilt, no more secrecy. There would be only them, finally free to be together in the way they'd always wanted.

Lexi pulled Catherine in closely, but she frowned as Catherine put her hand between them.

“You’ve spent the last few weeks taking care of me. Let me take care of you now. Please?”

Their whole relationship Lexi had refused to let Catherine “give” to her. She’d known that if she had there would have been nothing stopping her from giving her everything to Catherine. And with Catherine’s marriage standing in the way, she hadn’t wanted to risk her heart like that. Although she wasn’t sure now that it had served as any kind of protection. But now...now there was nothing in their way.

Lexi nodded and invited Catherine in with her eyes.

She let herself just feel as Catherine took her time slowly unbuttoning her blouse, savoring every inch of skin as it was uncovered. Lexi couldn’t help the shiver that ran across her skin as it was gradually exposed to the cold air.

As Catherine kissed down her neck, it felt as though tiny fires sparked to life at every kiss, burning into her skin—along her collarbones, across her breasts and stomach. Lexi’s breath hitched as Catherine’s hands fiddled with the zipper on her pants before smoothly dropping them and her panties to the floor. When Catherine gently pushed her backward onto the bed, she completely let herself go. It had been a long time since she’d given up control, but with Catherine she was finding it surprisingly easy.

Lexi could’ve finished right then as she watched Catherine drop to her knees in front of her.

“You don’t have to—”

“Shush. I want to. More than anything. Now let me enjoy myself. I’ve been waiting

months to touch you, to taste you.”

Lexi could only moan at that. She flopped backward. As much as she wanted to look into Catherine’s eyes while Catherine worked with her mouth between her legs, she knew she wouldn’t last a minute if she did.

Catherine’s touches were soft, gentle, and slow, easing both of them into it. Lexi found the tension she’d been holding begin to fade as Catherine stroked around the folds of her pussy with her tongue, as she delicately passed back and forth over her clit, replacing the stress of the last few weeks with warmth and pleasure. She felt herself sink into the feeling.

She could feel Catherine’s warm mouth taking care of her in the one way she had so desperately wanted to feel for so long now.

“You feel so amazing...” Lexi growled and her voice came out as no more than a whisper. She could hear her own moans as she relaxed into the pure sensation that was Catherine’s mouth on her pussy. She felt Catherine’s tongue pushing inside her and it felt like the most exquisite thing she could imagine.

Lexi could feel her climax growing closer and closer, slight tremors beginning to run their way through her. Warmth engulfed her pussy and she gripped Catherine’s hair as Catherine began to lick at her clit in slow circles, then flicking rapidly, and back to circles. Lexi couldn’t hold on any longer. She thrust her hips into Catherine’s face.

“I’m.... fuck..... I’m.... Catherine.....”

Lexi’s climax that she had waited so long to feel crashed over her, wave after wave flooding her body with pleasure like she had never felt before.

As the waves finally subsided she felt Catherine crawling up her body, the delicious

weight of Catherine's body pressing into her own. She looked into Catherine's beautiful amber eyes and kissed her. She could taste her own orgasm on Catherine's lips.

"You were incredible," she smiled at Catherine.

Catherine's smile back at her was more beautiful than ever.

"Thank you," Catherine said.

"For what?"

"For trusting me enough to give yourself like that to me. I know how much of a big deal it was for you. Pleasing you like that was the greatest pleasure I have ever known. I promise I won't let you down, Lexi. I love you."

Lexi smiled and for the first time felt the warm promise of their shared future flood through her. Things felt different now. In the best possible way.

"I love you, too."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:03 pm

The morning light softly spilled into the apartment as Lexi lay in bed, her body entwined with Catherine's. The quiet stillness of the moment was a far cry from the chaos of the past few months, from the secrecy and the fear of the unknown. Today, there was no more hiding, no more sneaking around. Today was different. It was the beginning of something new, something real.

