



Third and Long

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Category: Romance

Description: A sweet, sports romance where love is a four-legged word

Trauma survivor, Abby Barclay, finds purpose in her life with her therapy dog, Gen, helping terminally ill children and their families deal with pain and loss. When a playground accident brings nine-year-old Dylan into her life, even Abby is surprised at the depth of the bond between the boy and her dog. Her relationship with him—as well as with his divorced father, Scott—soon grows into something beyond professional.

Threatened by Abby and Gen's close relationship with Dylan, Scott's ex-wife reopens their custody arrangement, forcing Scott to decide between his son and the woman he loves. To make matters worse, Gen receives a devastating prognosis.

As Abby weighs losing Scott, Dylan, and her beloved dog, she must decide whether loving anyone is worth the risk and whether she can find the courage to go on even if she loses everything.

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One

BREATHE, JUST BREATHE...

What had begun as a mind-numbing litany years before had become a mantra. In, out, in, out... Some moments were easy, others it was all Abby could do to sense the air inflating her lungs, filling them like a balloon until they pressed against her ribs from within, constricting her heart, holding it together.

Fatigue slowed the young dog running by her side, tongue lolling out, but smiling in that dog way: jaw dropped open, eyes bright, tail wagging. Dogs lived in the moment; no past, no future, only the wind whistling in their ears and the warm pavement beneath their paws.

Sometimes, Abby wished she could live the same way.

She'd adopted the lanky, tufted black pup three years before, weeks after her whole world had collapsed. Her mind shied away. Breathe...

Mostly Lab, a little Border Collie, and probably a smattering of who-knew-what-else, she was all soulful brown eyes and midnight black fur, with a delicate, pointed face and tall, twitching ears that followed every sound. Perhaps Abby shouldn't have adopted the pup, the splintered pieces of her own life scattered, but the tag on the dog's collar said it all: Abigail's Genesis.

"C'mon Gen, one more lap."

They passed the playground, the happy cries of children echoing the bright colors splashed across the verdant foliage beyond. The many-leafed palmettos with their squat, ringed trunks and drooping branches interspersed with madronas, oaks, and the occasional maple. On the right, the fishing dock extended over the muddy tidal flats, buzzing with the drone of a thousand mosquitos.

Abby wrinkled her nose at the tang of stale saltwater and the rotting scent of fish carcasses from the previous day. Gen lifted her own nose and inhaled deeply.

Farther along, the path looped, and they passed the observation tower children so loved to climb. The flat landscape—barely above sea level—gave them an uninterrupted view all the way to the Atlantic Ocean, along with the wide, lazy tidal flats, rivers, and swampy bayous that lay between.

The trail continued to curve, opening from a mere path to a dusty gravel road. Onward they ran, the dog zig-zagging her way around the many muddy puddles settling in hollows, turning the fine grit to clay and preventing the water from seeping back into the ground. Swinging wide to keep her paws dry, she tugged the leash in Abby's fist, unbalancing her.

"Gen, that's enough." Abby's breath came quick but steady, leaving enough air in her lungs for a gentle scolding when needed. The dog settled back into her stride, only turning her head now and again to sniff at the carpet of dead, brown leaves littering the roadway.

Overhead, the massive shade trees sifted shafts of morning sun through their leaves, dappling the ground, playing tricks of shadow and light. Abby had seen deer hiding in the underbrush here, even scared a few snakes off the road as they caught the first warmth of the day. Once, a small alligator had crossed over, sliding into an overflowing drainage ditch.

Not as exciting as the dolphins she'd seen walking Gen on The Battery, but since then, she'd kept Gen on a shorter leash when they ran together.

A low concrete wall ran up from the ground, then curved away, leading Abby and Gen back toward the playground.

A scream reverberated through the trees.

Not an excited, childlike shriek of joy or excitement, but a screech that forced a shot of adrenaline through Abby's system—a cry of pain she recognized, and a response so ingrained she didn't notice the way her chest constricted, or her palms grew sweaty.

Gen pulled ahead, dragging on her leash, urging Abby to go faster.

The scream faded away, but the echo of it lodged in Abby's gut, nerves and tension and the unavoidable dictate to respond.

Abby took the last corner before the playground too sharply, her sneakers skidding out in the loose roadway, and she went to one knee. The gravel tore through her leggings, then the skin beneath. The heel of her hand, too, stung.

Gen was beside her in a moment, encouraging her. With a lick on the cheek, they took off again, the discomfort not forgotten but instead ignored, relegated to a part of Abby's mind that, though rusty, had long practice holding such feelings.

Pain. Fear. Anger.

Bursting onto the playground, Abby assessed the scene in a single heartbeat: a child sitting on the ground beneath the monkey bars, knees bloody, dirt smeared across his high cheekbone, arm clutched across his chest, eyes wide and glassy with pain. He

had brown hair, light eyes, and the kind of over-long, gawky limbs that suggested a middle school-aged growth spurt. Deep gouges in the wood chips showed where he had slid after falling.

Two girls watched from the platform above. The older one pointed to the boy.

“He tried to jump to the third bar and missed.”

Abby processed all of this in the few moments it took to slide to a stop beside him.

“My name’s Abby, and I’m here to help.”

The boy’s mouth hung open, head thrown back in a howl, but no sound came out.

More wood chips flew up as another adult skidded to his knees by the boy.

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“Dylan! What happened? Are you okay?” The man put his arms around the boy but wrenched away when the child flinched violently, another screech tearing from his throat.

“Are you his father?”

The man nodded. “Yeah, I’m Scott. This is my son, Dylan.”

“My name’s Abby, and I’m an EMT.” She grimaced and corrected herself. “I was an EMT and I’m trained in First Aid. Can I help your son?”

Gen crept forward on her belly until she could cuddle up against the boy’s uninjured side. He twined his fingers in her fur and leaned against her, panting in pain. The dog laid her head on his knee and nuzzled his injured arm.

The man, Scott, nodded once without looking at her, his eyes glued to his son.

Abby sidled in closer to the boy. “Hi, Dylan. I’d like to take a peek at your arm. You took quite a spill.”

She talked to him as she checked him over, her voice low and soothing, pausing only to monitor the cadence of his hiccupping breaths, high-pitched and wheezy, as if he wanted to scream again but the pain had stolen his voice.

He leaned deeper into the dog as Abby ran her fingers along his injury, and Gen responded by pressing closer and licking his uninjured knee.

“Is she safe?” The father’s voice broke through Abby’s methodical exam.

“She’s a therapy dog,” Abby replied, attention on his son. “It’s her job.”

Abby pulled the light jacket from around her waist and improvised a sling for the boy’s arm. “You need to take him straight to the hospital. I’m pretty sure he has a fracture, and he looks like he’s going into shock. Do you have a car here?”

“Yeah, right over there.” He waved toward the nearest parking lot, hidden in a copse of drooping palmettos, and dug in his pocket for his keys.

Abby clicked her tongue at the dog. “Okay, Gen, come here.”

The dog wriggled free of the boy and waited while the adults helped Dylan to stand. When he wobbled and reached out, Gen slid under his hand, taking his weight while he caught his balance. Abby ushered them toward the parking lot. A sleek silver sports car blipped and flashed its headlights as the group approached. Gen escorted Dylan to the back door and waited while he crawled in and buckled his seatbelt, then put her paws up on the white leather seat and licked his cheek. Abby pulled at the dog’s collar, her cheeks heating.

“Gen, off. That’s enough.” She turned to Dylan’s father. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. Thanks for all your help.”

She waited until they had pulled out of the space and turned onto the main road, fine dust billowing up from beneath his tires and settling thick and gritty on her skin before turning to her dog. “Gen, what were you thinking? You know better.”

The dog cocked her head and dropped her jaw in a wide smile.

Falling to one knee, Abby winced as the upbraided skin pulled, but she fondled Gen's ears, then scratched under her chin. "It doesn't matter. You already know you did a good job."

Standing, she clicked her tongue. "Come on, let's go home."

The pair meandered along the paths, Gen's nose to the ground as she investigated every tree trunk and hollow. Not quite a cooldown—even in March, Charleston was too humid to ever truly be "cool" —by the time they left the park Abby's breaths had evened, the surge of adrenaline dissipating.

They passed the heavy granite pillars and under the arching wrought-iron gates of the entrance, then turned onto the sidewalk. White row houses with black shutters and open verandas marched in perfect formation down the street. An occasional pop of pastel color painted a facade, but this was no Rainbow Row, and the neighborhood generally lent itself to a more traditional feel: quiet, clean, demure. Manicured lawns and perfectly clipped box hedges.

Like Abby, they hid their messes safely behind locked doors, out of sight.

A child's happy cry, so different from the one that had demanded their attention, echoed through the iron pickets, the playground invisible behind the myrtles and hanging Spanish moss. Gen danced at the end of her leash, tail swishing as she turned toward the sound, then back to Abby.

"Are you telling me it's time?"

The dog whuffed, and though Abby couldn't quite smile, she nodded.

"Okay. I hear you."

Two

“WHAT’S WITH HER?” The young nurse reached down to scratch Gen behind the ears, but the dog wriggled away and nibbled her fingers, then came back, pressing her head against the nurse’s leg. “Playing coy today, are we?”

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“Hey, Cara.” Abby glanced up from her paperwork. “We had a bit of an incident this weekend. I think she’s ready to get back to work.”

“Ooh, I heard about that from Tia in ER.” Cara plopped down in the gimbaled chair behind the counter, then bounced up again as one of the admin staff shot her a dark glare.

Abby rolled her eyes. “How did Tia hear about it?”

“She was working Saturday afternoon. Said a dad came in with his son and wouldn’t stop talking about the woman in the park, a former EMT, who’d helped them. Of course, as soon as he mentioned Gen, they all knew it had to be you. According to Tia, he kept calling you an angel.”

Abby wrinkled her nose, scrawled her signature at the bottom of a sheet, and passed it across the counter to the administrative assistant. “We’re going to see the Harper twins.”

He took the page and raised an eyebrow. “Good luck.”

The elevator chimed, and the doors slid open.

“We were running in the park, and his kid fell off the monkey bars. I think he had a fracture, maybe multiple fractures, and already going into shock. Gen went right to work; I think she’s missed it.”

“Well, it’s been a couple weeks since you’ve been here.” Cara squeezed Abby’s arm.

“We’ve missed you.”

A familiar weight dragged Abby’s shoulders down, the urge to curl protectively into herself almost too great to bear, but she forced her chin up and straightened her back.

“Yeah, sorry. It’s hard, you know, this time of year.”

Cara nodded as the elevator chimed again at the fourth floor. Abby reached down and straightened Gen’s working jacket, a heavy, red canvas harness that clipped across her chest and under her ribs with “Therapy Dog” stitched in brilliant white block letters on both sides. A plastic sleeve between her shoulders held a hospital badge, complete with a picture. The doors slid open, and Abby pasted a bright smile on her face.

Painted in a sunny shade of yellow with zoo animals marching up and down the long hallways, the juxtaposition of such cheerful décor in the center of a hospital always tugged at Abby’s heart, even more so knowing the misery hidden behind each of the doors. But it served its own purpose, as she and Gen did, a healing counterpoint to the pain of this place.

Abby paused at the nurse’s station, a small rectangle of desks and computers situated in the intersection of several halls. “Hi, Linda. We’re on our way to the Harper boys.”

“Bless you, Abby. Liam took a turn for the worse last week and Ethan is heartbroken. They’ve been moved to room seven.” The on-duty nurse checked her clipboard. “The Ross girl could also use a visit, and we have a couple new patients in four and nine but steer clear of six.”

Abby smiled. “Yeah, I remember. Christopher’s parents get nervous about having a dog around his ventilator.”

She waved goodbye to Cara, then guided Gen down the hall toward the Harper twins’

new room.

The boys had been a rambunctious pair before Liam developed a rare form of childhood leukemia and began treatments. Now, too weak to perpetuate any mischief, Ethan stayed by his side, a shadow of his former self as his brother wasted away. Identical twins with a rare blood type, Ethan often donated the blood for the transfusions needed to keep Liam alive. Both boys had slipped into deep depression early on in Liam's treatments; then, Abby and Gen entered their lives. The difference had been immediate and extraordinary.

Abby knocked twice on the open door, then entered. "Hi, guys! What's going on?"

The boys' mother raised an anxious face to Abby from her seat beside Liam's bed, her eyes reflecting the familiar emptiness and heartbreak of so many parents on this floor.

Ethan nudged his brother's shoulder. "Look, Liam, Gen and Abby are here."

Liam did, indeed, seem worse than the last time Abby had visited. His skin had a grayish tint to it and seemed translucent; his eyes were sunken and had none of their childhood spark. But he raised his head as Gen entered and his lips twitched in a smile of welcome before he flopped back in exhaustion.

"Ok, Gen, you know the drill. Hop up." Abby kept a light hand on Gen's leash and used the other on her collar to guide her landing on the sick child's bed.

Gen went to her belly and wiggled in as close to Liam as she could manage. The boy wrapped both arms around her and buried his face in her fur.

Ethan came around the bed and wound his fingers into her ruff. Everyone was silent for a moment. Then Gen squirmed around to lick Ethan's face, dropping her jaw to

smile.

Liam huffed a low laugh at Ethan's grimace and Ethan, responding to his brother's shift in attitude, giggled, too, then pressed his cheek against Gen's nose, encouraging her to lick him again. This time, he drew back in a parody of disgust, complete with long, drawn-out side-effects of "Ewwwww," and "Gross, Gen. That's disgusting!" He clowned for his brother and both boys smiled, one wanly and one with his heart on his sleeve.

After their round of the pediatric floor, Abby checked in again before leaving.

"Hey Linda, I'll be back Wednesday."

The on-duty nurse nodded. "We haven't seen you here in a while. The children are always glad."

Abby's shoulders tightened as the guilt and shame welled up within her. If only she were stronger, maybe this would be easier. She turned toward the elevator and punched the down button more aggressively than she intended. "Yeah, I know. I've been..."

"No need, darling. We all miss him." Linda's low voice flooded with sympathy. "But he'd be glad you still come. For the kids."

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Tears, never far from the surface, stung Abby's eyes and her breath picked up speed.

"Yeah."

Too slow to offer the refuge Abby would need in a moment, she abandoned the elevator and wobbled toward the heavy steel door to the stairs. As she passed, she ran fingers over the plastic sign, the rough right angles of the pictograph and the raised bumps of the braille beneath catching at her skin. Her hands were slick and clammy, and she lurched forward, Gen beside her, into the relative safety of the vaulting concrete stairwell. Collapsing to her knees, she wrapped both arms around the dog, fingers clutching at long tufts of fur. She buried her nose in Gen's ruff, and the familiar scent of the dog's shampoo filled her nose. Gen's steady panting in her ear, faster than her own breath, but soothing nonetheless, anchored Abby. One breath in for Gen's every four. And out again.

Breathing in time with Gen, Abby let the emotions wash over her. Grief, fear, anger... It had been six months before she could step into the hospital, a year before she could visit the pediatric floor. This had been his place. Only with the bulwark of Gen's presence had she ever found the courage to come back, but the need to fulfill his dream, to help heal children, won out stronger than her pain. At least one of them was still doing what needed to be done.

Abby dragged her sleeve across her eyes.

Gen shook, her fur settling back along her body where Abby's clutching fingers had rooted in it. Catching a lock of Abby's hair in her mouth, Gen tugged, then dropped it.

Abby ruffled the dog's ears and whispered, "Naughty girl," before standing again.

The familiar scrabble and click of Gen's toenails on the steep, concrete stairs grounded Abby as they descended, the cool wash of air-conditioned breeze drying the sticky sweat slicking her skin.

Ducking into the small café near the front entrance, Abby prepared some tea, wrapping her fingers around the heavy paper cup and letting the heat seep into her chilled and aching joints as she sank into a hard plastic chair.

"Are you okay, hon?"

Abby ripped her gaze from its blank focus on the curling steam to find a stranger at the next table watching her.

"Sure. I'm fine." The rote words were flat, a litany she'd repeated too many times to stumble over, even now, on the heels of nearly losing herself in the stairwell.

She was just... broken. And if three years hadn't been enough time to put her back together, maybe a lifetime wouldn't be enough, either.

Three

"WAIT." ABBY PAUSED, almost imperceptibly, before pushing through the door of Common Grounds, her favorite coffee shop.

After years of steady training, basic commands had transmuted into deeply ingrained habits. Pausing at doors, sitting at counters, staying in heel position. Often, Abby didn't need to use words – Gen took her cues from her body language – but it didn't hurt to keep the dog's obedience fresh.

She ordered her morning coffee and slid into a deep, leather seat, flipping over the paper on the small table beside her and checking the date.

“Can you believe they’re still blathering on about that stupid playoff game?” Jackie, the owner of Common Grounds, gestured at the paper. “It’s been months!”

Abby snorted. “True, but it’s better than baseball stats. I swear, their season never ends.”

Jackie rolled her eyes. “No argument here. Did you see Zack Hooper, is now accusing the quarterback of throwing the game? What a hack.”

“Edwards? You’re kidding. Why would he do that?”

Jackie shrugged a shoulder. “Something about how San Diego gave him his first shot, so he owed them.”

“That’s stupid,” Abby replied. “Isn’t he originally from somewhere down near Hilton Head? He played for USC, and he took a lower offer to play here so he could come home.”

“If you can follow his reasoning, you’re a more devoted football fan than I.” Jackie shrugged. “Well, you are anyway, but you know what I mean.”

Abby opened to the article and skimmed it. “Hack is right. This is like clickbait in print. Can they even publish this stuff?”

“Maybe in the Opinion section.” Jackie cleared a couple of plates from a table, then nodded at Gen, who’d managed to wedge herself underneath the chair. “She doing okay?”

“She’s great. We were at the hospital three times this week and she worked her magic, like always.”

“Good, good. You come in with her anytime, yeah? You need a refill before you go?”

“No, thanks.”

“Okay, have a good run. C’mon by afterwards and the next batch of scones should be out. Gen can taste test one.”

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At her name, the dog crept from her hiding place, wagging her tail as her gaze darted between Jackie and Abby.

Abby shook her head as she backed through the door, clicking her tongue at Gen. “I think you might be pushing the boundaries of dog-friendly with that offer.”

Jackie laughed. “As long as she stays out of the kitchen, it’s all legal.”

With a smile, Abby let the door swing closed behind her.

As they reached the park entrance, she broke into an easy jog, Gen loping along beside her.

Two laps in, they passed a man waving a jacket. Though he looked familiar, Abby couldn’t place him, but a few strides later, he called her name.

“Abby, wait up!”

Slowing, she stepped off the trail while she watched his approach, still trying to identify him. Had she seen him at the hospital? Maybe visited his kid with Gen?

He moved easily, athletic, but without the lean build of a serious runner, and she couldn’t imagine forgetting such piercing blue eyes, never mind the strong jaw with one cheek dimpled in a half-grin, or the tousled brown hair, flashing with caramel highlights in the weak morning sun.

Cara’s voice in her head cooed, Ooh, isn’t he a looker?

She'd be right, Abby supposed, if you were interested.

"Here, I wanted to return this to you." The man held out the jacket.

She took it, recognizing it as her own, her eyebrows knitting as she struggled to remember when she'd lost it.

"Scott. Dylan's dad." He shifted from one foot to the other. "My son, he's the one who fell off the monkey bars on the playground last week..."

The pieces finally slotted into place and Abby nodded. "Oh, right, sorry. How is he?"

"He'll be fine. He'd gone into shock by the time we reached the hospital, like you said. He fractured his arm in two places and sprained his wrist, so he'll be in a cast for the next eight weeks."

Abby cringed. She had always hated working with broken bones. Even the memory of an open break turned her stomach.

"The doctor says he'll recover, though, and with a little physical therapy, he'll be as good as new."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Scott gestured at her jacket. "I wanted to make sure I got this back to you."

"Thanks. You didn't have to go to so much effort..." She trailed off as Gen, sitting beside her, leapt up to put her paws on Scott's thigh, leaving a pair of dirty prints on his jeans. Abby dropped her jacket as she grabbed Gen's collar to pull her off. "Gen, no ma'am."

Scott reached down to cradle the dog's head, scratching behind her ears until Gen's back leg twitched. "It's okay. I suppose I have her to thank as well."

He grinned and Abby noticed he still had only one dimple. The asymmetry should have reduced his attractiveness, but it didn't.

"Dylan won't stop talking about her. Such an amazing dog. How she knew..."

"She's a therapy dog. She's trained to assist." Abby retrieved her jacket, shaking the dirt from it and looping it around her waist.

Scott ruffled Gen's ears one last time. "Well, that explains it. She's remarkable."

"Thanks." Abby laid her hand on Gen's head to settle her, worried she'd jump up again.

The silence stretched out for a few moments and Abby herded a small pebble across the trail with her toe before Scott cleared his throat.

"Listen, let me take you out...to say thank you. It means a lot to me that you helped take care of Dylan."

"I'm not, uh..." Her voice trailed off, gesturing at her running clothes.

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“Oh, no,” he reassured her. “Maybe tomorrow...” When Abby bit her lip, he continued, “Or next week sometime?”

Outwasn’t really her thing. And Scott owed her nothing for doing her job. Well, her used-to-be job. But as she opened her mouth to say no, Gen whined. When Abby glanced down, the dog dropped into a play bow.

“See, she’s saying yes.” Scott grinned, his stupid dimple deepening.

She wasn’t saying yes; she hadn’t been taught that command. But Abby couldn’t help the small smile sneaking across her lips as she watched her silly dog buttering up Scott in the hopes of getting him to play.

“Okay,” she relented. “Sure, maybe next week sometime.”

Four

CARA INSISTED ON coming over beforehand to help Abby pick out her clothes.

“It’s not a date. It’s coffee,” she reiterated, yet again. “It’s to say thanks for helping his son.”

“It’s not a date,yet,” Cara replied, holding up one finger. “It will be by the time I’m done with you.”

Abby’s throat dried out and she swallowed hard. “Please, no.”

Cara spun to face her. “Fine, I won’t hold out hope, but this is the first time you’ve been out with anyone other than me in literal years. I’m not passing up this chance to be girly with you.”

“I wasn’t planning to dress up,” Abby mumbled.

“Blah, blah, blah.” Cara made a talking mouth out of her hand and rolled her eyes at Abby. “Let me have my fun. Scrubs do no one any favors, and you can hardly wear leggings and a tank top.”

“You love your scrubs.”

Cara had at least fifty different patterns, from pink and glittery fairies to rainbow-hued dump trucks. She got it from her father, who firmly believed working in pediatrics required a healthy dose of whimsy.

“I do, because the kids love them. I do not, however, wear them on a date.”

Abby sighed. “It’s not a date, Cara. It’s just...”

“Coffee. I know.” Cara rolled her eyes. “I heard you the first six hundred times.”

Abby folded the clothes they’d already rejected, stacking them neatly at the foot of the bed. Turning, she froze as Cara pulled a breezy sundress from the closet.

She wavered on her feet. “Not that one.”

Cara held it up to herself and spun around, watching the skirt flair. “Are you sure?” She glanced at Abby, then hurried to hang the dress back up. “Sorry.”

Abby’s hands shook. “It’s fine. Pick out a top and I’ll wear some nice jeans.”

“And the boots? You know how much I love those boots.”

Abby shot Cara an indulgent half smile. “You picked them out for me; of course you love them.”

“You love them, too. Don’t act like you don’t.”

Abby tapped a finger against her chin, pretending to consider, but when Cara balled up her fists and set them on her hips, Abby relented. “You know I love the boots.”

Abby reached into the clean laundry bin by the bedroom door and dug around until she found Gen’s vest. Brushing a few stray bits of lint from the bright red canvas, she smoothed the heavy fabric between her hands.

“You’re not bringing Gen, are you?” Cara frowned at Abby. “You know she’s a giant distraction, and you’re always paying attention to her instead of the people you’re with.”

Abby flinched. “I don’t do that. Do I?”

Cara shrugged, expression shuttering as she dove back into the closet. “Here, this one.” She handed Abby a floral printed top.

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Abby took it but caught Cara's hand as she passed it over. "I'm sorry, Cara. I don't mean to."

Cara shook her head. "You know I love Gen, but someday you're going to have to let go of your four-legged security blanket."

Abby considered her dog, sweeping the floor with her tail, ears up, head tilted and eyes flicking back and forth between the two women, as if she knew they were discussing her.

She sighed.

"Someday, okay," she agreed. "But not today. Scott invited us both. He didn't even complain when she got muddy paw prints all over his jeans."

Cara snorted. "Fine. Geez. The pair of you deserve each other."

Whether she meant Abby and Gen or Abby and Scott, she didn't clarify.

Abby's knee jiggled as she waited for Scott, and Gen pressed her body into the side of Abby's leg. She absently reached down to rub the dog's ears.

Scott had offered dinner, which Abby had blatantly refused, citing a lack of dog-friendly restaurants. His next suggestion—a local brewery with pub fare—Abby had turned down, too, proposing coffee instead. Less pressure. Plus, it let her choose the location, so she'd settled into her usual seat at Common Grounds, Gen at her feet.

The silver Audi pulled to a stop across the street, not a speck of dust on it, flashing bright and clean in the rich afternoon sunlight.

Abby snorted as it parallel parked without disrupting the flow of traffic around it. “I wonder how often he gets it detailed,” she murmured to herself, thinking of the dirt roads in the park.

Despite his height, Scott strode through the coffee shop door without ducking. He finished rolling the second cuff of his pale blue button-up as his brilliant eyes swept the room. Could that color even exist? Maybe it was a trick of his clothes, the pastel color of his shirt forcing his eyes to appear super-saturated.

Her breath hiccupped involuntarily in her chest as his gaze caught hers, a slow smile spreading over his features. Still just one dimple. Standing, she straightened her shoulders as Gen wriggled beside her.

“Easy, Gen,” she said, glancing down and placing a steadying hand on the dog’s head.

He crossed the floor in several long strides. “Hey.”

“Umm, hi.” Abby turned Gen’s leather leash over in her hands, winding it through her fingers, then unwinding it again.

He gestured at the counter. “So, coffee. What do you want?”

They placed their orders, then Scott asked, “Can I get Gen a pup-cup? I have to say thank you to her, too.”

“Usually, I don’t let her have extra treats,” Abby hesitated. “But since it’s a thank you...”

“I’m glad you suggested this instead of the brewery. I don’t think they make a dog-friendly beer.” He grinned at her, his dimple giving him a mischievous air, inviting her to share the joke.

“I don’t really drink.”

The smile fled, his eyebrows pulling together as he studied her. “At all?”

“No.” Her voice flattened as they made their way to a small table and sat down across from one another.

Scott cleared his throat. “So, you said she’s...?”

“A therapy dog,” Abby supplied with relief. She could talk about Gen all day. “We work in the hospital and at a couple of assisted-living facilities, visiting the patients.”

“I bet they enjoy that.”

Their coffee arrived and Abby took a long sip while Scott offered the pup-cup to Gen—a dog-friendly concoction of peanut butter slush topped with a swirl of whipped cream.

Abby nudged the dog. “It’s okay, girl. Go ahead.”

Gen didn’t waste any time, tasting the treat then working her tongue in and out of the cup while Scott held it steady.

“We work a lot with long-term or chronic patients,” Abby continued. “Studies show those who have a strong support structure – friends, family, a purpose, and hope—are more likely to recover. A visit from Gen gives them something to look forward to. And Gen, well, she’s pretty much magic; she has been from the start. She loves

people, but not in that crazy, out-of-control way, jumping on them...” Abby paused, skin flushing in remembered embarrassment. “Well, not usually, anyway.”

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“Don’t worry about it! I didn’t mind.”

“That’s nice of you to say, but it still wasn’t okay.” Abby pinned Gen with a firm expression.

The dog ignored her, licking her chops for the last vestiges of frozen peanut butter, and crossing her eyes as she focused on the dollop of whipped cream stuck to the top of her nose.

“Here, silly girl.” Abby bent down and wiped her muzzle with a napkin. “Better?”

She glanced back up at Scott. “It takes a lot of training, a lot of time, to do something like therapy work. Even breaking the rules a little sets a precedent, creates a new pattern. Dogs don’t understand when something is okay under these circumstances, but not okay under those. Or how you can do something with this person but not with that person. We have to be consistent, or they end up confused.”

Scott nodded. “Sounds kind of like raising a kid.”

“Maybe a bit, yeah.” Abby thought about it for a moment, then continued, “And I guess our classes and stuff are like going to school. After her puppy obedience, I took her to get her CGC – her Canine Good Citizen – certificate, which gave me the confidence to take her out in public.”

“So, then she could go everywhere with you?”

Abby shook her head. “Oh, my gosh, no. No way. Therapy dogs aren’t service dogs,

so they don't have any access rights at all, except where they've been invited. We did most of our training in dog-friendly places like here." She gestured at the coffee shop around her. "Fortunately, we have lots of options, but even now, I can't—I won't—take her anywhere if it might compromise service dog rights. Their job is too important to risk for Gen's training."

Abby loved talking about Gen the same way parents loved talking about their kids, she imagined. For a long time, she hadn't been able to string two or three words together, but in addition to everything else Gen had done, she had given Abby back her voice, had given her something to talk about. Cara might call her a distraction, but Abby had needed one. Still did, honestly.

"When I approached the hospital about letting us work there, they were hesitant, but they agreed to a trial run. She hadn't had an accident in months, but the first day I made her go three times before we went inside." Abby let her gaze drift as she pictured a yearling Gen, all gawky limbs and over-sized paws, trying so hard to work even as the kids squealed in excitement at the sight of her.

Gen had been fine, of course. She'd jumped on beds, snuggled children, and obeyed all her commands. They'd gone back again the following week, then twice the week after, and within a few months, they'd become such a regular fixture in the pediatric department that the hospital began advertising an on-site therapy dog as a part of their comprehensive treatment programs.

"But she did?"

Abby shook herself. "Yeah, she did. And the rest, as they say, is history. We've been at Providence ever since."

"That's amazing." Scott's eyes locked with hers and she held his gaze.

She agreed whole-heartedly. Gen was amazing.

“How did you get involved in training a therapy dog?”

Abby dug the pads of her fingers into the coffee mug she held, willing herself not to react. “I kind of...fell into it.” She forced her hands to relax. “So, tell me about Dylan.”

Scott’s eyes lit up and Abby revised her previous thought. She loved Gen with her whole heart, but her bond with the dog, as sweet as it was, couldn’t replicate the relationship between a parent and their child.

“He’s the greatest kid. A lot of parents love their children but maybe don’t like them, you know? They don’t like to play with them or hang out with them, or they spend so much time trying to get them to behave that they’re exhausted by them. Dylan is super smart and he’s a ton of fun to be around. He’s in all advanced classes at school, and last year he started playing the trumpet.” Scott grimaced. “He had a rough start, but he’s much better now.”

Abby cringed. “I’ve heard musical instruments can be pretty brutal.”

“It could have been violin, so I guess I should be grateful. He’s into jazz, which is a lot of fun. When I promised him next year we’d go to New Orleans over his spring break and hear it for real, he ran back into the auditorium and told his orchestra teacher. I was kind of committed at that point.”

Abby pictured an ecstatic Dylan. In her mind, his face twisted in pain as he cradled his broken arm, but she’d had enough practice putting broken puzzle pieces of shattered expressions back together.

“Wait. He can’t be playing trumpet right now.”

Scott shook his head. “No, not until the cast comes off, but he’s still going to orchestra, and he spends a lot of time humming and tapping and using his good hand to practice blowing into his mouthpiece. I’m kind of worried he’ll dent his cast if he’s not careful. He thinks it’s funny to smack it on every possible surface.”

“They’re pretty sturdy. I’ve only ever seen one crack.” She didn’t tell him the person already had a cast when they were hit by a car and pinned against a brick wall. That had been a bad one. She shuddered, then pushed the memory away, forcing her vision of Dylan’s delighted face back to the forefront of her mind.

Scott winced. Abby hadn’t even flinched when treating Dylan in the park. If a cracked cast made her shudder, he never wanted to experience one.

“Phew, good to know. Now I have to make sure I don’t crack listening to it day and night for the next few weeks.”

Abby snorted. “Nah, I’m sure you’re made of stronger stuff.”

“Than cotton batting and fiberglass? I sure hope so.”

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The banter came easily, authentically. Yes, that was his general impression of Abby. Authentic, from her simple, blond ponytail to the way her skin glowed honey-golden, a true tan from her time as a runner, instead of a fake, orange-tinted color. Athletic, too, but not the kind that came from hours in the gym toning each individual muscle group; the kind that told you what activities she liked, if you could read it. Scott could.

Her comment about his strength might have rankled from anyone else, might have reminded him he'd been little more than a commodity in others' eyes for a long, long time. But from her, the gentle teasing invited him into the joke, rather than forcing him to be the butt of it. Though she looked nothing like his best friend—with her sparkling green eyes, fringed by the palest of lashes, she reminded him of Finn—who didn't shy away from telling things to him straight, but did it in a way that Scott never doubted he had his back. Finn would like Abby.

“So, trumpet, and really smart. Does Dylan play any sports?”

Scott forced himself to pause before answering. The quick answer, the easy answer would have been, “Not the right one,” but he didn't let the words slip out. His son was his own person, not simply a younger reflection of himself.

“This and that. I try to keep him in something for most of the year, but he hasn't found his passion, yet. We do a lot of swim lessons – kind of a necessity around here – and he likes soccer, but not the kids he plays with. He's kind of...” Scott paused as he thought about how to best describe his son. “He's cerebral, I guess. I don't always know what to do with that. He's a lot like... Well, he's not a lot like me, so we're still figuring it out.”

He caught her glance as it dropped to his left hand, wrapped around the handle of his coffee mug.

“And his mom?”

Scott gritted his teeth. He'd left that one wide open. “Every other holiday and one week in the summer. Otherwise, not in the picture. Not for a long time.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Don't worry about it. It's long past.”

Abby took another sip of her coffee, then obligingly changed the subject. It should have been awkward. It wasn't. “So, we've talked about my work and Dylan. What about you? What do you do?”

Most people expected a certain range of answers when they asked that question: doctor, lawyer, accountant, or perhaps car salesman or marketing director. Scott found people's reactions funny when his answer wasn't any of those, but in that brief moment, he hoped for a positive response from Abby.

“Actually, I play football.”

Her expression froze as she processed his statement, then recognition flashed across her face.

“Scott Edwards, quarterback for the Raptors... I can't believe I didn't realize...” She bit her lip and shook her head, shifting in her seat.

Gen pushed up to a sitting position, ears twitching forward in response to the edge in Abby's voice.

“That’s okay, people are always surprised when they see me without a helmet... and pads. I’m smaller than they think I am.” The corner of his mouth ticked up, a self-deprecating expression he’d practiced.

Abby let out a strangled laugh, but her clipped words were a far cry from the easy banter they’d been sharing a few moments before. “Yeah, I bet.”

Gen glanced from Abby to Scott, then back again, before relaxing her ears and leaning into Abby’s leg.

Scott noted the dog’s reaction. How accurate a barometer of Abby’s emotions could Gen be? She did not lay back down.

A moment later, Gen’s ears perked again as classical piano music floated up from Abby’s bag on the floor.

For a second, Scott thought she would ignore it, then she sighed and slid her phone out of an inside pocket.

“It’s the hospital,” she told him as she checked the ID, then turned in her seat to answer it.

Scott reached down to scratch Gen’s ears while Abby talked, but the dog jerked away, looking at her handler as she twitched, phone tucked against her ear.

Her face blanked, then, closing her eyes, she nodded. “Yeah. I’ll be right there.”

“I’m sorry, I have to go.” Abby shoved the phone back into her bag, gulped down the last few swallows of coffee, and wound Gen’s leash around her hand. “One of my kids took a bad turn and it helps when we’re there.”

He stood as she did and nodded. “It’s okay, go. They need you and Gen.”

He reached out to touch her shoulder in sympathy, but she slid away, avoiding him. Scott cleared his throat, then went on, “Let me give you a call later, maybe we could do dinner sometime, after all?”

Her eyes widened, reminding Scott of summers spent on his grandparents’ horse farm in Montana, before football camp became more important. They’d had a skittish mare who bolted from everything, even the grass when it waved wrong in the wind.

“I don’t...” Gen whined and pressed herself against Abby’s leg. Several expressions flitted across her face, then she shook her head. “I’m sorry, I have to go.” She turned and hurried away, then paused and glanced back. “Good luck with Dylan. I hope he’s better soon.”

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The bell above the door chimed her exit, and Scott sank back into his seat. Given his quasi-celebrity status, it wasn't the first time he'd been either blown off or cold-shouldered. Of course, sometimes that reaction beat the inevitable queue of girls lining up whenever the media got wind he'd be attending a benefit or gala without a date. He had to be careful; his reputation had taken a beating during his divorce from Dylan's mother, and it had nearly cost him custody.

He shivered. Lindsay had never wanted children, had certainly never wanted custody of Dylan, but it hadn't stopped her from threatening to take his son away throughout the proceedings, and even now, long after the ink had dried, Scott still got nervous anytime she hinted she might reopen litigation. He'd only been granted full custody because she hadn't fought him. And because he hadn't asked for child support. He could afford to take care of his son without her help, or the strings that would inevitably have come tangled up with it.

Almost full custody, he amended. Although, given how often she cancels, it might as well be.

In any case, his name had been linked to a few too many women in the year after his divorce had been finalized, and Lindsay's threats had been the wake-up call he'd needed. Now, he considered himself "settled," with a nanny for Dylan and a five-year contract to play for the Raptors. In fact, he hadn't had a serious love interest in years, and his sister had long since gotten fed up with attending events with him.

Of course, she'd also moved to Montana last year to take over their grandparents' farm and gotten herself married to one of the trainers in the process, so he went stag, and hoped to avoid the pawing hands of every celebrity-hunter in the city.

Well, Abby clearly wasn't a celebrity-hunter or a gold-digger. Could she be the kind of person he could call a friend? Or more?

His mind fixated on the way her eyes lit up when she talked about Gen. He'd never seen that shade of green before, light, like sage leaves, and sparkling with passion and determination. There was no denying her beauty, but it wasn't just physical. She had a beautiful soul, too.

He sipped the last of his coffee, then rose, placing the empty mug in the plastic bin by the door. He had Abby's information; he'd wait a few weeks and give her another call. In the meantime, maybe he and Dylan would visit the park more often.

Five

"AND YOU RAN out on him?" Cara's horrified expression said almost as much as her words.

"Well, Liam had already gone into emergency surgery and Ethan was a wreck. I had to go." Abby threw her hands up to stave off Cara's response. "Plus, he's a football player. He's, well... famous."

Cara made a face. "So? He likes you. You could at least become friends."

"It would never work."

"Why, because he clearly hates dogs, or wouldn't be supportive of your work? Because he despises coffee? And since when is football a bad thing? You love football."

"I like football. Geez, I'm not some rabid fan, Cara. And his second suggestion after dinner was a brewery. How, exactly, do you think that's going to work? You should

have heard his voice when I said I don't drink. 'At all?' He didn't even know what to say."

"Okay, fair point, but c'mon. He likes the occasional beer is enough reason to turn down a second date?"

"It wasn't a date." Abby took a deep breath, then blew it out. "I had fun, and I did like him." She didn't expect it would be so easy to admit. "But, you know, he's got a kid. A ready-made family is a big deal. If I was looking to date someone—and I'm not—it wouldn't be him. Plus, he's the hometown hero. He's in the news, and he has all those events and stuff, and he's always traveling for games. When would he have time for me? How would I fit into his life?"

"I'm pretty sure that's the point of dating, to see how each of you fits into the other person's life. How would he fit into yours?"

Abby thought it over. "I'm not sure."

"So, maybe it isn't this guy, but it's been three years. You know Will wouldn't want you to spend the rest of your life alone."

Abby flinched.

In fact, it hadn't taken long for word to circulate around the hospital one of their own had gone on a date—despite her protestations to the contrary—with the handsome football player who had brought his son to the ER with a double fracture of his left arm. It didn't help the ER doctors and nurses were all gossips and considered Abby a sort of legacy to be protected.

She'd assumed here, of all places, where his memory pervaded everything, there would be less understanding. Instead, she'd been surprised by the positive reactions

of the hospital staff, who seemed more aligned with Cara's position than hers.

Cara shook her head. "Don't you think they want you to be happy?" She opened her mouth to continue, then shut it and pursed her lips instead.

But Abby knew what Cara wouldn't say. Everyone else had moved on; no one would blame her for doing the same.

Abby turned the corner onto her street.

"Almost home, girl."

Gen sprawled across the backseat, tail limp, head down, the fur of her ruff blowing gently in the draft from the A/C.

Spring, now well-advanced, came with the usual wave of humidity, making the air thick and hazy, but Abby didn't have the energy to enjoy the honey-warm sun filtering through the thick canopy of new leaves and dappling the road.

After another emergency surgery, Liam's chances of recovery had plummeted. Ethan, still too weak from the last transfusion to give any more blood, had been inconsolable when they'd had to find a different donor.

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Abby shuddered. When they'd told Ethan his brother might not make it, his devastation had torn open a barely-healed part of her own heart. His horrified expression would haunt her nightmares for many nights to come. She and Gen had been at the hospital overnight as they comforted Ethan and his family during the surgery, then waited for Liam's condition to improve. Ethan had cried himself to sleep in the wee hours of the morning, head pillowed on Gen's gently heaving chest, fingers twined in her fur.

Parking, Abby's feet dragged as she unloaded Gen, and the dog's toenails scraped the ground with each weary step. At least she'd gotten to nap with Ethan. While he'd slept, his grief-stricken mother had finally broken down, and Abby had sat with her until word finally arrived Liam had stabilized.

Abby couldn't wait to crawl into bed and sleep...maybe for a week.

She reached down to scratch the dog's head as they walked. When Gen's ears pricked forward with interest, Abby missed it, exhaustion dulling her response. Finally, her eyes focused, and she stuttered to a stop.

The child sitting on her doorstep looked familiar. He could have been any of her previous patients, in fact, if she gave out her home address. Because she didn't, the pool of possible visitors narrowed to zero – except...

Her eyes caught and held on the blue cast spiraling from his palm all the way to his elbow.

“Dylan? What are you doing here?”

Gen lunged forward and threw herself into the boy's arms, slipping her leash from Abby's grasp.

Dylan, sitting on Abby's front steps, hugged Gen, then peered up through her fur. "I need help."

"Help?" Abby repeated dumbly. "What kind of help?"

Words cascaded in a torrent from Dylan's lips. "The doctor said he'd have to chop off my arm to remove the cast, and I'd have to get a robotic arm, and he'd try not to let it hurt too much, and my dad thought it was funny. But it's not funny; I don't want to be a robot, or have my arm cut off." He buried his face in Gen's ruff and sobbed.

"Oh, Dylan." Abby heaved herself down onto the steps next to him and wrapped an arm around him and her dog. "No one is going to cut off your arm."

The boy sniffled. "Promise?"

Abby nodded.

"Pinky swear?"

Abby smiled for the first time in days. "I promise." She linked her finger with Dylan and shook on it. "Now, where's your dad?"

Dylan snorted. "He had a press conference."

Abby's mouth dropped open in shock. "He left you here?"

"No way, I called an Uber." He smiled in pride. "I used all my allowance. Lauren, my nanny, thinks I'm in my room playing video games."

“You... you ran away?” Abby clarified.

Dylan’s forehead furrowed. “Yeah, I guess. But Dad wouldn’t listen to me, and I couldn’t think of any other way. He left your number on the fridge. I looked it up on the internet to get your address.”

Abby’s brain wasn’t processing at full speed, but she recognized the familiar sense of panic creeping up on her. She pulled her cell phone from her bag and lurched back to her feet, unlocking her door while dialing Scott’s number. She shooed Dylan toward the couch and let Gen hop up next to him.

The phone connected after the first ring. “Abby? I can’t talk right now, Dylan’s missing.”

“Dylan’s here, with me.”

“What?” She couldn’t tell if Scott was furious, relieved, or panicked. “Why?”

“I found him sitting on my front steps when I got home,” Abby explained. “I don’t know how long he’s been here.”

“I’ll be right over.”

Abby gave him her address and hung up. She glanced over at Dylan and Gen curled together on the couch and walked over to ruffle his hair. “Your dad’s on his way to come get you.”

Dylan cringed. “He’s going to be so mad at me.”

Abby crouched on the floor and caught Dylan’s eyes, bright and blue and so like his father’s.

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“Probably,” she admitted, “but it’s only because he’s scared for you. It’s okay, I’ll talk to him.”

Dylan perked up.

“Here,” she stood and tossed him the TV remote. “I haven’t eaten all day. Why don’t you find some cartoons and I’ll make us sandwiches? Can you eat peanut butter?” He nodded and Gen’s tail thumped the couch as Dylan snuggled in closer and turned the TV on.

Abby retreated to the kitchen. She figured Gen, who loved peanut butter, would be sharing. As long as Dylan wasn’t allergic, it was probably the best option. She debated making coffee but decided on a mug of chamomile tea instead. After all, once his father picked Dylan up, she still intended to go straight to bed; caffeine wouldn’t help.

Bringing the plate to the couch, she couldn’t help smiling when her prediction proved correct. Sure enough, for each bite of sandwich Dylan ate, he broke off an equal-sized portion and shared it with Gen.

“Don’t get used to it, girl,” Abby chided. “Tomorrow it’s back to kibble.”

Before long, the sleek silver Audi screeched to a stop across the street. Her heart leapt into her throat as she debated what she should say. Abby crossed the room and slipped out the door before Scott could knock.

He leapt the three steps and teetered to a stop before he barreled into her, one arm

already moving to sweep her to the side. “Where is he?”

She gestured toward her bay window. Dylan, curled on her couch with his arms wrapped around a blissful Gen, giggled at the television. “He’s fine. He’s safe, Scott. I promise. Can we talk for a minute?”

Scott’s jaw clenched and his words ran over hers. “He’s fine? He ran away!” He tried to side-step her.

She moved with him.

“Yes, he’s fine,” she reiterated. “But he’s terrified of his doctor.”

“He’s what? Are you kidding me?” He scowled, eyebrows knitting together. “That’s ridiculous.”

“He’s scared they’ll cut his arm off.” She pursed her lips. “Your orthopedist isn’t Dr. Cunningham, by any chance, is it?”

Scott nodded.

“I thought so. Good doctor, but no bedside manner, especially with kids.” She had her own reasons for disliking Cunningham, reasons unrelated to Scott and Dylan, reasons that long since should have been laid to rest. Still, they persisted. The fact that Dylan had been a victim of his twisted sense of humor tugged a chord she couldn’t sever, no matter how many years had passed.

“Uh, okay.” Scott glanced at his son through the window. “He’s scared? Are you sure? It was a joke, and Dylan loves robots.”

“Kids don’t always take jokes the same way adults do.” She could have said more.

Some jokes were hurtful no matter the audience. Sometimes they weren't meant to be jokes, at all, just cruel prodding, the adult equivalent of knocking shoulders and name-calling. Abby forced herself to let go of her anger; it could do nothing to help her right now. "He's also afraid you'll be mad at him for running away."

