In Your Eyes

by mcmachine

Summary

The past has a cruel way of repeating itself. As Jackson and April fly home from their emotional journey in Montana, they are reminded of how cruel it can really be as their plane goes down. Sometimes the road after is the hardest.
Chapter 1

JACKSON

You are a good father. You took us both in. You took care of her when I couldn't. And you haven't stopped taking of either of us since. Even with everything that's happened between us. You never bailed, and he couldn't do that.

The words that April had spoken to me this morning played through my head again.

Even after everything that had occurred between the two of us, even recently with the past that we had gotten into about her taking up for the position as interim head of general, she had never given up on me. She had never lost faith in who I was as a person. I'd said things to her that wasn't fair, and perhaps I had lost my faith in her, but faith was something that she had always been better at than me. She managed to keep it no matter what else was happening. That was a part of who she was, how she worked. I had been ungrateful.

Being a man of my word was something that I had prided myself in, once. I knew that I wasn't my father. Being able to face him after years of wondering and questioning had proven that.

But April had been there to push me along. I don't know if I would have been able to really confront him without her strength and encouragement. She put me as a whole before the pettiness that had occurred in the last weeks. She was looking out for me, taking care of me. Just like she had said I had done for her. I hoped that she gave herself enough credit because I hadn't.

Maybe she was giving me too much credit, though. She had so much faith in me and especially in the past few weeks with the whole Minnick debacle, I had been a dick to her. I regretted it now. Maybe I had made it obvious to her last night, I'd been able to apologize when buried between her legs and leave apologetic kisses along the slope of her neck and the curve of her spine. It was possible that she already knew. She was good at picking up on the things that I didn't say.

She shouldn't have had to, though. I could realize that now.

My mom's a wonderful grandmother, and you seem like a decent guy. But you're not a grandfather. You're not my father. And I figure, when you have a kid, you're making a promise. And I don't break my promises. That's the real difference between you and me.

The words spoken out loud to my father echoed through my head once more as I stepped outside of the diner, cold air instantly chilling the heat of anger that had been ignited.

April was standing outside waiting for me, toeing some of the snow on the ground. She looked up after a moment, seeming to sense my presence, and offered me a small smile. Her stare was intensely trained on my face, trying to get answers out of me before I could open my mouth.

"How did it go?" She asked, looking up at me expectantly.

"I said what I needed to," I let out a breath immediately after the words as my gaze rested on her. I wasn't him and I wasn't ever going to be him. Maybe I was divorced, but I still loved April, and I loved Harriet. Nothing would take me from them.

"Good. I'm glad." Her words were genuine, I knew that. "Should we head to the airport?" She glanced down at her watch as she asked and I nodded my head. Now, there was nothing left for me here.
April let there be some quiet between us in the car ride over to the airstrip, and for that, I'm grateful. Even if everything had been let out to my father, there were still thoughts playing through my mind. I would never understand what he did. Having Harriet in my life, and April, only made me even more apprehensive toward that decision of his. I loved them immensely. Both of them. In many ways, the divorce between April and I hadn't changed that. Harriet had only reminded me of the love that was still there between us, as had this trip.

"I got this." I grabbed her bag from the trunk of the car before she could, offering a small smile. But I only had to carry it for a moment before one off the attendants grabbed it to load it on the plane. "After you," I motioned her up the stairs of the plane.

"So do we get to have champagne this time?" April asked once she was seated across from me.

"Yeah," I chuckled. "Sure, whatever you want."

Each of us was served with a glass of champagne by Katie before we take off. I know that it's her favorite brand. Once upon a time, I had planned on us to take this very jet to go on some kind of honeymoon somewhere, the one that we had never gotten after our hitched wedding. Malibu, Hawaii, Nassau, Barbados. Where didn't matter as long as it was with her.

That had been during simpler times. Before Samuel.

I missed those days. Not just because things had been easier in all aspects of life before Samuel had come and gone, but because she had been my person. We had fallen apart but managed to grow closer again since she had moved in with me after giving birth to Harriet. She'd barely tried to move out once, and I was so glad that she hadn't. It had given us the chance to be with one another again, in one form or another. With her, something was better than nothing.

There were so many things that I had never said and done that I regretted now. I loved her. She made me happy, she made me a better person. Those were all things that she deserved to hear, but now, it seemed like it was too late.

Often I had to wonder whether it was too late for else. I felt like it was impossible for that. If that were true, she would have moved out when the opportunity had arisen the first place. We still lived together like a married couple, even though we were sleeping in different beds. Or at least, we had been prior to last night. I didn't know what her plans for the future were. I didn't really know what mine was, either. But all of yesterday, the surgery and the sex, it had been a reminder that no matter where we were or who we were to each other, it just mattered that we had one another at our side.

She was still my best friend – still my soulmate, my everything.

There was nothing that seemed capable of changing that. Even if we were divorced, even when we had fought like cats and dogs, she was still somehow my other half. We molded together. Maybe we had brought out the worst in one another sometimes, but we had brought out the best, too. Looking at her was a reminder that I could never stop loving her, no matter what. Maybe now, I would just have to love her silently. I couldn't ruin her life again.

"Harriet's going to be so happy to see us again," April commented, pushing up the window on the jet so she could see the clouds as we passed through them and ascended. "We've never been away from her for this long."

"I know," I nodded my head. "I missed her. It's weird to not be woken up in the middle of the night by her."
She laughed. "Yeah," she agreed. "I missed her too. So much."

I stared at her a moment, just watching.

"I'm glad that you came with me, April," I admitted after a moment of watching her, bottom lip rolling into my mouth. "I know that I didn't act like it at first and I've been a jerk to you the past few days, but… I'm really glad that you were here for this. There's not anyone else that I would have wanted by my side the past few days." I leaned forward just a bit, offering my hand to her.

"I'm glad that I could be here for you, Jackson." The smile that filled April's lips was sincere. Anyone could see that. "I don't know what you said to him and I don't need to know but whatever it was… it brought you some peace. I can see that." She reached forward and took my hand.

Turbulence shook the jet for a moment, and I took a slight pause before speaking again.

"It did," I breathed out, glancing out the window that she had opened up. "And it made me want to apologize to you, April. I know that you've said I've been there for you, but that's not as true as it should be. The past few weeks… I mean, I've known about my dad being there for them. And I guess that's why I reacted the way I did. You did what Bailey asked you to and all I saw was another person in my life going back on their word." I tried to explain.

The plane gave another unsteady shake around us and I let out a sigh. I didn't mind flying, for the most part. It'd been a little harder after losing Mark and Lexie, but I knew the chances of getting in a car crash were much better than that happening.

"I wish that you would have told me sooner," April murmured. "I would have been there for you."

"I believe that." She was just that kind of a person. "I just wasn't ready to tell anyone about it." Honestly, if she hadn't been here… no one would have found out. None of it was a conversation that I would have had with Meredith. She would have prescribed something negative, not pushed me into going and confronting him. Then there would have been no point in talking to anyone about it.

"That's okay." She squeezed my hand tightly for a moment.

The plane shook around us once again and I let out a sigh. It was odd. The sky around us with cloudy but no storm system was in sight. Flying wasn't normally a big deal to me. It had been difficult to get on a plane the first time after the crash had gone down, even though I hadn't been on it. Mostly, it was hard to push away the overwhelming thoughts about all of them.

"Thinking about Mark?" She asked.

Mindreader.

"Yeah," I nodded. I always did when I flew. His memory stuck with me clearly. "Hard not to, especially when the plane shakes like that." I shrugged a shoulder.

"I think of him and Lexie too," she admitted. "I used to think that, you know, if things had been different… Lexie and I would have been good friends, kind of like you and Mark were. We would have gone on double dates together and our kids would have been best friends."

I couldn't help but smile fondly at the thought. It hadn't crossed my mind before, but it was a nice one. Being with her, Mark with Lexie, the four of us happy in a way that we all deserved but had never quite gotten. All of us were good people, I thought. Maybe not as religious and devout as April, but still good. Surely we deserved something better than the short end of the stick that we
had all received in our love lives, and for them, life itself.

"Would have been nice," I agreed with a small nod. "I wish he and Lexie had a chance."

April nodded sympathetically. I knew she hadn't been as close to either of them as I had been, that Lexie had occasionally been cruel to her with some of the bullyings in the same way that the rest of us had been. That was all the past now.

"Harriet will have a lot of friends, I'm sure. She must have gotten that popular gene from you, based on what the ladies in daycare say." She spoke. I let out a laugh, amused.

"Guilty as charged," I agreed.

When the plane shook again, I stiffened and noticed as April shifted in her seat uneasily, holding onto the armrest a little tighter. I was starting to get a bit uncomfortable too. Katie hadn't said anything, nor had the pilot over the intercom. I tightened the seat belt resting across my lap, uncrossing my legs and sitting up a little straighter.

"Are you alright?" I asked, eyes shifting over her.

"Yeah. I guess it's just making me a little uneasy too," April murmured. "At least it's not a long flight."

"Right." I wet my lips. "It's short."

It was tempting to fall quiet and try to ignore the ruckus that the plane was making. I kept my mouth shut. The plane dropped suddenly – how far, I'm not sure, but it's enough to jostle the both of us. April let out a slight yelp and I clutched onto the side of my seat, gritting my teeth.

"Still okay?" I looked at her.

She nodded, though she certainly looked far from it.

"I'm sure it's just some normal turbulence." I tried to reassure her.

Despite my words, the plane shook again. Looking out of the window, I could see us rollicking back and forth. We were still high in the sky, the only thing that I could see below us being a blur of green. No cities, no houses, nothing. This was too similar. It couldn't be happening.

The sound of an explosion popped my eardrums and we both flinched, far louder than that of a car backfiring. the smell of something burning followed as the plane jolted this time, and I don't look out the window again. I don't want to see what's happening this time.

"Jackson." I could hear the panic in April's voice as she said my name.

"We're going to be just fine," I stated firmly.

I didn't know if it was true. I wanted it to be true, desperately. The last thing I wanted was for things to fall apart when it seemed like the two of us might have finally started down the same path again, when we'd gotten along for the first time in weeks and fallen in bed together like it was the first time all over again. This time, we had so much more to get back to. We had Harriet. There was no way that anything could happen to either of us. Our daughter needed both of us.

If it had been safer, I would have gotten up and found Katie or knocked on the pilot's door to try and figure out what exactly was going on. But now that seemed like a poor idea. Too little, too late.
"Jackson--" April repeated my name with more alarm in her voice than before.

"Hey, hey, don't look out the window, okay? Look at me, April. Look right here." Maybe if I could calm her down, then I would be able to calm down some of the other thoughts that were going on in my head. Did Mark and the others know it was crashing before it was too late?

The cabin was shaking violently, the turbulence was unbelievably strong. April's knuckles had turned white with how tightly she was holding onto her seat. I wanted to reach out and hold one of her hands, pull her into my lab, but she was too far away and it was safer for us to remain seated, buckled. The last thing I would have wanted was for her to get out of her seat right now.

"We're going to be alright, okay? You've been through worse than this. You had a c-section on a kitchen table at Meredith's house. You were in a war zone. You can survive anything. You're April Kepner." I encouraged her, taking a deep breath.

"I'm scared," she whispered. I don't know if she meant for me to hear it.

"It's okay," I repeated. "But right now, we need to do the brace position, okay? Bend over. Hands over your head." There may not have been luggage to fall on us, but it was still for the best.

I waited until she had assumed the position before leaning forward into it myself, taking a deep breath. I knew that right now, she had to be praying inside of her head. That was the natural thing for any Christian to do in her position. I didn't believe in God – but if he was somehow out there despite my nonchalance on the matter, I hope that he cared enough to be willing to listen to April. I couldn't imagine a world without her in it. The world needed people like her. Harriet certainly needed a mother like her.

The plane slammed down, bounced up, came back down on to its nose and began to cartwheel.

I couldn't hold the brace position and I bounced upright with my arms over my head. Despite efforts, I can't keep conscious of everything going around. The noise was vicious madness on my eardrums and the only peace from it is when blackness washed over me.

There's silence when I finally begin to take in my surroundings again. I'm upside down, hanging in a contortion from the seatbelt was the only thing to keep me from landing on my head and cracking it open on the ceiling of the plane. There was smoke and something was still burning – maybe the fuel tank, maybe something else.

Plane crashes were always something that got media attention. When the plane with Mark, Lexie, and everyone else had gone down, it had been covering all of the news outlets for days, obsessively so. Reporters had come to the hospital to berate Hunt and anyone else that they could get their hands on to try and find out more about it, as if any of us would have any idea what had been wrong. When they had finally been found, it had been covered then, too. They called it a miracle that only one had died. When Mark had finally weeks later, barely a word had been spoken about him.

What would they say about us?

Divorced couple orphans their child after their private jet crashed.

Maybe they would speculate we were still together despite the divorce. Perhaps they would go and talk to my father. That would have infuriated Mom.

It would make the news. Even if it was a private jet instead of a commercialized airline company like Delta or United, I was sure that it would make the news one way or another. The Avery
Foundation would be all over it, trying to control every detail of what was and wasn't released. I was sure that both of our faces would be released and our lives, together and separately, would be analyzed for a public display. Privacy would be gone.

"April?" I tried to test my voice. I don't know if any words came out.

It ached to take a deep breath but I do it anyway before looking over to my left. She wasn't there. I didn't see anyone. The plane had split open at some point after impact. But she should have been close to me. She should have.

Preparing myself to wince, I undo my seatbelt and fall to the ceiling of the cabinet. I pause for a moment to try and assess myself. My knee was dislocated. Maybe something had hit my leg in the tumbling of the plane. It was something fixable even if it was going to hurt drastically to try and walk on it. It was possible that there was something around here that could be used as a makeshift crutch. It needed to be immobilized but I couldn't deal with that right now.

A knee relocation was usually done by emergency or orthopedic doctors. The kind of thing that April would have been perfect for right now, but I needed to fix it myself before I could get up and try to find her.

The pain is inevitable when I align my lower leg and pop the joint back into place, yelling out though unheard by anyone. Things likely were worse than that, but at least I could limp.

Having on my jacket was luck. It was still cold outside. I didn't know where we were – western Montana, Idaho, or maybe eastern Washington. All of them were possibilities. I hold onto everything that I can to try and get out of the plane, but every step is agonizing. Pain was a good thing. At least it meant that I could still feel. I knew Arizona hadn't been so lucky with her leg injury in a plane crash.

I tried to call out for April again but I don't hear my own voice.

In the distance, there was more smoke. Crawling would have been easier but I try to remain upright, using everything in my path as a crutch. Everything was still quiet. I don't understand how anything could have been. There should have been screaming, yelling. But maybe there hadn't been enough of us on board for that.

Maybe everyone else was dead.

No.

I couldn't think like that. I couldn't afford to. Maybe the captain was dead and maybe Katie was dead and even if there was bound to be some kind of survivor's guilt at some point, I could learn to live with that. But I could not handle the idea that April was dead. I had nearly lost her those months ago when she had brought Harriet into the world, and that had been traumatic enough. I'd heard her screams for months when I had slept, but now, it was like when the screams had fallen silent and I'd had to question whether or not my wife ex-wife had just died in my best friend's hands.

Time passed in a long lull as I tried to make my way closer. I was hoping to hear some kind of helicopter flying overhead, some sign that there were first responders looking for us. Some kind of signal had to be sent out – there had been enough time for that to be done by the captain, surely.

Eventually, I come to more of the carnage from the crash. Although there was still smoke there were no clear flames. Perhaps whatever had been there had managed to burn out already.
Squinting, I try to make out shapes beyond the bent metal.

Her hair was the first thing I saw.

When April and I had first met, I had never taken notice of her hair. Back then it had been dyed a dark brown to blend in and keep from drawing attention to herself, appearing as mousy as she acted back then. But the first day that she had walked into work with her hair a new shade of red, which I'd later learned was much closer to the natural hair color of both herself and her family, I had noticed. It was eye-catching and noteworthy. For the first time, I had looked at her as more of a woman than as just another coworker in the background. But this time, spotting it sprawled out across grass and dirt hurts.

Moving as quickly as I could physically manage to get to her, I fall down on my better knee. Her eyes were shut. Gently grabbing on her shoulder, I gave her a light shake, hoping that it would wake her up. I don't want to jar her around too much just in case there was something I couldn't see there.

I paused and let a few moments pass, taking an unsteady breath. Hazel eyes don't appear staring up at me like I want them too.

The sleeve of her black jacket was singed and burned off. Some of it had been burned down to her skin. This was the exact kind of injury that I would have treated in the hospital, but here, I didn't have anything I would have needed for it. April was the one who was creative with treatments.

It covered most of her forearm, nasty blisters already there. It was at least a second-degree burn, possibly a third degree. That would have meant numbness. Nerve damage. The kind of thing that would ruin a surgeon's career. Her arm looked slightly swollen and gently, I grabbed her hand, bending it and placing it over her heart so that her arm could be slightly elevated. This could be the reason that she was unconscious – shock. She wasn't particularly paler than usual, at least. Fittingly pale. That was something.

"C'mon, April." I don't know if the words are spoken or merely thought, but it doesn't matter.

Taking a deep breath, I pressed my fingers into her neck to make sure that there's a pulse there. It's a little weak but still there and consistent. Next, my ear hovered over her chest, listening to her breathing. It would have been easier with my stethoscope, but she seemed to be breathing fine on her own. Two good signs. It was possible she had just hit her head and was suffering from a concussion. Maybe she had been conscious earlier and blacked out now. There were a lot of questions but not many answers.

Unbuttoning her jacket felt wrong but I needed to make sure that she wasn't hurt. Cristina had only noticed the cardiac tamponade for Mark based on the bruising on his chest when he had been unconscious. I couldn't handle a repeat of that.

When I push up her shirt, there is some bruising. It's not high enough to indicate massive amounts of fluid around her heart, but it does indicate that there's some kind of internal bleeding. Palpating her flank only confirmed with the tenderness there. I was sure that if she ha been conscious, what I was doing would have at least made her uncomfortable, if not completely hurt.

God, don't let it be shattered.

Surgery was no longer routine for kidney lacerations and most patients with kidney injuries were treated with rest. But a shattered kidney without immediate intervention could be life-threatening. Urinomas, hypertension, infections… all of it was possible as long as we were stuck out here.
There wasn't much I could do hear. I fell back to sit on my ass, moving her arm once more to elevate it a little more and have it elevated higher. I placed my thumb down on her wrist, feeling for her pulse to check circulation. It was a little weaker than it had been at her neck, but it was still there. Things could be okay if we were found soon.

But that was a huge if.

It had taken them a week to find Mark, Lexie, Meredith, Cristina, and Derek. Some places disappeared without a trace, but it seemed unlikely that would happen to us. There was technology to send out distress signals – the plane was new, it wasn't outdated. Every aircraft had one. The FAA required it. But I knew there were things that could have prevented that from happening. I just had to hope that things were simple enough that this wouldn't be one of those cases.

"C'mon, April," I whispered to her once more, blinking back the tears in my eyes. My head ached and my knee was throbbing, my entire body was sore from being thrown around. I knew had some bruising from the seatbelt, at the very least. "C'mon."

I laid down next to her and waited.

Eventually, I passed out.
Chapter 2

APRIL

Everything felt wrong.

It wasn't pain. There was a deeper heaviness that seemed to keep me pulled down and seated inside of me, feeling as if I had sunken lower in my body than ever before. Pain wasn't the right word for it but it wasn't uncomfortable, either. It was like waking up from a long sleep. Not sure of what day or time it was, or even where I was.

The light seemed blinding as I opened up my eyes, a bright blur above me. Blinking a few times only offered a slight degree of clearness. My contacts weren't in. I knew I had put them in that morning, packing up everything else in my room. Jackson had spent the night in it which had made a complete mess of things and I'd been worried about getting everything in order. I put them in, packed up my makeup bag, and went with him to wait outside while he talked to his father. We went to the airstrip. We talked on the plane for what felt like the first time in forever. Maybe it was. There had been plenty that we hadn't talked about since the divorce, plenty that had been avoided in the past few months together. But then...

Oh.

Turbulence, I could remember. Jackson had told me to cover my head. I'd prayed and prayed to God that at least one of us would be okay, that we would be able to go home to Harriet and to hold her and love her, to sing to her and kiss her curls.

In the books, whenever a character woke up in the woods, they talked about the overwhelming amount of green that surrounded them and the freshness in the air. Instead, I'd experienced a nightmare. Black smoke had been the first thing in my vision and I'd been able to smell the way that the fuel must have burned metal and whatever else had been in its path. I'd been able to smell burnt human flesh. It was a nasty smell that I'd learned to have to adjust to with work, especially in traumas where I'd wanted to scrub in with Jackson. But this had been slightly different. It had been my own flesh. My arm.

As the thought comes back to me, I reflexively try to move my arm. Looking at my peripherals, I can see that it does move. It's wrapped up in gauze, as is my hand. I don't feel any pain in trying to move it, but I can't see if my fingers are moving or not. It's hard to specify anything lower than my elbow.

Moving my gaze was the first indication that I wasn't alone. Another figure sat near the end of my feet in white, hunched forward so I could just see the hair on top of his head.

Owen was at my bedside and bent forward with his hands clasped together, his forehead pressed against them. He was praying. His posture made it obvious. I couldn't help the small smile that it brought to my lips. I knew that he wasn't religious in the same way that I was, probably somewhere on the spectrum between non-denominational and agnostic. But he was waiting and praying for me. I wondered how long he had been there.

"Thank you," I murmured softly, alerting him to my awareness.

He jerked up with light wide eyes staring at me, looking more as if he had seen a ghost than heard my voice. It wasn't particularly loud or clear, but enough to let him know that I was conscious
again. I must have been unconscious for a few hours for him to look so worked up.

"Hey," Owen gave me a concerned look as he shifted closer to me. "Try not to move too much, okay? You've got some stitches in your abdomen that you don't want to mess with." He warned me. I gave a slight nod of my head, gaze dropping to what portion of my body I could see.

"Okay," I vocalized. "I guess that explains why I feel like I'm drowning into the bed."

My mentor cracked a small smile. "Yeah, you're on a pretty strong drug cocktail right now. I'll wean it some now that you're awake, though. We weren't sure how long you'd be unconscious."

"So much for breastfeeding," I mumbled, blinking a few times. "I'm at Grey Sloan?" I asked.

"Yeah," Owen nodded, pausing for what felt like an impossibly long moment. I already knew what he was about to ask me. "How much do you remember about what happened?"

I shut my eyes for a moment, thinking back. My nose twitched remembering the smell of my own flesh burnt once more, trying to suppress it. Smell memory was incredibly strong. It was hard to ignore. I was cold. I don't know if it was because of where the plane had gone down or maybe if it was blood loss, or something else – there were too many things that could have been pinpointed on that, but my memory isn't quite clear enough that I can label it for what it was. Things spun around me and my chest ached, unable to get quite enough air in, even breathing rapidly. Somewhere in the background, the accelerated beeping on my heart rate monitor pulled me out of becoming too lost in my own memories.

"Hey– hey, it's okay." Owen's hand was on my shoulder as he spoke. "You don't have to."


"You don't need to be," he shook his head as he spoke. "I went through this with Cristina and trust me, you don't need to apologize for whatever's going on inside of your head, okay?" It made sense that he already knew how to handle this. I barely nodded.

"Where's Harriet?" I asked. maybe I could just focus on one thing at a time, and she was guaranteed to bring me joy and relief.

"Arizona's been taking care of her since you guys came here. I know Catherine had her while you guys were in Montana but she's mostly been at the hospital now," Owen answered with a small smile. "Mostly, at least. I watched her one night. She's been a little fussy and I think it's because she missed you and Jackson."

It took a moment for me to process everything that he was saying. I thought that we had been here for – a couple hours, maybe. I didn't think that we had been in the woods for that longs. A few hours? It wasn't a repeat of what happened to Mark, Lexie, and everyone else.

"What's today?" I asked, wetting my chapped lips.

"Wednesday," Owen answered vaguely. Picking up on my signal, he stood up and poured a cup of water, bringing it to my lips so that I could swallow a few mouthfuls.

We had flown back on Sunday.

"So it's been four days?" I breathed out unsteadily, blinking a few times to try and keep any tears from flowing past my lips. That was longer than I had been ready to hear.
"No." He frowned, setting the glass down. "It's been a week and a half, April."

Swallowing thickly, I could feel my heart pounding away in my throat – almost painful to think about when I could still so clearly remember the conversation that I'd had with Jackson when he had talked about his father, the way that he had mixed up the sayings so easily. Now, it felt like I was choking on it. My voice drowned out for a moment as I tried to figure out what to say.

"And how long have I been in the hospital?" I could start with that much. That was simple. Maybe it had taken them awhile to find us. It had been a private plane, not a commercial airliner. It would have made some kind of sense, at least.

"They originally took you to St. Mary's Hospital in Cottonwood, Idaho. That Monday morning. Then they transferred the both of you here that Wednesday, so you've been in Grey Sloan for a week." An entire week.

Crap.

"Harriet's okay?" I asked once more, attempting to blink through the tears and failing.

"She's fine," Owen confirmed. "Arizona's been taking good care of her, I promise. You know how good she is with babies."

That was true. There was a reason that I had wanted her to be Harriet's godmother – she was amazing with children and babies whether it was for medical and professional purposes or more personal ones. There was no one else that I would have trusted as much as I trusted her. But he had said Catherine had been mostly here, at the hospital. Not at home with Harriet. And Jackson wasn't in my room, waiting for me to wake up too. Which meant one thing.

"And what about Jackson?" He couldn't be dead. Things with Catherine would have been different if that was the case. I just wanted to know why they hadn't rolled him in here with me.

"He's here too," he nodded. "In another room. You're in the ICU, April. That's why you're not close to each other. We weren't sure if you were going to wake up or not. It's been awhile. I'm sorry, I don't know that much about Jackson's condition. I've mostly been in here with you when I'm not working." He explained.

Tears welled into my eyes once more. Not crying seemed like a hopeless feat now.

"But he's okay?" I asked, needing him to state it clearly, no beating around the bush.

"He is. He's been awake and here to see you a few times. I think Jackson's biggest worry in the past few days has just been you, April. He did have surgery too, some complications, but he's up and walking around. Talking. He's even fallen asleep in here once or twice." He said with a soft smile.

Unable to even try to hold them back any longer, relieved tears begin to stream down and I let out a sob. It ached to jerk my chest and abdomen that much but I don't care. I couldn't imagine a life without him in some form or another – he was my person, my other half, no matter how we were defined legally, he would always be the most important man in my life. There was nothing capable of changing that and I didn't want some cruel, senseless death to be the thing to separate us.

Owen's hand squeezed my shoulder gently, barely rubbing my upper arm and trying to offer me some comfort. It was different than some of the things in the past. No amount of saying that I'm a soldier would make this any easier to try and reconcile with.

"Thank you," I murmured, bringing up my uninjured hand to wipe my tears and the little bit of snot
from the messy crying. He offered me a tissue after a moment and I take it quickly.

"Take your time," he insisted, squeezing my shoulder gently.

When Harriet's birth had nearly killed me, there had been some kind of convoluted peace at the idea. I would have died to do something better, bringing life into the world, ensuring that Jackson would not have to go through the same grief and loss that we had both been through after we lost Samuel. But dying in a plane crash? No. I knew exactly how cruel that was, how senseless and confusing. I had seen firsthand the way that it tore at the people who loved you most.

"What about this?" I finally asked about my own condition, lifting up my hurt arm slightly.

"The burns are pretty rough," Owen answered. "We had a burn specialist from Seattle Pres come over and take a look. It's something that normally Jackson would take care of. Since it's already been a week and a half, a lot of has healed. It probably needs another week or so before it'll be fully healed."

That was a long time. I'd heard Jackson talk about burns plenty, knew the timelines and healing process well enough. It was at minimum second degree, maybe third. Burns that healed in under two weeks had a low chance of scarring. I wasn't going to be that lucky.

"How bad is it exactly?" I knew that he was trying to beat around the bush with me. It was clear. He was always looking out for me in one way or another, but now, I didn't want it.

"There was some pretty bad blistering with the burn. It's possible that you're going to need skin grafts."

What was it with this hospital and irony?

The wife of a plastic surgeon and burn specialist needed a skin graft. Ex-wife. Whatever. The wife of an orthopedic surgeon had seen her own bone stick out of her skin when she had been in a plane crash. The daughter of a pediatric surgeon had needed surgery after birth. Somehow, this place seemed cursed to take someone's worst nightmare and make it a reality.

"Nerve damage?" I asked, taking a deep breath and looking up at him.

"Possibly. We're not sure yet." Owen answered, glancing away. I could see the pain in his eyes now, even as he tried to hide it from me. In some ways, he was rather transparent.

"Am I going to be able to operate again?" I asked, point blank.

"Right now, it's up in the air. It depends on how the rest of your healing process goes and probably some physical rehabilitation. Now that you're awake, we'll have the burn specialist come back over from Seattle Pres and talk to you himself." He explained, looking back at me.

I fell quiet for a minute, unsure what to say.

My entire life had been about becoming a doctor and helping people. I had worked hard through high school and college, pushed to be the best of my class in medical school, all with the single goal in mind. Owen had taken me under his wing as his protege and helped me to become a trauma surgeon, pushed me to be better and stronger. And now, after a trauma of my own, that was all threatening to be taken away from me. Years of blood, sweat, and tears, of nothing other than sheer, agonizing hard work, could all be stripped away from me because of one accident. A career that I absolutely loved could be gone completely.
"But your arm isn't the full extent of your injuries, April." Owen's next words pulled me away from the mourning mindset that my brain had already settled me into, blinking in a few times in surprise as I looked up at him.

"W-what else?" I asked.

"The reason that you were unconscious is that you went into septic shock after the accident, April. Likely a result of an infection that you gained because of the burn." He began to explain. "We had to remove one of your kidneys, as well as one of your ovaries. We haven't seen any problems in your remaining kidney yet but we're keeping an eye out. We've been pushing IV antibiotics and corticosteroids, and vasopressor medications."

Septic shock normally killed over half of the patients that ended up with it. That fact didn't go above my head. The fact that I was alive was somehow more shocking than the fact that I had lost two organs on top of the burns that had riddled my right arm. I didn't know what to say.

"We weren't sure if you were coming back." This time, Owen was the teary-eyed one as he spoke. "And I'm really glad that you did."

Still at a loss for words, I reached out for his hand with my better one. I gave it a gentle squeeze with what energy I could muster up, trying to let it speak for me. God had pushed me to the edge of life and death, it seemed, but He and medicine had both managed to come through in the end when it mattered.

"Can I see Jackson?" I looked up at him, voice finally breaking through my thoughts.

"Of course," Owen nodded. "Let me get a wheelchair for you." He insisted.

"I can walk," I replied without thinking, placing both my hands down beside my legs to try and push myself into sitting up. It doesn't work as well as I'm hoping for. Being in bed for so long had left me weak and tired. My body didn't respond the way I wanted it to immediately. "Or… yeah, okay. A wheelchair." I wet my lips in shame. It was normal for any patient in my condition but I wanted to be up and moving around, same as Jackson.

He returned shortly with a wheelchair and neared it to the bed before moving around to help me get out. I want to put some effort into it, but I knew that he had no problem lifting me up and setting me back down. It's a little embarrassing, but focusing on seeing Jackson would push me past it.

Falling quiet as I allowed for him to push me around, my eyes trail in every possible direction to see what's going on around me. It was as if nothing had changed, but I don't miss the fact that every hallway we move down, eyes are on me, too. I knew how gossip worked around here. Sometimes people found out things about you before you did. It could be enough to drive any sane person crazy. Right now, I could feel it pushing me to that edge as nurses and orderlies liked eyed me like I was some kind of injured animal. But I don't say a word.

It took a minute for me to realize that the wing that Owen had rolled me into was the neuro ward of the hospital. When he had said Jackson had surgery, it hadn't occurred to me it would be brain surgery.

"Why is he in neuro, Owen?" I asked, straining my neck to look up at him.

"I think that it's better for you to talk to him and Amelia about that." He answered uninformatively.
Anxiety swallowed me whole when Owen doesn't give me a clear answer. My hand tightened its grip on the armrest of the wheelchair and my gaze is suddenly trained on the floor immediately in front of me, unable to look at anything else. People were terrified of brain surgery. Of waking up, and of dying from it. It was hard to predict who would come out the other side, both in terms of survival rates and the changes people dealt with as a result of it.

Jackson was the person that I knew better than anyone else in the universe. I knew his thoughts, his strengths, and weaknesses, his insecurities. The connection that we had established in Montana had only strengthened the fact that even if we were divorced, at our core, we were still one another's person.

Now, I'm not sure what to expect.

Okay. That was the word that Owen had used to describe him. I had assumed it meant normal and neurotypical, but when it came to brain surgery, the word okay could have a hundred different meanings. Was he brain dead? Probably not. Comatose? Also unlikely. Was he still a slow reader? Did he remember that his favorite uncle's name was Norbert? Was he still the same forward, fiercely intelligent man that I had fallen in love with years ago? The protective father that would go to Hell and back for his daughter and for me, that would do anything for his family, to not be the man who had left him and his mother behind? I couldn't find answers to those questions quite as easily.

I shut my eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. My lungs were fine. I could feel where the stitches were, probably only because this was my first time moving around. I had survived something that, statistically, I probably should not have. Jackson was just as strong as me, if not stronger. He would be fine. He would have to be fine. I couldn't imagine a life where the alternative was true.

After what felt like an eternity, we finally reached Jackson's room. He was laying on the bed with his eyes shut and his vitals appeared to be normal. He was just sleeping, as far as I could tell. Amelia wasn't hovering with bad news. Maybe Owen's hesitation had been an abundance of caution.

"I'll give you a minute and go get Amelia," Owen said, placing his hand on my shoulder and giving it a slight squeeze before walking away. I stared at Jackson for a moment, taking a deep breath.

"Jackson?" I asked quietly.

Despite my voice, he doesn't respond. I stare at him for a moment, blinking. He was a heavy sleeper, occasionally. After a long day at work, he could just about sleep through the house burning down if someone didn't shake him awake. If he had been in the hospital for as long as I had, exhaustion seemed normal enough. Even if you weren't doing a lot, playing around in a patient bed all day seemed to breed more laziness. There was a reason that we tried to get them up and moving as soon as was possible and safe after surgery. Combatting that was important.

"Jackson." I raised my voice slightly louder as I said his name this time, but he still doesn't stir. My left leg began to shake up and down slightly, trying to tame the nerves flaring.

Okay. New plan.

My hand reached out for his, lucky that Owen had rolled me up to the side that didn't currently have an I.V. set up in his metacarpal veins. Fingers wrapped around his larger hand and I gave it a squeeze, hoping that it would be enough to prompt some form of consciousness in him.
Beautiful, seafoam eyes open to look at me, and I finally smiled.

"Hi, Jackson." I croaked out, trying not to let my voice get the best of me. It doesn't work. Even in the three syllables, it's enough for my voice to crack as I look at him. "Hi," I repeated.

"Hey." His voice was raw as he looked at me. I can't help myself for a moment, dropping down my head so that it rested on the edge of his bed and let the tears that I had been holding back speak freely. He recognized me, he knew who I was, he was speaking. Three huge fears that came with brain surgery had just been marked off easily. Whatever Owen had been vaguely talking about, he must have thought it was more of a big deal than it was.