Catherine shifted in Lexi's arms, her face buried in the crook of Lexi's neck, her breathing slow and steady. Lexi's heart swelled with affection as she pressed a kiss to the top of Catherine's head. They'd made it through the worst—the hard decisions, the pain, the weeks of living in the shadows. And now they had nothing left to hide. Their love, raw and unfiltered, had survived.

"I never thought this would happen," Catherine murmured, her voice muffled against Lexi's skin. "I didn't think I would ever feel this...free."

Lexi smiled softly, running her fingers through Catherine's hair. "It's not always easy, but you're free now. And I'm not going anywhere."

Catherine pulled back slightly, her eyes meeting Lexi's with a depth that made Lexi's heart skip a beat. There was so much in those lovely amber eyes—so much history, so much longing...and now, so much hope.

"I know," Catherine whispered, her voice filled with sincerity. "I didn't realize how much I needed this. How much I needed you. To be seen. To be loved for who I really am."

Lexi's chest tightened. The words hit her harder than she'd expected. The pain that

Catherine had carried for so long, the loneliness she'd experienced in her marriage to James, and the fear that she wasn't worthy of love—it was all there in those words. It broke Lexi's heart to think of the years Catherine had spent in that marriage, suffocating under someone else's expectations.

“You deserve so much more than what you had,” Lexi said, her voice thick with emotion. “You deserve someone who loves you without reservation. Who sees all of you—your strength, your brilliance, your heart. And that's me. I'm here, Catherine.”

Catherine's lips curled into a small smile as she leaned forward and captured Lexi's lips in a kiss that was soft but filled with an intensity that spoke volumes. It wasn't just a kiss of passion. It was a kiss of reassurance, of a promise. They were building something together, brick by brick, and nothing was going to break that foundation.

When they pulled apart, Catherine rested her forehead against Lexi's, her breath warm on her skin. “I don't ever want to go back to that life. To pretending. To hiding.”

Lexi's hand cupped Catherine's cheek, her thumb brushing against the soft skin. “You don't have to. Not anymore.”

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. They just lay there, wrapped in each other's embrace, the quiet comfort of their shared space enough to fill the gaps that had once been filled with doubt and uncertainty. Lexi knew, without a doubt, that this was where she was meant to be.

Eventually, the silence was broken by the sound of Catherine's phone buzzing from the bedside table. She groaned, pulling away reluctantly from Lexi's warmth, but the reality of the world outside their bubble had to be acknowledged eventually. Catherine reached for her phone, her eyes scanning the screen before she let out a small sigh.

“James,” she muttered under her breath, her fingers pausing on the screen.

Lexi could see the tension in Catherine’s posture immediately, the familiar tightness creeping back into her shoulders.

“You don’t have to answer it,” Lexi said softly, her voice laced with both understanding and a tinge of protectiveness. “You don’t owe him anything anymore.”

Catherine hesitated, her fingers hovering over the screen, before she set the phone down without answering. She turned to Lexi, a small but resolute smile on her lips. “You’re right,” she said quietly. “I don’t owe him anything. Not anymore.”

Lexi’s heart warmed at her words. It wasn’t easy to let go of someone who’d been such a big part of her life. But Lexi knew that Catherine had already made the decision—her marriage had ended long before she’d signed those divorce papers. It had ended the moment she’d chosen herself.

“Are you okay?” Lexi asked, her hand gently squeezing Catherine’s. “I know it’s still a lot to process.”

Catherine nodded slowly, her expression softening as she met Lexi’s eyes. “I am. I’m just...I don’t know. It’s weird, you know? Finally being free. It’s like I’ve been holding my breath for so long, and now I can finally exhale.”

Lexi pressed a kiss to Catherine’s forehead. “You don’t have to do anything on your own anymore, Catherine. I’m here. Every step of the way.”