"Well, he's not wrong." Scott set both fists against his hips. "How did he get here, anyway?"

"Apparently, he found my number on the fridge and looked me up on the internet."

Scott dropped his arms to his sides and let his fists unclench, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Of course he did." He dropped his chin, glancing at her through his lashes, that dratted dimple quirked his cheek. "I planned to call again."

Abby stepped out of the way and waved him inside. "Well, Dylan saved you the nickel."

Scott's bark of laughter as he entered her home caught Dylan's attention, and he turned on the couch, clutching Gen closer, to face his dad.

Entering Abby's home, Scott couldn't help noticing the contradictions in her space. Clean, almost sterile, except for the dog toys spilling out of a basket near the kitchen and across the dark, wood-planked floor. Missing a dining table, two stools sat at the bar cordoning the kitchen off from the living space. An off-white wall with rectangles of brighter paint ran down one side of the room, as if pictures had once protected the color beneath while the sun faded the rest. Long bookcases marched down the other, filled with thick, heavy, leather-bound tomes with gold leaf edging. Until the last few shelves. Then, a riot of brightly colored paperbacks overran their allotted space, pictures of dogs on their covers. Training books, but why had she crammed so many

in so tightly with all the available space among the other shelves?

His eyes slid to the soft, thick carpets beneath the comfortable, over-stuffed furniture facing the bay window and the street outside. At first, he thought the black couch a bit stark, then Gen's tail thumped the cushion. The color matched her fur.

Much like Abby, the space perplexed him, similarly to when he'd met her for coffee. Her nervousness when he approached her and her confidence talking about Gen, her direct refusal of his offer for dinner but her easy banter... Who was she?

Would she give him the chance to find out?

He forced his mind away from the conundrums and focused on his son.

"Hey, Dylan."

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He knew men who parented with discipline and rigor, especially boys. Dylan had never needed that kind of parenting before, but maybe he needed to adjust. Then again, if Abby had read the situation correctly, if Dylan's misbehavior had come from fear, it wouldn't help to yell.

"Hey... Dad..." His son's voice caught, the wavering tone betraying his nerves.

Scott couldn't even pretend to still be angry. Shame and guilt wrestled within him, along with a sense of failure, as he circled the couch and sat beside the boy.

As he did, he kept an eye on Gen, gauging Dylan's emotions through the dog. Though her ears followed his movements, she didn't tense or show distress. "So, I hear you're not a fan of Dr. Cunningham."

Dylan shook his head, then whispered, "I don't want to lose my arm, even if I do get to be a robot."

"You know the doctor was joking, right? He's not going to cut off anything." Scott frowned. "I'd never let anyone do that to you, Dylan. I'd never let anyone hurt you."

Dylan's eyes dropped away, his fingers winding and unwinding in the fur of Gen's ruff.

"You know that, right?"

Dylan kept his face down and his shoulders twitched, not a shrug, but close enough.

Wounded, Scott wondered what he'd done to earn his son's lack of faith. However it had happened, it ended here. "Okay, we'll find a different doctor."

Dylan's head jerked up, his eyes searching his father's face. Apparently seeing what he needed to, he blew out a sigh of relief.

Gen turned to check in with Abby, then laid her head back on Dylan's knee as Scott rested his hand on his son's shoulder for a moment and squeezed.

Reaching for the forgotten peanut butter sandwich, he asked, "Can I have a bite?"

Dylan glanced sideways at Gen before Abby came up behind the couch. "Why don't I make you one of your own? I don't guarantee Gen hasn't snuck a lick or two."

"That'd be great, thanks." He stayed a moment more beside his son, trying to make sense of the cartoon, then gave up and followed Abby to the kitchen.

He settled on the empty stool at the bar. More books filled a second one, the heavy, leather-bound kind, not the dog training kind. A layer of dust coated their covers, the only sign of a mess in the place besides Gen's toys strewn across the floor.

"You keep things very... neat," he commented as she opened and closed cabinets, revealing perfectly aligned stacks of dishes and boxes of food.

Abby shrugged. "Former EMT, you know. Everything has to be cleaned before it's put away, always in the same place, and always organized. Imagine the mess if the team on the shift before yours skimped. It kind of carried over."

Scott chuckled. "Yeah, I imagine it would." He glanced back at Dylan. "My life is a lot less organized since having a kid, but the nanny does a pretty good job keeping things running. Except when my son takes it into his head to run away." He frowned,

but Abby's face cleared, and she laughed.

"Yes, I suppose that does make for a disorganized afternoon." She slid a plate across the bar to him, but stayed standing on the kitchen side, picking at her own half-eaten sandwich. "Here," she scribbled for a moment on a pad of paper. "Try Dr. Hastings. He's a good friend of mine, and great with kids."

Scott accepted the torn-off page and slid it into his pocket, then, swallowing his bite of sandwich, prompted, "So, you never did tell me why you quit being an EMT?"

Abby's face crumpled and she twisted away.

He half-stood, then hesitated, waiting until her ragged breathing steadied again. She turned back, tugged a tissue out of the box on the counter, then cleared her throat. "Sorry, it's been a long couple of days."

Scott waited.

"One accident too many, I guess, and I... I couldn't go back."

Abby seemed under control again, but for the first time since arriving Scott took a moment to focus on her, rather than his son, or Gen, or her home, or how he should act, or what he should say. Dark smudges under her eyes testified to at least one sleepless night, and her shoulders—her whole body—slumped with exhaustion. Now that the situation with Dylan had been handled, whatever had been going on at work had caught up with her.

"Oh, Abby, you look awful," he blurted out, then cringed. In his experience, women didn't like being told that kind of thing.

She attempted a smile, but it came out more as a grimace. At least she wasn't

insulted. “Like I said, long couple of days.”

They finished eating in uncomfortable silence and he followed her lead when he’d swallowed his last bite, putting his empty plate into the dishwasher.

He glanced up to find her studying him and laughed it off. “Yeah, I know how to use a dishwasher... and I fold laundry.”

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Her half-smile, the first since he'd asked her about being an EMT, sent a cool wave of relief flooding through his veins. A moment later, she clapped a hand over her mouth to hide a yawn. "Sorry, I haven't eaten in, well, I'm not sure... I think I had some coffee..." She trailed off and swayed on her feet.

"We'll get out of here and let you get some sleep." He moved toward the living area, meaning to call to Dylan, but stopped at the sight of his son stroking a worn-out Gen's silky ears while she snored beside him.

"It's fine," Abby reassured him through another yawn.

"C'mon, Dylan, let's let Abby and Gen get some rest."

"Awww, Dad, do we have to?" Dylan whined. "I like it here."

Abby flopped onto the couch beside him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and resting one hand on Gen's delicate head. "Tell you what, Dylan. You are welcome here anytime.If," she glanced back at Scott, "you have your dad's permission."

"Promise?"

Abby held out her little finger. "Pinky swear."

Six

SCOTT FLIPPED THE pages of a magazine and shifted, trying to find a comfortable spot on the worn waiting room chairs while Dylan smashed the block city he'd built,

using a toddler's plastic airplane to strafe the buildings.

“Pew! Pew, pew!”

His son's sound effects were more suited to some sort of epic space battle with lasers and missiles.

A nurse poked her head into the waiting room. “Dylan Edwards?”

The explosion noises broke off.

Scott stood and settled a comforting hand on Dylan's shoulder. “We're right here.”

“This way,” the nurse waved them down the hall. “Room three. Dr. Hastings will be with you in a moment.”

The two slipped into the small exam room and Dylan glanced around, eyes wide. “I wish Gen was here.”

Scott groaned. He hadn't even thought to ask Abby to come, though they'd seen her and Gen a few times at the park in the last couple of weeks. She always paused her run to say hello, and once or twice he'd even gotten her to stick around for a short conversation, usually while Gen squirmed on her back in doggy bliss, Dylan scratching her exposed belly.

“Sorry, kiddo, maybe next time.”

A few moments later the door swung open, and Dr. Hastings breezed in. Tall and lanky with dark-skin, he pushed wire-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose. Coarse gray hair curled close to his scalp. He carried a folder under one arm and wore scrubs with multi-colored dinosaurs printed all over them. Glancing at Dylan, he

winked before offering his hand to Scott.

“I’m Dr. Hastings.” He rotated to face the boy and continued, “You must be Dylan. Let’s have a peek at your arm.”

Scott couldn’t help immediately comparing this new doctor to the old one. Dr. Cunningham had spoken exclusively to Scott, except for when he had talked about cutting Dylan’s arm off. Dr. Hastings began by asking his son what TV shows he liked, and Dylan didn’t hesitate to burble excitedly about his favorites. Even after the doctor had finished a cursory exam of Dylan’s arm and cast, he continued to pay careful attention until Dylan dragged in a long breath, gearing up for another round.

Scott caught himself smiling. Of course, Abby had known exactly the right doctor to recommend.

Dr. Hastings, engrossed by the battle between the good guys and the bad guys, nodded as Dylan prattled on. “You said the yellow one got broken...”

“Ripped apart.”

“Sorry, ripped apart. Sounds like he needed a mechanic to help put him back together, right? Well, I’m kind of like a mechanic for humans. Shall we take a look at what you need put back together?”

Dylan swallowed hard and dropped his eyes to his lap. He picked at a thread on his jeans, then scratched a nail across his cast. Scott nudged him, bumping Dylan with his elbow, “Dylan? Did you have a question for the doctor?”

Dylan swallowed again, then, taking a deep breath, he gathered his courage. “Will you have to cut off my arm?” It came out as little more than a whisper, but Dr. Hastings paid close attention.

“Absolutely not! When we get there, I’ll tell you more about how it works, but for now, rest assured young man, I won’t leave a single mark on you.” When Dylan’s forehead still furrowed, Dr. Hastings crouched down until he could catch Dylan’s gaze. “I promise you; I won’t hurt you or your arm.” He paused, then held up one pinky. “I pinky swear.”

A moment later, Dylan smiled. They shook on the deal and Scott let out a sigh of relief.

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Dr. Hastings flipped open the folder he'd been carrying, pulling out a stack of x-rays. He snapped them into place one by one on the lit panel hanging beside the examination table. Studying them for a few moments, he slipped all but two back into the folder. "So, looks like a fracture each to the radius and ulna above the wrist. Compression?" Scott nodded. "Yes, I thought so. And his records from Dr. Cunningham state he also had a sprain."

Scott nodded. "Yeah, he fell off the monkey bars."

The doctor nodded and smiled. "Yes, I had heard the story." He turned back to Dylan. "So, we're going to do a couple more X-rays today to evaluate how it's healing, then we'll have a better idea of when we can take the cast off."

As the tech prepared Dylan for his X-rays, Dr. Hastings surprised Scott by waiting with him in the hallway.

"It's a light day," he explained, "and I know Abby has taken a personal interest in Dylan's well-being."

Scott nodded, avoiding the doctor's penetrating stare.

He hadn't made any secret of Abby's involvement with Dylan on the playground when they first visited the emergency room, and to tell the truth, it had reassured him when the hospital staff had recognized her name.

"She suggested you might be a better match for Dylan than Dr. Cunningham."

Dr. Hastings arched an eyebrow. “No, she’s never much cared for Tom. Not since he tried to edge Will out of his med-school internship at the hospital by playing the ‘my-father’s-on-the-board’ card.” He shook his head.

“Will?” Scott twitched. “Boyfriend?”

“Ah. Not... exactly. She didn’t tell you.” It wasn’t a question.

Scott shook his head. Had she brushed off a date with him because she already had another man in the picture? But, if so, why hadn’t she said anything? Could Will be a brother, a cousin, a colleague from her days as an EMT. An ex-husband. Though why she wouldn’t have said so when she asked about Dylan’s mother...

She doesn’t owe you anything, Scott reminded himself. You’re not even really friends. Though, he’d hoped they were, especially after her help with Dylan.

“No, she wouldn’t have, but I won’t say anymore. It’s her story to tell, when she’s ready.” The doctor crossed his arms, effectively blockading any further questions.

Though curiosity gnawed at Scott, he didn’t press.

Fortunately, Dr. Hastings continued, “My daughter, Cara, is one of Abby’s best friends. That’s how I know Abby’s taken an interest in Dylan’s case. All above board, of course; HIPPA and whatnot. She asked me to take extra good care of him if he came in. Mentioned he appreciated pinky promises.

“She really is something special with kids, her and Gen,” the doctor went on. “I don’t see as much of her these days now that I’m in private practice, but I went up to pediatrics not long after she and Gen started visiting and the difference they’d already made astonished me. I was a skeptic before—dogs didn’t belong in hospitals—but now? They changed my mind.”

Scott nodded. “Dylan adores Gen; I’m pretty sure she’s the only reason he didn’t panic when he fell. And Abby’s talked about how much she loves her work at the hospital...”

The tech had finished with Dylan, so he didn’t continue, but Dr. Hastings nodded.

Back in the exam room, he pulled up the new X-rays on his computer and rotated the screen toward Dylan. Pointing, he explained, “See the original cracks, here and here? And the whitish buildup around them? Your bone is callousing—healing.”

Dylan nodded with wide eyes.

Dr. Hastings studied the screen for a few more moments, tapping his lower lip with one finger as he did so. “I think a little while longer. It’s been, what? Four weeks since you fell? Yes, I think two more weeks and it should be ready to come out of the cast by then.”

“And you won’t cut off my arm?”

“No, Dylan. Like I promised.”

Dr. Hastings shook Scott’s hand, gave Dylan a high-five, then headed out the door, but Scott followed him, catching him in the hall.

“Listen, I don’t know how, but... Well, I’d like to help, too. Not like Abby does; but maybe in another way. As a parent, watching Dylan fall felt like seeing something in slow motion, completely outside my control.” Scott shook his head, shaking off the memory, as well, then continued, “I can’t imagine what those other parents are going through.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I play football, and we have a publicity department. I know some of the other guys have worked with Providence in the past. Who would I call if I wanted to set something up?”

Dr. Hastings grinned, brilliant white teeth glowing in the dim hallway. “I’ll get you that number.”

ABBY STEPPED THROUGH the sliding glass doors and paused as the hospital A/C hit her with a blast of cool air.

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“Apparently summer is arriving early this year,” she said to Gen, pacing at her side. “Leave it to Charleston to hit eighty-five degrees in April. I bet the humidity is at least eighty, too.”

The dog shook, collar jingling and paws sliding on the smooth, tiled floor, her fur fluffing as if to let the artificially chilled air reach her skin.

Liam had pulled through, another miracle in a long line of them. Ethan, gaining strength again, had already promised to be ready the next time Liam needed him. Their mother, well aware Liam lived on borrowed time, didn’t have the heart to tell them otherwise. The last time Abby had visited, they’d been busy making plans for a great nerf battle when Liam could go home.

The depressing cycle could be overwhelming, as Liam improved only to get sick again. She’d seen it before: the hope, the brilliant smile, and the belief they’d finally triumphed over the disease ravaging their body. Then it would come back, making them ill and weak. She wasn’t sure how many more times she could bear it. How many more times it would take to break Ethan’s heart once and for all.

She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath, raising her chin and pasting a bright smile on her face. No matter how much it hurt, these kids needed her, needed the hope and comfort she and Gen represented. She couldn’t forget that.

The doors slid open, and Abby stepped out of the elevator, only to be whacked in the chest with a small foam football. Gen’s whole body wriggled, an undulating motion that started at her tail and rolled through her whole body. Snatching the offending toy in her mouth, she glanced sideways up at Abby, then pranced forward a few steps.

“What...” Abby trailed off as she surveyed the chaotic pandemonium before her.

Streamers in silver and black hung from doors, walls, and light fixtures; large boxes over-flowed with silver and black sports jerseys, stuffed birds, and posters; and small foam footballs whizzed back and forth all over the place. She stepped forward as the elevator doors threatened to close on her. Three more footballs pelted her, and she laughed as Gen chased down each one and crammed them into her already full mouth.

The nurses at the station across from the elevator looked up and grinned at Abby as she continued laughing. They still had jobs to do, but Abby couldn't believe they could work through this noise.

Then again, Abby thought as she took in the black marks painted under each of their eyes, maybe they've already had their fun.

“What is going on?”

Linda, the head nurse, waved down the hall. “Outreach and PR arranged a little surprise for the kids.”

A chorus of cheers erupted from the direction she gestured, Cara's voice audible even above the general tumult.

Abby turned and started down the hall, ducking the flying foam footballs that continued in a steady stream between rooms and up and down the corridor. Gen, still wiggling in joyful abandon, dropped both the balls she'd managed to pick up and leapt into the air each time a new one sailed by, teeth snapping in a vain attempt to catch them all. Abby didn't have the heart to correct the behavior, even if it wasn't professional. Professional appeared to be out the window, today, anyway.

Cara staggered out of the mass of people by the door as Abby arrived and lit up at her friend's approach. "Abby, you're here. Quick, look!" Breathless and smiling, her hair slipped out of its sleek and tidy bun in all directions.

Abby stood on tip toe to peek over the heads of the children, nurses, and parents crowding the door and gasped in surprise. Tiny, frail Liam perched on the shoulders of one of the burliest men Abby had ever seen. Not fat, but three hundred plus pounds of pure muscle, and well over six feet tall. Liam's head brushed dangerously close to the door jamb, even slumped over, his weakness still apparent. An over-sized silver and black t-shirt had been draped over his small frame, a raptor in full steep emblazoned across his chest. Beside him, Abby recognized Dylan on the shoulders of another, more slender man, and both boys studied their opponent.

Ethan held one of the ubiquitous foam footballs, the over-long sleeves of his shirt tangling in his elbow as he prepared for a throw.

Abby's breath stuttered. Wearing his own number seven, gleaming in silver against the stark black of his jersey, Scott coached Ethan. A strange pressure built in her chest, and her heart threatened to burst through her ribs. She remembered the sensation, remembered the person who had made her feel that way. Then, it had a different, more clinical flavor, but the result had been the same. Her eyes misted and, for a moment, she pictured a different face. Then, they cleared, and Scott had his hands wrapped around Ethan's, guiding his hold.

As Ethan drew his arm back, the gathered crowd cheered. He loosed the ball.

It made an imperfect spiral across the room and straight into Liam's outstretched hands.

"Interception!" Cara hollered, as the big man capered down the length of the room, Liam secure on his shoulders, and passed the clearly designated touchdown line. But

it obviously didn't matter to any of the children who won, or even whether they were on the same team or not; they were all bright-eyed, flushed with exhilaration, and smiling from ear to ear.

Gen, too excited to contain herself, let out a series of high-pitched play barks. Liam turned his head, scanning the on-lookers for the dog, and Ethan wheeled toward them, peering through the adults.

With her presence thus announced, Abby pushed her way forward.

"Abby, look." Ethan pointed at his twin. "Liam's in the NFL."

Abby threaded between the last few bystanders and went to her knees in front of Ethan. "I know, I saw. He caught the ball and took it all the way." She held up both hands for Ethan to high-five, then stood, turning to Liam and reaching up so he could give her a high-five, too.

Dropping her gaze lower, she met the eyes of the man carrying him. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

The guy smiled and bounced Liam, not noticing the boy's slight weight on his shoulders. "Scott set it all up. Thank him." He jutted his chin and nodded behind Abby.

She turned, her gaze meeting Scott's as he wove his way toward them.

"You did all this?" She stopped, words escaping her as she processed what kind of planning it must have taken, what it must be costing. "Why?"

Scott's solemn eyes held hers. She wanted to glance away, unused to this kind of open confidence. The vulnerability and authenticity of eye contact. Most people

from before still wouldn't meet her gaze; Gen distracted anyone new before they could notice her. That's how she preferred it.

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“I know how much this place means to you. And I know how much Dylan’s fall scared me, even if it wasn’t anything compared to what these kids face every day. I wanted to do something to make them happy.”

Time froze as people swirled around them. Dylan lunged out of the crowd and swung his arms around Ethan, whooping, then Liam joined them, and all three flopped to the floor beside Gen as the dog wagged her entire body, surrounded by her favorite boys.

“It looks like Gen will be busy for a while.” Scott quirked a half-smile at the four of them. “Take a walk with me?”

Abby slipped Gen’s leash out of her loose grip and handed it to Cara. She glanced again at the smile lighting Liam’s face, then turned to Scott and nodded. “I know a good place.”

The hospital had originally been built as a squat, rectangular building, red brick and white mortar, with a small parking lot tucked behind. Over the years, it had been renovated and added to, until only a few years before when it had undergone a major overhaul. Now, the original wing had grown several stories taller, redone in a modern tone with expansive panels of glass, while the two wings to the east and west kept the original brick tones.

The northern wing, now called the North Tower, vaulted overhead, the opus of the new facility. It soared several stories above its sister wings, while still maintaining an ethereal quality of grace and delicacy. It also housed some of the most advanced diagnostic and treatment facilities in the state.

Abby described the changes to Scott as they took the elevator to the ground floor, then wound their way to a set of glass doors with ATRIUM etched across them.

The gem of the new hospital was the enclosed central courtyard. Filled with gardens, a play structure, a few benches, a winding pathway, and a coffee stand, it opened to the sky but remained protected by the surrounding buildings. It provided a perfect place for children to play while a hospitalized relative slept, rehabilitation patients to relearn how to walk, and doctors and nurses to take a much-needed respite from the stresses of the day. A small fountain tucked away in a corner played its tinkling music and streamed into a small rivulet, which then flowed into a rock-lined pool to one side of the coffee stand. Large koi swam lazy circles and searched for treats and tidbits from the surface or flagged their fan-like fins in the current.

“You’ve been here a long time.”

Abby nodded. “I started as a volunteer when I was sixteen. I always wanted to work in healthcare, so when I needed hours for high school, it made sense. That was...” She paused, tipping her head to one side. “Wow, fifteen years ago. Almost half...”

She trailed off, swallowing hard. Half her life.

Half her life, so far.

But at just past thirty, she had more than half her life still to live.

Emptiness spooled out ahead of her.

Three years of barely surviving and she couldn’t imagine another thirty... forty... fifty.

Her breath stuttered, her inhale ragged, and she closed her eyes, but the vacant black

behind her lids did little to reassure her. Popping them open again, she spun toward Scott, grasping for normalcy before her brain could spin and spiral.

Eight

SCOTT ABSOLUTELY KNEW you didn't ask women their age. It wasn't a mistake he'd ever made, fortunately, since his mother had taught him manners as a child, but with some quick math, he could make an educated guess.

A bit younger than him, but not as young as he'd initially assumed, given her air of delicate vulnerability.

When she abruptly spun toward him, eyes wide and breath catching, he struggled to read her reaction. She'd talked the whole way down here, but she'd yet to say anything about his visit, though her words to Jimmy, upstairs, seemed to imply she appreciated it.

"I don't know what to say," she gasped, the words tumbling over themselves as she raced to speak them. "It's so much for you to have done this. The jerseys, the footballs..."

Scott shook his head. "It really wasn't anything. We always keep boxes of stuff lying around, especially all the leftovers from last season, to give away like this. The team likes the publicity. I just made some calls."

Abby snorted, the wildness slowly fading from her face. "I'm sure the hospital appreciates the publicity, too."

Scott paused, weighed his words, then continued. "Dylan had his appointment with Dr. Hastings last week. I explained how I wanted to help, too. Like you do. You... inspire me."

Abby's eyes widened, then the corners of her lips fell, and her voice turned flat. "I'm no one's inspiration, believe me."

She turned away, but Scott caught her arm. "Hey, I mean it. What you do here? It matters to these kids. To their parents. It's important work." She didn't move, but tension hummed through her frame, stiff and unyielding beneath his touch.

He waited. Most people appreciated a compliment, even if they wouldn't accept it, demurring with false humility, or shrugging it off. Abby, though, didn't do either. She seemed genuinely hurt by his words. His brows knitted as he studied her, trying to unravel her mysteries.

Her eyes shimmered as she answered him fiercely, "No, what matters is the doctors who heal them. The research they need to destroy the things that are killing them. What Gen and I do? It's not enough. It will never be enough." Her breath hitched, speeding up.

Abby's words were layered with weight, with meaning Scott couldn't grasp, and he negotiated his way through them, trying to find the missing piece. It eluded him, so instead he reached for her hand. "You may not be able to heal their bodies, but you heal something even more important: their souls."

She wrenched away, pain pinching her features.

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Why couldn't she understand the value in her work? Why had she quit as an EMT if she truly believed nothing mattered as much as healing the body? It didn't make sense. She didn't make sense, and no matter how he turned it over, like a jeweler holding a gem to the light, he couldn't understand why the façade refracted strangely. She reminded him of a confused defensive line; trying to make meaning out of meaninglessness and everyone ended up out of step.

The low rush of the creek filled the echoing space around them, the leaves rustling in the slight breeze, and a chickadee chirped in a tree. She crossed her arms, tucking her hands close to her body until she stood stiff and still. The silence spooled out between them. Her eyes flitted to the trees, the glittering stones in the pavers beneath their feet, past his ear, then darted away again.

“Who's Will?” The words were out before he could call them back and she jerked.

Her jaw tightened as her teeth ground together, and Scott shivered at the sound, like nails on a chalkboard. Her eyes turned hard, boring into his with fire and fury as she hissed, “Where did you hear that name?”

He lurched an involuntary step back. “Dr. Hastings mentioned it. We were talking about why I switched Dylan to his office, and he said you'd never liked Dr. Cunningham. Not since... Something about an internship?”

“Tom's always been an ass.” Her face twisted with her bitter tone. “He's only ever been in it for the money, the prestige. He's never cared about helping people. He wants to be the most important person in the room, and if anyone doesn't think he is... Well, he's small-minded and petty enough to make sure they regret it. The Board saw

through him, though. And he never got over it.”

Scott nodded. Paused. “And Will?”

She froze, not breathing for a long second, then two, then three, until her chest heaved wildly on a ragged inhale. She closed her eyes, her lips moving with silent words.

Scott saw the exact moment she got herself back under control; her breathing steadied, her lips stilled, her eyes opened again, flat and remote. “He was my husband.”

A bare whisper of sound, little more than the susurrating breeze, and he wasn’t sure he’d heard her correctly, at first. Then, she continued in a louder voice, but one devoid of emotion, reciting facts, clinical. “He died. Three years ago. He was a pediatric oncologist—a cancer doctor for children.”

“Here?”

She nodded.

The missing piece slotted into place. It explained her deep ties to this hospital, to these kids. It explained why she believed only the doctors—the researchers—mattered in the long run.

“I’m so sorry, Abby.”

“It’s okay. It’s not your fault.” She said this in the same, dead voice. Rote. Memorized.

“What happened? Or do you not want to talk about it?” Scott cringed. “Sorry, I didn’t

mean to be insensitive. You don't have to answer."

She wandered away a few steps. Her hands clenched and unclenched, turning over each other.

"He'd been working late, trying to finish up a paper before the publishing deadline. A drunk driver ran a stop sign and clipped his bumper, spinning him over the edge of a ditch and into a tree. He was thrown..." Her breath stuttered again, but she swallowed and continued, voice steadying as she spoke, the distant, clinical tone returning. "He went through the driver's window. When we got there, the police were already on scene, directing us toward the victim. We could barely see anything through the pouring rain, but his head... There was blood everywhere, and there had been significant cranial trauma, as well as multiple limb fractures."

"Wait, we? Oh, my God. You were there?"

Abby nodded, her voice dropping to a harsh whisper and tears flooded her eyes. "I didn't see the car. I didn't... I didn't recognize... him. I thought it even then: I've never seen an accident this bad. He's not going to make it. And he didn't. He died a few hours later."

"But you were with him, right?" Scott found himself wishing it. For her sake, he couldn't imagine she might not have been.

"I was, yeah. They called me, once they ID'ed him. It took a while, but I made it at the end." She coughed, a short, bitter sound. "First to treat him, first to say goodbye."

"I don't even know what to say. That's why you quit being an EMT. That's why you don't drink." They weren't questions.

"Yeah. I couldn't go back to work. I could barely leave the house."

She stood, fingers plucking at the seams of her shirt, looking lost and forlorn. He wanted to hug her, pull her into him and hide her from the world, from her grief and pain. Would she let him? She'd been so careful. Kept some distance between them. But had that changed? Sharing such a deep part of her soul, would she let him comfort her?

"I'd like to hug you." The words were awkward. They seemed silly out in the open, now. But she huffed a short breath through her nose.

"I could probably use a hug."

He moved toward her, slowly, and opened his arms. She stepped into them, forehead falling against his chest, her breaths shuddering through her frame. After a few moments, the whipcord tension of her body softened.

Scott had no words. What could you say to such a story? It explained so much about Abby, and yet, at the same time, it left so many questions unanswered. Where had Gen come from? Was she even interested in dating at all, never mind dating him? Did she think him some kind of jerk for pursuing her?

He cleared his throat. "Listen, I'm sorry. I didn't know. I shouldn't have pushed before. When we had coffee."

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She stepped away, restoring some space between them, but the distance didn't feel like a wall between them, anymore. "It's fine. I had fun. I hadn't been out with anyone in a long time. You made it...easy, I guess. Or like it could be easy."

"Then I'm glad." There wasn't much else to say.

She pressed her lips together. "C'mon, we should get back."

They arrived to find the foam balls still flying. Gen, flopped on the floor at Cara's feet and surrounded by several children, had the shredded remains of innumerable footballs between her front paws as she gnawed the nose of another one.

"Here." Scott dug through one of the boxes and pulled out a gift bag, black with a silver raptor, glittering strands of silver rickrack erupting over the top and trailing down the sides. He handed it to Abby.

Digging beneath the decorative layer, Abby pulled out two rolls of cloth. She shook them out to discover a pair of jerseys, but they were different from those the kids had been given. One, in her size, had the Raptor's symbol on the sleeves, but whereas the children's shirts had double zeroes and the team's name, hers had Scott's number—seven—and his last name emblazoned across the back. The other, much smaller, took Abby a moment to recognize.

"For Gen?"

Scott nodded as Abby held it out to the dog to sniff. She unclipped Gen's working jacket and slipped the dog-sized jersey over her head. Gen nipped at the loose fabric a

few times, then flopped back to the floor, taking up one of the masticated footballs between her paws and trying to find an unchewed part.

“Thank you.” Abby smiled up at Scott.

“Well, I don’t know if you’re much of a sports fan, but maybe you could wear it on game days.”

Cara giggled. “You have no idea. She can probably quote the Raptors’ stats from last season better than you.”

“Shut up, Cara.”

Scott turned toward Abby and the flash of pink across her cheekbones caught his attention before she could duck her head into the jersey, hands smoothing it down over her shirt.

“I love it. And I’ll definitely wear it on game days. But only if you promise to hit a passer rating of over a hundred this year. Last year, you werehellon my Fantasy score, and Livins got traded to Miami this year, so you won’t have anyone to pick up youruncatchable throws.” She used air quotes, her derisive tone a categorical judgment of what the commentators deemed acceptable.

His jaw dropped while Cara’s peals of laughter echoed down the hall. A moment later, he allowed himself a chuckle, running through the other above-one-hundred quarterbacks in the league and considering himself in good company if he could match them. Over a hundred would be a good goal, considering he’d broken ninety-five last year.

“Yes ma’am.”

The elevator dinged and several more people disembarked onto the pediatric floor, cameras and note pads in hand.

Scott grimaced. “Ah, the press corps. Like I said, the team loves this kind of publicity.”

Linda, the head nurse, came out from behind the counter and smirked at Scott. “Don’t you worry yourself, darling, the hospital loves this kind of publicity, too.”

“I, on the other hand, do not.” Abby eased away.

“But you’re the whole reason we’re here,” Scott reminded her.

“Inspiration, darling. It’s a powerful thing,” Linda added. “As are all those donor dollars we’ll get when the pictures hit the internet. You want to deprive the kids of that money?”

Abby shuffled her feet a moment, twirling her ponytail, then sighed. “Fine. For the kids.”

Nine

“ABBY, YOU CAME!” Dylan launched himself across the wide, grassy field, one arm waving wildly, the other slightly less so, weighed down by a bright blue splint.

Abby and Gen had joined Dylan at his most recent appointment with Dr. Hastings, and after taking another set of X-rays, he’d pronounced Dylan’s arm healed enough to remove the cast, though he’d have to wear the splint and go to physical therapy for a few more weeks.

Gen had climbed on the table with Dylan while the doctor cut off the cast, pressing

her body against his leg and letting him wrap his free arm around her, face buried in her ruff.

Afterwards, they'd all gone out for ice cream, and Dylan invited Abby and Gen to his school fundraising fair.

Laying at Abby's feet, Gen pushed up into a sit, ears forward, tail wagging through the grass as Dylan approached.

Abby glanced down at her partner. "Easy, Gen."

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Dylan skidded to a halt in front of them. “And you brought Gen. I can’t wait for you to meet my teacher. She said maybe you could visit our classroom...”

“Whoa, Dylan. Easy kiddo.” Scott caught up and laid a hand on his son’s shoulder. “What did we talk about?”

Dylan stilled and wrenched his gaze from Gen with a visible effort. “Sorry, sir. Hi, Abby. I’m glad you came to my school fundraiser. May I pet Gen?”

Abby, taking her cue from them, nodded solemnly. “Thank you for inviting me. Yes, you may.”

As Dylan dropped down beside the dog, Abby glanced at Scott, who shook his head in mock irritation. “All he could talk about on the way over was his excitement about seeing Gen. I reminded him how you said usually a handler likes to be acknowledged before the dog, but...” He shrugged.

Abby nodded. “It’s hard.”

They turned and started across the lawn toward the bright lights and musical jingles of the midway. To the right, a small Ferris wheel spun slowly, while other rides were arranged around its base like chicks beneath the protection of their mother’s wing. Wide red- and white-striped canvas tents covered a petting zoo, picnic tables for eating, and long benches overflowing with silent auction items.

Abby twined Gen’s leash through her fingers, the leather worked soft from years of handling, as Dylan danced ahead of them burbling a running commentary about his

friends, teachers, favorite rides, and games.

“This is quite the event. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Beside her, Scott snorted. “You should see the fall fundraiser. They rent out an entire corn maze and at least one kid always gets lost.”

Dylan’s enthusiasm led them as far as the first row of games, where Scott turned over a couple dollars so they could toss rings over the tops of glass bottles. Abby struggled, and when one of her rings bounced wildly back out of the arena, Gen leapt into the air and caught it.

“Keep it,” the carny laughed. “She’s earned it.”

As they moved on to the next game, Gen paraded with her ring in her mouth, much to Dylan’s entertainment. He asked her to give it up, but it soon devolved into a tug-of-war game.

“Don’t let her win. Tug is great, but it’s really important she doesn’t learn to play keep-away.”

Dylan nodded, fingers wrapped around the slick, plastic ring, but when Gen wrenched it loose, Abby hooked her fingers through it.

“That’s enough, Gen. Leave it.”

Gen dropped the ring, mouth wide open in a smile, tail whisking the air behind her.

Abby tucked the ring into her small backpack, grabbing a few dollars at the same time. At the next booth, she handed them over so they could throw balls at stacked milk bottles.

Dylan won a small, inflatable teddy bear and Scott got a lucky bounce, winning a stuffed hippo with rainbow wings.

“You haven’t won anything yet,” Dylan commented as they moved on. “What games are you good at?”

Abby studied the next few tents. “I’m not sure, actually. I’ve never played the fair games.”

Dylan’s eyes widened. “Never? Not even as a kid?”

“No. My parents were kind of old school. They believed in hard work and saving.”

“So, you didn’t ever do anything fun?” Dylan’s wrinkled nose spoke volumes about his opinion.

“Dylan...” Scott scolded, but Abby laughed.

“We went camping for a week every summer in Congaree, and sometimes I’d go with my friends to their families’ beach houses, but this kind of thing,” she waved a hand, encompassing the festive fair atmosphere, “they didn’t really see the point.”

“That sounds...”

Abby caught Scott’s gaze as Dylan struggled for something polite to say and had to bite down on her lip to keep from laughing. Throwing him a lifeline, she said, “We’ve been to fairs for training, but I’ve never ridden the rides, or played the games.”

“You go to fairs for training?” Scott lifted an eyebrow. “Actually, never mind, I’m not surprised at all.”

Abby shrugged, though his words pricked her. Did she really not know how to have fun? “I am my parents’ daughter, and they’re good for distraction.”

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“So, what next?” Dylan asked, back to his usual, enthusiastic self now that he didn’t have to find something nice to say about what he clearly considered a deprived childhood. “Squirt guns, bottle lift, or Whack-A-Mole?”

“I haven’t had much luck with the bottle games so far. Maybe Whack-A-Mole?”

“I can take care of Gen while you play,” Dylan offered, magnanimously.

Abby almost smiled at his solemnity, but he held the leash so carefully, took the role so seriously, she held back.

“It helps if I imagine the mole is someone I hate.” Scott handed her the heavy mallet.

Abby’s mind flashed through several options: Tom Cunningham, a girl in high school who had made fun of her hair once, then it froze on one face. No, she didn’t—couldn’t—hate him.

Her breath caught.

What did it say about her that Will’s face came to mind?

Anger bubbled up, providing a reason, but she squashed it down, as she always did. She didn’t hate Will for leaving her. She didn’t.

She shook herself. “Who do you hate?”

Scott’s brows drew together, and his eyes turned stormy, then they flicked to Dylan,

and he took a conscious breath. “Maybe someone I really don’t like, then.”

She nodded, forcing her mind back to Tom. “Okay, go.”

Scott hit the button to start the game and Abby watched for the little mole to poke its head out of a hole. When it did, she smacked it down again. A moment later, it popped up in another hole, and another. Then, two moles popped up at the same time.

Abby’s arms shook by the time she missed enough to end the game. She handed the mallet back to the person manning the booth and turned to Scott but paused at the look on his face. “What?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head, and his expression cleared. “You’re very intense when you’re concentrating.”

Abby frowned, unsure how to respond. Was intense good or bad?

“Here you go, Miss.” The person behind the counter held out a small stuffed toy. “Your prize.”

“I won a prize?” She turned toward Dylan and Scott. “It’s...”

“Hideous,” Dylan supplied, then flushed, eyes dropping to the toes of his sneakers. “Sorry.”

A peal of laughter escaped Abby, and she forgot to wonder what Scott’s words meant. “I suppose it is. Here, Gen, want a new toy?”

She wiggled it at the dog, who sniffed it, sneezed, then shook herself all over.

Scott chuckled. “I think that might be a no from her.”

“I think you’re right.” Abby tucked the unidentified stuffed animal into her backpack.

“Here, Abby.” Dylan handed Gen’s leash back to her.

“Thank you.” She wrapped the leather around her hand, then ruffled his hair gently. He leaned into her touch before leaping ahead of them, leading them on to the next game.

She met Scott’s eyes, his expression unreadable again. She swept her hand over her hair, smoothing back the small tendrils that had come loose while she played Whack-A-Mole, then smoothed her shirt as well. She darted a glance down the midway at the other people coming and going, then peeked back toward him.

“You okay?” Scott asked.

Abby chewed her lip. “What’d you mean earlier, about me being intense?”

He shrugged. “You’re... driven. You want to succeed.”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

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“Some people too much so.” His eyes fixed on the distance as he spoke; then, with a shake, he swung his gaze back to her. “But in you, it’s...”

Dylan’s shout interrupted him before he could finish speaking.

“Dad, look!” Two booths ahead, Dylan jumped up and down.

Scott’s eyes lit up, and he grabbed her hand, pulling her along beside him.

“It’s what?” she asked, towed along in his wake.

Spinning, he locked eyes with her, then winked. “It’s sexy.”

Speechless, Abby stuttered to a halt beside him as he reached Dylan.

Scott slapped a dollar on the counter and scooped up the football, cradling it in his arms for a moment before fitting his hand around it. The way he held it—firmly, but with care, confidently—pulled at Abby. He didn’t grip it, but he’d only give it up if and when he truly meant to.

The same enthusiasm permeated his expression and his son’s antics. They were an ebullient pair, not afraid to show their excitement. For Abby, whose emotions had been locked down so hard for so long, their zeal for life called to something long dormant in herself. She’d smiled and laughed more today, with them, than she had in months.

“Hey man, you need any help?” The kid behind the counter tucked the dollar into his

apron, then plunked two more footballs down where it had lain.

Scott smirked. "I think I've got it, thanks." He hefted the ball a few times, then turned to Abby. "Catch!"

Abby threw both hands up in front of her as the ball sailed toward her face. "I can't..." It flew right into her outstretched palms and her fingers instinctually spasmed closed around it.

Scott stepped close to her, eyes glowing. "Sure, you can."

She froze, his words dropping into her heart like a stone in a still pool, radiating ripples of impact which wouldn't stop until they had reshaped the entire surface. His hands wrapped around hers, warm and firm, as she held the football. His eyes, liquid and swimming and as deep as the ocean, caught her own. Then they sparkled and cracked, and he grinned as he used one hand to pop the ball up out of her grip and effortlessly caught it with the other. She shivered, and Gen pressed herself against Abby's leg.

"One point to hit the biggest target, three points for the medium, and five points for the little one," the kid behind the counter droned.

Scott nodded, fitting his hand around the football again. He squinted at the board, planted his feet, and flicked his wrist. Faster than Abby could track it, the football sailed through the largest hole. "One point, right?" The kid nodded, boredom written across his face.

Scott took the second football, eyed the target again, and threw. "Three points!" He said it even before the ball had made it to the target.

"Mmm-hmm." The kid didn't even glance up from his phone, thumb scrolling down

the screen.

Scott took the last ball, lined up his throw, and let it spiral. As it left his fingers, he held himself completely still, waiting. “And that’s five.”

The kid glanced up, the first glimmer of interest catching in his expression. “Sorry, man. I missed it.”

“Aww, come on.” Dylan’s face fell, the promise of a potential prize wrenched from his grasp.

Scott shrugged. “It’s okay, I can do it again.”

He pulled another dollar from his pocket and set it on the counter. The kid put up three more footballs, but this time he watched as Scott stepped up to the line, drew his arm back, and released.

“Five points!” Dylan grabbed ahold of Abby’s hand and squeezed. “Watch, he’ll hit them all this time.”

The utter confidence in his tone didn’t waver. His dad could do it, end of story.

The kid nodded and put down his phone. A few other people stopped to watch, too.

Scott picked up the next ball and did it again. “Ten, right?”

“Yep, ten points. That’ll get you one of the medium prizes.” The kid pointed to a wall filled with oversized inflatable sledgehammers and stuffed animals much larger than Abby’s indeterminate toy.

“I play to win.” Scott glanced over his shoulder at Abby and grinned. “I think I see

one up there that looks a bit like Gen.”

Certainly the size of Gen, the giant black dog had a heart between its front paws.

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Abby laughed and shook her head. “Oh no, one Gen is enough for me!”

“I want a Gen,” Dylan announced.

“You have to hit the three or the five for that one, man,” the kid explained.

Scott wagged his eyebrows. “I think I can manage.”

He was poised. Assertive. He knew his own abilities when it came to his sport, his passion.

Abby smiled softly as he bantered with the kid. Several more people stopped, his enthusiasm catching, but beneath the easy-going exterior, Abby couldn't miss the genuine love. He loved playing football. Loved it as much as he loved Dylan.

He clowning a bit more, chatting with his son, with the kid, and with a couple of people watching. Then, barely looking at the target, he turned and flicked his wrist. A cheer went up around them as the ball sailed neatly through the five-point target a third time.

He gave some high fives, then turned to the counter, where the kid had already brought down the over-sized stuffed dog. Several more people stepped up to the counter and a second worker scrambled to put up more footballs.

The kid leaned forward, half-hidden behind the enormous toy. “How'd you do it, man?”

Scott shrugged and smiled. “Got lucky, I guess.”

“Nah, man. The hole is only seven inches. No one gets that lucky.”

Scott winked. “I do.” He pulled the stuffed dog across the counter and presented it to Abby.

She tucked it under her arm, then wrapped both arms around it, then handed it back to Scott. “Here, you won it. You carry it.”

“I’ll carry it,” Dylan hollered, taking it from Abby, then shoving it into Scott’s arms. “Oops, gotta go. I see Neveah.”

He took off through the crowd, weaving between the other groups at a full run.

Abby glanced at Scott, whose lips were twitching in amusement. “Guess I’m carrying Gen Two, then. Hungry?”

Abby’s stomach growled as the scent of fried food drifted in the wind. “I could eat.”

“Come on,” Scott caught her hand. “If I know Dylan and Neveah, they’ll find us as soon as we sit down.”

Abby thought about tugging free, but the way he held on, firmly, but gently, reminded her of the way he’d held the football. As though he wouldn’t let go until he chose to. The pressure enveloped her fingers, safety and warmth traveling through them, up her arm, and lodging in her chest, somewhere in the vicinity of her heart.

He left her at a picnic table, the giant stuffed toy seated beside her, and she watched as he made a round of the food stalls. Sure enough, as he returned with two trays piled high with food, Dylan and a girl with deep umber skin and tightly curled coils

bounded up to them.

“Thanks, Dad. I’m starved!”

“Thanks, Mr. Edwards,” the girl parroted.

“No problem. Is your brother around?”

“Jimmy’s in the dunk tank.” She shoved a fry into her mouth, then glanced side-long at Scott. “He said you were too scared to sign up.”

“Maybe we’ll have to make our way there next.”

“Abby, have you had garlic fries?” Dylan asked around the nest of fries poking out of his mouth at odd angles.

“Dylan, manners, son. Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Dylan’s cheeks bulged, then he swallowed hard. “Sorry, sir.”

Abby grabbed a couple of fries loaded with minced garlic. “I love them.”

Dylan nodded decisively, as if he expected nothing less. “Good. Oh, there’s Mrs. Rosalind. I want to talk to her about Abby and Gen visiting.” He jumped to his feet, waved, then took off again.

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“See ya later, Mr. Edwards.” Neveah shoved three more fries into her mouth, then ran after Dylan.

Gen leapt to her feet to follow, then settled back down when Abby didn’t move.

“You’d never be able to keep up, pup.” Scott scratched under her chin, earning a sigh of contentment from the dog.

Abby slid a slice of apple off a fruit skewer and handed it to him. “Here. Ask her to ‘Tell you a secret’.”

Scott leaned his head close to Gen and repeated the command. She poked her nose close to his ear and wuffed gently, then play growled, then wuffed some more. When she finished, she licked his cheek, and Scott gave up the bit of apple.

“What’d she say?”

He waggled his eyebrows at her and pressed a finger to his lips. “Shh, it’s a secret. I’ll tell you when it comes true.”

Abby frowned. “It’s a secret, not a wish.”

“Why can’t it be both?”

Gen huffed, head tipping between them as they talked. She wuffed again, probably hoping for more apple, then flopped down into the grass.

“See, that’s that.” Scott brushed his hands together as if finishing a job. “You heard her: I can’t tell.”

Abby rolled her eyes, then smiled. “Don’t worry, she’ll tell me later.”

She missed his reply as Dylan returned, dragging his teacher behind him to coordinate a classroom visit, but Abby would swear Scott had muttered, “I hope so.”