"I can't believe I've been out for a week and a half," I mumbled. "I'm sorry." I didn't know what I was apologizing for, yet the words slowed seamlessly from my lips regardless. "Owen said that Harriet was okay. That Arizona's been taking care of her and that your mom's been here a lot. I'm-- I'm sure that you already know that, though, if you've been awake for a week. Of course, you already know that." I rambled on without thinking about a word that was coming out of my mouth, turning my head so that my cheek was pressed down instead of my forehead. "I can't believe this happened to us. I never thought that something like that would…"

Shock was a normal part of it, of course. No one ever thought that something like that would actually happen until it did. By then, there was no time to try and prepare for all of the processing that a trauma like that would take.

But still, I expected Jackson to say something to the rambles that fell from my lips. I knew that he was accustomed to hearing me go on and on about whatever subject happens to be on my mind for that day, and it was only natural that this would be the thing that I clung to and went on and on about. It was too huge and traumatic not to. But instead, he doesn't say a word. He just looked at me with his eyebrows furrowed down toward his nose like he was trying to figure out what exactly I was going on about.

"Jackson?" I questioned once more, trying to get him to say something – anything.

"April." Amelia's voice drew me away from my thoughts and I straightened up from my hunched position, looking over my shoulder to see her standing behind my shoulder. She offered me a sad smile. I can't figure out if it's about me or him. "I'm glad to see that you're awake. It was looking a little hit and miss for awhile there."

"Thank you." I gave her a small smile, unsure for a moment if she was being genuine or just trying to buy herself a few more seconds for whatever there is to tell me about Jackson. "What's going on?" I asked.

Her gaze turned to Jackson as if asking permission. Right. I wasn't his wife, I didn't technically have any legal right to know about what was going on unless he wanted me to. I'd forgotten about that inconvenient tidbit, mostly because it so rarely applied to us. I looked back at him and he nodded.

"Jackson had a brain bleed as a result of the trauma from the crash. I fixed it." Amelia's voice was soft, gentle. Not the confident, hilarious woman that I knew as a coworker. She was talking to me like the loved one of a patient. "The brain bleed was located in the temporal lobe. We need to do a few more scans but it looks like the damage was localized in the auditory cortex." I blinked a few times, trying to keep up with everything that she was saying, even though she was speaking slowly. "Based on the tests that we've already run, we're looking at about fifty to seventy-five percent of hearing loss. We need to check up on auditory agnosia, illusions, or… hallucinations, as well." She breathed out heavily.
The way that she was looking at me, it was like she was expecting me to fall apart.

I remembered when I was first pregnant with Samuel before I had broken the news to Jackson, the way that we had fought about raising our child. Deafness was something that we had specifically talked about, because of a case. Immersing a deaf child into the deaf community and letting them know that it was a blessing was something that I considered important – for anything, not just this specifically. Fixing it with an elective surgery like there was no other option didn't settle right with me. He had been insistent that any child would have been fitted with an implant, just like that, without even considering my opinion on the matter. I remembered the way that he had used it to tear down my religious beliefs still.

This wasn't the same. This wasn't our child. Harriet was fine – that seemed like the only good thing that I had learned today. All I could do was stare and blink at her for a moment, like I was the one who had trouble hearing her.

"Okay." What else was I supposed to say? Nothing about this was okay.

I knew him, I knew his mother. He would get fitted for whatever device was necessary to avoid having to live and deal with that kind of thing. I loved him, I did, that wasn't in question, especially now. But I knew that he would take the easy way out of this if it was an option.

I turned to him, speaking as clearly as I could. "Can you hear me?" I asked him.

"A bit," Jackson gave a slight nod of his head.

"I, um," I winced for a moment as I felt a cramp in my leg. It hurt and I scrunched up my face, trying to swallow the pain so that I could focus on what he was going through at the moment.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"Nothing," I shook my head, focusing on keeping my voice loud and clear so it would be as easy as possible for him to hear.

It pained me to admit it, but I was a little bit jealous. His biggest problem could be fixed with a cochlear implant or some kind of hearing aid, some electronic device could be the end of his worries. He would be able to go back to life as normal sooner than I would. He didn't have to worry about whether his career was going to be on the line because of this plane crash, question if he was ever going to be able to operate again. I wasn't going to get off that easy. That much had already been made abundantly clear to me.

"I think…” Dizziness swam in my head for a minute. "I think I'm going to throw up."

"I got you, Kepner," Amelia's voice was loud and clear in my ears, but it didn't matter. I don't see her go for a bin for me to empty the contents of my stomach into. I don't hear the worry that came from Jackson.

Instead, I slumped forward into nothing.
Chapter 3

JACKSON

It had been a torturous week of not knowing if April was ever going to wake up.

If she didn't, it was my fault. Montana hadn't requested me there. I had volunteered to go. The patient and her family just as easily could have been brought to Grey Sloan but I had gone. Even if it was supposed to be Meredith in that plane with me and not April in the first place, there was going to be a degree of something that rested on my shoulders because I had been such a stubborn dick about going out there and confronting my father.

Then I had backed off, and she had been the only reason that I was able to follow through with saying all of those things that I had always wanted to say. She had pushed me to be a better man and to do the right thing, both for myself and for Harriet. Robert walking out on me and my mom had affected me in more ways than I had ever wanted to admit and I think she realized that, because some of those things had been inevitably taken out on her over the years – when she'd gone running off to Jordan, most prominently. The past few weeks, somewhat more subtly, though perhaps now explained to her. If she woke up.

If.

That word had been haunting me, between the real nightmares. Between holding her and waking for her to wake up, waiting to see those eyes flutter open. She never had, no matter how I had held onto her. I wondered if I would end up just like Mark.

Now, perhaps more than ever, I wished that Mark was here. I wasn't worried about recovering from my own injuries just yet, that was something that maybe I could think about once she was up and walking around again. But if he had been here, he would have had the right words to help me get through this. He would have been able to come up with the best treatment plan for her arm and healing the burns there, making sure that was minimal to no nerve damage that would have affected her longterm. He would know what to do.

April was always the one who had brought me comfort and reassurance when I didn't know how to go forward. Whether it was personal matters or a case, she always knew what to say when it came to giving me the confidence that I needed again. Now more than ever, without the two of them, I felt like I was truly lost.

Many hours had been spent sitting at her bedside once I had been cleared to do so by Shepherd. It hadn't been that bad of a recovery – headaches, mostly, but that was taken care of with some pain medication.

There was the matter of my hearing, or my lack of hearing, really. That was on the back-burner.

Feeling her warm touch and opening my eyes to see her in a wheelchair next to my bed felt like a miracle. April may have been the one to have faith and to believe in God, but this was perhaps the closest I had been in my entire life to feel his presence again with the absolute warmth that filled me seeing her there with me again. I hadn't wanted to give up, I hadn't given up. But every day had gotten a little bit harder to deal with as it passed by.

"Hey." A simple word, just barely something.
Her lips moved but it was hard to figure out exactly what she was saying as she spoke. I'd been average at best at lipreading, but it was much harder now to actually understanding what she was saying.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

I couldn't understand exactly what she said before she finally slumped over. I was already missing out on important things. I lurched upward and Amelia responded to her before I could, leaning her back so that she didn't fall out of the wheelchair. With baited breath, I watched as she assessed her quickly, both pupils still reactive to the flashlight that she shone in there. Her problems were different than my own, but she had enough that it was hard to pinpoint on the spot which would be her current one.

"What's going on?" I asked, looking up to Amelia. Bailey appeared in the room moments later.

Both of them were speaking in quick, hushed whispers that I wasn't able to understand. I couldn't tell if it was intentional to keep me from overhearing them, but just the thought is enough to send a fresh wave of rage coursing through me.

Soon enough, April was wheeled out of the room on a gurney, and I was left alone again. The silence was something that I wasn't sure I was going to get used to. ENT was one of my certifications. Hearing aids didn't work the exact same as glasses, fixing the issue. Hearing aids amplify sounds, but it only made them louder, not necessarily crisper or clearer. It took re-training the brain to interpret and prioritize sounds. All of it was difficult.

Patients had told me exactly how isolating it could be to lose the sound of the world around you. Never hearing the voice of loved ones, children, missing out on the sound of music, never getting the punch line of a joke. I also knew that sometimes, cochlear implants and hearing aids really were the best thing. But every case was different.

This damage was unilateral. I could hear out of my left ear normally, in theory. The brain bleed had only been on the left side of my auditory cortex. But using dichotic listening was an important part of everyday life, being able to filter out which sounds were important and which ones weren't, knowing which to focus on. I couldn't do that anymore. I couldn't filter out the beeping of the monitors, the sound of the air conditioner running. It was overwhelming to hear everything at once.

Worrying about my own hearing felt impossibly selfish when I didn't know what the hell was going on with April. I couldn't stand the idea of her falling back into that coma again. It had been hard enough once.

Despite being well aware that it was perhaps one of the last things I should do, I pushed myself out of bed. Her wheelchair had been left in my room by mere oversight. Collapsing right back down into it is easy, and more exhausting than what I wanted to admit. I could find my way to her room easily and get answers for what I wanted to know on my own terms. Waiting around to see which one of our coworkers was going to be the first to take some mercy on me didn't seem like it was going to be a fulfilling option.

"–Avery, what the hell–" Enough of my mother's voice made it through.

I stopped where I was going, looking over my shoulder. I shouldn't have been surprised to see my mother standing there with her hands on her hips, glaring at me like I was fourteen again.

"Mom, listen." I tried to start with her as she moved to stand in front of me.
Her lips are moving, and I get a portion of what she was saying. "Get back to dead before I…" No, bed. She was definitely saying bed. The disagreement between what made sense and what was heard was going to be a lot to get used to. Her voice was loud, not too high-pitched, a little more ideal for me to be hearing. For better or for worse.

"I need to see April, Mom. She was awake. She came by my room earlier and she was awake and then she passed out. I don't know what happened. I couldn't hear Shepherd and Bailey talking about her," I explained, hoping that would have some mercy at the moment.

Mom stared down at me with furrowed brows, the glare on her expression softening slightly. I knew that she had a soft spot for April. She had made that very clear when she had decided to call her to replace Meredith going with me to Montana. I wasn't sure how exactly she had known that I was going to need her by my side, but that was a conversation for another time. A time when I knew exactly how April was recovering from the crash.

"Well, you couldn't be pushing yourself." I think that's what she said. Couldn't or shouldn't, I'm not sure. Mom moved behind me, grabbing onto my wheelchair and beginning to push me toward the elevator.

"Thank you, Mom." I breathed out in relief. One less fight for today.

The elevator ride seemed impossibly long even if it was only a few floors. I could feel the eyes on my co-workers staring at me, trying to figure out what was going on, but none of the nurses or orderlies wanted to ask or say a word. I was sure that they had already heard enough. No one stayed quiet about gossip in the hospital, especially something like this.

When she finally pushed me off, I let out a sigh when I saw Bailey standing outside of her room and talking with Webber. The both of them there couldn't be a good sign.

Bracing myself, I took a deep breath as my mom rolled me up and stopped, stepping around to give her husband a hug. I glanced inside of April's room briefly. She was… sleeping? Unconscious? It was hard to tell which one was right at the moment. My mouth ran dry as I tried to figure out what to say. It seemed like the doctor inside of me had somehow shut off, that the panic and the worry as her husband – no, her ex-husband had decided to take control of my brain instead. It was beyond frustrating.

"Can I go in?" I asked finally, glancing up at Bailey till she nodded in approval.

All of the monitors that she was attached to seemed loud, but looking at them, things seemed mostly normal. As normal as it could be. I pushed myself right up against her bed, positioned with my left ear toward her in case she woke up so it would be easier to hear. I wrapped my hand around her much smaller one, squeezing it.

"Jackson." Bailey addressed me. I wasn't sure the last time she used my first name like that.

"What's going on now?" I turned my head toward her, looking up and taking a deep breath.

She stepped forward, handing me a chart so I could see. It was lab results. "We just got these back from the lab." She was speaking loud and clear for my benefit. "Look at the urinalysis and the blood tests. The levels of urea and creatinine. It looks like her remaining kidney is going into acute kidney failure."

"Give her mine," I replied without pausing to think about it. I knew that we had the same blood type. We'd barely talked about it, once, the fact that we were a match and we would have both been
willing to give a kidney to each other. It had been back when we were residents, actually, working
the same transplant case together. I had been willing to do it then – when I hadn't even recognized
that I loved her. Now, it was far from a decision that I would have to think about.

"You just had brain surgery, Avery." Her voice was more serious now, switching back to my last
name.

"I don't care. Give mine to her. I'll be fine." Fuck the logic, the facts.

"A transplant isn't the best course of treatment right now." Bailey looked directly at me, placing
her hand on my shoulder. "We're giving her medication. We'll balance her fluids and we'll do
dialysis. Her remaining kidney just needs a chance to adjust and recover. You know that."

Maybe somewhere in the back of my head, Bailey was right and I did know that. There was no
reason to jump to a kidney transplant for acute failure. This wasn't end-stage kidney disease, she
didn't have diabetes or high blood pressure or congenital problems. April was healthy as could be
up until now. There was nothing to say that she couldn't recover fully and live a normal life.

The facts didn't have room for doubt. Only my worried brain did.

"Can I have a moment with her?" I requested, looking back to April.

When the movement in my peripheral gaze indicated that I was alone in the room, my other hand
wrapped around hers so that both of mine were holding onto hers. I dropped my head down onto
the bed. It probably could have looked like I was praying. I don't know if I should, if He would
even listen to me if somehow He really was out there. It didn't seem like he was, not right now.
April was a good woman. She was a woman of faith. To have something so cruel happening to her
didn't seem right. She always did the right thing by everyone around her even if they didn't always
see it, like I hadn't always been able to see it.

What kind of loving God would put her through so much?

None that I could think of. She deserved better than this. Better by her God, better by me, better by
everyone else around her. We'd all been dicks to her before. I wondered now if people had even
bothered to come by and see her, to apologize for everything that had been said both to her face and
behind her back. She deserved better than all of us.

"Please," I whispered out, voice raw and barely able to hear myself. "Please, I need you. I need you
to wake up and be fine. Harriet needs you to wake up and be fine. Just wake up. For her, for me.
We both need you, April."

I squeezed her hand just a little tighter, hoping that some kind of stimulation would hope to arouse
her again. Acute kidney failure had a long list of symptoms. Nausea was one of them. Fatigue, too,
could keep her down and under. In the worst of cases, a coma. I couldn't have her go back to that
state of being.

Then, of course, there was the long list of other complications that could come because of acute
kidney failure. A fluid buildup in the lungs could cause some complications and respiratory issues.
If her pericardium became inflamed, then there would be chest pains when she was conscious. Her
body being out of chemistry could have muscular problems. In the worst of cases, there could be
permanent damage, it could lead to end-stage renal disease and then she really would need a kidney
transplant to survive. Or death. But I couldn't focus on that.

After what seemed like an impossibly long time of sitting and waiting, she finally stirred just
enough that it drew my attention. I lifted my head up, focusing on her face.

Finally, I can see those beautiful hazel eyes again.

A small smile softened my lips and I straightened up my back slightly, but I don't let go of her hand, squeezing it just once more so she knows that I'm really here. She blinked a few times to adjust to the bright lights of the hospital, but it doesn't take long for her gaze to rest on me, and she returned the tiny smile I had offered.

"Hey." It was a little easier to hear her voice in here with the doors shut than it had been in my room. I was grateful for that much. I wanted to hear her voice more than anything.

"Hi," I answered back slowly.

"What happened? I was in your room, and..." She made it clear she didn't remember much.

I took a deep breath, bracing myself to explain. "You fainted. They ran some labs and it looks like your remaining kidney isn't doing so well. You're probably going to have to undergo some dialysis to give it a chance to recover while you're here." It looked like neither of us were going to be going home any time soon. Amelia was keeping me around for observation and more information about my hearing loss. Her arm still needed treatment, and now there was this.

"Oh." April seemed unsure what to say for a moment. I couldn't blame her. "What about you? Shepherd was talking about you... your ears, right?" She questioned, blinking a few times.

"Yeah," I nodded. "I can't hear out of my right ear. That's why I'm sitting on this side of you, so it's easier to hear." Having my ear facing her and not the hallway also helped to block out some of the extra sounds that my brain was having a hard time being able to filter out.

"I'm so sorry, Jackson." She murmured, frowning at me.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, April. This isn't your fault." I reminded her. "It was a freak accident. There was nothing that either of us could have done to stop it."

That didn't mean the nightmares would believe me quite so easily. I had them since waking up from surgery, every time I shut my eyes. I could see her pale body, the burnt flesh of her arm. Her breathing had gotten more shallow at the end of it, shortly before we had been found by the first responders that had been sent out to check for survivors. She had been lucky. She might not have known it now or felt that way, but she would not have survived out in the woods for much longer than the time we had been stuck out there. I wasn't sure that I would have survived to lose her, either.

"What about my arm?" April asked. My gaze fell down to the bandages.

"It's pretty bad," I admitted honestly, unable to look up at her. "It's going to be a long road to recovery. I talked some with the specialist from Seattle Pres when he visited and we went over his plan. There's going to be some skin grafts. It's hard to say exactly what's going to happen until those are done." I explained, chewing at my lower lip. "We'll have him come by again."

"Am I going to be able to operate again?" I knew why that was her focus. I would have wanted t to know the exact same thing if our situations were reversed. I still had questions how the single-sided deafness was going to affect me as a doctor.

"I think so." The injuries were bad. I couldn't ignore that. But if there was anyone who was going to be able to overcome all of that, it was her. I didn't doubt her abilities.
April blinked a few times before giving a small nod of her head, and I barely forced a sympathetic
smile on my lips. This was going to be a long road for the both of us. But now, more than ever, I
wanted to be by her side on that road. I didn't want to leave her behind or take her for granted
again. I didn't want to have regrets and constantly think about how she deserved better. I wanted to
be the better. I needed to be the better. For her and for Harriet.

"We'll be okay." I murmured gently.

Normally she was the optimistic one, but this time, I could take that off of her plate. She had faired
worse from the crash than I had when it came to physical injuries. Maybe it was a good thing that
she hadn't been conscious, that she wouldn't be haunted in quite the same ways that I was. But I
could do this much for her.

Keeping one hand wrapped around hers, my other rubbed up and down along the skin of her arm,
grateful that my good hearing side happened to line up with which one of her arms that wasn't
damaged. I traced back and forth along her freckles.

We both fell quiet for a moment, and I could only assume that she was just as lost inside of her
head as I was. There was too much to think about. This would affect us as parents. I'd never wanted
Harriet to live a sheltered life even if April had always disagreed about her needing to stay humble,
but now, I don't think I could ever put her in a plane in my right mind. I don't care if the odds of
getting in a car crash are hugely more likely. It seemed like a stupid, impossible risk to ever be
willing to take with her. Maybe I could be happy with humble after all.

Movement in my peripheral caught my attention and I sat up straight again, looking over to see
Arizona hovering in the doorway of her room. I gave her a slight smile, unsurprised to see her here.

"Hi, you two." She looked like she was on the verge of tears, even with a smile.

"Hey, Arizona," April said. Arizona walked over to the opposite side of April's bed and sat down
on the edge of it. I watched as she nearly went to grab her hand and retracted immediately.

"Hey," I greeted her with a slight smile of my own.

"How's Harriet?" April asked.

I zoned out for a moment as I let the two of them talk back and forth, not trying to focus on the
words leaving either of them. My thumb rubbed circles across the back of her hand, staring at two
of the little freckles there – snakebite freckles, she'd affectionately called them once, just because
of how close they were to each other and that they were fairly identical in size and shape. I brought
her hand up to my mouth, kissing the space between them.

"Oh--" I caught Arizona's gasp. "Are you guys?"

I'm not sure if she finished the question. But it was still easy to tell exactly where it was supposed
to be going. I glanced up at April, her eyes already on me. She didn't have any more of a set answer
than I did at the moment.

"Kind of," she settled on, wetting her lips. I nodded my head in slight agreement. We would have
to talk about it. All of this would definitely push back some of that conversation.

"Is Harriet in daycare?" I asked her, shifting the subject slightly.

"Yeah, she's down there," Arizona answered.
"I'll be back in a few minutes, give you two a little time alone." I kissed the back of April's knuckles once more and gave her a slight smile before rolling myself out of the room. I was sure they wanted time to catch up. I wanted to see our daughter. Arizona and my mom had both brought her up to see me a few times, but now, it was time to bring her up to see her mother. I'd been hesitant to do so while she was asleep. She wasn't even a year old but I was worried about it scaring her, seeing April unresponsive like that. It was hard to predict what kind of effect it would have.

My mom and Webber were both still waiting in the hallway outside of her room, unsurprisingly. Whether they were talking about me or April at the moment, I couldn't hear from a distance. I rolled up to them both, Richard turning and noticing me rather quickly.

"Is there something that you're not telling me?" I asked, jumping to conclusions.

They shared a look for a brief moment before shaking their head. "No. Your mother was just talking about the hearing specialist from Boston that she was going to have come out to see you." At least her interference was typical.

"Where are you heading off to now?" Mom asked. I could tell that she was intentionally speaking loudly.

"I was going to get Harriet down from daycare and bring her up to see April. I thought that she could use it." Truthfully, so could I. It'd be nice for her to see me without bandages around my head.

"I'll take you down there," Webber offered. I accepted with a slight nod.

He pushed me back down the hallway to the elevator. I know that he's going to say something. His voice is deeper than anyone else who had spoken with me today – which made it a little easier to pick up and distinguish from other people's. A good thing, certainly.

We reached the elevator and waited for a bit, and I could feel myself growing impatient. It was difficult to be in the hospital and not go home with my daughter every night. I had taken it for granted, the fact that April had stayed with me long after she had recovered from her own surgery and Arizona told her that she could move out. We both got Harriet and didn't have to worry about the back and forth of some kind of custody agreement, or missing out on big moments in her life. Now, well, we were missing out. There was no way to deny or ignore that.

"How are you feeling, son?" Webber asked when the elevator doors shut.

"I'm okay." It wasn't a complete lie. I was feeling better after the surgery, the pain was manageable even though was still some headaches, and April was awake, at least. No longer comatose. "I'm just worried about April."

"We all are," he answered back empathetically. "But she's a strong woman. We were worried after she gave birth to Harriet, and she recovered better than anyone could have predicted." He reminded me.

"I know that she's strong." There was no doubt about it. "It's still a lot for anyone to go through."

"It is," he agreed. "But the two of you can get through anything if you put your head's together. I know that you may not be together anymore, but you've always been good at working together. You've pulled it off for Harriet and I'm sure that you can do it for this, too. You're good, hard-working people. I don't think either of you will be stuck in the hospital for too much longer,
either."

I knew he had always been rooting for us, one way or another. "Do you think that about me, or the both of us?" I knew Shepherd would clear me soon, but I wasn't so sure about April.

"Dialysis won't require her to stay here. It takes about four hours, we'll do it three times this week and run some labs after that to see how long she's going to need it for. It might just be a couple of weeks." He explained. That was good to hear. "As for her arm, well, I'm sure you know more about that than I do."

"I'm worried about her arm," I admitted. "It blistered pretty badly and I know that she's going to need some skin grafts to treat it. I'm sure that's where she got the infection from. Some fibrinous exudate may end up developing. I know she had her tetanus shot, so there's that, but I'm worried that we're not getting a full picture of the extent of the nerve damage. I know how important her job is to her. She can't lose her ability to operate.

"We'll have the specialist come over tomorrow and get her scheduled for that skin graft surgery. It's a partial dermis graft, right? Not a full-thickness. That should help with the recovery time and minimize the scarring significantly." I knew everything that he was saying, but it does help to hear it from someone else instead of being the one to try and convince myself.

"Alright." The elevator doors dinged open a moment after I spoke and he pushed me out. I could already hear the loud laughter and noises the daycare. I'd never been such a softie for kids until having Harriet.

It only took a moment to reach the daycare room. Webber left me outside and went in to get Harriet himself. I knew I could have gotten up to get her myself and there wouldn't have been a problem with that, that he was just being extra cautious and reasonably I should have been able to appreciate that, but I find myself irritated with it regardless. If I was going to be released in a few days, then I could get out of this wheelchair and go get my daughter out of daycare without anyone else assisting me.

But all of that goes away the second that Richard brought her out.

"Hey there, ladybug." I greeted her. Harriet reached out for me immediately and I took her from her grandfather. "Hey there," I cooed. "Did you miss me? Daddy missed you so much."

Speaking wasn't quite there yet with her but she babbled enough to make it clear that she was close. I stood her up on my thighs, bouncing them slightly and holding onto her sides as Webber began to roll us both back toward the elevator. She reached out toward me, placing one of her tiny hands on my face and covering up my nose.

"Look how big you're getting, ladybug. You're getting so big."

High-pitched noises were the easiest to lose track of with being able to hear out of only one ear. That meant the squeals and laughter and giggles that she made were the first thing to disappear with a noisy background.

That was going to be infuriating to deal with.

I pushed down the thoughts as quickly as I could, taking a deep breath. It would be good for her to see April after all of this time – I was sure that she had missed her mother, and that April was already antsy about having not seen her. Montana had been the longest that we had gone without seeing her, and that had been before. Neither of us had planned on being away from her for that
long. Neither of us wanted to. Every moment with her was precious and working so much made sure that the both of us knew that well.

When we finally reached her room, Arizona and April were still talking. But they stopped immediately and the blonde stood up as we entered the room, exiting alongside Webber to give the three of us some much-needed family time.

"Hi, ladybug!" April's voice was barely heard – she was talking in that high-pitched voice, must have been. "Oh, hi there, nugget. Mommy missed you so, so much. Oh, yes Mommy did. Come here and give Mommy some snuggles." She reached out for her.

Slowly I stood up, setting Harriet down on the bed. Harriet sat up on her own easily and I stayed there, just in case she tried to go anywhere.

"She missed you too," I told her with a small smile.

"Mommy missed you so much, Harriet. Mommy loves you so much." Again, her words were soft. But I could see that Harriet was absolutely thrilled to see her mother again, falling forward into hugging her and wrapping her little arms around April's neck the best that she could.

"We're going to be just fine, April. All three of us."

Hopefully, I could learn to believe that.
I'd listened to my share of patients complain about having to be on dialysis. Most people didn't like needles. Even if it was always a little different to have them inserted in yourself than it was to be handling them with patients, they still didn't bother me all that much. That probably made it much easier for me to deal with. At least there was that.

The first two treatments of dialysis had been boring. Four hours of just letting it happen and trying not to become too bored or too impatient. Kicking back and letting the machine do its job was just mind-numbing. Sitting there and staring at the machine, I went through the process in my mind. My blood was removed and pumped in. There was a heparin pump to prevent clotting, an arterial pressure monitor, and a dialyzer inflow pressure monitor before the actual dialyzer part. I never thought that I'd put so much thought just into the path my blood was taken before it was returned into my body again. There wasn't much else to focus on.

On the second visit, just a few days ago, Jackson had brought me a bag of things after hearing me complain about the boredom. Among the items was the Bible that I kept in my nightstand. He had already been discharged and sent home.

We had joked that he had gotten off easy just because he had come home from the hospital, but I knew that with brain surgery, that couldn't have been further from the truth. The hearing wasn't something he liked to talk about, it seemed. I knew Catherine had gone with him to get fitted for hearing aids. I also knew that she was currently staying at the house with him and Harriet. That had to be driving him crazy by now.

My second visit had been dedicated Bible study time.

The Books of Psalms was one of the most popular and treasured books in the Old Testament. It was one of the few in the Old Testament that I had truly dedicated myself to reading and studying. So much of it was about the life of the individuals under differing circumstances, under suffering, and enraptured the spirit of someone who was dedicated to the Lord. It was all about the spirit of the heart, less instructional than some of the other books in that portion of the Bible. It was exactly what I needed right now.

"Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken." Psalm 55:22 had been running through my head since the moment my eyes read through it again. The Lord said, more than once, that he would never cast his eyes from his children when they called out to him. Maybe it was difficult to understand why Jackson and I had gone through something so horrific and capricious, but it was just another one of those things that it seemed like I wasn't meant to understand. Like losing Samuel. There had been some beauty to come from that pain, even if it had caused more pain at first. The constant arguing right before the divorce had given us Harriet, ultimately, whom we both loved more than anything else in the world.

Then, of course, there was Psalm 147:3, which was perhaps more preached. "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." There is comfort in the Lord to those who reach out to him. I was working at finding that comfort once again.

Even if I knew the healing words wouldn't have the same effect on Jackson as they did on me, maybe if I could find a little peace, it would be easier for him too. I thought that maybe it would be easier for the both of us once I was discharged. Webber had promised that after the third treatment,
he would let me go home and heal there on the contingency that I would still be coming up for a few more dialysis treatments as my remaining kidney recovered.

Three and a half hours had passed for the current treatment. Somehow, the last half hour always managed to feel like the longest portion of it, even with the finish line so close.

"Hey, stranger." I jerked my head up from the Bible in my hand where my gaze had glazed over, lost in thought, finally pulled back out of it by Jackson's voice.

"Hey," I smiled. "I didn't know you were stopping by."

"I needed a break from my mom," Jackson chuckled, pulling over a chair to sit down. He was next to my right arm, still wrapped up to cover the burns. The worst of it was healed for now – better than they had expected, though there would be some scarring. Skin grafts wouldn't be necessary. Instead, it was a choice whether or not I wanted it to make my skin appear more normal.

I smiled. "Is she really driving you that crazy?" I teased.

"She is questioning our parenting choices just because Harriet isn't sleeping entirely through the night yet," he answered with a shrug.

"Well, that's just because she hasn't had both of her parents home with her in over three weeks now. She misses us. Of course, she's not going to sleep through the night yet." I reasoned. "But that should change tonight."

"That's true," Jackson smiled. "My mom wants us to go out to dinner, you know. To celebrate."

"I'm fine with that," I barely shrugged. "I could use food that isn't from the hospital."

His larger hand wrapped around my right hand, and I curled my fingers back around his in response. I could feel my hand, move it around. The sensation in my arm was different than what I was used to. Numb. Not quite pins and needles but something weird. It seemed like my hand was fine, though, but it would take physical therapy to really tell the extent of how it was going to affect the rest of my career. Time would tell.

Stretching out my fingers and giving a little wiggle, I turned over my hand so that I could wrap my digits back around the palm of his hand. I felt like the dexterity was still there, even if there was a little bit of a difference when it came to my grip. I had noticed holding Harriet that I favored my left arm and hand, even though I was right-handed.

"How is the dialysis going? Your other arm doesn't hurt, does it?" Jackson asked.

"No," I shook my head. " Barely even felt it go in when the nurse poked me. By now, I barely even remember that it's there. I'm just... so bored of being in this place, sitting down for hours at a time. I need to stretch out, move around. "I complained.

"You're almost done, right?" I nodded my head at his question. "We can go for a walk before we head back to your home to get all of the discharged paper taken care. " He suggested.

"Okay," I agreed.

The last minutes of the dialysis tick by slowly even with Jackson by my side. He talked on and on about how Harriet had been at home since he had been discharged, the smile on his face bringing a light that I had missed seeing. There was one key to both of our hearts, shared, and that was our daughter. There was nothing else in the world that could possibly compare to the pure joy that
being in her presence brought us, the appreciation for life and all of it challenges packaged up in one little bundle of goodness.

I couldn't wait to go home to her, to cuddle her and hold her without having to worry about wires or anything else. Jackson had told me that he had been letting her sleep in the bed. I hoped that I would be able to talk him into letting me in there, too.

Things were still left to be spoken about, of course. We had jumped into bed in Montana, the thrill of such an amazing surgery coming out, the closeness that the entire trip had sparked into us again. We had needed that, the trip itself. Maybe this was supposed to be the good that came from the bad, the little bit of beauty that would lighten what was otherwise painful. It didn't hurt to have some hope.

By the time that it was done, I was practically ready to jump out of the room and run around the block. I wasn't quite in the condition for that just yet, but it didn't matter. I needed out.

"Ready for that walk?" Jackson teased me. I could tell that he already knew I was.

"Yes, please." Our elbows hooked together and I leaned into him for just a moment, taking a deep breath. Physically, I didn't need to. I had been talking about and getting back on my own two feet again. It was an important part of recovery and a good indicator of how things were going. I just wanted to with him.

For a few moments, the two of us were quiet as we begin to walk down the hallways. Some of the stares from our co-workers had lessened. Some hadn't. It’s nurses and orderlies, mostly, people who weren't willing to otherwise approach us about it.

"Can we talk?" Even if we had both been hospitalized, I felt like I hadn't seen much of him.

"About what?" Jackson asked, glancing down at me.

"Us." I had hoped that it would have been obvious, but his need for clarification didn't bother me. Communication hasn't always been our strong suit. When we didn't know what to say or how to feel, we fell into bed with each other, time and time again. It was a little hard to do that now when he'd had brain surgery just over a week ago, and I had surgery of my own. "Montana. Before… the crash. We slept together." My voice was quiet, not wanting it to be overheard by anyone else that we may have passed.

Even the slight pause from him was enough to make me cringe and wonder if I had said the right thing. I knew I was standing on his better side so that he would be able to hear me. He always sat with his left ear facing me. It meant that his arm was hooked around my bandaged one, but that didn't hurt, at least, even if the sensation was a little odd.

"We did," he confirmed slowly. "And… I don't know what you're going to say about it, but I don't regret it." Relief flooded through me even with the simple words about it.

"Neither do I." I murmured, wetting my lips and glancing at him with my peripherals as we rounded a corner. "I've… I've missed you a lot, Jackson. With the interim chief and Minnick thing, but even before that. Dating was stupid and just made me miss you more." I admitted, swallowing thickly.

"It made me miss you too." His voice was quiet. I wondered for a moment if he could hear what he was saying. "And it made me jealous, too, especially giving you dating advice. It was like when I sent you running to Matthew."
"He was always settling. Those guys were too." I had tried to go out and have a good time like he and Arizona had both advised me too. It just wasn't that easy for me. I didn't know if I was bad at dates or maybe it was just that much easier for me to fall in love with a friend than try to with someone that I barely knew. "You've always been the right pick for me. Whether we're together or just co-parenting… I mean that, Jackson. One way or another, I always find my way back to you."

After my declaration, Jackson fell quiet again. There's that annoying plague of doubt wondering if he had heard me right, but I felt bad having to ask him. I knew him, though, he was a stubborn as could be and didn't like to ask for help. I knew he wouldn't like having to ask people to repeat themselves. Even if it was something small, it would drive him crazy. I was worried about him.

"Maybe we're just meant to find our way back to each other, one way or another. I always said that you were the one." His hand gave me a gentle squeeze and I was glad I could feel it.

"You're my best friend, my person." Even if it was a silly hospital thing, it still meant something.

"You're mine too, April." Jackson returned the sentiment without hesitation.

"Do you still love me?" I asked impulsively, bottom lip catching between my teeth and keeping my gaze intensely trained on the hallway in front of me as we walked, refusing to look over him even though I could feel his eyes on me.

"I never stopped. I can never stop loving you, April. I've tried and every time I looked at you, I just remember how much I want you." I had heard those words from him so many times before. Full of love and hope, affection and desire, desperation and pleading. But this time, it's different. This time, there was just truthfulness. I could feel that.