Catherine’s eyes softened. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye, but this time, it wasn’t from pain or fear. It was from relief. From knowing that, finally, she wasn’t alone. “I know,” she whispered. “And I’m so grateful. I don’t even know how to thank you.”

Lexi smiled and brushed the tear from Catherine's cheek. "You don't have to thank me. You just need to be here. With me. That's enough."

For a long moment, they just held each other, basking in the warmth of their connection. Catherine had faced a lifetime of uncertainty and fear, but now she was here with Lexi, starting a new chapter of her life. And Lexi was ready for whatever that chapter held.

Finally, Catherine pulled back slightly, her hands tracing the outline of Lexi's face with reverence. "I don't want to waste another second," she said, her voice filled with quiet determination.

Lexi's heart skipped a beat as she looked into Catherine's eyes. "What do you mean?"

Catherine leaned in, her lips brushing against Lexi's ear as she whispered, "I want to start living for us. I want to build our future, Lexi. No more hiding. No more pretending."

A wave of emotion washed over Lexi, her chest tightening with the intensity of Catherine's words. She'd never been more sure of anything in her life.

"Then let's start now," Lexi said, her voice hushed with love and certainty.

And with that, their lips met once again, a kiss that was full of promise and hope. It was a kiss that spoke of everything they'd been through to get here, and everything they would build together in the future. No more barriers. No more doubt. Just the two of them.

EPILOGUE

5 YEARS LATER

Catherine awoke to the soft light of a Sunday morning filtering through the bedroom curtains, the familiar hum of the house around her. For a moment she just lay there, eyes closed, letting the peace of the morning wash over her. The warmth of the blankets cocooned her as the scent of freshly brewed coffee drifted up from downstairs. The house was quiet except for the soft, distant sounds of Lexi moving around in the kitchen.

The past five years had transformed her life in ways she could never have predicted. It seemed like a lifetime ago that she'd been tangled in the suffocating grip of her marriage to James, the constant fear of being a disappointment, and the loneliness that had gnawed at her even when she was surrounded by people. But that was before Lexi. Before everything changed.

How had five years passed since they'd met? It felt like both an eternity and the blink of an eye.

Catherine shifted quietly, not ready to get out of bed just yet. She let her eyes wander around their bedroom—the soft, muted colors of the walls, the photographs on the bedside table, and the small knickknacks they'd collected over the years. There was a picture of the kids at the beach from their last vacation. They'd grown so much since that picture, even though it was only a year old.

She thought back to the day they'd met, when everything had been so uncertain. Lexi

had been there for her in ways she hadn't known she needed, her steady support the one constant during the hardest time in Catherine's life. Catherine could still remember the first time she'd admitted out loud how afraid she was—of being alone, of losing herself in the weight of her marriage, of everything she thought she should want. But Lexi had been patient, never pushing, just offering a safe space for Catherine to find her own path.

And now, five years later, Catherine couldn't imagine her life without Lexi.

She gently slipped out of bed and stood, stretching to shake off the remnants of sleep. There was so much to do today. The kids had a soccer game in the morning, followed by a picnic in the park for Natalie's birthday, and then a family dinner that evening. It was going to be one of those busy Sundays, the kind they'd grown to love. They'd built a life together, full of laughter, love, and moments like this—small and ordinary, but they meant everything to her.

Lexi was already downstairs, standing by the coffee maker with a cup in her hand as she looked out the window, the morning sun casting a warm glow on her face. Catherine watched her for a moment, taking in the way Lexi's hair was still a bit tousled from sleep and how comfortably she stood in the kitchen, as though this was just another ordinary Sunday. But Catherine knew it wasn't ordinary. It was extraordinary.

Five years ago, Lexi had walked into her life at a time when she hadn't even realized how lost she was. Catherine hadn't known how much she'd been yearning for someone who would truly see her. And Lexi had done that. She'd shown Catherine that love didn't have to be complicated or painful. It could be simple. It could be the way Lexi looked at her across a room, or the way she held her hand when they were together, as if she would never let go. It could be in the quiet moments they shared, the laughter that echoed around the house as they navigated their new life together.