Ten

“SO, HOW ARE... things?”

Abby rolled her eyes at Cara. “Subtle.”

“What?” Cara’s eyebrows rose and she gave the slightest shake of her head, the picture of innocence. “I’m just asking about...stuff.”

“Is Scott things? Does that make Dylan stuff?” Abby leaned back in the flimsy plastic chair and crossed her arms while Gen lifted her head from the linoleum floor at her favorite human’s name, checking the small hospital café for her friend.

Cara pressed a hand to her chest, all affronted dignity now. “You said it, girl, not me.”

“We both know you were asking.”

“And if I was?”

Abby considered for a long moment. “I don’t know.”

Cara waited.

“I suppose... I suppose I’d tell you there’s a beautiful bouquet of roses on my kitchen counter with a note from Dylan thanking me and Gen for visiting his class last week.” She reached down and scratched the dog’s ears, remembering the way Dylan’s eyes had shown with pride when he’d introduced them to his class. Abby had even let him show off a few of the tricks she’d been teaching him.

“Ooh, red roses?” Cara’s eyes rolled back in her head as she mocked a swoon, one hand to her forehead.

“Yellow.”

Cara’s hand fell to her lap. “He’s a smart one, isn’t he?”

Abby nodded, having come to the same conclusion, herself. What she wouldn’t accept from him, he gave from his son.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” she repeated. Abby picked at the leftover chocolate banana breadcrumbs on her plate as she picked her way through the thoughts whirling inside her head. “When it’s all three of us, it’s...easy. Fun. I like spending time with them. And there’s no... pressure, I guess. We go to the park, or for ice cream, or I go over to their place for dinner, and we all watch a movie together. It’s... nice.”

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Cara didn't reply, and Abby rushed on, filling the silence. "I start thinking I could get used to it, but then Dylan isn't there and I see the way Scott looks at me, and I'm not stupid. I know he wants this to be more, and I..." She trailed off, swallowing. Her words caught in her throat when she spoke again, strained and strangled. "I'm scared."

Abby stared at the small pile of fluffy crumbs she'd managed to herd across her plate, then shook it, scattering them again.

"I think you get to be scared." The words were slow, deliberate. Out of character for Cara, who tended to poke and prod Abby forward rather than let her dwell in the past.

Abby raised her eyes to her friend's, her voice small. "I really like him. But I don't know if I can do this..." She waved her hand and Cara nodded in understanding. "And it's not only about me and Scott. There's Dylan to think about, too. He'd be crushed if this went sideways."

"What about being friends? No risk there."

"What if friends isn't enough for Scott?" Abby wet a fingertip and pressed it to the pile of crumbs she'd gathered up again, then popped them into her mouth, chewing as she thought.

"Then at least you know. Either way, if friendship is all you can do right now, he deserves to know, to decide for himself if he can live with what you're willing to give or not."

Abby studied her friend. “That’s actually... really wise.”

Cara slid Abby’s plate under her own, then tossed their used napkins on top. “I know you think I’m flighty, and yes, I like to have fun, but I also know what I’m looking for. So, if I go on a first date and I can immediately see it isn’t what I want, then I say so. I’m not going to fight for love of it doesn’t feel right. But I don’t know until I give it a try. Saying yes to one date doesn’t mean I’m going to marry the guy.”

“So, you think I should go on a date with Scott?”

“I think you should decide what you want and then see how Scott fits into your vision.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Abby ran a fingernail across the table’s rough surface, the heavy weight of Gen’s head on her foot a gentle counterpoint of comfort. “What then?”

“Then, amazing as he is, he’s not the right one for you. And that’s okay. See, the great part of knowing what you’re looking for is it’s easier to say no to what you aren’t.”

“I guess.”

Cara leaned forward, elbows on the table. “And hey, don’t think I haven’t noticed a couple months ago you told me you wouldn’t go on a date to save your life, and now here we are, discussing this like you might be considering it. That’s progress.”

Abby’s throat tightened at Cara’s words. This was the other piece, of course. The piece she didn’t want to face, yet. “Do you think...” She trailed off, unable to finish.

Cara reached across the table and squeezed Abby’s hand. “I think he’d want you to be happy. And if you can’t trust that, then maybe you could think about what you’d want

for him, if the roles were reversed. If you could see him struggling like you're struggling, what would you say to him?"

Abby turned Cara's observations over in her head, her own guilt warring against what her heart already knew. She surged to her feet and swiped the empty plates off the table. "We should get back upstairs. C'mon, Gen. Heel." The dog rose and shook, collar jingling, then took up her position beside Abby.

Cara's question remained unanswered.

Abby swept the sponge across the counter in long strokes, cleaning up the last few splatters and crumbs from dinner. Her near-obsessive compulsion for cleanliness had its roots deep in her psyche from years of working as an EMT, from being married to a doctor, from being in a hospital...from controlling her environment to make up for not being able to control her experiences. Ingrained in her nature, she struggled with Scott's tendency to "leave it."

She smiled at Gen's command not to go after something she wanted to chase.

Not that Scott didn't have a good reason. He prized his time with Dylan, and if it meant extra work to clean up after his son had gone to bed, Abby could easily understand the trade. The nanny spent weekdays with Scott and Dylan, cleaning, cooking, and ferrying Dylan to school or his activities on Scott's busy days. Lauren didn't come by on the weekends, though, at least not during the off-season. "The boys" were on their own from Friday night to early Monday morning, and Scott kept things as clean and organized as he'd claimed. He hadn't even been joking when he told her he folded laundry.

She swept the last few crumbs into the sink, rinsed the sponge, and set it to dry beside the faucet. Turning on the water, she filled the coffee carafe and poured it into the coffeemaker.

Her coffeemaker at home—a wedding gift—had faithfully brewed their fix through many late nights, early mornings, graveyard shifts, and hours of test-cramming. Old and decrepit now, the finicky buttons had gone sticky with age. Scott’s coffeemaker, a high-tech miracle of modern engineering, needed only the press of a button and away it went. If she wanted something special—espresso, or a latte—a whole screen of options would grind, tamp, steam, and froth it for her.

The coffeemaker whirled and hummed as it measured and ground the beans, then popped and hissed as it heated the water and began brewing. Abby leaned back against the kitchen island while the carafe filled. She had come over often enough in the evenings they had developed a kind of schedule. Scott would take Dylan up to bed and tuck him in while Abby cleaned the kitchen and brewed the coffee.

Gen always followed them up the stairs but never came back down with Scott. Abby suspected Dylan let her sleep on the bed. She also suspected he had a secret stash of dog treats hidden somewhere; why else would Gen be turning her nose up at her food so often lately? Then, she and Scott would settle on the couch, drink their coffee, and talk. Later, Gen would wander in and lay her head in Abby’s lap, tail low and wagging, a gentle reminder they had things to do in the morning.

Abby’s musings were interrupted as Scott entered the kitchen. He folded his arms and scowled at her in mock anger. “I told you to leave it. I’ll clean it up later.”

Abby smiled in return. “Sorry, I can’t help it. Besides, it passes the time while you put Dylan to bed.”

A little musical tune announced the coffee had finished, and Abby turned to get a pair of mugs from the cabinet. Scott moved behind her and she turned, passing him the white porcelain mug with a maroon and black rooster—his college mascot—and “National Champions” emblazoned across it. Her own thick, heavy mug had water-colored tulips painted on the outside. There were other mugs in the cabinet, but these

two had become “theirs.”

“I have a surprise for you.”

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“You don’t have to get me anything.” The automatic response came without conscious thought. She had a hard enough time letting him pay anytime they went out, and always offered her fair share, but he wouldn’t accept it.

Gifts... Aside from the flowers, ostensibly from Dylan, and the jerseys during his hospital visit, there hadn’t been any, but Abby couldn’t forget her early concerns about Scott’s fame. She didn’t want gifts from him and didn’t want to grapple with what they might mean. Didn’t ever want him to think she might be using him.

“It’s something small, I promise. There, in the pantry.”

“The pantry?” She loved chocolate; maybe he’d gotten a special dessert. She pulled open the door and glanced inside.

A large plastic tub with a silver ribbon stuck to the lid caught her eye. Flipping it open, she couldn’t help the grin stealing across her face.

Popping her head back into the kitchen, she laughed. “I think this might be the sweetest gift anyone’s ever given me.”

“I mean, technically it’s for Gen, but same thing, right?”

“No more plastic baggies of kibble. She’ll be thrilled.”

“There’s more.”

“More?” The smile flickered and died. Abby didn’t notice anything else in the pantry,

but when she peeked out again, a small gift bag sat on the counter. She approached, eyes flitting between the bag and Scott. “You really didn’t have to...”

“I know. But I wanted to. Please, open it.”

She hesitated, but his tone, underpinned with uncertainty, decided her. She pulled the tissue paper from the top and plunged her hand inside, rooting around until her fingers met a cool, smooth, curved surface.

She pulled it free, and the corners of her lips couldn’t help pulling upwards.

“Dylan picked the color—red, like her jacket—and I thought the rubber ring on the bottom would save her from chasing it all over the floor.”

“It’s perfect.” Abby turned the dog bowl in her hands, finding a painted scrawl of cursive on one side spelling out Gen’s name. GiftsfromDylan; giftsforGen. Oh, he was a smart one, indeed. But how could she be mad? How could she say no when they had been so carefully chosen, so personal, so kind?

She set it down on the counter and turned toward him, unsure what she’d say, but her conversation with Cara echoed in her mind. Did she like him enough to risk her heart, and his, and Dylan’s, too? Was she lying to herself, believing she could even try?

She imagined Will somewhere in whatever came next, after death, staring down at her standing in another man’s kitchen. Was he rooting for her? Or was his heart breaking?

“Scott...”

“Abby, listen.” He cut her off before she could say more, stepping close and taking her hand in his. “I like you. I like having you in my life. I like having you in Dylan’s

life. Heaven knows I could use a few more friends, and he could use a role model he can respect. Be inspired by. And if that's all you want, then we—then I—can be okay.”

She opened her mouth to respond, the conflicting quagmire in her mind swirling without resolution, tearing her in two, but Scott continued on before she could gather her words.

“I want you to stay in my life—in our lives—in whatever shape you're willing. As friends, yes. But I think we could be more.”

“More?” It came out strangled, a question, though she already knew the answer. He responded anyway.

“If you're ready...when you're ready, yes. More.” He pulled her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. “Not before then. I won't try to compete; that's not fair to either one of us, but I'm willing to wait. For as long as it takes.”

Abby wrenched her hand from his, the scruff of his stubble scratching her knuckles and sending shivers skittering over her skin. “Don't. Don't make promises you can't keep.”

Hadn't Will done the same? Hadn't he promised her forever? A lifetime together...For better or for worse, in sickness and in health, 'til death do us part. Oh, they'd had better and worse, but they'd skipped over sickness and went straight to death. And whose death? His, or both of theirs? How long was she bound to his broken promises?

Abby wrapped her arms around her chest, pressing against the familiar ache of her heart breaking all over again. Physiologically, a broken heart didn't exist, but as her breathing sped up and her lungs gasped for air, the pieces of herself unraveled, flying

away before she could catch them.

She clenched her eyes shut, realizing too late she couldn't reel herself back together. Not here. She clung to that thought, like she had at the hospital when her body had betrayed her. Not in front of Scott. Not now.

"Gen!" Her voice cracked as the name erupted, a command and an entreaty. But no comforting jingle answered, no toenails clicked over the floor. Asleep in Dylan's room, she'd left Abby alone.

Alone, alone, alone.

The word pulsed in her mind, dragging her deeper.

Always alone.

The shivers turned to tremors as the world shook itself to pieces around her.

Scott lunged toward Abby as her legs collapsed. He caught her, pulling her into his arms, but she thrashed, fighting him off. He sank down with her, afraid to let go but afraid he'd hurt her if he didn't. The guttural sound of her hiccupping breaths wanted to form words, but he couldn't understand them.

"Are you hurt? What's going on?" He half-turned, reaching for his phone before remembering he'd left it on the coffee table in the living room. And who could he call? Cara?

Abby's nails bit into his arm, his presence her only anchor.

The moment rose up around him, spooling out of control. Scott forced himself to breathe, his body already responding the same way it always did when the pressure and the emotions threatened to overwhelm him on the field. A hundred games had prepared him, the clock running out, a first down, a long throw, or a couple more points to win the game.

"I've got you." He swept Abby into his arms, her gasping breaths punctuating the quiet calm of his voice. "I've got you, Abby. I'm right here with you and I'm not leaving." He carried her into the living room and laid her on the couch, then cradling her hands, pressed them to his chest.

"Breathe with me, Abby. In and out. In and out. Feel that?"

Abby twitched and convulsed, her cheeks pale and the edges of her lips darkening with a bluish-purple tint. Her fingers shook in his, ice cold despite the warmth of his skin.

“C’mon Abby, listen to me. I know you can do it. One deep breath in.”

A jagged sob escaped her lips, and she dragged in a half breath before wheezing it out again.

“Good job. Can you do it again? I’m right here. We’re going to do it together. Ready? Deep breath in...”

Even as he kept his voice steady and calm, a part of him reeled. Should he call for help? Was she sick or dying and he thought some deep breathing exercises could cure her?

Another part of him recognized the burst of adrenaline, the panicky response, and his college coach’s voice echoed in his head.

Calm body, calm mind, Edwards. Don’t look out there, look right here.

It had been his first time starting and they were playing their old rivals. A sea of navy-blue and gold filled the bleachers, the sound deafening, and they were all counting on him. What if he failed them? What if he threw an interception on the first play?

His chest had tightened, his vision narrowing until the uniforms had blurred around him. A dull roar had filled his ears, though whether from the crowd or inside his own head, he couldn’t tell. Then, the clap of a hand on his shoulder.

Breathe, Edwards. Just breathe. It’ll pass. Calm body, calm mind...

“Calm body, calm mind. Just breathe.” He kept his voice low, but Abby’s tremors eased. Her chest rose, then hitched, then rose again as she matched his inhale. He exhaled and though her breath came out ragged, broken, whistling through her pursed lips, still she tried.

“Good. We’re going to do it again, for as long as it takes, okay? Big breath in...”

She came back to herself, like swimming through molasses. One part of her mind gibbered she needed to pull herself together; another cringed away, already humiliated Scott had seen this side of her; another clung to his voice like a lifejacket in a storm-tossed sea.

Breathe, just breathe.

Her litany.

Scott’s voice.

Her eyes were shut. Black. A rainbow of sparkles. Jagged strikes of lightning. The green afterglow. Black again.

Her fingers spasmed. The heat of Scott’s skin against hers. The fabric weave of his shirt. The hard plastic of a button. The pressure of his hands.

She thrashed, her ears straining for the comforting sound of Gen. Scott’s voice, calm and soothing, still droning. Cars passing on the street outside.

The remnants of dinner perfumed the air: garlic and tomatoes. Coffee.

They’d been drinking coffee.

No, that wasn't right. She'd made the coffee, but then Scott had given her a gift.

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Her sluggish thoughts were slow to grasp reality, again.

Her eyes flew open as air shuddered in and out of her lungs. Scott's face crumpled in concern, and his hands, holding hers, squeezed too tight. Her fingers tingled and she pulled away from him. She tried to speak, but her throat, fiery and raw, strangled her words. Had she been screaming?

"Are you... okay?" Soft and soothing, his voice tamed the wildness in her mind, settled the fluttering of her heart.

Her eyes filled with tears, and then finally—finally—came the comforting tap of nails on the hardwood floor. Breaking their locked gazes, she wrenched herself around on the couch and her voice rasped out. "Gen? C'mere, girl."

Gen approached, tail low and deep eyes limpid in the dim light. She laid her head on Abby's lap and Abby pressed her forehead to the fine fur between the dog's ears. She dug her fingers into Gen's ruff and focused on breathing.

In, out.

Gen caught her hair in her teeth and pulled, the gentle tug at her scalp so familiar, so reassuring.

"No, Gen." Scott touched the dog's shoulder, but Abby shied away, her body convulsing tightly around Gen's head.

Gen pressed her chest against Abby's legs, then worked her front paws into her lap.

With more of the dog's weight in her arms, Abby squeezed, finding the steady rhythm of Gen's breathing. Slowly, her breathing matched Gen's and her heart rate slowed.

Unable to face Scott, she kept her face pressed to Gen's fur and mumbled, "We should go."

"You don't have to."

She appreciated his kind offer, but as lucidity returned, so did the dawning horror of Scott having witnessed her first full-blown panic attack in years.

She rose, hand still tangled in Gen's ruff. "I can't. I'm sorry."

Sorry for ruining his evening, sorry for thinking she could try to start over again, sorry for dragging him into her mess. There were no words to fix what she'd done.

Eleven

SCOTT ROSE IN the early morning, giving up after a night of broken sleep, rubbing exhaustion from his eyes. Trailing into the kitchen, the dog bowl on the counter mocked him, and lifting it in careful hands, he put it away in the pantry.

He'd thought it an innocuous gift, the latest in a line of them carefully designed to earn Abby's trust. Clearly, he'd miscalculated.

"How am I going to tell Dylan?" he asked the empty room, his voice echoing back at him.

Instead of tackling that problem, he methodically cleaned up the still-full, now-cold mugs, the slight spill where some coffee had sloshed onto the counter, the crumpled

towel which had fallen to the floor at some point during Abby's...

What? Episode? Attack? Finn's younger sister had anxiety and sometimes couldn't breathe. Scott considered calling his best friend, but he wasn't sure what had happened to Abby. And, he wasn't sure he had the right to share her struggle with someone else without her permission.

Ghosts clearly haunted her; maybe he should have left them well enough alone.

Should he not have given her the bowl?

He rubbed his forehead. No, that way lay madness. A twisting labyrinth of second guesses and regrets. And he had plenty of those.

He'd lost his best friend in high school. Jake had been the star receiver on the team; Scott had been the quarterback. It had been a running game back then; throws were rare, but he and Jake had practiced for hours in the back yard—so much so their coach had given them the go-ahead to run a play during the homecoming game. Scott had thrown a perfect spiral, and just like a thousand times before, he waited for it to slide into Jake's arms. But it didn't. Jake dropped the catch.

They lost the game. Not because of the dropped catch, but because Scott had been furious. They'd gotten into a yelling match on the sidelines, and he'd been about to throw the first punch when the offensive coach pulled them apart. After that, he hadn't trusted Jake. Not to make the catch, not even to make the run. He'd been foolish, handing the ball off to others again and again, his frustration mounting as they failed to move the chains. By the end of the game, their friendship had ended.

It took a couple more years—and a lot more games—for him to learn sometimes perfect throws end in dropped catches. He could only control what happened on his side of the ball. He'd made the throw. Now, Abby had to choose what she would do

with it.

A knock sounded on the front door, and Scott's heart turned over. He didn't need to check to know Abby had returned. He wore only sweatpants and an old t-shirt, the collar worn out and full of holes, but he wouldn't make her wait. Wouldn't make himself wait for her answer.

Either way, it was time to find out if she could catch.

Abby slept like the dead, Gen curled comfortably in the space behind her knees, and woke, eyes burning and throat raw, emotionally hungover and wrung out. Gen padded after her into the kitchen and waited patiently, tail swishing the floor, while Abby filled her food dish.

"Okay, Gen." Her voice shook and broke as if glass shards were lodged in her throat. The dog cocked her head and studied Abby before sniffing at the bowl, then sitting again. Abby sighed. "It's okay, girl. You can eat."

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Gen wagged again, then laid down and rested her head between her legs. A low whine crawled up Abby's spine.

Anger swept through her, her cheeks heating, and she let it bubble up, burning away the numbness and exhaustion. "Enough, Gen. Either eat or don't. I don't care."

She whirled away and threw herself onto the stool, sending it into an aggressive spin. Her foot bumped its twin with Will's old books, stacked exactly as he'd left them three years before, never touched again. She kicked out, rocking the stool, then caught its edge in both hands, shoving it over until the whole pile tumbled to the floor.

A puff of dust rose, then settled in the morning sunlight.

Gen's collar jingled as she pushed back into a sit, watching Abby, who stared, shocked for a moment at her own emotional display. Guilt and shame spiraled around each other in her gut, banking the fire of her fury. She slipped from her stool and knelt, lifting one book that had flown open and tucking its pages back into place before closing the cover with a gentle pat. Dust streaked her fingertips, grayish and grainy. She sneezed.

Standing, she righted the fallen stool and circled into the kitchen. She dampened a rag and returned to the jumbled books, lifting each one with reverence and wiping it down before stacking them beside her, squaring the edges with tender fingertips. When they were all pristine, she swiped the rag over the floor, then the stool as well, cleaning the mess until no trace remained.

She was awfully good at that.

Lifting the pile of books, she approached the long shelves, eyes flitting over the titles, searching for the spaces they'd once occupied, long since forgotten. She slid one into place, then another, but when she shelved the third, it wouldn't fit. Too wide. The coals of her anger flared.

"Fine, whatever." Her harsh voice cracked the silence. "It's not like it matters, anyway. He's not coming back for you." She shoved the book lengthwise across the top of its fellows, then jammed the last few helter-skelter wherever they could fit. When the last one resisted, she whirled and threw it.

It slid across the floor, thumping into the leg of a bar stool and spinning. One corner crumpled, and the cardboard cover under the faux-leather binding peeked through. That's what happened, she supposed, when life handed you a hard hit. It showed you what you were really made of.

Gen whined again.

What was she made of? Tears and memories, held together with cheap binding and a little gold leaf for distraction, spinning through life and wondering when the next hit would come. It fit all too well.

She was tired of life happening to her, tired of taking hits, of waiting.

He's not coming back for you.

Hot tears pricked her eyes, but for once, she didn't let them fall. Her anger bubbled up again, a molten heat churning her gut and flaming her cheeks. For the first time since Will's funeral, she allowed the emotion to flow freely. At him. At herself.

Had she had plans before Will died? He'd wanted to change the world, to cure cancer. She'd wanted his dream for him, content to sit in his shadow, the woman behind the man, quiet and demure. But what had she wanted?

Him.

She'd wanted him. Ever since their first kiss she'd known they belonged together, and she'd followed wherever he led, like a lamb.

What did she want now?

Gen. She loved Gen and their work together. She loved the kids. Somehow, even in Will's shadow, she'd made it hers. Not curing cancer—that would never be her role—but standing beside those fighting their battles. Doing good, worthwhile, important work, too.

A vision unfurled in her mind: a team of therapy dogs. Hospital dogs, first responder dogs, school dogs, court dogs. So many places could use a trained therapy dog. For comfort, for recovery, for joy and love. What if she could be more than one handler and her dog? She'd taught herself from scratch, but what if she could help others learn to do therapy work? Maybe start a non-profit, expand, and do even more.

She loved kids.

Dylan's face flashed across her mind. What would it be like to have one of her own?

She wanted... Scott.

The realization shocked her.

The betrayal stung, but it was also a relief. She'd held so tightly to Will in the years

since he'd died, cocooned, unable to move on. Unable to believe she had a right to do so. But now the cocoon that had protected her restricted her too tightly. She wanted to stretch, break free.

The thought scared her.

I think you get to be scared. Cara's words echoed in her head.

Scary, yes. But also... freeing!

Could she rise above the fear and do it anyway? Be a whole person? Be her own person?

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And if she did, could Scott fit into her future? Would he want to?

As committed to football as Will had been to his research, there would always be something seductive in that level of determination. It drew her in, because if he could look at her like he looked at the thing, whatever it was, cancer research, or football... She'd seen Scott look at her with that intensity, and it stole her breath. Her blood heated, then abruptly cooled.

She remembered Will, too. The times he'd turned the same intensity on her. The addictiveness of being the one he utterly adored. It made up for all the times in between, the distance, the late nights, the half-present conversations trailing off into silence as he retreated inside his own head.

She struggled to admit how much it had hurt. Struggled to accept Will for who he had been—all of who he'd been. He'd loved her, but, if she could be completely honest, she wondered if he'd loved her enough. Would she have woken up one morning tired of fighting for his attention?

Would the same happen with Scott?

No, she wouldn't let it.

She'd learned to live on her own in the last three years. And if she had Gen, and their work, and maybe a therapy dog school, she'd have plenty to keep herself busy. Her own passions and commitments. Scott could be a part of her life, if he wanted to, but not her whole life. It could be different this time.

She grabbed her keys and strode out the door.

There was only one way to find out.

Twelve

HER NEWFOUND PURPOSE sustained her during the drive to Scott's house, but as she turned up his street, it faltered. The fractured memories of her panic attack the night before swirled through her mind, and her stomach roiled in response. How would she ever explain it to Scott?

A knot of nausea threatened to undo Abby's determination as she made her way up the porch steps. She knocked, then clenched her fingers, waiting for Scott to answer.

The door swung open, and it took all her willpower to meet his eyes. To still herself. To breathe.

"I'm... sorry." Her voice cracked.

His eyes didn't waver, the intensity of his glacial blue gaze searing.

She dragged in another breath. "I have some anxiety. I had a therapist for a while. She called it PTSD. When I get..." She stopped before the next word slipped out. Not upset. He hadn't upset her with his gifts, with his declaration. He'd scared her. "Scared. When I get scared, it's hard to control. And then, after... I thought you'd think I'm crazy. Or broken." She couldn't explain it any better, and Scott still stood in the doorway, eyes hard and unwavering.

Gen, at her feet, leaned against her leg.

Whatever he said, Abby drew comfort from the dog's steady presence.

He sighed and raked a hand through his hair, then stepped to one side. “Want to come in and talk about it?”

Abby exhaled and Gen popped to her feet, mouth dropping open in a doggy smile. “Yes, I do.”

She stepped inside, releasing Gen to go find Dylan.

“I made coffee.” Scott waved toward the kitchen, then froze, expressions flitting across his face too fast for her to follow.

“I could definitely use some coffee,” Abby said, following him as he turned.

He pulled two mugs from the sink—their mugs—washing them quickly, then filling both, spooning sugar and pouring creamer into hers before handing it over.

When had he learned how she preferred her coffee?

She leaned back against the counter, blowing gently across the surface to cool it, then sipping.

And how had he gotten it perfect without even trying?

Clutching the mug, she welcomed the heat as it scalded her fingers, breathed in the scent as it rose on curls of steam, awakening her senses and securing her to this moment.

“I thought I’d gone insane the first time I found myself curled in a ball on the kitchen floor.” The sensory memory of her raw throat and aching chest washed over her. “I told myself the grief, the pain of losing...Will needed an outlet, and it would get better with time.”

She took another sip of her coffee, eyes darting up to meet Scott's, then back down again.

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One hip leaned against the counter, he waited patiently while she picked her way through her thoughts. Through the story she needed to tell, and the paralyzing fear that knowing it, he'd turn away. He had a son, after all, while she had a matched set of emotional baggage.

"It didn't. A few weeks later it happened again, then again the next week. Pretty soon, it was every couple of days, then daily. I hadn't gone out much, not since Will's death, but I stopped completely, scared it would happen in public."

She'd seen the homeless people on the corners in the city, eyes wild, screaming at ghosts, or huddled in a corner, rocking back and forth and keening. Once, she'd judged them. Now, she was them.

"Cara kept coming by, checking on me, making sure I ate, even if only a few bites. I..." She trailed off, then took a fortifying breath, her words a raw whisper through a throat half-closed in both denial and the relief of admitting a truth she'd never shared with anyone else. "I wanted to die after losing Will. Eventually, even Cara couldn't reach me."

She'd drifted, unmoored and aimless. No hope, no future, nothing but one long day bleeding into the next, empty and destitute.

"What about your family?"

Scott's voice captured her, anchored her, drew her back from the vacant threshold that threatened to sweep her away again, though it had been three years.

“They... tried.” She couldn’t give a better response. “They didn’t understand why I couldn’t move on. ‘Life knocks you down sometimes, but you pick yourself back up’,” she mimicked, her voice more bitter than she’d intended.

Perhaps Will wasn’t the only one she harbored anger toward.

They came from a different world, a different generation, or they simply wouldn’t meet her where she’d found herself, drowning in grief, but either way, after suggesting she be committed to a psychiatric hospital if she couldn’t pull herself together, they’d left her to Cara’s increasingly futile efforts.

“I don’t remember much from that time. My therapist said it’s pretty common,” she shrugged, but the gaps in her memory bothered Abby.

What had happened in those weeks and months after Will’s death? Who had come to his funeral? What had the eulogist said about his life? She couldn’t recall, even when she tried.

“Then, Gen.”

Like sunrise after the longest night imaginable, a warm, fuzzy weight in her arms, a rough tongue on her cheek, puppy breath in her nose.

“I was in bed. Or maybe on the couch? Cara plopped this soot sprite of a pup into my arms and told me I had a dog, now, so I’d better take good care of her.” Abby smiled at the first happy memory she had after Will’s death, and it gave her the courage to raise her eyes to Scott’s.

He watched her, mug abandoned at his hip, his intense gaze boring into her, peering into her very soul.

“She grabbed my hair in her little mouth and pulled,” Abby laughed, wrapping a lock around her index finger and tugging.

She’d always wanted a dog, but Will had been so busy with school, and her shifts were never regular. It wouldn’t be fair, he’d said.

She’d clutched the warm, wriggling puppy to her chest. Well, she had time, now. All the time in the world. An empty lifetime unspooled ahead of her, bringing with it an unending sense of existential exhaustion. A dark wave rose up, threatening to pull her under again, but before it could, those teeth had latched onto her hair again, pulling and growling.

“For weeks, every time I drifted away, she’d grab my hair. It didn’t matter how many times I pried her little jaws apart and told her to cut it out, how many obedience classes we took, how many dog training books I read—nothing would stop her. Eventually, I gave in.”

“But she doesn’t do it to Dylan,” Scott said. “Do I need to be worried?”

Abby shook her head. “She’s never done it to anyone else. It’s her one bad habit, and honestly, I don’t mind. Not anymore. Gradually, the attacks tapered off for the most part. I still have one sometimes, but not often. Usually only when I’m...”

“Scared,” Scott supplied.

Abby dropped her eyes from his gaze. “Yeah. Scared. Or... upset.”

She hadn’t wanted to use that word, but she owed him the truth, and she’d all but wrenched her heart out through her chest for him already; she might as well finish the job.

“Last night you were... upset.”

Abby swallowed hard. “Not at you. At... me. I don’t know how to do...this.”

Scott crossed the kitchen floor, crowding into her space, and though she eased back, the counter pressed into her spine, preventing her retreat. Stopping, he towered over her, but despite his close proximity, he didn’t touch her.

“Don’t know how, or can’t?” When she didn’t answer, he continued, “Because I’m willing to wait, if it’s what you need, but I can’t fight a ghost. That’s not fair to either of us.”

She nodded. “Or to Dylan.”

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A flash of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, but not enough to bring out his dimple. “You’ve thought about this.”

“Of course. And...” She swallowed again, then stepped closer, closing the last bit of space between them, laying her forehead against his chest and looping her arms around his back. “I don’t know how to do this, but I think I want to try.”

His arms came around her shoulders, pulling her in. “Good. Me, too.”

Thirteen

ABBY DUCKED INTO an empty room, cleaned and sanitized and waiting for its next patient. Locking the door, she leaned against it, teeth gritted. She still had three rooms to visit, and her wet and bloodshot eyes would reassure neither the children nor the parents. Sinking to her knees, she wrapped her arms around Gen, pressing her face into the dog’s fur, letting the silky softness absorb the tears on her cheeks.

Death never surprised her anymore; there were always signs near the end. Doctors didn’t lie to parents, but they did try to remain optimistic. Parents would never believe the worst, anyway. But sometimes, you know. And sometimes the fight lasts longer than others.

Anna’s battle had been swift and brutal, only a few weeks. Diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, even aggressive treatment had failed. The once bright-eyed little girl withered, hair falling out in handfuls from the chemotherapy, cheeks sinking, skin stretching, corpse-like, over her brittle bones as the disease ravaged her from within.

Only the fact that she had passed painlessly consoled Abby, one hand in her mother's and one arm wrapped around Gen's neck, her breath ruffling the dog's long fur. Then, in a moment, it wasn't.

Abby understood the long, relentless journey toward a single moment. There... and then not, but no amount of knowledge or experience could ease the moment of stark realization; all the futuresomedaysswallowed by one overwhelmingnever again.

And it didn't get any easier. In some ways, her pain reassured her: easier meant calloused, apathetic, indifferent. The white-hot knife's edge of grief cut both ways, reminding her it hurt to care so much, but also reassuring her she'd done her job, had loved these children well, and had brought them some measure of solace in their last hours.

The door bumped the frame behind her as someone tried the handle, and Abby wiped one hand across her face before glancing around for a tissue.

"Abby, it's Cara. Let me in."

Finding a scrap of paper towel, Abby dabbed her eyes before flicking the lock, letting Cara tumble inside, as well.

Throwing herself into Abby's arms, Cara sobbed, shattering Abby's fragile control. They cried together, another devastating rite that had become heartbreakingly familiar working in this department. Sharing the grief eased the terrible burden. The family would have each other, but those who cared for the patient found no closure when the end came. Those at the hospital became a family of their own, then, supporting one another as they each worked through the pain of loss, magnified dozens of times over. A number, fortunately, dwarfed by those who were able to return home, treatment successful, happy and healthy, their whole lives ahead of them.

Could she change those statistics? With another dog, or a team of them, could she do for the staff what she did for the kids and their parents? Help with the pain? Bring some consolation and solace on the most difficult of days?

Maybe, but for now, they cried together, Gen curled between them, doing for her handler what she had done for one little girl, broken by the battle she couldn't win.

By the time she made it home, Abby's tears had dried, but the tell-tale burn of too much crying and her bloodshot eyes in the mirror were plenty to keep the burden of the day fresh in her mind and heart. She remembered too many nights like this one, grief shared between herself and Will, but devastating all the same. Then, they had cuddled up together on the couch, ordered pizza, and found some horrid rom-com or ridiculous action film, laughing until the wetness leaking from the corners of their eyes could as easily be mirth as misery. Abby wrapped her arms around her torso, too spent to cry any more, but still fragile and shattered, nonetheless.

The tinkling notes of her phone distracted her, and Scott's picture on the screen reminded her that, although the face had changed, she didn't have to be alone anymore.

"Hey." Her voice quavered but it didn't break.

"Hey, yourself. You going running? We could meet you at the park."

"No, not today," she managed to reply, then paused. She cleared her throat, weighing her words before saying them aloud.

Life had happened to her again today. She couldn't control the outcome for every child she helped, but she could control her own actions, her own responses.

"Listen, umm, I had a crappy day at... at the hospital." Her voice broke, but she

fought on. “We lost one of our kids, and it always sucks so much.”

Scott didn’t speak, didn’t try to fill the silence with empty platitudes. Too many people would be quick to jump in, thinking they could share in her grief, or alleviate it with their words. Scott waited, as he always had, for her to let him know what she needed. She couldn’t even verbalize how much she appreciated that about him in this moment.

She sniffled, then continued. “We used to do this thing, you know, when we lost one of our kids. We’d order pizza and watch crappy movies, and pretend the tears were from laughing...”

This time the silence quivered with anticipation. Then, “I can be there in twenty minutes. Pepperoni or veggie?”

Abby let out the breath she’d been holding. It had been too much to ask. Too much to expect him to fill in for a ghost—especially for one he already worried he’d never be able to compete with. But it was a step forward, too: Abby learning to ask for help and believing it would come. Deciding which traditions were important to her, which ones actually helped her get through the rough times and finding the person who could stand beside her as she did it. And she’d taken it on her own, without prodding from Cara or pressing from Scott. Her choice, to ask.

“Whatever. I don’t even care. I... I want you here.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Here, Dylan, like this.” Abby helped Dylan rearrange his fingers in the leather leash until it wrapped around his hand and looped over his thumb. “Now, tell her to heel and walk five steps. Then, mark it with her word if she’s still in position. You remember?”

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Dylan nodded, brows furrowed in concentration.

“If she isn’t in position, remind her with the command.”

Scott watched as Dylan lifted his chin, pride in every line of his body. “Okay, Gen. Heel.” His lips moved as he counted his steps, Gen pacing beside him, then glanced down to check the dog’s position. “Yes!”

Gen’s ears came forward and she lifted her front paws off the ground before planting them again, mouth dropping open in joy. Her tail waved through the air behind her as Dylan fumbled with the pouch of food Abby had attached to his belt.

“Feed at the side,” Abby reminded him as he withdrew his hand from the treat bag. “That’s right. Don’t let her curl in front of you.”

Once Gen had taken the food, Dylan checked in with Abby, eyes shining. “Can we do it again?”

Abby laughed. “Go ahead. You can walk her around the playground, but mark and feed every five to ten steps if she’s in position. If she isn’t...”

“Remind her to heel. Yep! I’ve got it, Abby. I promise, I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t, Dylan. I believe in you.”

Dylan beamed, and Scott’s breath caught as his heart stuttered an extra beat. The adoration with which Dylan gazed at Abby tugged at something deep within him. His

son deserved someone who would love him with the kind of care and attention Abby lavished on him, and it stitched up a broken part of Scott's heart when the two of them were together. But it terrified him, as well. This thing he had with Abby was new, and fragile, and tentative. What if it didn't work out? What if she ran again? What would it do to Dylan?

Scott would move mountains for his son. He would protect him with the last breath in his body and the last shred of his being. Seeing the way he idolized Abby, if she left now, the fallout would be devastating. Dylan had already been rejected by his mother. Could he handle another woman rejecting him?

"Great job, Dylan!" Abby tracked the pair's progress around the playground, turning slowly to keep them in sight. "You've got this. Remember, big voice. Right now, she's working, not playing."

Dylan frowned and his mouth formed the wordheel. Gen slowed her steps and came back from where she'd crept out in front, and a few moments later, Dylan stopped and dug in the food pouch for another treat.

"You know, he asked me last night if we could get a dog."

Abby turned to him with wide eyes. "Oh no. I'm sorry. I should have realized..."

Scott slung an arm across her shoulder and couldn't help his pleased grin when she let him. "Don't worry about it. I told him about your idea for a therapy dog school, and then he wanted to sign up for that, too. I should have seen it coming."

"He's working hard with Gen. Training can be difficult, especially staying firm when you'd really rather not." She smiled, an expression on her face Scott recognized easily. Pride. Pride in Dylan.

His stomach turned over again. “Dinner!” The word came out before he thought it through. “Come to dinner with me? This weekend.”

Abby stiffened under his arm, pulling away. “Like... a date?”

He turned toward her, meeting her gaze. He’d been so patient, so careful, but suddenly he needed to know. Was she as committed to finding out if they had a future as him?

“Yes. Exactly like a date.” He waited, breath held. Would she agree? Or would it be too much? Would she run again?

She fiddled with her fingers and glanced toward Gen and Dylan, then her eyes darted back to his. “Nothing fancy?”

Scott mentally scratched Circa 1886 off his list. “Absolutely, something low key.”

“And I don’t...”

“Drink, I know. No pubs.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? As in, okay, yes?”

Abby turned to welcome Dylan and Gen back, ruffling his hair as she praised his effort. Then, glancing up at Scott, she smiled. “Okay, yes.”

Fourteen

THE FIRST, TRULY hot day of summer, Dylan announced, “I’m going swimming,”

then, turning to Abby, continued, “Can Gen come, too?”

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“I don’t know, Dylan,” Abby hedged.

Scott already let her dog spend inordinate amounts of time sprawled in front of his air conditioning vents; letting her swim in the pool might be pushing too far, and she didn’t want to risk overstepping.

“Does she not know how to swim?” Dylan cocked his head. “That’s okay. I can teach her.”

“No, she can swim,” Abby replied. “But she has a lot of fur, and she’s shedding. I don’t want her to clog your filter.”

Turning to his dad, Dylan lifted pleading eyes. “It can’t be worse than when the cherry tree drops all those petals in the pool, right, Dad? You always complain when you have to clean them out.”

Scott grimaced. “I don’t complain...”

“It’s okay,” Abby assured them both. “Gen doesn’t need to swim.”

“But she’s so hot.” Dylan flopped to the floor beside the dog, whose fine fur quivered in the breeze from the vent. “Look, she’s panting, even in her sleep.”

Scott dropped an arm over Abby’s shoulders. “I don’t mind, but it’s up to you. I can ask the pool guy to come a little more often.”

“I can’t...”

“Yes!” Dylan leapt to his feet. “C’mon, Gen.”

The dog lifted her head, gazing up at Dylan with adoring eyes, then heaved to her feet, shaking and jingling her collar tags.

“Dylan.” Scott’s firm voice stopped his son in his tracks. “Gen is Abby’s dog. She gets to decide, and you’ll abide by her decision.”

Dylan’s shoulders slumped as Gen, also chastised, sat at his feet, ears pulled back.

“Yes, sir.” Then, he turned his most angelic expression on Abby. “Please?”

Gen flicked her ears, dropping her jaw open in a doggy grin and sweeping the floor with her tail, as if asking for permission, as well.

Abby couldn’t help snorting a laugh. How could she say no with both of them ganging up on her? “If it’s okay with your dad, it’s okay with me.”

“Alright!” Dylan punched the air, then rocketed up the stairs, Gen fast on his heels.

“Are you sure?” Abby turned to Scott, already questioning herself. “It’s really no big deal...”

“I’m sure,” Scott said.

He tugged her closer and she turned into his body, resting her forehead against his chest.

The slow sweep of his hand up and down her spine left a trail of goosebumps, lifting the hair on the back of her neck and rushing down her arms. They hadn’t kissed, yet, but his casual touch no longer surprised her, and she’d come to welcome it, as well as

the slow coil of heat it built low in her belly.

So different from Will's, which had been all electricity and intense passion, trapped in moments between his obsession with his career and research. Instead, Scott stole every opportunity to brush against her, wrap her hand in his, or tuck her under his arm.

Dylan came trouncing down the stairs wearing his swim trunks, and though Abby pulled away, Scott kept his arms firmly around her.

Ignoring them, Dylan banged through the house, Gen close behind, collecting two towels, then tearing out the back door.

Scott turned to follow them, keeping Abby gathered in close.

As they stepped out onto the back porch, she tugged again. "I don't want Dylan..."

"Dylan will be fine," Scott interrupted her, but he loosened his hold enough that she could slip away if she truly wanted to. "He adores you, and it's good for him to see I do, too."

Abby hesitated a moment longer, then nodded, threading her arm around his waist. "Okay."

"Watch this!" Dylan hollered from the end of the diving board, then cannon-balled into the pool.

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A wave of water swamped the concrete deck, setting Gen to prancing as it washed over her paws. Edging her way to the ledge, she leaned forward until she almost tipped in, eyes searching the surface for Dylan.

When he finally popped up in the center of the pool, she yapped a series of high-pitched play barks.

“Is she telling him to get out or asking if she can get in?” Scott asked.

Abby shrugged, smiling. “I’m not sure, but she’s playing emotional keep away.”

Gen backed away from the edge, then approached again, play bowing.

With a shake of his hair, Dylan sprayed water in all directions, then called to Gen. “C’mon, girl. You can do it!”

Finally committing, Gen flung herself into the pool after him, a wash of water submerging him momentarily until he surfaced again, grinning and calling her name.

Throwing her head back, Abby laughed at the sight. She couldn’t explain why Gen and Dylan playing together warmed her heart, but she couldn’t deny the joy that took hold of her every time the boy and the dog interacted.

Gen had never had a friend like Dylan. She loved children – she had to, in her line of work – but all the children she spent time with were sick and weak. Dylan, the picture of perfect health, full of rambunctious energy and mischievous plans, was the antithesis of all her experiences. And Gen loved him even more for it.

Had she done a disservice to Gen, forcing her to work as a therapy dog? She had discovered a whole new facet to the dog's personality since meeting Scott and Dylan, and she couldn't help doubting her decision. The playful, energetic dog before her had little in common with the hard worker who stood beside her in the brightly-colored halls of the hospital. Except her love of children.

On the pool steps, Dylan buried his face in Gen's damp ruff, then blew raspberries at her while he wiped the stray strands of fur from his cheeks. Throwing a familiar foam football, he dove after it, Gen doggy paddling behind him.

"Come on," Scott tugged at their entwined hands, leading her across the lawn and onto the deck. He let go long enough to pick up the towels Dylan had left strewn across a lounge chair, stack them on a small table, then drag a second lounge close to the first. Collapsing into it, he reached for her hand again.

Bringing it to his mouth, he pressed a feather-light kiss to her knuckles. Over almost as soon as it began, Abby didn't have time to overthink, to demure, to pull away. Even afterwards, when her brain had caught up to the moment, she didn't move.

Scott rested their hands together between them, seemingly content with nothing more than what he'd already done, and though Abby's cheeks pinked with delicate heat, his attention switched fully to Dylan and Gen's antics, letting the flitting breeze cool her skin.

Thus began a new tradition. After work, instead of meeting at the park, Abby and Gen would go to Scott's and Dylan would swim with Gen while Abby and Scott sat on lounge chairs on the deck, supervising their play and talking in quiet, intimate voices.

Scott studied his tablet, brows knitted in concentration, while he rubbed the inside of Abby's wrist with one thumb. He couldn't help wanting to touch her soft skin, though

he kept the pressure light, nearly not there at all. One of these days, she'd be ready for more, and then...

Scott forced his attention back to the screen. Picturing Abby after their first kiss—eyes half-lidded, cheeks pink, and hair mussed—would not help him learn the new plays Jeff, his offensive coordinator, had sent over in preparation for training camp.

Still, she'd set her book aside a few minutes ago, eyes on his son and her dog, but every time his thumb ceased its circles, her arm twitched.

Scott hid a grin. He might have doubted he still had any allure, given how little Abby responded to him, but she had her own ghosts to put to rest, and he could be patient. Especially when little signs like this one showed progress.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the moment a smile turned the corners of her mouth up. Squeezing his fingers, she waited for him to glance over.

"Thank you," she said when he did.

She turned back as Dylan faked throwing a ball, then hid it behind his back as Gen made a mad dash around the perimeter of the pool before realizing Dylan still had it firmly in his grasp.

Scott let the tablet fall flat in his lap. "For what?"

"For this." Abby jutted her chin toward the pool, the dog, and the boy. "I don't think I've told you. I'd never seen this side of Gen before we met you and Dylan. She's so happy with him."

"Of course." Scott twined his fingers in hers, bringing them to his lips to brush a kiss

over her knuckles. She didn't resist, and he tallied another point of progress in his head. "We love having you and Gen here."

Keeping her hand tucked into his and pressed to his chest, he turned his attention back to the tablet. As training camp approached and the season ramped up, he'd spend more and more time preparing, both on and off the field. This was the nature of his job, but after the last several months of having a looser schedule, how would Abby adjust to the demands of his career?

Sighing, he turned the screen off and set it to the side. "There's something we probably need to talk about, though."

Abby stiffened, fingers tight in his.

Gen paused and turned to stare at her, the change in Abby's breathing triggering her therapy response. Dylan's gaze followed hers, until both of them stared at Abby and Scott.

Internally berating himself, Scott hurried to salvage the situation. "No, no, nothing bad." He squeezed her fingers tighter, preventing her from untangling her own. "We need to discuss... work. My work."