My hand squeezed his, feeling my throat tighten as I tried to swallow some of the emotion. I had never stopped loving him either. I had tried, time and time again. I had been so hesitant to move in with him because I knew how we functioned, I knew the way that we fell into old habits. And we had, minus the sex. We had lived just like a married couple except for at night when we fell into different beds along. We still functioned like a unit, even without the label of husband and wife.

"I love you too, Jackson." I murmured. "I'm just… a little scared, I think. We've hurt each other. I know that I've hurt you and you've hurt me and that scares me." I had tried to talk to him about this before the divorce. Maybe now, it would work better.

"We have." Confirmation stung a little, even if I had said it first. I wanted to look back and see the good parts, the happy parts, but that wasn't looking at the whole picture.

"I know that we can't start over, but… maybe we could try again." Finally, I look up at him.

Jackson looked back down at me. The swirl of blue and green in his eyes was gentle in his gaze, soft and loving. There was the man that I was married staring back down at me, the one that I had missed so much in the past few months. I could see him, I could hold onto him again. I could even kiss him if I dared.

"Maybe try again slowly," I added, wetting my lips.

"We could." His voice was serious, a little hard to read.

"Is that something that you would want to do?" I asked, chewing at the inside of my cheeks.

"Of course it is, April." There was the quicker, firmer answer that made a spark of hope flutter through my heart, squeezing at my chest in the most delightful way. "But you're right. Slow is
I smiled despite myself. Even if it was childish to try and idolize the relationship that we had in the past given all of the faults that had ultimately torn us apart, he had made me happy. Happier than anyone ever had. He always filled me with life and passion, kept me on edge, made me better and stronger. He was the one that I wanted to raise my children with.

"Well, it's not like we can jump into bed any time soon." I chuckled with a glance.

"That's true." Jackson laughed, looking down at me.

We reached my room only a few moments later, both of us sitting down on the bed side by side. There was no reason for him to be here other than to visit me. I knew that and I appreciated that, especially given that he could have been at home with Harriet. I trusted Catherine with her granddaughter, of course, but it just always felt better to be able to take care of your own baby than to hand her over to someone else, no matter the circumstances.

Leaning into him once more, I let my head rest on his shoulder and his arm wrapped around my shoulders. I could smell his cologne. It was a little silly, I thought, for him to spray something so expensive just to come to see me.

"Are you tired?" Jackson asked.

"No, I've actually been feeling a lot better since the dialysis started. I've got more energy, I just have to get out of the haze of being bored to tears once I'm done." I offered the words lightly, just barely smiling at him.

"Well, that's good to hear." Webber's deep voice surprised me and I sat up, tucking hair behind my ear and looking at him expectantly, feeling as we had been caught.

"Yeah," I murmured, cheeks warming.

"Catherine told me that she had already insisted to Jackson that we need to have a family dinner tonight. I told her that we should leave it up to you and how you feel." I knew that Richard was always a little bit of the mediator when it came to the family dynamic. "But I'm glad to see that you're feeling better than before, and you seem quite comfortable around Jackson again." I also knew that he had been rooting for the two of us to sort our crap out. He wasn't as quiet as he thought when he talked to Harriet.

I placed my hand on Jackson's thigh, giving it a weak squeeze. "Like I told Jackson earlier, that sounds just fine to me. As long as it's an Italian place." I smiled at him.

"I'm sure that won't be a problem," Webber chuckled.

"So, April can be discharged today?" Jackson asked. He was just as eager about it as I was.

"I've got the paperwork right here." He answered, lifting it up slightly before handing it to me, giving me a pen. My ring finger trembled slightly as I wrapped my fingers around the pen, trying to steady my grip. But there was a slight tremble there I couldn't ignore. "You've been talking to about physical therapy already, right Kepner?" Richard asked.

"Yeah." I swallowed thickly, lips tightening as I tried to hide the embarrassment even if I knew my cheeks wouldn't allow for it. I flipped to the page that I needed to sign quickly with my left hand, finding the line and scribbling out my signature. The first letters are clear. The rest aren't. "There." I handed it back over to him quickly.
"One of the nurses brought by a pair of scrubs for you," he motioned to the dark navy fabric on the table. "You can get changed and you're good to go. I'll see you both later."

As he exited the room, I found myself staring down at my trembling hand. I knew that Derek had issues with his own hand after his surgery – but that had been a much different injury than this one. The tremble only seemed to act up when I tried to do something. Muscle weakness, maybe. There was a chance that it really was something that would be fixed with physical therapy, but that didn't stop the worried thoughts from spiraling out of control inside of my head.

"Do you want to get changed?" Jackson asked, drawing me back to reality.

"Yeah." I nodded my head, getting out of the patient gown and into the clean scrubs.

Given that Jackson's surgery was still rather fresh, neither of us are in condition to drive home. Instead, we take an Uber. The driver eyed the both of us though didn't say much. I couldn't blame her. Coming home from the hospital was always something, and I imagined it was a bit weird of a drive for them to have to take.

But by the time we reach our house, I couldn't be more grateful. Stepping in, Catherine came up to me with Harriet almost immediately and I took my daughter into my arms, giving her a firm hug.

"Hi, ladybug. Mommy missed you so much." I kissed her on top of the head. Jackson had brought her up to see me a few times, of course, I'd gotten to show her off when Facetiming my family with their concerned calls, but nothing compared to coming up and being able to snuggle with her just like this. It was so simple and exactly what I needed to really feel better.

"I'm gonna go get changed and take her with me. Just knock on my door when it's time to leave."

With that announcement made to Jackson and Catherine, I headed down the hallway to my bedroom, keeping Harriet on my left hip. Her hand had already tangled its way to my hair and began to pull on it like she was always doing, but I didn't mind in the slightest. I just wanted to hold her and love her.

Instead of changing immediately, I initially laid down on the bed with her, getting her on her tummy for some time there. She seemed happy that I was home, just like I was to be home. God, I had missed her.

Eventually, I do get up to strip out of the scrubs that I had been given, and put on a pair of clean clothes. I throw on a loose fitted navy floral dress and a cardigan, not wanting the wrap around my arm to draw any attention from outsiders. Coming out my hair just a bit, I only put it in a neat bun, just wanting something quick and easy. For once, I don't bother with any makeup. I hadn't been wearing it in the past few weeks and my skin was clear. I do put on perfume, though, embracing how it feels to wear my own clothes and smell good.

Laying down for Harriet for only a few minutes longer, the knock on the door let me know that they wanted to leave soon. I get Harriet ready, dressed in a cute white shirt and skirt overall along with some Mary Jane's. I had my fingers crossed that she would behave on our first night out in a while.

"We're ready. Aren't we, ladybug?" I joined the both of them in the living room.

Letting Catherine and Jackson sit in the front seat to drive, Webber apparently planning on meeting us there and hopefully taking his wife home with him so we could finally have some time with just the three of us, I sat in the backseat with Harriet. Perhaps I was attaching myself more than
necessary, but it almost felt like separating from her had been a bad luck charm.

Webber had booked a reservation for us at some fancy Italian restaurant that I hadn't been to – well, since Jackson and I were married, before Samuel, probably. I'd almost forgotten that it existed. We got seated quickly, Harriet between me and Jackson.

"How has Harriet been acting while you've been with her?" I asked Catherine.

"Oh, she's been perfect. That little girl loves her Grandma Catherine." My former mother-in-law's gaze was on Harriet as she spoke. "I'm sure she missed you two but she has been just fine. Happy as can be."

"Good," Jackson said with a nod of his head, placing his hand on top of Harriet's head and running his thumb over the curls on top of her head affectionately.

"Richard says that you've been healing nicely, April," Catherine said, looking back at me. I nodded. "Yeah, I've been feeling a lot better since I've started dialysis. Lots of energy."

"And how did the fitting go for Jackson's hearing aid?" Webber asked, looking between his wife and Jackson.

"I've decided that I want to go for the BAHA transcranial CROS. It looks like it'll be a better fit for me than cochlear implants or the conventional CROS hearing aids." Jackson answered. I pulled in my lip, staying quiet. It was more invasive of a placement than a traditional hearing aid, but I knew that he knew more about this than I did.

But I could see that he was uncomfortable with the conversation. He had made it rather clear that he really didn't like talking about his injuries or the deafness, even if I could tell that he wasn't quite the same. He was irritable in louder settings. He didn't always seem to be aware of his own volume when he spoke. He looked around considerably more than he had before, no doubt because it was harder to tune things out now.

"Maybe we should talk about something else," I suggested with a fake smile. "Not any injuries."

The tone of my voice came out a little harsher than what I intended, but given the circumstances, it seemed like it was enough to keep Catherine from trying to bring it back around to the topic. She and Richard both managed to respect my request for the course of the meal – talking about different aspects of the work, and about Harriet, of course. She was impossible not to talk about with every little cute moment that she had, always managing to bring the conversation back to her one way or another.

Even though it does go better than expected to have a meal between the five of us, by the time that we were taking an Uber back home, I was exhausted. Today had been busier than any day that I had recently.

Harriet, too, seemed to be rather exhausted, much to the relief of both of us. We went into her nursery together to put her down for the night. Normally it was just one of us, but after the month that we had, it just made more sense for the both of us to do it. It didn't take very long for her to drift off with Jackson rubbing her back sweetly.

"She's so precious," I whispered to him, smiling from across the crib at him.

"Yeah, yeah she is." He agreed.
Slowly making our way out of the nursery with the baby monitor in hand, we pulled the door shut
quietly and both paused outside of the door to make sure that we hadn't accidentally woken her up.
A little part of me wished that she did, just so I could go in there and scoop her up, but I knew that
it was good she was sleeping soundly.

"I'm exhausted," I informed him, letting my hair down.

"Me too," Jackson nodded.

The both of us paused in the hallway for a moment, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was thinking what I was thinking. I wanted to go to bed with him. Not for the sex, no, we both already had discussed the fact that that was out of the question. But just to be with him a little longer, to have his arm curled around me and to embrace the relationship that we had in the past and would hopefully be able to reignite again.

Neither one of us said anything initially, my bottom lip caught between my teeth as I stared up at him. Slowly, Jackson stepped forward, leaning down and pressing a sweet kiss against my lips.

It wasn't hot or heated like some of the kisses we had before. Instead, it was gentle and sweet, a comfort for the both of us. I reached up and placed my hand on his cheek, stroking my thumb along his cheekbone for a moment as I pulled back just so I could look at him properly. Up close, I could see every little flicker of color that decorated his unique eyes, the details of all of the freckles that were so lightly sprinkled across his nose and upper cheeks. I could feel his gaze just as intensely on me.

"Do you think I could sleep in your bed tonight?" I finally asked, meeting his gaze.

"I was hoping that you would," Jackson answered.

"Okay," I smiled, wetting my lips. "Let me go get changed."

Pressing onto my toes for one more kiss, I headed to my bedroom to change out of my dress and remove my bra, putting on a pair of checked pajama pants and a cotton tee. Being comfortable was important for healing and sleeping, especially given it was a little harder to find a comfortable position since the surgery.

But in bed with him, I didn't think that would be a problem.

"Hi." It was all I whispered as I joined him in his bedroom agree, welcoming myself into his bed and dipping into it. His sheets were soft against me, the duvet head and warm on top of my legs and stomach. But most importantly, he was warm as he curled up to spoon me from behind. His arm was low on my waist as it wrapped around me and I knew that he was being careful of the small incision sights from the kidney removal surgery.

"You're cold," he murmured softly.

"It's okay," I replied. "You'll warm me up."

Just like that, the two of us fell asleep together. Even if it wasn't technically the first time in a long time given that passionate sex that had occurred in Montana, this was something different enough that it did feel like it was the first time in a long time. It was a different kind of intimacy, an open vulnerability.

When I sleep, I don't dream of the crash. There was nothing for me to remember of it besides before it had actually happened, the plane shaking in the air and Jackson telling me to brace
myself. I'm grateful that I don't remember it.

But nightmares still woke me.

It wasn't my own. Instead, it was Jackson who was crying out my name, obvious anguish in his voice. He had rolled away from me so that he was no longer curled around me, covers kicked off the both of us, no doubt from the thrashing that he had done. He was the one who was dreaming about the crash. He was the one who actually remembered it.

"Jackson, Jackson, wake up." I grabbed his shoulder, shaking it. "You're having a nightmare."

Wild eyes flew open and stared at me, a moment passing before he seemed to recognize me.

"Sorry," he muttered, blinking quickly.

"Don't apologize," I shook my head quickly. "You don't need to apologize. It's okay." I sat up slowly, pushing hair back out of my face. "Have you been having a lot of nightmares since the crash?" I asked, brows furrowing.

"Yeah," Jackson breathed out.

"You had them after the shooting, too," I remembered, thinking out loud. My hand fell onto his arm, rubbing up and down. "Do you want to talk about it? Or maybe, do you think we should see someone about it? I'm sure the others did, after the crash." I suggested, looking at him.

To my surprise, he rolled away from me, pulling up the covers.

"I don't want to talk about it," Jackson announced suddenly. "Goodnight, April."

Oh.

"Goodnight, Jackson." I laid back down slowly, sighing quietly.

Maybe tomorrow would be a better day for that.
Chapter 5

JACKSON

The nightmares began and ended in the same place.

All of the happenings in between was what seemed to be a constant variation, always unpredictable even if they came to the same end time after time. The inside of my mind, once I was no longer in complete control of my thoughts, were horrific and felt endless when caught up inside of the moment. Agonizing pain and images that haunted time and time again, the same heavy feeling in the depths of my chest that I was incapable of easing or ridding myself of.

Her chest was heaving, struggling to get oxygen inside. Each movement was jerky and unsteady, a precarious pause between each round of rising and falling that threatened whether or not there would be another breath taken. Every cycle of breathing was harder and harder to predict, the pause between becoming longer and longer. I clutched onto her tighter with having to wait, the seconds that ticked by between every ragged breath more and more agonizing. Nothing about the way that she was looking was promising. She was still unconscious, no matter what I did to try and wake her up again. It was like she didn't want to come back to me. That was the worst ending for this I could imagine.

Except, well, apparently it wasn't. I could feel her ribs break beneath me as I pressed my hands into her chest with desperation to perform CPR and try to resuscitate her again. There was blood on her lips when I sealed my mouth over hers and tried to blow air into it. Layers of terrible hit each other one on one, stacking up higher.

"C'mon, April, c'mon. You're stronger than this. Stay with me, April, please. For Harriet. For me."

No matter how I beg her, there's not a difference to be made. Her skin turns a paler shade than what any human body should have been seen at. Lips that I loved and cherished so much turn a sickly shade of blue that even made my stomach capable of churning at the ghastly sight. She was there, right there, and yet at the same time, the woman that I loved was nowhere to be seen. Instead, it's just a vessel that was supposed to resemble her.

Yet I keep trying. I keep pounding against her ribcage, begging and pleading with her to come back, to take that breath of air on her own and to just breathe. It's one of the most simple things in the world. One of the most taken for granted things in the world, too.

A guilt complex was something that I wasn't used to living with. At no point in my life had there ever been an opportunity for genuine guilt to come across me. There had been patients that I hadn't been able to save, but there was always a medical explanation for their death. I had seen other horrible things happen, the shooting had happened and I had been haunted by that with nightmares after, but none of it had been my fault. In this nightmare though, replaying in my head night after night regardless of whether I'm alone in bed or there's someone there with me, it burdened me with guilt like nothing before.

Mark is there. I don't know how and I can't even question the logic of his presence when I've got my hands beating against April's chest every few seconds to demand her to come back to me. Panic overruled the need for any kind of logic. Instead, he's there and staring at me like I'm an idiot, one of those looks he'd given me when I had first started with plastics and hadn't been great.

He was saying something. I couldn't understand what exactly was coming out of his mouth.
Everything was muffled or he wasn't speaking clearly or – shit, no, I just couldn't hear him. It was just me. I was the issue.

"You can save her, Avery, all you have to do is…" That was all I could hear.

"What? How? How can I save her?" I yelled the question at him over and over again, but there's no clarity in whatever he's telling me. My arms are exhausted from pounding away from her and my vision was a blur with the tears stinging in my eyes. No matter how much of myself I try to put into saving her and bringing her back, it doesn't make a difference. She's not breathing. She's getting colder and looking more ghostly with every moment that passed. The woman I love disappeared as she shifted into just a corpse.

I have to sit there and hold her body. There's nothing else I could do. I had to protect what was left of her from the outside world. Everyone knew what had happened to Lexie, had been haunted by listening to wolves or coyotes tear apart what was left of her. I couldn't let that happen to my April. I couldn't.

Tears are shed over her. Both in the dream and in real life. When I wake up there's a distinct dried trail across half of my face from where it had fallen onto the pillowcase I was laying on. Both when April woke me, and when I woke naturally in the morning.

There was no sunlight streaming into our room that morning, the sound of thunder instead shaking the room. I glanced over my shoulder to see that April wasn't there. She had probably already gotten up and got Harriet out of her crib. Even though rain was something she was used to just from being born in Seattle, she still didn't like the way that thunder could shake the house completely when it was strong enough. At least this morning, we wouldn't have to do the fuss that she would put up going to daycare on a stormy day.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray…"

Her voice singing softly traveled through the hallway so I could hear it without disturbing the moment that the two of them were having. I knew that April had missed her desperately – in the days that I had been discharged and she hadn't, it was nearly all that she wanted to talk about, to make sure that our little girl was carrying on alright without her.

Slowly I made my way down the hallway to find the two of them sitting on the couch in the living room. Harriet was sitting on her lap, facing April, and I could see the slight bounce up and down that the redhead gave while she sang to our daughter.

"Morning," I greeted them.

"Good morning, Daddy." April's voice was high, talking to Harriet much more than she was me. "Barely," she added after a moment, her voice returning to its normal pitch. "It's almost eleven."

I blinked in surprise, glancing over at the clock on the wall to confirm what she had said. I hadn't noticed how late I had slept in and I was surprised that she hadn't woken me up sooner. Normally she didn't let me sleep in quite so late in the day.

"I didn't realize it was so late," I remarked, shrugging before joining her on the couch.

"I thought I would let you sleep in since I knew that you weren't sleeping well," April replied.

"I slept just fine." It was a blatant lie and I was sure that she knew it just as well as I did. Harriet was the only one in the room who didn't know about the nightmares afflicting me. I wish it wasn't that way, but it was hard to ignore how perceptive April could be on a normal day, and her
catching me in the middle of the night was making it too easy for her to pick up on.

She looked from our daughter and over at me, the rise of her eyebrows making it clear that there wasn't any way she was going to believe me, let alone just from my word. Her lips tightened for a moment and she shook her head.

"No, you didn't." April disagreed. "You've been having nightmares and I doubt last night was the start of them, either. You had them after the shooting too and didn't want to talk about them then, and of course, you're having them now. I'm sure if I remembered a thing, then I would be having them too." She bounced Harriet once more before pulling her back against her chest, turning the little girl around so that she was facing out toward me.

"Is now really the time to talk about this?" I countered with a sigh.

"If not now, then when?" She asked with a pointed glare. I glanced away from her a moment.

I fell quiet, well aware that I didn't have an answer for her. Eventually, after enough time had passed, the nightmares from the shooting had gone away on their own accord. But that had been a bit easier, I knew, simply because I hadn't lived through the worst of it. I hadn't been shot. I hadn't slipped in the blood of my best friend. I had operated on Derek, but even then, Cristina had been the one with the gun pointed at her, not me. Just a little genius had gotten all of us out of that situation.

This was different. There was no avoiding it, nor any detaching myself from it. I had lived through every ounce of it, and to a degree, I had felt like I had done so alone. Clutching her unconscious body, it had been an experience that I could never comfortably speak of.

"You can't just do this, Jackson," April said with a shake of her head.

"Do what?" I asked.

"This! You know what a big part of our problem was as a couple, Jackson? We didn't talk. We did everything in the world to not talk and if we're going to start things over, that means we can't just make the same mistakes over and over again and pretend like it's going to end up just fine." Although there was plenty of reason for them to be, the words escaping her weren't angry. They were just tired and frustrated. It was hard to spite her for that.

For a brief moment, I fell quiet and let a sigh breathe out through my nose. She was right. Although our relationship had its highs, the lows had stemmed usually from the same thing time and time again. We didn't talk about our problems. We danced around them until the fallout came crashing down on the both of us. But this didn't seem like it was a problem to be shared between us. She had been unconscious during the worst of it. Unleashing those burdens onto her didn't seem fair when she had a different peace of mind than I did. Sinking her down there with me didn't seem like the right thing to do.

"This is different, April." I countered. "This is something that's just about me, okay? It's not me and you. It's me. Which means that I'm the one who needs to deal with it and my way of dealing with it isn't just opening up about it and acting like that's going to fix everything, alright? Because it won't."

I knew it wouldn't. Talking about it meant confronting the fact that my fears were real and I wasn't ready for that. The idea of losing her wasn't completely gone – even if she was discharged from the hospital and seeming better now that she had a few dialysis treatments under her belt, there was still that possibility lingering in the back of my mind, more real than ever. Two times, she had
come far too close to death and escaped it. I'd had a couple nightmares after Harriet, too, even if sleep then had been minimal enough for the both of us that it had gone unnoticed. This was another time that was far too close for comfort. What would happen next time? I knew the saying third time's the charm. In this twisted scenario, charm was the last thing that it would have for me.

"How is this only about you, Jackson? We both went through it. And this was something huge and life-changing! It's not something that you can just cover up and pretend it didn't happen." She pointed out. She was right, again, but I couldn't have any of this. This wasn't a conversation that I was comfortable having – not with her, not with anyone else. I didn't care if I was functioning off of no sleep whatsoever. I couldn't do it.

"You were unconscious, April, okay? You were unconscious. Don't act like we went through the same thing. You didn't have to be out there in the same way as I did. You got lucky." I know it before I have to see the look on her face. I'd fucked up.

"Lucky?" April shouted at me. "I may never operate again, and you're calling me lucky?"

"Did Harriet wake up crying this morning?" I questioned quickly, pausing only long enough for her to nod and confirm my suspicions. "I couldn't even hear her cry, April. Not because of nightmares or anything else. I couldn't hear our daughter cry."

Before things could get any worse between the two of us, Harriet began to cry again. I hadn't heard the clap of thunder but the strike of lightning had only occurred moments before. I can hear her a little better than before this time with my working ear facing toward her. April glared at me with teary eyes and got up from the couch suddenly, pressing her lips into Harriet's forehead and bouncing her gently to try and soothe her. I don't get up to follow or to help, not yet. It seemed like all three of us needed a minute to cool down again, and that was probably my fault.

Getting up, I headed to the kitchen to make myself a cup of coffee. There were a couple of dishes in the sink from where April had prepared herself and our daughter breakfast this morning. She must have been tired, too – she never left dishes in the sink to be put in the dishwasher later, no matter how many times I had insisted on it in the past.

Hearing her in the nursery with Harriet, I passed by and headed back to the bedroom to shower and change into a fresh set of clothes. I'd give her the time that she needed with Harriet.

Or at least, I would keep using that as a justification for further avoidance.

I keep busy that day with running errands and catching up on bills and other paperwork that had fallen behind while we had both been out of commission. I hadn't thought that I would want the distraction with her back home and in the house again, but apparently, I had been wrong.

My mother turned out to be another welcomed distraction, shockingly.

Catherine had decided that her nose was going to be in our business no matter what we tried to do – which meant putting on a happy face for a variety of reasons, most of which was trying to keep her out of it. She had already inserted herself in all matters of our health and care, which was enough of an energetic burden. Having her digging into our personal affairs and what relationship may or may not have been there would have only made things more complicated.

But in a weird way, I sensed that she had a feeling there was more than just a friendship going on between us. That had seemed to be the case before the crash. It was the only explanation for why she would have picked April to go with me on the trip when we had barely been on speaking terms in the days before. Nosiness was to be expected.
Hopefully, and yet, unfortunately, it would die down soon. I had my last appointment before the surgical process for getting the BAHA transcranial CROS placed in, which would hopefully return my hearing to normal.

On the same day, of course, April had her last dialysis treatment. Or what should be – Webber said that it was pending the results of a few blood tests and a urine test to make sure that her kidney had truly picked backups function again, but they both seemed to be pretty optimistic. It was easier to talk to April about the medical side of things lately than it was anything else because I knew at any given moment she might bring up a topic that I rather not broach with her or anyone else. She wanted to help, I knew that, but we had different needs when it came to helping on those type of matters.

Walking down the hallways of the hospital after my appointment was done, I knew had a bit of time to kill before April would be done. There's not much poking around I can do yet with old cases – it'd be another two months or so before I came back to work, assuming all went well with getting my hearing device implanted.

Unsurprisingly, I nearly walk into someone rounding the corner who was too focused to look up from the chart that they were reading. It happened here and there, people always focused on their work, a good trait for the most part. My mouth opened to apologize habitually before realizing who it was.

"Hey, Alex," I greeted with a short nod.

"Avery." He looked surprised to see me. "What are you doing here? I thought you and Kepner were still out for a few more weeks."

"We are," I confirmed. "We both had a few more follow-up appointments and it'll be awhile before she's doing with hers. I was just stretching my legs." I explained with a slight shrug.

"Ah," he nodded. "Glad you guys are both doing better. Want to grab a coffee?" He suggested.

"Sure," I agreed quickly.

We walked side by side to head down to the first floor and outside to the coffee cart. Even though the coffee at the hospital was far from the best in the world, I didn't realize how much I had missed it until I had taken a sip from it and let out a content sigh. At least something felt like it hadn't changed. The same couldn't be said for a lot of other things around here right now.

"So, how have things been going around here?" I asked. I was pretty much eager to hear anything that didn't revolve around my household and knew that there had to be something that I had missed out on. Things were never boring around the hospital, for better or worse.

"Not a lot," Alex shrugged. "I've mostly had to listen to Mer and Maggie gush and bitch about Riggs." He looked less than amused by the answer that he gave me.

"Dude, you've got to get out of that place," I remarked with a chuckle. "What's going on with Jo?"

He grunted. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"That bad?" I asked.

"Has been since the Deluca stuff. It changed something for her. I was just trying to protect her and she doesn't see it the same way." A couple of honest sentences about it was probably the most that I would be able to get out of him. I knew he wasn't the talk about it type either.
"That sucks," I remarked. "I'm sure she'll come around sooner or later. You guys have been together awhile." Just like me and April. I wanted that time together to mean something, not to have been wasted.

"What about you and Kepner?" He turned it back around on me. "How are you guys holding up?"

"What about us?" I reflected with a raise of my brows.

Alex snorted, clearly amused by my attempt. I knew it wouldn't go very far. You don't live through something like a plane crash, especially given that it wasn't the first to directly affect the people of Grey Sloan Memorial. The hospital had its name because of a damn plane crash. I thought with him that I might have a chance of getting away with it.

"You've been living together for months and now you just went through a plane crash together. There's got to be something going on there." He stated the words far too simply to even begin to cover the circumstances. Yet at the same time, he was still right.

"There kind of was," I admitted with a slight shrug of my shoulder. "But lately she's just been on my ass about some other stuff." I tucked my empty hand into the pockets of my pants.

"Sounds like her," he commented. "The hearing or something else?"

It was a heavy as hell something else but at least I knew asking him about something more or less related to it wouldn't get the same reaction as someone else. Alex was good at keeping his composure and not overreacting to anything, as far as I could tell. He had his head screwed on tight. It helped, too, that he knew just about all of the happenings of the hospital at every point in time since he had been here, whether or not he had wanted to know them.

"Do you know if Mer or any of the others had nightmares after the crash?" I asked, quickly taking a sip from my coffee and glancing down at the cup so I don't have to look him in the eye.

"Course," Alex stated bluntly. "Pretty sure all of them did. You having them too?"

I nodded, letting out a sigh. "April's all about talking about it and I'm not."

"Figures." He shrugged. "You might as well do it. It's supposed to help and all that crap, or whatever, but at least it'll get her off your case about it."

"I guess that alone might be worth it," I remarked with a slight shake of my head. "I'll think about it."

It wasn't so much as getting her to stop nagging me about it as it was to get her to not worry about it. I knew that she was a worrier at her core, that it was just a part of who she was. For some things, that was fine. When it came to matters concerning Harriet, I even appreciated it. But I just wanted this to stay as my business and not drag her down along with me.

But maybe I was viewing it all wrong. It seemed like pushing her away was pushing her down to that place that I didn't want her to go in the first place. If Cristina and all of them had managed to get through it one piece and eventually with their sanity intact, then we could, too. I was sure that Cristina probably hadn't talked to Owen about any nightmares if she had any of them. Of the group in the crash, she was probably the one I was most similar to – and hell, April was a bit similar to Owen in some ways, though her persistence was not entirely equal to how pushy I knew he could be.

Things changed easily. When it had been the divorce that torn us apart, because of Samuel, I had
been the one who wanted to talk about it and she had been the one to run away. Quite literally. Maybe that was the thing that kept me from opening up to her now, the lingering possibility that it could happen again. She was the one who had cited me for repeating the mistakes that we had made in the past, but maybe it was just because I was worried that she might do that, too.

Hell, maybe I did need some therapy.

The dinging of Alex's pager caused us both to pause and look down for a minute. I missed hearing that noise, definitely. I already knew what he was going to say before the words could come out.

"Hey man, I gotta go. Kid's coming into the E.R. Good to see you, though." He clapped my shoulder before tossing out his coffee and beginning his jog to the emergency room.

A little extra of the time that I had left waiting around for April is spent on the skills lab, making sure that my hand-eye coordination was still there and sharp after the brain surgery. I knew that it would have to be tested again once the implant was there to make sure that there hadn't been anything erroneous about the procedure, but it was nice to see that I still had it.

Around the time that she predicted she would be done with the dialysis and the blood tests, I picked up Harriet from daycare and headed to the entrance of the hospital to meet up with her. Harriet was tired and a little cranky. Her entire schedule had been thrown off since we had gone to Montana and I knew that all of the doctor's visits and everything else wasn't helping with that, either. Hopefully, things would return to normal for all of us soon, or even better than the normal that we had before.

Even if she was grating on my nerves now with trying to push me into therapy, I did still love her. She was the mother of my child, my best friend, my person. She was everything and I did not anticipate that to change any time in the near future.

I didn't hear April approach, but I see her lips move in a simple syllable, probably a hey.

"Hey," I greeted her with a small smile. "Are you ready to go?" I asked.

Once she nodded her head, I let her take the stroller so that she could push Harriet and we walked to the car without another word. This time, it's not because of the tension that had been sitting between us in the past few weeks. It was her courtesy to me. She knew that I had a difficult time carrying and understanding conversation in public when there was so much going on and I couldn't filter out background noise.

When we get in the car, we both get Harriet into her car seat. Her hand was getting better, the movement was there, but I knew that she didn't always quite trust herself with everything that she was doing. I knew it was best to just help without saying a word.

I decide to wait until we're home again and April had put Harriet down for an afternoon nap before I try to broach the subject again. This one was better left without an interruption of our daughter, just in case.

"Hey, do you have a minute?" I asked, already knowing she didn't have other plans.

"Yeah, what's up?" April answered, her eyebrows raising as she looked over at me.

"I just want to talk a minute." I sat down on the couch as I spoke, motioning for her to follow. She joined me, sitting down on the other end of the piece of furniture with some space between us.

"Okay…" she spoke, her voice trailing off uncertainly.
I took a deep breath, preparing myself. Even if I had time to think about it in the car, that had been mostly making the decision about whether or not opening up with her and the situation was the best decision. I hadn't taken the time to try and map out what I was going to say to her about it. I knew I wanted to be honest, but that was only a small start.

"I want to talk about the other day." I'm sure that she would know what I was referring to immediately. "I shouldn't have pushed you away like that and I'm sorry. I know that you're just trying to help, to be a good friend and..." Girlfriend? "I just want to apologize for how I reacted."

"Oh." She looked surprised. That was my fault. "Oh, I'm-- well, thank you. I wasn't expecting that."

"I know," I admitted, lips tightening into a line for a moment. "But I am sorry and you deserve to know that. You were just doing what you thought was best and I'm sure if the tables were turned, then I would be trying to do the same thing. I also want to apologize for diminishing what you're going through. I didn't mean that. I was just... angry and wanted to try and get you to stop pushing and I said something that I should not have said under any circumstances." I continued to apologize.

To my surprise, April scooted over to close some of the distance between us, placing her hand on top of mine. "Thank you for apologizing." She said with a sincere smile. "I appreciate that."

"Of course," I barely nodded. "And, uh... you know, you were right. About the nightmares. I did have them after the shooting, and after you almost died giving birth to Harriet, and then again now. It's just the way that I deal with trauma, I guess. That's what my brain comes up with."

"But you know that you can talk to me about them, right, Jackson? You know that?" She looked at me with large eyes.

"I do," I answered firmly. "I know that I can talk to you about anything, April. That's not an issue. It's just that... I don't always want to talk about them. The nightmares are pretty bad and I don't want to dump that on you. Because I know that you don't remember and I don't want you to remember. I don't want you to end up stuck with the same dreams as me, let alone because of me." I wanted to protect her from that much. Maybe I hadn't been able to protect her from the crash or all of the physical trauma that had come of it, but I could try and save her mind from this one thing.

"I'm sure that wouldn't happen, Jackson. But maybe you should really reconsider therapy, you know? It can really work wonders." She murmured gently, giving my hand a squeeze as she spoke. That was something that I should have seen coming but even so, I was ready to shut it down all the same. Even if I could entertain the idea of trying to talk to her about some of it, I couldn't entertain that of opening up to a complete stranger. For the shooting, it had been necessary in order to get inside of the operating room again. But this time, there wasn't that motivation. Therapy wasn't something that the Avery family did, I certainly knew that much.

"I'm not going to do that." My voice was a little harsher than what I intended it to come off as, corners of my mouth tightening. I needed to remember not to take it out on her. It's easier to remember when I'm not talking about it than when I am, though. "I'm sorry, but that's not for me."

"You don't know that, Jackson..." April started with a sigh.

"I do," I disagreed. "I don't want to do that. But... maybe I can start by just talking to you about it instead." A compromise.

"Really?" She questioned.
I nodded. "Yeah, really."

"Okay."
April

Jackson's nightmares weren't getting any better.

He had begun to sprinkle details of some of the different nightmares that he was having when I asked about them. They were violent, terrifying, and heartbreaking all at the same time. I knew that he had been broken up about Mark after the plane crash, that it had bothered him in a way that he had never really talked about, and it seemed like all of those buried feelings were coming to the surface once again with what we had been through. Not remembering was bothersome at first, itching in the back of my mind, but the more that he expressed of his nightmares, the more grateful I became that I couldn't remember it.

But at least for the next few days, it wasn't the top priority. That was the surgery that he was having tomorrow to get his hearing device implanted. It was a custom built BAHA. He'd had a few different appointments making sure all was going to go well, and now, the day had finally come. I couldn't tell if he was more worried or relieved. Pushing him to talk about nightmares meant he didn't talk about much else, emotionally. Like he had a limit of openness with me.

I was tired. I spent a lot of nights staying up to watch him sleep, or with Harriet to make sure that she didn't wake him. I wasn't getting as much sleep as I should have. It didn't seem to matter that much, not when I wasn't having to go to work every day.