Catherine walked up behind Lexi, wrapping her arms around her waist and pressing a kiss to her shoulder. Lexi turned her head with a smile, her eyes still sleepy but full of warmth.

“Good morning,” Catherine murmured.

“Morning,” Lexi replied, her voice rough from sleep. She leaned back into Catherine’s embrace, and for a moment they stood there, just breathing, savoring the calm of the morning.

“How are you feeling about today?” Catherine asked, her voice light, even though there was a deeper tenderness in her tone.

Lexi shrugged. “Excited, mostly. Max is determined to score today. He’s been practicing nonstop in the backyard. And it’ll be nice to see family later.”

Catherine laughed softly, imagining the scene. “Ten years old. Natalie’s growing up too fast.”

The afternoon was warm with the lingering glow of late summer, the park bathed in golden light as families filled the space with laughter and chatter. The air smelled like fresh-cut grass and the faint hint of cake, carried on the breeze from the picnic tables where the birthday celebration was set up. Catherine leaned back against the blanket spread out on the grass, watching the bustling scene around her. It was one of those moments when everything felt just right—calm, full of love and life.

Max was bouncing around like he owned the world, his soccer match still fresh in his mind. He’d scored the winning goal, and his energy was infectious high. His face was flushed from the excitement, his bright smile never leaving his face as he ran laps around the field with a few of his teammates, occasionally glancing over at the picnic to see if anyone was watching his impromptu victory lap. Catherine chuckled to

herself as she watched him, her heart full. She couldn't help but feel pride surge through her as she watched him.

Across the picnic blanket, Rosie—still a toddler, not quite two yet—was giggling as she chased after a butterfly near the swings. Her tiny hands reached out eagerly, her small steps unsteady but determined. Catherine's heart melted at the sight. Rosie had her mother's curiosity, always wanting to explore, to touch, to see the world with wide, eager eyes. Catherine knew she was still a little young to grasp all of the family dynamics, but she was already so loved, her joy pure and untainted. Rosie's laughter filled the air, echoing through the park as she toddled back toward the group, her tiny hands still sticky from the apple juice she'd had earlier.

Speaking of cake, Catherine glanced toward the table where Natalie was helping Josephine and Ember cut slices of her birthday cake and hand them out. It was hard to believe that not too long ago, their relationship had been so tenuous, full of misunderstandings and doubt. Now Josephine was part of their family in a way that felt effortless, like she'd always been there.

Catherine shifted on the blanket as Lexi joined her, a plate of cake in hand. She handed it to Catherine with a smile, then sat beside her, nudging her gently with her elbow. "You didn't think you'd escape the birthday cake, did you?"

Catherine grinned as she accepted the slice. Her eyes twinkled as she watched Rosie, who was now holding up a piece of cake like it was the most important thing in the world. "It looks like she's having her own party."

Lexi laughed softly, leaning back on her elbows as she took a bite of her own cake. Her eyes flicked toward the table, her expression warm as she observed her niece. "Natalie's going to love the cake. I swear, Ember's baking gets better every year. Next year the cake will be three tiers high!"

Catherine chuckled. "I'm sure she'll try."

Max bounded back toward the blanket, flushed and breathing heavily from tearing around the playground. He plopped down next to Catherine, his energy still vibrating through him. "Did you see me, Mom? I scored the goal! I won the game!" He grinned at her, his eyes alight with pride.

Catherine placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it affectionately. "I saw. You did an amazing job out there. I'm so proud of you."

He beamed and took a bite of his cake, barely pausing to chew before he jumped up again. "I'm gonna go see if I can kick the ball to the other side of the park!"

"Not so fast, soccer star," Lexi called out, laughing. "Eat your cake first."