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Abby swallowed, her throat bobbing, but her grip slightly relaxed in his.

“I got my dates for training camp last week. I have to be in Springfield starting on the twenty-second.”

“Huh, really? I thought it started on the sixteenth.”

Scott snorted. “Rookies report on the sixteenth.”

“Right, sorry. I knew that. Okay, the twenty-second. How long?”

“Six weeks.” Assuming I don’t get cut. Or traded, remained unspoken.

He didn’t have many superstitions, especially compared to some of the other players he’d seen, but he never put words to a possibility he didn’t want to consider.

If he didn’t measure up to the coach’s expectations, if a trade would grant the team a concession better than his ball skills, if the back-up suddenly exploded with new skills he’d never had before... his stint in Charleston would be over, contract or not. Then he’d have to leave his home, the place he loved, uprooting Dylan and their whole lives, leaving Abby.

He frowned. He wouldn’t allow it to happen.

Stay focused.

“Six weeks. That’s...a long time. I mean, I understood, in a theoretical sense, but I’d

never thought about it.” Abby chewed her lip.

“Well, I mean, training camp is only the first few weeks, but pre-season runs through the end of August, so...”

No matter which way you cut it, the chaos of mid-July until the start of the regular season couldn’t be matched by any other time of year. It wasn’t the most exhausting; that would come around Thanksgiving as injuries stacked up, bye weeks were long past, and the interminable stretch to post-season loomed over teams in contention. Still, twelve to fourteen-hour days, two-a-day practices, scrimmages... He barely had time to eat and sleep during those first, all-important weeks.

“Lauren moves in when I leave for Springfield, then stays until the season starts. I try to get home most days, but, honestly, it’s a lot of late nights and early mornings. Even on my days off, I end up sleeping most of the day...”

“No, it’s fine. I get it. This is your job, and you love it. You have to do what you have to do.” Though she didn’t meet his gaze, the resolute tone in her voice reassured him. “You wouldn’t expect me to skip Gen’s training for you.”

“Gen’s training isn’t six weeks of hell.”

She shrugged. “No, but the point remains.”

“Dylan will go to his mom’s for a week or so early in August. It’s always worked out well that way.”

Another topic they hadn’t discussed, and one he needed to bring up sooner rather than later, but he didn’t think he’d have time before reporting to Springfield.

Scott sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. He couldn’t help wishing the

honeymoon period had lasted longer, cementing this thing growing between them. Would Abby even want to stick around after she got a first-hand view of the life of an NFL WAG?

God, he hated that term—wives and girlfriends—hated to think about how many of his friends had lost the people they loved to the game. The cost to play was high.

As if she could hear his thoughts, Abby sighed and cocked her head, considering. “Well, Gen and I are pretty self-sufficient. We’ve learned to be. I’ll miss you, but we can text, right?” He nodded. “And maybe call sometimes?” He nodded again. “There we go, then. It’ll be like a long-distance relationship. And if you have time and want me to come by, then we’ll come over, and if not, that’s okay, too. Dylan needs you more than I do.”

“Are you sure? It’s brutal, this process. A lot of girls—women—they can’t handle it. I wouldn’t blame you if...” He trailed off. Why was he convincing her to bail?

Abby gazed at Dylan and Gen, a slight smile playing over her features. “Well, I can’t promise I won’t feel differently on the other side, but six weeks isn’t too long, all things considered. Not as long as med school and residency, anyway. And we have plenty to keep us busy. Unless you...?”

“No, I want this. I want us. But I know how hard it is, and I don’t want to drag you through it if...”

“If I’m not ready. If I’m not all in. And if I’m going to bail later, anyway, it’d be easier if I did it, now.”

His throat went dry, his thoughts echoed in her words, anxious that, in spite of all she’d said, she would change her mind. Her veiled reference to the sacrifices she’d made for her late husband’s career hadn’t escaped his notice, either.

Will's presence remained a ghost between them.

How do you exorcise an ex-husband? Scott winced. Probably the same way you did an ex-wife, and if Will remained a barrier between them, at least his name was out in the open. Lindsay...

Scott shook his head. He wouldn't let her mar this moment with Abby. They'd have time to discuss his ex-wife. He'd make time.

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Abby chewed her lip. “Well, like I said, I can’t make any promises, but then again, neither can you, right? I mean, you might go six weeks and figure out you don’t want to be with me anymore. I guess that’s the nature of relationships. No one can ever make any promises because... because you never know what’s going to happen.”

She wasn’t only talking about the two of them, and he thought back to his own, failed marriage, the promises he’d made and broken. “Yeah.”

The word stuck in his throat like a burr. He wanted more this time around, wanted to let the promises pour past his lips in a reassuring litany, but he couldn’t ignore the truth of Abby’s words; they had a long way still to go before she could trust him with her whole heart.

Could he trust her with his, too?

“Hey, Dad, watch this.” Dylan had convinced Gen to get onto the diving board and now wound up his arm and launched the ball to the far end of the pool. Gen, claws scrabbling on the textured surface, launched herself into the air, then splashed down, sending a huge wave spraying up to either side. High enough to flood the deck and spatter Scott and Abby where they sat. They tucked their feet up and Abby flung a towel over her book to protect it.

Gen chased the ball, heaved herself onto the deck, then flopped down, tongue hanging out and panting. Dylan, racing around the edge of the pool, about fell over her as he slid to a stop beside her. “Good girl.” He rubbed her ruff, ruffled her ears, then laughed as she proceeded to lick his face clean of the last beads of sweat and water still clinging to his skin. He glanced up at them with a radiant smile.

Abby returned it, then snorted with laughter. “Maybe we’ll try dock-diving classes while you’re away.”

Fifteen

I’M TOO TIRED for this.

Scott scrubbed a hand over his grimy, sweaty face, the grit and grass clippings of the practice field scraping away like clay under his nails.

I should have showered before calling her back, he lamented, not for the first time in the last fifteen minutes.

Then again, Lindsay had always known which buttons to push to rile him up, and even the veiled inference something might have happened to Dylan had sent Scott scrambling to reply, shower or no shower.

Of course, his son was fine, and now he found himself subjected to a long list of his shortcomings as a father, the ridiculous sacrifices he made for his career—abandoning his son for months at a time, and her general displeasure at the interference in her own life. By now, he knew better than to answer any of her accusations; letting her vent until she ran out of steam would take much less time than the argument that would follow if he dared to suggest her one week a year and two major holidays weren’t enough to mother her only child. Or, worse, if he pointed out it had been she who had left both of them to pursue her career in New York City. So, instead, he hummed when she paused for breath and let the words wash over him and then away.

“And now I have to listen to him prattle on about this new woman you’re seeing, and her dog this, and her dog that... I’m not sure I’m comfortable with him spending so much time with this person I’ve never even met. Given your track record, I bet she’s

nothing more than another fake-blonde, bimbo, gold-digger, and I won't have my son around that type of person, do you hear me? Mark my words, if that dog bites him, which I'm sure it will, stupid mongrel, I will sue that bitch for all she's worth..."

Scott ignored the sting of her insult, recognizing the trappings of truth to it, even if they were more a record of his past than his present. But her implicit threat against Abby pricked his ears. Lindsay had long since proven she had a vicious streak; she wouldn't be above moving against Abby if it meant striking at him in the process. What had he ever seen in his ex-wife? Where did the inexhaustible wellspring of her hate stem from? Their divorce had not been amicable, but he couldn't understand when their soured relationship had turned so mean, why she tried so insistently to ruin his happiness.

"... and I'm not kidding, Scott. If my son isn't safe, I'll take him back. You know no judge would challenge me, his mother..."

And there it was, the threat Lindsay always hung over his head, like a guillotine blade waiting to slice him apart, but instead of his head, she'd chop his heart out of his chest. Eager to end the conversation, worried allowing her to continue would wind her up more, Scott interrupted. "If it's too much of an inconvenience for Dylan to be there, you can send him home. I can call Lauren."

"Home? Ha," she barked.

Scott sighed silently in relief. Complaining about him again meant she had moved on.

"My place is as much his home as yours. He needs to learn that. Needs to learn I'm his parent as much as you are. Certainly, much more than whatever little tramp you're seeing."

Scott bit his tongue. Replying would only encourage her, he reminded himself. Fed

up, he blew out a breath. “I mean it, Lindsay. If you want to send him back, let me know, but I have to go, now. Give Dylan my love.”

She wouldn’t, of course, but with those words, he hung up.

When his phone vibrated again a few moments later, he almost threw it against the wall in anger and frustration, but settled, instead, for tossing it face-down on the bed.

He took the longest, hottest shower he could manage, letting the heat seep into his sore, tired muscles, dissolving away the caked grime and sunscreen, soothing the stress of Lindsay’s call. After a while, though, he heard banging on the bathroom door. Finn must be back from his receivers meeting and wanting a shower, as well.

Towelng himself off, he winced as his muscles protested the sudden movement. Mostly dry, he wrapped the towel around his waist and stepped into the small hotel room, jerking his head toward the steamy bathroom. “All yours.”

“Thanks, man,” Finn replied. “Didja leave me any hot water?”

“Nope.” The corner of Scott’s lips quirked up, the closest thing to a smile he’d managed since he’d picked up his phone at the end of practice.

“Asshole.”

“Yep.” With that, Scott released the last of his tension and let the half-fledged smile spread across his face, wrinkling the creases at the corners of his eyes.

As Finn closed the bathroom door, Scott flopped unceremoniously, exhaustedly, on the bed, then dug out his phone from where it jabbed into his hip. Blowing out a breath, he forced his attention back to the screen.

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Seeing the missed call from Abby, emotions flitted through him: disappointment, guilt, anxiety, relief. Disappointment he'd missed her call, guilt he hadn't even bothered to check his phone, assuming Lindsay had called to harass him some more, anxiety Lindsay might go after Abby, or she wanted to end things between them, or a million other doubts he had about their relationship that bubbled to the surface, no matter how hard he quashed them... Relief he hadn't picked up—the most complicated feeling of all.

Tapping the screen, then holding the phone to his ear, he waited while it rang. When she answered, he had the ugly thought he'd been hoping it would go to voicemail. “Uh, hey. It's me.”

“Rough day?” Abby, hearing the edge of exhaustion in his voice, worried she shouldn't have bothered him. But, no, he had called her, she reassured herself. He wouldn't have done that if he hadn't wanted to talk. Right?

“Tired. Two-a-days are brutal.”

“I can't even imagine. And in this heat...” she trailed off, unsure what to say next.

“Yeah.”

The pause turned long. Awkward. “Well, I'm sure you're playing great,” Abby managed, trying to restart the stalled conversation.

“I'd better. Quarterbacks are a dime a dozen, or so I'm told.”

“Ouch, that bad?”

“It’s the football equivalent of basic training; break us down to build us up or some bull...” He cut himself off, voice harsh on the line.

“Oh.” The silence stretched thin and brittle again.

Gen, responding to Abby’s growing distress, twined herself between her handler’s legs.

“Gen, that’s enough. Go lay down.”

The dog ignored her, pressing her body harder against Abby’s.

Sighing, Abby bent down to scratch her ears. “Gen’s being weird. I should figure out why.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re being weird. She’s a pretty accurate barometer of your emotions, after all.”

Abby tensed, her breath catching in her chest. Another long, fraught pause.

“Okay, then,” she managed through a throat closing with some unnamed emotion existing somewhere between fear, anger, and sadness. “Well, I’ll stop bothering you.”

“Abby, wait, I didn’t mean...”

Her eyes burning, Abby let the phone drop into her lap. She pressed the red button to end the call, then buried her face in Gen’s ruff.

“I literally have no idea what the hell just happened. But I’m guessing that’s a no on

borrowing his pool this evening. You'll have to make do with the fan."

Gen panted in response and, grateful for the distraction, Abby ran her fingers over the rough patch of fur Gen had been worrying for the last few days.

"I don't want to shave you, girl, but I think I'm going to have to. This hot spot isn't getting better, and if you have one, you probably have others." Abby frowned.

She'd discovered early on Gen couldn't comfort the children when she'd been shaved. Without her long, tufted fur, the kids didn't want to pet and cuddle her.

Gen whined, then flopped onto her side, still panting. Whining again, she twitched a leg, then laid still, air whistling through her nose as she breathed, each exhale a hair-raisingly high-pitched sound on the upper edge of Abby's hearing.

"Yeah, definitely going to have to shave you."

Abby got up to gather the necessary supplies. Taking her phone with her, she scrolled through her contacts, then dialed. It went to voicemail. "Hi Sadie, it's Abby. Listen, I have to shave Gen; she's got some hot spots, and I was hoping I'd be able to do some other OTC treatment, but it isn't going to be an option."

Abby gritted her teeth, tempted to call Scott again, but then she steeled herself. She would not become a burden on him, a parasite, another person who only wanted him for what he could give her.

"Anyway," she continued, "I think it'll be a few weeks before we'll be able to be back. She'll need time to heal before I can bring her into a sterile environment again."

Hanging up, she pressed her lips together, then reached for the electric clippers.

For Gen, she would do anything.

Anything except call Scott back and ask to use his pool.

Sixteen

“DUDE, YOU STILL haven’t called her?” Scott couldn’t miss the condemnation in Finn’s voice.

He cringed. “I meant to, but then I tweaked my shoulder, and Lindsay had to send Dylan home, so I had to coordinate with Lauren, and I wanted to give her a few days to cool down, anyway...” He trailed off, noting Finn’s raised eyebrows and crossed arms and knowing his excuses were as empty as a backfield on a five-wide.

“Can you imagine what Kelly’d say to me if we had a fight and I didn’t call for six days?”

Scott could, actually. Finn’s wife ran their home with an iron fist, which benefitted Finn, because otherwise he’d have already blown his contract money on fast cars, fancy suits, and expensive watches.

“But it’s different,” Scott insisted. “You’re married.”

Finn silence further implicated Scott, and he had the adolescent inclination to squirm under his best friend’s unwavering gaze. “You wanna marry this woman?”

Scott raked a hand through his hair. “Yeah, maybe. Someday.”

“Then you gotta start acting like it now. You know this life ain’t easy, and if you can’t hack it dating, then what makes you think you can get married?” Finn paused. “You of all people should know that.”

“Low blow, there, man.”

Finn jutted out his chin. “Harsh, maybe, but you know it’s true.”

He did.

“You think she’ll be angrier at what I said or at me blowing her off?”

“Does it matter? Either way, you’re gonna have to apologize.”

Scott shook his head. “All your marriage counseling must be paying off.”

“You spend long enough in therapy, you learn a few things, whether you want to or not.”

Eager to turn the topic away from himself, Scott perked up. “Kelly forgive you, yet?”

Finn waved a hand. “Long since. Don’t mean she trusts me, though. Away’s are gonna be rough this year. Takes time. But we both want it.”

“She’s good for you.”

“Your girl good for you?”

“I suppose she is,” Scott replied, accepting Finn’s unspoken rebuke for changing the subject.

“You got a few minutes right now. ‘S good a time to call as any.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m going, I’m going.” Scott snorted as he stepped into the hall, then girded himself and tapped Abby’s picture in his contacts.

“Hello?”

His breath caught at her voice. In that moment, he feared he might lose her, and it would be all his fault.

“Hey, Abby. How are you?”

“I’m fine.”

Her words were clipped, short. Whether hurt or angry, he couldn’t tell.

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“Good, good. I’m glad.” He paused. “I should have called sooner. Things have been a little crazy around here. Practice, and Dylan had to come home early, and...”

“Yeah, I get it.”

He paused, then spoke again, his words low. “I’m trying to apologize, here, Abby.”

“Really? Because it sounds like you’re making excuses.”

Scott slumped against the wall. “Whoa, okay, then.”

The silence stretched taut between them. Then, her quiet voice came down the line. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, it’s okay. I shouldn’t have waited so long to call. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Her tone gentled. “I understand.”

“No, it’s not fine. I was frustrated last week. I shouldn’t have said the things I did, shouldn’t have taken it out on you. I’m sorry, Abby.”

“Me too.”

“No, you didn’t do anything.” Scott ran a hand through his hair, tugging the strands at the end, a knot of tension building in his chest. He didn’t want to share these things with Abby. Didn’t want to burden her with them. “I’d been on the phone with Lindsay and...well, it doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have said those things.”

“Yeah, no, I understand. It’s okay.”

“Thanks. For understanding.” He pushed on before the pause could turn awkward.

“How’re things?”

“They’re, umm, quiet?” Her words were an odd cross between a question and a statement. “I’m still working on the business plan for the therapy dog school.”

He pushed off the wall and dropped into a chair, grateful the conversation seemed to be normal. “Do you have a name yet?”

“Not yet. Nothing seems right.”

“Well, when you’re done, I could take a peek at it. If you wanted.”

“Oh, no,” she said, quickly denying the possibility. “I wouldn’t want to... Well, you’re so busy right now.”

He laughed. “Abby, you know I have a business degree, right? I even graduated with honors. I’d be happy to help out any way I can. Unless you’d rather I didn’t. I know this is still new for you.”

When she didn’t answer right away, Scott wondered if he’d overstepped. Then, he heard a ragged, indrawn breath.

“Yeah, that would be great. When I’m done.”

He nodded, though she couldn’t see him. “What else is new?”

“I had to shave Gen because I thought she had some hot spots, and she did, but none big enough to justify how uncomfortable she’s acting. And shaving her hasn’t helped.

I'm thinking it might be time for a vet visit."

"Is she okay?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe? It's probably the heat getting to her. I know I don't want to eat, either, by the end of the day, and I don't even have fur."

"Well, if you need to, Lauren and Dylan are home. Drop by the house, use the pool, enjoy the A/C..." Scott trailed off, wishing he'd thought to give Abby a key to his place before he'd left. "I know Dylan misses you guys."

"Th-Thanks..." He wasn't sure what caused her to stutter, or why her voice filled with some kind of deeper emotion.

"I mean it. You should go by this evening."

"We'll see." He heard her shift through the phone, the creak of a chair, or maybe the couch. Toenails clicked in the background. "So, how's practice going?"

"Eh, as well as can be expected." He didn't like talking about training camp, or even pre-season. He didn't want to risk jinxing it. "Starting to gel a bit, hitting the targets, running the plays. One day at a time, you know."

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Abby laughed. “I always thought all those platitudes at press conferences were an act. What else am I going to learn this season?”

Scott snorted. “You have no idea. Oh, speaking of which, Finn’s wife, Kelly, wants to know if you’ll be at our home opener. I know you haven’t met her yet, but she’s awesome. I thought maybe the two of you could sit together.”

“I don’t know. It might be too late to buy tickets,” she hedged.

At her words, Scott couldn’t help laughing. “No worries, Abby. I’ve got you covered.”

“It’s not that. I mean, I can buy a ticket. You don’t have to get one for me.”

“It’s no big deal, promise. I have a couple free tickets to all our home games. Dylan comes, and sometimes my sister or my parents if they’re in town.”

Scott grimaced at the small “oh” coming over the line. “Sorry, I’ve never, uh, done this before. I don’t know how...”

“Me either. Usually it’s my family, if anyone comes at all, but Sarah’s in Montana, now, and my parents loved San Diego so much they stayed, even when I got to come home. I’d like you to be there, though, and if you want, Dylan can come, too, or I can have him stay home with Lauren...”

“He doesn’t go on his own, does he?”

“No, he sits with Kelly, or with Jimmy’s family. You met Jimmy at the hospital?”

“Yeah, I remember him. Big guy, six siblings, right?”

“Yep, that’s Jimmy. His littlest sister, Nevaeh, is a little older than Dylan. The two of them are like a hurricane when they get together. Batten down the hatches, ‘cause something’s gonna get thrown around, broken, or flooded.”

“I met her at the fair.” Abby laughed and Scott let go of the tension he’d been holding.

He understood her hesitation, knew she didn’t want to ask too much of him, now, at training camp, or in general, not wanting anyone to think her interest in him stemmed from what she could get out of it.

On the other hand, every time she refused to let him do something, whether picking up the check at dinner or giving her tickets to one of his games, a small part of him wilted. He wanted to be able to give her these things, and more. He wanted to spoil her, even though she’d never allow it. He wanted to shower her with gifts, physical manifestations of his affections. And to be honest, proof he could.

He worked hard for his salary, and if it made him want to show off a little bit, who could blame him?

“Alright, I’ll be there. Dylan can introduce me to everyone and Kelly, was it? Kelly can tell me all your deepest, darkest secrets.”

Scott snorted. “Don’t have many of those.”

“Aww, no secret girlfriends? Weird quirks?” she teased.

He didn't want to tackle his relationship history, yet, so he chuckled, instead. "I'll get those tickets for you, and we can chat later about all the details."

Seventeen

"WHAT A WASTE of time."

Gen, curled on the backseat behind her, lifted her head for a quick scratch behind the ears.

"Dr. Stevens should be back from vacation next week; I'll try to make another appointment, then."

Abby wrinkled her nose, dissatisfied the on-call vet had taken one look at Gen's half-grown fur and decided ahead of time Abby was some kind of clueless dog owner.

"You should have brought her in as soon as you suspected those hot spots. We could have shaved only those and saved her the trouble."

As if Gen missed her thick, black coat in the height of the summer heat and humidity. As if Abby couldn't recognize and treat basic hot spots at home.

Then he'd heard about the swimming.

"Chlorine is bad for dogs," he'd haughtily informed her. "It dries their skin and can poison them if they drink too much of it."

"She doesn't drink it. And I rinse her with clean water afterwards."

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He crossed his arms. “Doesn’t matter. Still dries out her skin. She has flaky patches...” He pointed to one of the most virulent hot spots, which, Abby knew would have been flaky anyway.

It hadn’t taken long for Abby to devolve into humming in response to whatever the on-call vet had said, filing it away to check with Dr. Stevens later. At least she had a tube of hydrocortisone, now, to help treat the lurid red patches on Gen’s skin.

“Plenty of fresh water, my foot,” she grumbled as she navigated through traffic. “As if I don’t give you a full, new bowl every morning and evening. Try changing her food if she’s not eating... It’s not like you’re on some kind of cheap, corn-based diet.”

It was odd, though. They hadn’t been by Dylan and Scott’s place more than a couple times since he’d started training camp, so empty calories from stolen-away dog treats weren’t filling her up. She must miss the boy, Abby concluded, and resolved to swing by Scott’s place on their way home.

Maybe Lauren would let her take Dylan to the park for a while. He and Gen could run and play together, and maybe the dog would find her old enthusiasm again. She hadn’t spent any time with children the last few weeks since being shaved. She must be lonely.

Abby pulled into Scott’s driveway, slid out of the driver’s seat, and opened the back door, waiting for Gen to jump out. After a moment, when no collar jingle came, she ducked her head to check on the pup.

Gen’s eyes were dull, staring across the car, and her tail gave only a few feeble

thumps.

“Hey girl, you doing okay?”

Gen’s ears cocked forward, then flicked back again and she gingerly rose, stepping across the seats and jumping down to the cobbled driveway.

Perking up, she pranced to the front door and waited while Abby knocked. Flicking her ears as a flurry of footsteps on the other side announced Dylan’s arrival, when the door opened, she leapt up and draped her front paws over his shoulders, nuzzling her head beneath his chin.

Abby couldn’t help smiling at the sight. “Hey Dylan, we’re heading to the park. Want to come?”

“Why don’t we stay here, instead?”

Abby’s jaw dropped as Scott strode across the living area and into the front entrance, then swept her up in his arms and pulled her against him.

“Mmm,” he hummed against her ear. “I’ve missed you.”

“Missed you, too,” she replied, still surprised. “But what are you doing here?”

“Day off. I thought I’d run home before Dylan starts school next week.”

“Ooh, that must be hard. Him starting school right in the middle of training camp.”

“Not quite in the middle; we’ll be wrapping up in another few days and then it’ll be prepping for pre-season. At least I’ll be home.”

“Speaking of home,” Abby tucked herself under his arm as they headed toward the kitchen. “I checked. First home game is week three against Seattle. I figured I could come pick Dylan up early and then go over to the field. I’d hate to get stuck in traffic or miss anything.”

“It’s a one-o’clock game, so the tailgating should be pretty tame. You shouldn’t need too much extra time.”

“Still...”

Abby had arrived during dinner prep, so Scott put her to work. Elite athletes had to eat a lot of protein to keep from wasting away, but fruits and vegetables were equally important in maintaining both a balanced diet and a sufficient intake of all the trace vitamins and minerals their bodies burned.

During the off-season he hadn’t been quite as careful, but with practices now in full swing, she figured meals would become simpler, faster, and more calorically dense.

She wasn’t wrong.

Scott handed her a recipe for quinoa and goat cheese stuffed peppers with caramelized onions and chard on the side, then set her to work chopping herbs.

“That smells amazing,” she exclaimed as Scott lifted the lid on the rice cooker and fluffed the quinoa with several generous pinches of thyme.

“I’ll be eating chicken and potatoes soon enough. Doesn’t hurt to make things I enjoy while I have the time.”

Abby poked her head into the living area to check on Gen and found her rolling on the floor with Dylan while he ruffled her ears. Not allowed to lick, Abby couldn’t

help giggling as the dog stuck her tongue in and out, wetting her nose, but keeping enough distance from the boy she didn't get him.

Leaning against the kitchen doorjamb, Scott's warm presence came up behind her, then one arm snaked around her waist and tugged her closer.

He'd grown. Not significantly so, but more solid, wider in the shoulders. His bicep, where it pressed into her upper arm, was thicker, banded with defined muscles. She sighed and leaned back against him.

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“How’d her vet visit go?” Scott’s voice ruffled the strands of hair by her ear that had pulled loose from her ponytail. Electricity raced up her spine as they tickled her neck.

“Not great.” She cleared her throat, swallowing through the sudden thickness roughening her voice. Scott’s easy breath on the back of her neck sent her stomach tumbling, even as frustration rose in her chest. “Our vet is on vacation, so we had to see the on-call doctor. He pulled a Cunningham.”

“A Cunningham?”

Abby turned as Scott let her go, albeit reluctantly, dragging a hand across her hip.

Following him back toward the stove, she caught her breath, then explained, “Sorry, that’s what we used to call it when a doctor wouldn’t bother to listen to the patient.”

“Ah. The name sounded familiar.”

“Dylan’s first ortho,” Abby reminded him, voice dropping.

Scott, stirring cheese into the quinoa mixture, jerked his head around to her. “Oh, that’s ‘pulling a Cunningham’.”

They locked eyes a moment longer, then Scott’s attention went back to the bowl in front of him, a slight smile playing on his lips.

The ease of sharing these tidbits of her life before had grown slowly. The night she’d called Scott and asked him to bring pizza had taught her she could, but she’d been

careful, choosing only the happiest memories, the ones that still made her smile. A shared joke without someone to share it with left a wispy shadow of melancholy behind, but Scott's smile reminded her she didn't have to face her ghosts alone.

"Here, can you cut these, too?" Scott handed her a board full of greens.

As she sliced the long ribbons of chard, a thought occurred to her. "Hey, what does Dylan do for away games?"

"He stays home with Lauren and watches them on TV. Why?"

Abby cocked her head to the side and considered. If Scott would soon be home from camp, they'd be spending more time at his place again. Gen would have more opportunities to hang out with Dylan, but away games could be week-long commitments, depending on the location, especially if they played back-to-backs or Sunday and Thursday games on the West Coast. In those cases, the team wouldn't even come home in between. "What if he came over to my place for the season opener?"

"It would make more sense for you to come over here; our TV is better."

Setting the knife down, Abby leaned on the counter and studied Scott. "I meant he could stay with us. Like, the whole time you're away. I know you have Lauren, and she knows during the season she needs to be here more, but Gen adores Dylan, and so do I, and I can get him to and from school. I have that extra room he could sleep in..." She trailed off, her voice rising as if in question.

Scott had turned toward her as she spoke, eyes locking with hers, and as she ran out of words, he took two long strides across the tile floor. She straightened up, turning to meet him, but still wasn't prepared as his arms came around her and his lips crashed into hers.

Surprised, but not opposed, she allowed herself to be swept up in the kiss.

They broke apart, her breath stuttering in her chest. “What was that for?”

“I love you.” Abby froze, but Scott continued. “I love how much you love my son. I love how much you want to spend time with him. I love how you care as much about having a relationship with him as you do with me. I just... I love you.”

Her default reaction—to run—was too deeply ingrained in her psyche not to be her automatic response. Forcing herself to stillness, she allowed her fear to wash past, her fingers trembling with the effects of the adrenaline, the fight-or-flight response coursing through her veins. But she recognized it as an old adversary, one she knew all too well how to process. She wouldn’t let it win; she wouldn’t let it steal her future.

“I love you, too.”

She wanted to say more, but Scott crushed her to him. She breathed in the fresh scent of his soap mingled with the spice of the herbs he’d mixed into the quinoa, her nose pressed to the cool, clean cotton of his shirt.

No more words were needed.

Eighteen

“ABOUT FLIPPING TIME.” Cara smacked the table.

Gen jumped to her feet, head cocked, then slid back down to her belly when Cara scratched her under the chin, apologizing for making so much noise.

“Though you can’t blame me,” she continued. “It’s only taken, what? Six months? I

swear, y'all have been slower than molasses flowing uphill in winter. New England winter. Not Charleston winter."

Abby snorted. "It has not been six months."

"Close enough. You know, most couples save sex for the third date, not kissing."

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“Cara...” Abby’s cheeks flamed as she sputtered. “I don’t... I’m not... We aren’t...”

“I’m teasing,” Cara said, more gently. “You and Will waited, and I’m sure you and Scott will, too, because I know how important it is to you.”

Abby winced, weaving her fingers together, then pressing them into her lap. “We haven’t exactly, uh, talked about it.”

“It’s been six months, girl! What have you been talking about?” Cara demanded.

“It hasn’t been six months,” Abby repeated, rolling her eyes.

Cara rolled her eyes. “Oh, my God, this is going to be the ‘it’s coffee, not a date’ conversation all over again.”

Abby counted back in her head. “Four months if you include when we started spending time together. Three if you count our first official date.”

“Fine. I can work with three months,” Cara conceded. “It’s still a ridiculously long time to wait for a first kiss, though. You know that, right?”

“I’m not you, Cara.” Abby dropped her gaze to her hands, still tangled in her lap, Gen’s leash twining through her fingers.

Even with Will, she’d been slow and cautious, though that had been tempered somewhat by adolescent hormones and peer pressure. Now, haunted by the ghost of her ex-husband, slow and cautious had become ponderous and guarded.

But Scott had torn down her defenses, one at a time. With the same methodical precision as executing a play, he'd planned his pursuit perfectly. And, incredibly, she could acknowledge it had worked. His patience had paid off, and though she certainly wasn't ready to jump into bed with him, she could imagine a future including him and Dylan. A life together. A new chance at happiness.

She finally glanced up at Cara, who wore an uncharacteristically somber expression.

"I know you're not. I'm sorry."

Abby nodded.

"But I am going to tell you about my date last Friday with Chase Edgerick over in ortho."

"The new department head?" Abby had seen him in passing. Handsome enough, though not Cara's typical preference. She didn't tend to date inside the hospital.

"Cunningham is pissed. He thought he had ortho wrapped up, but the Board of Directors picked Chase instead."

Abby winced. An outsider hired in over his head? Tom wouldn't have liked that at all.

"He's calling him a DEI hire. Loudly." Cara crossed her arms.

Abby whistled. "He's going to get himself fired if he's not careful."

"And not a single person would miss him."

Abby glanced around the hospital cafeteria and shushed her friend. "You will, too."

His dad is still on the board, even if Tom didn't get chosen."

"Fine," Cara scoffed. "But I, for one, am glad to see daddy's influence finally isn't enough to drop yet another choice position in his lap. He hasn't done a lick of original research in years. He and Will may have hated each other, but at least they fostered some healthy competition."

"Will didn't hate Tom," Abby insisted. "He just didn't think nepotism should rule hiring. I happen to agree."

Cara shrugged. "So do I, but this is supposed to be a research hospital. If he's not publishing, he'll perish." Cara winced. "Sorry, I didn't mean it..."

A knife twisted in Abby's chest. She knew the saying—publish or perish—but in Will's case, his obsession with work might very well have played a contributing role in his death.

How different would her life look today if he hadn't stayed so late finishing his very last paper?

Cara leaned forward, covering Abby's hand with hers. "Really. I'm sorry. That was insensitive of me."

Abby breathed through the stinging prick in her sinuses. "I know. It's okay."

"Anyway, Chase published an article in *The American Journal of Sports Medicine* last month about youth athletes and he has another one coming out in October with *The Journal of Orthopedic Surgery and Research*."

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“Wow!” Abby shook her head. “Tom’s not doing anything remotely comparable anymore. What’s the new one about?”

Cara grinned. “Pain management in pediatric patients. Opiate use in the wake of the opioid crisis isn’t well-studied in children.”

“No kidding. I wonder if he’d consider doing some crossover work with pain management in oncology.”

Will would have been interested in exactly this kind of collaborative work, but without him to drive it, Abby wondered which of the current doctors she could approach to float the idea.

“I can ask. I’m seeing him again this weekend.”

“Again?” Abby arched an eyebrow at her best friend. “Wow, two dates in two weeks. You must really like this guy.”

“Don’t tell my dad. He’ll never let me hear the end of it when he finds out I’m seeing a guy in his field.” Cara snorted, but her smile belied her complaint.

“I’m happy for you,” Abby leaned forward, wrapping one arm around Cara in a half-hug.

Gen, ready to work, jumped to her feet, but when Abby sat back, she settled onto her haunches again, then slid down to the floor, watching as a family with two young kids found a table nearby.

“Ooh, look, Mommy. A doggie!”

The little girl pointed and Abby, attention caught by her words, asked, “Do you want to come pet her?”

It took several minutes for the parents to corral their kids back to their own table, but when they did, Cara leaned both elbows on the table and studied Abby.

“So, it’s going well, then? I don’t want to pry, but you’ve been pretty tight-lipped for all the time you spend at Scott’s place.”

Abby nodded. “It is. It’s... really good. I adore Dylan. And Scott, he’s...”

Perfect.

He wasn’t, of course. But when he always seemed to know the exact right things to say and do, she couldn’t help falling for him more every day.

Will wasn’t perfect, either, but he loved you.

She’d been grappling with Will’s ghost for months, the reality of who he had been edging uneasily alongside her grief, and the idea she should honor the dead, no matter their mistakes in life. Allowing herself to acknowledge his imperfections stopped her from comparing Scott to a paragon on a pedestal.

She owed Scott the chance to love her on his own terms, not competing with a shadow.

“... amazing,” she finished. “He’s amazing. The season starts on Sunday, but even with practices, he’s taking Dylan to school every day, and he’s making time for us most evenings. We had a talk before training camp started, and I really doubted we’d

make it, especially when I had to shave Gen, but I think we're going to be okay."

"D'you think they'll bring home the championship this year?" Even a non-fan like Cara knew how close the Raptors had come last year.

Abby shrugged. "I don't know, but I think they have a shot."

They lost the first game of the season, and the commentators went crazy. Even before the post-game press conference, they were discussing the Raptors in a one-and-done tone and decrying their chances of even making it into the playoffs. Abby shut off the TV and she and Dylan went out for ice cream.

"Dad doesn't celebrate losses," Dylan told her between licks.

Still hot and humid, despite being the first week of September, he caught the drips with his tongue before they ran over his fingers and fell to the ground.

Abby snorted. "We're not celebrating a loss; we're being defiant their whole season will be defined by one game."

"Uh-huh," Dylan agreed, "accidentally" letting a small dollop of ice cream fall to the ground between Gen's outstretched paws.

Abby frowned. "She can't eat off the ground, Dylan. It will teach her it's okay to scavenge for food."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Abby. I didn't know."

Abby scooped the ice cream up in a napkin. "I know, kiddo, that's why I told you. There's a lot of rules, but you're doing great."

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“Can I give her some in a bowl, instead?”

She shook her head. “Not today. She hasn’t been eating much lately, so I want to make sure she’s not filling up on junk.”

“Is she okay?”

“She’s fine.” Abby ruffled his hair. “We have a vet appointment next week to double check, but I think the heat is bothering her more than usual.”

Scott picked Dylan up from school on Monday and Abby brought his small duffel bag home that night when she joined them for dinner. Quiet through the meal, she wasn’t sure how to handle the loss, but Dylan defused the awkward silence, filling it with a running commentary of their weekend’s activities.

“... and then I told him we went out for ice cream after the game because we were being... definite...”

Abby laughed. “Defiant.”

“Yeah, defy-nant.” Dylan shoved another forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth, then continued around the bite, “Don’t worry, Dad. We got your back.”

The corners of Scott’s mouth twitched upwards, and with a heavy breath, he shook the loss from his shoulders. “Well, I appreciate it. And please don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Under the table, he reached for Abby's hand and squeezed her fingers.

Thursday afternoon, Abby picked Dylan up from school for another long weekend at her place. Scott and the team had headed out that morning for San Francisco and Abby had called him before the flight to wish him luck.

"We're ready," he'd told her, adamant.

"Play your best; that's enough."

Sunday afternoon Abby and Dylan huddled in front of her small television, wearing their Raptors jerseys.

After a long drive down the field, they had to settle for a field goal. Abby made popcorn and Dylan practiced balancing kernels on the end of Gen's nose during the commercials. When he'd realized how much food training was an integral part of Gen's routine, Dylan had embraced the new dynamic and taken it upon himself to "help" her.

If she left the popcorn, he'd take it from her nose, pop it in his mouth, and offer her a small piece of kibble in return. When she didn't manage to resist the temptation, he followed Abby's instructions to "cover" the food when it fell to the floor, preventing Gen from positively reinforcing her own disobedience. After a few rounds, she ignored the popcorn every time.

By half-time, the 49ers and Raptors had battled up and down the field but only scored nine points between them: one field goal for the home team and two for the visiting team. Both would have to adjust.

When the 49ers received the ball to open the third quarter, they scored a touchdown in less than two minutes. Under pressure to respond, the Raptor offense took the field,

but a quick three-and-out later, the 49'ers were in control again. They pushed down the field and into the red zone. A last-ditch defensive effort, led by a big stop from Jimmy, held them to only three points, but they'd widened the gap to a two-score game.

Scott took the field with his offense, but their struggles led to a third and eight. Scott flicked a pass to Finn, who dove toward the line, and the chains came out.

"Fourth and inches," Abby said as the television posted the same in a strip along the bottom of the screen.

"They should go for it," Dylan declared.

"Seems early, still."

"Yeah, but if they turn it over and San Francisco scores, they'll have to dig out of a seventeen-point hole."

Seconds later, Scott went under center. Dylan had been right.

Abby mulled it over as she kept one eye on the television and one on the boy. He never missed his dad's games, but he definitely didn't have Scott's passion for football. Some kids would have already been on a champion selections team by Dylan's age, following in their father's footsteps. Abby had always assumed because he didn't play, he wasn't interested. She'd been wrong. He'd grown up with this game, grown up on Scott's lap as he watched tape, grown up on the sidelines with the kids of the other players, many of whom were on those elite teams. He'd listened to countless hours of commentary, decoded innumerable plays, slid Xs and Os around a board since he'd mastered a pinch grip at less than a year old.

"Yes. Go, Dad!" Dylan pumped his fist as Scott dove over the line and got the first

down. He turned to Abby. “He’s been watching a lot of tape of Manny Patrick, the Chiefs quarterback.”

Abby nodded. “Looks like it paid off.”

A couple solid runs and some quick passes got them into the red zone, and if they pressed now, they could close the gap with a full quarter still to play.

Dylan, fingers twining in Gen’s ruff, hummed as the offense set. Then, eyes lighting up, he leaned forward. “C’mon, Dad.”

The ball snapped, Scott dropped back and turned right, passing the ball to one of his runners. The cameras and blockers slid left, following the runner, who ran out of bounds after only gaining a yard, but then...

“Yeah!” Dylan whooped.

The camera, realizing the runner didn’t have the ball, panned back to Scott, who’d already set his feet. He drilled a pass between two defenders, a chancy throw, but it paid off.

The receiver rolled to his feet and spiked the ball as the refs raised their arms.

“Touchdown.”

“Finally!” Abby high-fived Dylan.

But the Raptors had blown all their energy on those seven points, and the defense struggled against the 49’ers offense. Garrett Matthews, the quarterback, had studied in Kansas City under Manny Patrick; one step better than studying his tape, and they’d dialed in their rushing game. Another touchdown.

Again, the Raptors were deep in a hole.

Playing catch up since the half had taken its toll, and exhaustion dogged the defense’s steps. They needed a long drive to run out the clock a bit, then maybe take a two-point conversion. Either way, they couldn’t allow the 49ers to score again.

Then, in surreal slow-motion, Scott passed up the field, straight into the arms of a defender.

“No,” Abby shrieked in outrage. “Come on.”

Dylan slumped in his seat.

“It’s okay, there’s still time...”

But the last few minutes of the game spun out with another touchdown for San Francisco, an easy pick-six, and by the time the Raptors got the ball back, only enough time remained for Scott to pitch a Hail Mary up the field, but the receiver tripped over his own feet, sliding on his belly in the turf as the ball sailed overhead.

The last second ticked away.

Dylan and Abby sat silently as the commentators picked the game apart, then Abby grabbed the remote and mashed the power button. The screen went dark, but still, neither one said anything.

“It’s early in the season,” Abby choked out. “Away games are hard. They’re home next week, and the Seahawks lost today, so they’re only one-and-one...”

Dylan nodded. “I know.”

He didn’t need reassuring; this had always been his life.

“Ice cream?”

Dylan grinned. “Yes.”

Nineteen

SCOTT DIDN’T NEED her reassurance, either, but it didn’t stop Abby from trying.

“Don’t worry about it, plenty of teams have a rough start. What matters is peaking at

the right time, not too early..." The words poured from her mouth like a leaking faucet she couldn't quite turn off.

"Abby," Scott rested his hand on her arm, sending a slow curl of heat through her chest.

Why did even the most casual of his touches set her senses spinning?

"It's okay, I'm fine. You don't need to do this."

Abby's shoulders slumped. "Sorry. I'm not sure what to say..."

Scott pulled her into a hug. "Nothing. Let it go. That's what I have to do, too."

"Are you sure?" At his nod, she relented. "Okay, letting it go."

Abby tipped her face up toward his and pecked his lips with her own.

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“I want to talk about something besides football right now. How’d Gen’s vet appointment go?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you. She’s fine. I mean, I knew she was, but I’m glad we went back. We tried switching her food and she started eating again right away, so the vet thinks she became sensitized to something in the old formula. Or maybe they changed their ingredients.”

“That happens?”

“Sometimes.” Abby shrugged. “I’ve also been working with Dylan on not feeding her extras or scraps, so I think that might be helping, as well.”

Scott shook his head. “Sorry, I should have put a stop to it when it started.”

“Don’t worry. I should have, too, but they both enjoyed it so much.”

“Still, good news. I’m glad she’s okay. Are you going to bring her to the game?”

Abby shook her head. “She’s a therapy dog, not a service dog. There are places where I can toe the line, like the coffee shop, because they’re dog-friendly, but I have to be careful. Trying to get her into a place like the stadium could hurt working service dog teams.”

Scott cocked his head. “Wait, they’re not the same?”

“Not at all. Service dogs provide tasks for their handlers, like guide work, diabetic or

seizure alert, or retrieving dropped items. Therapy dogs are trained to help other people, not their own handler. I have no reason to take a therapy dog to the game. I mean, except maybe to comfort the Seahawks when they lose to you.” She grinned.

“Yeah, they’ll need all the therapy they can get by the time we’re done with them.”

But when Scott dropped Dylan off at her place on Saturday afternoon, all business, Abby accepted his perfunctory instructions and logged Kelly’s number into her cell phone in case something came up. Already getting his head into the game, she wished him luck with a quick kiss on the cheek.

She hadn’t known most teams kept their players in a hotel the night before a game, even if it’s at home. Something about team bonding, getting a good night’s sleep, and having breakfast together for morale, Scott had explained, then rolled his eyes. “Unless your roommate snores. Or is up all night on his phone. Or the hall noise is too loud. Or a million other things that could all be solved by letting me sleep at home in my own bed.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow after the game, right?”

“Yep. Kelly will make sure you get to the ready room. I’ll meet you there.”

“And then we’ll go celebrate.” She didn’t want to jinx it, especially given they’d already lost the first two games of the season, but Abby also understood this wasn’t the time for being a strict realist—or worse—a cynic.

“Then we’ll go celebrate.” Scott kissed her one more time, shorter than she would have liked, but understandable.

“Love you,” she reminded him as he turned to leave, but he had already begun his pre-game shift into player mode, and she didn’t think he’d heard her.

She thought she'd planned plenty of time for them to arrive at the stadium, park, and get to their seats, but she was little more than an amateur when it came to game day. The coin had already been tossed by the time Dylan, tired of waiting for her as she squinted up at the signs over each tunnel, grabbed her hand and wove her through the crowds and right to their seats.

A woman with warm, ochre skin and a halo of long, tightly curled, dark hair waited for them, looking more beautiful and stylish than anyone at a football game had any right to. She wore a jersey with the number 11 and WATKINS printed across the shoulder blades. Over the W, looping script in glittering silver declared, MRS.

Dylan slid into the row first, high-fiving a few people above and below them along the way, then flopping into the seat next to the woman.

Abby followed behind him, smile pasted on her face, fingers shaking. She lifted her chin, trying to ignore the curious glances being shot her way.

Rising, the woman chivvied Dylan over another spot, and, grinning, pulled Abby past him into the seat beside hers.

"You must be Abby. I'm Kelly."

Enfolded into a hug before she could even think to resist, surprise warmed her cheeks at the welcome from a complete stranger.

"I'm so happy to finally meet you."

"Uh, thanks?" Abby sank into her seat. Only then did she realize the stares had followed her, a few heads even craning from below, studying Kelly's welcome.

Kelly, noticing, smirked. "Ignore them. They aren't sure whether you're the new

nanny, the girlfriend, or another football... follower.” Her tone of voice made it clear follower meant something else.

Abby blanched.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re with me, and I’ll take care of you.” With that, Kelly shot a dark glance at those still sneaking looks at them. Abby’s breath stuttered in relief as most eyes turned guiltily toward the field.

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Dylan pulled her sleeve, and Abby turned toward him.

“Look, there’s Dad.”

Abby followed the line of his finger and found Scott squinting up into the stands, one hand held high with thumb, forefinger, and pinky extended. She recognized the ASL sign for I love you.

Dylan waved, then flashed the same sign back.

“You should do it, too. It’s for luck.” He gazed up at Abby with wide, dark eyes.

Smiling, she formed her fingers in the same way Dylan held his. Scott couldn’t possibly see them clearly from where he stood, even if he seemed to know exactly where to direct his gaze, but she did it, anyway.

Settling back into their seats as the teams lined up for kickoff, the woman in the row behind them leaned forward, into their space, and raised an eyebrow at Kelly.

“Intro?”

Kelly smiled. “Jif, this is Abby. Abby, Jif.”

“Like the peanut butter?”