Heaviness in my eyelids allowed them to shut for a moment, sitting cross-legged on an empty bed in the hallway. It wasn't quiet out here. Movement and life continued as if there was nothing different going on. Even if I wasn't a part of it at the moment, there was some comfort to be found in just existing in the same space as the rest of it, listening to all of it echo around me.

My stomach didn't feel quite right. It was hard to know what was normal these days and what wasn't, to be quite honest. It's always different to assess your own symptoms than it was that of another person's. I knew that the lack of proper sleep was affecting things negatively as well, but I didn't see that changing any time soon. I had thought that Jackson opening up to me might help, namely. But he needed real help. I'd dug into some techniques and therapies to see if I could get him to try them, but I knew that once I brought up the textbook details of treatment and therapy for PTSD, that he was likely to shut down again. I wasn't quite sure how to avoid any of it. I needed a little bit longer. Hopefully, the surgery would be a distraction for him, too.

For him, at least. For me, it was just another point to worry about.

Even though his surgeon was experienced with this kind of surgery before and came with strong recommendations, it was still nervous to know that anyone was going to be cutting inside of him again, even if it was minor. Minor enough that the operation only took about an hour.

"And you're going to stick with the general anesthetic, right?" I squeezed the ball in my hand tightly, a part of my physical therapy routine. Even if it was a little more risky to go under, it would be better for the anxiety than a local. I knew that. I hoped that he knew that, too, but it was hard to predict what he would and would recognize about himself lately.

"Yeah," Jackson nodded, reaching her and squeezing my thigh gently. "It'll be fine."

"Surgery is scheduled for early in the morning. You know the drill – no food, water beforehand."
Dr. Rumalla said with a smile. They had just finished their appointment. "All of the usual stuff you would tell your patients. I'll see you bright and early tomorrow."

Chewing at my lower lip, I watched as she exited the room. There as a million questions in my head, but I already knew the answers to all of them. Being a doctor felt like a little bit of a curse at the moment. I couldn't ask her for information to coddle my feelings. Today and tomorrow, I would be the wound up one.

"I want to check up on a few of my patients," Jackson said. "Shouldn't take too long."

"Okay," I nodded. "I'm gonna stretch my legs a bit. I'll meet you downstairs in the lobby."

He got up before I did. I knew that he missed surgery and was eager to get back to it as soon as he had healed up from this surgery and got things sorted out with the hearing device, but I wasn't so certain in the future. I didn't have a date set. I could write with a pen and whatnot, but that was so much simpler than operating. Too long and my hand still shook. I needed to build up my hand strength and endurance, assuming that there wouldn't always be a tremor.

Standing up slowly, I took my time walking down the hallway. Being here was a little painful. It was a reminder of everything that had suddenly slipped out of my reach.

It almost reminded me of the way that I had felt being here after Samuel. Owen had made it so tempting to fly halfway around the world with him. But this time, I didn't want to go anywhere. I wanted to be the place that it seemed like I instead couldn't be. The conflict rumbled uneasily in my stomach, almost nauseating.

No, it was definitely nauseating.

Before I could control it, I lurched toward the nearest waste bin and emptied the contents of my stomach inside of it, heaving over it. My throat burned and my back ached, clutching onto the edge of the bin a little harder than necessary. I stayed there for just a moment, breathing through my nose and trying to calm my body back down again. I hadn't thrown up like that since I was pregnant with Samuel, either. I had been luckier with Harriet.

But at least now, there was no way I was pregnant. Sure, Jackson and I had fallen into bed together and there had been nothing between the two of us. Multiple times. But it had been one night, there had been the plane crash... there was no possible way that I could be pregnant. I was still breastfeeding Harriet. It must have just been the stress.

Straightening up once I was able to, I quickly made my way to the bathroom and splashed a bit of cold water on my face, washing my hands thoroughly. It was silly to think that I might be pregnant. Wishful thinking, even.

Patting my face dry and drying my hands, I let out a sigh, staring at myself in the mirror for just a minute. I looked the same. The same as I had the past few weeks, at least. A little extra bit of baggage beneath my eyes, posture a little more slouched. The skin of my arm had scarring. I wasn't sure if it was really as noticeable as I thought it was, or just all of the staring I had done had made it feel that way. The worst of it was on the underside of my arm, where the skin was palest. I could almost pretend it looked normal otherwise. Almost. I pulled down my sleeve quickly, walking out of the bathroom.

It was a short walk to the lobby of the hospital and I didn't have to wait long for him to show up. I don't bring up my thoughts as we walk up to the car or drive home, preferring to keep it inside of my head for just a few minutes. It was probably ridiculous. He had so much to worry about, he
didn't need that added into the picture.

But the silence doesn't last for long. Once the babysitter was paid and had left the house, he turned toward me while holding Harriet on his hip, eyebrows raised up at him expectantly.

"So, what are you waiting to tell me?" Jackson asked expectantly.

"What?" I questioned, blinking a few times.

"I know you. And I know that look on your face. There's something on your mind and you don't want to tell me about it." He started. I sighed, wetting my lips as I searched for an explanation. "Come on, April. You know I've been more honest with you than I have been with anyone in my entire life. If we're serious about doing this, being better than we were before, shouldn't it go both ways?" He asked.

He was right. I knew that he was right. I had pushed him so much about opening up when he had been resistant, and now he was just asking me to do the same. But this felt like it was something different. There was no level of certainty. It could have been nothing.

"I just… I'm not sure about something and I don't want to tell you if it's nothing," I muttered.

"Just talk to me, April. I don't want to be the only one doing this." He pleaded with me.

"I'm just… a little worried that I might be pregnant." I finally blurted out.

He blinked in surprise. "What?"

"Well, I haven't had a period since that crash and I threw out of the blue today and I just… kind of thought it was weird because I haven't done that since I was pregnant with Samuel. I mean, not even with Harriet, so it really just shouldn't be a big deal at all. It's probably nothing, or just stress, or nothing." The rambles of justifications came tumbling out of my lips all too quickly, only able to stop myself by taking a deep breath and staring at him expectantly.

"Seriously?" Jackson questioned once more. "I mean, you think it could be a real possibility? After the crash and everything? You were really sick, April."

"I know. I'm probably crazy." I smiled, half-sheepish and half-apologetic. "The chances are probably non-existent, it just kind of came to mind, and you asked, so… I'm telling you. I'm being honest, which is what you wanted." A shoulder lifted and fell in a shrug.

"Well, get it checked out tomorrow. You'll be at the hospital anyway," He suggested, stepping toward me and taking my hand. "For the record, it wouldn't be a bad thing."

"Our lives are crazy right now, Jackson, and I know that we don't exactly have a great record of good timing with pregnancies, but…" I started.

"April." He interrupted. "I don't care. There's nothing I love more than having a family with you."

I fell quiet for a minute, allowing myself to fall forward and lean into his chest. His arms wrapped around me and I took a deep breath. Hopefully the surgery tomorrow would make things a little easier between all of us. It would take some of the weight off of his shoulders, I knew, getting his hearing back. Maybe back wasn't the right way to put it, but at least better than where it was. It would give him a chance to focus on the other thing plaguing him, not having that obstacle in the way. This would be good.
"We'll figure it out tomorrow." I sighed out. I pulled back just enough to kiss Harriet on the cheek, smiling fondly at our daughter. She was beautiful. So, so incredibly beautiful. Even if things were far from simple right now, they hadn't been easy when she was brought into the world, and we worked it out. Maybe we could again.

It made it a little easier to fall asleep that night. Of course, the exhaustion from staying up to watch him sleep the past few nights. But if there was a baby in the picture, then I needed to take better care of myself.

We both get up early. There were some nerves about his surgery, though he seemed to be pretty calm about it. That was good. Anxiety and stress could contribute negatively to outcomes for a surgery, so it was better that I was the one carrying this for just a little while. Harriet didn't put up a fight in the morning with anything, much to our relief. She ate breakfast without making too much of a mess and seemed fine for once to be passed off to daycare.

"Are you sure that I can't just sit in the gallery?" I knew that it was a lot to ask and I would have had the exact same answer if a patient's wife, surgeon or otherwise, asked me.

"April, it'll be fine." Jackson insisted. "I'm sure you can find something to do." A pointed look.

"Okay," I gave in before Dr. Rumalla had to chastise me. "I guess I'll talk to you in a couple of hours." A smile that was hopefully believable filled the curves of my lips. I was sure that things would go well, I trusted the surgeon, I just needed the next bit of time to go by as quickly as possible. It was a good thing I had something else to do.

I walked with him to the sterile line, standing there for a few moments after they had crossed it and disappeared to get him prepped. We had both made it this far. Things were fine. He was alive and conscious, and so was I. Good things.

Making my way to the elevator, I know that I need a visit to Arizona. Even if she had been a little bit unreliable last time given the way that she had told Jackson that I was pregnant, I knew that she was still good at her job. And this time, well, Jackson knew everything going on. There wasn't going to be an argument about it, the risk of things falling apart.

The elevator doors separated and I took a deep breath before stepping out, approaching one of the nurses to ask where Arizona was. I knew that she wasn't in surgery from a quick peek at the O.R. board, but I knew that more often than not, she was busy with patients – expected or unexpected. To my relief, she was just finishing up with one expectant mother and should have a few minutes. That would give us some time to talk, get my question out of the way, and maybe even catch a little snack together. I could easily fill up Jackson's time under the knife with her.

A few restless minutes manage to pass. I pace. It's the only thing that I can do to pass the time. I need it to go by as quickly as possible, just to know everything was going to be alright.

"Hey!" The second she stepped out of the room, I nearly bombarded her.

"April!" Arizona chirped out. "What are you doing here? Isn't Jackson in surgery?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "But I'm trying to keep busy and I actually wanted to talk to you about something, if you have a little bit of time." A smile on my lips, trying to act nonchalant about it. That was never something that I had been very good at, for better or worse. I tucked my hands into my pockets, trying not to be too restless.
"Yeah?" Her eyebrows rose up. "What's up?" She asked.

"Let's go in here," I suggested.

Pushing open the door to one of the empty patient rooms, I turned on the lights and shut the blinds to make sure that no one was going to see that it was the two of us in there. It was better not to have people talk, even if the chances of that were pretty low. Everyone knew that we were best friends. The Minnick drama had been completely forgotten after the crash. I took a deep breath, preparing myself mentally for what I was about to say.

"I think that I might be pregnant," I admitted, sitting down on the table and looking at her.

"What?" She questioned. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "I… I haven't had my period since the crash and the night before, Jackson and I slept together. A… a few times and we didn't use protection. Now, I know that breastfeeding is natural birth control more or less, but I was feeling nauseous the other day and I just thought maybe."

The chair dragged across the floor loudly as Arizona sat down in front of me. "April…" She started slowly. "I uh, I'll do an ultrasound, if that's what you want. But I don't think you're pregnant."

"What?" I furrowed my brows. "Why would you say that?"

"You lost a kidney. An ovary. You had surgeries right after. The sepsis. None of that would have been compatible for a pregnancy." My mouth opened to interrupt as she spoke, but instead, my jaw only fell slack. "And… there's a lot of scar tissue there, from Harriet's c-section. I did the best that I could, but April," she leaned forward as she spoke, taking both of my hands between hers. "Scar tissue like that can obliterate the normal cavity and can interfere with conception, or increase the risk for miscarriage or other complications." She explained it to me as if I was a regular patient.

"I…" I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I knew what she was saying. Saying or recommending, I wasn't sure which. My eyes blinked furiously, trying to keep away the tears that were burning in my eyes. "What exactly are you saying, Arizona?"

"I don't think that you'll ever be able to have another baby of your own naturally, April. The chances of conception are low and even if you do, it's dangerous to both you and any potential child." She stated clearly.

I stood up suddenly, looking away. My gaze was blurry and yet I couldn't bear to see what expression was on her face. I was almost sure that it would have been the exact same way that she had looked at me when she and Dr. Herman had to deliver the news about Samuel's results. I couldn't do it. Not again. I wouldn't.

"I'll talk to you later," I said shortly, walking out.

New plan. I would do what I could by myself.

I head down to the free clinic. No one stops me as I walked into one of the supply closets and snagged two of the tests from there, then making my way to the bathroom. Peeing on a stick was never graceful and it didn't have quite the same reliability as a pregnancy test, but I needed to know. Peeing on two at the same time was less than classy. Jackson had seemed so excited by the idea. There had been light in his eyes. I was excited about it, too. I wanted this baby badly.

Five minutes hadn't felt this long in a while. I pace more. I check the time practically every forty
seconds on the dot, thinking that it would be a minute. But when the time is finally up, the results on both of the little sticks were perfectly clear.

I'm not pregnant.

My stomach dropped. I was an idiot for even mentioning it to Jackson in the first place. Tears burned in my eyes and I tossed them in the trash, washing my hands and using a little more paper towel than necessary to dry them so I could cover up the evidence in the trash. I had been through a plane crash and surgery. That didn't necessarily mean that Arizona was right.

There's still time before Jackson would be out of surgery and awake in the recovery room. But I have no interest in spending it with Arizona. I needed a little time to myself.

Intentional or not, my feet end up taking me to the skills lab. I need the practice. Playing with a stress ball was only doing so much. I needed real practice that would be directly applied to getting myself back inside of an operating room again, in command and in control.

Stitching grapes would do. I'd see interns do it, practicing cutting and stitching up the grape skin as practice for human skin. Grapes had the same thin and delicate structure that demands the kind of precision required to suture human skin. It had been a long time since I had been able to cut into it. But when I pick up the blade, my hand doesn't shake in the way that I expected it to. For a moment, I felt strong. I felt like myself again. It was a glorious feeling to be able to bask in for just a few minutes, to block out everything else.

But like everything else, it's ripped away from me. I cut too hard. My hand shakes when I try to switch. If I was working inside a body cavity, I would have been a danger to my patient. I still had work to do before I got back to work again as a surgeon. If I got back to work again. I could be stuck doing administrative work for the rest of my life. I hadn't minded doing it before, but now it sounded like torture.

Tears fall as I try and fail, over and over again. They blur my vision but I know even then, it's not the thing that was keeping me from doing my best job. It was just me. I couldn't do it anymore, no matter how hard I tried.

They get louder, the more that I keep going.

"April?" A familiar voice drew me out of my thoughts.

I shook my head as if I could somehow deny that I was there, dropping the tools in my hand. Quickly I rubbed underneath my eyes with the back of my hand, hoping that it would somehow conceal the fact that I had been crying. But it was too late for that. I had already been caught in the act.

"Hi," I whispered out, voice hoarse.

"April..." Owen moved to sit down next to me. his arm wrapping around me from the side and bringing me in for a hug. "You shouldn't even be in here. What's going on?"

"I can't do it." I cracked out. "I don't have my hand anymore. I can't operate. And I--I thought that I might be pregnant. I thought that maybe, just maybe, God had given me something good in the midst of everything else. A baby. Like he did with the divorce. But uh, according to Arizona, I'm not going to have another baby of my own, so there's that." Everything that I was holding inside of my spilled out. Even as he held me against his chest, I was still shaking.

"Oh, April. I'm so sorry." His hand soothed up and down my back. "But you will be a surgeon
again, I promise. You were meant to be one. I know you. I know how talented you are and I know that there's nothing in the world capable of stopping you once you're set on a goal. You can't forget that. You were ready to run me over with an ambulance to prove it once, remember?"

Maybe his words were what I needed to hear, but I can't move past it entirely. It would be more weeks and months of physical therapy, to not even know if I was going to get back what I loved.

"Isn't Jackson in surgery right now?" He questioned after a few minutes.

"Yeah." I nodded. "We were... we were going to work things out, you know? We were. I love him, Owen. I love Jackson. Kids and surgery... that's who we are. What we do. What happens to us if I can't be a surgeon? I told him I might be pregnant and he just... he was happy, you know?"

"You're going to be okay. You are. You're going to get your job back, I promise. It's going to be there for as long as you need to get back on the wagon. I'm going to make sure that this job is there for you. It's the least I can do for you." Owen said softly.

I wanted to believe him. I needed to.

I carry Owen's words with me as I sit at Jackson's bedside, waiting patiently for him to wake up. According to Dr. Rumalla, everything had gone well with the surgery. Amelia had come in to check on him as well. He was getting all of the attention that he needed. He was recovering well. I couldn't help but feel jealous. His body was repairable. It seemed like mine wasn't.

Despite that, I hold onto his hand and don't move until he finally does. I see his eyes open up and all of the jealousy inside of me softened, forgetting about it for just a moment. He really had a way of bringing out the best in me.

"Hey," he croaked out.

"Hi." I smiled. "Doctors say that you're alright."

And he was. Of course he was. I didn't want to be bitter and resent him. I really, really didn't want to be. Neither one of us needed that in a relationship and it wouldn't help either of us be able to piece things back together again. That was still most important to me, above all else. I wanted to be a family. Whether it was just to Harriet, or whether maybe it was possible to expand. I craved for the latter so desperately, yet it seemed so impossibly far away now.

Maybe he wasn't the only one who needed therapy.

Reasonably, I could talk myself into remembering that it wasn't his fault. Not that I had been on the plane, or anything else. There wasn't anyone to blame for something like that. Sometimes life just happened, unexplainable. This was one of those times.

"I feel like my head is a balloon," Jackson commented.

"That's because you're high," I laughed, forgetting about everything else in the world.

"Did you find out about the baby?" He asked.

Oh. "I'm not pregnant. I, uh, Arizona said I probably can't get pregnant anymore." There was no way to say it. I just wanted to say it once and then never have to think about it again. I knew he meant well with asking. He had been excited about it. I don't want to talk about the way that it hurts now.
"Oh." He breathed out. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I brushed off quickly. "Let's just focus on how you're doing now, okay?"

Though the surgery seemed to be successful, we had to wait for the surgical site to heal completely before he could get the additional piece to hopefully return a normal life.

A month. Maybe two. That was how long they would tell us that it would take to get it. Then there would be more time made for adjustments. It wasn't like putting on glasses, where the world suddenly became drastically clearer and that was all that it took. It was so much more involved than all of that. It would take adjustments and more adjustments, then time for him to be able to adjust himself.

But it's not all darkness between now and then. I couldn't be more grateful for that.

Harriet's first birthday happened to fall inside of the waiting period. With neither of us at work, it gave us plenty of time to try and plan the most magical, perfect birthday party possible for our little girl. It was a princess theme, of course. She loved all of the Disney movies. Getting her dressed up as Princess Tiana in a poofy, green gown lights her up with an incomparable smile. I dress up as Ariel from the Little Mermaid of course, and I manage to talk Jackson into dressing up as The Prince. He's not quite as into costumes in general, but there wasn't a thing that he wouldn't do to make Harriet smile or laugh. Everything about the party had her in fits of giggles, joyful like nothing else. Seeing her smile like that was priceless.

"She's growing so fast," I murmured, leaning back into Jackson. His arms settled around my waist, and without looking at him, I knew we were both looking at the same thing. Harriet was with Sofia. Sofia was holding onto her hands, helping her walk.

"She is," he agreed. "And she's looking just like you. Her hair's even getting a little red."

"But she still has your eyes," I countered. "Just a hint prettier." I teased.

"More than a hint," Jackson chuckled. His hand rested on my stomach and he rubbed it gently. I felt his hands trickle across where the scar was from her c-section. It only served as a small reminder of the fact that I would never be able to have another little baby just as perfect as Harriet was. A painful reminder, at that.

I should have been happy to have Harriet. And I was. She was still the light of my life, the one who could bring me joy and happiness when it seemed like there was nothing else in the world to be found. But knowing that I couldn't have another one just like her, accidentally or intentionally, it just hurt to think about. I didn't know how I was supposed to move forward while carrying that information inside of my head.

"Hey, did you--" Jackson started to ask me something but the question was interrupted by the loud sound of a car engine in the street backfiring. We both flinched from the sheer volume of the noise, as did the kids, though most brushed it off quickly.

"Did I what?" I questioned.

When he didn't immediately respond to my words, I straightened up and looked up at him, leaning to the side slightly so I could get a glimpse at his face.

"Jackson?" I questioned.

He looked like he was somewhere else. The hand that was on my stomach was no longer soft and
gentle, but instead completely rigid, as if he had been frozen in time. His entire body had locked up as if he was preparing to be under attack. My brows furrowed as I stared at him for a long moment, expecting him to suddenly snap out of it. I tap his chest lightly and he doesn't move.

"Jackson," I repeated his name a little louder than before, hoping to snap him back out of it. "Jackson, do you hear me?" I had never seen him go into a state like this before. Normally I was the one who zoned out of it.

"I've gotta… we gotta get down, April, you need to get down." His words were a disoriented mumble, barely clear enough that I was able to somewhat understand what he was saying.

"Jackson, what are you talking about? Talk to me, baby." I attempted again.

Suddenly, before either one of us said anything more, he had ripped himself away from me. Jackson quickly got out of the backyard and into the house and I stood there for a moment, trying to figure out what had just happened. He had never done that before. I had never seen him react to anything like that before.

"April, is everything alright?" Meredith called out, eyeing me with concern.

I forced a smile and nodded my head quickly. "Everything's fine."

Put on the act. That was what I would have to do, in front of Meredith and everyone else who was here. Jackson had been so uptight about me talking to him about what was going on and I knew that if I began to air any of it out, things would only get worse for him. It took a few seconds before some of the eyes finally drifted away from me and I felt like I was able to drop the smile. This was supposed to be a good day. It was Harriet's birthday party. I didn't want anything to get in the way of that.

"I uh, I'll go talk to him," Alex said as he walked by.

"Thank you." Maybe one of us would have better luck.
Chapter 7

JACKSON

Everything was closing in. It felt like I had taken a blow so hard to the chest that it was caving in and making it impossible to breathe. Something was sitting on top of my chest. I couldn't push it away or force it to go like I did in other circumstances. I knew panic. Panic had become a familiar enemy of mine recently. Despite it, I was good at pushing it beneath the surface. Now I couldn't. My control over the situation was gone completely.

The sound of the explosion replayed in my head again and again. This time, it's not as simple as a car backfiring in the middle of the street. Instead, it's the sound of the plane engines exploding behind us, the drop in pressure as the plane fell out of the sky. Everything flying around and no way to keep the both of us safe. I had to get out of there. I had to get out of there now. There had to be somewhere safer, somewhere that wasn't exposed out in the open. Letting go of April or anyone else watching wasn't even considered as I tore out of the party atmosphere, rushing into the house. There's no safe space, no panic room. There should be. There needed to be somewhere safer for the both of us. Somewhere nothing could hurt us. But there wasn't time to make adjustments for that. It was already too late.

Our closet is small. No exterior walls or windows. Most of the objects that could have fallen or been flown around the room were soft, clothing or accessories. Lights don't come on as I slam the door behind me, falling onto my knees.

We need to do the brace position, okay? Bend over. Hands over your head.

I remembered saying the words so clearly. The way that the plane had flown so erratically through the air, cartwheeling through the air without anything to stop the violence inside of the cabin, the forceful popping of eardrums, the jerky movements. It had been enough to kill the other people on board. Her praying just quietly enough that she thought I wouldn't be able to hear it. That was one of the last things that I had been able to hear clearly before all of the damage had been done. Before everything had gone black and there had been nothing more to do.

Hands folded tightly around the back of my neck. It was hot in here – impossibly so. That wasn't right. It had been cold when we crashed. Snow had still been on the ground in Montana even if the crash had certainly ruined some of it from the flames and explosions. It was so hot. I felt like I was burning up. Just like April's arm had.

Light streamed in from behind me for a moment and I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block out whatever it was. Intrusions weren't safe. I needed to be alone. I hadn't been able to protect April, the one that I was supposed to more than anyone else. There was no way that I would be able to protect anyone else in this situation. It wasn't safe. It didn't matter who it was.

"It's not safe – you've got to get out of here!" I yelled.

"What's not safe?" Karev was a surprise to hear, but I still didn't look back. "What's going on?"

"It's not safe. It's not safe." It was like I couldn't manage to get out more than those three words out of my mouth. I didn't know how to articulate any of it. He couldn't know. He couldn't understand. I was in danger. The palpitations shaking my chest made it more than clear.

"Hey." He cleared his voice as he spoke and I heard him shuffling, sitting down next to me.
"You're fine, man. You're safe. A car engine backfired and that's it. Shit is loud as hell – I'm surprised it didn't set off any of the kids at the party."

My hand tightened around the back of my neck though it doesn't make it any easier to control any of the reactions that I was having. I was breathing too quickly and not deep enough. I couldn't tell if that was making the unbearable heat any worse than what it already was. It wasn't hot outside yet I was burning up like it was the middle of the damn summer and there wasn't a thing that I could do to stop it.

"It's not a crash if that's what you're thinking about." Alex cleared his throat. "Yang was real jumpy after it, too. Would've never told anyone about it though. Just breathe, alright?"

There wasn't a word managing to get out, not to agree or disagree with him. But instead, I manage just enough to focus on his direction. In, out. In, out. I tried to force the inhales to be longer and deeper than the ones, trying to ease some of the aches inside of my chest.

"You still not feeling safe?" Alex asked after a few minutes.

"Yeah," I admitted.

"Well, you still are safe," his hand clapped the back of my shoulder as he spoke. "You know I wouldn't lie to you. I'm not that much of an asshole."

Somehow, the words managed to bring a chuckle out of me. "Guess not," I breathed out in agreement. "I just need another minute, okay? Before all of the questions and stares." And people who were almost certain to get into business that wasn't theirs.

"Sure thing," he agreed. "Do you want me to stay?"

Would it make a difference? Probably not.

"No, it's fine." That was a stretch, but the words were mostly based on truth. Mostly. I swallowed thickly and placed my hands on the carpet as he got up from the floor and stared at me for a moment longer before leaving me alone in the closet.

My hands spread out my fingers as wide as they would go, digging into the carpeted floor. It was there. It was real. It wasn't the floor of the interior of an airplane. It was just the closet. The crash had been weeks ago and the both of us were on the road to recovery. Soon enough, I would be going back to the doctor to get the last step of the heading implant process completed. Maybe April would be going back to surgery soon. This wasn't the end of the world, no matter what the pounding in my chest tried to tell me. We were okay.

Those are the three words that I needed to replace the others with. It's not safe, to, we were okay. Easier thought than actually done, though. I had always been too damn stubborn for my own good. Here was proof.

Vey slowly, I pushed myself up from the curled ball that I had been into, sitting back on my heels for a moment and taking a deep breath. The closet looked the exact same as it had been before. No disaster or catastrophe anywhere in sight. All of the hangers still aligned, shoes still on the rack, drawers all shut. No signs of danger, either. I pushed myself up all the way to my feet, taking another long look around the room. Everything was the same as before.

Only upon standing could I realize how monumentally exhausted I was, as if I really had been through hell and back. I checked the time on my watch. It wasn't that much longer before people would begin to politely excuse themselves as the party came to an end, fortunately. A little more
socializing, or using my hearing problems as an excuse not to, and then I could push all of this out of my brain and lay down to try and forget it. Something told me that it would be much easier said than done, knowing April. But I also knew the longer that I lingered back here, the more pestering there would be about it later.

Noise outside indicated that the party was still going on like normal without me. That was probably a good thing. This was supposed to be Harriet's day, I didn't need any of the fuss to be about me. Most of the people out there were friends or acquaintances, people bound to ask questions, but I wasn't going to deal with that.

Biding my time still, I walked out of the closet and through the rest of the house. My stomach was still uneasy. But I had to put on the face for everyone else. I reemerged back outside.

Alex and I made brief eye contact for a moment and I gave him a slight nod in silent thanks. He was standing around with Grey and Wilson. Both of them gave me a long look but neither moved to approach me to say something. He must have asked them not to.

"Hey," I greeted April gently.

"Hi." She turned toward me with furrowed brows. "Is everything okay?"

"Uh, it is now," I answered with a slight nod of my head. "I just needed a minute." I didn't want to alarm her in front of everyone else. I didn't want to talk about it, full stop.

Her hand rubbed along my bicep. "Are you sure?" She questioned.

"Yeah," I cleared my throat. "We can talk about it later. After all this…” I motioned to the ongoing party.

If anything had changed when I had gone inside for the party, it was hard to tell. All of the kids were still running around the backyard like normal. A few of the kids had icing of some sort smeared across their face, our daughter included. She must have refused to let April clean it off of her. That much she was probably getting from me.

Like anything else, though, the party came and went with its end. As goodbyes are exchanged and a plethora of thank you for coming and all of the gifts that Harriet had received, I could see the way that people were looking at me. Like I might go off at any given moment. It made my skin crawl even worse – that they could think of me that way. Even if I had lashed out, it had been at myself. Not at April or anyone else. But knowing that they all knew what was going on was an uncomfortable invasion of my privacy.

Harriet was completely pooped from all of the attention and energy at the party, going down for an evening nap without putting up any kind of fuss. I wanted to do the exact same thing. But April wouldn't encourage that with me like she did our daughter.

Despite it, once Hattie was down, I laid down in my own bed. Exhaustion was there and washed over me without any hesitation. It felt good to let go of the tension in my body, no one else around to stop me. Once my eyes are shut, I'm out. It doesn't take any fuss or tossing and turning to get comfortable, not when I was this exhausted.

There was no knock on the door in a warning or at least, not one that I was capable of hearing in my heavy state of sleep. I don't notice the bed dipping underneath her weight as she joined me.

"Jackson?" April's voice barely pierced through my sleep.
What did finally wake me was her hand on my shoulder giving me a gentle shake. I blinked a few times to clear some of the exhaustion from my vision before my eyes really opened, managing to focus on the fiery-haired figure who was sitting cross-legged next to me.

"What? Is something wrong?" I asked, running a hand over my face.

"No," she shook her head. "I just wanted to talk about earlier."

Yeah, no surprise that she wanted to. I sighed quietly, pushing myself up so that I was sitting up. I twisted myself in each direction until there was a satisfying crack of my back heard before I focused on her. I didn't have anything to say about it, my reluctance to pretend that it hadn't happened to kick in. But I knew that she probably had plenty of thoughts and questions about it.

"What's up?" I asked simply.

"You just ran out," she called, glancing down at her hands. "I was worried. I didn't want to make a scene but I didn't know what to do and... I'm still worried about you, Jackson. Was isn't the right tense. I'm always worried about you."

"I'm fine now," I muttered. "It was... a panic attack, alright? I had a panic attack. I needed to be alone."

Silence fell between us for a few short seconds after I admitted exactly what it was. I already knew what it was and I was sure that she did, too. We had both done psychiatry rotations in medical school but even then, it wasn't necessary to identify something as obvious as that. I took a deep breath, hoping to mollify some of the nerves in my stomach. It doesn't seem to make a difference now.

"I know it was a panic attack," she said slowly. "I just didn't realize that you were having them. I know that you're still having nightmares and they're not getting any better, but... it seems like things are getting worse for you."

"Well, sounds like that don't happen every day," I tried to justify myself.

"But it's still a big deal, Jackson. I've had a panic attack before. I know how brutal they are."

"Why don't we talk about this later?" I deflected. "I need to take a shower."

"Fine," she muttered.

I watched as she rolled off the bed and gave me one last glance before walking out of my bedroom. Even though we had been sharing rooms more nights than not ever since that plane had gone down, there was still some kind of small divide. She had her room and I had mine. Some extra level of privacy.

Getting out of bed a few minutes after she was finally gone, I kept to my word, stripping out of my clothes and heading into the shower. Most of the time, I take short showers. I'd always teased April when we were together about how obnoxiously long hers were, and she always said that it was because it took a while to shampoo and condition her hair – something I couldn't understand. But this time, I put her length of showers up for debate, knowing I was taking way too long in mine.

The entire bathroom mirror was covered in steam by the time that I finally got out. I don't bother wiping it off. Drying myself off, I put on a pair of sweatpants and an older t-shirt. I lingered with the door shut, knowing that I couldn't block her out for long.
Finally caving in, I toss my used towel in the hamper and walk down the hallway. April was sitting on the sofa, staring mindlessly at some television program that was playing on the flat screen. I glanced at it only for a moment, realizing it was one of those wedding dress shows. One of her guilty pleasures, but far from one of mine.

She looked up at me with wide eyes, blinking a few times, no doubt surprised to see that I had come out here on my own free will instead of her pushing and pulling to try and get more out of me. I barely lifted up the corners of my mouth to offer her something of an apologetic smile. I knew that I was hard to live with lately. Both of us were. After everything that we had been through, well, it didn't make sense for us not to be. That kind of trauma was what left people permanently changed. Like Samuel had. But this was a different kind.

"Hey," I murmured softly.

"Are you feeling any better?" April asked.

I nodded. "Yeah," I began. "I was just worn out from earlier. It really took it out of me."

"Before you sit down, will you grab that lotion off the counter? It just came in today from Amazon. The one you recommended for my arm." She requested, pointing it out to me.

"Sure," I agreed as I walked over, grabbing it from the counter before sitting down next to her.

"Can we take about it now?" April read through the label on the bottle. It should have helped with the appearance of the scarring on her arm, even if it wasn't going to make a functional difference. I knew that she was insecure about both. Even around the house, she wore long sleeves.

"Only if you let me put this on for you," I suggested, taking the bottle from her. I squirted some in my hand and she stretched her arm over to me as I begun to rub it into her skin gently.

"Thank you," she murmured softly. "But I know you're still avoiding it."

I didn't say a word immediately, staring down at the skin of her arm. It wasn't soft or smooth in the way that it had once been. It was doing a good job of healing but staring at it for any period of time more than a few seconds made it obvious that it wasn't normal. I hoped it would help. Skin grafts were still a possibility, something that we were both well aware of, but we both wanted to avoid more surgery if we could.

"We both have our problems." I shrugged slightly. "And we both rather avoid talking about our own, by taking care of one another's." If she was looking for honesty, well, there it was. Even if it wasn't about how I was feeling after that panic attack.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." April agreed, staring at me for a moment and then her arm.

Though the lotion had already been thoroughly rubbed into her skin, I continued to massage her arm gently, enjoying just a little closeness between the two of us. It was simple, a quiet moment. Exactly what I needed after what had happened earlier.

That night, the only way that I was able to fall asleep was with her in the comfort of my bed. Normally, in most situations, I was the big spoon between the two of us. I was nearly a foot taller than her as well as much larger, so it just made more sense. But tonight, April was curled up against my back, both of her arms wrapped around my waist and holding onto me like a little spider monkey. It was nice to be held, too. I can't smell her hair in the way that I normally did whenever we curled up in bed together, but I still know that she was there all the same.
For a week, I'm able to avoid talking about it further. It's a week as if things were normal – despite that neither one of us was working. Supposedly I would be able to after the hearing implant was set up properly, and April had to wait and see how her healing was going. She was cooking a lot to try and practice. My stomach was pleased with that. She seemed to be getting strong every day, too, but she was still hard on herself.

That week comes and goes to its end, though. It wasn't about getting back to work and seeing everyone else again, not for me. Even though I did love our job and everything that I did, being able to hear was so much more than just going back to work. I couldn't go out in public and hold a conversation anymore. Voices were too hard to distinguish if there was more than just one happening, especially with the added noises of the background. At home, we couldn't hold much of a conversation with the television on. It was clear that all of this was affecting my ability to be a parent, too, if running out in the middle of Harriet's party hadn't been enough. I couldn't always hear the sound of her crying out for either one of us. It was more than enough to drive me crazy.