Max groaned dramatically, but sat down long enough to finish his slice before bounding off again toward the open field, soccer ball in tow.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:03 pm

Catherine found herself leaning into Lexi, who wrapped an arm around her. “This is nice,” Catherine said softly, her voice almost a whisper. “I can’t believe how much has changed. It feels like a dream.”

Lexi’s fingers lightly traced the curve of Catherine’s hand. “It’s real, baby. This is our family now, and we’ve earned every bit of it.”

Catherine smiled, watching as Rosie held up a cake-covered hand, giggling in delight as the icing smeared across her face. It was the purest form of happiness—a simple, unguarded joy that made Catherine’s heart ache with gratitude.

As the last crumbs of cake disappeared and the kids ran off to play, their sugar-fueled energy evident in the way they darted across the park, Josephine and Ember made their way over to Catherine and Lexi. The two women looked content, relaxed in the late afternoon sun, their hands intertwined as they watched the children with easy smiles.

Josephine, her hair pulled back in a loose ponytail, was carrying a bottle of sparkling water. Ember, ever the easygoing one, followed with a small cooler bag slung over her shoulder, probably full of snacks for later. They settled down on the blanket beside Catherine and Lexi, their movements a comfortable rhythm, like they’d been friends for years...which, at this point, they had.

Josephine glanced at Catherine, a smile tugging at her lips. “I have to admit, I didn’t think we’d ever get here,” she said, her voice light but sincere. “But look at this. You two—your family—it’s beautiful.”

Catherine chuckled softly, a mixture of pride and disbelief in her voice. “I never could’ve imagined this either. It’s...it’s everything I never knew I needed.”

Ember, who’d been taking in the scene of the kids running around, raised an eyebrow at her wife. “Don’t get too sentimental now, Josephine,” she teased, nudging her gently. “You’ll have us all crying before the cake’s even settled in our stomachs.”

Josephine rolled her eyes, but leaned over to give Ember a quick kiss on the cheek. “Well, I’m feeling sentimental,” she said, her tone playful but full of warmth. “Seeing the kids together like this...it makes you think about everything we’ve been through.”

Ember nodded in agreement, her eyes softening as she looked at Max, still running in circles, and Rosie, who’d finally tired herself out and was sitting in the grass, playing with a small toy. “It’s nice, though. We’ve come so far from where we started.”

Lexi’s smile was wide as she squeezed Catherine’s hand. “Yeah, we’ve definitely come a long way. But I wouldn’t change a thing. This...all of this is everything I’ve ever wanted.”

Josephine leaned back on the blanket, glancing over at the kids playing, then back at Catherine and Lexi. “It’s funny how life works, huh?” she mused, her voice quieter now. “You think you know what your future looks like, then it completely surprises you. I’m just glad it worked out the way it did...for all of us.”

Catherine nodded, her gaze lingering on the laughter and joy radiating from the kids. “Me too, Josephine. Me too.”

As they all sat back, letting the gentle hum of the park wash over them, Ember sighed contentedly and stretched her legs out on the grass. “We’ve got the whole afternoon to enjoy, don’t we?”

Lexi grinned. “Absolutely. And I’ll be here for every minute of it.”

Josephine, looking at her watch, raised an eyebrow. “How long before the kids burn off all that sugar?”

Catherine laughed, her eyes meeting Lexi’s. “Not long, I suspect. But as long as they’re happy, we’ll enjoy the chaos.”

“And,” Lexi smiled with a glimmer in her beautiful blue eyes, “next week, we will have someone new we want you to meet.”

“Oh, who is that?” Ember raised her eyebrows.

Catherine met Lexi’s gaze and smiled. “We are adopting a dog from the shelter. A Golden Retriever named Captain.”

Lexi smiled at them. “Captain is amazing. So good with the kids. We get to collect him tomorrow.”

Lexi took Catherine’s hand and smiled. Catherine had wanted a dog and a family for so long and now she had it all. And she knew she would never ever let it go.