The woman laughed and rolled her eyes good-naturedly, flipping her long, caramel-brown hair over one shoulder.

“Short for Jennifer,” she emphasized the “if.” “It’s a nickname, but it kind of stuck. Like peanut butter.”

“Who are you...? I mean, is there a player...” Abby trailed off, realizing she didn’t quite know the right etiquette. Would Jif be insulted?

Jif laughed again, reassuring Abby she wasn’t. “I’m Coltan Pritchard’s sister. Hislittlesister, so my chances of being ‘with’ anyone on the team is approximately negative infinity.”

Kelly snorted. “Doesn’t stop you from trying.”

Jif stuck out her tongue. “What can I say? Some of those guys definitely put the ‘fan’ in fanatic.” She waved her hand as if she were too hot and puckered her lips in a sexy pout.

Kelly groaned. “That was terrible.”

Jif ignored her. “Welcome to the club, sister. And I promise to keep my eyes off your man.” She held a hand to her heart. “Scout’s honor.”

“Were you a Girl Scout?”

Jif grinned unrepentantly. “Nope.” She popped the P.

Abby turned back toward the field, a small smile on her face. She liked Jif. And she liked Kelly.

“Scott said you had a dog.” Kelly said, carrying the conversation easily. “Will we get to meet her?”

Jif leaned forward, a curtain of her hair dropping between Kelly and Abby. “Ooh, I love dogs!”

“She’s a therapy dog, so I have to be careful...”

Jif frowned. “I know. Jimmy said she did an amazing job at the hospital. I’m so jealous he’s met her, and I haven’t.”

“You just met Abby.”

Jif ignored Kelly. “Will you bring her next time?”

“I can’t.” As disappointment flashed across Jif’s face, Abby sighed. “But if you wanted to grab coffee later this week, there’s a place in Cannonborough we go to a lot.”

“Yes!” Jif pumped her fist and threw herself back in her seat.

Abby, eager to change the subject, took the opportunity to talk to Kelly without Jif’s head between them. “So, what do you do?”

“I’m in marketing. Advertising, specifically, but I also handle Finn’s contracts.”

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“And I’m an education major at CSU.” Jif’s hair draped between them again. “But I’m hoping to become a trophy wife. Preferably a wide receiver. Do you know how much stamina they have?”

Abby’s cheeks turned pink. She wasn’t going to think about the stamina of the players on the field. Especially Scott. Nope.

Kelly rolled her eyes and gently pushed Jif’s shoulder back. “Yeah, you and half this section.”

“Can I help it if I’m beautiful, an adoring fan, and fully prepared to commit to the manner of living that being a football wife entails?”

“Colton will be crushed when you don’t use the shiny new education degree he’s paying for.”

Jif giggled. “Half the girls he brings to his games don’t want to use their shiny degrees. They just want something shiny. It’s why so few of them last.” She cast a long glance down the row, where a few heads jerked forward, caught eavesdropping again.

Abby mulled that over. “Does Scott...?”

“Oh, no, but it doesn’t mean the others don’t. Some guys, there’s a different girl in the seat every week. The Raptor WAGS aren’t as bad as some, but they still notice. And Scott’s the quarterback. In most organizations his wife would be the center of the social circle, but he’s so private, you can’t blame them for being curious.”

Once again rendered mute, Abby nodded and turned her attention back to the game.

“Abby, can I go get a snack?” Dylan, wiggling in his seat, provided a welcome distraction.

“We ate lunch before we came, kiddo, and the game’s barely begun.”

“Something small? We didn’t have time before.”

Resigned, Abby reached into her bag at her feet, rummaging for her wallet. “Okay, let’s go.”

Dylan, jumping to his feet, took off down the row, then bolted up the stairs, skipping two at a time.

“Dylan, wait...” Abby called after him, rising to her feet, but Kelly’s voice boomed out over her own.

“You got your Stadium Card?”

Dylan threw a thumbs up over his shoulder. “He’ll be fine. He knows he isn’t supposed to go farther than the next section, and most of the vendors will recognize him. Scott’s good about keeping his card full.”

“His card?”

“Stadium Card. Kind of like a gift certificate. Saves having to bring cash.”

Though Abby might know football, she didn’t know anything at all about everything else that went on during games. Out of her element, her frustration mounted as she flailed, failed. In front of an audience. She gritted her teeth, finding herself angry at

Scott for not doing a better job preparing her, but she let it go as quickly.

Lips pursed, she forced herself to take a deep breath, then turned back to Kelly. “Sorry, I’m new to this.”

“You’re doing fine, hon. The boys, they throw us to the sharks here and have no idea how hard it is. That’s why I told Scott I’d shepherd you to your first game.”

“But you and Finn, Scott said you guys have been together since college.”

Kelly’s cheeks and the tips of her ears darkened, and she ducked her head, but pride filled her voice. “Since freshman year. They didn’t have a gymnastics squad and cheerleading was the next best thing, so we ended up spending a lot of time together during the fall.”

“That’s really sweet.”

Scott, under center and shouting last-minute instructions to the line, took the ball, then dropped back and threw. It connected with the tight end, a rookie from Texas the Raptors had drafted in the third round. His jersey said “Highcastle,” but Abby couldn’t remember his first name.

“Looks like Jordan’s finally gotten himself up to date on the playbook.”

“Have you met him?”

Abby wondered how well the players knew each other off the field, as well as how much contact the families had with each other.

“Yeah, we put on a little welcome party earlier in the year for the new guys, although we don’t always catch all the last-minute trades or free agents. Plus, the Raptors are

good about having a team spirit, not pitting the receivers against each other, so Finn's spent a bit of time with him. Hard worker, but, apparently, a bit of a partier."

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Abby couldn't help the small smirk at Kelly's comment. She hadn't been a partier, herself. Work and school had taken up far too much of her time, and she'd never needed to wade into the bar scene to find a date, so there hadn't been much point. But fresh out of college and straight into the NFL, she could imagine how that might impact someone's lifestyle.

"It's about thirty-seventy," Kelly continued. "Although, during the season, most of them are too busy or too tired to go out much. Those who do, anyway, don't last long. It ends up showing on the field, especially by November or December."

"I would have expected it to be higher."

The Raptors, now across midfield, ran the ball six yards for another first down.

"Partying, not so much. Now, check out the parking lot on your way out tonight. You'd think the NFL owned stock in luxury cars. Hannah said Pierce wanted to get an Aston Martin with his signing bonus and she had to talk him down to a Maserati." Kelly rolled her eyes.

"Scott's Audi is pretty nice. I always feel guilty when Gen sheds all over it."

"Yeah, and still under a hundred thousand, so don't you worry your head about it. He's one of the smart ones."

"He is?"

Kelly snorted. "Well, life bit him pretty hard. It's difficult to be that guy when you're a

single parent. Everyone else goes out after the game, but you have to be home for bedtime stories.”

“He’s an amazing dad.”

Kelly glanced around, then, seeing no sign of Dylan yet, muttered, “Dylan deserved at least one good parent. Lisa and John helped out a lot when they were still in San Diego, but Scott’s been on his own since moving home.”

“Lisa and John?”

“Scott’s parents. They stayed in San Diego after Scott came to the Raptors.”

Abby’s brows knitted. “I thought Scott grew up here.”

“He did, but when the Chargers drafted him, they moved to California to be closer. A good thing, too, after Dylan came along.” Kelly’s mouth snapped shut and her eyes flicked over Abby’s shoulder.

Turning, Abby understood why Kelly had stopped talking.

Garlic and fries wafting around him like an olfactory halo, Dylan plopped back into his seat.

“Here, I brought you some, too.” Dylan presented a small cardboard container with a flourish. “Derek’s makes them best. Stadium Fries doesn’t do a bad job, but don’t ever get them from Endzone.”

Abby nibbled one, then grinned at Dylan as he crammed them into his mouth, fries hanging out at odd angles until he could work them in and swallow.

It had been a long drive down the field, but they were within striking distance. Scott took the snap, dropped back, then flicked the ball, connecting with Finn, who ran the last few steps into the end zone.

The entire section leapt to their feet, cheering and shouting, and the stadium full of fans, so disappointed through the first two weeks of the season, screamed their excitement.

As if responding, the Raptors stopped Seattle and, again, took the ball all the way down and scored. By the half, they were up twenty-one to seven.

The third passed with all the drama of a baseball game in its seventh inning; that is, none. Both teams jockeyed up and down the field, but no points were scored, and by the fourth, Abby let herself hope they'd finally be able to bring a win home.

The Seattle quarterback scrambled and broke free, earning more yards in one play than his top running back had all day, then they scored on the drive, but the Raptors responded, and as the clock ran down, Abby breathed a sigh of relief.

They'd won, and it had been a solid win. Not a runaway, but not by the skin of their teeth, either, so maybe the commentators would calm down a bit.

"They're in Charlotte next week, but the Panthers have an evening game tonight against the Vikings." Kelly gathered her things into her lap and waited for the crowds to thin.

Abby stood and stretched, slinging the strap of her bag over her shoulder. "They're one and one at the moment." Abby wracked her brain to come up with the right statistics. "And they've had some injuries already. It could be a few weeks before they're strong again."

“Here’s hoping.” Kelly lifted an invisible glass and pretended to clink it. “C’mon, it’s clear enough, now. I’ll show you how to get down to the guys.”

“Dylan could show me, too.” Abby gave Kelly an easy out if she wanted it.

She’d been so nice all afternoon, but Abby worried it was only because Scott had asked her. Starting a new friendship from such an uneven foundation didn’t quite feel impossible, but certainly close.

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“Don’t be silly. First of all, I bet Dylan is already down there and getting into some kind of trouble with Nevaeh, so, good luck with that...” Kelly chuckled. “And I’m heading down, anyway.”

“Yeah, but I’m sure you want to be there to congratulate Finn when he comes out. He had a great day.”

“You trying to get rid of me, girl?”

“N... No. I mean, I don’t want to be in the way.”

“You listen up, now, okay? You aren’t in the way, and you’re not, what? A burden? No way. I know all this is new to you, but Scott adores you, and, before you start thinking I’m only being nice because he asked me to, you should know that’s not the kind of person I am. I’m nice to people who deserve it, and I don’t have any time for the fake crap some girls try to pull. If Scott loves you, it’s because you’re worth loving, so the least I can do is get to know the girl he thinks the world of. Especially since he and Finn are as close as brothers, so we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other before too much longer.”

Abby, chastened by Kelly’s emphatic speech, had little to say in return, so, nodding, she accepted she had made a new friend. Then, curious, she asked, “Why haven’t I met Finn yet?”

Kelly rolled her eyes. “That boy. He was so worried about scaring you off he about disappeared this summer.”

Abby's eyes widened and she sucked in a breath. "Finn...?"

"Nah," Kelly interrupted, catching on to Abby's train of thought. "He saw the two of you together at the hospital visit thing, but Scott kept insisting you weren't ready. You should have seen his excitement when he told us you'd agreed to come to the game with me. If he weren't six-foot-four, two-thirty, and one of the most intense quarterbacks I've ever seen on the field, I'd almost call him adorable."

She flashed a sideways grin at Abby, who could picture an adorable Scott much more easily than the one Kelly described. She'd seen so much of the relaxed, real version of him over the last several months, and so little of the one who ruled the turf.

Abby chewed over Kelly's revelations as they descended deeper into the bowels of the stadium and her stomach turned over. She had been scared, and so anxious; Scott had been right to fear. But in pursuing her, he'd let his own friends—his own life—slip through the cracks, sacrificing them to be with her. Even if it had been his choice, Abby couldn't allow it to continue now that she knew. She hadn't even questioned his attention, hadn't questioned why he hadn't spent any time with his own friends and teammates all summer.

Abby raised her chin, resolving to change, to do better. Scott shouldn't have to give up his life because of her anxiety. He shouldn't have to give up his friends because of her fear. Dylan shouldn't have to give up seeing the Raptor kids because he spent all his time with her and Gen, either.

"We're having a barbecue in a couple of weeks. You should come, let Scott introduce you to some people. Bring your dog. I hear she's well-behaved, and Dylan will love showing her off." Kelly raised an eyebrow.

Abby nodded. "I'll be there."

Twenty

ONCE AGAIN, SCOTT dropped Dylan's bag off at Abby's house on Thursday morning. She could have brought it over the night before, after dinner, but Scott had been adamant he wanted to come by before he left. Arriving with his son's duffel, two cups of coffee, and a small paper bag with several different kinds of doughnuts, he settled on the couch while Abby grabbed plates from the kitchen.

Gen, who had greeted Scott at the door, pranced around the living room holding a tug toy in her mouth. After trying several times to grab the other end of it, Scott turned to Abby with a perplexed expression.

Abby laughed. "She wants to play, but she doesn't want to risk losing. Ignore her; she'll get tired of playing keep-away and come closer."

Sure enough, within a few minutes, Gen laid her head on Scott's knee, toy still clenched firmly between her teeth.

"You ready to play now, pup?"

Gen lifted her head, ears twitching forward at his playful tone, and Scott caught hold of the toy.

"Watcha gonna do now, huh? I've got it and I'm not letting go."

Toenails scrabbling on the slick floor, Gen backed away, jerking the rope. Taking pity on her, Scott slipped off the couch and onto the floor where he, too, slid with the strength of her tugs. With one more massive effort, Gen yanked, overbalancing Scott until he sprawled, face down on the floor, losing his grip on the rope.

Gen tumbled over backwards.

Abby, sipping her coffee, coughed as she held back her laughter.

“Well, that’ll teach me.” Scott stood and pretended to dust himself off before settling again on the couch, twining his fingers in Abby’s.

“Can you imagine trying to explain it to the team if you’d gotten hurt? ‘Yeah, I dislocated my shoulder playing tug-of-war with my girlfriend’s dog’.”

“Coach would kill me. But at least you’d be able to reset it, right?”

“Ah, maybe no more tug.” Technically, she could, but she had no desire to ever deal with a dislocated joint again. Not as bad as an open fracture, but still... yuck!

Abby set her coffee on the table and reached for a doughnut. Before she could, though, Scott gave a quick tug at their twined hands, toppling Abby against him.

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“Well, maybe no more tug with the dog, anyway.” His lips ruffled the strands of hair framing her face, his breath catching the shell of her ear and sending shivers down her spine.

Testing the weight on her other hand, she pulled it from where she’d braced it on the cushion beside Scott and planted it in the middle of his chest. As his eyes widened, she overbalanced both of them, landing with a huff against the solid wall of his torso.

“Gotcha.” She laughed.

“Cheater,” Scott scolded through his own laughter. “That’s like letting go of the rope.”

Abby, still giggling, lowered her lips to his, humming as the kiss deepened and Scott’s arms came around her, holding her to him.

“Bummer.” She deadpanned. “Looks like I lost. Oh, woe is me...”

“Shut up, you,” Scott reached up to tangle a hand into her long hair and pull her lips back down to his.

“Make me.”

And he did.

They had to fight harder than Scott liked for the win, and he wasn’t above being grateful the Panthers were still missing two of their key receivers and one of their

tackles. Slogging through the game, it hadn't seemed to matter whether the numbers were on the Raptor's side, whether they had the healthier team or the better record, but, in the end, the final score showed another W under their belt.

Jogging down the tunnel toward the visitor's locker room, he bumped knuckles with several other players, celebrating the victory. The film tomorrow wouldn't lie, and there would be some choice comments from the coaching staff for a lot of players, himself included. He still couldn't believe he hadn't seen the safety cut across the field and pick the ball right out of the air, yards in front of the intended receiver.

Filing into the locker room, though, the relief of a second win permeated the space.

"Hey, Finn, help me peel out of this jersey, would you? It was hotter than a Carolina Reaper out there."

After hours of play, with all the sweat and layers of sunscreen, bug spray, or spilled Gatorade, it often seemed to take more effort to strip off the jersey than to play the game.

Once they'd both discarded their jerseys into the bin for cleaning, Scott unstrapped his pads. He liked to be one of the first into the showers. He had his choice of stalls and could stretch his time out a little longer before having to meet the press, and also because sometimes the guys needed to have a good jaw about the game, and he'd found they tended not to be as free with their words when the quarterback lingered.

Before padding to the shower, he slid his cell phone off the locker shelf, hoping for a message from Abby and Dylan.

"Shit, I have to go." He threw the phone back into his locker and started pulling his clothes on over his sweaty, grimy body with panicky, jerking motions inconsistent with his usual lithe grace and athleticism.

“What’s up, man?” Finn, naked beside him, grabbed his clothes, too.

“Lindsay showed up at Abby’s place and took Dylan.” Scott, dressed now, shirt sticking to his sweaty skin and twisting awkwardly across his shoulders, shook his head, forcing his brain to process the next step.

A car. He needed a car. The team bus wouldn’t leave for hours, and he needed to be home now. He needed to put his own two eyes on Dylan, to hold him in his own arms.

What the hell had Lindsay been thinking?

“Here, man, I texted Kelly. She’s coming down to meet us.”

“You don’t...”

“Shut up. Yes, I do. I’ll go let them know and meet you outside.”

Scott nodded, grabbed his phone, and left the locker room, barely hearing the subdued voices around him wondering what had happened.

Dialing, he prayed Abby would answer.

“Scott? Oh my God, Scott, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know what to do. She showed up here and started saying all these horrible things. I called you, but the game had started...”

He interrupted her, panic closing his throat. “Abby, did she say where she was taking him? Did she say why?”

Abby’s shaky breathing echoed through the phone. “I don’t... I don’t know. She showed up a couple minutes after kickoff and told me she didn’t want to hear any

more about Dylan staying with random women because you couldn't be responsible enough to make sure he had adequate supervision. I tried to explain, but she walked in, grabbed Dylan, and started pulling him toward the door. She didn't even let him get his things. I thought about calling the police, but she's his mother. What could I do?"

"Okay, okay," Scott processed the information as she threw it at him. "I don't know where she'd take him, except maybe back to New York, but that doesn't make any sense."

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His brain spun, slipped, skidded out. She didn't want Dylan, never had, so she must have found out he'd been staying with Abby and wanted to cause trouble. But why? To be difficult? To hurt him? To scare Abby?

"Abby, I have to go now. I'm going to call her and get this figured out, okay? I'll talk to you later."

"Let's go." Finn grabbed his arm as he came out of the locker room and towed him along behind him until they met Kelly, coming down the long corridor toward them.

"This way." She gestured, keys dangling from her fingers, and the two men followed her as she set a brisk pace, winding between stragglers but keeping their heads down and walking with purpose.

Scott didn't think he'd be able to keep it together if someone recognized him and asked for an autograph or, heaven forbid, a selfie.

The torturous drive home from Charlotte seemed to last forever. He tried calling Lindsay, but she'd turned her cell phone off, sending him to voicemail. A spiteful, mean move, meant to keep him scared to death. He called the house, then Dylan's cell phone, then Lauren, but no one answered.

Finally, after scrolling through the increasingly panicked texts from Abby she'd sent while he'd been playing, then listening to the four messages she'd left, he dropped his head into his hands and found himself hoping his son would be there when he got home. If he wasn't, he'd be flying to New York tonight.

“Is that Lauren’s car?”

As they pulled into Scott’s driveway, Finn’s voice broke through the miasma his mind had sunk into during the three-hour drive.

His breath caught in his chest, then rushed out verging on the edge of a sob. “No. No, it must be Lindsay’s.”

He had the door open before the car stopped moving, feet hitting the cobbled, granite blocks.

“Dylan?” He burst through the front door, shouting his son’s name.

“Oh, be quiet, you’ll wake him up.” Lindsay perched on the edge of his couch, a half-filled glass of wine on the coffee table in front of her. She snapped closed her book, the sound echoing in the silence between them.

Ignoring her, he crossed the room in four long strides, taking the stairs two at a time. Not until he laid eyes on the sleeping form of his son, tucked into his own bed, in his own house, did Scott’s heartbeat slow for the first time since reading Abby’s text message in the locker room.

Gritting his teeth, the cold knot of fear that had been lodged in his belly for the last three hours unwound, then, in an instant, turned red-hot. Closing the door, he retraced his steps to the living room.

Seeing his ex-wife in his home, his refuge—his and Dylan’s—words failed him. The rage simmered so close to the surface, it would take only the slightest spark to explode.

He forced himself to breathe.

Yelling at Lindsay would solve nothing, he reminded himself.

Lindsay rolled her eyes. “I’m his mother; it’s not like I’d let anything happen to him. Unlike that girlfriend of yours. Did you know her stupid mutt growled at me? I can’t believe you let Dylan spend time with it. I’m half-tempted to call Animal Control and report her.”

Scott ignored her jabs, ignored the way her lip curled when she called Abby his girlfriend, ignored her snide tone when she talked about Gen.

None of it mattered.

“Why are you here, Lindsay?”

His ex-wife took another sip of wine, rose, and sauntered across the living room, gathering her coat and bag from where they’d been resting on a chair near the front door. “I’m here to take care of my son, since you can’t find someone to do it for you. I understand you have a home game next week, so I’ll see you in two weeks... Or, do you need me to come down next weekend, as well?”

The heat coiled deep in his belly, a familiar friend, the same kind as each time he took the field. No, the same kind as in those games that were so much more than simply a game: a redemption game, a come from behind game, a rivalry game. Anger, yes, but anger he could use.

He kept his voice quiet, level, remarkably so given how well Lindsay could rile him. “You kidnapped my son.”

She stalked toward him with the lithe grace of a tiger. “I’m his mother...”

“Maybe you birthed him,” Scott interrupted her, “but it takes a hell of a lot more than

that to be amother.” He spat the last word at her. “And I have a custody agreement saying you only get to be his mother every other holiday and one week in the summer.”

Lindsay’s eyes widened, but, for the first time, Scott ignored the small voice in his mind warning him not to cross her. He’d spent so many years tiptoeing around her, believing her when she assured him no judge in the world would uphold his parental rights if she ever wanted Dylan back, heeding her because she was a lawyer. But this? She’d pushed too far, overplayed her hand, and in that moment, the bulwark of threats she’d fashioned meant nothing.

“A custody agreement saying you. Kidnapped. My. Son.”

Her face went white, the color draining at his accusation, then rising back up, beginning at her collar, until her entire face suffused with red.

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“For now,” she hissed back at him, flouncing out the front door and slamming it behind her.

Twenty-One

IT DIDN'T TAKE long for her to make good on her threat, and on Tuesday Scott called his lawyer, Mark Lystead, trying to parse the paperwork Lindsay had sent him.

“Can she do this? Unilaterally reopen a custody negotiation?” Scott had hoped Lindsay's threats had been nothing but empty bluff, or, at least, that she couldn't do anything to change the status quo.

“She's supposed to have a good reason, preferably one showing a clear and present danger to the child. She's claiming a lack of caretaking on your part and questioning whether your girlfriend is a safe person for him to be around,” Mark explained.

“That's ridiculous. Right? I mean, a judge is going to take one look at this and say it's garbage... won't they?” Scott began ticking things off on his fingers. “I have a great nanny for Dylan, his grades are good, he's happy. He adores Abby and Gen. Hell, Gen is a therapy dog, so Lindsay can't claim she's aggressive or untrained. Abby works in pediatrics, for crying out loud. I'm sure she had to pass some kind of a background check...”

“Scott, relax. We'll gather all your paperwork and send it in. I don't expect we'll get an initial hearing for a couple of weeks, but at least it'll be here, because this is where Dylan lives. The biggest question is whether you'll be able to attend with your schedule.”

Scott knew the importance of the hearing; he couldn't not go, even if it interfered with games. His best defense lay in how well he'd cared for Dylan since he'd won custody. No judge in the world would see skipping a custody hearing, even for work, in a positive light. "I'll make it work."

"Okay, then. I'll send the paperwork in and let you know as soon as I have a date."

After hanging up, Scott forced himself to take a deep breath in, fighting the knot in his stomach.

This is so stupid.

Lindsay didn't want Dylan; hadn't ever wanted him. Oh, they'd gotten married because she'd wound up pregnant; it had been "the right thing to do," the obvious next step in their relationship, but she'd never made a secret of her resentment, anger, or sorrow.

She'd been devastated when she found out, and she hadn't been alone. His future had been uprooted, too, equally unready to face the reality of fatherhood.

But she hadn't adjusted. Her visceral reaction remained, long after he'd made his peace with their life plans suddenly wrenched wildly awry.

Sure, she'd married him, and he'd thought the tears she'd cried as she walked down the aisle had been for joy. He'd long since accepted they hadn't been. He'd once read an article talking about how tears of joy and tears of mourning had different chemical makeups.

He knew from experience they still looked the same.

He'd hoped with Dylan's birth, she'd come around. That she'd be so in love with this

child she wouldn't notice the cost, or would count it worthwhile, as he had.

Instead, she'd rejected him from the start.

She'd refused to nurse him, even when, minutes after he'd been laid into her arms, still slick with blood and fluid, he began rooting. She'd handed him off to a nurse, pleading exhaustion, requesting he be placed in the nursery, asking for a bottle. Scott had fed him his first meal, marveling at the tiny human he'd helped create, while Lindsay had turned her face away.

She'd continued to withdraw once they were home, and Scott, having been warned, assumed the post-partum depression had overwhelmed her. Trying to help, to take some pressure off her, he'd soon begun getting up for night feedings and diaper changes. Hoping to help them bond, he'd make a bottle and bring it to Lindsay while he ran laundry, did dishes, or made dinner.

Take care of her, he'd been told. She birthed a baby. She's weak, exhausted, hormonal.

Except the more he helped, the more drained he became, burning the candle at both ends, and still trying to manage his rookie year in San Diego.

And then she left. Right before Christmas, only a few games left, when Scott had been looking forward to their first holiday together, as a family, as well as a period of rest and recuperation once the season ended.

The Chargers wouldn't even make the wildcard round, so he counted down the days until their last game. He'd taken Dylan shopping, walking up and down the light-strewn aisles to show his son the twinkling strings twined around the fake Christmas trees in their burlap-wrapped stands. He'd agonized over which toys to pick: wooden, plastic, or cloth; appropriate for babies or toddlers... They had to last a whole year, or

at least until his birthday.

In the end, he'd gotten them all. His contract in San Diego hadn't been huge, but it was enough, he rationalized, to let him spoil his son at their first Christmas.

He came home, maneuvering car seat and shopping bags through the door, to find the house cold, dark, and empty. Nothing but a note on the kitchen counter, and, though he'd wanted to rail, even to cry, Dylan fussed with hunger and needed a diaper change; he had tape to watch, and a game on Sunday; there wasn't time to do anything other than keep moving forward.

By the start of the next season, he'd managed to piece his life back together. It had been a rough run for a while. A series of short-term sitters, a few too many wild nights, and some women (and choices) he'd always regret, but he'd known from the start he didn't want to lose Dylan, so when his lawyer in California suggested his recent exploits may not be the perception he'd want the court to have when awarding custody of his son, he'd mended his ways.

Now, here they were again, and this time his eyes were wide open. No rose-tinted lenses, no misperceptions, only the harsh reality that Lindsay's interest in Dylan hadn't changed.

"Then why is she doing this?" he asked aloud, to the empty room.

No answer came.

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“Yeah, it was awful. Dylan cried and screamed, and the game had begun so I couldn’t reach Scott. He thinks she planned it that way on purpose, but I can’t imagine anyone...” Abby shook her head, words failing her. “Dylan is her son. How could she do such a thing?”

Gen pressed herself into Abby’s legs and she reached down to scratch the dog’s ears. The soothing action grounded her, brought her back to the present, back to Cara, sitting on the bar stool beside her at the coffee shop.

Abby pressed cool fingers to her hot cheeks, fear and anger shooting new adrenaline into her system, though it had been three days since Scott’s ex-wife had ambushed her home, stolen Dylan, and sent Scott into a tailspin.

He’d called her Sunday night, late, to let her know he’d found Dylan home and safe, but nothing more. She’d waited, giving him space through Monday and Tuesday, hoping he’d call again and trying not to let the fact that he hadn’t sting. Wednesday morning, she’d called Cara.

“And you haven’t talked to him since?”

Abby shook her head. “I want to check in, but I don’t even know if they want to hear from me. I mean, I lost his kid, for heaven’s sake. If I were him, I’d be furious. I’d never want to talk to me again.”

“You can’t possibly think he blames you for this.”

Abby looped her finger in circles on the countertop, tracing the ring of spilled coffee

from her cup. “I don’t know.”

Cara didn’t speak for a long moment. “Well, look on the bright side, here you were, so afraid this relationship would be full of drama from him being a football player, and it turns out all the drama is the regular kind: a messy divorce, an ex-wife, and a poor kid caught in the middle.”

“Cara!”

“Or maybe our perspective of parenting is skewed, spending all our time with parents who would give anything for their child to be healthy again, or to save their life. Maybe we have no idea what real parents are like.”

“Oh, my God, Cara, you’re horrible. Scott is an amazing father...”

The corner of Cara’s mouth ticked upwards, and Abby huffed. “I hate when you do that.”

“Maybe if it didn’t work so well, I’d stop, but you’re always more honest when you’re pissed.”

Abby rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t deny Cara’s observation. Her view of parents could very well be skewed by her experiences at the hospital. Certainly, her own parents had struggled to find common ground with her since Will’s death. Maybe as an adult in her own right, it made sense for them to keep their distance, especially since they couldn’t understand the all-consuming nature of her grief, but it still felt like she’d been abandoned when she needed them most.

Abby dragged her thoughts back to her conversation with Cara. “Speaking of, I had an epiphany this week.”

“About being pissed?”

“Forget pissed; I was absolutely furious when she took Dylan. I should have done more to protect him, somehow... No, I realized I wouldn’t have been so angry if I didn’t care so much about him, about what happened to him. I ran it back through my head a million times Sunday night, what I could have said or done differently. If I could have stopped it or at least made it not so awful. If I could have done something for Dylan, reassured him... He didn’t deserve to go through that. Scott didn’t deserve to get off the field and then have to jump right into the worst-case scenario for his son. I’m so mad for them.”

“You care about them.” Not a question, but a statement.

“I love them.” She’d said it to Scott, but she hadn’t said it to anyone else, yet.

Plain and true, the words came with ease, not fighting past a lump in her throat, or stinging her eyes with a phantom sense of betrayal.

“Wow.” Cara’s eyes widened.

What kind of comment would she make? It’d be like her friend to snort and then ask if it had hurt to say out loud, or to remind Abby with an I-told-you-so she’d been in favor of Scott all along.

Instead, she asked the question Abby had been turning over in her mind all week. “So then, what now?”

Abby grabbed a napkin and swiped it over the counter, clearing the spilled coffee, then crumpling it and tossing it into a trashcan. She spun on her stool and leaned an elbow on the long counter. “I think, now I fight for them. If Scott’s changed his mind, then that’s one thing, but if he hasn’t, if he still wants me in their lives, then I’m

ready, and whatever comes, we'll weather it together."

Gen pricked her ears, and her tail swiped across the floor, as if to agree.

Twenty-Two

DESPITE HER RESOLVE to fight for them, Abby wavered between calling and giving Scott space. At least he'd texted her again on Wednesday night, but by Friday, the lack of meaningful contact began wearing on her. She worried that even as she'd committed completely to them, he'd changed his mind, but she still had enough residual anger left over from the previous weekend she convinced herself he at least owed it to her to say it to her face.

Gen leaned against her leg and rested her chin on Abby's knee, then thumped her tail against the floor. She clearly missed her best friend.

"Yeah, I know. Quit worrying and call them, right?"

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Gen wagged again.

Still, Abby hesitated. Living in the unsurety of whether Scott did or didn't still want a relationship with her held its own weight, but hearing a definitive answer might be more than she could take.

Cara would say if this broke them, better to know, and at least she'd learned she had the capacity to love someone again.

Abby couldn't be quite so sanguine about the possibility of having her barely-healed heart shattered. She'd rather hold the decision at arm's length, treading softly and not risking outright rejection.

For how long, though? When would the risk of the worst answer outweigh the burden of uncertainty.

Abby bit her lip as she studied the phone in her hand. The screen lit up with a picture of Scott, Dylan, Gen, and herself, all grinning, the park playground where Dylan had fallen from the monkey bars in the background.

If not for his injury, they'd never have met.

Good things could come from devastating circumstances.

If Scott rejected her, she'd still have Gen. She'd still have Cara, and her work, and the dream of a therapy dog organization. She'd survive.

It may not be pretty, but she'd lived through a broken heart once before. She could do it again.

Swiping to Scott's number, she held the phone to her ear.

"Abby, hey." His breath heaved and a shriek of joy in the background reverberated through the phone, making Gen jump to her feet. "Dylan, buddy, hang on. It's Abby."

"Abby?" She couldn't help but smile at Dylan's voice. "Is she coming over tonight? Is she bringing Gen? We haven't seen her all week."

"Hang on, kid. Let me talk to her, okay? Why don't you run upstairs and put away the laundry that's been sitting on your bed since this morning?" Scott chuckled, then asked, "So, are you? Coming over?"

Abby rubbed Gen's ear between her fingers. "I wasn't sure if you wanted me to."

Scott exhaled. "Listen, we need to talk, but I don't blame you for what happened, and I'm not angry. At least, not at you."

"Okay, if you're sure...?" She wanted to fight for them, but would they want her?

"Absolutely sure. C'mon over and we'll talk. I should have invited you sooner, but, well, I wanted this time with Dylan, you know?"

"Yeah, I get it. Okay, we're on our way over."

"Good." And he said it in such an adamant tone she couldn't help but believe him.

"Abby!" Dylan's infectious joy surprised her. Greeting her first instead of Gen, he ran up and flung his arms around her waist, pressing his head to her stomach. "I

missed you.”

Gen, whining, circled them both, then, as he let go of Abby, she jumped up, resting her front paws on his chest.

“Gen, off,” he commanded, then kneeled down to wrap his arms around her.

“Good job, Dylan. That was exactly right.”

His brilliant expression showed his pride, and Abby couldn’t help smiling in response.

As Dylan bounded off up the stairs, Gen close behind him, Abby turned to Scott. “I’m so sorry...”

“Abby, no,” he interrupted her, crossing the floor until he could wrap her up in a tight embrace. “I should have called sooner. This was not your fault. I expected Lindsay to make trouble eventually, but I didn’t think it would be this soon. Or that she’d choose quite so dramatic a reentry into our lives.” He rolled his eyes. “I should have known better the first time she mentioned you.”

“Mentioned me?”

Scott raked a hand through his hair. “I guess Dylan talked a lot about you when he went to visit her this summer. She called me at training camp to complain. That was the day I was such a jerk on the phone.”

“Oh my gosh, Scott. I’m so sorry. I wish I’d known...”

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“Would you quit apologizing for my ex-wife being awful?”

“Sorry.” She paused, grimaced. “I mean, umm, okay.”

“Anyway, I’d meant to talk to you before training camp started, but it never seemed like the right time.” He paused, frowning. “No, that’s not true. I didn’t want to ruin our time together by bringing up my marital baggage.”

Abby snorted. “As if I don’t have a matched set myself?”

“It’s different,” he said. “But I should have realized in July she’d have her sights set on you. Finn even warned me I should talk to you about it. But with one thing and another...” He shook his head.

Abby studied Scott, his shoulders slumped, head down, a frown pulling at the corners of his mouth. “Is this like with him? Like with meeting the team? You were scared if you told me I’d bolt?”

She hadn’t said anything, yet, about what Kelly had told her, but having caught on, she’d noticed how he’d been treading around her. Her words were abrupt—blunt, even—but they needed to be; otherwise, he might tiptoe around this, too.

Scott twitched and his eyes came up to meet hers, a sheepish expression stealing across his face. “Honestly? Yeah. Lindsay can be kind of a lot to deal with.”

Abby nodded. “I wish you’d told me, but I can understand why you didn’t. And I wish I’d gotten to meet your friends before I had to pick your best friend’s wife out of

a crowd of WAGS at a home game.” She arched an eyebrow at him. “But I understand why you did that, too.”

“I didn’t want to scare you off.”

“I know. I get it, but can we stop, now? I trust you, I’m not running, even if I’m scared to death of some of those women and the way they looked at me. Even if Dylan’s mom shows up at my house every day for the next year. I love you, and I love him, and I’m not letting you go.”

“Okay, no more buffering, got it.”

“And you’re going to tell me more about your family, too.” Abby leaned back in his embrace, making eye contact and ignoring the familiar shock of their crystalline depths. They took her breath away every time. “I know they were a huge part of Dylan’s life before you moved back to Charleston, and they loved you enough to move to California when you left for college. I want to hear all about them.”

“Done.”

“Finn, too. Your friendship with him. Oh, and your sister. She’s in Montana, now, right?”

Scott laughed. “Whoa, easy there. I’ll tell you everything, I promise, but you have to tell me stuff, too.”

Abby froze, her throat closing over her words. “What stuff? Will...”

“Not Will,” Scott squeezed her arms. “I won’t ask you to share more unless you want to. But what about your family? Usually, only children are close with their parents, but you don’t talk about yours at all. I’ll tell you anything you want, but you have to

share, too.”

Abby bit her lip, eyes dropping to the white plastic buttons on Scott’s shirt. Four tiny holes, with white thread in a crisscross pattern to hold them in place. The rough fabric against the tips of her fingers. The shriek of laughter from Dylan, upstairs, and Gen’s replying yap of excitement.

This conversation hadn’t gone quite the way she’d anticipated, but she wanted them in her life. She would fight.

Maybe it meant not only for them, but for herself, too. Maybe it meant fighting her own demons, until both of them could retire their emotional baggage, or at least get a matched set they could share.

Abby coughed, her throat aching as she forced words past the stone she couldn’t quite swallow. “Okay. Whatever you want to know, I’ll tell you.”

Scott pressed the tip of his finger under her chin until she raised her eyes to meet his again. Brushing a gentle kiss over her lips, he nodded. “Good.”

Twenty-Three

WITH THE INITIAL hearing scheduled for a Monday morning, Scott bailed on dinner with his teammates after pulling out a last-minute win during Sunday Night Football. He’d taken a hard hit in the third, one that had rattled his head enough the coaches sent him into concussion protocol, letting the backup take over and putting them seven points down in a matter of minutes.

Then, he’d spent an hour reassuring Abby he hadn’t been seriously injured.

Only later did Kelly tell him how she’d gone almost immediately catatonic in the

stands. Only Dylan had been able to get through to her as her breathing accelerated until she almost passed out.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Kelly told him. “Not even when Marissa has anxiety attacks. They come on so much slower, so she has time to manage them. But Dylan said her name, and she kind of shook, then pulled him in for a hug and reassured him you’d be okay. It was like a light switch flipped. She wasn’t there, then she was again. Of course, by that point, you’d gotten up.”

Scott grimaced at the description. Kelly might not have seen it before, but he had.

At least Dylan had pulled her back into the moment before she went too far.

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Now, promptly at eight in the morning, shaved, suit and tie pressed, shoes polished, he shook hands with his lawyer, Mark Lystead, then sank into one of the high-backed captain's chairs to await Lindsay, exhaustion dogging his steps.

She sailed into chambers in a business suit as sharp as his own, barely-there makeup, and only the demurest whiff of light perfume. Setting her leather bag on the floor, she took the seat across the aisle, crossed her ankles, and folded her hands in her lap.

“All rise.”

At the bailiff's words, all three of them came to their feet and waited while the judge entered and took his place behind the bench.

Settled, he studied both of them across the dark, heavy desk, then turned his attention to Lindsay. “Ms. Meyers, while I understand you practice in the state of New York, it is irregular for a parent seeking to change a custodial agreement to represent themselves. Moreover, your field of expertise is not in family law. Are you certain this is how you wish to proceed?”

“This is my son. I can't imagine trusting anyone else to fight for him better than his own mother.”

Scott barely caught himself before rolling his eyes at her tone: low, wavering, but determined. All too often, their conversations had been punctuated by what he could only describe as her shrewish complaints. Hearing such a muted, deliberate cadence in her voice – she'd put on a different persona. One he wasn't sure he'd ever really known.

How far would she go to hurt him?

You have primary custody already, Mark had reminded him before the hearing began. All you have to do is not lose it. She has the uphill battle to fight.

“Well then, let’s begin, shall we? Mr. Edwards, I’ve read over the affidavits you sent from your son’s nanny, his teacher, and his therapist. Ms. Meyers, I’ve also read over your petition and, I have to say, I’m a little confused as to why we’re here. The child seems like a happy, well-adjusted boy, yet, in your statement, you make several allusions to his well-being.”

“Yes, Your Honor.” Her voice trembled and Scott ground his teeth together. “You see, Scott, that is, Mr. Edwards, my ex-husband, has a unique job.”

“I’m aware, Ms. Meyers.”

“Well, when he has away games, he’s always left Dylan with our nanny, but this season, he’s been leaving him with some girl. I’ve never met her, and when Dylan missed his weekly call with me that Saturday, the fifteenth of October, I flew down to check on him.”

“He didn’t miss your call, you cancelled it,” Scott interrupted, but the judge gave him a stern stare, and he forced his lips together before any other words could slip out.

“Well,” Lindsay continued, now abandoning her false emotionality for a righteously angry tone. “I’m glad I did. When I went by that woman’s house to check on them, her dog attacked me. Dylan was crying and screaming, so I picked him right up and left. I took him straight home, to Scott’s house, and stayed there with him until Scott arrived later in the evening. Then, I even offered to fly down, on my own, for all his away games and spend the time with Dylan, but instead of being grateful, he threatened me.”

“And what was the specific threat, Ms. Meyers?”

“He accused me of kidnapping Dylan. He said I wasn’t a good mother. You can imagine how devastated and insulted I felt, and after I’d already gone all that way, but, you know,” she switched to a more conspiratorial tone, “Scott hasn’t always made the best choices in who he spends his time with, and he’s often been blinded to a woman’s true nature until it’s too late.” Lindsay sat back in her seat, folded her hands, and gazed up at the judge, eyes wide with innocent candor.

Scott’s hands clenched around the arms of the chair, knuckles white from the strain. He held his tongue between his teeth, biting down to keep from exploding in angry denials. Why wasn’t Mark saying anything? Couldn’t he object to such blatant falsehoods?

“I see. Mr. Edwards, would you care to add anything?”

Scott’s lawyer set a quelling hand on his arm. “Yes, Your Honor. While Ms. Meyers tells a compelling story, it is...incomplete.” The deliberate pause, so laden, implied another word. Scott allowed himself – forced himself – to relax. “What Ms. Meyers fails to appreciate is my client has been seeing this woman, Abigail Barclay, for months, now. They are in a committed, monogamous relationship, and she cares for Dylan. The dog, Gen, is a certified therapy dog and the pair, she and Ms. Barclay, work in the pediatric department of Providence Hospital. As to what Ms. Meyers says occurred at Ms. Barclay’s home, it is our understanding Dylan didn’t become upset until she forced him to leave, which, in turn, distressed the dog, with whom he has a close bond. While we recognize the circumstances are not ideal, we would ask the court to consider Ms. Meyers was, by legal definition and according to her custody agreement with my client, in the act of kidnapping the child.”

The judge folded his hands on his desk and leaned over them. “I see. And if this is the case, why were the police not called, Mr. Lystead?”

Scott's lawyer again spoke for him. "Ms. Barclay believed that, as Dylan's mother, Ms. Meyers' had the right to take the child out of her care. Further, upon learning he'd been taken, Mr. Edwards did not know where they had gone and could not contact Ms. Meyers, who had her cell phone turned off. Rather than call the police, he checked at his home for them before taking any additional steps. Fortunately," and here the lawyer paused, again, sighing in a moue of relief, "he found them there."

The judge considered for several long moments as a fraught silence reigned in the room. Then, opening the file before him, he paged through several sheets, eyes scanning each one, before closing the entire file again.

"Parents sharing custody have misunderstandings. As such, it is my sense this case does not need any additional intervention. Ms. Meyers, if you are not comfortable with your son spending time with Ms. Barclay, I suggest you communicate that to Mr. Edwards as per the parent communication training you should have had upon the finalization of your current custody agreement. Mr. Edwards, as I understand it, you and Ms. Barclay are not married. Until such time as your relationship changes, I'd suggest, per the same parent communication training, you take Ms. Meyers' concerns under advisement." He nodded to each of them. "Will that suffice?"

Scott and Mark both nodded respectfully, but Lindsay shook her head, her curls bouncing. "Your Honor, I wish to amend our custody agreement. This whole incident has shown me I am not as involved in Dylan's life as I would like to be, and I accept responsibility for that fact; I wasn't ready to be a mother to him when he was younger."

How did she manage to sound both vulnerable and adamant at the same time? After this hearing, Scott had new respect for her acting skills, even if his general respect for her had fallen several more notches.

She raised her chin. "I'm ready, now."

Scott clamped down on his tongue again, but, unfortunately, couldn't quite cover his snort of derision.

The judge shot him a look, opened the file again, shuffled a few more papers, then closed it. "Ms. Meyers, if you think your personal circumstances have changed enough to warrant a reconsideration of the custody agreement, I respect that. However, without evidence of this fact, I cannot order an amendment to this agreement as it originated outside of my jurisdiction. California, I believe? Well, then, as you may or may not know, the next step would be for you to file affidavits or request an additional hearing in order to prove you are, indeed, the better parent to provide care for your son. That being said, I see no evidence Dylan Edwards is not being well cared for in his current situation so, barring any additional information to that end, I am hesitant to allow this process to continue."

Lindsay opened her mouth to argue but he held up a finger to stall her. "Ms. Meyers, it is obvious you care for your son, so if you insist on continuing, I can and will order a guardian ad litem be assigned to this case in order to provide the court with an objective opinion of the child's well-being, and I will order a psychological evaluation, as well, of both you and Mr. Edwards. Of course, as the parent seeking to change the custody agreement, you would be expected to pay for this evaluation."

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“Yes, Your Honor,” Lindsay capitulated.

Scott’s cheeks heated with the rush of victory, but her next words dashed his hopes once again.

“I’ll arrange for an evaluation.”

“Very well, Ms. Meyers, Mr. Edwards,” the judge nodded to both of them. “I’ll see you again when the proper paperwork has been submitted.”

They filed out of the room and Scott half hoped Lindsay would make some kind of snide comment, maybe even within the judge’s hearing, but she, too, was on her best behavior, even going so far as to make an abortive attempt to reach for his hand. Pulling back, as if she hadn’t even noticed she’d done it, her eyes flicked to Scott’s lawyer, then back to him.

“Are you sure we can’t...?” She left the question hanging and if he weren’t so angry right at this moment, he might be tempted to applaud her for the show she’d managed to put on over the last twenty minutes. “Well, then, you can’t say I didn’t try.”

He opened his mouth as she turned to leave, but the barest shake of his lawyer’s head warned him, so, shutting it again, he swallowed back the slew of words wanting to force their way past his clenched teeth.

Gesturing to a small, side room, his lawyer, sounding as frustrated as he did, bit out, “Let’s talk.”

Behind closed doors, Scott finally vented his frustration. “What a performance. I should have given her a standing ovation. This is ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous. Why are we even jumping through all these hoops?”