If that didn't, well, going with my mother to the appointment would.

April had offered to go with me. Catherine had already insisted that she was going to be there. That hadn't been much of a question. But she didn't know that we were working on things again. I wasn't sure how she would affect things, but I knew there would be some influence.

"Hi, Ma," I greeted her, bending down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Hi baby," she cupped my face affectionately for a minute. "Well, come on. No need to waste time. Let's make sure getting those implants were worth the extra surgery."

The appointment isn't a long one. Most of the questions that I had were already out of Mom's mouth before I had the chance to ask them, predictably. I sit still as he examined the surgical site and my inner ear, taking a deep breath when the outer attachment is put on. It sticks out when my hair is shaved short. The curls would have to make a come back.

When the sound processor was attached to an external abutment, I took a deep breath, knowing what was about to come. It would be implanted in the deaf ear and carry sound vibrations through the skull directly to the other ear's cochlear nerve to stimulate it. There was no less of the energy of the vibrations. That was why the system tended to have higher patient satisfaction even though the obstacle of having surgery between could be a deterrent for some. The outcome was what I was worried about. Between the surgeries and everything else, whatever had to be accomplished, that was doable. As long as the end result was an improvement.

I watched the doctor's lips carefully as he said that he was going to turn on the device. For a moment, there's a long, tense silence. But it wasn't until my mom spoke again that I realized it was working.

"Jackson, baby, don't just sit there. Say something!" Mom insisted.

"I can hear you," I replied to her, looking up to meet her gaze and a smile breaking across my features. "I can hear you."

"Oh, of course you can," she beamed at me, reaching over and taking my hand. "I knew it would work."

More tests and adjustments are made. It wasn't a process that could be fixed at the snap of the fingers, but even just listening to the other doctor and my mom talk, the huge difference was right there, heard clearly. I didn't have to strain to try and focus on either of their voices in the way that I
did before. I wasn't turning my head to try and funnel the sound in. It wasn't perfect and it wasn't quite the way that it had been before, but this was an amazing difference. I had worked with deaf people before, seen the way they cried when things worked out well. But I had never felt that, not truly, until now.

Of course, I don't cry. Not in front of either of them. But a giant weight had been lifted from my shoulders knowing how much easier things were about to be. I could join society again. I could be in public without the constant worry of missing out on things. I could be a person again.

"I'm glad we could get this all sorted for you, baby," Mom said affectionately, her arms hooked around one of mine. "I know none of this has been easy for either of you."

"Thanks, Mom," I glanced down at her briefly as we walked out to our separate cars.

"Of course, I'm no fool, despite what you might want to think, Jackson. I know that you're struggling with PTSD. You might as well have put a sign on your forehead saying so at Harriet's party the other day." I frowned as she reached into her purse, sifting around for something. "Here." She handed me a card. "The very best specialist you could ask for. Go see him. He's already expecting your call. I might stop harassing you if I know you're seeing someone."

"Mom, I…" Barely getting the chance to start, she cut me off again.

"I don't care what you're about to say. Go." She insisted.

I looked down at the card in my hand, taking a deep breath. "I'll think about it. How's that?"

"Well, I'm going to make sure that Webber and Bailey don't let you back at work until you do, so how's that?" My mom countered without missing a beat, her eyebrows raising up sharply.

"Yeah, okay..." I sighed. "Bye, Mom."

I watched her get into her car and drive away before I got into my own, pausing and looking over the business card once more. The name didn't ring a bell but I was sure that if he had my mother's approval on the matter, then he must have been among the best of the best. She would not have had it any other way.

For the first time in far too long, I turn on the radio and listened to music for the drive home. It was whatever station that April had last left it on – early nineties rock, apparently. I don't care if it's not my usual cup of tea. It feels too damn good just to be able to hear the singer in contrast to the rest of the instruments that were playing. I'm so distracted by being able to listen to it that I nearly miss the turn into my neighborhood.

Drawing my lower lip between my teeth, I try to keep the excitement contained as I parked in the garage and got out of the car. Being able to hear both of my girls clearly was going to be amazing. I felt like I had been missing out on so much with Harriet. Even though April understood the magnitude of what was going on with my hearing and could adjust herself as needed so that I would be able to hear her, it was too much to try and to explain to a barely one year old. Maybe she didn't necessarily notice that there was something different going on with her dad, but it was impossible for me to ignore or forget. I opened the door to the house, pausing for a moment.

The television was on some movie – I'm not sure what. But I could hear Harriet laughing loudly. That was enough for it to happen. Tears welled in my eyes and I took a deep breath.

"April?" I called out, shutting the door behind me.
"Hey!" She appeared a bit suddenly from the other side of the sofa, standing up. "You're back."

"I am." I smiled, dropping my bag as I took a few steps inside of the house. Now I could see that it was some Barbie movie playing on the television. Harriet hadn't seemed to take notice that I was here just yet, completely enthralled with the program.

"How did it go?" April asked, moving around the couch so that she could walk closer to me. Her eyebrows puckered together as she stared up at me, looking for some kind of sign.

"I can hear you." I took a deep breath. "Without asking you to turn down the television, I can hear you. I could hear Harriet laughing when I walked in. I could hear the song playing on the radio when I drove home without straining myself." For once, I get caught up in rambling about the details of all of it. It's something she would do, not me, but it felt too good.

"Wow," she breathed out. "Jackson, that's amazing."

I smiled down at her widely, unable to help myself. Instinct takes over as I pressed my lips to hers, breathing her in. Her hands held onto my face and I deepened the kiss between the two of us further. Her hips pressed forward against mine as I grabbed onto them, her back arching slightly because of the couch behind her. When she moaned against my lips, I could feel it and hear it. Just being able to hear her made me want to bend her over and take her right there.

"Baby," April mumbled against my lips, barely pulling away. "Baby, I want to ask you something. And I want to make sure that you can hear me when I do." God, all I wanted to do now was kiss her.

"What?" I mumbled, nipping at her lower lip. "I can hear you."

"I want to have another baby." She announced.

"Huh?"

"I want to have another baby," April repeated herself, pulling her lips away from mine though her hands remained on either side of my face.

Unintentionally, I blink at her a few times as I process the words. I knew that she had been fixated on a few things lately. Getting back to work with surgery was a huge focus of hers. We hadn't talked a lot about the fact that Arizona had told her she wasn't going to be able to have another child naturally. It had been over a month ago now. She hadn't brought it up and I had tried once when she had gotten her period, just to see where she stood on the matter. But she had pretty much ignored it. Now it didn't make any sense.

"You want to have another baby? Together?" I repeated her question, taking a deep breath as I tried to figure out how to navigate this conversation.

"Of course together," she nodded eagerly. "I wouldn't want a baby with anyone else and– I want Harriet to have siblings. She would be such a good big sister, don't you think?" The smile and light in her eyes were beautiful to see. God, I had missed it.

"What about what Arizona said?" I asked.

"What about it?" She questioned.

"She uh, she said that it couldn't happen." I reminded her, brows furrowing toward the bridge of my nose. I didn't want to crush her dreams on the matter. I wanted her to be realistic.
April shrugged. "I don't care what she said, Jackson. We– we have been through a shooting and lost a child and a divorce and a plane crash and… I survived the impossible by having that c-section with Harriet. Who's to say that we can't do this? We can totally do this. If anyone can do it, then it's us."


"What? You don't want one?" Her nose wrinkled as she questioned me.

"That's not what I'm saying," I shook my head quickly. "I'm just a little surprised by all of this, that's all." It could easily be a lot for her. Focusing on surgery when she didn't know that it was something that was going to be attainable or focusing on having a baby when it may not have been possible either. My lips pressed together in a thin line, taking a deep breath through my nose. "Maybe we should take some time to think about it."

"I don't," she disagreed. "If it's going to be hard then, you know, we should get a head start." Her fingers hooked around my belt loop as she spoke, a huge distraction. "It might take some time."

"Maybe we should focus on what's right in front of us for a little while," I suggested with raised brows.

She blinked at me. "Do you not want to do this?" April asked.

"No, no, that's not what I'm saying at all," I disagreed with a quick shake of my head. "I just... think that it would be a good idea to focus on concrete steps before anything else. You wanted me to go to therapy, right?" I reached into my pocket and pulled out the card my mom had given me, handing it over to her. "Maybe it should be something for the both of us to really tackle. Together." Hopefully, I looked down at her. "You wanted us to do things differently. Healing together would be different."

"Harriet healed us," she pointed out. "Why couldn't this, too?"

"I'm worried it might hurt more before it helps. If it helps." I reached for her shoulder, smoothing my thumb across it.

"Is... is this about something else? The scars or..." Insecurity quieted her voice. I took her hand, lifting up the burned arm and pressing my mouth to the inside of her wrist, kissing it gently. I kissed up along the scarred skin until I reached her elbow.

"I promise, it has nothing to do with that, okay?" I reassured her. "I just want us to think about it, okay? I'll think about it."

"We'll think about it." Her arms wrapped around my waist and I returned the embrace without hesitation.

"Yeah, okay."
Rejection wasn't a feeling that I was used to. Not anymore, at least.

It was surprising, really. I had been the ugly duckling for most of my life and I'd never been popular among boys or girls my age. But I had never tried to seek them out, I had avoided relationships throughout high school and even parts of college, so that sting hadn't been there. Colleges had seemed to be the only thing interested in me. It was why I had been the first in my family to go to college, of course. Matthew had sought after me hard, and then Jackson had too with how he had stood up to sweep me away in the middle of what should have been my big wedding. He had loved me and wanted me so strongly, there was no doubt of that.

Since then, well, it had been up and down. My peers here at the hospital hadn't liked me very much but I had found my way back into their good graces again. Offers had been rescinded when I had failed my boards, I had earned that, unfortunately, but things were all back on the table again now. My career was on track. All had been well.

Had. Now, well, my career was no longer on track. I was getting a bit stronger each day but my hands still weren't perfect. There was a tremble there. Not every motion caused it, I could write a few notes down and cook in the kitchen again, but the absolute stillness and precision that was required in the surgical field weren't there yet. I might be able to slice open an abdomen but I doubted my ability to hold instruments without shaking it, to not nick an artery or vein. It was just a bomb waiting to go off.

But now? It was all I could feel. Jackson had looked at me like I was crazy when I had suggested trying for another baby. Was it really that unappealing of a thought? I knew exactly what he had said, but his eyes had betrayed him.

Maybe I was crazy. Maybe I had earned those eyes.

Crazy could be a cruel world and I knew that it wasn't applicable to everyone that went and saw a psychiatrist for whatever reason. But maybe, this was one that finally applied to me. My stress ball for physical therapy had marks from my nails digging into it so often. Amelia had seen it and gotten me a new one in the shape of the brain, citing that it wouldn't be as noticeable because of the folds in the brain. She was right. It had a permanent place on my nightstand because of that. Maybe that frustration would have some kind of good effect and be the thing to help get me stronger.

The appointment with Dr. Eric McCullough was scheduled. He was supposed to be a PTSD expert and one of the best in the business. His reviews online were quite strong as well as the fact that the recommendation had come from none other than Catherine Avery herself. That was pretty much a guarantee that he actually knew exactly what he was doing.

Going alone was the best thing for the both of us, I thought. I had been the one who wanted to do therapy with him together at one point, but now it no longer seemed like the time. I had too many things that might hurt him. I was too jealous of where he was compared to where I was.

I sat in the car parked outside his building, staring at the time. I had gotten there thirty minutes earlier than required. There had been new patient paperwork to fill out and submit online and that was already done, so there was no reason for me to actually be there this early other than absolute nervousness. The air conditioning in the car blasted on my face as I played with the hair tie that I
normally wore around my wrist. Playing with rubber bands was supposed to be beneficial. This was close enough.

Thirty minutes early slowly dwindled down to ten minutes. I got out of the car slowly and headed inside the building, having a quick conversation with the receptionist before sitting down.

"April Kepner?" A male's voice called out after a few minutes.

I forced a smile and stood up, approaching with an extended hand. "Hi, that's me."

"Welcome, I'm Dr. McCullough, but you can call me Eric." He introduced himself and took my hand, shaking it firmly. "Let's just head back to my office and sit down."

There was a clear image of how this would go in my head. I pictured an old brown vinyl lounger where I would nervously sit and sink back into, trying to be comfortable but never quite finding it. The room would be dimly lit with some faint ambient music playing in the background to set your mind at ease. Dr. McCullough was well put together, older and heavy set with salt and pepper hair and a sweater vest. That was about the only part about the room that I had gotten right.

A light gray tufted settee was in place of the older couch I had pictured with a cream-colored blanket draped across from it. There was a nice, soft lighting for ambiance with a bit of daylight streaming in, perhaps for the plants in the room. It was cool and there was no music playing, but there was a white noise machine. Sitting down on the couch, it was extremely comfortable.

For a moment, I just leaned back and adjusted the throw pillow behind my back, crossing one of my legs on top of the other. This was comfortable. I shut my eyes for a moment and take a deep breath. The room smelled like lavender and something else that I couldn't quite name, but it was soothing smell overall. I knew lavender was supposed to have all kinds of soothing effects for people and I was sure that was intentional on his end. Opening my eyes again, he had a soft, polite smile on his lips as he looked at me adjust to his space. It was surprisingly nicer than sitting on the couch in the house Jackson and me lived in. There was nothing wrong with our house, this was just designed very specifically.

"Please tell me you're not going to show me Rorschach photos where they all just like an incest of some kind." I finally broke the silence between us, knowing that something had to be said.

"No, definitely not," Dr. McCullough chuckled. "I just want to talk. You're a trauma surgeon, right?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "At Grey Sloan Memorial."

"I've heard a lot about that hospital before," he remarked. "The shooting and the plane crash that happened there a few years back. The Avery Foundation owns it now, right? Catherine Avery did give me a brief call, letting me know a little bit about you and Jackson."

At least he was being honest. "It's been through a lot, yeah." I agreed. "It uh, we had to do some mandatory counseling after the shooting. Then I wasn't really involved in that plane crash, so…"

"But you were with this one," he pointed out the obvious. "And you went through a lot."

"Yeah," I tried to brush it off, rubbing my arm.

"Emergency services, in general, is a difficult field for anyone to be in. EMTs, firefighters, police officers – they're the front lines, but you see a lot of it, too. It's difficult for humans to be continuously exposed to constant levels of trauma that you see every time you go to work." Eric
spoke. "Emergency service workers face high rates of PTSD. Think about it. People typically choose to become an emergency responder because they are extremely compassionate. This same empathetic person is continuously exposed to trauma, tragedy, violence, and incredible risk. Naturally, this is bound to take a toll. How can it not?"

"I love my job," I said quickly, blinking at him in surprise. I hadn't expected to come in here and talk about work. "I love it more than anything. I know that I see a lot of trauma, that's… in the description, obviously. That's not what gets to me. I know how to compartmentalize when it comes to that kind of stuff. This is completely different." I stated defensively.

"It must be difficult to not be able to go back to work yet," he commented as he glanced down at my hand. "I know that I'm attached to my job. Something like that, you must be attached to be so passionate about it."

I nodded, "I am passionate about it. It's my life."

"Do you think that you would be adjusting faster to what happened to you if you were at work?" He asked.

"Yeah," I nodded, brows furrowed. "I like helping people. I like the kind of difference that I make. After… after I lost Samuel, getting back to work was the only thing that made any kind of difference to me. I have to work through my problems. That's the only way that I get through." I explained, wetting my lips.

"So how are you getting through now, without it?" He asked.

I blinked in surprise. It was a natural progression in the line of questioning and yet I hadn't expected it to come out so directly. He was a clear guy, that was for sure. He might have been dressed like something of a softie but he seemed very no-nonsense. I took a deep breath, releasing it through my nose. I suppose this was where I was supposed to admit that I wasn't getting through it. That was the truth, after all. I loved Harriet and there had been exhausted, frustrating days in the past where I would have wanted nothing more than to stay home with her. Now that was all I had and it was more difficult than I could have ever imagined.

"Uh," I stuttered out nervously. "I... I was told that I can't have a baby again on my own. And I'd like to do that. My daughter, she's about one, she makes me happier than anything else in the world. She fills me with such joy and satisfaction and I want to do that again. I want to bring another amazing creative little human being into the world."

"Parenthood is satisfying. I have a little girl too. Well, she's not so little anymore. She's seventeen and loves to remind me of that," Dr. McCullough chuckled. "And what about Jackson? Is he on the same page?"

"No," I shook my head. "I asked and he said I needed to focus on the tangible."

"Well, it sounds like he's trying to do my job for me," He remarked. "Focusing on the immediate is a good thing. A baby is a big project, one that's minimum of nine months. I'm not recommending against it, but, I do think that there's something more you could be doing for the right now."

He was right about part of that, at least. Having a baby would be a long-term project especially if it wasn't going to be as easy to get pregnant as it had been with Samuel or Harriet. Both of those pregnancies had happened without trying.

"What do you suggest?" I asked. "I've been going to physical therapy for my hand. I'm getting
better. Stronger. I've been cooking a lot to practice finer skills."

"That's good," he nodded in approval. "The goal of therapy isn't trying to poke around in your past, or in your head, and find something to blame your problems on. Instead, I like to look at the present and in the future. My goal is to be able to reorient your thinking. Do you talk openly about these things with Jackson?" He asked.

"Not really," I admitted. "He has so much going on. I don't want to add my stuff."

"I think that it would be good for you to start opening up how you feel immediately," Dr. McCullough started. "A journal could be good. Somewhere to just jot down what's going on inside your head. It doesn't need to be anything fancy or elaborate. I just want to make sure that you're not keeping it bottled inside of your head."

A journal. "I could do that," I nodded. "I used to, actually. I don't know why I stopped. I guess I just got too busy with work and ran out of reasons to need it."

"That's good." He added. "A lot of adults don't actually know how to journal anymore. A lost art."

To my surprise, after that, the conversation takes a turn to the normal. I thought that it would be a fifty minute long feelings session in which I would probably cry at some point. But it's nice to talk about parenting and life in the city, the work-life balance that I would hopefully be getting back into at some point. I had so much to look forward to getting back to the hospital. It would be nice to be back with everyone socially again, too, not just an occasional visit here and there or a night at Joe's. I missed everything about the hospital. It truly was my home away from home in every possible way. Life didn't feel right or in balance without it.

Even without having to break down in tears in front of Dr. McCullough or anyone else, there's a sense of relief when I finally get into the car again, a catharsis taking over every exhausted bone in my body. That was the first real conversation I'd had in a long time that left me feeling refreshing afterward instead of further exhausted. I really wasn't used to it.

A necessary pit stop was made at Target on the way home, picking up a new journal with a watercolor design on the outside and a new pack of pens as well. I knew we had plenty of pens at home but there was no such thing as too many. A cute new outfit for Harriet does get thrown into the mix with the journaling supplies, rarely able to resist on matters regarding my daughter. I used to be the pinnacle of self-control but I just couldn't resist spoiling her when the opportunity arose.

Finally getting home, the sound of a football game on the television was in the background, loud and clear. I set down the plastic sack on the countertop and took off my jacket before joining Jackson and Harriet on the sectional.

"Hey," he greeted, looking over at me. "How was Dr. McCullough?"

"I liked him," I answered honestly. "He said to remind you of your appointment with him. But he was a nice guy. Different than I expected, actually. It was kind of like... I don't know. Sitting down with your dad and having a real conversation." I paused, realizing the fault in my words. "Sorry. That's not a good description."

"It's okay," Jackson brushed off. "For once, paternal issues are far from the top of my list." He reached for the remote and turned down the volume on the television. "How are you feeling now though?" He asked.

Harriet crawled over from his lap to mine. "Good," I smiled down at her. "A little bit lighter,
actually. I think you were right to suggest it and I think you'll be even more right to go." My gaze met as I looked back up at him, the smile remaining curved across my expression unchanging.

"I'm glad." He nodded, scooting over toward me and wrapping his arm around my shoulder. "I ordered pizza for dinner. I hope you don't mind. I wanted a normal night and wasn't sure how you'd be feeling after."

I leaned into him. "Thanks," I murmured. "I think I want to go up to the skills lab tomorrow."

Tomorrow, of course, was no normal day. Jackson was finally going back to work. He was recovered fully from his initial surgery as well as the additional one that he'd had to implant the abutment for the hearing device. He had a second appointment with the specialist and more adjustments had been made to the device. It really seemed like he was hearing his best since the surgery. I was happy for him. Happy for him without feeling jealousy, for the first time in a long time.

"Really?" Jackson questioned.

"Yeah," I confirmed. "We can go in together, just like old times. I'll drop her off at daycare and head up there and see how things are going. Spend the morning there then me and Ladybug can go to lunch together. We'll spend the afternoon together then come to pick you up from work after."

"You've already got it all mapped out in your head," he remarked. Jackson shifted slightly and placed a kiss on top of my head. "That sounds good, actually. I'd love to see whatever you get done."

"Maybe. Depends on how my stitches are looking." I answered with a slight shrug. Last time they had looked like a messy intern had done the work. It was technically acceptable but certainly not as an attending, let alone one that was supposed to be an attending and teach the younger generation of medicine. There were still other things too, of course. I would probably have to assist on a few surgeries before I could really get back into everything I was doing before. Owen would be patient with me, I knew that. He would do everything that he could for me like he always did.

"I'm sure they're good." His hand rubbed up and down along my arm. "Your standard just so happens to be higher than any other surgeon in the hospital. Except for maybe mine." He chuckled.

"Well, you're a plastic surgeon. If yours wasn't higher, then I would be worried." I replied with a grin.

The doorbell rang a moment later and I hopped up to get the door, grabbing my wallet so that I could pay and tip with cash. The smell of pizza already wafting into the house even while inside of the box was so enticing. Lately, I had been cooking so much for the both of us, a mixture of simpler and much more complex meals, that I had forgotten just how nice it would be to indulge on an extra cheesy pizza and some breadsticks. We rarely indulged like this. But maybe today was something of a momentous day for the both of us.

After a long, steaming shower and exfoliating my skin, I let Jackson massage lotion into my body and the more expensive one on my arm. It's nice to relax and just be touched in a simple way. The scars in my abdomen had healed and begun fading but my arm had a long way to go.

Falling asleep that night is easy. We're still in the same bed together with almost no space between us. No matter how we fall asleep, our legs end up tangled together at some point throughout the night. We always gravitated toward each other and the bed was just so much more comfortable with one another in it, even if we hadn't had sex with one another since Montana and the plane
crash. There's nothing physical stopping us anymore. We just hadn't gotten there yet.

Morning comes faster than I expected. Jackson's laying at an odd angle with one of his legs hooked around mine, still fast asleep. I leaned over and turned the alarm off quickly, not wanting him to be jolted awake by the sound of it blaring.

Taking a deep breath, I rubbed the back of my eyes to try and get rid of some of the exhaustion. Everything was a little blurry first thing in the morning without my contacts in. Pulling my leg away, I rolled over toward him and placed my hand on his arm, rubbing up and down along the bicep gently. I pressed a soft kiss into the back of his shoulder before giving a slight shake, wanting him to wake up easily.

"Good morning, baby," I whispered softly.

"Mm," he grunted out. "Is it really morning already?" He grumbled.

"Unfortunately," I chuckled hoarsely. "You have got to get up and shower because you stink. I'll get up Hattie and get some breakfast made for all three of us."

"Alright, alright," he muttered.

Giving him one more gentle push, I moved off the bed in the opposite direction and stretched out my arms overhead. I rolled my wrists in each direction and stretched them and my wrists as much as I could. It always felt good.

Once the sound of the shower running caught my ears, I changed into a pair of jeans and a button-up blouse. I've been wearing them all the time - any small, delicate motion of my hand was one I would go out of my way to do. Then I get Harriet up and dressed in a pink shirt and a pair of jean overalls. She's always bright and happy in the morning, a bundle of joy in every sense of the word. Hopefully, that wouldn't change when we had to drop her off to daycare for the first time in a while.

Oatmeal would be a good, hearty breakfast to get him through the day. I put the coffee pot on and get it started, putting out some Cheerios and cut up fruit for Harriet to eat, making sure her bib is nice and secure so she doesn't get anything on her outfit. I keep a careful eye on her, sipping and content.

Jackson finally joined us in the kitchen, dressed and fresh-faced. He goes for the coffee without a word, taking a few mouthfuls of the hot coffee and a moments before speaking.

"God, it's so much better when you make it." He complimented.

"Maybe." I shrugged innocently. "I'm going to go put on some makeup and do my hair. But I'll be ready to go whenever you are." I let him know.

There was no point in putting on a full face or doing my hair up if I was going to be buried in the skills lab all day. I put on a layer of foundation and a bit of mascara and blush, making myself look alive before I do my hair in a simple braid. Nice and simple. Baby steps to getting back to normal. I grab my purse, tucking my new notebook and a pen in it just in case. Inspiration might hit or the sudden need might arise.

"Are you ready?" I heard his voice suddenly.

"Yep!" I chirped, quickly sliding on my sneakers and bending down to tie them. "Let's go."
Excitement was coursing through my veins and that bit of growing impatience was enough to make it feel drastically longer than it actually was. I knew traffic wasn't that bad but my eyes drifted to the clock over and over again as we drove, trying to keep my nervousness from being too obvious.

Finally, we pull into a familiar parking spot and I let out the breath I was holding onto. Everything looked the same. It was sprinkling outside, enough that it kept the June temperatures nice and cool. Getting Harriet out of the car and into the stroller with the roof pulled overhead so it doesn't rain on her any, we walk in. Normally he's a little faster to walk than I am just from his long legs, but this particular morning, I'm the one who was pushing forward eagerly.

"I'll see you this evening. I'll text you when I'm here." We shared a quick kiss before parting ways.

Taking her down to the daycare on the first floor, Harriet does put up more of a fuss than I expected. It had been a while since she had come here. She had been a little spoiled with having the both of us at home so much, rarely both of us going out without her. Our babysitter had gotten a healthy break with neither of us working for so long. She cried and clung onto my shirt, pulling my hair as I passed her over to the attendant. It hurt physically to see her cry like that but she would have to adjust to it one way or another. I would get back to work again. Doubt wasn't a feeling that I could afford to have.

It was a familiar pathway to the skills lab. It was the only part of the hospital that I had been in lately besides the actual patient room that I had to stay in during my own recovery period. There was no place like the emergency room but at least this was the place that I could actually do some kind of work in. That was better than nothing.

Grapes are my go-to surgical model lately. I cut, I stitch. I cut, I stitch. The process repeated itself over and over again, minute after minute. It takes an hour before my hand begins to cramp. I was far much out of practice than what I liked.

"Oh, come on," I breathed out, leaning back in my chair and massaging my hand.

Pulling at each finger, all of my knuckles popped easily. The release of pressure felt nice. Spinning and rolling my wrist in every direction, then pressing my palms together for a few long seconds and the back of my hands, getting it all stretched out. It would take time to build up my tolerance, but my skill set was improving. If I came in and did this every day, I could get it back. Even if it was only half a day. I had to begin treating it like a job again.

Moving on from grapes, I take a new target that's conveniently already here. Gloves. Latex gloves had a thin, flimsy, delicate structure that demands the kind of precision required to suture human skin.

I already had an idea for tomorrow, too. Drumsticks, chicken breasts, either would do. The smell wouldn't be great after but I could handle that easily – rarely was any of it a good smell inside of an operating theatre, but that was something that you built up a tolerance to rather quickly. Smell was the quickest sense to adapt in that kind of situation. Stitching together tiny blood vessels could be good.

Maybe I could try some of Jackson's video games, too. I was sure that he would teach me how to play. It was good for hand-eye coordination, the same as typing, but that wasn't something that I did a lot of. I had seen studies about how surgeons who played video games tended to learn faster when it came to using instruments for laparoscopic surgery. That would be something relatively easy to incorporate in my life, even if it meant something stupid like playing one of those soccer or football games with him.
Eventually, my hand was too tired to keep going. It was noon. I could go get my daughter and get to lunch. I was sure that she would be happy to be out of daycare.

Harriet was, of course. We go to Panera. She always likes the food there, mostly because the macaroni and cheese there was delicious. It was better than anything that I made, I wasn't proud enough to hide away from that. We go out for some frozen yogurt afterward and then the park, spending a good amount of time outside. The rain was on and off, normal Seattle weather. For once, it felt like my life was somewhat normal. The weather was typical of where we lived and it was warm without being uncomfortable. I had spent my morning in the hospital and now I got to spend my afternoon with the little human being that I loved more than anything else in the world. That all constituted a wonderful day.

When we get back at the hospital, I don't have to wait long for Jackson to finish up with what he was doing. He scooped Harriet up from my arms as he greeted the both of us, giving her noisy kisses on her forehead and cheeks. One is given to me, as well, a chaste one on the lips.

"Did you have a good day?" I asked, pulling out of the parking lot.

"Yeah," Jackson nodded with a relieved smile. "No surgeries but I got back caught up with everything that was going on in the burn unit again. It's not too crowded at the moment but it was a good way to get back into things again." He elaborated.

"That sounds really great," I commented, clasping my hand on top of his.

"What about you? How was your time in skills lab and then around town?" He asked.

"Good," I answered honestly. "I think I'm going to pick up some drumsticks or something to practice on blood vessels. I've been doing good with grapes and latex gloves." Reaching into the cup holder between us, I handed him my phone. "I took some pictures if you want to look."

There was a moment of quiet between us as he looked at the pictures and made a noise of approval. I couldn't help but smile to myself as he complimented it. I didn't know if he really meant it or if he was just saying the words to be kind. Either way, it was a nice feeling. I wanted to get right back to where I was and I knew that he was probably the most critical in the hospital about stitches.

Dinner goes by easily. Salad and spaghetti, simple and easy, but at least cutting vegetables gave me an opportunity. I hated cutting up salads once it was in the bowl – so I made it as chopped and diced up as possible.

By the time that we're laying in bed again, I pull my journal out and begin writing in front of him. Jackson gave me a look but he doesn't ask. Instead, it was just nice to detail down how good I felt by the end of the day. Maybe it was mostly meant for negative things, but recording the positive felt good. Recording both seemed important. I couldn't ignore all of the things in my life that I had to be grateful for. I couldn't lose my faith.

"Do you have any surgeries scheduled for tomorrow?" I asked as we laid in bed. He was already dressed down in just a pair of pajama pants and I was in a silky nightie.

"Yep," Jackson nodded, setting down his phone to look at me. "Cleft palate surgery."

"That's exciting," I murmured, using my pointer finger to draw little patterns on his arm. "You're getting back in the O.R. again. You're going to be able to hear all of the monitors beeping and everything else. It's going to be a good day, baby," I encouraged him.

"And you'll have another day of getting some good practice in," he commented, looking over at
me. "I'm sure if you went down to the morgue, they would let you practice on some of the bodies
there. It's not live flesh but it's something."

I rolled onto my side, propping my head up with one arm. "I have something else to try."

"What's that?" He asked.

Not offering a verbal response, I cupped the length of his cock over the material of his pajama
pants. I could feel him twitch in response immediately and his gaze stared holes at me. A few
squeezes and I could feel him beginning to harden beneath my touch. I knew that it had been a long
time for him just like it had for me. As far as I was concerned, this was a way to get my hand
stronger. It required some endurance.

"A good hand exercise," I remarked. Jackson lifted his hips slightly so that I could push down his
pajama pants just enough that it freed his full length.

"Damn right," he grunted in agreement.

My thumb ran along the vein on the underside of his dick. My movements were faster than usual
like it was something that I hadn't done before, quickly gathering precum that leaked from his tip
and smearing it on his length for a little more lubrication. He grunted and groaned, not expecting
me to go so fast, but I had a goal in mind. He's hard and warm, his head tilting back as I moved
faster along his length. I could feel his pulse and he gripped onto me hard, his hand on the inside of
my thigh, just beneath where I could feel my own pulse pounding.

"April, April, you've got to slow down." Jackson protested as I jerked him off quickly. "You're
gonna make me cum." Too fast, was what he meant, but that wasn't about to stop me. That was
exactly what I wanted to happen.

"No, baby," I shook my head as I continued. My grip on him tightened as it moved up and down
along his entire length. I wanted to see him cum undone quickly. It was what I needed. "Cum for
me."

When Jackson finally does reach his climax, my name was choked out of his lips and he splattered
across his own bare stomach. He whines, spasms, stutters. I leaned down and licked it clean off of
his abs, slow and taking my time. His hand tangled in my hair and I could feel him loosen, relaxed
against the bed. He had unwound well.

It doesn't end there. The two of us spend the entire night moving as one, making love. It's me and
him and nothing else in the world.

"I love you, Jackson," I tell him when we're both spent and naked.

"I love you too, April."
Therapy was supposed to be about talking.

I had done my research on the best therapies for PTSD. Sure, I trusted my mom's judgment but I wanted to know what I was walking into – I wanted to know what April would be going through with these sessions as well. If Eric McCullough was the best, then I was sure he would be using a few different kinds of therapies, but they would likely fall under CBT.

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a type of psychotherapy that has consistently been found to be the most effective treatment for PTSD, short-term and the long-term. It's trauma-focused for the specific treatment of PTSD, compared to other mental health issues like depression or anxiety, meaning the traumatic events are the center of the treatment. It focuses on identifying, understanding, and changing thinking and behavior patterns. The two main components of it were exposure therapy and cognitive restructuring. In my particular case, I figured it was going to be a focus on the latter. I knew how exposure therapy could work for phobias or OCD, but I didn't see it going particularly well when the root issue was a plane crash. Maybe there were less obvious or less physical ways to go about that kind of exposure, but I could already feel myself fighting back against that.

With a focus on cognitive restructuring, I figured the approach would be stress inoculation training. It aimed to reduce anxiety by teaching coping skills to deal with stress that may accompany PTSD. It was done by teaching different types of coping skills like breathing training and muscle relaxation. The latter would certainly help. Too often, my shoulders and back ached from the way that I was tensed up.

Nightmares were still the biggest problem, the one that I didn't want to talk about even though April seemed more than sure it was exactly what I needed to talk about. Not getting enough sleep was troublesome but they were occurring multiple times a week, even if I wasn't sure that she knew how frequent they still were. I had done my research for that, too.

According to what I had read, nightmare symptoms often get better with standard PTSD treatment. IRT was supposed to be good specifically for reducing how frequently nightmares occurred. Imagery Rehearsal Therapy required the person who was having nightmares, while awake, changes how the nightmare ends so that it no longer upsets them. Then the person replays over and over in their minds the new dream with the non-scary ending. It sounded too simple for it to really be that effective, but I didn't want to be entirely skeptical about it and ruin my own chances of having things go successfully. I needed to get better.

Sitting in silence wasn't the way to accomplish any of those things. Yet my voice is gone. Being quiet isn't usually an issue for me, not quite like this. I had been a bit stubborn about getting here in the first place, sure, but I had shown up. I had been on time for the appointment. That was something.

"Your wife seems lovely," Dr. McCullough broke the silence, leaned back in his chair with his hands folded.

"She's my ex-wife, actually." The words feel strange leaving my mouth even if they had been the truth for nearly two years now. There were days, especially recently, when I had to question what I had been thinking when I had gone through that divorce. Had I wanted to get even that badly, to
hurt her back in the same way that she had hurt me? Was I really that person? "But we're trying to work things out again. What we went through... it made it easier to see what was important and what wasn't." Even if it made so many other things more difficult.

"Understandable," he nodded as he spoke. "That's not an experience that a lot of people share together. Trauma doesn't always bring people together, however. I'm sure that's something that you're familiar with."

My arms crossed in front of me. "Yeah," I muttered, lips pressed together with a slight frown. Samuel must have been brought up already. It was a little difficult, being unaware of what he might or might not have already known about me. It gave me no room to lie or avoid the truth. Probably a good thing, but still annoying.

"You know, it is common for people to feel guilt or shame about aspects of their trauma that were not actually their fault. People remember their trauma differently than how it happened." His hands unfolded and he leaned forward. "Do you feel guilty?"

"I have no reason to be guilty," I replied, brows furrowing.

"That's not what I asked," he reminded me. "I asked if you felt guilty, Jackson."

"Yes." The answer came out of me without having to think further about it.

"Why is that?" Dr. McCullough questioned.

There was nothing that I could have done to change it, realistically, once it had started to happen. I wasn't a pilot. I didn't know anything about flying a plane, let alone trying to deal with one that was crashing and tumbling through the air like a gymnast. If I had things my way, it would have been Meredith on the plane with me, not April, given the petulant argument that the two of us had been stuck in before we had gone on that trip together. If she hadn't of been there, well, things between us probably still would have been just as bad as they had been before. I wouldn't have resolved anything with my father. I would have left bitter and angry.

"I didn't want her to go with me on the trip in the first place and she was the only reason I got what I needed out of being there," I looked past him as I spoke. "She got nothing but pain and trauma out of it. She might lose her career now. Did she tell you that she wants to have another kid? But she can't. That's all on me."

"That's not all on you," he disagreed. "Did you cause the plane to crash? Did you hold her at gunpoint to get her onto that plane with you? Did you will something like that to happen?"

Questions like that coming out of him made me feel ridiculous, but I knew where he was going. There was no reasonable or logical way to place the blame for something like that happening. It was cruel and random and it had been an accident. The investigation that was done by the FFA or whoever had concluded that it had been a mechanical error, an erroneous mistake but not at the specific fault of anyone who was on the plane. It had just happened, plain and simple, as malicious as it seemed.

"No," I answered simply.

"So why do you feel like it's your fault? What could you have done differently?" Dr. McCullough continued.

I shifted how I was sitting, unfolding my arms and crossing my legs. "Nothing."
"I'm not trying to sound like an asshole here," he began. "But this is how you begin to gain control of how you're feeling about it, facing that negativity. You have to recall details of the traumatic memory and reframe negative thoughts about the trauma. Now, a lot of therapists will have their patients write a letter to the past and do some kind of farewell ritual. I'm guessing that's not your type of thing. So I'd like to do something a bit different. I want you to be completely unfiltered with me. Curse, scream, whatever it is that will help you vent it out. That's how I want you to tell me about the plane crash."

"Fuck it," I breathed out impulsively. "Fuck the goddamn hearing aid and the nightmares. I hate what it's done to me. That I have to wear a damn aid just to be able to hear my own daughter or get through a day at work. I hate what it's done to April. I hate what it's done to us. I know it... I know that it brought us back together, but we're not who we were before. And of course I would want another baby with her – but I don't want her jumping into it just because she thinks that she can't have one and she wants to say screw you to the rest of the world. I want her to want it because she loves me and because she loves our family. Like I do. I love her so goddamn much. And I hate that I feel like I'm the one who ruined us. I hate it." My hands were shaking by the time that I finished, pressing them down against the tops of my thighs.

There was silence for a brief moment after I had emptied out the worst of it inside my head, and I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself again. I had always kept things bottled up – whether I was blaming it on April, or I was doing it just because it was what I had been trained to do. It felt good to be able to release it all.

"That's good," he encouraged. "Those are the kind of things that you need to allow yourself to say and feel. When you let it out, you're validating yourself. You're acknowledging what you've been through. You need that for the healing process."

I nodded slightly at his words, keeping my gaze away from him for a moment as I recovered. There was a burn of tears in my eyes, but even after what he had said and what I had already released, I refused to let them come out. I gripped onto the arm of the sofa, resisting the urge to pick at one of the loose threads that were there. I wondered if April had done the same thing when she had been the one sitting here.

"What about the nightmares?" I finally questioned, looking up.

"Guilt is likely contributing to them. As you continue with these sessions and acknowledging the reality of the events, it should help them fade. For now, I'd like to try imagery rehearsal treatment with you, and I'm going to write you a prescription for prazosin. It's off-label but one of the best for PTSD. In addition to preventing nightmares and insomnia, it can help improve overall symptoms, such as flashbacks and irritability or anger."

"I've read about imagery rehearsal treatment," I muttered, running my hand over my head. I wasn't sure how I felt about being given a drug right off the bat, but I'd do a little more research before trying it. "I reimagine it with a happy ending, basically, right?"

"Correct," Dr. McCullough nodded.

"A hell of a thing to try and make rainbows and sunshine out of," I commented.

"It doesn't necessarily have to be rainbows and sunshine," he remarked. "But something lighter and better than reality. Something to remind you that those worse case scenarios that your mind may go to, they aren't what happened."

A sigh pushed out of my nose and I shut my eyes. "So we're on the plane..." I started, hand
tightening around the arm of the sofa. I could feel the jolts of the plane around me, seeing the panic on April's face. "It's shaking. There's turbulence. April's scared. All I can think about is the fact that I lost the closest man I'd ever had to a father in a plane crash." Mark was on my mind more than ever. "But we're not crashing. I'm right when I tell her not to worry. We get through the turbulence." That was harder to imagine. But I know what April looks like when she's at peace. That's the expression that made me feel at ease, too.

"That's a start," he encouraged. "I want you to try and do that before bed. The more detail that you can give it, the better, even if it's just inside of your head and you're not vocalizing it. Allow yourself to take control."

Control.

That had been a terrifying part of all of it, even if it didn't come to mind quite so easily as some of the rest of it. I had no control over the situation. Neither had April or anyone else. All of it had been beyond anyone's control, from the way that we had tumbled through the air to the hours that we had spent alone in the forest, hoping that someone would find the both of us alive before it was too late for either of us. I hadn't been able to control what I could and couldn't hear for months, and now, I was getting that back. I was finally in the operating room again. But April hadn't found that level of control back, not yet.

For the remainder of my appointment, Dr. McCullough walked me through a few different scenarios that I could try before bed and wrote out the prescription for me, sending it to the CVS by my house. It was ready by the time that I had to drive home and wait in line at the drive-thru. The clerk asked if I had questions – I did, certainly, but I politely declined. I would answer them myself.

When I get back to the house, the garage was empty. April must have still been at the hospital with Harriet. I'd thought that she was only going to be there for a half day, but it didn't surprise me that she got lost in practice. It must have been harder now that I was operating and she still wasn't.

There were a few old texts on my phone from a group chat that the attendings had. Apparently, there had been chaos in the emergency room after a huge MVC had come in. That was just another day of the week, really, a part of living in a city as big and rainy as Seattle.

But that was also going to frustrate April, I was sure, given that she wasn't able to participate it in the way that she wanted to. Going through the junk drawer in the kitchen that was mainly filled with food menus, I pull out the one to her favorite Chinese restaurant, picking up the phone to order delivery and placing our usual order with my fairly expected request – extra fortune cookies. After not too long of being home, I hear the garage door go up. That must have been April and Harriet.

"Can you believe the Daddy beat us home?" The first thing that I hear is April's voice, higher pitched than usual and undoubtedly talking to Harriet. I smiled.

"Daddy!" Harriet cried out enthusiastically when she saw me, reaching out to me.

"Hey, ladybug." I greeted as I approached them, lifting Harriet from her mother's arm. I stretched her high into the air and spun her around, listening to the loud fits of laughter that came from our little girl, before settling her back down into my arms again. "Did you have a good day today?" I asked, nuzzling my nose softly against her cheek and breathing her in.

"Happy," she answered as she wrapped her tiny arms around my neck. My hand rubbed her cheek for a moment, breathing her in and glad that she was such an affectionate little girl.
"Hey, Apes," I greeted her mother after a moment, stepping forward to kiss her on the cheek.

April turned her head, catching my lips in a quick kiss. "Hi."

"I went ahead and ordered Chinese for dinner. I thought that you might want a break from cooking. Plus, extra fortune cookies." I wiggled my eyebrows teasingly with the words, glad to see a smile crack across her expression.

"Guess what?" She questioned, skipping past my words quickly.

"What?"

"I got to work today!" The words are squealed out and nearly mashed together with her enthusing.

"Huh?" I questioned.

"The emergency room was a complete mess and there weren't enough hands on deck when the MVC came in today. I was already down there talking to Hunt and when they were all coming in, he asked if I thought I was good enough to dive in and help out – and I just did it. I didn't think about it, I didn't question or doubt myself, I just did it." She was beaming as she spoke, a wide smile stretched across her lips and dimpling one of her cheeks. "It was amazing, Jackson! I haven't felt like myself in such a long time and that was just such a good feeling. I feel… I just feel so good, after all of that. I didn't get to go into the O.R. but I was doing triage and whatnot. It's like I'm myself again. And you know what? I talked to Bailey afterward. She said to come in tomorrow and she'd scrub in with me, that we could do an appy together and she'd seen about getting me back to work full-time again." April rambled on excitedly.

The news was an unexpected delight to hear and I was sure that it showed on my face from the slow reaction that I had to process the information. I hadn't realized how close she was to getting back to work again. My gaze dropped to her arm for a moment, examining the wounds there closer. That was good news. It was great news, actually. My own smile began to crack across my face as I nodded enthusiastically.

Maybe this would help with the guilt, too.

"That's amazing, baby." I leaned down and captured her lips in another hard kiss, feeling her smile against my lips. It had been a long time since we had kissed like this, enthusiastic and joyful without worry. God, it felt good. I had missed this. I had really, really missed this. "That's so amazing. I'm so happy for you."

"Me too," April beamed as she pulled away from me, her forehead pressing against mine. "Mommy's going back to work!" She cooed out with a look at Harriet.

"Yes, yes she is." I echoed. "I'm really happy."

For a few minutes, the three of us just danced around the kitchen with one another, celebrating the joyous victory that April had finally overcome. It had haunted me, the fact that she may never operate again, seeing those scars on her. The scars might have been there, but it wasn't going to be enough to bring her down. She was better than that, stronger than that. That was some knowledge that would make it that much easier to sleep well at night. It offered a little extra reality to the ideas that I was supposed to be getting through my head – a little less guilty for me to have to bear.

An interruption finally came in the sound of the doorbell ringing. I handed Harriet back over to April so she could get her in her high chair while I got the door, quickly answering the door. I paid, tipped generously, and thanked him as he handed over the food, and he confirmed that there were
some extra fortune cookies inside the bag.

"Do you want to pour some wine to celebrate?" I asked as I began to set out the food.

"Beer is gonna be better, I think," she replied with a shake of her head, situating Harriet before heading over to the fridge and pulling out two cans.

Everything got sorted out quickly, fortune cookies dumped out in the middle of the table. I knew Harriet enjoyed them just as much as her mother did even if they were a little hard for her. The moment that I got a bite of food in my mouth, I realized just how hungry I was. Therapy had been mentally exhausting but I hadn't realized that it had managed to take such a toll on my body, too. Hopefully, that would either change and become a good thing, like the kind of exhaustion that came after a good workout.

"Oh!" The noise came through a mouthful of April's food.

My eyebrows raised at her silently as I chewed and swallowed my own food, taking a sip of beer.

"I didn't even ask – how did therapy go? Did you like Dr. McCullough?" She spoke.

"Oh," I breathed out, leaning back in my chair slightly. "It was alright. He seems like a good guy – kind of blunt, though, which I guess is a good thing." I remarked, watching her nod in agreement.

"He gave me a prescription for prazosin. I know it's not a sleeping med, it's for high blood pressure, but apparently, it's really good for nightmares." I explained, picking at the napkin in my lap slightly.

"That's a good thing," April encouraged. "They've been eating you alive, Jackson. I know you don't like to complain about it but I've been able to see it. You don't sleep nearly enough. I don't know how you're making it through the day at work."

"It's been a little hard," I admitted with a shrug of my shoulders, trying to minimize it.

"Are you going to do that in therapy?" She questioned, snatching a fortune cookie from the middle.

My brow furrowed. "Do what?"

"That." She motioned to me. "Brush off what you're going through and try to act like it's no big deal. Because you need to be honest, Jackson. That's the only way that you can get better, you know? It's the same thing now that it was after the shooting when they made all of us do that mandated therapy. You can't take it less seriously just because your job isn't hanging over your head."

"I am taking it seriously," I replied defensively. "It's just a lot to, you know, vent all of it out at therapy then come home and do it all over again. It was exhausting enough the first time," I explained, growing a little irritated with her assumptions.

She frowned. "Do you promise me that you're taking it seriously?"

"Yes." For a moment, it was a bit like talking to my mother. "I am. Trust me, I don't like having these nightmares, okay? I just… I process things differently than you. You know that."

"I know." April pushed her plate a bit in front of her, hands folding together and looking down. "I just… I'm sorry if I'm asking too much. But I know that after Samuel, I didn't ask when I should have and it made things so much worse for us. We're supposed to be learning from our mistakes together, right? So I feel like I need to ask. To be there for you."
It was a precarious balance and we both knew that after all that we had been through together. April hadn't asked after Samuel died, she had run away halfway across the world, and I hadn't let it forget it for months after she had come back. Things were different now. I knew that she wouldn't do anything like that again because of Harriet. Yet her asking doesn't feel as good as I thought it might have after we had lost our son. It just made me defensive. Maybe it was because of the guilt or maybe it was something else. Whatever it was, I needed to find some kind of middle ground. Therapy could have been it, but it was hard to tell right now.

"No, I'm sorry, I'm overreacting." I breathed out my own apology, wetting my lips. "You're right. I guess now I get it – why after Samuel, you didn't want to talk about it…" The tables had turned on us. She was the one pushing and I was the one hiding away.

"Yeah, I guess I get it too." April murmured.

The two of us sat in a reproachful silence for a long moment, trying to figure out where to go from there. Moving forward in the same way that we had in the past, well, we knew that would only lead to more failure. Even if we couldn't get divorced again, there were still risks. We could break up. She could have moved out. Neither of us really wanted that, not when we had found a good balance with what we were doing and raising Harriet. I didn't want to threaten that.

"Maybe we should set up some kind of guidelines, or something…” I suggested, setting my hands back on the table.

"What do you mean?" She asked.

"We could have some clear things that we always talk to one another about. Maybe physical things – like if you're having problems with your arm or hand, nerve issues, whatever, you always tell me about it. And if I'm having issues with my hearing aid or anything, then I tell you about it. We're each other's medical proxy. We should know about those type of things, anyway," I started, watching her expression carefully. "And then maybe… some of the more mental stuff, we stay honest with Dr. McCullough and keep each other on track about going to all of our appointments and doing the followup work, but we just… let it be, unless the other volunteers." Maybe with a little help from therapy, volunteering to open up would be easier. "How does that sound?"

April took a loud, deep breath. "That would be fair," she agreed with a slight nod of the head, thinking the words over. "I just… I don't want to agree to that and have you think that because I'm not pushing you, I'm not trying or I don't care. I do care. I care so much, Jackson, and I need you to know that."

"I do know that." I reached across the table and offered my hand, squeezing hers gently as she took it. "I know that and I trust you, baby. I trust you and I love you. This way I just… I think it's a good balance of keeping each other responsible for being truthful without pushing it too far. Honestly, I was… really exhausted after therapy. I came home and just did nothing for a little while beside order dinner." I admitted, shrugging my shoulders slightly.

"Yeah, I get it," she nodded in agreement. "I was drained after my first session, too. I just sat in the car for a minute and kind of zoned out, like, oh crap, that was a real thing that actually just happened." She admitted sheepishly, squeezing my hand back.

"I guess it does feel a little unreal, in hindsight," I muttered. "But I think we can dot his."

"One question," she threw in.

"Uh-huh?" I asked.
"Where would the whole… I want a baby thing fall?" April asked shyly, shoulders slouching as she shrunk slightly.

A deep breath filled my lungs as I processed her question. I knew that when we had talked about it previously, my response to her had without a doubt left much to be desired. As much as I loved Harriet and the idea of having another child with her, I didn't want her to think that being able to conquer this one thing was going to fix everything else that was going on in our life. Having another child would mean more challenges, especially if it wasn't going to be as easy as getting pregnant the first two times had been.

And truthfully, I didn't think either of us could handle another harsh blow.

"That can be a discussion that the two of us have together," I began hesitantly, carefully picking and choosing my words. I didn't want to get her hopes up, but I didn't want to leave her crushed, either. "I know that it's something that you feel strongly about. I'm not… I'm not against it, okay? I want you to know that. I just don't want to jump into this big decision when we're not necessarily in the best place in our lives."

"I do feel strongly about it," she confirmed with a vigorous nod of her head. I watched her nervously rub the scars on her arm. "I'm feeling better today than I have in a long time, to be honest. I know it's because I'm getting back to work. I feel strong and I feel like myself again and… I just think that means that it would be a good idea to start trying. Especially if, you know, it's going to be hard, like I said last time. I'm in a good place and it could be a long process. Even if it does, by some miracle, happen quickly, we'll still have another whole nine months before the baby would actually be here. There's a long timeline for this, either way." She elaborated.

"I get that," I agreed. "And maybe we could go to a specialist and get a second opinion about the likelihood of getting pregnant before we really dive into it. A second opinion is always a good thing. I trust Arizona, but she's a neonatal specialist, not a fertility specialist." I released the breath I was holding onto. "I just want to feel more secure in our relationship first."

"What do you mean by that?" April asked.

This was the part that I thought she might not like.

"I'm just… a little bit worried that you want a baby as some means to prove that you can do what you've been told that you couldn't. That it's not because you want another baby with me," I confessed, deciding to go for full honesty.

"Seriously?" She questioned.

I nodded my head.

"Jackson– no, no, honey, that couldn't be further from the truth. I love you. No matter what we've been through, the ups and downs and the divorce and everything else between, I love you. Okay? That's never been a question. It's always been there, it's always been a fact. I have always known that I loved you. Even in the moments where I wanted to hate you, I love you. You're the only man that I could see myself having a family with. That's always been the truth for me." April began emphatically, standing up from the table as she spoke.

"Then where did all of the baby stuff come from? I mean, were you thinking about having another one before?" I asked.

"No," she admitted with a shake of her head. "But having Arizona tell me that I couldn't – it just
reminded me of how much I could. I always wanted kids and a family with you. You know that. Two boys and a girl, just like I said on that first day when we were interns at Mercy West. And I still want that with you. Life is short. Life is so short and I don't want to miss out on some opportunity, something that I really want, because of a plane crash or an injury or old age or anything else. I can't just look at these missed opportunities. I love Harriet more than anything, she makes me happier than anything, and I can't even begin to imagine how happy our lives would be if we could double that joy." She explained thoroughly.

My heart was warmer than I could begin to express upon hearing all of those words leave her lips. I stood up from behind the table and walked over to meet her, cupping her face between my hands and bending down to place a hard, firm kiss across her lips, letting her know quietly just how much I loved her and that deep down, I felt the same, even if there was some hesitation on the surface because of everything else that we had been through. Of course, I did want a family with her. I just wanted it to be at the right time for once. We hadn't had that with Samuel or Harriet. We deserved something easy, at the end of the day.

"How about we agree to go to a fertility specialist? We can ask around for some recommendations," I suggested.

"I'd like that a lot." A smile filled her lips, a glisten of appreciative tears gleaming in her eyes as she squeezed my hand.

"I want you to be happy," I reminded her. "I do. And I would love for Harriet to be a big sister. I think that she'd be great at it. And... I think that right now, we're doing a good job about being rational and talking things out. That's new for us."

"Yeah, it is." There was still a smile on April's lips, but this time, it was just a little bit sad. "Let's keep it that way, okay?"

"Of course," I nodded quickly. "We're doing it better this time, April. I promise, we are."
Diligent work was put into braiding the back of my hair. I braided it frequently for work and rarely was it a big deal or something that I thought twice about. Often, it was easier to flip a braid up and tuck it into a scrub cap than it was a ponytail just because it was all contained, and it came down much neater. But today, it's more than just convenience for sticking it in my cap in case I get to operate on someone today. It's attention to detail, proof that my hands and fingers can work and do the same things that they did before. One little piece, the icing on the cake, doing everything that I could to make it known.

My baby hairs are smoothed back behind my ears, makeup covering up the small bags beneath my eyes. Today was going to be my day. Even though I had gotten to get back to work in the emergency room the day before, that had been an impulse, an opportunity to prove myself – but far from planned or conventional. It had been out of desperation from the others.

Now, it was a well-thought out decision, one in which I had to continue to prove myself. I had to make sure that it hadn't just been luck that had kept my hand steady while I was working in the trauma room. It would take much more to prove that I was ready to be an operating room again. Operating with Bailey was something that normally I wouldn't have thought twice about in the past, especially on something as simple as an appendectomy. They were simple procedures that certainly didn't require two surgeons as talented as each of us were individual. Interns and residents generally handled it unless there was something else factoring in. But now, it was going to be the thing that proved to her my hands were as they had been before, that the accident had not taken away my ability to do the best job in the world.

The alarm on the counter buzzed, reminding me that I needed to leave. Being on-time was rarely an issue for me. Sure, I had fallen out of my usual routine, but waking up this morning had been easy. I just wanted to make sure that I was bright and early for everything.

Harriet and Jackson were already in the kitchen getting ready. I'd been dealing with her most mornings now since he was working properly and I, well, hadn't been. Given that today was such a big deal for me, though, he had taken over all of the regular morning duties – breakfast and getting her dressed, making coffee, citing that he wanted to do everything possible to make today as much of a breeze as possible for me. It was appreciated though hard to focus on anything other than the prospect of getting back inside of an operating room again.

"Sweetheart?" I caught Jackson peeking in through bedroom. "Are you ready?"

"Yes!" I called out, briefly straightening up the counter before joining him. "I'm good to go."

He bent down, kissing my lower lip softly. "I'm excited for you," he murmured.

"You don't have to be. I'm excited enough." I smiled up at him.

Even though he had taken over most baby duties for the morning, I still scoop Harriet up to take her to the car, covering her with sweet kisses and hugs, letting all of my joy flow from myself to her. She doesn't put up a fuss getting into the car seat, or when we get to daycare. It was a good thing, it made it just a little easier to get excited about working again.

"Good luck today," Jackson murmured after walking me down to the emergency room.
"I don't need it." I beamed up at him.

"I know." He gave me a smile before walking off.

Checking the time on my watch, I was early. Bailey was likely to be early too, of course. Even though I knew she was busy with being the chief, she was still an absolute force to be reckoned with and managed all of her responsibilities flawlessly now. It had been a bit of a bumpy start, sure, with the whole Minnick debacle. I knew Minnick was still hanging around the hospital too. Hopefully, I could go a day or two without having to see or deal with her while I adjusted back.

The emergency room looked the same as it always did. Owen had teasingly complained that things were never running as smoothly without her as they were with, but I knew that he had managed to get everything under control in the months since the plane crash.

Optimism was something that had been shaky in the past few months. I had done my best to keep my faith despite everything that was happening in my life, I knew that was important. I couldn't give up on my faith and survive everything else in my life. I had to keep it together for Jackson and for Harriet, and for myself. Believing and praying made it a little easier with every day that passed. Today was the day that I really needed to keep it close to my heart and close to my hands. I had been the one to harvest and grow my talent but it all due to Him and His eternal love, the strength that He gave me. Today would just be a demonstration of that.

"Kepner!" Upon hearing my name, I turned around quickly. "Are you ready to scrub in?" Bailey questioned before I had the chance to greet her or say anything else.

"Yes, of course," I answered with a quick nod. "Ready when you are."

"I'm always ready." Bailey took off toward the elevators and I followed immediately.

Jitters began to surface and I pressed my palms against the outside of my thighs to make sure that they're still. It was the first time that I had to do it for something that, well, was technically within my control. The little shakes were just from being excited about getting back into my favorite place.

"Now, you know that I have to be hard on you today. Nothing can go wrong on this procedure. I know you know how to do an appendectomy but you've been out of the game for a while now." Her voice was firm as she spoke and I understand why.

"I know," I nodded. "Today's going to be fine, I promise. I'm ready to operate. I'm so ready."

"I trust you," Bailey said with a look up at me. "I know that you're good at your job, Kepner, and I know that Hunt is more than ready to have you back in the emergency room today. I want everything to go well today."

"Thank you," I smiled sincerely down at her.

A soft sing went off as the elevator doors opened again and we stepped out. Though Bailey was short in stature, she moved as if she hadn't the longest legs in the world, quick as always. All of the extra energy in my system made it easier than usual to keep up with her. Both of our names were already written on the O.R. board. Nice and early in the morning, there would be no distractions for either of us given how short the procedure generally was.

Reaching the scrub room, I smiled to myself before turning on the sink and beginning the four minute process of thoroughly washing my hands and forearms. The cool water felt good against my skin. From washing my hands so frequently, they had always been a little dry. It felt different
against the burns on my arm. Though the prescribed lotion had helped and I slathered it every
night in some different conception to try and minimize the appearance of scars across my arm, it
would never look as smooth or beautiful as it had before the accident. Usage had returned to where
it was, but the appearance never would. I had always preached that the inside mattered more than
the outside. Now was the time to believe it.

Just over four minutes passed and Bailey had finished humming her tune, and I followed her into
the O.R., back first. I can't keep the smile off my face as I slip into the familiar surgical down and
one of the scrub nurses put gloves on my hands, size six and a half, just like always. It felt too
good, too comfortable. It was right where I was supposed to be.

"You make the first cut. Kepner. This is your show. I'm just here to witness it." Bailey said.

Taking a deep breath, I nod my head. I could do this.

"Tin blade." I requested.

The weight of the instrument is familiar in my hands. Pressing the sharp blade into the flesh of the
patient on the table, it glided across for that first incision easily. My hand did exactly what I
wanted it to – just the right amount of pressure, the seamless control without a tremor. All of the
hours of physical therapy and practicing on fruits and gloves and everything else was proving itself
to be worth the frustration and tears right now. Every careful step taken proved that one of my
worst fears had not become a reality. I could do this. I could be a surgeon again.

Time flies by. Even though this particular surgery was always a quick one, it seemed to go faster
than ever, faster than what was possible. The thrill and excitement of being back inside of an
operating room even for something as simple and occasionally boring as an appendectomy
distorted my sense of time, and it's far too soon before I'm putting stables inside of the body and
closing him up for good.

"Everything looks good," Bailey said as I stepped away from the table. "You don't need me or
anyone else to babysit you."

"Thank you," I beamed as I pulled the surgical mask off my face, nearly hugging her. The only
thing that stopped me was the fact that we both needed to scrub out. "Thank you," I repeated.

"Don't thank me," she shook her head. "You worked hard for this."

Her words were true. I had worked hard. The plane crash had already changed so much between us
and I couldn't imagine losing such a big part of my life because of it. Enough was already different,
some of it for the worse, but this didn't have to be one of those things.

Pushing the knob on the sink with my elbow and turning it off once I was finished scrubbing out
again, I shook some excess water droplets of my hand before grabbing a paper towel to finish
drying them and tossing it away. I was done. The patient was alive and stable and their appendix
would go to medical waste like anything else. I was a surgeon again. A kickass, crazy talented,
trauma surgeon who had managed to overcome something that had seemed so impossible at the
beginning. There was nothing in the world that could stop me and nothing that could take away
this feeling from me.

A confident smile on my face for the first time in a long time, I pulled my scrub cap and let my
braid fall back out, tucking it into the front pocket of my scrubs and heading to the elevator to go
down to the emergency room. If I wasn't going to be busy in the operating room, then I would be
busy downstairs in the E.R. There was almost always something down there going on and today,
even though it was a little twisted, I was hoping that something gnarly would come in. I wanted to prove myself on so much more than just a simple appendectomy. Anyone could have done that with a little luck. I needed something that was going to prove that I was just as crazy talented as I had always been and that there was not any room for doubt about it.

Elevator doors opened up and I headed into the E.R., taking everything in for what it was. It was a little noisy but not over the top, and I could see the interns and residents keeping busy with what was going in and out, assessing cases for what was surgical and what could be catered off for another department to handle.

"April." Owen's surprised voice caught my attention and I turned my head, a smile filling my curves. "How did your surgery with Bailey go?" He asked.

"Perfect." I beamed. "I'm cleared for work like normal. I'm back here full-time."

"That's great." To my surprise, he pulled me in for a quick hug. I returned the embrace fondly. He had always been like an older brother to me and his support was expected. "I'm glad to have you back, April. Things around here just aren't the same without you."

"Well, hopefully, that'll never happen again." I would have to keep my fingers crossed for that.

"Hopefully," he agreed with a nod as he pulled away. "Well, let's get you back to work. I'm sure that you must be itching for it." A sympathetic smile rested on his lips as he looked down at me, clapping my shoulder.

I nodded along with him. "Of course," I agreed. "I love Harriet and it's been so nice to have more and more time with her lately, don't get me wrong, but it just feels wrong not to be as work. This place is just as much of a home to me as my actual home is, so…" My words trailed off and I shrugged my shoulders.

"I get what you mean," Owen murmured. "Have things been easier at home? With Jackson?"

"Yeah," I breathed out with a nod. I had nearly forgotten that I had talked to him about everything. "We... we're in a good place right now, actually, both individually and as a couple, I think. I don't know that it's been like that for us since before everything with Samuel happened. So it's really good for the both of us. And we're maybe going to try for another baby soon, so that's a good thing." I shouldn't have been telling anyone that just yet – but if there was anyone in this hospital who was going to understand the insatiable desire for one, it was Owen.

"Really?" His eyebrows shot up. "April, that's great." He smiled. "That's great, for the both of you. I'm sure that Harriet would be a good old sister, too."

"I think so," I agreed. "It might be a little uh, hard, but we're going to give it a try anyway."

Both of our pagers suddenly went off at the same time and we each paused the conversation to look at them. An incoming was coming from an MVC, multiple people with sustained injuries. This was what I had been asking for today. I couldn't help but smile even though the information wasn't necessarily good.

"Good luck," Owen said firmly. "Now, let's get to work."

The day in the emergency room flew by. I barely had time to get coffee or stuff a snack down between everything that was going on. Four different patients came into the emergency room and two of them were critical, desperately in need of an O.R. stat. Being able to lead in my own surgery right off the bat was thrilling, not having a babysitter or someone watching me more carefully than
they were watching their own hands. It was the assertion and independence that I needed to prove myself, even if there was no one to witness it besides the second year. Despite how hard of a save it was, I bring him out to the other side against all odds. By the time I scrub out, I'm nearly disappointed to have to come down from such an intense high of adrenaline.

The end of the day came by far sooner than I expected it to. There was a part of me that was ready for another shift right then and there, even if my feet are just a little sore, no longer used to spending all day on them. But it was easy enough to ignore. All of the other great things that came from this were more than worth a little soreness that I would get used to as soon as this was my regular schedule again.

Finding my way back downstairs again but not bothering to change out of my scrubs, it doesn't take me long to find Jackson. He was waiting for me with Harriet in her stroller already, bending down to greet me with a kiss as I approached the both of them. I kissed Harriet on her cheek.

"How was the surgery? I saw you had another on the O.R. board." He questioned, smiling.

"It was perfect. I'm back to my old self again." In a professional sense, at least. The same could not be said for much else but that was fine. "I had a long surgery on an MVC guy who shouldn't have made it, but, he did. I'm great. I'm so happy."

"Well, I've got another piece of good news for you, too," Jackson commented as we began to head toward the car, one arm around me and the other pushing our daughter's stroller.

"What's that?" I asked, glancing up at him.

"I pulled a couple of strings and connections that my mom has, and I got us an appointment at the Sound Fertility clinic with Dr. Lin. She's supposed to be one of the best in the city and my mom knows her, she's heard nothing but good things about her, so… it should be a good place to start. I thought it would be a little bit of a stretch to head down the coast and see Addison Montgomery. I know that a couple people around here know and recommend her, but it's a two day drive, so…"

We both knew why flying was out of the picture. "She actually wasn't accepting new patients but once I talked to her one-on-one, she penned us in immediately."

A large smile grew across my face. "Really?" After the conversations that we had about it, I thought it was something I would have to do myself. "That's– wow, thank you, that's great. When's the appointment?" I questioned, picking up Harriet from her stroller to put her in the car seat.

"Tomorrow morning," Jackson answered simply.

"Really?" I questioned, glancing at him as he put up the stroller in the back seat of the car. "That soon? How did she have the time in her schedule?"

"She moved stuff around for us," he shrugged slightly, shutting the trunk and walking around to the driver's seat. I got in the passenger seat. "She said that she was happy to do anything for the son of Catherine Avery. Can't say my last name's given us nothing."

I reached over, squeezing his hand as he began to back out of the parking spot. "Thank you for this."

"Don't," he stole a quick kiss from my lips before beginning to drive. "I want this too, April. I know that I may not have made that clear at the beginning, but I'd make a hundred babies with you."

"I'd make a hundred babies with you, too." I beamed to myself. "A hundred and two."
"A hundred and two might be excessive. Let's just stick with one hundred." Jackson chuckled. "What do you think about that, Hattie?" His voice softened slightly as he spoke to our daughter and I glanced back at her briefly to watch her little facial expressions. "Do you think that you'd like to have a little brother or sister?"

"Yeah!" Harriet enthused. I'm not sure if she understood the question completely, but it made me smile.

"You're such a good girl," I cooed, twisting my arm and reaching back for her. Her tiny fingers wrap around one of mine and hold it and squeeze it. For the rest of the car ride, I keep my arm just like that even though it hurt my shoulder just a bit.

Pulling into the driveway, it's a little later than the time that we would have usually gotten home from a day of work. To try and compensate for it and not mess with Harriet's nightly routine too much, I make quick work of dinner and throw on a pot of pasta to make some spaghetti for all of us. She still got a bit fussy if we weren't regular about getting her to bed and neither one of us wanted to mess with her schedule like. Dinner flew by, as did bath time and putting her down for the night. With a pinch of luck, she would sleep through the entire night without waking up.

I take a long, steamy shower to clear some of the exhaustion from my body. But it's not till Jackson joined me inside that I finally relax, his hands starting innocently on my shoulders then disappearing between my thighs, bringing me over the edge before picking me up and fucking me against the tile walls. We become one, steamed up even more from the contact between us. He tired out what little energy was left inside of me.

For the sake of the appointment in the morning, I take a little longer in the shower once he was finished, washing out every little bit of me and shaving down there thoroughly. Jackson doesn't mind that I usually have some hair down there even though I maintain it neatly for both of us, really, but any time that I'm going to have a doctor appointment that involves something down there, I always clear out as much of it as I can. I know it's not necessary and that they see it on people every day. I saw it on people every day and it didn't affect me as a professional. But there was still just a little bit of a compulsion for things to be as tidy as possible. At least it gave me one tiny piece of control over the inevitable challenges that were coming our way.

Collapsing into bed that night in a clean nightie, I crawled under the sheets and curled up against him, inhaling the scent that I couldn't describe as anything other than Jackson. His arm curled around me and for once, I fall asleep without a problem.