“Shh.” Mark pressed his finger to his lips. “I understand your frustration, but this is the process. For what it’s worth, Judge Farmer is a pretty fair judge, and, reading between the lines, he thinks this is a giant waste of the court’s time. The psych eval is cost-prohibitive and tends to cool down a heated custody battle. I’d be far more concerned at how quickly she agreed. It means she’s in this for the long haul. The only thing that would have me more worried would be if she bought a place down here.”

Scott’s eyes widened with sudden panic. “She wouldn’t. She couldn’t!”

“If she’s serious, she might, and it would carry a lot of weight with the judge.”

“But she doesn’t want Dylan. Why is she doing this?”

“That’s not a question I can answer. If she is as disingenuous as you say she is,” Mark paused, raising an eyebrow before continuing, “then perhaps she simply doesn’t wish you to be happy and will do everything in her power to ensure it.”

Scott, catching his lawyer’s slight hesitation, winced. He’d thought—he’d hoped—knowing the whole story would have inured Mark against her wiles, but even he had fallen prey to at least some small aspect of Lindsay’s performance.

“More than that, well, I’ve seen enough custody cases to know no two are ever the same, but people are people, and if she’s willing to go this far, then we’d better prepare ourselves: she’s not going to settle.”

Twenty-Four

WHEN SCOTT TOLD Abby what his lawyer had said later that night, after Dylan had gone to bed, she couldn't help wondering what drove a person to such lengths. Was his ex-wife really doing all of this to ruin Scott's happiness? And, if so, how long could Scott hold out in the face of such an attack? How long could he continue choosing to be with her, knowing it might cost him his son? Because, if it ever came to a direct choice between them, he'd pick Dylan. As he should.

She pushed the niggling doubt this thought left in its wake aside, but once acknowledged, she couldn't shake it.

"I never thought a three-and-two record could be a relief to talk about," she joked, trying to change the subject, to lighten the mood.

"Me, either." Scott's voice flattened. "Coach wasn't happy I missed this morning, but at least the Raptors are supportive, and they understand my family has to come first. Still, it's like I have to play twice as well, now, to prove it isn't impacting my game."

Abby rolled her eyes. "Welcome to what it's like to be a woman. 'Except backward and in high heels'."

Scott raised his brows.

"Someone said it once about Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. She did everything he did, except backwards and in high heels."

"Now, imagine that on a football field," Scott replied, eyes dancing.

Abby paused and cocked her head, taking a moment to visualize the ensuing chaos. "Finn would rock some Louboutin's, though. Those red soles? He'd be all over that."

"Oh, my gosh, I am texting himright now." Scott lurched for his cell phone and held

it up like a trophy before pecking at the screen.

“Fine, but I bet Kelly agrees with me.” Laughing too hard to fight him for the phone, his first smile in weeks made it worthwhile.

Scott’s phone pinged and he took a moment to read the message before dissolving into whoops of laughter. Not yet recovered, Abby turned the screen toward her and read the message through bleary eyes. “Manolo Blahniks? What even...?” And then she, too, lost it again.

Gen, curious, padded down the stairs from Dylan’s room and, toenails clicking across the floor, came to gaze up at Abby and Scott, as if to ask why they had gone bonkers, and did this fall under her job description as a therapy dog?

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“Good girl,” Abby gasped. “You’re a good girl, Gen.”

Scott, catching his breath, leaned over to scratch the dog under the chin. “She sure is. Hey, maybe if Dylan took her to the next hearing Lindsay would be so scared, she’d run away.”

She thought he meant it as a joke, but both of them sobered.

“I know why she growled at Lindsay. I wanted to myself.” Abby sighed. “But she shouldn’t have. I mean, she wasn’t working, but still...”

Scott rested his arm over her shoulders. “It’ll be fine. Like you said, she wasn’t working, and you and Dylan were both upset... She couldn’t help reacting to all the stress.”

Abby picked at a fingernail. “Yeah, but what if she reacts that way again? What if she does it at the hospital? Dogs pattern fast; once might be all it takes for her to think it’s okay...”

“Hey,” he interrupted, pulling her into his side. “We’ll worry about it if it happens. Once isn’t a pattern—not yet—and I’m sure she’ll never do it again.”

“She hasn’t been herself, you know? The hotspots, but they were so weird this year, and then being off her food, and sometimes she doesn’t want to go running with me.”

“I thought the vet gave her a clean bill of health.”

“He did. But then I keep second-guessing myself. Something comes up, and I think I should take her in, then it goes away. I’m worrying too much, that’s all.”

“You love her. We worry when we love someone.” Scott laughed. “I remember the first time Dylan caught a cold. It had been going around the daycare, a little sniffle, but he woke up one morning with this smear of snot across his whole cheek and this yellow line running out of one nostril and I’m pretty sure I about called an ambulance.”

“Ewww, that is so gross.”

“Really? Ewww? You deal with IV’s and blood and stuff all day long.” He squinted at her.

“Don’t forget catheter bags.”

“And on that note... Anyway. He was fine, of course. Didn’t even need antibiotics.” He frowned. “Another time, certain it was nothing – maybe teething? I waited and waited to take him in. I only did because I had a game, and I didn’t want him to end up sick with the nanny. Poor kid had a double ear infection and strep. I thought I’d locked up the award for the worst father ever.”

He’d told the story to be funny, to make her laugh, but it struck something deeper in her than amusement. “See, sometimes something is wrong.”

Scott turned toward her, lifting her chin so they could lock eyes. “You’re right, sometimes there is. Would it reassure you to take her in? To tell the vet everything and know for sure she’s fine?” At her quiet yeah, he nodded. “Then we’ll do it tomorrow.”

Except tomorrow came and they didn’t. Abby spent the next several days at the

hospital; Liam had been admitted again, making eight times so far this year. Scott had practice, then Dylan had school, and band, and soccer, then another away game. This time, Dylan stayed home with Lauren and Abby came to their place, instead.

They won again, a solid streak, now, with four in a row, and Scott played well—better than the previous week when the hearing the following morning had been looming over his head. The next two games were at home, so Abby and Dylan spent them together at the stadium and went out for dinner afterwards with Finn and Kelly, too.

Once, Jordan joined them. Young, unattached, and far from his parents, Abby loved how Scott and Finn took him under their wing. They made sure the team became his family, with Jordan, as the little brother, trying to survive his rookie year.

Abby made good on her personal promise to encourage Scott to get out more with his teammates and friends, though she couldn't be upset when he chose to spend what precious little extra time he had with her and Dylan.

Liam's kidneys were failing, but they didn't want to put him on dialysis yet. They tried a transfusion, which helped for a few days, but then the toxins in his kidneys began building up again.

Some days, Abby spent all hours at the hospital with Liam, Ethan, and their family, supporting Cara and Linda and the other nurses, waiting as the doctors considered first one treatment, then another. Then, she went home, or, more often, to Scott's, and she got to be a whole different person.

No longer somber and quiet, or endlessly upbeat and positive, she could be her real self – doubts, stresses, strains, and all.

Gen, equally exhausted by their long days, flopped onto Dylan's bed with him and

slept until Abby came up to get her.

The guardian ad litem that had been appointed by the court contacted Scott. She'd already spoken to Lauren and most of Dylan's teachers, but she still needed to interview Scott and Lindsay. She wanted to speak with Abby, too. The psychologist also contacted Scott, but he lived in New York and would have to find time to fly down. Scott offered to do a telephone evaluation, hoping to save himself the hassle of meeting with the man, but he'd been insistent on a face-to-face. In no particular rush to change the custody arrangements, Scott had acquiesced.

"I'm Ruth Weiring. As you may know, I've been appointed to help the court decide the best course of action for amending the custody agreement for Dylan Edwards. I'm not here to take sides; my sole purpose is to consider the best interests of the child in question and make a recommendation to Judge Farmer." The guardian ad litem's words were professional, and though firm, she expressed a sense of fairness that should have reassured Abby.

Still, she couldn't comprehend what purpose interviewing her could serve.

The woman waited for an answer, so Abby nodded, fingers twisting in the hem of her shirt. "I understand."

"Let's start with how you got to know Scott and Dylan." The guardian locked eyes with Abby, her full attention absorbed by the conversation between them.

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“Uh, well, I first met them last spring,” Abby explained. “Dylan had fallen off the monkey bars and broken his arm...” She told the story, smiling as she recalled Scott chasing her through the park to give her jacket back, their awkward exchange of information, and her chagrin at being asked on a thank-you date. Then, she talked about how Dylan had showed up on her doorstep several weeks later.

“So, he felt safe with you?”

Abby considered before answering. She didn’t want to imply he hadn’t felt safe with Scott. “I think he remembered I’d taken good care of him when he first broke his arm. He hoped I’d help take care of him again.”

“Because he didn’t trust his father would.”

“N... No. Nothing like that. Scott thought it was funny. I think most parents would. He didn’t catch on right away to Dylan’s... worry.” She shied away from using the word fear. “As soon as he did, though, he changed right away. He found a new doctor for Dylan, helped him understand the process, even let the doctor use the cast-saw on his thumb before using it on Dylan.” When the guardian blanched, Abby shook her head. “It’s fine. You hold it at an angle and it tickles. Most kids are scared of the saw, so it’s kind of standard practice.”

“And what about later? I understand the two of you began dating in June?”

“Yes, although, we had kind of been dancing around each other for weeks beforehand. We did a lot of stuff all together, with Dylan, and my dog, Gen, too. I wasn’t... I didn’t feel ready to date, yet, but I enjoyed spending time with them, and

Scott's such a good father..." She trailed off, unsure what else to say.

"Have you ever heard Scott talk about his ex-wife, Lindsay Meyers?"

Abby chewed her lip. "Before all this? Not at all, no. He thought it would be too much drama for me. And Dylan didn't spend a lot of time with her, anyway. Since," she waved her hand to encompass the most recent events. "We've talked. He's told me a little more about what happened between them and how he feels, now."

"How does he feel?"

Abby's gaze hardened as she studied the guardian. "I think that's a question you should ask him."

The guardian nodded, sat back, then continued, "What about in front of Dylan? Have you seen him discuss this situation with his son?"

"The situation? Yes," Abby hedged. "His mom, no."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, they had to talk about his mom taking him from my place. He's a pretty easy-going kid. I've never seen him upset like that, before. And he knows his mom and dad are back in court about his custody. He's smart, and he's asked a lot of questions. Scott always answers them honestly, but he's careful not to say anything about how it's going or about his mom."

"Can you give an example?"

Abby tipped her head to one side, rifling through remembered conversations.

“Dylan wanted to know why he couldn’t stay with me anymore when his dad had away games. Scott told him he and Lindsay were learning to co-parent in a new way, and that included respecting how his mom didn’t know me.”

“How did Dylan take that?”

Abby huffed a small laugh. Dylan’s response wouldn’t be judicious in this situation.

“He accepted it.”

“Has he promised Dylan that he can stay with him?”

Abby shook her head. “Scott tells him he has to be patient, and there are a lot of people who love Dylan very much, and we’re all trying to figure out what’s best for him. So far, he’s accepted that answer, too.”

“Has Dylan talked about wanting to live with his mom?”

Abby compressed her lips before a smile could sneak out. “No, he hasn’t.”

What he had said, a few nights ago as Abby had tucked the blankets around him and leaned down to brush his cheek with her own, had been, “I wish I could live with you and Gen instead of my mom.”

Abby hadn’t thought it wise to answer him then, nor did she think it prudent to say as much, now, but the memory warmed her heart, nonetheless.

She wished he could, too.

Twenty-Five

EVERY YEAR SIX teams draw the short straw and have to play on Thanksgiving Day. While Abby loved the chance to sit at home and watch back-to-back football all day, this year, the Raptors were one of those teams. Sunday to Thursday always made for a short week of recovery, but at least they got to play at home. The Saints would have to travel, on top of only getting four days off, but they'd all have over a week afterwards to rest up for the last big push into the end of the regular season.

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The Raptors would also go into this almost-double header with a six-and-three record and a two-game, on-the-road winning streak behind them. Scott's stats had improved all season long. He and the team were peaking at exactly the right moment, if they could only hold onto the momentum.

The only downside, aside from having to play on Thanksgiving, was how long it had been since their bye week, or so Scott had lamented to Abby.

"I'm going to need all ten days after Thanksgiving to rest up."

It would be a weird year, too, because Dylan's custody-mandated holiday in New York would fall right in the middle of their court battle. Though Lindsay had cancelled the last two times his visit had fallen on Thanksgiving, even Scott had to admit it wouldn't make the best impression for her to do so again this year.

So, Abby would go to the game alone, sit beside Kelly, who had fast become a good friend, and hope like crazy Scott could bring home two wins in a row. Nine-and-three would make for a great start to December.

That had been the plan, anyway. Then, a week before Thanksgiving, Cara called her. "Don't look at Hooper's latest article, hon."

"What, why?" Against Cara's advice, she popped open her laptop.

"I mean it, Abby. At least call Scott before you do. It's his fault, anyway."

Abby's palms went slick with sweat as anxiety curled a tight knot through her

stomach. “What’s going on?”

She tapped the keys to bring up The Charleston Herald’s main page, then clicked on the Sports section.

“You’re already reading it, aren’t you?” Her friend’s sigh of resignation echoed through the line. “It’s talk. Idle talk. It doesn’t mean anything. Everyone knows Zack Hooper is a hack.”

But she didn’t hang up.

Abby’s eyes flitted over the first few headlines, then caught on the word football.

FOOTBALL FLOOSIE’S TRUE COLORS SHOW

Gold-Digger Girlfriend of Local Hero Quarterback Doesn’t Bleed Black and Silver

Hometown hero and Raptors Quarterback Scott Edwards has had, like most pro football players, his fair share of off-field romances, but the glitter is off his current one to local girl, Abby Barclay, after it leaked she is unemployed and has been for the last three years.

“Is he serious?” Reading farther, her mouth fell open.

“Lies,” Cara hissed.

“Well, I mean, technically, yes, but my work with Gen is only part-time,” Abby replied, forcing a deep breath into her constricted lungs. “It’s nice that Activities hired us, but it’s not like I have benefits or whatever. And they have no way of knowing with Will’s life insurance I’m fine.”

Ignoring Cara's sputtering, she continued reading until she got about half-way through the article. "Mentally unstable," she screeched, then, realizing she did sound that way, tamped down her reaction and reread...

After battling depression in the wake of her husband's death, sources close to Ms. Barclay suggest her trauma has not fully resolved and she may be 'a ticking timebomb,' as evidenced by her recent mental breakdown during the Raptors game against the Detroit Lions a few weeks ago.

"Right? Ridiculous," Cara scoffed. "I can't for the life of me figure out who would say something like that about you, never mind in an interview. There's no one who doesn't love you."

Abby could think of a few people, right off the top of her head, who didn't love her, but she figured it wouldn't help to say so.

"Anyway, that's all the important stuff," Cara said. "The rest of the article is nothing but speculation about the Raptor's season. Not even good speculation, either, because they're doing so well lately. You should call Scott, though. Like I said, it's his fault. Maybe one of his teammates said something."

"I doubt it." Abby paused, chewing her lip. "There's nothing in this that's outright wrong, except the specifics of my employment status, and maybe my current mental health, and who knows? 'Sources close?' It could be a janitor, a former patient, anyone."

"You know," Cara observed with a hint of steel in her voice, "it wasn't long ago you were scared to death of this exact thing happening. Waking up one morning and being all over the internet because of Scott."

A soft, delicate smile turned the corners of Abby's lips upwards. "Yeah, I guess so."

The wind stripped from her sails, Cara sighed. “You love this guy?”

“I do.”

Her voice hardened again. “Then tell him to fix this mess.”

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Abby hung up, then dialed Scott.

“I amsosorry, Abby.”

Tempted for a moment to play dumb, she decided Scott had enough going on in his life without adding to his stress levels, so, instead, she reiterated Cara’s words. “It’s okay. It’s idle talk.”

“But it’s not true. How can they publish something like this? It’s... it’s slander.”

“Well, I’m not going to say I’m thrilled that people are speculating about my mental health, but I doubt quoting a source counts as slander, and as for the rest, nothing else they said is wrong.”

After a beat of silence, surprise colored his tone. “But what about the work you do with Gen?”

“Oh, it’s work, for sure,” Abby assured him. “But not full time, and I don’t get paid much for it.”

Scott spluttered for a moment before she took pity on him.

“It’s... complicated? I think HR kind of took pity on me after Will died. I’d quit being an EMT, and then I showed up, trying to volunteer in pediatrics—his department—with this dog. Therapy dogs are a lot more prevalent, now, but they weren’t back when we started, so they didn’t quite know what to do with me. They offered me a kind of contractor position. I’m under Hospital Activities, but I do my

own thing, make my own schedule. I'm not on-call, but I am, and I'm not full time or salaried. They told me when I started, they couldn't pay me much, but I didn't mind. We don't need much, and Will's life insurance was...a lot."

Abby swallowed. When the first check came in, she'd fallen to pieces over it. Crumpled to the floor, sobbing, unable to touch the little slip of paper.

Blood money, she'd called it. I'd rather have him back.

Then, Gen, still little more than a gawky pup, had crawled into her lap and grabbed a lock of her hair. She'd been distracted enough to make it through the next minute, the next hour, the next day.

"Anyway, we were both so busy with school and stuff, we didn't do a big wedding, so my parents helped with the down-payment on our place instead of throwing a huge, fancy bash. After Will died... Well, we'd been smart with our money, and with our planning. Plus, the car that clipped him was a corporate vehicle, so there was a settlement, there, too. I paid off the mortgage, but the rest... I kind of put away. Like I said, Gen and I don't need much, and there hasn't been anything else to do with it, so..."

"Abby, what are we talking, here?"

She bit her lip. Will had been a successful pediatric surgeon, despite his relatively young age at his death. He'd done well for himself, for them. They'd taken out life insurance policies for both of them for the standard ten times their rate of pay.

"Umm, a little over three million? I haven't checked it lately, but in March I meet with an accountant, for taxes. With interest, I think it's about four million, now."

Scott choked. "You have more saved than my last contract paid me."

“But I thought the Raptors...”

“Oh, yeah, no, they did. I meant in San Diego.”

“Gotcha.” She paused, gathering her courage. “I know you like to pay for stuff, but that’s why I always offer to split it. I can make my own way.”

Scott didn’t answer for a long moment.

Maybe she shouldn’t have said anything, but he had refused to talk about his friends on the team, about Lindsay, and now they were in the middle of this mess together. She wasn’t going to make it worse by ignoring yet another thing that could divide them.

“I didn’t realize. I assumed, of course, you were working, but I didn’t want to hazard a guess at what you made. You’re independent; I’ve always respected that, but I wanted to take care of you.” He huffed a laugh. “I guess you didn’t need me to, did you?”

“Scott, no, it’s not like that. I didn’t want—don’t want—you to ever think I’m with you for what you can do for me. I hate how this money came to me, I hate talking about it because it’s so wrapped up in what happened, but if it can do anything good, maybe it can be proof I love you for you. I don’t need you. But I still want you.” The line went quiet again, but it wasn’t a fraught sort of silence anymore.

“Well, I’ll talk to publicity and my agent and see what they think. They might want to push back, or they might think the best course of action is to play dumb. It’ll probably depend on whether the story goes viral. It’s bad timing, though. Mark called me yesterday to let me know the judge is ready to schedule our next hearing. I guess Lindsay thought it would be worthwhile to expedite the psych eval.”

“I expected it to take longer.” Abby tucked the phone between her chin and shoulder as she scooped a cup of kibble into Gen’s bowl, then ran water over it in the sink.

“Me too, but I guess you can pay to have them process it faster. I only met with him last week.”

Dancing around her feet, Gen followed the bowl to her mat on the floor, then waited until Abby gave her the quietokayto eat before burying her nose in it.

“So, when will it be?”

“He said after Thanksgiving. We’re getting into the holidays, but Mark thinks this case is moving a lot faster than normal.”

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“Well, maybe we’ll get lucky, and it’ll be over by Christmas.” Abby smiled, picturing Christmas morning with Scott and Dylan.

It had been a long time since she’d celebrated with more than a couple presents on the floor under the one potted plant on her bookshelf. Her parents always sent something, no matter how chilly their relationship had turned in recent years, and Will’s parents did, too—one of the few ways they’d remained a part of her life after Will’s death.

While her own parents had struggled to understand the depths of Abby’s grief, Will’s parents had wanted to share theirs all too viscerally. When she couldn’t reciprocate, they’d given her space, but made sure she’d known she never left their hearts.

For years, their gifts had threatened to drown her in fresh waves of devastation, but maybe Dylan’s custody hearing being over by Christmas would make this year different. Maybe, for the first time, she’d be able to open their gifts without suffocating in the guilt of having failed their son. Maybe she’d even find it in herself to send them something, too.

Twenty-Six

THE RAPTORS WON on Sunday but lost on Thursday, a brutal defeat, at home, against a team with a worse record. A slew of injuries in the first half left them limping through the second, and the short few days since their last game wore on them. Scott threw one interception that came back for a touchdown, then the rookie, Jordan Highcastle, fumbled on a catch and turned it over again.

The defense, too, struggled. One defensive end had already been replaced a few

games before and was starting to find his stride, but a hard hit during a blitz put the other defensive end, Mike Clemens, into concussion protocol. Fortunately, he'd be good to play again for the next game, given the ten-day break; unfortunately, with him out for the remainder of this one, the Bills offense proceeded to decimate the Raptors, finishing with a blow-out score of 42-17.

With a win, no one worried Scott's personal life impacted his playing. With a loss, the recent article about Abby wound up front and center during a brutal press session.

"Do you think the recent controversy regarding your girlfriend distracted you?"

"No," Scott shook his head. "Clean ball handling hurt us tonight. We need to do better next week against Miami. We'll work on it."

Before the same guy could ask a follow-up, someone else piped up with the team motto. "Work harder!"

Scott nodded, picking the speaker out from the crowd. He looked familiar, and in a moment, Scott placed him. He'd been part of the team that had covered the Raptor's visit to the hospital. Relief flooded his veins. They had at least one friend in the room. "Yep. The Raptors are always trying to find ways to work harder, and we'll do the same this week."

Another question popped up. "What do you have to say about last week's article in the Herald?"

Scott blew out a frustrated breath. "Listen, guys, we're here to talk about football. If there are no more football questions...?"

Jesse in publicity jumped in then. "You'll notice in tonight's press kit an article referenced from last spring that should answer any additional questions you may have

about Ms. Barclay. We expect a forthcoming retraction from The Charleston Herald, who has clearly been misinformed.” She nodded to Scott. “Thanks, Scott. Jordan, you’re up.”

Scott exited the stage and slid out the back with a sigh of relief and an internal promise to send Jesse a thank you gift for the holidays. Then, he reached Abby, waiting in the ready room with Kelly and the other WAGS, face pale and eyes pinched.

“You heard?”

“How could I not?” She shook her head and tucked her chin, eyes on the floor, but he caught the tell-tale shine of tears.

“Hey, hey, it’s fine. We’ll win next week and this will all blow over.”

“It sucks, people saying I’m some kind of... parasite.”

In the tight space, privacy wasn’t possible, and several of the other women glanced over. Apparently, they, too, were divided on what to think of Abby. Fortunately, she’d gotten to know several of them over the course of the last few home games, and Kelly’s vote of confidence had paved the way for her acceptance, but after the article, their opinions might change.

WAGS were a tight-knit group; they had to be. No one else could understand their lives. Having the team accept or reject your girlfriend wasn’t the be-all or end-all of a relationship, but it could have an impact.

They’d reached the tipping point. Kelly’s credibility, Scott’s judgment, and Abby’s acceptance all hung in the balance.

Then, the wife of one of the offensive tackles approached.

“Oh, hon, we’ve all been called that, or worse.” She hugged Abby. “You have to let it slide off.”

“Yeah, screw them and what they think. We know you’re the real deal.” Jif, impulsive and reckless and loyal to a fault, crossed the room and threw her arms around Abby, who belatedly hugged her back.

Scott let out the breath he’d been holding.

He and Kelly locked eyes across the room, and Kelly smiled.

Abby had been accepted, and that meant the Raptors would stand behind her, no matter what the press, or anyone else, said.

Once again, Scott wore his best suit.

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Instead of the Monday morning after a late game, he'd leave directly from the hearing and head to Green Bay on a late Thursday night flight. Fortunately, he'd miss only a day with the team.

Management hadn't been pleased, but his attempts to explain he couldn't change the hearing date had fallen on deaf ears until his coach spoke up.

"We're not side-lining our quarterback because he has a custody hearing, gentlemen. And if anyone makes a big deal of it, that's what we'll tell them."

It wouldn't go over well for any organization to seem unsympathetic to Scott's plight, though his fight to keep his son hadn't quite hit the headlines, yet. So far, it had been wiser to keep it quiet. But the court of public opinion was powerful, if fickle, and if he could use it to his own advantage—well, he wouldn't be opposed.

Entering the courtroom with his lawyer, Mark, Scott took a deep breath and walked up the aisle. The weight of the space sank heavily onto his shoulders. To one side, the jury box stood empty. Approaching the bench, Scott passed the empty rows of the gallery, then slid behind the table that already held several files of documents in case Mark needed them during the hearing.

He sat, adjusting his cuffs and straightening his tie.

Lindsay exuded comfort in the vaulting space, not surprising given how many times she'd probably litigated in similar courtrooms. Dressed in a smart, black suit, she sat tall in her chair, hands folded on the table, as she awaited the proceedings.

A few moments later, the bailiff announced the arrival of the judge, then, as they took their seats again, the doors behind them opened and the quick click of heeled shoes announced the arrival of the guardian ad litem.

Judge Farmer spoke first. “Ms. Meyers, Mr. Edwards. I’ve had the opportunity to read over the reports and evaluations provided to the court by Ms. Weiring...” He nodded at the guardian, now seated in the gallery behind Lindsay.

Did that signify something? Maybe her unvoiced support for his ex-wife?

“... as well as those provided by Dr. Grant Ferndale.” He paused, studying Lindsay over the edge of his glasses. “I must say, I was surprised to receive Dr. Ferndale’s report so quickly. He appears to be much sought after in New York. I expected it to take much longer.”

Lindsay dropped her eyes to her folded hands and took a ragged breath. “Dr. Ferndale is a professional colleague, Your Honor. When I explained the circumstances of this case, he willingly prioritized it...” she paused, then continued, “for a price. Of course, I paid it.” A sheen of tears filled her eyes. “I’d like to have my son home by Christmas.”

Scott clenched his fists. “I thought you were going to Vienna for Christmas this year.” The comment slipped out before he could bite down on it.

Lindsay turned to give him a hard stare but didn’t respond.

“Mr. Edwards.”

Scott turned his eyes to the judge, then flushed and lowered them. “I’m sorry, Your Honor.”

The judge waited another long moment, a clear rebuke, then continued, “Mr. Lystead, you’ve had a chance to look over Ms. Weiring’s report and Dr. Ferndale’s evaluation? And you’ve spoken to your client about the findings?”

“Yes, Your Honor.” Mark shuffled some papers. “We take issue with Dr. Ferndale’s conclusions. First, he suggests a slight change to Dylan Edwards’ math grade is indicative of a major disruption in the home. What he does not note is Dylan switched to an accelerated math course this year.” Mark rifled through the stack, removing two of Dylan’s report cards and several exams, then standing and handing them to the bailiff, who then handed them up to the judge. “You’ll notice on last year’s report card, he averaged an A-minus. This semester he’s sitting at a B-minus, including that exam you have, there, on top, on which he scored a seventy-two percent.”

The judge glanced down, then nodded.

“However, he has not yet had the chance to re-take the exam, as per the class administration, which I’ve also provided. You’ll notice last year’s exams, also provided, show a marked improvement between the first and second tests, and we expect a similar pattern this year.”

Judge Farmer nodded. “I see. Ms. Weiring, you spoke to Dylan Edwards’ teachers as a part of your investigation?”

The guardian stood, though she did not come forward. “Yes, Your Honor. None of his teachers have expressed any concern about his academics this year; however, as I wrote in my report, several have described his demeanor as being more distracted.”

Scott slumped in his chair. Mark had warned him about this.

“Yes, the, uh, dog doodles?” The corner of Judge Farmer’s mouth ticked up.

“Yes, Your Honor. His English teacher, in particular, lamented all of his assignments now have sketches of dogs in the margins.”

Mark, too, stood. “Your Honor, Ms. Barclay has a trained therapy dog...”

“Yes, yes, I understand.” Judge Farmer waved him off. “Nevertheless.”

“Your Honor?”

Scott’s head swung of its own accord toward Lindsay.

“Since Mr. Lystead has mentioned Ms. Barclay, I’d like it notedThe Charleston Heraldpublished an article regarding her character and, as a mother, I must say, the idea she may not be emotionally stable disturbed me.” Lindsay flicked through her own papers, then offered a copy of the article to the bailiff. “Unemployed, depressed and anxious, with PTSD. Although my ex-husband believes the best of this woman, I can’t in good conscience ignore the warning signs the way he can.”

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Scott's teeth ground together, and Mark settled a hand on his arm.

"Ms. Weiring, your report also suggests possible co-dependent tendencies?"

"Yes, Your Honor, although..."

"And that dog," Lindsay interrupted the guardian. "It growled at me when IrescuedDylan... Is it really a therapy dog? I know there's all sorts of people these days pretending to have service dogs when they're nothing but glorified pets." Lindsay's lips crinkled in a sneer as she bit out the last word.

Scott exploded to his feet, hands shaking. "Gen is a therapy dog, and the work she and Abby do is critical. They're at the hospital two to three times a week visiting sick kids. They go in anytime they're called, day or night. And Gen behaves perfectly. They have a therapy certification from..." His lawyer tugged his arm and Scott trailed off.

"Sit down, Scott." Mark's tone brooked no argument.

His eyes sought the judge's and, seeing the impassive expression on the man's face, his shoulders dropped and the heat that had run to his face drained away. "I'm sorry, Your Honor."

He sank back into his seat.

A slow, victorious smile spread across Lindsay's face.

“Ladies, gentlemen,” Judge Farmer began. “The intent of this hearing is to explain any mitigating circumstances to the findings of Ms. Weiring and Mr. Ferndale. If there are no other explanations forthcoming?” He paused while Lindsay and Mark both shook their heads. “Very well. We will adjourn while I consider all the evidence provided to me today. We will convene again—hmm, with the holidays coming up—in six weeks’ time. At which point, I will render a new custody arrangement.”

He picked up the gavel and brought it down with a quick snap.

Twenty-Seven

THEY WON IN overtime on Sunday. Tied at three at the end of regulation, the Raptors pulled out a miraculous touchdown on the back of a solid offensive line, who held the pocket, even as a blitz pushed through to Scott. Abby, hanging out with Dylan at Scott’s house, hadn’t even processed the play before Dylan leapt out of his seat and danced around the room.

Lauren, making dinner, poked her head through the door. “They won?”

Dylan, jumping up and down and clapping his hands, nodded. “Yep, they’re nine and four.”

Abby did the math, then shook her head. “Easy, Dylan, they’re in the hunt, for sure, but they’d be seeded pretty low right now, and if the Rams win, that’ll set the Raptors back into a wildcard spot.”

Dylan wrinkled his nose at her. “The Rams are playing in Kansas City tonight.”

“Still...” Abby knew better than to count her chickens before they hatched – or her points before they were on the board. She’d been a football fan longer than Dylan had been alive.

“Are you staying? Please stay?” No longer flailing around the room, Gen leaned into Dylan’s legs, and he knelt to wrap his arms around her.

“For dinner, yeah, but then I have to get going. Your dad won’t get home until tomorrow morning, anyway.” Although the chance to talk to Scott, to learn how the hearing had gone, to celebrate the win tempted her to stay, she couldn’t justify the risk of an overnight, even if he wasn’t there.

He’d call her tomorrow morning, so she’d have to be patient. Besides, Dylan had school in the morning, and if she didn’t go home, he’d want to stay up late playing with Gen.

Speaking to the guardian had put Abby on her guard; every choice she made had the potential to reverberate through Dylan’s life. She couldn’t be responsible for anything that might strip Scott of his parental rights.

His face fell. Would every choice they made hurt Dylan, no matter how hard they tried? Would it be better for him to be tired but happy in the morning? Or should she stick to the rules, even if it did impact Dylan’s mood? She didn’t have a good answer and couldn’t make the call without Scott’s input.

“Sorry, kiddo. Them’s the breaks.”

He pulled Gen closer. “Okay, I guess. But can I go to the hospital with you later this week? I miss Ethan and Liam.”

“You know Liam can’t play, right? He shouldn’t even have a lot of visitors.”

“I’ll wear a mask, and gloves, too, if you want,” Dylan pleaded. “Please? I haven’t seen them in so long.”

Abby sighed, then nodded. “Okay, I’ll talk to your dad. Maybe Thursday, if you don’t have too much homework.”

Dylan gave her a radiant smile, then, true to form, jumped to his feet, pulling at Gen’s collar. “C’mon, I’m hungry.”

Instead of calling, Scott came by the house in the morning, a rare, mid-season, half-day off. Coffee and bagels in hand, but dark marks beneath eyes still shot through with red from too short a night, Abby appreciated he wanted to spend time with her more than stay home and sleep, but her stomach knotted.

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“C’mon, let’s go for a walk.” Abby leashed Gen and grabbed her light jacket, necessary now that the weather had finally cooled down.

The fall wind rattled through the last remaining dead leaves in the white oak trees, acorns raining down like pebbles, and the dry, loamy, spicy scent of the decaying foliage fought with the rich aroma of her coffee. Palm fronds littered the sidewalk, and Gen grabbed one in her mouth, parading ahead of them while they walked.

Laughing, Abby soon stopped telling her to drop it, as she’d simply pick up the next one she came across.

“I shouldn’t have let her get to me. I’m pretty sure that’s what she wanted, anyway. And Mark is worried showing my temper, well, between that and the football, it’s ridiculous, but he thinks the judge might see me as too aggressive.”

Scott had already filled her in on what had happened during the latest hearing, and as he processed the last several days, their arms brushed occasionally.

“But the guardian spent a whole day with you and Dylan,” Abby said. “She has to have told him you’re, like, the best dad ever.”

He pulled her into his side, planting a kiss on her temple before releasing her again. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

He stared into the distance, quiet and distracted, and Abby, hoping to cheer him up, curled her fingers in his. Juggling her coffee and Gen’s leash in her other hand, she snatched sips between the dog’s zig-zags across the sidewalk. “But, hey, you won

yesterday.”

Scott frowned. “I didn’t even score a single point all game.” He blew out a breath. “It’s exhausting, worrying about Dylan all the time, still having to play. I thought I could compartmentalize better than this.”

Abby had nothing to say. She couldn’t imagine the pressure Scott faced.

Like lightning, the obvious solution to Scott’s problem struck her.

“Hey, if it would help, I could, you know...” She trailed off. “I mean, if I’m such a part of the problem...”

She didn’t want to say the words. Didn’t want to admit the reality that something as simple as stepping out of his life might make all the difference, at least for him and Dylan.

“No.” He squeezed her hand, then tucked it against his chest. “No, I don’t want that. Anyone with an ounce of sense is going to know you are nothing but good for Dylan. This is the stupidest circus, but I have to believe the judge is going to see through Lindsay’s shenanigans. She’s going to get tired of fighting, or of paying, or of flying down here for hearings. She’s going to get sick of Dylan and remember why she doesn’t want to be his mother, anyway. The season will end, and I won’t be burning the candle at both ends...”

His voice trailed off raggedly.

Did he believe any of his words, or was he trying to convince himself as much as her?

“Please,” he finished, stopping and turning her toward him. “Don’t give up on me. Not yet.”

“Okay.” Abby pressed herself close to him, burrowing her nose into his collar, where the sharp odor of his aftershave permeated the fabric.

Breaking apart, Abby stumbled, then grabbed Scott’s sleeve for balance. Gen, trying to move into position beside Abby when they’d stopped, had gone around Scott to do it. Now, the leash looped around their calves, tangling them together.

Laughing, Abby tried to free herself, but she couldn’t slip the leash off over her cup of coffee, and if she let go of Scott, she’d fall.

“Here,” Scott took her drink, freeing her hand to shake off the leash.

Dropping it, Abby wiggled an ankle until it loosened enough for her to step out and pick it up again. Taking her coffee back, she sloshed it for a second and, deciding she’d had enough, tossed the rest into a garbage can. Then, linking her fingers in his again, she leaned into his side.

“So, Dylan asked to go to the hospital with me this week. I said I’d ask you. He says he misses Ethan and Liam, but Liam... He’s not doing well. I’m not sure you want Dylan to see him like this.” She paused. “Maybe he and Ethan could play in the atrium while I visit Liam with Gen.”

Scott’s brow wrinkled. “I don’t know. Things are so unsettled right now for him...”

Abby nodded. “I had the same thought yesterday. Everything we do has the potential to mean much more than an off day for him.”

“Maybe when things are less...”

“Fraught? Yeah, okay.” She frowned. “He’s going to be disappointed. I can’t win either way, these days.”

Scott squeezed her hand. “We’ll tell him tonight. Together. We’ll explain it so he understands. I won’t make you be the bad guy.”

She smiled up at him. “Thanks.”

Not long after Scott arrived home his phone pinged with a new message.

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Swiping open the note from Jesse in PR, he read, Good job. Maybe send this to your lawyer.

He clicked on the attachment—a screenshot taken from Instagram. A picture of him and Abby at the park that morning, Gen's leash wrapped around their legs, Abby's head back, staring up at him with adoring eyes, him smiling down at her.

Whoever the photographer had been, they had tagged it #relationshipgoals. Laughing, Scott saved the picture, then forwarded the email to Mark.

Twenty-Eight

“HEY, CARA, WHAT’S up?”

Abby, juggling her jacket and keys, Gen's leash, and the salad she'd prepared to take over to Scott's place for dinner, pressed the phone between her ear and her shoulder.

Dylan had band rehearsal after school. He'd play first chair trumpet in the Christmas concert and he'd been up late every night for the last week practicing, working on his homework and end-of-semester projects, and hand-making holiday decorations, half of which went up at his house, the other half of which went home with Abby.

She'd made the mistake of mentioning she had only a small, fake tree and a single string of lights—neither of which she'd put up in years—and Dylan had taken it upon himself to remedy her obvious lack of holiday cheer.

Abby pressed down on one of the curling, wilted paper cutouts of holly Dylan had

colored the night before, so saturated with dark green ink even the generous use of double-sided tape couldn't keep it flat. Then, clicking her tongue for Gen, she held up her leash.

"Hey, Abby," Cara paused, her voice breaking. "I think you and Gen should come in."

"What happened?"

"It's Liam..." Her words choked to a stop.

Abby didn't need Cara to say anything more.

"We're on our way." She hung up and clicked her tongue again.

Gen, curled in her basket on the floor outside the kitchen, raised her head, then dropped it again.

"C'mon..." She swallowed hard, clearing the thickness she could hardly breathe past. "C'mon, Gen. Let's go."

The dog rose, shook, then padded across the floor, head low and ears pressed back, her tail drooping, and Abby knelt as she approached. Wrapping her arms around Gen, she pressed her face into the fuzzy, black ruff for a moment.

Breathe.

Twenty minutes later, Abby tapped her knuckles on the door to Liam's room. His mother answered, jaw tight and eyes shimmering.

"Abby. Thank you for coming."

“Of course.” Abby stepped into the room, bright from the harsh, fluorescent lights above.

The setting sun, bleeding brilliantly in orange and magenta across the sky, went unnoticed outside the window. Ethan laid in the bed beside his twin, still, for once, his hand resting on Liam’s chest as it rose and fell in sleep. A man sat on the bench beside the window. Liam’s dad.

She didn’t ask. Didn’t need to. Whatever had happened, it didn’t matter, now. Only the long, silent vigil remained as those in the room waited for minutes, or hours, until the tiny chest would rise no more.

Her eyes burned.

It never got easier, but this one... This one would hurt more than most.

She guided Gen to the bed, knowing this would be the last time she would set her hand to the dog’s collar, give her the command, and help her leap onto the sheets and settle herself beside Liam’s small form.

Ethan, alerted by the jingle of Gen’s collar, reached across his brother and rubbed Gen’s soft ear between his fingers. “Liam? Gen’s here.”

It lacked his usual exuberance, the triumphant announcement of a friend arriving to play. Quiet instead—subdued—little more than a whisper, as if Ethan didn’t know whether to let his brother sleep or wake him up to say hello.

Liam’s eyelids fluttered, then opened, looking out with an emptiness Abby recognized all too well. His tiny hand twitched beside him, and Abby guided it around Gen’s neck, pressing the dog’s head lightly into place on the boy’s chest.

Her tail thumped once, then stilled.

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“We’re here, Liam. Gen is here. Do you feel her soft fur?” Abby ran his hand down Gen’s back, then settled it around the dog. Ethan, still cuddled close beside his brother, let go of Gen’s ear and laid his hand atop her head, rising and falling with Liam’s breaths.

Spent by even so little effort, Liam’s head fell to the side, eyes fluttering closed again, the deep smudges of purple beneath them standing in stark contrast to his skin, too pale, almost gray, the edges of his lips already turning blue.

Abby turned to the boys’ mother. “Do you want me to call a nurse and get some oxygen?”

She shook her head. “No. The doctor says it will only prolong things. He had a cannula earlier today, but it kept falling out, and he’s resting more...” She paused, her breath hitching. “More comfortably, now.”

By the window, Liam’s dad closed his eyes, wincing.

They were a brave family. Liam’s mother more than any of them. Since Liam’s diagnosis, she had fought for him. For treatment, for time, for her twins to be together. She had fought herself. Hopelessness, guilt, the price one brother paid for another. She had fought for her marriage, for a modicum of normalcy in the midst of tragedy.

And she’d still be fighting tomorrow. Fighting for Ethan, who would be alone for the first time in his short life. Fighting survivor’s guilt. Fighting the questions that were sure to come.

A flash of shame bit Abby. Ethan and Liam's mom didn't have the leisure to fall apart tomorrow, or any of the days after. She'd get up in the morning and keep on going. Abby hadn't had that strength. Couldn't imagine the burden.

Didn't wish it on anyone.

She and Gen sat a silent vigil beside Liam's family, their presence enough. On the low bench, his father took his mother's hand. Her knuckles turned white.

The minutes ticked past, the machines by Liam's bed beeping obscenely in the quiet room. After a while, a nurse came in to check his monitors. She gave Abby a quick nod and, as she left, again, she ran a hand down Gen's spine.

Abby made a mental note to stop by the nurse's station.

The sky outside darkened, color fading in pinks and oranges, then to purple twilight, then bleeding into night.

Ethan, close beside his twin, stroked Gen's head, then let his hand rest again. Liam's fingers twitched where they lay on the dog's shoulders.

They waited.

"Mom?" Liam's weak voice cracked. "Ethan?"

His mother rose and crossed to his side, taking his hand where it flailed against Gen's midnight fur. "Shhh, I'm here, Liam. We're both right here."

She leaned over him, brushed the hair from his forehead, then pressed her lips to the skin slicked damp and glistening under the harsh lights.

He thrashed, shaking his head from side to side and moaning.

Ethan, beside him, held him tighter, eyes wide.

“Here, Ethan, come here,” Abby held her arms out for the boy. “Let your mom and dad have a moment with Liam, ‘kay?”

The boy slipped from the bed and Gen raised her head, eyes following him, as he folded himself into Abby’s arms.

Once Ethan settled securely into Abby’s embrace, she rested it back down, nuzzling beneath Liam’s chin.

His mother held his hand in one of hers, the other tucking stray hairs behind his ear as she spoke in a low voice.

His dad came around the bed and Abby moved to the side, Ethan hitched against her hip, though he was far too big to be carried like that. His arms tightened around her neck, his small body trembling against hers.

“I’m here,” his mom said, voice low and soothing. The voice of a woman who had come through surgery after surgery, procedures prolonging Liam’s life week after week, month after month, buying her son as much time as she could. “You’re going to be okay. I’m not going anywhere. Daddy is here, too. Gen and Abby are here. Ethan is here...”

Liam thrashed again, then stilled.

Ethan, breath hitching, pressed his face into Abby’s neck, hiding, and she held him close.

Glancing over her shoulder at the pair, their mother's voice broke. "Abby... Ethan. Can you...?"

Abby nodded and rose, the boy still tucked into her embrace. "Gen, let's go."

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The dog lifted her head and thumped her tail once, then laid it back down again.

“No.” Ethan jerked, trying to break free from Abby. “No, I need to be with Liam. I need to be with my brother.” His voice rose, broke, crashed, a wave beating itself against the shore, shattering into a million tiny droplets.

“Shh, shh.” His mother reached for him and Abby let him slip into her arms. “Okay. It’s okay. You can stay.”

She turned back to the bed and settled beside Liam, Ethan tucked in her lap.

Abby, too, approached, and laid one hand on Gen’s head, the other on Liam’s shoulder.

“Do you want me to go?”

She shook her head. “No, please stay. Unless you need to...?”

“No, I can stay as long as you need.”

Silence blanketed the room for a time and Ethan, exhausted, drifted off.

Then, Gen lifted her head and whined, high-pitched, on the edge of hearing.

Moments later, the first alarm blared.

Ethan twitched in his mother’s arms as a second alarm beeped. A nurse arrived,

followed by another, and soon the quiet room blared with a cacophony of voices and piercing warnings.

Ethan clapped his hands over his ears and cried, “Make it stop. Make it stop.”

Pressing his face into her shoulder, his mother rocked him, then, with an authority at odds with the moment, spoke. “Turn them off.”

The nurses nodded and, while one began resetting and disconnecting each machine, the others filed out. Then, quiet returned, except for Ethan’s hiccupping sobs, muffled in his mother’s shirt.

His father stood gray-faced and still, but Abby didn’t make the mistake of thinking he didn’t care. She’d seen this too many times to judge how another grieved.

“Ethan, it’s time to say goodbye, now,” his mother whispered as she stroked his hair. “We talked about this, remember? Liam can’t keep fighting anymore. His body is ready to give up...” Her voice broke, but she cleared her throat and continued. “Do you still want to stay, or do you want to go with Abby?”

Ethan sniffled, then turned toward his brother and dragged a sleeve across his nose. “I want to stay.”

His mother nodded and, turning, set him on the bed, where he cuddled close beside Liam and took his hand again.

“I love you, Liam,” he whispered, pressing his forehead to his brother’s temple.

Their mother leaned over both of them, holding Ethan’s other hand and resting her own over Liam’s where it still lay on Gen, an unbroken circle. Liam’s father clenched his fists, jaw tight and eyes wet, as he bent over his son’s prone form.

Abby thought back to the first time she'd stood this unthinkable vigil over a body broken beyond recognition. The silent minutes ticking past, alone, scared of what life would be when it finally ended. She studied the little family before her and grieved for what she hadn't had, then. For what she'd been too proud to accept from those who loved her. For the solace she'd denied herself, wrapped so tightly in her own desolation.

A few moments longer they remained, then Liam thrashed again, coughed, and laid still. His mother locked eyes with Abby, then sobbed once, shaking her head. Lurching toward them, Abby threw her arms around Ethan as he bolted up in the bed, confused and alone for the first time in his life.