Nor do I wake up at any point in the night from nightmares on his end. It hadn't happened in nearly a week with him. The medication that Dr. McCullough seemed to be working, he was better than he had been before. Both of us were getting better. It was almost a little worrisome to know that things were going so well. It was like a reminder that there was still a lot we could lose.

"Wake up, sleepyhead." Gentle hands gave me a slight shake.

Blinking a few times, it takes a moment for my vision to be able to focus on Jackson hovering above me. I was so used to being the first one awake that it nearly scared me.

"Hi," I breathed out quietly, beginning to sit up. "Is it really already morning?" I croaked out.

"Uh-huh," he nodded. "I'm going to go get Harriet up. I let Bailey know that we have a doctor's appointment and that we're going to be a little late. Did you tell Hunt?"

"I'll text him," I murmured. "Let me get up and use the bathroom first."
Swinging my legs off of the bed, I blindly make my way to the bathroom to get my contacts in before going about the rest of my morning routine, including a quick text to Owen to let him know what was going on. The appointment was definitely early, likely the first of Dr. Lin's day from the time that we had scheduled.

Harriet was more awake on this particular morning than I was. It's a little bit of a hassle to drop her off at the daycare in the hospital then head to the clinic building. It wasn't much of a drive, fortunately, about fifteen minutes up the road and just off of 5th Street. Trying to get parking was the worst part of it, always a nightmare in Seattle but especially at this time of day with all of the morning traffic that never seemed to cease. But Jackson does eventually pull into one of the parking garages. I was ready to be poked and prodded if it meant good news.

"After you," Jackson murmured, opening up the door for me.

The reception that greeted us was exceptionally friendly as she checked us in. There were a few forms to go through with new patient paperwork and I sit down to get them down. My medical history is complicated after everything that we had been through and it takes a little bit longer than I would have liked before I'm finished with everything and able to hand it back over to the reception to give to Dr. Lin.

Sitting back down in the waiting chairs and waiting with Jackson, trying not to grow too impatient, I lean into him. The decor is predictable – mothers and their children, posters explaining the physical aspects of pregnancy and what the body goes through. I was sure that I had seen it in some parenting book that I had read through when I was pregnant with Samuel or Harriet. Before that, I had definitely seen it in medical textbooks during the brief interest that I had with obstetrics. I could have labeled a blank one without trying.

"April Kepner?" A woman's voice called out.

"Hi, that's me." I stood up, extending my hand quickly to take hers and shake it. "And this is Jackson Avery. My– boyfriend. Partner. We've been together a long time. We have a daughter together." In a circumstance like this, it's a little awkward to not be married, but I don't linger on the thought.

"Hi, nice to meet you." Jackson threw in, taking her hand and shaking it after mine.

"Well, come on back, I'll take you both to an exam room." She smiled. "I'm Dr. Lin. I'm going to take care of everything for you. We'll get some blood work done to test for a few things and I'll have you get in the stirrups so I can look at a few things myself. I understand that you've been told in the past it's unlikely for you to be able to get pregnant?"

"Yeah," I sighed out, following her into the patient room. "I uh, we actually, we were in a plane crash a couple of months ago. I had an ovary removed and a few other things. One of the surgeons in there, she said that it was unlikely. She's a fetal surgeon. Dr. Arizona Robbins."

"A fetal surgeon?" Dr. Lin questioned, waiting for my nod before continuing. "Well, then it's a good thing you came for a surgeon. I've heard about her and I'm sure that she's immensely talented, but if she's not a fertility specialist, then I wouldn't want to trust what she said about it completely. This isn't her area of expertise. Let's get a blood draw from you and then I'll do an exam. We have our lab here so it shouldn't take long to get the results back." She explained thoroughly.

Taking a deep breath, I gave a nod. "That makes sense." Even if it seemed similar, it wasn't the exact same specialty. There was a chance that Arizona could have been wrong.
"Jackson, I would be wrong not to ask how your mother is doing." Dr. Lin spoke.

I let the two of them chatter back and forth for a moment as she took my blood, not wincing as I watched the needle go in. It's a little different to have your own blood taken that to deal with it as a doctor, but really, nurses did most of the work when it came to that kind of thing. I was surprised that Dr. Lin was doing it herself, but I suppose that was a part of what she meant when she said that she was going to handle everything herself. She left the room momentarily to hand it off to one of the orderlies as I changed into a gown.

"She seems really nice," Jackson commented while we were alone.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I hope that she's right, what she said. That Arizona just… wasn't entirely qualified to say what she said. I love her, I do, and I know that she's good at what she does. I just hope that she was wrong about this."

A knock on the door ceased our conversation and I invited her back in again, getting up on the table. As she does her exam, I stay quiet even with the bit of pressure that some of it caused. It was quite easy to be an annoying patient. I didn't want to pour out all of the things that I knew and had looked up about the situation even if it had been a lot. I was never good at stopping myself once I started spiraling into research. But this was her area of expertise. I wouldn't want her telling me how to do my job. I could try to respect that for her.

"So, how is it looking?" Fortunately, Jackson asked when I was being timid about it.

"Based on your medical history, it's about what I would expect." Dr. Lin started vaguely. "A normal uterine cavity and endometrial lining are necessary to conceive and maintain a pregnancy. Scar tissue within the uterine cavity can partially or completely obliterate the normal cavity and can interfere with conception or increase the risk for miscarriage or other complications later in the pregnancy. You don't show signs of Asherman Syndrome, which is good, and you put down that you have regular periods, is that still true?"

"Yeah," I nodded quickly. "I've never taken birth control and uh, now that I'm no longer breastfeeding my daughter and not on any medication, my periods have returned to normal. Light and regular, just like they've been my whole life. I've always been like a clock." I explained, speaking a little too quickly.

Dr. Lin nodded. "So, I need to wait for the bloodworm to get back to be sure, but right now, I don't think getting pregnant is going to be the problem. Based on the scar tissue, I would be more worried about being able to maintain a pregnancy from the first trimester and beyond." She explained. "Now, I have said that to couples who now have beautiful, happy children. I can write you a prescription that will try and help buff up your uterus, essentially. It's a progesterone supplementation, to be inserted vaginally, twice a day during the second half of their menstrual cycles. Progesterone has been shown to help stabilize the endometrium which helps the healthy embryo develop. How does that sound?"

All of the information was just a little overwhelming to hear and I took a moment to repeat what she had said in my head. It sounded correct. All of it made sense. But it was hard to say which was worse – not being able to get pregnant at all, or facing the idea of losing children to miscarriages while trying to get pregnant. It wouldn't be the exact same as Samuel. Both of us would know going in, it wouldn't catch us by surprise, and I wouldn't make it to nearly the third trimester, more than likely. The odds went down significantly after thirteen weeks. It would be painful, but a different kind of painful.

"You've had success with this before?" Jackson asked.
"Yes, absolutely," Dr. Lin answered. "Particularly for women struggling to stay pregnant."

"It's still the first half of my cycle," I murmured, half to myself. "Uh, I mean, if you think it'll work… it sounds like a good idea. Sorry, I'm just a little overwhelmed right now." I sat up, blinking back sudden tears. "I thought this was going to be a lot harder or you'd say there's no hope."

"It's nothing like that," she smiled sincerely at me. "There's always hope, especially for you two."

"I think I'd like to try it." I glanced over at Jackson, chewing at my lower lip and reading his response. He gave me a nod of his head. I figured in a situation like this, he was going to go along with whatever I said. When I had been pregnant with Harriet, I had made it clear enough that it was my body and my decision. Things were different now but he still seemed to respect that.

"Great," Dr. Lin replied. "I'll write the prescription officially once I get your blood work back and if anything is different, then I'll give you a call. You're free to go ahead and start trying as soon as you want to. Just be careful about following the instructions, which I'm sure I don't have to tell you."

That was a given. I'd always been a stickler about that type of thing but now was more important than ever.

The appointment doesn't take too long after that. A part of me wished that it had been scheduled for the night so that we could go home and talk about everything instead of having to carry it around in my head for the rest of the day, but at least there's a brief chance in the car ride with just the two of us. There was no way that I would have been able to keep all of it inside and I didn't want to blurt it out to anyone else until we had the chance to talk about it first.

"So, do you really think we should do this? That was… better news than I anticipated." Jackson admitted.

"I do," I answered with a nod. "I want this, Jackson. I really do."

"If it's going to be hard, though, I think there's one thing that we need to get out and in the open right now. I know how hard Samuel was for you and it was for me, too. We ended up grieving him together and if we're going to go through a rough time like that with this… we can't do that again. We won't make it." He breathed out. "If we're going to try, we need to be completely open with each other. No holding back. We're all in this together."

I looked at him, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze.

"Of course we'll be open. We're doing to do this, together."
JACKSON

To Dr. Lin's credit, she's right. It doesn't take time for April to get pregnant.

Immediately when we start trying for a baby, her period doesn't come two weeks later. The test turned positive and she cried with relief. But a week later, a trip to the hospital in the middle of the night proved that Dr. Lin had been right with everything that she had said. The challenge wasn't in getting pregnant. It was staying pregnant.

Something was different about it than Samuel. Maybe it was because both of us knew from the beginning that there was a good chance that it wasn't going to be a successful pregnancy, we didn't pour ourselves into it in the same way. We hadn't discussed names and there wasn't a nursery built up for the child already. It was just different. But it still hurt. Seeing her cry when the obstetrician on-call confirmed what we had both already suspected still broke her down. I held her as she cried when we both took off work that day, I sat with her in the church pew and held her while she prayed – for comfort or for guidance, I'm not sure which. It's hard to tell if she found either, but she doesn't run away from the journey we were on.

We let her body return to a more normal state and cycle again before we try for round two. It was another success. The test turned positive and I couldn't help but sigh with relief. Even if it was going to be an on and off trials, at least I knew that things were going to be easier for the both of us when the stick showed two lines instead of one, in the weeks before the bad news could come.

Opening up to one another came along with it, whether it was entirely intentional from the both of us or not. A miscarriage was painful. It was a slap in the face, no matter how expected, especially for her. It's not something that either of us can avoid talking about, not when we lived together and had Harriet together, not when we were both trying again for better luck. I didn't want to see her in pain. Getting her to open up about it was the only way to try and know if we were going too far. But she didn't open unless I did. We were both teetering along a two-way street.

Even walking on it together, though, the street was bumpy. Potholes and sharp turns, other hitches that we couldn't see coming, they were all there. It was better that we weren't going about it alone, that we were going to therapy and at least I was medicated for help with the nightmares. But shit, it was hard.

"How are you feeling this morning?" I murmured to her softly, dropping down my head to press a gentle kiss to her forehead and tucking long, soft hair behind April's ear.

"I'm okay," she smiled up at me. "Just a little tired and a little nauseous."

"That's kind of good then, isn't it?" I reasoned. "That means that you feel pregnant."

"I do," she chuckled. "Even though I wasn't this nauseous with Harriet. I took that for granted."

"Well, maybe that was a blessing or whatever, right? You had enough hard stuff then and you were dealing with it alone. Now you've got me, so – you can handle some nausea." Not my best sentiment. I was trying to appeal to something that I didn't quite believe in.

The words earned a predictable snort from April and she shook her head, though there was a soft smile on her lips that said she appreciated what I was trying to do, even if I wasn't doing a stellar
job at it. My fingers ran over a smooth lock of her hair once more, opening my mouth to say something before her pager went off with a buzz. I paused as she looked at it and let out a sigh.

"I've got to go. Incoming in the E.R." She answered before I could ask.

"I'll see you later." We shared a brief kiss. "Don't work too hard."

Watching her hurry off to the elevator with a soft smile on my face, I let go of the breath that I was holding onto. It's hard not to walk on eggshells – not because of her, but because of the situation that we were in together. It was unpredictable. Neither of us knew when everything was going to change – it could happen at any moment, sudden or not. It was a hard state to have to live in.

In order to try and compensate for that, and the fact that our jobs didn't always give us an opportunity to be together even though we did both work at the same hospital and even under the same department, we had a standing date every Friday night. Mom babysat Harriet for us, or Owen or Arizona, whoever was available that given week. It was a chance for us to unwind from the week and talk about whatever was going on, good or bad. Somehow it was easier than doing it at home. Maybe because it kept it from lingering in the room between us. There was an interruption or a waiter or getting the check or something when things became too much, one that allowed us to step back and think instead of drowning in it.

Eleven weeks. That was how far along she was with this pregnancy – for the second time, after such a hard fist loss and what we had been told by Dr. Lin, it was a good sign. Maybe things had been exaggerated or she had been particularly conservative with what she had told us, knowing that it was better than the alternative (at least with medicine). Both of us were feeling good about it. It had been an easy, happy discussion on Friday. Monday rolling around hadn't ruined either of our moods about it.

But all it took for that to be ruined was one 911 page from April. Even though it could have been about a patient, something in my gut told me that it wasn't. She rarely paged me 911. Plastics wasn't a 911 type of specialty. I know that it's over before I get there.

Entering the room, April was laying on her side with her knees pulled upward into her chest. There was a blanket covering her frame – I couldn't even tell if she had her scrub pants on. She wasn't crying like I expected her to be. Instead, she just looked exhausted and numb. The deadpanned expression on her face made me freeze for a moment, unable to speak. Was it already this bad? How were we going to keep going like this?

"April…" I started slowly as I approached.

"It's too late." She murmured. "Did you know that research among women with a history of miscarriage shows that if you see the heartbeat at nine weeks, there's a 98% chance of continued pregnancy?" She stated. "98% chance and I still couldn't keep our baby alive."

"There's nothing that you can do to control this, baby. You know that. You have to know that." I sat at the edge of the bed, setting my hand on her thigh. "Because if there was, then we wouldn't be here. I know there's not a thing in the world that you wouldn't do to have a healthy, happy baby. I know that, so you need to know that too. You're doing everything you can. But you can't fight biology. Not like this."

She winched and I can't tell if it's physical pain or my words. "The baby stopped growing at nine weeks and I didn't know. I have to have a D&C, Jackson. Or take the pills to… to make it happen."

"You should take the pills and let it happen that way," I answered without hesitation. I don't mean
to boss her around, but I know the alternative. "If you can," I added. "The D&C is going to be harder on you physically and might... it might make things harder to try again if you still want to. I'll call Dr. Lin. Let her know."

"Do you think that's best?" April asked, looking up at me with wide eyes.

"I do," I answered affirmatively, squeezing her knee gently. "I really do."

"Okay." She answered weakly.

I nearly stood up, but pause for a moment to look down at her. "But you should only do it if you're comfortable doing it, April. I just think that it would be easier for you, physically and emotionally, then having to go through a D&C. But you should still do it because you want to. Not just because I'm telling you that it's what I think is best."

"I just don't know what to do," she admitted with a mumble. "Right now, I kind of need you to just... tell me. Because I'm not going to be able to figure it out on my own."

"Okay. Okay, sweetheart." I replied with a nod, swallowing thickly and leaning down to kiss her forehead. "I'm going to call Dr. Lin, and I'll let Owen know that you're going home for the day and you won't be in tomorrow, okay? Then I'll take you home."

April doesn't offer me a verbal response, which scared me a little bit. Hesitantly, I stand up and give her one last look before stepping out of the room. The conversation with Dr. Lin is a short one. There's not much to do. She agreed with taking the pills as opposed to a D&C procedure if it could be avoided and offered her sympathy, but it doesn't make much of a difference. Two quick text messages are sent to Owen. He knew we were trying and I was sure that April had expressed in detail some of the difficulties after the first miscarriage with him. She trusted him like a brother and he knew the struggles of desperately wanting a child after his tumultuous relationship with Cristina. It was good that she was talking to people. I knew that.

I found a fresh pair of scrub pants in her size before heading back to her. Stepping back inside of the room, April hadn't moved from her current position. She doesn't say a word as I sit her up and help her into a clean pair of pants. I'm not going to push her – not yet, at least. Maybe it would be easier when we were home and had some privacy, there was no risk of coworkers seeing anything. We make our way to daycare and get Harriet quietly, waking her from a nap. Our little nineteen month old wasn't in a good mood either. It was like she could sense it.

"Why don't you lay down, and I'll bring you some tea? I'll see if I can get Harriet down." I suggested.

"Okay." She murmured.  

The lack of a response was worrisome. I knew that this was harder for her than it was for me from the physical aspect of everything and the hormones having an effect. But I knew myself, too. I knew that it was dangerous to go down that line of thinking after what had happened with our separate grieving of Samuel. I had stayed strong and silent to support her and because of that, it had nearly destroyed me when she left.

Harriet doesn't put up a fight go down for an afternoon nap. I'm grateful for that. As much as I loved her and didn't want everything that we were doing to affect our parenting her, I didn't know how to balance both of the girls in my life at this exact moment.

Making a cup of chamomile tea for her, hoping that it would help her sleep for the afternoon a little
and hope her skip past some of the physical symptoms of what was still going on inside of her body, I pause outside of our bedroom door to take a deep breath. We would have to talk about it regardless of it was now, tomorrow, or if it ended up pushed off till Friday. I didn't know if I was going to go to work tomorrow – it would depend on how she was feeling in the morning and what she wanted from me. But for now, I would be there with her, even if it meant just sitting in silence together.

She was laying on her back which meant that she wasn't about to fall asleep. Good or bad, I didn't know. Toeing my way out of my shoes and walking around to her side of the bed, I set down the cup of warm tea on a coaster.

"Here you go," I murmured. Moving back to the other side of the bed, I laid down next to her.

"Will you hold me and rub my stomach?" April requested.

"Of course, sweetheart." I slid up against her and wrapped an arm around her, my large hand settling on her stomach. She hadn't really gained any weight, not a visible kind, at least. Just a softness that I could feel as I began to massage her stomach, hoping that it would help with some of her cramps. "Is that okay?"

"Yeah," she breathed out.

The two of us lay there for a long time and don't say anything just yet. I let my eyes fall shut as I massaged her lower stomach, just above the waistband of her pants, knowing that's where she liked it best. Or at least, I assumed it was the same kind of pain that she got whenever she was cramping on her period. She doesn't say anything or ask me to change what I'm doing. I can't tell if it made a physical difference, but at least I was making sure that she knew she wasn't dealing with this alone. I was right there with her, every step of the way. I wasn't going to let her run away from it this time.

Eventually, April does fall asleep. Her breathing evens out and I can feel the tension begin to disappear from her body as exhaustion took over everything else. It allowed me to finally relax as well. This process was draining and here we were, right at the beginning again.

We would have to try again. Trying was easy. Apparently, so was getting pregnant. Samuel and Harriet had both been proof of that – we had never had to try to get pregnant before this, it had just happened with inconvenient timing. The irony that now that we wanted a baby, it was becoming so difficult, that hurt to think about. I didn't want to put her through more pain but I knew that she wasn't going to give up yet. She just wasn't like that.

Eventually, I do get out of bed instead of falling asleep with her, getting up to wake Harriet and try to keep her near the schedule that she had been on before. I wanted some semblance of normal around here, something to make it all just a little bit easier. She gets up and eats a snack in a much better mood than before, even if it's hard to dodge the questions about why Momma was asleep and why we came home early. It's too big of a topic to really explain to her. It was something that we couldn't share with her until we knew it was serious. She doesn't know about Samuel yet, and it was too soon to try to explain that or the other little siblings that she should have had and didn't. That conversation would have to wait to happen when she was a little older.

Getting dinner prepped, I decide to go for simple comfort food. Grilled cheese and tomato soup, making it just a little fancy by throwing on tomatoes and bacon for April and myself, getting out the bag of croutons to go with the soup. She always had tomato soup when she was sick, not chicken noodle. Even if this wasn't sick, it was time to take some comfort.

"Hey…" Her quiet voice caught me by surprise.
"Hi." My brows furrowed as I looked at her. "How are you feeling?" A stupid question yet it came out.

"My stomach doesn't hurt as much now." It doesn't surprise me her answer is strictly physical.

"That's good," I murmured. "I'm making some grilled cheese and tomato soup. Why don't you sit down with Harriet? I'm almost done. I'll serve you once it's ready." I suggested.

"Okay," she gave a slight nod of her head as she went to join our daughter.

Even if it doesn't fix or take away any of the pain from what we had gone through again today, it was just a bit of a relief to see her interacting with Harriet as though everything was normal. She was such a phenomenal mother. I had no doubt that she would have been just as crazy wonderful with another little girl or a little boy of our own. Fortunately, that wasn't something that I had to question.

Once the grilled cheeses were finished up, I cut them diagonally and grabbed a small bowl from the cabinet to pour the tomato soup in, sprinkling a couple of croutons. I carried the plates and bowls over to the both of them.

"Thank you, Jackson," she murmured as I set it down in front of her.

"Of course," I replied.

Harriet is the center of attention and the source of most of the noise of the duration of dinner. She was babbling along happily and didn't notice that there was a thing different with two of us. It was nice to feel normal even for a few minutes. I couldn't tell if April felt the same way from how quiet she was upon waking up. Before, she had rarely been a hard read. Even when she didn't necessarily want to open up like a book, her eyes made most things clear. But now, it was all just a little bit blurrier than it had been before.

To my surprise, she ate all of her dinner. She must not have gotten lunch because I figured that she would take a couple of bites for the sake of appeasing me and then leave it be. I clean up the kitchen once all of us are done, and let her get Harriet into the bath and ready for bed. After the first loss, once her crying was over, all she had wanted to do was coddle our little one. That seemed to carry over.

I waited for her in the bedroom, skimming through a few different research articles about pregnancy after recurrent miscarriage. The prescription that Dr. Lin had written was reliable based on the evidence. Maybe she needed a stronger dosage or more time on it before it would work. If it was time, we didn't have to keep trying. We could give ourselves a break from all of the pain that we had been going through. The parts about the psychological effects on it don't miss me, either. Anxiety. Grief. Depression. PTSD. Suicide. Even if we were still going to therapy, and I knew this was something that she talked to Dr. McCullough about, I was going to have to keep a very close eye on her. Her mental health was too important to cast aside.

The bedroom door opened up and I looked up at her with a soft smile. She looked just as exhausted as she had before. I didn't say anything as she washed her face and changed into a pair of sweatpants and a silk blouse.

"I'll make sure that Owen doesn't say anything tomorrow. I'll talk to him." I murmured as she laid down in bed next to me and curled up against me, wrapping my arm around her frame.

"Thanks," April muttered against my chest.
"Do you want to talk about it now, or do you want to hold off until Friday?" I questioned, looking down at her.

"Not tonight." She chewed at her lower lip. "I'll be ready by Friday."

I trust her. I had to. That was one of the most important of what we were doing and how we were trying to build our relationship going forward. I knew that she would be honest with me when she was ready but I also knew that if I didn't push, she might hold off on that honest for as long as she could. That was the hard part.

Owen stays a man of his word and doesn't push about April not going into work that day. When Arizona asked where she was, I told her it was a case of food poisoning. No one had known that she was pregnant in the first place except for Owen, merely because he was capable of helping April hide it in the emergency room by taking on the cases that would need x-rays or other things that could have given her away by forcing her out of the room. We didn't want to have to tell anyone until she was visible and impossible to hide. By that point, the chances for miscarriage or even spontaneous abortion should have been low.

The rest of the week went by as a drag. Friday was something that I had looked forward to in the past few weeks when we had thought that the baby was healthy and viable, but this time, it's something different. Not dread. I want it to happen because I want her to open up and talk about it. I want to talk about it too, honestly. The nightmares had eased up because instead of the flashbacks from the plane crash, I can't focus on much more than April's pain. I had traded one evil for another.

By the end of the day on Friday, there's no relief for going out. Owen had offered to take Harriet for the night. We go for sushi. She couldn't have it while she was pregnant so we may as well squeeze it in while it was an option. Hopefully, it wouldn't be for long.

"The miso soup is good for your stomach," I murmured as I noticed her not eating much.

"I know," April breathed out. "Thinking too much. It's hard to eat."

"Then talk," I stated simply.

April took a deep breath, chewing at her lower lip before she grabbed a spicy tuna roll and swirled it in some soy sauce, popping it into her mouth. I set my chopsticks down and leaned back in the booth as I waited, wanting to give her an uninterrupted opportunity to try and let out whatever was going on inside of her head.

"You know that I believe that life begins at conception and you don't." The words come out of her mouth hesitantly like she was trying to avoid an argument. My brows furrowed, waiting for her to continue. "I feel like we're seeing this differently. Feeling it differently. It's not like Samuel and… I know that we both know that but it hurts like Hell. I feel like we're killing them."

"April…" I breathed out, shaking my head. "That baby was our little boy or girl. So was the first one. I—I don't not care about it just because we have different beliefs about abortion. It's our baby."

She barely nodded. "I'm trying so hard not to ask why but the damn question keeps going through my head. Then it's not fair. To… to Him, or to Harriet. I feel like by getting so upset over this, I'm not appreciating her enough. Maybe it will continue to lessen if God ever gives us a child. Maybe not. Maybe I will one day hold those kids in heaven." I listen to every word that she said, even if I can't relate to all of it. "God sees the heartache that no one else can and heals, comforts, and strengthens like no one else could. I read that somewhere. I believe that he sees me now. I just…"
can't find the rest of that now."

"I think we'll see Samuel and them again one day." I did believe that. Maybe we didn't have the same idea of God or Heaven, but there was something to be found in the idea of being able to see that children that we lost one day.

"Do you really believe that?" April questioned, her brows furrowed.

"I do." I nodded. "Maybe I don't have the same idea of God or Heaven as you do, but… something."

"We have to keep trying." She stated.

A breath escaped from my nose and I nodded my head slightly as I began to take another piece of sushi from one of the plates in front of us. She began to eat again after I did. It's a small break from the emotional toll of being honest with one another. It was hard to hold onto hope that this would be worth it in the end. I knew that she didn't want to give up, but I did hate to put her through it over and over again. There were other methods – surrogacy, adoption. Dr. Lin had mentioned it after the first miscarriage but she hadn't said a word on it.

"Do you ever think about trying in other ways?" I questioned gently, not wanting to push it or make it seem like I was giving up on her. "Dr. Lin talked about surrogacy or adoption. There are plenty of babies out there…"

"No." She shook her head. "I want to do this. I know that Zola made Meredith and Derek so happy and that Arizona loves Sofia like she's her own even though Callie carried her. And I know that I would love a baby like that, too, as long as it's ours. But… just being told by Arizona that I couldn't, or by Dr. Lin that it was unlikely… it makes me feel like I have to do it. My entire life has been full of people who didn't really believe in me. They never thought I was good enough to be a doctor or hardcore enough to be a surgeon. This is just one more thing. I can't let people telling me it's impossible to stop it. I have to do it."

Oh. So that's what it was with her. The thought of surrogacy or adoption didn't phase me – maybe it was because I wasn't the one who had to go through the physical process of pregnancy, it wasn't that much of a difference who carried it to me. But she was right. She had a history of people not believing in her, no matter how she deserved their support.

"I believe in you, April," I affirmed. "And I believe in us."

"Thank you." The words are an emotional whisper as she reached across the table, squeezing my arm.

The rest of our meal was finished and it was easier. Most of it was out in the open – I knew that she was questioning everything, her faith and herself included, even if she hadn't hit the point of doubt. I was worried that was going to come at some point or another. But I believed in her, her resilience, even if I didn't want to push it so intensely. That was the thing that worried me.

Once our meal was paid for and we left the restaurant, we swung by Owen's place to pick up Harriet, making quick conversation with him and Amelia. A part of me had to question whether or not they were trying, too. I didn't know how Amelia felt on the kids' matter, I'd never really known her that well. She was a wisecracker and fiery but I didn't know her on a very personal level. But Owen wanted them intensely. I could see it with the way that he stared at Harriet and even Amelia had those same soft eyes as she looked at our daughter. Maybe we weren't the only ones struggling with fertility.
Of course, it was a common struggle, even if it wasn't one that was frequently spoken about. So many miscarriages happened across the country every day even though people didn't talk about it. I was sure that April had dealt with it in the emergency room. It was probably harder now than it had ever been.

"How was she?" I asked Amelia.

"Good," she smiled. "Sweet as always, of course. She had Owen singing Moana. That was a real treat."

"Yeah, Hattie's been pretty obsessed with it lately. She pretty much won't watch anything besides it and The Little Mermaid, but I think that's just because of Ariel's hair." April murmured, hitching Harriet up on her hip and kissing her forehead.

"Thanks for watching her again," I offered. "We appreciate it."

"Of course, any time. You know that." Owen answered with a firm nod of her head. "I hope you two had a good time."

April glanced at me. "We did."

Good may not have been the best word to put on it, or maybe not in the most obvious context. It was good that we were staying open with one another and being mature in the way that we were handling it. It was good that we were continuing to move forward. But the pain that we were experiencing with each loss that came to us was far from good. It was destructive.

But despite that destructive pain that has to come in between, we focus on the goal. A baby. Our baby. How could we hope for anything else? That was where this all came from.

After her next period comes, we start to try again. That was the easy part for the two of us, after all. Each loss meant for something different in the bedroom. No longer was it just sex or making love, but instead, it was a need for something greater. There was something more intimate about trying so desperately to create a baby with one another. It came in holding onto each other tighter than before, that long pause after each of us had reached her high and we hesitated to move from the closeness of the position. Every movement was careful and calculated, holding on so tightly as if something might disappear should we not. Neither of us gets up immediately after, lying there and holding onto one another desperate for conception.

This time, she doesn't get pregnant immediately. It's hard to say whether or not that's better or worse. When she got her period, she groans about the cramps and sends me to the store for Midol. The nine-month anniversary of the plane crash came. April stays in bed that day. To me, it's not as important as some of the others. One month, six months, one year. But I know why she's obsessed with nine months. If she had been pregnant, our baby would have been due. Born maybe.

"Sweetheart?" I called out to her, seeing her from beneath the covers of our bed.

She muttered something indistinguishable.

"Dr. Lin called with the results of your last blood test. Your progesterone is still low so she wants you to double your medication. She sent the prescription to the pharmacy, so we can pick it up on the way home from work tomorrow."

It was one of those situations where being right wasn't a validating experience.

But as she was instructed, April doubled her medication. She was good about taking it every time
at the same time of day, not letting work or surgery mess up her schedule of taking it, waking up early enough on the weekends that she didn't have to worry about that interfering, either. Some doctors made the worst patients, but it seemed like for her, she had to be the perfect one. Instead of letting all her knowledge make her think that she knew better than Dr. Lin, she let it remind her exactly why she needed to follow every little detail of her word.

Another missed period comes. Given the history that had been the past months of her period, it really hadn't been consistent since Harriet had been born according to her and then the way that miscarriages could mess up the body, we can't depend on that to be a positive sign. We wait for two weeks before taking the test. It's next to impossible to keep with the idea. But we balanced each other out. The moments that I couldn't seem to wait any longer, she was the one to ground me. When I found her clutching onto the box of the pregnancy test and reading over the instructions like she hadn't already taken multiple this year, I got her back down again. It was a push and pull process, but it seemed to work for us.

When two weeks finally pass, it's a relief to wait outside of the bathroom door for her as she peed on the stick. Married or divorced or whatever it was between the two of us, she'd never liked to use the bathroom in the same room as me. She still had some privacy things here and there. It was kind of adorable, even if a little frustrating right now.

Watching my watch carefully, I waited until five minutes had passed.

"Well?" I called out loudly, waiting for an answer. "What does it say?"
Chapter 12

APRIL

Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

It's not easy to stare at the arms on my watch slowly drag by with each passing second. Maybe it would have been easier to take a deep breath and join Jackson waiting in the hallway but I can't get off of the bathroom floor. Nothing about this moment made me feel pregnant. Instead, all I felt was absolutely terrified.

Pregnancy didn't mean anything, not anymore. I had been seven months pregnant with Samuel when the news had come that had shattered my entire world and at the end of the day, Jackson and I had still come home from the hospital with empty arms and absolute silence. Twice now I had watched the test turn accurate and yet here I was, more children in Heaven than here on Earth. Big bump, no bump, or tiny bump, it all came to the exact same end. No baby for us to raise and take care of. Another failure to slap me in the face. Even if this test showed two strong lines and good HCG levels, it could all come crashing down tomorrow or two months from now or whenever it was time for genetic testing. There was no guarantee anymore. Pregnancy was supposed to be one of the most natural things in the world, yet… nothing.

Tears burned in the corner of my eyes and I squeezed them shut to try and keep them from flowing over. I didn't want Jackson to think that I had been sitting in here and crying no matter how tempting it was to do exactly that.

No matter what kind of face I wanted to put on for Jackson, and the one that I had to put on for everyone else given how private we had been about trying for another baby with our coworkers, it was impossibly difficult to maintain it all the time. There were moments where all I wanted to do was cry and I didn't know how to actually do anything else. Surviving all of this emotionally seemed next to impossible. It was more than just black and white grief, not quite as intense as what Samuel had been given the expectations that we had gone into all of this with, but that didn't stop it from hurting. It was just a different kind of pain. A slow burn instead of a wrenching heartbreak.

The emotional impact usually takes longer to heal than the physical recovery does. My body might have been ready after the first miscarriage, but I hadn't been. I might have been by the time that we had lost the second baby, but I wasn't this time, despite throwing myself into it again and again. All of the websites said to wait and allow yourself to heal, but I couldn't do that. I had never been able to sit back on my hands and wait for things to happen. I had to go and get them, no matter what waves of emotion crashed through me. I had felt them all – disbelief, anger, anxiety, guilt, depression.

But there was an interesting role reversal that I had tried to focus on. I had read on websites how men and women grieve differently. Generally, women are more expressive about their loss and more likely to seek support from others. Men may be more action-oriented, tending to gather facts and problem solving, and therefore often do not choose to participate in support networks that consist of sharing feelings. Yet I was the one who had buried myself into my work and into trying again instead of talking about it as openly as I should have. Jackson talked a lot. I tried to talk but there were moments where it was just too much, even for the times that we had scheduled down to do exactly that. I was doing everything that I could to just hold on tight and not lose myself.

Five minutes eventually pass and I take a deep breath, looking down at the test in my hands.
Negative.

A heavy breath was released from my lips as I heard Jackson's question, taking a minute to gather myself. What was worse? A negative, or a positive that would haunt me for every second, wondering if it was just going to be another loss? I was too scared to attach myself to a pregnancy now. Yet at the same time, I couldn't not. That just wasn't who I was.

Pushing myself off the ground, I set the test on the counter, not bothering to carry it out with me. If it was positive, he would have been celebratory – negative was just… there. There was no point in showing it to him. Opening up the bathroom door, he looked down at me expectantly.

"It's negative," I announced plainly.

"Oh," he breathed out, blinking in surprise. "Well, that's okay, we can try again." He suggested.

Try again. That was the logical thing to do for any couple that was struggling to get pregnant. Truthfully, that wasn't the problem. There were plenty of explanations for why it hadn't taken on this try. Sometimes after a miscarriage, the body just needed a month or two to reset again. That sounded like a plausible explanation. We had already had two easy rounds in a row of getting pregnant – maybe instead of third time being the charm, it just happened to be the opposite for us.

Hopefully, that would not be true of our entire relationship. This was the third real try that we had given at things. The first time had ended up with an awkward and painful breakup after another negative pregnancy test and I had ended up in a relationship with Matthew, and him with Stephanie. Even if the second time we had ended up married for a few months, it had ultimately fallen apart and the divorce papers had been signed. My wedding ring was just sitting in the bottom of my sock drawer where I never had to worry about losing it nor accidentally finding it. I wanted this to work, us to work. But the circumstances that we had chosen to throw ourselves into were challenging.