"It's done, Ethan. It's over, now," Abby whispered against his ear. "Liam is gone. He doesn't have to fight anymore."

Twenty-Nine

ABBY WOKE EARLY, the solid weight of Gen's warmth behind her knees, and blinked her eyes, still raw and burning. Curling into a tight ball, she blocked out the pain. Her heart had been broken once before and she'd survived it, but, oh, how it hurt.

Rising, she pulled a sweatshirt over her head, then sat back down on the bed and ran a gentle hand down Gen's spine. The dog lay still.

"Come on, Gen. You need to go out. We need to eat."

A list of tasks. A purpose. That would help them go on.

At her name, the dog's lashes fluttered open, revealing dull, gray eyes. She didn't lift her head; not even her tail thumped against the bedspread.

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“Breakfast, Gen,” Abby tried again, using a word she’d recognize. “Breakfast and a walk.”

Still the dog lay there, unmoving, her eyes drifting shut again.

Abby nudged Gen’s shoulder.

“I know, girl. I’m...” she gulped back a sob. “I’m sad, too, but you have to get up.”

Gen uncurled, then heaved herself to her feet. Her head hung low, ears pressed flat to her skull, tail tucked behind her.

Abby stood, clicking her tongue as she did so. “Good girl, Gen. Come on. You’ll be better after breakfast.”

Gen crept to the side of the bed, but instead of leaping to the floor, her front legs collapsed, pitching her nose-first over the edge.

With a startled yelp of pain, the dog lay there, limbs a tangled heap, staring up at Abby with empty eyes. Scrabbling for a moment, she pulled her legs under her body, but as she rose, they gave way again.

Horried, Abby dropped to her knees and gathered her friend close against her chest. “Gen?”

Staggering to her feet, the full weight of the dog in her arms, Abby careened down the stairs. She hefted her higher and swept a hand over the small table until she found

her keys, then lurched out the door. Laying Gen in the back seat, she wrenched the front door open and fell into the driver's seat, scrabbling to find the right key and shove it into the ignition.

Her eyes blurred as she drove through the morning traffic, weaving between cars, running stops signs, and honking her horn if the cars ahead of her didn't move fast enough when the light turned green. An eternity later, she parked, gathered Gen back into her arms, and burst into the vet's office.

The receptionist, starting to gather her paperwork for the day, froze at the sight of Abby, wild eyed and frazzled, barefoot, still dressed in her pink sweatpants with teacups printed along the cuffs.

"Something's wrong with Gen."

Abby wouldn't call until Liam had recovered, but when a second day passed without word from her, the persistent worry became too much for Scott to ignore. The days until Dylan's Christmas concert had ticked down, and his son would be devastated if Abby missed it. Still...

Hey, how's Liam doing?He sent a low-key, quick text she could either answer, or not.

He took Dylan to school, went to practice, watched tape, plotted a new play with the offensive coaches, then went home again. No response.

You okay?he texted after dinner.

By the time he'd put Dylan to bed and still hadn't heard from her, a coil of anxiety knotted itself in his chest. Standing in the kitchen in his old, comfortable sweatpants with a cup of tea, he called Abby's cell phone.

It rang, then went to voicemail.

He frowned, hung up, then scrolled through his contacts.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Cara. It’s Scott, Abby’s boyfriend?”

“Hi Scott. What can I do for you?” Exhaustion threaded through her voice, muting the drawled words until they flowed almost unintelligibly into each other.

“Sorry to call you so late, but I haven’t been able to get ahold of Abby in about two days and I’m starting to get worried. She hasn’t responded to my texts and she’s not answering her phone. I know Liam needed her, and I don’t want to disturb her if she’s still with him, so I thought I’d call you and make sure everything’s okay.”

The silence stretched out on the line, then Cara said, “She hasn’t told you?”

“Told me what?”

“I... I can’t... HIPAA... I’m not allowed to say anything, but, umm, if she hasn’t called you, you should go over and...” Her voice broke and she had to clear her throat before continuing. “And check on her.”

Scott glanced at the clock, thought of Dylan, asleep in his bed, thought of practice tomorrow. Hated himself for weighing all of that against Cara’s words, against the dread growing in the pit of his stomach.

“I’ll call the nanny.”

It took longer than he would have liked, for Lauren to arrive, and by the time she did,

Scott had pulled on some jeans and a t-shirt. “If I’m not back tonight, make sure Dylan gets to school on time. And tell him I’ll see him at his concert.”

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Abby's windows were dark when he pulled up to her house. Her car, parked awkwardly on the street, angled out into traffic. That no one had hit it constituted nothing short of a miracle. Taking the front steps two at a time, he pressed the doorbell. It chimed inside, but no other sound came. After several moments, he tried again, then knocked. Still nothing.

Hesitant to call out, not wanting to disturb the neighbors, he wondered if she'd gone out. Maybe back to the hospital. He had no idea where to start searching. Ringing the bell and knocking again, he risked raising his voice. "Abby? Abby if you're there, it's Scott. Come open the door."

Finally, a thump sounded from within.

It took far too long, and each time the silence stretched out he rapped his knuckles against the jamb. Finally, the lock clicked.

The door swung open, and it took Scott's eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness within. The streetlights behind him shed pale illumination through the open door, throwing Abby's face into a relief of shadows. Her shoulders slumped, and her tangled hair half fell out of the ponytail she'd pulled it into. Without acknowledging him, she shuffled backwards, turned away, staggered toward the stairs.

"Abby, hey." He reached for her, catching her arm and pulling her into his chest. "What happened? Is Liam..."

An inhuman sound fell from her lips, somewhere between a scream and a sob. Another followed, then another, crying, but yelling at the same time. She buried her

face in his chest, body shaking.

This wasn't like the panic attack she'd had at his place last spring. This was different. More. It scared him.

Her lips moved, but the words were unintelligible. Only his conversation with Cara gave him enough context to understand.

"He's gone... He's gone..." She repeated it again and again, and Scott's own throat tightened.

"Abby, where's Gen?" The dog would help her. Abby might have trained her for therapy, but she did as much for Abby, herself, as she did for others.

Abby stilled, face pressed into his shirt, fingers spasming in its folds. Then, a movement so slight he barely caught it. The most minute shake of her head, lips forming a single word.

No.

Grabbing her upper arms and pushing her away until he could lock eyes with her, he couldn't help the way his hands trembled. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

Abby's face crumpled, and she dropped her head. She would have collapsed if not for his strength, and he crushed her to him again. "Okay, okay. When you're ready. Tell me when you're ready."

Nonsense syllables poured from his lips as her body shook and tremored. When it seemed they'd finally tapered off, she'd catch little more than a single breath, then begin sobbing anew.

“Abby?” His shout broke the spell of her grief, and she raised swollen, bloodshot eyes to him. “Abby, I need you to tell me what happened.”

“Liam’s gone,” she croaked, voice cracked and raw. “He’s gone, and Ethan’s alone...”

“Abby, what about Gen?” He interrupted her, afraid if he didn’t, she would once again dissolve into unintelligible sobs.

Abby bit her lip, shook her head, as if she couldn’t even bring herself to say the words. Then, taking a breath, a hysterical bubble of laughter escaped her lips. “She’s at the vet. I knew something was wrong. I knew it. I should have... I should have...”

Her knees gave way, and he sank with her to the floor. She wrapped both arms around her body, as if to keep herself from falling to pieces there, before him.

“I should have...” she mumbled again.

“Oh, Abby.” Pulling her to him, he lifted her off the floor and climbed the stairs to her bedroom, tucking her head beneath his chin as she continued to mumble. Laying her on the bed, he tucked the blanket around her body, whispering reassurances. “Sleep, now, Abby. Get some sleep. It’ll be better in the morning. Rest.”

He rose again, but her fingers clutched at his forearm. “Don’t leave me...”

Sinking down again, he nodded. “Okay. I won’t go. I’m right here.”

Her nails bit into his skin, but he ignored the sting, stretching himself out beside her and draping his other arm over her waist.

“I’m not going anywhere, Abby. I’m here for you.”

Abby woke slowly, a comforting weight across her stomach, and reached down to scratch the delicate bones of Gen's head. Instead of the expected fine fur, though, her hand slid over rough hair and across thick knuckles. The previous night came back to her, and biting her lip, she fought back tears. Still, she couldn't fully overcome the sharp burn as she swallowed them away.

A tinkling of bells forced her back to the moment. Rolling to one side, she squeezed Scott's hand as he grunted in response, arm tightening around her. She slid out of bed, paused until he settled back to sleep, then, hearing the bells again, she padded from the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

Her phone sat on the kitchen bar, screen down, and Abby hesitated as she approached it. She didn't want to talk to anyone; hadn't wanted to since...

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She shied from the thought.

But if it was the vet, she couldn't afford to miss the call. Flipping it face up as if it were a striking scorpion, she half-hoped for someone else, half-feared it might be.

Seeing the screen, she squeezed her eyes closed and pulled it toward her. The weight of it, like lead instead of glass and plastic, dragged at her hand.

"Hello?"

Why did people still answer their phones this way, even with caller ID? The observation, though stupid, anchored her into the moment.

"Abby, this is Deanna at Dr. Stevens' office."

"Hey, hi." Abby swallowed. "Is Gen...?"

"She made it through the night, but she's pretty weak. You're coming in today?"

"Yes, as soon as I can."

"Okay, I'll let Dr. Stevens know. The panels should be back soon, so we'll have a better idea of what we're facing."

"Okay, thanks."

Abby hung up, swallowed hard. Arms encircled her from behind and she allowed

herself to melt into them. Turning, she forced herself to meet Scott's eyes. The previous night, all bits and pieces and jagged, broken edges, haunted her memory.

Cheeks reddening, she dropped her chin, her gaze sliding away from his. "Sorry. About last night."

Scott's arms around her squeezed, hugging her close. "I'm not. I wish you would have called me. Would have told me."

Her throat closed, a lump threatening to cut off breath along with words, but she nodded.

"What happened to Gen?"

Abby didn't answer for a long time, swallowing back the tears threatening to erupt again. "She's really sick. Dr. Stevens thinks... He thinks it might be cancer."

"Thinks?"

"He needed to run some tests, but he's pretty sure. I'm going in today to meet with him."

Scott released her, checked his watch, then swore under his breath. "I can't... I'm taking too much time off, already, for the hearings..."

"I know." She pressed herself into the safety of his embrace and he obliged by wrapping his free arm around her again. "You have to go."

"Call me when you know more?"

She nodded.

“Promise?”

“Yeah. I will.”

She went with him to the door, hated the way her body yearned after the comfort of his touch, even as it slipped away.

“Scott?” It came out a little wildly, her fear and abandonment filling her voice.

“Thank you. For coming over. I should have called.”

Turning, he nodded and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Always.”

Thirty

SHE TOOK THE time to shower before going into the vet’s office, knowing she hadn’t in... well, she didn’t know the day, never mind how many had passed. Fresh clothes helped, but her eyes would betray her grief with even the most cursory inspection.

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She also forced herself to eat a few bites and drink a sip of water. Her hands shook and she couldn't decide if the reaction betrayed her mental or physical state. Likely both. But she wouldn't be any help to anyone if she collapsed.

Creeping into the vet's office, as if by entering that way she could avoid any bad news, she caught Deanna's eye.

"Room three," the receptionist mouthed, jerking her head toward the back.

Entering, Abby poked her head through the open back door, glancing past a desk with a bank of monitors, a few microscopes, and glassed-in shelves above holding tools and medications.

Dr. Stevens wore a pristine, white lab coat like a cape around his shoulders. Flanked by two vet techs, he caught sight of Abby and nodded, then gave a few, final directions to one of them. Approaching, he and the other tech joined her in the small exam room.

Without Gen's enthusiasm to fill it up, the room echoed. The dog had always loved her vet, had loved the treats and the full-body massage he gave her during his exams. Even the occasional vaccine hadn't been enough to teach her to fear a white coat.

"Abby." He reached for her hand and gave it a quick shake, then frowned. "I won't belabor the point. I'm afraid the news isn't good."

Abby sucked in a quick breath at his words but forced herself to stillness.

“Gen has a form of lymphoma that focuses its attacks on the gastrointestinal system. It’s malignant.”

Abby struggled for a moment, reached deep, found the place of center, of quiet, she’d spent years honing as an EMT, let the right words find their way out.

“Prognosis?” Her voice rippled but didn’t break.

“It’s hard to say. You mentioned yesterday she’d been struggling with some tummy issues, which, to be honest, is what made me suspect this instead of something milder. More...treatable. The blood screens came back positive, so I ordered a scan to find out how much it had progressed. If it hadn’t, surgery would have been an option...”

“But it has.” Abby swallowed hard. “How far?”

He shook his head. “It’s spread throughout her intestinal track and has begun moving into other areas. Surgery isn’t an option.”

Abby closed her eyes. “How... How long?”

“Abby...” Dr. Stevens reached out and squeezed her arm. “You can’t do that. This isn’t your fault.”

She gritted her teeth and repeated herself. “How. Long.”

He sighed. “If we’d caught it when you came in a few months ago? Maybe a year? Hard to say. The prognosis would be better, though.”

“And now?”

“Well, there is some positive news, if you can call it that.” Dr. Stevens knew about her background and Gen’s therapy work. Her familiarity with human medical diagnoses meant he didn’t have to sugarcoat or explain. He could simply give her the facts. “I’d recommend starting her on chemotherapy. It’s spread, but I wouldn’t call it systemic quite yet. If we treat it aggressively, she may be uncomfortable for a while, but there’s as much as a sixty percent chance of survival. With remission, she could have another few years, still.”

Abby’s knees gave way, and she grabbed at the small exam table to catch her balance. “Sixty percent? That’s... That’s so low.”

It wasn’t. Objectively, she knew kids whose chances of survival were much lower. But nothing in all her years of therapy work with Gen had prepared her for the stark reality of facing exactly what every parent she’d ever met in the oncology department faced.

Gen’s entire battle reduced to a simple number.

“There’s another option, too.” Dr. Stevens spoke slowly, carefully, as if unsure Abby could handle his words.

She pulled her shoulders back and cleared her face. If Liam and Ethan’s mother could face years of these conversations, Abby could manage a few more minutes.

“There’s a clinical trial that opened up recently at the university: combination chemotherapy and adoptive T-cell therapy. I went to grad school with the doctor overseeing the study, and Gen would be an excellent candidate. She’s otherwise healthy, at a good weight, active, and I know they’d take the very best care of her. Of course, it’s a study, so she might end up in the control group, but it’s worth considering.”

“I... I don’t know...”

“You don’t have to decide today. I’ll pull the information and send it home with you so you can think about it. I’d like to keep Gen another day or so, try to take care of the dehydration and at least give her a foundation for improving. If you weren’t going to join the trial, I could start treatment right away, but if you’re willing to consider it, it might be better to wait until she’s enrolled.”

Abby shook her head. “No. Start the treatment.”

“Are you sure? It’s not cheap...”

“It’s fine. I’ll figure it out.”

“Abby...” Dr. Stevens held his hands open in surrender. “I know you love Gen. Believe me; I know it. But you need to think about what’s best for her. You need to listen to all your options before you make any decisions.”

Abby paused, closed her eyes, nodded. “Sorry.”

“I know this is difficult to hear.”

“No, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Okay. We can do chemo independently of the trial. It would mean weekly shots for sixteen to twenty weeks. Radiation therapy has also had good outcomes, but we don’t do it here. I could refer you to a veterinarian oncologist with the proper facilities if you wanted to go that route. Or, if you went with the trial, it’s possible they would recommend some kind of additional combination treatments.”

Abby nodded. It’s a case study. Find the symptoms, treat the cause. It’s not Gen; it’s just a case study.

“Chemo in dogs isn’t as bad as it is in humans, but it can cause vomiting and diarrhea. Given it’s already her intestines that are most affected and she’s showing signs of malnutrition and weakness, that is a concern, but I think this is still the best option, regardless of what you choose to do otherwise.

“As for cost, I can print you an estimate. The chemo alone would probably be around

four thousand dollars. The radiation, I couldn't really tell you. If you were accepted into the trial, it would be cost-free, but, again, you could end up in the control group. At least the chemo would be covered, though, even if she didn't end up getting the T-cell injections." He paused. "I know it's a lot to take in. There are a lot of options and decisions. Do you have any questions?"

Abby choked on a bitter laugh. How often had she heard a doctor give this exact spiel? A cancer doctor. The universe had a cruel sense of humor, to put her in this position. "Are there any other options?"

"You could take her home."

Abby couldn't help the sob that escaped her.

"You could love her like crazy, visit some kids, let her eat cheeseburgers and all the junk we always tell owners never to allow their dogs. You could have this time with her, and, when you're ready, you come back. You take this time to give her a good life. To say goodbye."

Abby gritted her teeth, turned her face away. "I can't..."

She couldn't even finish the sentence.

Dr. Stevens nodded. "It's okay. You can think about it. Call me tomorrow and let me know what you want, you can either pick Gen up then, or we can start treatment, and she can go home the next day. In the meantime," he tipped his head toward the tech at his side. "Jenny can take you back to visit her."

"Thank you."

Scott scrubbed the towel through his hair and debated texting Abby.

From the next cubicle, as if he could read Scott's mind, Finn asked, "Has Abby called, yet?"

"Not yet."

"How long you gonna wait?"

Scott pulled an undershirt over his head, voice muffled in the fabric. "I asked her to let me know. She said she would."

To be honest, it stung she hadn't called sooner, either when Liam had died, or when Gen had gotten sick. And now the afternoon had almost passed and still nothing. Did she remember Dylan had a concert tonight?

He mentally kicked himself.

He wasn't being fair; she'd been through hell this week. If she missed it, he would simply have to explain what had happened to Dylan. Still, a small seed of anger burned, and he didn't know how to stamp it out.

"What if she doesn't?"

"She will," he snarled, angry at his best friend for putting words to the niggling worry he couldn't suppress.

Finn held up both hands. "Okay, man."

Scott shook his head. "Sorry."

"No worries. Have you told Dylan?"

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“Not...yet. Things are so unsettled right now, I don’t want to rock the boat more, you know?”

“I hear you.” Finn frowned. “When’s the final hearing?”

“January fifteenth. I’m not sure why the judge wanted six weeks to make a decision, but I can’t say I don’t appreciate I won’t have to fight Lindsay for Christmas this year.”

“Speaking of. Kelly wants to know if you guys want to come by for Christmas Eve?”

“Let me ask Abby. I’m not sure it’s a good idea this year, but I’ll see.” Scott’s phone chirped, and he snatched it up. “It’s Abby.”

Finn flipped him a wave and he hustled out of the locker room.

Scott knew Abby had retreated to a place he couldn’t follow when her wooden voice spelled out Gen’s diagnosis and options, utterly devoid of emotion. In some ways, though it broke his heart, he’d rather she sob again, allow the pain to penetrate, experience it instead of pushing it away, pretending it didn’t affect her.

Her clinical voice bothered him. She’d used it with him only a few times before: that long-ago morning on the playground on the day they’d met, speaking professional words of reassurance to his son as he cradled a broken arm; then again the day she’d told him about Will’s death. What had been calming then terrified him now. How could she disconnect from herself so completely? It couldn’t be healthy.

It's not, a small voice insisted. Maybe she isn't as stable as you thought.

Scott shook his head, burying the voice. "What are you going to do?"

When she spoke again, the words were small, scared. Not an EMT or a medical professional anymore, but someone whose dog was dying.

"I don't know."

Scott weighed his next words carefully.

Let me be a part of this, he wanted to beg. Come to Dylan's concert tonight; we'll go back to my place afterwards and talk. Don't shut me out.

He said none of these things.

"Will you let me know when you decide?" Perhaps it wasn't fair, but the vicious, small voice in the back of his head won.

If she loved you like she claims, she'd say those things all on her own.

"Yeah, of course." The distance returned, far away and receding, like a riptide pulling away from the shore, dragging her to a place he couldn't—wouldn't—follow.

Scott paused, waited, thought about speaking again. He could push. Prod. Remind... He should, he told himself. She'd had a horrific week; she couldn't be blamed for forgetting about Dylan's concert. But he remained silent, and then she'd hung up.

Thirty-One

THE RAPTORS ENDED the regular season at twelve and five, which let them

squeak into the playoffs but not earn a bye.

Middle of the pack wasn't a bad place to be, Scott reminded himself as they won their first playoff game against their wildcard opponent, the New York Jets. Not when most teams didn't even make it this far, but the second week would be a hard fight for every yard, every point. And then, assuming they survived, they'd still go on to face the first-seeded team: the ever-present, always-dominant, Kansas City Chiefs.

One week at a time, Scott reminded himself, lacing up his cleats. Beat the Texans today. Worry about the Chiefs next week.

His phone chirped. Good luck.

He clenched his hands into fists, pretending they didn't tremble too much to type a reply. Then, shaking them out, he took a deep breath and exhaled through his nose, slow and controlled.

Thanks. Love you.

She didn't answer. He didn't expect her to. He'd have to be content knowing Abby would watch the game on her tiny television, Gen curled beside her. Maybe, eventually, he'd convince himself the space benefitted both of them; with only a couple weeks until Dylan's final custody hearing, he didn't need Lindsay getting all upset again about Abby and Dylan spending time together. Or worse, learning of Gen's illness and making an ill-conceived comment that would devastate his son.

Then again, Abby's presence hadn't been an issue the last few weeks. Since Gen's diagnosis, they'd only seen her a few times, and even then, she'd been quiet. Withdrawn.

Gen had bounced back from her trip to the vet, although she'd lost weight. More

subdued than usual, still, her enthusiasm at seeing Dylan again had overwhelmed Scott. Like long-lost best friends, Dylan had opened his arms to her, and she'd bounded into them, throwing both of them to the floor, and proceeded to wash his face with doggy kisses.

Abby, protective, had warned Gen to settle down, had warned Dylan not to rile her up too much, had refused to let them retreat to his room, had warned him not to feed her or sneak any treats, then, after a few minutes, had recalled the dog to her side.

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“Dad, why wouldn’t Abby let Gen play with me?” He’d been tucking his son into bed.

He brushed the fine shock of hair back from Dylan’s forehead. “You remember I told you Gen had been at the vet?”

Dylan nodded.

“Well, it’s worse than we thought. Gen’s sick, and Abby’s worried about her.”

Dylan popped the end of his pinky into his mouth, chewing the tip of it, an old throwback to a nervous habit he’d had as a young child. “Will she be okay?”

Scott opened his mouth, shut it, cleared his throat. “I... I don’t know, bud.”

Dylan pondered Scott’s words for a long time, then asked, “Will she die?”

“Everyone dies eventually.”

“And Gen? Will she die like Liam?”

Dylan had attended his friend’s funeral but hadn’t understood much of the service. Instead, he’d clutched the small card tucked into the bulletin with Liam’s picture and a short poem about love and loss to his chest.

On Dylan’s other side, Abby and Cara had sat together, shaking hands clasped and knuckles white, eyes shimmering.

When Dylan had cuddled into Abby's side, she'd ruffled his hair and hugged him, but she had only been half-present, a part of her beyond Dylan and Scott, as was so often the case these days.

Grief-stricken, she sat alongside all those who had helped care for Liam during his long battle.

Dylan had shuffled back across the bench into Scott's side.

"We hope not. Abby enrolled her in a clinical trial at the university. They're going to use a new treatment to help Gen get better, and her weekly shots already seem to be making a difference." Scott couldn't explain the possibility of Gen being relegated to the control group to Dylan, and with everything in him he'd been hoping she'd been chosen for the treatment group.

Abby couldn't handle losing Gen.

"Is that why Abby's been so sad? Because of Liam, and now Gen being sick, too? Does she have what he had?"

Scott leaned down and pressed his cheek to his son's. "Yes, she does."

The boy sniffled. "I'm sad."

"Me, too."

Shaking his head, Scott brought his attention back to the locker room, back to Coach's usual pre-game speech, back to the men clustered around him, old faces and new, veterans and rookies, but all wired, all buzzing with the tension of a playoff game. It never got old, never became commonplace. And, as the excitement in the room surrounded him, anchored him, Scott let himself slip into the quiet place in his

mind that he found before every game. Losing wasn't an option. Play hard. Play harder.

Then, at an unseen signal, they trooped out of the locker room. A few of the younger guys whooped, but most of them remained quiet, marshalling calm, game faces on.

Jogging onto the field, Scott headed straight for their sideline, scooped up a ball, backed up and threw a few passes to keep his shoulder warm. Checked the plays, squinted across the field at the bright white of the Texan jerseys, swiveled and found the section where his son sat, Kelly beside him, happy to keep an eye on him so he could be at his dad's game. National Anthem, coin flip, Raptors defer, and then nothing more than another sixty minutes of playing the best football he could.

Abby couldn't keep her attention on the game. Gen had only pecked at her breakfast and now curled beside her, eyes dull and tail limp. A high-pitched whine accompanied each exhale.

She rested her hand on the dog's head and ran her nails along the delicate bones of Gen's scalp. "It's okay, girl. I'm right here. You're okay." Shifting, she lifted the dog into her lap, cuddling her close.

There wasn't much else she could do.

She'd picked Gen up the morning after her diagnosis, brought her home, bought two bags of dog food, three types of canned food, and five new bowls, setting each one out so Gen could have her choice.

Rubbing her thumb over Gen's nose, dry and cracked, she frowned. She wished she could explain to the dog why she needed to drink.

Dehydration had become their greatest threat. Gen refused to lap much more than a

mouthful or two of water each day, and if Abby added any liquid to her food, she'd refuse it outright. They'd been back at the vet twice in the last month for IV treatments, but Abby didn't mind paying, especially not once they'd been accepted into the clinical trial. It had been a relief knowing all of Gen's care would be covered.

Dr. Singh had personally welcomed her on their first visit, introducing her to the team of graduate students who would run the trial and examining Gen himself. He'd explained the T-cell treatment in detail, answered all her questions, and thanked her for considering their program.

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“I’m so glad my dear friend Jim referred you to us. If the therapy is successful, perhaps you’ll allow us to include some of the details of Gen’s work in our papers? We treat lots of pets, but a working dog is extra special to us.”

She understood how clinical trials worked, but it had given her an ember of hope Dr. Singh and his team seemed to care about Gen’s prognosis at a more personal level. Hope she desperately needed as the treatment took its course and Gen seemed to get worse.

“It will seem that way, at first,” Dr. Singh had reassured her. “It will be hard on her system, but we’ll keep a close watch, and we should start seeing improvement soon.”

The Raptors scored, Scott connecting with Finn in the end zone off a solid screen play and a beautiful spiral pass into the back corner. One foot down, two, and then sliding out the back, ball clutched in his cradled arms.

“I should be there,” she told the dog in her lap. “He invited me to go, but I... I couldn’t imagine leaving you.”

Gen’s tail thumped once against her thigh, her wide eyes gazing up at the face of the person she loved most in the world, and if Gen had a voice, she’d be saying, Yes, you should be there. He loves you as much as I do.

Wrapping both arms around Gen, Abby buried her face in the dog’s ruff and breathed in her scent. “I love you, too, girl.”

Gen pressed herself closer, as she always did when Abby needed her. She stretched

toward Abby's face, slow and weak, but Abby bent toward her dog, and tears flooded her eyes when Gen's jaw worked for a moment until she could take a lock of Abby's hair in her teeth and pull. Abby couldn't help the half-sob that escaped. Even being eaten alive from the inside out, Gen couldn't stop being a therapy dog.

The game ended. The Raptors had been strong; the Texans struggling with injuries to several key players. The muscles in Abby's cheeks contracted in a way they hadn't in weeks. As the last few seconds ticked off the clock, she smiled.

Next Saturday, they'd be playing in Kansas City.

Thirty-Two

"I MEAN, IF you want to go, I'm game. Tickets are going to be expensive, though."

Abby hummed. "I know. Really expensive. But I don't mind paying."

"Girl, if you don't say yes when Scott finally asks you to marry him, I'm gonna smack you upside your pretty blond head, you know that, right?" Abby could picture the stern expression on Kelly's face, even through the phone.

"Funny, my best friend said the same thing when I told her."

Actually, Cara had demanded when she'd hurry up and ask him; none of this waiting around for Scott to get his act together. Girls ran the world, now, in the twenty-first century.

"Okay, then, you find tickets, I'll find flights, and we'll go surprise the boys."

Abby hung up, glanced at Gen, curled at her feet, then slid her laptop across the bar.

“Six-hundred dollars? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Gen lifted her head, cocked it to one side, then settled it back on her paws, as if to say, Well, it is a divisional playoff game.

“I know, girl. And it’s the Chiefs. I’m afraid to go; their fans are rabid.”

She clicked the buy button, then sent the information on to Kelly.

Picking up the phone again, she found Scott’s number and dialed.

“Hey, Abby. What’s up?” The hesitancy in his voice stabbed at Abby’s heart. She’d failed him—and Dylan—so badly.

“Hi Scott. I was, umm, wondering if Gen and I could come by tonight. Maybe eat dinner with you guys? If... if it’s okay?”

He didn’t answer right away, and enough time passed for anxiety to bubble up in Abby’s chest, then, “Yeah, sure. That sounds good.”

Relief flooded through her, but tension followed on its heels, again. She’d been an awful girlfriend; she owed Scott an apology. She only hoped he’d be willing to accept it.

Gen had eaten an entire bowl of canned food as an early dinner, and now she pulled Abby toward Scott’s door, breath huffing in her throat as her collar pressed against her neck.

“Gen, heel, girl.”

The dog pranced, circled, but obeyed, falling into step beside her. Hope sprang up

anew in Abby. Gen's palpable excitement at seeing Dylan mirrored her old self, as if she'd never been sick at all.

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When the door opened, Dylan tumbled out, already throwing his arms around Gen.

Gen, tail wagging so hard her whole body wavered, pressed her chin over his shoulder and lifted one paw, resting it across his leg where he crouched beside her. Abby had to swallow hard against the thickness in her throat as her dog nearly hugged Dylan back.

She'd done nothing in weeks but hold back one spate of crying after another.

Enough. No more tears.

If Gen could fight for her life, then she'd do her damn best to make sure it wasn't made more difficult by forcing her dog to comfort her.

Can you gaslight a dog? Abby wondered.

Slipping the leash from her wrist, she handed it to Dylan. "Don't let her get too excited, and no..."

"No treats or extra food." Dylan nodded and stood; his forehead crinkled with concern. "I'll take good care of her, I promise."

"I know you will." Her throat closed, her voice pitching higher than normal, but her eyes stayed dry.

Instead of running for the stairs, Dylan led Gen into the living room, where a large dog bed had been tucked against one end of the couch. Flopping down on it, Dylan

patted the space beside him.

Gen sniffed it, circled, then curled up.

He ran a hand down her spine. “Good girl.”

Heading for the kitchen, she slipped inside. Scott juggled a pan and a pair of tongs, a stack of ingredients waiting to his left, the sharp sound of sizzling oil and scent of browning meat filling the room. She paused a moment, taking in the sight of him, shoulders straining the fabric of his shirt, cuffs rolled up to his elbows, jeans hugging his hips.

But nothing on those tight leggings he wears to play.

Jif’s comments about the players rattled through her mind at the most inopportune times. Her cheeks flushed and she swallowed hard.

Crossing the tiled floor, she slid up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He stiffened, then relaxed. “Hey.”

She pressed her nose between his shoulder blades, inhaling the scent. “Hi.” Then, “Missed you.”

Turning, he pulled her into his chest. “Missed you, too.”

Tipping her head back to smile up at him, he bent to meet her, his lips brushing across hers, delicate, tantalizing. Pushing to her toes, she pressed into the kiss, and he responded in kind, running a hand over her hip and up her spine to tangle in her hair.

Dropping her hands to his waist, she found the loops of his jeans and pulled herself closer as he cradled her head and ran a fine line of kisses along the length of her jaw.

Abby let herself get lost in the sensation of his firm strength, a welcome distraction, something good in the midst of so much terrible.

Scott broke the kiss, but Abby followed him, not yet ready to surrender the moment. He pressed his lips to hers again, more gently, then touched their foreheads together, eyes dark and expression solemn.

The acrid tang of smoke burned her nose, and she pulled back.

A moment later, Scott noticed, and, with a swear, he dove for the pan of chicken on the stove, sliding it off the hot burner and reaching for the tongs.

Stepping back, Abby combed her fingers through her hair and smiled. “Did you save it?”

Scott glanced over his shoulder and winked. “I alwayssave it.”

She burst out laughing and he froze, hand suspended above the pan, tongs already angled to scoop up the lightly charred chicken.

“Sorry,” she gasped, shoulders still shaking in amusement. “Sorry, that was... I can’t ...”

He turned back to the stove, held still a moment longer, then moved the chicken onto a plate. Under his breath, she barely caught his words. “You haven’t laughed in weeks.”

She sobered. Took a breath. Let it out. “I know. I’m... sorry.”

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He kept his back to her as he measured some broth, poured it into the searing pan, and scraped the leftover bits off the bottom. He set it aside to thicken.

“I shouldn’t have pushed you away. I couldn’t...” She still didn’t have the words as her mind played the moment Gen collapsed over and over. “I’m sorry.”

“You missed Dylan’s concert, my last game...” The accusation in his voice cut through Abby’s defenses like a scalpel.

She winced. “I know.”

He stirred the broth, then turned to face her. “I would have come over. I would have helped bring Gen home, brought Dylan to visit...”

“I know...”

“Brought pizza and a crappy movie.”

She nodded. “I... I’m sorry.”

It wasn’t enough. She knew that, too. It didn’t matter how much she meant it; she’d hurt him – hurt Dylan – even if she could have excused it, she wouldn’t. They deserved better from her.

In one long stride, Scott crossed to her, hands wrapping around her upper arms. “Why, Abby? Why won’t you let me help you?”

She didn't have an answer. Not for him, not for Cara, who had asked the same question more than once, not for her former in-laws, who'd been cut out of her life after Will's death, too stark a reminder of all she'd lost, not for her own parents, who'd tried for so long before giving up.

"I don't know."

He raked a hand through his hair. "I thought I understood what I was getting into, dating you. I thought..." He shook his head. "You know when we went to that Japanese art exhibit over the summer? They had those broken bowls, but instead of throwing them away or trying to cover up the cracks, they'd filled them in with gold, instead. They were beautiful. The cracks hadn't ruined them, they'd made them better."

Abby pressed her hand to her mouth, refusing to let the sob escape.

No more tears.

"I thought, That's Abby. Those bowls, they were you. Shattered by use, by life, but instead of being thrown away, they'd been knit back together. Instead of trying to pretend the cracks never happened, they became art, a testament that broken didn't have to mean useless. Purposeless."

"And now?" She didn't know where the strength to ask came from. She already knew the answer.

"Beautiful, but untouchable. Encased in glass."

Her shoulders jerked, his words a physical blow. What would it take to shatter the glass she'd surrounded herself with? Why couldn't it be enough that she'd learned to love again? Why did loving Scott mean she had to surrender every part of her

defenses, even in the midst of being shattered again?

Liam is dead, she wanted to scream. Gen is sick.

How could she let him in? How could she keep her heart from flying into a million pieces if she didn't clutch every one of them? She wasn't an empty bowl, to be put up on a shelf until someone had time to fix it; she was a living person, and if she didn't hold it together, everything within her would leak away. Only an empty shell would be left.

Scott spoke again, fists clenching and unclenching at his side. "Dylan's final custody hearing is a week from Wednesday. I have to walk into a courtroom and convince a judge I'm the best parent for him; otherwise, Lindsay will take him. I'll lose my son, Abby. How can I defend my relationship with you and not be able to trust you'll be there for us? How can I say you're good for Dylan and then have to explain how upset he was when you missed his concert?"

She flinched again. "I'm not perfect..."

"I'm not asking for perfect. But right now? I need better than this. I need better than you disappearing on us. I need you to decide: are you in? Are you going to let me in, let us in? Or are you doing life on your own. Because if you are..." He opened his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I can't lose my son."

She lifted her chin, met his eyes, and she blinked hard. She could make it up to them, but it would hurt.

"I know. I know you can't. I know...we can't."

He stilled. "We?"

She nodded. This much she could do for him. “I won’t be the reason you lose Dylan, Scott. I can’t be. So, if you need to walk away for a while, fight this battle while I fight Gen’s, I get it. If I can’t be what you both need, then maybe it’s for the best.” She paused. “But not forever. This stupid custody thing will end, and you’ll get Dylan back. And Gen... When Gen’s better...” She still couldn’t say the words. Her hope perched too fragilely in her soul to speak it aloud. “Then maybe we can try again.”

He stepped back. “So that’s it, then.”

“Its... It’s for the best,” she said, as the pieces of her heart ripped apart in a whole new way.

Thirty-Three

THE LOCKER ROOM had gone mad. At half-time, the Raptors were up twenty-one to three in Kansas City. No one had ever done anything like it. Not in a playoff game, not in a championship game. Not with the Super Bowl on the line.

And none of it will matter a bit if we call in the second half, Scott thought to himself. The Chiefs were masters at the come-from-behind victory. You could never count this team out.

As if he could read Scott's thoughts, Coach called for silence, gesturing the last of his staff away from the small huddles of players. The offensive coordinator, Jeff Rigby, showed Scott a final play on the small tablet lying across his knees. Scott nodded, then poked Finn, tipping his head at the screen. Finn checked, nodded, and offered a fist-bump.

"... but we can't get slack. Defense, keep the double coverage going, but don't forget it's a red herring for their run game. Offense. Let's keep those points coming. We all know that team out there has a long history of closing big gaps. We're not adding to their list."

The men in the locker room leapt to their feet. "Work harder. Work harder!Work harder!"

The chant echoed from the walls, and Scott welcomed the familiar rush of adrenaline, feeding off the energy around him, and feeding it, in turn, as he jammed his helmet onto his head and led the rush back onto the field.

Reaching the sideline, Jeff took Scott aside. “I think we should keep the ball on the ground, unless we have to pass. Less chance of a turnover if we keep it out of the air.”

Scott nodded. Football, especially in the playoffs, could be as much about the mental game as the physical one. Not only keeping your emotions in check, but playing smart, as well.

“You got this?”

“I got this.”

And he did, for the most part. He pushed Abby from his head, pushed Dylan’s hearing away, too, forcing his mind to a laser focus. Thirty more minutes to play. Thirty minutes, and then he could deal with all the rest of it. Maybe he and Finn could go out, afterwards, win or lose, and he’d tell him what happened with Abby this week. Maybe in telling someone, it might make it real.

The Chiefs pushed hard, but the defense held them to another field goal. Then, Scott had his hands on the ball again, a line of men before him, Finn behind and to one side.

He breathed, let the sound of the crowd wash over him, closed his eyes for a moment. Letting them snap open, he read the line and absolutely knew they’d already recognized the play. So much for the run game. He stood, called the audible, watched his men shuffle. He crouched, gave the count. The ball touched his fingers, the rough, pebbled surface exactly like a million times before.

The world went silent.

He stepped back once, twice. Checked right. Finn. Double covered. Glanced left. The

rookie, Highcastle, open. Planting his feet, he spun the ball off his fingers. It sailed, floated, in slow motion, and Highcastle, head turned to track it, let it slide into his outstretched arms.

Sound returned, a rushing wall battering his senses, buffeting him as he followed the ball's progress down the field. One tackle avoided, a quickstep and spin, and then a clear, straight run.

“Yeah!”

He chased Highcastle into the end zone, knocked the forehead of his helmet against his, grabbed his arms, too pumped to use words, nothing but an animalistic scream of victory.

They still had twenty-five minutes to play, but the Raptors had controlled their own fate and would continue to do so.

Scott's hands shook, but not for the usual reasons. Well, not just for the usual reasons. The usual reasons were the kind of pre-game jitters he'd spent a decade mastering, or accepting and getting the job done, anyway. Post-game jitters, on the other hand, were for the adrenaline crash after a high-stakes game or...I'm going to the Super Bowl!

Elated, breathless, beyond words, he shook out his hands, took deep breaths, grounded himself in an overwhelmingly surreal moment.

The long walk back up the tunnel had been muffled, his mind so far out of his exhausted body he'd been hovering. Sound receded, only one thing kept looping through his brain: Super Bowl, Super Bowl, Super Bowl...

I can't wait to tell Abby...

And then it all came crashing back in, like the moment after the snap, when the other team has anticipated the play, and his vision filled with nothing but the massive bulk of a lineman coming straight for him.

Stand up. Protect the ball. Take the hit.

He didn't know how many more hits he could take.

Through the haze, as if his best friend could sense his thoughts, his attention snapped to Finn. "I'm sorry?"

"Have you seen Abby, yet?"

"Abby?" The air went out of the room. "What do you mean?"

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He should have told Finn about the breakup sooner, but they'd been so busy with practice...

"Oh, man, Kelly is so psyched to be here. Didn't even care at least a dozen Chiefs fans flipped her off before she made it out of the parking lot."

"Here?" Scott's voice cut out, sound strangled in denial. "Kelly's here?"

"I couldn't believe it, either, when she told me... Wait," Finn's brain caught up to his words. "You didn't know? Crap. She's gonna kill me for ruining the surprise."

"Abby's here?"

"Dude," Finn shook his head, then peeled out of his jersey. "I mean it, she might actually kill me. If you value our friendship at all, don't tell her I told you."

Dazed, Scott nodded.

Abby was here, at Arrowhead? Why?

"I swear, Kelly, it's okay. I'll wait for you out here."

Kelly whirled, cocked her head at Abby, and crossed her arms. "What happened?"

"N... Nothing."

She raised one eyebrow and waited. Abby twisted her fingers in the hem of her

jersey. The jersey with Scott's name and number emblazoned across the back. The one he'd given her when he'd visited the hospital last Spring. Only a few weeks ago, she'd wondered if it might someday sport the same glittery scrawl of letters Kelly's had: Mrs.

Now, it never would.

"You've been quiet as a church mouse since I met you at the airport yesterday. I know Gen... Well, I know what's going on, but now you, what? Don't want to go see Scott? He won, girl. He's going to the Super Bowl. You think he won't be thrilled you flew out? I told Finn we'd be here because I knew how much it would mean to him to have me in the stands while he played. So, what's going on?"

"I'm so sorry, Kelly, I should have told you. I wanted you to enjoy the game. I wanted to enjoy Scott playing one last time, and pretend..." She took a deep breath. "Scott and I broke up last week. That's why I didn't tell him. That's why I don't think I should go in there."

Kelly's face fell. "Girl..."

The ready room doors swept open, cutting Kelly off, and the first few players trickled out.

She turned, searching their faces for her husband. "Highcastle, nice catch, man. Well played. Donte, solid defense. I loved that stop in the third..."

A consummate football wife, Abby thought as Kelly greeted each player coming out of the locker room by name, offering some small word of praise or encouragement. She'd only had eyes for Scott, even if he wasn't hers anymore. Hadn't even noticed the receivers, except where they'd made Scott's throws matter, hadn't noticed the defense, except for getting their job done and getting the ball back into Scott's hands.

I'm so selfish.

Swallowing the bitter pill, her chest tightened as she counted what it had cost her.

Then, Finn came out, and, with a screech, Kelly launched herself into her husband's arms.

Abby was forgotten. As she would be by next season. Nothing but another girl who had dated a player for a while, then disappeared.

A lump formed in her throat, choking her breath.

Behind Finn, now kissing Kelly passionately enough to draw some wolf whistles from the players skirting around them, those whose wives or girlfriends hadn't been able to come, Abby recognized a familiar shock of tousled hair, the freshly-showered look that made her knees go weak and her breath catch. She froze, pressed her back to the cool concrete wall behind her, wished it would swallow her whole, so she didn't have to face this moment.

He was braver than her. Crossing the hall, he punched Finn's shoulder as he passed. "Let her breathe, man."

Stopping far too close for comfort, but still too far away, out of reach of the fingertips that longed to reach for him, to brush against the buttons at the collar of the blue polo he wore, the one that brought out his eyes, Abby shoved her hands into the tight pockets of her jeans.

Not yours, anymore, she reminded herself.

"Why are you here?"

He sounded angry, hurt, and Abby cringed. She'd somehow managed to mess this up, too.

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“Kelly and I planned to come. I didn’t want to bail on her.”

“Planned? When?”

She bit her lip. She didn’t want to make this worse, didn’t know how to do that, except to say nothing. But a few players had slowed in the hall, edging around Finn and Kelly, then, scenting drama about to unfold, stopping outright. “I bought the tickets Monday morning.”

He flinched, and his thoughts flickered across his face. Monday morning. And by Monday night, it was over. “I... see.”

The silence stretched again, tense, anxious, but without any entertainment factor, the men in the hall began easing their way onward, toward the team busses that would take them back to the airport.

“You, um, played good. Well. You played well. Your throw right at the beginning of the third? Beautiful.”

He nodded. “Thanks.”

For a moment, his eyes lit up, and Abby reveled in the rightness of it. His love of the game. His joy in sharing it with her.

Then, they shuttered again.

Accepting the inevitable, though it tore her apart to do so, Abby forced a smile to her

lips. “Congrats. Super Bowl. That’s... amazing.”

He nodded, then turned as another wave of men went by. “I should go.”

“Yeah. No, I know.”

Another moment passed as they locked eyes, and the weight of the things between them suffocated her, sucking the very air from her lungs. Then, his gaze slid from hers, and, following it, he moved away, down the hall, after his teammates.

“Scott?” Her voice threatened to break.

He paused, glancing over his shoulder.

“Good luck. Wednesday. I hope...” Her throat closed and she couldn’t force another word through.

“Me too.”

Then, he’d disappeared. A moment later, Kelly stepped up beside her, Finn following his quarterback out of Abby’s life.

“Okay, girl. Now we drink. And you tell me what the hell happened. And we figure out how to fix it.”

For a moment, Abby actually considered it. It wouldn’t take much alcohol to dull the keen edge of her pain. But no, she couldn’t do that.

“You drink, I’ll drive.”

“You talk.”

Mute, Abby nodded.

Thirty-Four

THE VICTORY ON Sunday was a million miles—or ninety-nine and a half yards—away as Scott sat in the courtroom on Wednesday morning. Hoping to capture at least the essence of a win, he'd opted to wear his college championship ring, a gaudy thing, larger than his knuckle, but the weight of it on his second finger grounded him. It also gave him something to do with his hands other than wring them in his lap. Twisting the band, he rubbed his thumb over the face, a stylized version of his college mascot, rough with detail against the smooth stone behind.

Dylan sat in the front row, a single paper shaking in his hands, his statement for the judge asking to remain with his father. He'd written it with the guardian ad litem, who sat on one side, Lauren on his other.

Scott sat next to Mark, a file of papers before them, but the small table otherwise bare.

A side door opened, and Lindsay swept in, but not alone, as Scott had expected. Dr. Ferndale, the psychologist, accompanied her.

She crossed the aisle, the staccato click of her heels echoing in the chamber, knelt before Dylan, and brushed some hair from his forehead.

“Oh, darling, I'm so sorry I missed our Christmas together.” She paused, as if noticing the guardian beside her son for the first time. “Things will be different next year.”

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Dylan reached up and ran his fingers through his bangs, pulling them back down and straight, but didn't say anything.

She leaned forward, pressing a kiss to his cheek, then swept his hair to the side again as she stood.

Dylan's brows knit as he reached up to fix his bangs a second time. His gaze followed his mother as she slid behind the second table, then turned and smiled at Dr. Ferndale, seated behind her in an obvious show of support.

Dylan frowned, slid closer to Lauren, and pressed himself into her side.

"I don't like him," he mumbled, almost inaudibly.

But Scott, attuned to his son, twitched.

He leaned toward Mark. "Did you hear that?"

Mark glanced across the aisle at Lindsay, head bent and studying the papers before her, then nodded.

"I thought..."

Mark shook his head, a subtle motion, but Scott stopped talking, forcing himself to stillness.

Mark spun in his chair, facing Dylan, seated behind them. But the banister—what

lawyers call the “bar” —sat between them, the distance too far for a subtle conversation. Any movement on their part toward Dylan would catch Lindsay’s attention.

Scott clenched his hands, the bite of his ring grinding into his palm. Heat suffused his face. White-hot anger swept through him.

A hand on his sleeve brought him back to himself; Mark, head cocked, squeezed his arm and flicked his eyes behind them.

The susurrant of voices too quiet to understand reached Scott’s ears, one, his son’s, the other less familiar. He strained his ears but could make out no words, locked eyes with Mark, and raised his eyebrows. Then, the voices stopped. Scott snuck a peek over his shoulder as fabric rustled behind them.

The guardian glided up the aisle, pressed aside the double door of the courtroom, then exited into the hall beyond.

He turned, words already on his tongue, but Mark shook his head again.

“Wait.”

He’d chosen Mark for his expertise; he’d trust his lawyer.

Scott had been his own worst enemy throughout the custody hearings, a fact he understood all too well. If he’d only managed to keep his mouth shut at the last one, maybe they wouldn’t even be here, today.

Minutes ticked past and Scott checked his watch. Judge Farmer had been punctual to the previous hearings. Mark had even warned him before the first one he had a bit of a reputation for it and wouldn’t have much patience for a parent who showed up late

to discuss custody. Scott had always been early.

The rear doors opened again, and the guardian reentered the courtroom.

Moments later, the bailiff came in and, standing to one side of the bench, called the room to order. "Judge Farmer presiding."

The judge entered, long, black robes sweeping the floor, and, settling himself, straightened the files on the table before him. It seemed to take longer this time than in their previous appearances.

Had his nerves gotten the better of him?

Satisfied, Judge Farmer cleared his throat. "Ms. Meyers, Mr. Edwards." He paused and glanced behind Scott. "And you must be Dylan."

Though he spoke firmly, the gaze he bent on the boy showed an unexpectedly paternal kindness.

"Yes, sir. Umm, Your Honor." Dylan stumbled over the unfamiliar title and the edges of the judge's lips twitched.

"Either is fine, young man."

Judge Farmer paused again, cleared his throat, ruffled his papers. Then, gathering himself, he spoke. "I have been a Family Court Judge for a number of years, now, and I believe it is one of the most difficult fields to work in. To ask any person to judge between two parents on the care of their child is a grave responsibility, and one I do not now, nor ever have taken lightly. Sometimes, the choice is simple and straight-forward. Other times, it is more complex. This case appeared to be of the latter type."

Scott's chest clenched at his words. I'm going to lose Dylan. The realization flooded through him, paralyzed him, stole his breath. I'm going to lose my son.

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And, on the heels of that thought came another. I lost Abby for nothing...

Swiping his eyes, his gaze caught on Lindsay, across the aisle, hands folded on the table before her, lips turned up in a sharp smile of victory.

“However,” Judge Farmer’s voice hardened. “Sometimes complex cases can be deceiving.” He turned toward Lindsay. “Ms. Meyers, your reasons for requesting a change to your custody agreement were spurious at best, a waste of the court’s time and energy. That said, I appreciate circumstances can change, and the presence of a child in one’s life can be the greatest catalyst for change of all. With good faith, I allowed this case to continue. As a judge, I must give each parent an opportunity to be a part of their child’s life, so long as it does not effect the well-being of the child, and, as such I was prepared this morning to render a judgment in favor of split custody.”

Scott’s vision narrowed, his breath coming too fast. Dylan...

“Dr. Ferndale.”

“Your Honor?” He stood, hands dangling at his sides, relaxed, despite the razor-sharp eyes of the Judge upon him.

“Your professional evaluation suggested Ms. Meyers would be a better parental figure for Dylan Edwards based on a number of factors, including a...” He ruffled through his papers. “‘Clear reduction in the grades of Dylan Edwards since his father began seeing Abigail Barclay.’ Not only that, but you go on to note, via hearsay, I might add, potential psychological factors of the aforementioned Ms. Barclay that

could contribute to a clear and present danger to the child. Correct?"

"Yes, Your Honor. Hearsay is a legal term, and one I, as a mental health professional, am not subject to. Upon interviewing a number of subjects, it became clear to me Ms. Barclay is deeply disturbed and a continuing relationship between Mr. Edwards and Ms. Barclay could be not only detrimental, but dangerous to Dylan."

"I see." Judge Farmer paused. "And how much did Ms. Meyers pay you to perform the psychological evaluation for this case?"

Dr. Ferndale stiffened. "Pay, Your Honor?"

"Indulge me, for a moment, as I notice Ms. Meyers has not provided a receipt for your services."

"Ah, of course, Your Honor. I believe the agreed-upon fee was... Well, I'd have to check on the exact amount..."

"An estimate, then?"

"Well, there were flights, of course, to interview Mr. Edwards..."

Beside him, Mark stood. "My client was interviewed once by Dr. Ferndale. No more than one round-trip flight would have been necessary."

Dr. Ferndale scowled at Mark. "By flights, of course, I meant the one down here, then a return, and the custody hearings, this one included..."

Judge Farmer interrupted. "So, three trips, each with two flights. Six, total, correct? Upon receipt of an itemized invoice, I would see six flights listed."

“Eight.” Wrought from him like a witness on cross-examination, he spoke barely above a whisper, as if by volume, alone, he could distance himself from the truth he’d been forced to speak.

“Eight?”

“There was one, additional trip, just before Thanksgiving.”

Scott clenched his fists. “The article...” It hissed through his teeth, against his will.

Mark leaned in close, his voice in Scott’s ear. “Don’t.”

“Thanksgiving.” The judge paused on that word. “Interesting. And what, exactly, were your plans over Thanksgiving?”

Lindsay jerked, a motion not at all subtle and more than enough to draw the attention of every eye in the room.

Dr. Ferndale cleared his throat. “I believe I spent Thanksgiving with my sister.”

“Indeed. You made no other stops?”

“Your Honor,” Lindsay had collected herself and rose to her feet. “I can’t imagine...”

“Neither could I, Ms. Meyers, and yet, here we are. Dr. Ferndale, please answer the question.”

The man fidgeted, rubbed his forehead, tugged his cuffs straight. “Ah, I might have made another call or two on my way home. Professional courtesy, of course.”

Judge Farmer sat back in his seat, and, in that moment, Scott caught a glimpse of the

kind of lawyer he must have been before ascending to the bench. The kind of lawyer he'd be grateful to have on his side, and afraid of going up against.

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“And did one of these, what did you call them? ‘Professional courtesy calls,’ include Ms. Meyers’ residence?”

Dr. Ferndale shot Lindsay a desperate glance.

“Well, I think I have my answer. Of course, though I loathe to stoop so low, I could ask Ms. Weiring, the court-assigned guardian ad litem what Dylan remembers of that... professional call.” The words left his lips dripping with disdain, emphasizing the clear difference between the objectivity of the lawyer and the guardian. “As a child, I could not, of course, countenance requiring him to repeat it a second time this morning.”

The psychologist wilted under the judge’s penetrating gaze, then shook his head. “No, Your Honor. That won’t be necessary.” Shame colored his voice. “I did make a brief stop at Ms. Meyers’ residence. What was meant to be a brief stop. Ah, poor choices were made.” His glance slid sideways, to Dylan. “I don’t believe I understood what an early riser a child could be.”

“I see.”

Perhaps in an actual trial, a lawyer might have pressed, but for a custody hearing, Judge Farmer had already risked his objectivity enough.

Scott waited, not daring to hope, hands clenched now not in anger, but as a desperate attempt to keep himself from leaping to his feet and shouting for joy.

“Dare I pursue the subject of your fee, Dr. Ferndale?”

The man shook his head, and his face paled. “Ten thousand, Your Honor. Plus, expenses.”

Even Mark’s eyebrows shot up and a low whistle broke the silence.

“Mr. Lystead.”

“I’m sorry, Your Honor.”

“Ten thousand...” Judge Farmer spent a long time looking at Dr. Ferndale, who refused to meet his eyes, then, shifting his attention to Lindsay, he remained silent, studying the woman. Finally, he sighed. “Never, in all my years... Well. I will not so dishonor this courtroom as to ask if the... fee Ms. Meyers paid you included a foregone conclusion. Testimony already given today is more than enough for a dismissal of this case. If Mr. Edwards chooses to take up civil charges—and, given the expense of this circus, any competent lawyer would recommend he do so—he can get to the bottom of this sordid affair. As for me...” He shuffled several papers, setting a small stack to one side, then nodded to the bailiff.

“All rise, please.”

Scott lurched to his feet.

“I do not appreciate individuals who choose to use the legal system as a weapon against their former spouse, even less so when a child gets caught in the crossfire. I do not appreciate having my or the court’s time wasted on frivolities. This case is dismissed with the contempt it deserves and there will be no mandated change to the custody agreement for Dylan Edwards.”

Scott’s knees gave way, and he caught himself on the edge of the table, already turning toward his son as the judge continued.

“As a further note, I understand, Ms. Meyers, your practice is not within family law, and perhaps things are different in your corporate law firms in New York, but we take seriously any number of infractions you have committed before this bench. Rest assured, a strongly worded letter to the appropriate disciplinary committee will be forthcoming.” His gavel smacked the desk, and with a small cry, Dylan launched himself over the banister and into his dad’s arms.

Scott clutched his son.

Beside him, Mark shook hands with the guardian. “Thank you.”

“It’s my job, Mr. Lystead.” She turned to Scott. “I’m sorry you had to go through this, but I’m glad we were able to get to the truth in time.”

He reached out and took her hand. “Thank you. Thank you so much. I don’t even know what to say...”

“Mr. Edwards,” she paused. “Dylan is still a bit too young to have his preferences taken into account in court, but I found him to be a precocious child with a solid sense of what he wanted out of this situation. With respect to that, I’m pleased with how things turned out for you today.”

While Scott parsed the words for meaning, Mark frowned. “Ms. Weiring...”

“Oh, Mark, did you see the way that woman slunk out of here? She won’t be appealing.”

“Still...”

“Oh, fine, then, I’ll say no more.” But she smiled as she offered her hand once again to Scott. “Mr. Edwards, Dylan, it was a pleasure to meet you both. Good luck.”

Thirty-Five

SCOTT FOLLOWED MARK out of the courtroom, one arm wrapped around his son. As they passed the threshold, Lindsay pounced.

“No mangy mutt today?”

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Dylan stiffened beside him, but Scott let her words flow over him. He'd spent so long living in fear one day she would change her mind and come for Dylan. Now, she had, and he'd won. With that, she'd lost all ability to rattle him.

"So, the rumors were true." The vicious expression on her face, a malicious parody of a smile, screamed her victory, even in the face of all the defeat of the day.

He kept his voice low, still hoping to protect Dylan from his mother's vitriol, but done with Lindsay's garbage, especially after Judge Farmer's ruling. "I hope you're proud of yourself."

She snorted, eyes glancing over Dylan in dismissal. Scott waited for the anger to bubble up within him, but it didn't come. When had it lost its ability to sting?

Abby's face floated into his mind, then Dylan's, with the expression of adoration he had when Abby walked him through the steps of handling Gen. Those were the faces who mattered most to him.

He thought back, trying to recall a time when Lindsay had looked at Dylan the way Abby did, eyes shining with pride and love; when Lindsay had invested into her son the attention Abby lavished on him.

I can't lose her.

"Dad? Can we go get some lunch? I'm hungry."

Scott glanced down at his son, squeezed his shoulder. "Sure. What sounds good?"

“Can we go to Burger Barn? Can I get a shake?”

“Shakes at Burger Barn are for special occasions.” Also, Burger Barn would definitely not meet his diet plan, and he didn’t relish trying to explain to the team nutritionist why he’d broken the rules on a non-cheat day.

“Isn’t this a special occasion?”

He stilled himself, a visceral reaction, long habit more than conscious thought. His eyes flew to Lindsay’s face... and then nothing.

Dylan had surprised them both. He’d been deep in his first year in the NFL, a rookie relegated to a third string position despite his high draft number. He’d shed the ego, the entitlement of being an All-American athlete, a championship-winning college quarterback, working twice as hard as anyone else to earn his spot on the starting line-up. Lindsay had been studying for the bar.

One night in particular would always symbolize everything about that time in his life. He’d been exhausted, run down in body and in mind, and Lindsay had been pacing the kitchen, crying hysterically.

“You have no idea what I’m going through, Scott. There’s this parasite growing inside of me, I’m sick all the time, I’m so tired... I hate this! I never wanted this.”

Scott couldn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes. He’d never understand why she wouldn’t make the best of it. Why she wouldn’t accept life didn’t always go the way you planned.

With the benefit of years of hindsight, he could begin to sympathize.

He’d never intended to be cruel, but that’s how Lindsay had taken it. Perhaps she

hated him so much now because he'd failed her then. He'd been so wrapped up in his own head he hadn't made the space to understand things from her point of view. To empathize with her experience, even if he couldn't share it.

Had he done the same to Abby, now, as he let her freeze him out in the midst of her grief over Liam, over Gen? Would she, too, one day come to hate him? Was he the problem, after all? He'd never asked himself the question before.

His eyes softened as he took in his angry ex-wife, then he turned, wrapped an arm around Dylan, and guided him away. "Okay, you can have a shake."

Lindsay's shrill voice followed them down the hall, "Don't you pity me, Scott Edwards. Don't you dare. I don't need your pity..."

Mark shielded his back.

The small shoulder of his son tremored beneath his hand, betraying his tension, walking away from his mother as she screamed after them.

Scott took a deep breath.

They had a chance at a new beginning, right here, right this moment. A second chance. And Scott didn't waste second chances.

"Will Abby be there, Dad?"

Scott frowned as he helped Dylan layer his numbered jersey into the overnight bag on his bed. "I don't know."

"I hope so. I miss her."

“Me too, Dylan. Me too.”

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Scott dropped the bag by the front door. Kelly would be by later in the week to pick up Dylan and drive up to Charlotte, where she would chaperone him to the Bank of America Stadium.

With the venue so close to Charleston, it might as well be home field advantage for the biggest game of the year—only the Panthers would have been better positioned, playing on their own turf, and they'd been knocked out in the wildcard round. On the other hand, Philadelphia wasn't all that far away, so their fans would make a good showing, as well.

Scott turned and surveyed the living room. Abby's presence permeated it. There, on the couch, they'd cuddled together the first few days of December, before their lives had fallen apart, sipping coffee and staring into the leaping flames of the gas fireplace. On the floor, Gen's giant bed still lay, virtually untouched, two shallow dents mute testimony to the time Dylan had spent beside the dog before...

He'd had to explain to Dylan, then, what had happened. Why Abby had left with no goodbye. Why she wouldn't be back. They'd ended things, and he'd owed Dylan an explanation.

But if the last two weeks had taught him anything, he wasn't ready for their relationship to be over. He couldn't control Abby, but he could admit, now, he'd been so wrapped up in his own problems he'd allowed Abby to push him away. He hadn't fought to keep her. Ironical, of course, given how hard he'd fought to get her in the first place.

Classic athlete, he thought to himself, chagrined. Play to win, but once you've won,

where's the challenge?

But she hadn't stopped fighting for him. She'd flown to Boston, to cheer for him in the biggest game of his career thus far, even after they'd broken up. Could he do any less to try to prove his love for her?

So, he'd spent the ten-thousand dollars to buy an extra Super Bowl ticket at face value. He'd pulled the strings to make sure she'd be sitting with Kelly and Dylan. Then, he'd packed it up in a courier envelope with a long letter, part apology, part promise for the future, part hopeful desire. She'd made her gesture, and he'd turned away. Now, it was his turn, and he could only hope. And wait.

Abby's hands shook as she slit the top flap of the envelope and removed the heavy, thick packet within. What could Scott be sending to her that would require this? Had he lost Dylan? Was this some kind of legal statement?

A coiling fireball of anxiety knotted itself under her sternum.

Gen, sensing her distress, lifted her head from her bed and slunk to Abby's feet.

As Dr. Singh had warned, she'd gotten much worse for a while, but even if she'd been relegated to the control, the chemo had finally started working. It would be a few more weeks, still, before they'd find out whether they'd been assigned to the treatment group.

Sinking down, Gen laid her head on the floor. Abby wiggled her foot, sock-clad, and rubbed the spot above the corner of her jaw, at the base of her ear, with her big toe.

Inside the large, yellow envelope, emblazoned with the courier labels, a single, thick security envelope lay, white, with Abby's name scrawled on the front. The tension in her chest unwound and she ran her thumbnail under the sealed edge. Two pages,

hand-written, with one, smaller envelope tucked into the crease. She set this aside, then smoothed the letter on the bar counter.

Dear Abby...

Her eyes burned and she had to blink before she could continue reading. No more crying, she reminded herself. Her new therapist disagreed, but her resolution was only one of a long list of items they'd be working through in the foreseeable future.

And it would be work.

But it would be worth it. If Scott gave her another chance, she wanted to be a better person, a healthier person, for him and for Dylan. And if he didn't... Her breath caught.

"That would be okay, too. And I would still be a better person. I would still want to be a better person." She said the words aloud, learning to believe them a little more each day. Healing wasn't linear, and she had to trust the process.

Her eyes dropped to the paper.

Dear Abby,

We won! It feels selfish to begin this letter with that, but I think you'd be happy to know...

Her heart beat faster. They'd won. No other news could compare. The importance of knowing how the hearing had ended eclipsed anything else Scott could say.

... Long story, short, the judge threw out the case. There will be no change in Dylan's custody agreement, and, without going into a lot of details, I wouldn't be surprised if

she keeps a pretty low profile for a while.

I owe you an apology. A lot of them. I should have told you more about Lindsay sooner. I shouldn't have let her blindside you like I did. I should have done more to fight for you, no matter what. I shouldn't have let you go.

I'm worried you'll think all of this is some kind of high from winning the case. That now, in hindsight, it's easy to wish I'd handled things better, but what if I'd lost? If she had taken Dylan, would I think differently? And the truth is, I can't promise I wouldn't. But I do know this: the way you look at Dylan, it's like nothing I've ever seen. And the way he looks at you... He adores you. More importantly, he trusts you.

I love you, Abby. I love the way you love Dylan. I love the way you love your kids, the way you celebrate their recoveries and the depth of your grief when you lose one. I love the way your eyes light up when you talk about Gen and your work together, your passion as you talk about the training and the relationship between the two of you.

I love the way you support me. That night, you could have named a million reasons why our relationship wasn't working. You could have blamed me, and you wouldn't have been wrong – I wasn't being the person you needed me to be. You could have used Gen as an excuse. But you didn't. You said, "I won't be the reason you lose Dylan."

I want you to be a part of my life, of our lives. I want to be there for you for as long as you have left with Gen, whether it's months or years. I want to hold you when the time comes and remind you you'll never be alone again.

I'm sorry

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Abby finished reading the letter, took a shuddering breath, then slid the last envelope across the counter toward her. She turned it over in her hands, puzzling, then slit the flap.

Sliding the thick cardboard rectangle out, her fingers spasmed as her brain processed the fancy, holographic stamp adorning one corner. It reflected a rainbow of blues and greens, but her eyes were drawn to the graphic stretching from the barcode at the top all the way to the series of letters and numbers beginning about two-thirds of the way down: the Vince Lombardi trophy, silver and sleek, topping the Roman numerals of this year's game.

Thirty-Six

"SHE'S FINE, I promise. Go, enjoy the game."

Abby allowed the lock of hair twisted around her finger to uncurl before picking it up and winding it again. "But you'll call me..."

"No. Absolutely not," Cara deadpanned. "I'm an irresponsible friend and, although this is the second time in the last month I've stayed with Gen while you went out of town to a fancy football game, I will definitely fail to call you if there is an emergency."

"Cara..."

"Abby. Quit stalling. I'll call you if something happens. Right now, your job is to get in there and cheer for Scott and the Raptors loud enough for the entire pediatric unit.

Now, get going, before you miss kickoff.”

“Okay, okay. I’m going. Kiss Gen for me.”

Abby hung up, checked her watch, glanced in the rear-view mirror, flipped her hair behind her shoulder, and straightened the black and silver jersey she wore. Smoothing her hands over the latex numerals, her sweaty palms caught and dragged at the material. She twitched the hem, then shook her head.

Cara was right. She could stall all day and miss the biggest game of the year, the biggest game of Scott’s career, or she could catch her courage with both hands.

He wants me here, she reminded herself.

A press of people surrounded her as she approached the stadium entrance, the weak, winter sun filtering through a few, high clouds, enough to bring the temperature into the low fifties, but no higher. Pawing through her bag as she approached the security checkpoint, she pulled out a black knit hat with a grayish-silver pompom and the Raptors name and logo.

She’d bought it a few days after receiving Scott’s letter, when she’d realized she’d need a few more layers if she wanted to stay warm in Charlotte. She hadn’t been sure, up to that point, if she’d go, but it had caught her eye in an ad column to the side of an article she’d been reading about some holistic care options for Gen, and before she’d thought it through, she’d clicked on it.

Wearing it, along with her jersey, dark jeans, and warm boots, she blended in with the crowds around her. Not the girlfriend, not the distraction, not the basket-case or the dog-lady. Another fan, one of many.

Remembering the easy way Dylan had threaded through the crowds and led her

straight to their seats at their first game together, Abby lifted her chin the slightest degree higher, borrowing some of his confidence and letting her eyes flash over each numbered tunnel.

As she neared the right section, the hot, steamy scent of salt and starch billowed out from one of the food counters. Her feet turning without her conscious permission, she smiled. She'd been so worried the first time Dylan ran off to get something to eat, but he'd been fine, and he'd returned with enough garlic fries to share. After that, they'd always made time to stop and grab some before kickoff.

Until Lindsay came along and ruined things.

Abby shook her head. Lindsay had lost; what she thought didn't matter anymore, and maybe next season she and Dylan could continue their tradition...

She stopped herself. She didn't want to assume. She couldn't afford to get her hopes up, yet. Still, as the line crept forward and she reached the counter, she ordered two plates of the garlic fries. She had no one to share them with, but she'd think of Dylan, somewhere in this vast stadium, as she ate them.

Food in hand, she made her way through the crowds to the tunnel with her section number above it. Hawkers brushed elbows with fans as they made their way up and down the stairs, shouting their snacks and drinks and stopping all forward progress as they made a sale. A typical football game, but times about a million with an excitement—a tension—absolutely unlike anything she'd ever experienced before.

With only a few more rows to go, her feet stuttered beneath her. There, below her and a couple of seats in, she recognized a familiar Raptors jersey, glittering script covering the W across the shoulders, and, to the right, a head of brown hair as dear to her as Gen's fluffy black fur.

And then an empty seat.

“Hey, c’mon, keep moving.”

The person behind her gave her a bump, propelling her forward a few more steps. Even with their row, she froze, wondering if she had time to ease back and away before they noticed her.

She crowded the knees of the person at the end, letting the obnoxious pusher past, then turned, foot hitting the first step. She’d climb back up to the last tunnel and watch from there.

“Abby?” Dylan jumped to his feet, threw his arms out and leapt over the three people between them before she could edge her way against the flow of traffic. “Abby, you came!”

“Oof. Easy, there, Dylan. I’m going to drop something.”

“You brought me fries.” He turned to Kelly, who swiped at her eyes. “Look, she brought me fries.”

“C’mon Dylan, let’s go sit down, okay?” Abby nudged him along with her knee, smiling an apology at the people whose space they’d invaded.

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“Okay, okay, but wait.” He dove beneath his seat and emerged again, triumphant. He offered her a small plate of fries. Then, his voice dropped. “I... I wasn’t sure if you’d come, but, if you did, I didn’t want to forget...”

“Oh, Dylan.” Abby dropped to her knees before the boy and pulled him into a tight hug.

His body shivered against hers, and a small sniffle warned her to keep holding on. Knowing how much a young boy wouldn’t want to be caught crying, she waited until he moved away before releasing him.

No more tears, she reminded herself, then repeated it again, when Kelly fanned her face.

“You’re going to ruin my makeup.”

Abby’s eyes burned as she laughed. “I promise if I ruin yours, I’ll ruin mine, too, so we’ll match.”

Kelly barked a sound, half-sob, half-laugh, then waved Abby over. “Come here, you. It’s been too long.”

“Abby! Abby look.”

Dylan jumped up and down and gestured at the field. Squinting, Abby followed his jouncing finger. On the sideline, now full of players in their signature black jerseys with silver sleeve-stripes, Scott stared straight back up at them, identifiable at this

distance only by his number and familiar dark hair.

He held his hand high, fingers signing I love you.

“Is she there?”

Scott shaded his eyes and focused, but the seething crowd kept shifting, blocking his view, changing his perception. “I think so, but... I’m not sure.”

“Would it change the way you played if she wasn’t?”

Scott scowled at his best friend.

“Then pretend she is.”

Nodding, Scott turned and scooped up a practice ball. He never imagined the normalcy of such an action. That, in itself, lent a surreal, dream-like air to the moment. They were in the Super Bowl, and yet, like the start of any other game, he stood on the sidelines lobbing throws into the net.

The coaches called for a final huddle before the National Anthem, then the team captains strode onto the field for the call, Scott among them.

For the first time, Scott allowed the weight of the moment to land as the referee, via a microphone echoing through the stadium above them, described the fancy gold coin he would toss.

“Visiting team will make the call.” The ref jutted his chin toward Scott and the other Raptors.

“Heads,” came a deep voice from beside him, and Scott nodded. They’d decided

ahead of time who would call, and what he'd choose.

The ref flipped the coin into the air, and they all gathered close, craning for a glimpse before he announced the result. "Toss is tails. Eagles choose to receive."

Scott jogged back to the sideline, shaking his head. It doesn't matter. It's the coin toss. Don't get superstitious now.

"Okay, boys," Coach shouted as he clapped his hands. "Let's go play the best damn sixty minutes of football of our lives."

The waiting had always been the worst.

Seeing the defense on the field, trusting their skills, staying warm until he could earn his salary; it used to drive him crazy. Older, now, more seasoned, with an arsenal of tools to manage the nerves, he almost convinced himself this was any other game. Almost, but not quite.

Dropping to the bench, he let his head drift down between his shoulder blades and took several deep breaths.

In, two, three. Out, two, three, four, five... Calm body, calm mind.

He let the noise of the game wash over him, the defensive coordinator's voice as he sent men onto the field, pulled others off, the roar of the crowd behind him, the hum of the players around him...

"Edwards, let's go."

Scott's head snapped up.

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The Eagles were in the red zone, pushing hard.

Scott stood, tossed a ball, shook out his arms, bounced on his toes.

The Eagles scored. First blood.

He snapped his helmet on, turned to his offensive line. His throat closed over the rallying speech he'd planned. Coughing once, he let the silence of their small circle spool out, then said, "Now, it's our turn."

They had to answer big. Derek Baldwin and the Eagles' offense had bled over six minutes off the clock with their drive. Scott eyed the defensive lineup, ran through the play in his head, called the snap. He dropped back, and, with a quick flick of his wrist, sent the ball six yards up the middle to Finn.

Jogging to the line, he counted, then handed the ball off, pushing ahead for another three.

Third and one. His eyes flitted over the defense again and something in the pit of his stomach turned over. A sixth sense he'd learned to rely on, to trust. They knew the play. He paused, weighed the risk, then killed the option. His line shifted, automatically lining up for the backup play.

"One, two." The fullback took the ball and dove forward while Scott twisted away and checked high, trying to fool the Eagles defense. Expecting the throw, they took the bait, and a moment later, the Raptors had the first down.

Finding his rhythm, Scott and the Raptors marched the ball down the field. A quick pass here, a little run there, third and a few. He dropped back deep. Waited, feet planted. The offensive line bought the time he needed and then Scott reeled it back and let go. The football sailed down the field toward Highcastle, two steps ahead of his defender, and slid into his outstretched arms. Head down, running with every ounce of power, Jordan crossed the touchdown line and leapt into the air.

“Asked and answered,” Scott hollered, racing down the field after his receiver. “Asked. And. Answered!”

Thirty-Seven

THE SECONDS PASSED in fits and starts. Each one stretched out into minutes at a time, then condensed and flashed past. They fought and pushed, held the line, defended the end zone.

At half-time, Scott didn’t even have the energy or focus to wonder if Dylan and Abby were enjoying the show. He stripped down, used the bathroom, and gulped a half bottle of Gatorade.

Then, the coaches called the new plays, adjustments to the Eagles on both offense and defense. Back to the field. So much noise. The flash of a million cameras.

Distracted by the crowd, the lights, the sheer exhilaration of playing in the game of his life, Scott lost focus for a moment.

The defense shifted.

Pulling back his arm, Scott loosed the ball, noticing the corner back cutting across the route a moment too late. Even as the ball left his fingertips and sailed over the offensive line, a green jersey leapt into the air, cutting off Finn. The ball slid right

into his outstretched hands.

“No.” Scott fisted his hand and beat the air, then dropped his head.

The Eagles had the ball at the forty and he had no one to blame but himself.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” the offensive coordinator, Jeff Rigby, told him, but neither of them believed the lie. Scott kicked the grass with his toe, then flopped onto the bench, head in his hands.

“Hey,” Finn nudged his foot. “It happens. Don’t lose it, now.”

Scott sat back. “I know. But it was a stupid...”

“I hear ya.”

“So, let’s get back out there and make it up.”

They did, but it left them trailing as the game devolved into a shoot-out.

The seconds bled away, an interminable countdown. Baldwin, the Eagles’ quarterback, played the head-game to perfection, expertly spooling the clock.

Powerless as the Eagles made their slow but methodical way down the field, Scott sat on the bench and stewed. The Raptor defense never gave up the big plays, but Baldwin, his runners, and his receivers took the field yard by yard, and they hemorrhaged time while they did it.

Jeff sat beside him; tablet strapped to his hand. “Don’t panic, we’re gonna get it back, and even if they go all the way, it’ll be a three-point game.”

Scott understood the subtext: Get the touchdown if you can; but if not, field goal range is enough.

The Eagles scored, then Baldwin lined up under center again. Scott lurched to his feet, horror lodging deep in his gut, as realization rippled through the Raptors' sideline like the whisper of a discordant violin.

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“They’re going for the two-point conversion.”

The Eagles wanted to win, hoping to lock up the victory with an extra point. If they got it, the Raptors would have to score a touchdown; there would be no field goal, no tie, no overtime.

Baldwin threw. His favorite receiver caught. Four quick steps.

The crowd went wild.

Scott closed his eyes, forced himself to breathe, played out the rest of the game in his mind. Enough time for one or two more plays before the two-minute warning, then a long drive down the field for a touchdown. No interceptions. No letting the defense stop them.

He jogged onto the field, checked the defensive line-up, settled under center.

Four yards.

Two more.

The whistle blew for the two-minute warning.

Huddled together, Scott twitched and fidgeted as the short break wound down. His body, his brain, his very being needed to be on the field, throwing the ball, scoring those points.

Third down and four still to go.

Scott took the snap, dropped back, let the line in front of him slide as Finn ran the length from left to right. Flicking the ball to his best friend, Finn tucked it under his arm and took the two long strides they needed for the first before taking a hit that laid him out backwards.

He stood, shaking it off, and jogged back to the huddle.

Scott glanced at the clock, still ticking down.

“Get it out of bounds.”

Heads nodded around him.

He called the play.

Incomplete.

They set again.

The running back rushed for two.

They set again.

The Eagles blitzed, the outside linebacker slipping between the Raptors’ tight end and tackle.

His breadth took up the entirety of Scott’s vision. Tucking the ball and twisting to the right, he cradled it close as he hit the ground. It would be a loss, and he took it, as well as the pounding that went with it, knowing if he held on, at least the Eagles

wouldn't get a fumble recovery.

Abby gasped as Scott went to the ground, the massive Eagles linebacker riding him into the turf. He laid there a moment and Abby leapt to her feet, fear icing through her veins.

Her breath sped, but she swallowed back her fear, sinking into the seat beside Dylan and squeezing the hand he automatically slipped into hers.

Then, Scott pushed himself up again, shook his head, and jogged back into the huddle.

"He's okay."

Dylan nodded, but his eyes crinkled, and his lips turned down.

She ran her thumb over his cheek. "Hey, it's okay. He's fine."

"Yeah, but now it's third and..." His eyes flicked over the field. "Long. Really long."

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Abby released his hand and wrapped her arm around his shoulders, pulling him into her side. “I know. But he’s beaten longer odds than this.”

She wasn’t talking about football, and Dylan understood. He smiled. “Yeah, he has, hasn’t he?”

She kept her arm around him as Scott and the huddle broke apart.

They’d throw.

No one could pick up eighteen yards in a single play without throwing.

And the Eagles were ready.

Scott took the snap. The line held. They had to, at least long enough for the receivers to get into first down range.

Scott dropped back. Waited. Finn and Highcastle broke right, forcing the safety to follow both of them, but then Highcastle dropped his head and poured on the speed, outdistancing the defender as he waited the split second to ensure the corner back would cover Finn.

Scott planted his feet.

The line broke.

His arm reeled back.

The defensive end lurched toward him.

The ball sailed over the Eagles line as it forced its way through the offense. One, lone hand reached up to tip it, but the ball sailed over his outstretched fingers.

The defensive end hit Scott full in the chest, bearing both of them to the ground, but his helmeted head followed the ball.

Abby's heart leapt into her throat as Scott took the hit—the second in a row—but ignored it. Only the ball mattered as it spiraled through the air.

Abby's gaze, too, locked on the ball as it hung like an ornament in the sky, floating there for longer than physics could ever allow.

Highcastle's legs churned.

Beside her, Kelly mumbled, almost praying, "Come on, Jordan. Come on."

The ball dropped in a long, slow arc.

Scott shoved the defender off him and leapt to his feet.

Seconds ticked past.

Highcastle turned his head, reached long, and Scott's perfect spiral slid into his outstretched hands.

The stadium exploded as the rookie, his forward momentum barely slowed by the catch, ran the last few yards.

"They did it, they did it!" She couldn't hear herself think, couldn't hear the words

Dylan chanted in her ear, couldn't hear the scream coming from Kelly's throat.

Scott turned and stared straight at them. He pointed.

This one's for you.

It didn't matter who he pointed to: Dylan, herself, the fans. He'd done it for all of them, and they'd share his excitement, howling it back to him, a war cry of victory.

Then, Abby's breath froze in her lungs.

There were still fifty-five seconds left to play.

By the time the Eagles took the field after the extra point and the kickoff, the clock had only ticked down to fifty seconds.

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The Eagles began their march down the field, and time itself seemed to bend to their will. No stress, no hurry, no worry, only the slow, methodical game of a team used to winning.

“Come on, defense, come on,” she found herself chanting over and over. “Come on, guys. Come on.”

Beyond Dylan, Kelly spoke the same litany. “Big stop here, boys. Big stop.”

But it didn’t matter. Like tissue paper, Baldwin and his offense ripped through their line again and again. They didn’t want the field goal, the tie, the overtime. They wanted the win.

Finally, the clock caught up with them. Twenty seconds and twenty yards to go. Short pass and out. Sixteen seconds and fifteen yards. Quick rush, timeout called. Nine seconds and eleven yards to go.

The Raptors took in the offensive line, then called their own timeout.

Finally, both sides set again.

Baldwin dropped back, waited. Nowhere to go. He threw it away. Incomplete.

Four seconds.

The Eagles set and the Raptors used their last timeout.

Abby's hands shook. She couldn't imagine being Scott, on the sideline, powerless as this played out moment by moment, yard by yard, and knowing he could do nothing but hope.

Baldwin went under center. Dropped back again. Hesitated.

"No," Abby screamed, seeing the receiver come across the end zone, the defender two steps behind, at the same moment the Eagles' quarterback did.

Baldwin's wrist flicked and Abby, throat raw and voice gone, silently screeched in defiance of the imminent defeat.

A flash of silver.

Every fan in the stadium paused as time stood still.

A beat of supernatural silence.

Shock, awe, stunned confusion.

Then, like a tsunami, a wall of sound.

"Interception," Dylan hollered in Abby's ear.

"It's over?" She couldn't believe it. Waited, sure a flag would come, or a challenge, or...

But Dylan had called the interception correctly. A goal-line interception in the biggest game of the year. And the Raptors were victorious!

Thirty-Eight

“HEY SCOTT, IT’S time.” Abby’s spoke slowly, steadying her voice with every word. She’d been practicing until she could say them with the same calm she could assess a fibrillating heart or a collapsed lung. Practicing hope instead of despair. Her new therapist called her a badass. She wasn’t sure she believed her.

“When?”

“She had her bloodwork on Monday. Dr. Singh says the results are in and they’re ready to meet with us. Will you...” Her voice cracked, but she took a deep breath and tried again. “Will you come?”

“I can pick Dylan up at three, unless you need us there sooner?”

They’d talked a lot in the last several weeks about the future, Gen’s and theirs. When the Raptors won the Super Bowl, the players’ families had rushed the field and, one hand gripped in Dylan’s, the other sleeve caught in Kelly’s unrelenting grasp, she’d been dragged along.

Scott had reached for his son, tossed him into the air, and, together, they’d screamed in victory. The moment had been caught by a photographer and immortalized on the front page of every major news outlet in the country.

Abby, not sure she even belonged there, had allowed the momentum of the crowd to carry them away, but Dylan tugged at his dad’s sleeve and dragged his ear down so he could shout into it. A moment later, Scott’s head jerked up and his eyes locked with hers.

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Even as the amoeba of people moved between and around them, he reached out, and, like a lodestone, she found herself responding.

“You came.” He had to shout over the melee.

Mute, Abby nodded. Her throat had closed over the words she wanted to say, but this wasn’t the time or place for them, anyway. Instead, she held up her hand, index finger, pinky, and thumb extended. I love you.

Taking her hand in his, he’d gathered it close until it rested against his chest. Dylan still on his hip, eyes shining, he’d mouthed the words she couldn’t say. I love you, too.

Then, sweaty, disgusting, and sticky from the Gatorade that had splashed all over the players as they dumped it on their coach, he’d crushed her to him and refused to let go.

The words had come later: apologies from both of them, shared joy over the outcome of the custody battle and the game. Harder words, too: Abby’s uncertainty for Gen, her inability to hope, the mistruths she believed about herself and about everyone around her, her fear of being alone again.

Since then, Abby had worked hard to change. Going back to therapy had been only the first step; she’d applied for a business license to start a therapy dog school—no matter what happened with Gen; she’d attended Dylan’s most recent concert and sat in the front row, giving him a huge bouquet of yellow roses when he finished; she’d even called her parents.

The road ahead of her wouldn't be easy or quick, but for Scott, for Dylan, and most importantly, for herself, she'd walk it.

"Scott, are you sure?"

She'd been hesitant to have Dylan in the room when they got Gen's test results. What if the treatment hadn't worked? What if she had only days or weeks left with Gen? What if she'd misunderstood the control and Gen had never had any treatment at all? What if she lost it in front of Dylan? What if she scared him? Abby shook her head, forcing the swirling thoughts away.

Quiet, Tom. I won't believe you.

Her therapist had recommended naming the intrusive, negative thoughts, so she could address them directly. Even if she could never tell the real Tom to shut his trap, she got to do it inside her head a dozen times a day. It was, indeed, therapeutic, especially after the hospital rumor mill churned up the juicy tidbit that it had been Tom Cunningham who'd spoken to *The Charleston Herald*, at the behest and payment of some psychologist from New York.

How Dr. Ferndale had dug up Abby's contentious past with Tom escaped both her and Scott, but rumor soon swirled again, confirming his new supervisor, Dr. Edgerick, had filed a disciplinary warning for workplace gossip and undermining the reputation of the hospital in public. Abby was a colleague, after all, even if she wasn't a doctor.

"Abby, Dylan loves Gen," Scott said gently. "We've talked about this."

They had, the two of them and then with Dylan, as well, and Abby had to trust Scott would protect his son, even when she doubted herself.

“Alright. See you soon.”

“I love you, Abby. You won’t be alone, okay?”

“Okay.”

After she hung up, she pulled Gen into her arms and hugged the dog. “No matter what, girl, I’m here for you.”

She whispered the promise but would keep it with every fiber of her being.

If the treatment didn’t work, she’d make sure her dog had the best, most spoiled life of any dog ever. They’d visit the kids, eat cheeseburgers, and swim in Scott and Dylan’s pool every day. If it did, they’d still go visit the kids, and she’d tell them about how Gen, too, had fought a battle, and she’d beaten cancer, so they could, as well.

Either way, Abby swore she would value every day she had with Gen, whether she had only a little time or a lot.

And soon, there would be another puppy to train. Maybe two.

Abby had met with her bank and her accountant in the weeks since Scott’s victory and transferred some of her savings into a new business account. She’d applied to the city for a business license and filed her non-profit business plan with the IRS. Now, she needed to find the right litter.

Abby wondered if Gen would like having a new puppy around the house. Would she want to play with it, or would she be annoyed and ignore it? She supposed, as long as it didn’t compete with her attention from Dylan, Gen would probably be fine. She ran her nails over Gen’s delicate head and rubbed her ears between her fingers. They’d

come a long way from a gawky puppy and a woman with nothing more than a few shattered pieces of her heart left to give.

Whatever came next, they'd figure that out, too.

Dr. Singh entered the small exam room and took Abby's hand, pressing it between both of his, then nodding as she introduced him to Scott and Dylan.

Gen, stretched lazily on the exam table, thumped her tail at Dylan's name.

"Congratulations on your win, Mr. Edwards. Very exciting for all of us."

Scott nodded.

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Dr. Singh turned to Gen.

“Beautiful lady,” the doctor greeted the dog, scratching her under the chin. “Shall we give your Mama the good news, darling?”

Abby’s fingers, twined together, spasmed. “Good news?”

Dr. Singh smiled, and Abby’s heart leapt with hope. Surely, he wouldn’t have said those words, wouldn’t have that expression, if Gen were still dying.

Scott moved closer, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, and Dylan’s hand crept toward her.

Unwinding her fingers, she took it.

His small voice filled the room. “Do you mean Gen’s going to be okay?”

Dr. Singh nodded. “She is. As you may have already guessed, we included Gen in the T-cell treatment group of our study. We finished her course of treatment, an abbreviated version of chemotherapy combined with the T-cell adaptation injections, rather than chemotherapy alone. Because she presented initially with stage II symptoms and B-cell lymphoma, it was always likely she’d have a high chance of responding positively to the treatment. As of right now, according to her lab work, she is in full remission.”

A choked sob wrenched itself from deep within Abby, and her shoulders shook, but she pressed her lips together.

No more crying.

Scott pulled her into his side and Dylan squeezed her hand.

A moment later, she straightened and turned to Gen. Ruffling her ears, she pressed her forehead to the dog's.

“You did it, girl.” She whispered the words, and Gen's tail thumped the table again. “You beat it. You're going to be okay.”

The dog snuffled Abby's ear, then gently took her hair in her mouth and tugged, as if to say, Of course I did. I learned how to be a fighter from Liam.

Dylan, too, threw his arms around Gen. “She's going to be okay? She's not going to die?”

Scott laid one hand on Dylan's shoulder. The other stroked Gen's spine. “She's going to be okay.”

Tears flooded Abby's eyes at the words, but she blinked them away. Turning back to Dr. Singh, she threw her arms around him. “Thank you!”

The veterinarian cleared his throat and pushed his glasses back up his nose. “Of course, Ms. Barclay. We'll want to see Gen again in a month and continue to monitor her over the next year – all things we've already discussed. But, between you and I, I believe there's a good chance she'll live a full, long life.”

Dylan laid his head against Gen's stomach, arm encircling her, and Abby smiled.

“The fullest.”

Epilogue

“THIS ONE.” DYLAN sat cross-legged in an eight-sided pen full of wiggling Labrador puppies.

“Are you sure? I thought you wanted a boy.”

Dylan cradled the little yellow female under his chin, crooning to her as she waved paws far too big for her tiny body.

“No, this is the one.” He spoke firmly, confidently.

Scott glanced at Abby, who raised her eyebrows and gave the slightest nod. “Okay, then. That’s the one.”

The puppy licked Dylan’s chin, eliciting a giggle before he caught himself. “No, ma’am. No licking.”

He tugged her tiny, black collar, jingling her new ID, 02 engraved on the back and Abby’s logo stamped on the front. He glanced up at Abby, checking if he’d done it right.

“Good job.” She smiled down at him. “It will take a long time, and a lot of work on your part, but I think she’ll make a great therapy dog, someday.”

Beside her, Gen’s tail thumped the floor as three more puppies tumbled over her.

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The mother had been skeptical of a strange dog during the first encounter, but when Gen had laid nicely outside the pen and gently touched noses with her pups, eyes still closed and noses rooting at the stray tufts of fur poking through the pen bars, she seemed to relent.

This time, Gen had followed them into the midst of the rough and tumble pups, now old enough to leave their mother, and seemed content to let them explore, so long as they didn't try to nurse.

Abby slipped a hand into her bag and drew out the first of a pair of tiny, red vests. She turned it over in her hands, nails scraping the raised, embroidered letters—Genesis Therapy Dogs: Puppy in Training—and handed it to Dylan. The other, she slipped over the head of a little black male, the one she'd chosen when he'd pranced up to Gen, confident as anything, and baited her with a length of tug rope.

She snuggled the male against her cheek, the rough fiber of his collar catching her skin, the tag tinkling against her earring. Like his sister's, the front had Abby's new logo stamped and the back had his ID number: 109. Scott's Super Bowl-winning, MVP-earning, best he'd ever done quarterback rating.

Gen, half on her side with two other puppies still crawling all over her, stretched her head up to lick his nose.

Abby smiled as the puppy huffed a sneeze. "Hi, Raptor. Welcome to the family."

Scott crouched beside his son and scratched the female under the chin. "What will you name yours?"

The puppy turned in Dylan's lap, flopped down, and her eyes drifted closed. A deep sigh heaved through her body as she tucked her nose under Dylan's elbow.

"I think I'll name her Rêve. My teacher says it's French for dream, and she's my dream." His eyes shone with happiness as he gazed up at Abby, his fingers drifting down the soft fur along her spine. "Is that okay, Mom?"

Abby twisted the gold band on her finger. "I think it's perfect."