Mostly chosen to throw ourselves into, at least. The plane crash hadn't been a choice. Montana had hardly been a choice for me, I just couldn't really say no to Catherine Avery when she asked a favor like that of me. Jackson's PTSD wasn't a choice. My lost ovary and the fact that I had nearly died of an infection hadn't been a choice. Struggling to carry a baby to term wasn't a choice.

But trying, trying was a choice. That was one thing that I still had control over.

"Yeah, we can try again," I echoed his words.

For a long moment after speaking, I just stare at him as if I was expecting words that might fix what we were going through. But there was nothing to fix it.

After Harriet, I couldn't escape postpartum depression as a new mom. I hated to call myself a new mom at that point in my life and I wasn't one, really, but there were so many things in my life at that point that had been new. It wasn't something that was spoken about. Maybe Jackson had picked up on it, but we hadn't been in a secure point in our relationship, certainly not one that I would have reacted well if he had called me out on it. Eventually, things had gotten easier. Now that the hardship was all coming before, it was just unbearable.

Pregnancy loss might be the most common experience nobody knows about until it happens. I didn't consider Samuel that, he had been something else, a different pain. As a doctor, though, there were things about it that I wish I didn't know. Miscarriage literally means "carried wrong." Women shouldn't have to feel guilty about that, yet how could I not while knowing that? There's no bereavement leave and there's no funeral. Grieving in any sanctioned way just didn't happen.
Even if it meant carried wrong, though, I knew that Jackson didn't blame me. Shame and blame drove couples apart. We had learned that with Samuel. Pain calls for tenderness and this time, the pain of loss opened us up to new compassion and tenderness with one another. Some beauty to come with the pain, even if it didn't negate it.

"April?" Jackson's voice was quiet as he questioned me.

"I..." There was something on the tip of my tongue that doesn't make it out. "I, uh..."

"Here, why don't we lay down for a minute, okay?" His voice was gentle as he spoke to me as if I were a child, his arm wrapping around my waist as he moved me down the hallway. When we reached the bedroom, I plopped onto the mattress, feeling it bounce beneath me.

Laying flat on my back, his hand smoothed up and down along the length of my arm. Subtle had never been one of my strong suits and I was sure that was coming to the surface with him now. My heart was heavy. I knew exactly where it should have been and yet it felt like it had sunk all the way down to the pit of my stomach. All of the rest of my organs were crushing it and swallowing it, suffocating inside of me. It was drowning.

"How?" I questioned quietly.

"How what, sweetheart?" Jackson questioned, drawing patterns around my elbow.

"How do we just keep trying? I feel like I'm suffocating. Like the next loss we have is going to be me, like I might actually just... die. My heart is going to give out at any sudden moment with the rest of it." Rambles come out of my mouth too freely, wishing momentarily that I had held back at least some of it.

"Just because it's taking a long time to get pregnant doesn't mean there's something wrong with you. You know that." Jackson murmured, wetting his lips as he stared at me with concern.

"You read Cosmo." I pointed out. "I read that too."

He gave a soft chuckle. "We've both read a lot on this, haven't we?" I nodded. "But that just means that I don't have to tell you all about being patient. You already know it. You knew that before we were trying. You're too smart."

"Tip number five, don't be afraid to take time off. If the conception routine is taking a toll on you and your partner, don't be afraid to take a break for a while. Relax and enjoy each other's company. Have sex and pay no attention to cycle days. A few months can recharge your spirit." I hated the fact that I could recite that pretty much word for word. Burning every bit of it into my memory might have helped. It was hard to know anything with certainty.

"That was a parents magazine, right?" Jackson questioned, raising his eyebrows at me.

"Yeah." I breathed out, trying to slow down my heart rate and calm myself back down again. "Will you hand me my phone?" I requested, holding out my hand.

He gave a nod of his head and handed it over to me. I opened up my Pacifica app, taking a deep breath. It was supposed to help with anxiety. I had joined groups of other women struggling to get pregnant on it. But for now, I don't go to that. A pop up asked how I am and I dragged the circle around to not good, showing it to him. He gave a nod of his head. There's a little option to add specific emotions and I tap on that, selecting just a few. Pessimistic. Exhausted. Unmotivated. Powerless. I had to wonder how different that would have been if the test was positive. At least two of them would have been the same.
"Thanks for sharing." He murmured. That was the least that I could do. "April, do you want to keep trying?"

Did I?

It was hard to know the answer right now. I wanted another baby and that wasn't something that I had to question or doubt, at least. This wasn't going to fix us but we were in a good place, in a weird way. We were more open and honest with each other than we had been in perhaps the entirety of our relationship. Something that should have killed us had been the thing to bring us together again. Our lives were backward.

"I don't know," I admitted and squeezed my eyes shut. "I don't know if I can take another loss like this. It hurts."

"I know that it hurts," he murmured. "It hurts me too. I hate to see you like this. I hate what it's doing to you."

"Maybe a break from all of this would be good." I ran my hand over my face and kept my eyes shut for now, pushing loose strands of hair away from my face. "I just don't know. Maybe I need a break from having to decide for just a little while." Temporarily, it could at least clear my head.

"If that's what you want to do, then we can do that. Whatever you want." Jackson said.

Another sigh passed through my lips as I laid there with my eyes shut. There was no way that I was going to be able to fall asleep, not when I was this wound up. But it didn't seem like I was going to be able to calm down any time soon. I could tell that he was tense too, and maybe we were in the same boat. How could we help one another calm down when we couldn't manage to do it for ourselves? It was one of those things where it was hard to know whether or not it was easier to do it for yourself, or for someone else.

"We should get away." He suggested after a few seconds.

"Yeah. Yeah, we should." I agreed.

So we do, two weeks later.

It was a long drive to Gold Beach, Oregon. Flying was out of the option, of course. When we talked about it with our coworkers, Meredith had given us a reminder that we were going to have to fly again at some point, but I rejected it. We were taking Harriet and there was no way that either of us could have managed that. It was a good 9 hours just of driving. We spend a little extra time in Portland for lunch, but we make it by the end of a very long day.

Jackson booked us a beautiful coastal home, more space than we needed between the three of us but beautiful. It had a pristine view of both the ocean and a rocky shoreline, a spacious and open concept living room with a fireplace to keep warm. The temperature there was cool, as it was in Seattle, pleasantly cloudy though not particularly rainy compared to what we were used to. Everything about the house was warm and luscious. The master bedroom had a glass door and glass windows that looked right out into the windows. Maybe it would have been a little weird for year round living, but just for a few days on vacation, there was something perfect about it. It was private and intimate, just what we needed.

Harriet was sitting on top of Jackson's shoulders about a mile into our hike. She had done a good job until about three-quarters of a mile in, complaining about her shoes. We had never gone on a hike as a family. It had been years since I had done one at all. There wasn't much opportunity with
our work schedule to just take a chunk of time like this. This wasn't bad, though, along the beach and through old-growth forests.

"It's so peaceful up here." I took a deep breath, smelling the ocean clearly.

"Definitely doesn't make me miss the city," Jackson admitted with a chuckle.

"I guess I can twist the city boy out of you, huh?" I suggested teasingly, shooting him a smile.

"Mama! Look! Birdie!" Harriet pointed with her finger, bouncing upon her father's shoulders eagerly. We both looked in the direction that she pointed out, spotting a puffin and its bright orange beak walking amongst the rocks on the shoreline. "Birdie fly!"

"Uh huh, sweetie, it's a puffin." I smiled up at her. "Bet you've never seen one of those before, have you, Daddy?"

"Nope," he popped the syllable as he answered. "Pretty cool looking, isn't it?"

"I think it looks like Daddy." I grinned. "What do you think, Hattie? Does it look like Daddy?"

Harriet laughed wildly at the suggestion. "Daddy! Daddy!" She chanted.

"Oh!" Jackson clutched his hand over his heart dramatically in mock offense. "Just remember, Mommy, payback is a b-i-t-c-h." He spelled out with a wide, cocky grin on his lips. I shook my head and let out a laugh of my own.

"Come on, slowpoke," I said, picking up the pace. We were near the restaurant that we were talking to for dinner.

"Hey, I'm carrying a little extra weight here." He retorted.

"Well, I kind of carried her for nine months, so I think you're still compensating." I shrugged easily.

It's easy to forget about everything else that we were dealing with in a moment like this. Maybe we didn't spend enough time as a family between our busy work schedules and trying to get enough sleep to actually function as normal adults. But I loved moments like this, sweet and casual just with my man and my daughter. Sitting down at a restaurant with the two of them, Harriet with a case of the giggles and Jackson doting on her, it made me forget about what we didn't have. Because this was enough. This was everything in the world that made me happy and fulfilled me. Even if I wanted to add to that joy by bringing another child into our family and prove the odds wrong, I couldn't forget that this was still more than enough. I still had a precious, beautiful family to be grateful for.

There is a not so minor spill of water that comes from our daughter which results in embarrassment and apologies to the waiter, though most of it ends up on me. It makes the walk back to the rental house from the restaurant just that much cooler for me. Harriet walks most of the way home, even if she's in Jackson's arm by the time that we actually get there.

"I'm going to give her a quick bath and get her down. You can put on something a little drier." He said as we walked in the door.

Letting him take care of our daughter, I don't get any drier. Instead, I head to the shower and scrub off the sweat and grime of the day, letting hot water cascade over my back and shoulders. I take my time lathering my hair with shampoo and allowing the conditioner to sit in it. It's a little more humid here and I'd felt that with the frizz in my hair all day. Even when I've done everything that I
should, I linger in the shower just a little bit longer.

"Hey, babe?" Jackson's voice called out. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," I replied.

The curtain rustled as he stepped inside behind me, already naked. His arms wrapped around my waist and he nuzzled the top of my head with his nose. I could hear the deep inhale that he took and I leaned back against him, reaching up and running my fingers over the short curls on top of his head. They were just barely beginning to grow out to the length that I preferred.

"I'm so glad that you found this place for us," I murmured appreciatively. "I haven't been this relaxed in a long time. It's nice to just be us again. To be a couple again, without anything else happening. No tragedies or anything."

"Maybe we should just move into the mountains and get away from the rest of the world." He chuckled.

"Mmhm," I hummed as his hands moved over my breasts, thumbing my nipples. "I would go crazy without a good trauma surgery and you know it. You would also be bored out of your mind. It would take a month for our lives to turn into The Shining and I still hate that you made me watch that movie."

"Think about how much of this we could have." Jackson's hand slid between my legs, his middle finger finding my clit.

"We have plenty of this anyways," I moaned, arching my back and rubbing my hips against him. This time his mouth doesn't provide words. Instead, he got my hair out of the way and began to suck on the curve of my neck, instantly fining that sweet spot that always made my knees go weak. He knew every crook and crevice of my body all too well, knowing exactly what touch would be enough to make me absolutely crazy. He was too damn good at all of this.

"In the bed," I murmured. "I want you to make love to me in bed."

Reaching around me to twist the knob of the shower off, neither one of us bothered to dry off as we moved from the bathroom to the bedroom. The sheets get wet instantly as we both collapse onto it, his mouth dominating mine before taking to the slope of my neck. His weight pressed against me and I could feel the hard length of his cock pressed against my thigh. I reached between us, grasping it firmly. He moaned against my skin as I began to stroke him.

"God, Princess," Jackson groaned as his hips bucked into my hand.

"Do you like that?" Purposefully, I make my voice sound as innocent as possible.

"You know I do."

But he doesn’t get caught up in his own pleasure for long. From my neck to my chest, he placed a slow open-mouthed kiss on my sternum before shifting his head. His teeth graze over my nipple and his tongue darted out, teasing the hardened nub as it strained to beg for more attention. His hand paid attention to its twin, cupping and squeezing it firmly. Sinks his teeth into the creamy flesh at the side of my breast, he sucked a mark into the delicate skin as I cried out.

Suddenly, he pulled away from my body. His hands grasped both of my wrists and he pinned them above my head. It took me a moment to catch up with the sudden change of pace.
"Don't move," Jackson said firmly.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Good girl," he purred as he moved down my body, and then slides his tongue all the way up my slit without warning, the tip of it slashing quickly back and forth over her clit. I cried out at the feel of it, back arching off the bad. Jackson held me back down with a firm grasp of her hip, his other hand tight on my thigh. I can't hold back the gasps and moans that tumble past my lips when his fingers fuck rapidly in and out of me, his tongue circling my clit, sliding up and down between my labia. He wanted to make me cum. I knew that was exactly what he was doing – quick and dirty, all hands on deck.

And I do. When my walls start to flutter around his thick digits, he doesn't stop. Instead, his fingers curled just a little deeper into the spot inside of me as they fucked into and out of me, teeth graving across my clit as his lips surrounded it. My thighs trembled as an orgasm crashed into me, crying out his name far too loudly. I collapsed back against the bed, momentarily losing control of the rest of my body.

But when I finally find control again, I reached for his dick, pumping him once, and then again, sliding my thumb over the engorged tip. He groaned, his hips jerking toward me and crashing his lips to mine. I let him take control as my mouth opened up to him, his weight pressing down against me heavier than before. His hands roam further down, one going to the back of my thigh to prop it up, the other sneaking between her legs to press directly against my, a surprised yelp leaving me at the sudden jolt. He laughed and I could feel him smile against me.

"So good." Jackson smiles wickedly, slowly moving his cock up and down my core. Then suddenly he slammed inside of me and I cried out, hands tightening and digging my short nails into his skin. He doesn't stay still for long, pulls out of me and fucks back in hard and fast, the sound of skin slapping against skin filling the room.

His hand came up to cup my face and I took advantage of it, turning my finger to grab his thumb and sucking it into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it obscenely. He swore loudly, driving into me harder than before. My eyes stayed on his as I hollowed my cheeks around it. Jackson was struggling to control himself, I could tell it from the harsh thrusts as he moved into me. I was going to be sore tomorrow and I didn't care for a second.

"Cum for me, please." I knew he loved that word.

"You first." He retorted, thumb finding my clit again.

Walls squeeze around his length this time as he pushed me to another orgasm, harder and quicker than the last. I scratched down his back as my hips jolted against him. I can feel his finish as he spilled inside of me, pushed all the way inside of me and leaving me with an indescribable fullness. Even once his hips had given that last jerk of pleasure, he remained there, holding onto me. His weight was barely held up, but I liked having him crushing me like this. There's something too good about having him all over me in every sense.

"Vacation was a very good idea," I breathed out, lifting up my chin enough kiss him.

He returned the kiss, softer than before. "I love you, April."

"I love you too." Jackson gave me one more kiss before rolling off of me, getting up to get a towel for the both of us. We both clean up and dry off, ditching the current bedroom for the second one, still with a bed big enough for the both of us.
We fall into it and his arm curled around my waits to pull me back against him. I love falling asleep like this, even if we don’t wake up in anywhere near the same position. Usually, he’s at a weird angle and our legs are tangled up by the morning, sheets kicked halfway off the bed. There are still nightmares, here and there. But with the medication that he’s been on, they haven’t been nearly as bad as they were at the start. I’m awake, though. Very awake.

"Do you still dream while taking the medication?" I asked, twisting my head back to look at him. "Or is it just nothing?"

"Sometimes." Jackson gave a slight nod of the head. "Not a lot."

"What do you dream about?" My fingers intertwined with his on top of my stomach.

"You. Harriet." He took a deep breath and I could feel him release it. "I have this one memory of my dad, you know. He was throwing me up and down in the pool. It's why I wanted a house with a pool. I think about that with Harriet, you watching and laughing, taking pictures. It's the only real memory that I have of him and why I want to get her in swimming lessons soon, you know? I want that."

I smiled. "I like that." I murmured. "We can start putting her in the pool this summer. I think it's another year before we're supposed to get her in swimming lessons. Tomorrow, let's buy her a cute swimsuit."

"What do you dream about?" Jackson turned the question back around on me.

"Our family too," I nodded. "But more than just the three of us. Sometimes I see Samuel. Sometimes it's other babies. I don't... I don't know if it's the ones that we've lost already or maybe it's the one that we're meant to have still. I see us being happy. Really, really happy."

"We're taking a break from trying, but..." He paused. "Do you think about adoption? Or surrogacy?"

The question was enough to make me break eye contact. I'd been trying not to think too much about it the last two weeks, focusing on work and the baby that we already had at home, and of course, planning a few things here and there once Jackson had let me know where we were going on our little vacation. The last two weeks had been some of the most stress-free weeks that I'd had since the plane crash. It was a lot of stress to have to go through for almost a year. It was crazy to think that it had already been so long since we had almost died.

"A bit," I admitted with a small nod. "Adoption. I couldn't do surrogacy. The thought of... I worry so much about it within my own body, I don't think that I would make it nine months with another woman carrying our baby." I explained, wetting my lips. "Five. That's... that's my number. Five miscarriages and I want to stop and adopt."

"Five?" Jackson questioned.

"Five," I confirmed.

Coming home from vacation is hard, but at least I feel refreshed by the next time that I have to head into work again. There's not nearly as much heaviness carrying around inside of me. I don't know if anyone else can feel it, but I can feel it. Jackson can feel it. Maybe Harriet could feel it, too. It seemed like our house had finally returned to a happy place, happier than we had ever been as a collective. It was marvelous.

Much to my surprise, it's Owen who jumps to the adoption train and began fostering a little boy
named Leo. It was a nice thought, nice to see the two of them together. He had wanted a child for a long time, years, and I knew it had to be a much different struggle to go through as a single male.

"How's he taking to the nights?" I asked, plopping down in a chair behind the nurse's station.

"Uh, it's been pretty rough," he half-chuckled. "I guess the change is hard? That's what I've heard, at least. He'll make it through a couple of hours before waking up, but it's really hard to get him back down for the night again."

"I remember that phase." I smiled fondly. "It gets easier. Sometimes they just have to work those things out."

"But I'm happy." Owen through in quickly. "I'm really happy to have him. This is what I've wanted."

The smile remained on my lips until I winced, gripping my side. I'd been – well, not cramping. The pain wasn't quite that. A little pain here and there was normal as long as it wasn't too extreme and I'd felt it in my side all day. It wasn't my appendix, I already knew that. Diagnosing appendicitis was something that I had done far too much of while inside of the emergency room. It's far too common. I blinked a few times as I regained control of my facial muscles again.

"What's wrong?" He questioned, looking down at me with concern.

"I uh, I've just been having this pain in my side." I wet my lips. "But it's not my appendix. It's probably nothing."

A frown filled his mouth. "Given your history, April, that's not something that you should ignore. Come here."

I stared at him for a moment before getting up and following him to an exam room, shaking my head to myself. It was just like him to be worried about me, I already knew that. He had always treated me like a little sister no matter what else was going on. He pointed at the exam table as I stepped into the triage room and I laid down, rolling up my shirt to ribcage as he pulled over the portable ultrasound machine. I was sure that he was going to find nothing. My kidneys were good, all of my organs were good. He started just beneath my ribs, exploring my abdomen carefully with the machine.

"I told you, there's nothing to see there." I could see my stomach and spleen, the liver, everything about it looked utterly fine. I paused for a moment to glance at my phone, making sure that I hadn't missed any notifications as he explored.

"Uh, April." Owen's movements stilled beneath my belly button. "You might want to take a look at this."

My head jerked over to see what he was talking about, squinting and furrowing my brows. Now on the monitor that he had turned to face me, there was a distinctive blob that didn't match up with any of the organs inside of me. Instead, this particular blob had distinctive features about it. A clear head and nose. I gasped.

"I'm pregnant?"

"Should I page Jackson?" He asked, looking down at me.

"That's... that's impossible. We haven't been trying for weeks now. I took a pregnancy test after we stopped and it was negative. I—I didn't take it too early like most women did, but... that's an eleven-
week-old fetus." Two old to have been conceived any time after the pregnancy test had taken. The test had been a false negative which only meant more problems. Low hcg levels, likely. That had been what had caused me this much pain so far and it had to be the case now. Or something worse. "It can't be. I can't be." I stuttered out.

Eleven weeks, again.
A strange sense of peace had been found between us in the past few weeks. The pressure of no longer trying for a baby had been a good thing – especially for April. She wasn't worried about every little thing that she did, didn't have to question having a glass of wine with dinner or staying up too late, working through lunch. All of it returning to something normal, something before the plane crash had changed the entirety of our lives, it was a good thing for her.

Sure, in a weird way, there was some good that had actually come from the crash. She and Dr. McCullough had been more of a proponent of that train of thought that I personally had but I could see where they were coming from with everything. Before it, we had been at each other's throat. Maybe that hadn't been the norm for us before but now I couldn't imagine seeing her with that kind of animosity for a long list of reasons. I'd been petulant and distracted. Now, well, the things that troubled both of us ran a lot deeper than something like the fight that we had been in, but we weren't fighting against each other. We were fighting alongside each other, occasionally against ourselves. That change had a huge effect on who we were as a couple, one that had ended up better. Communicating had made us stronger together, a better foundation than what we had when things had been good and easy between us. April had always said things happen for a reason, not me. But now I could finally believe it, just a little bit.

Our weekly dinner dates were no longer about figuring our crap out but instead, just being a couple again. Being a family again. That seemed to be the best thing that this break had really given the two of us, the ability to be a normal family and couple again, not burdened by everything that we were going through. Even if we were divorced technically, dating – though we hadn't exactly put a term on it, both functioning on the same assumption that everything was exclusive given we'd never had to work about an alternative – now, it was the most normal that we had ever been together. Not friends with benefits, not a couple that just got hitched. We were almost normal together.

It was so nice to have things actually going well between the two of us without waiting for the other shoe to drop. To laugh and have fun, to be relaxed around one another instead of awkwardly navigating co-parenting and living together, just being with one another and enjoying the moment. Somehow, I'd never been this happy in my life. It was a weird thought. Nothing about my life was unhappy but it just didn't quite compare to the good place that we had been in lately. I was happy to just be here and not have things change.

But even if I'm not waiting for the other shoe to drop, it was still there.

Nothing about my pager going off is abnormal. Seeing Owen's name on the other end was normal enough too even if it was usually April who paged me to the E.R. just so we had a chance to work together for a little bit when the opportunity presented itself. But what was abnormal was the fact that it was a 911 page with April's initials attached to the end of it.

Practically blacking out with an inability to focus on any of my surroundings, feet move with quick speed to take me down the stairs to the first floor of the hospital, not taking the time to wait on the elevator. I sprint from the stairwell to the room number that had been included in the page, bursting open the door with enough force that it slammed and rattled against the wall a second later. Both of them looked startled by my sudden entrance. But April was laying on the bed and… fine? She didn't look like she was in any pain. Certainly not dying.
"What– what's going on?" I questioned, out of breath.

"You paged him without telling me?" April barked at Owen, turning toward him with a furious expression on her face. I could see the sheepishness take over the other male immediately. April might have been nice, but she was scary when pissed off.

"I thought you'd want to talk to him. I would want to," he justified. "I'll leave you guys alone."

Was this another secret?

Brows furrowed as Owen clapped my shoulder while moving past me and out of the door, and I nudged the door shut with my heel before turning back to face her, arms folding defensively in front of my ribcage. I could already feel myself falling back into one old habit that I didn't like, yet at the moment, I couldn't just turn it off. She sat up, legs crossed and arms resting on her thighs. I could already feel myself falling back into one old habit that I didn't like, yet at the moment, I couldn't just turn it off. She sat up, legs crossed and arms resting on her thighs.

"What's going on?" I repeated the question to her.

"I… I wasn't feeling well." April began to explain, dropping her gaze and looking down at her nails. "Owen could tell, I guess. My side hurt so he wanted to check for appendicitis just to make sure it wasn't that or anything else, you know? I already knew it was harmless but I went ahead and let him so he wouldn't keep pestering me about it." She paused, taking a deep breath. "But when he got out the portable x-ray machine, he found something else."

My mind was swirling with possibilities. Appendicitis would have been easy to handle even if it was a little scary for most people, it was a quick surgery and recovery. But she was beating around the bush with whatever it was, explaining more than she had to. I knew how diagnoses were made. What was it? A tumor? Cancer? Something worse?

"I'm… I'm pregnant." She finally clarified.

I froze. All of that beating around just to tell me that she was pregnant?

Looking up with exasperation, I released the sigh that I had been holding onto and shook my head, not wanting to take out the frustration on her. This was hard on her. It had to be from the way that she was going about it. When we hadn't meant to get pregnant, it had happened again. We'd stop to prevent the pain of a loss for just a little while and yet it had slipped right up on us again. I'd been careful about using protection or pulling out with her in the past couple of weeks, or so I thought. Apparently, not careful enough.

"You're– you're pregnant? That's it?" I questioned before responding to the words, wanting to make sure that there wasn't something else that she was hiding.

"Yeah." She squeaked out with a slight nod.

"God, April… Owen's page and you beating around the bush like that, I thought… I don't know…"

I shook my head, running my hand over my face before scratching over the back of her head. "How far along? We– we can make an appointment with Dr. Lin for this week, I'm sure she'll be able to squeeze us in."

"Uh, well, that's the weird part. It looked like it was probably measuring around eleven weeks, actually." She answered, wetting her lips and pressing them in a thin line. That was – a while ago. It had to be before that negative test had been taken. Huh.

"So… before we went on vacation, that was a false negative?" I concluded, waiting for her to nod. "Huh. I guess we took it too soon."
"Or there's something wrong. With me or with the baby." April countered.

A deep breath was sucked in, knowing exactly where she was coming from. Even though it was impossible not to feel something for the little life that was growing inside of her from the mere fact of knowing that it was there and it was mine, she was already trying to distance herself from the heartbreak that would come if we lost this baby to another miscarriage, too.

"You don't know that," I reminded her. "Let's call Dr. Lin and we'll make an appointment as soon as we can, okay? We'll get another look at the baby and we can get her opinion on it. Or we can go to whichever OB is on call right now and ask her if you want." I suggested.

"No," April shook her head quickly. "I don't want anyone here to know. If–if something happens that just makes it so much worse." She looked up, clearly trying not to cry.

"Again, you don't know that something bad is going to happen, okay?" I stepped forward as I reminded her, wrapping both of my hands around her smaller ones and rubbing circles across her knuckles. "I know things have been going bad but – hey, you're already pretty far along. You got to skip a lot of that worry and anxiety that comes with the first few weeks, okay? That's a good thing. We're in pretty far and we haven't been agonizing. Who knows? Maybe stress has been the thing biting us in the ass every time." Lifting up both of her hands, I kissed each knuckle slowly. "This is a good thing, baby."

Big, wet hazel eyes stared back at me. "You can't know that. There's no way to know that." She muttered.

"Maybe there's not," I agreed with a sigh. "But you've made it this far. You've been happy and smiling and having fun with your life again. All of that while pregnant. C'mon, you're the one who thinks there's a reason that everything happens. This should be an easy one for you."

"Nothing about this is easy." She snapped back at me. I realized my mistake immediately.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." I backtracked. Before I could get further, she continued.

"I haven't been living like I was pregnant. You're right, but that's not a good thing, Jackson. We work in a hospital. I work in an emergency room. I've been around x-rays. That means minute amounts of radiation. Not to mention all of the sick people. I've even had a glass of wine now and then! All of that during the first trimester. I mean, what if this was our one chance, the one that would have worked – and I ruined it, just because I wasn't listening to my body?" She exasperated, tears finally spilling past as she spoke.

"Hey now," I reached up, wiping away her tear. "You didn't do a thing wrong. You didn't know. It's just as much my fault as it is yours, okay? I just don't think that we should get ahead of ourselves with the blame and the guilt if we don't know that there's something wrong."

Both of my arms wrapped around her frame and I brought her close to my chest, resting my chin on top of her head and breathing her in. For a few minutes, she cried against my chest and I don't stop her, just letting it happen and soothing up and down the length of her back to try and make all of it just a little bit easier for her. I couldn't stop or change the way that she felt, not beyond a surface level, really. She was going to deal with this in her own way. The best thing that we could do was try to wait out the worst of it until we knew all of the information that we could get our hands on. That wasn't an easy thing to do either, though. Genetic tests came with their own small risk. A complicated history of both genetic issues and miscarriages with pregnancy made for a hard balance to try and find.
But we have no choice now. We have to find it, for ourselves and whatever peace of mind there may or may not have been out there, and for this child. If there was something, the sooner that we knew, the better. Whether it meant doing what we had been forced into doing with Samuel and breaking our hearts all over again or just preparing ourselves for what was to come. I knew we wouldn't be able to repeat the past like that unless it was true what was best for the baby.

Fortunately, Dr. Lin is able to bring us in for an opening after hours the next day. It makes for a painful twenty-four hours to try and get to but at least with a relatively immediate point in time to make it to, it's that much easier. We trusted her with everything when it came to it, and this was just going to be one more exercise of trust between the three – or four – of us.

April laid on the table with her shirt rolled up and the gel already spread across her stomach, the ultrasound machine pulled over and just waiting for Dr. Lin to come in and look at it herself. I could tell that she wanted nothing more than just to do it herself even if neither one of us was an obstetrician. I knew that she knew a ton about all of this stuff after all of the research that she had done on Samuel's ultrasounds and then in the more recent weeks and months. She probably could have been double certified, even if trauma and babies rarely had much to do with each other.

"There's my favorite couple," Dr. Lin announced as she walked in. "How are we feeling?"

"Nervous," I answered as I glanced at April, squeezing her hand gently. "We just want to know everything's alright. We took a bit of a break and yet… this happened anyway, so."

"Sometimes that's just the way it goes. Frustrating, absolutely, from what I've been told." She smiled at both of us as she put on a pair of gloves and pushed her stool over, sitting down on top of it as she grabbed the receiver to the ultrasound machine. "But let's take a look at this little nugget."

Holding our breath, we waited as she moved the receiver around on April's lower stomach in search for the baby. A few seconds pass before we began to hear the quick and steady sound of a heart beating and I squeezed her hand just a little tighter than before. It was strong and steady, the right speed – a good thing. A small shift of Dr. Lin's wrist clarified the image that was on the screen in front of us. Clear blobs that designated our little baby growing inside. Head, nose, mouth. Those were all clear to see.

"That's him," I breathed out, allowing myself to finally smile.

"Or her." April blinked in surprise, tears burning the corner of her eyes again. "Our baby."

"Your baby has a very strong heartbeat." Dr. Lin commented with a glance over at both of us. "I'd say you're measuring… oh, eleven weeks, six days. Is that about consistent with what you thought before?" She questioned.

"Yeah, I guess," April muttered. "We– we took a pregnancy test around what would have been week five or six and it turned out negative, though. So I… I haven't been careful. But why would it be negative? I mean, that's not too soon and if the medication was working with the HCG levels, it shouldn't have been." Clearly, she had already done her research on the matter.

"There have been cases where actually having too high of an HCG level can cause a false negative. It's weird, I know, but that could have been caused by the medication. In this case, though, that seems like a good thing since you're making it further than you have with any of your prior pregnancies since starting with me." The answer was a good thing. I think. "If you were well-hydrated, sometimes that can dilute the urine. That's why we recommend taking the test in the morning. If something was wrong, we'd worry about ectopic or molar pregnancies, but I know that's not the case here."
Good news. That was all good news. Even if being this late wasn't an indicator that we were going to have a happy and healthy baby, it was still a strong sign in that direction, stronger than any of the ones that we had before today. I nodded as she spoke and turned my head to April, letting her speak.

"But I haven't been careful." Her hand was shaking against mine, just barely. I wasn't sure if she even realized it. "I work in the E.R. X-rays. Radiation. I've had a couple glasses of wine in the past two months. I… I know none of that is a good thing."

"If you're up for it, we'll do the CVS test and check to make sure there aren't any genetic abnormalities. I don't see any physical abnormalities or any other soft markers right now. We'll keep a careful eye on everything as your pregnancy progresses but at the moment, I don't see anything wrong with this baby, April. You'll have to be careful going forward obviously, make sure that you're eating smart and getting enough rest, drinking enough water… but this looks like a healthy pregnancy."

Tears finally come from April but this time it seems to be out of relief instead of the fear that had been baited beneath. If it had just been the two of us in the room, I probably would have considered crying, too. It was a relief to have good news after so many tries and even after the scars that we had gone through with Harriet. There was still months to go, but we had already managed to conquer one mountain. We could make it through the rest.

"We want the test," I confirmed with a nod, staring at April as I spoke. She nodded too.

"Then we'll go ahead and do it today. You know the drill already," Dr. Lin nodded.

Once she was out of the room, I spoke. "It'll be okay. I promise it will be."

Guaranteeing that was impossible but I hold onto her hand the entire time when Dr. Lin returned with the needle to gather the small sample of cells from her placenta to be examined. It was a quick procedure even if getting back the results weren't going to be quite so fast. At the minimum, it would take another day or two. CVS test results came back faster than an amniocentesis but patience was still necessary.

"We'll know in a couple of days and it'll be over then." I reminded her gently.

When we get home that night, April doesn't hesitate to call Dr. McCullough to move up her next appointment and go lay in bed. CVS tests were pretty safe overall and the chances were in our favor on all matters there, of course, but I knew that she wanted to be careful about things for a little while after. Better safe than sorry, we both knew that rather well. Plus, there was always a bit of soreness associated with after having the test. I brought her up dinner, leftover chicken and cauliflower from the night before, and take care of Harriet for the night. She was already asleep by the time I showered and was ready for bed.

Falling gently into bed next to her, I paused for a moment to see if she woke up. She didn't. I curled up next to her and breathe her in, my arms wrapping around her waist and hand flattening against her stomach. There's not quite a bump there – a little extra weight, but it's not a distinguishable baby bump. But she would start showing soon.

Sleep comes upon me quickly. Even if the day had not been a physically demanding one, a regular day at work, the appointment, then just being a parent for the remainder of the evening… carrying all of that worry and tension before the appointment wasn't emotionally easy. It was all draining.

April was sobbing. The sound was the only thing that I could hear and everything else was an
indistinguishable blur. Her knees were pulled into her chest and she was pulled in so small that she looked like a frail child as she cried on the bathroom floor, squished into the small space between the bathtub and the toilet. A quick glance and someone could have missed her from how easily she fit in such a tiny gap, but it was impossible to miss the noises. She was crying and cursing. She wouldn't look over me no matter what I did or tried to say but every time I opened my mouth, no noise actually comes out. I'm like a fish out of water, flapping around uselessly and accomplishing nothing. There's a puddle of blood that she's sitting in. She's blaming me. It's my fault for this. My fault that she's hurt again, my fault for the plane crash, my fault for all of this.

I woke up suddenly with a jerk, covered in cold sweat. Hazel eyes stared down at me with concern and my ears catch up with the rest of my surroundings, realizing that April was asking me what was wrong and trying to wake me up.

"You were having a nightmare," she murmured, cupping my face. It was the first time I had woken her up with one in a while. Most of them had gotten easier to handle.

"Sorry," I murmured, blinking a few times to clear up my vision. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay. It's… it's been a while since you have." A frown pulled at the corners of her mouth.

"The baby stuff, I guess. I've got a whole new thing to worry about on top of the usual stuff." I placed my hand on her stomach as I spoke. "It's okay. Time for work already?" I questioned.

April nodded. "The alarm clock is gonna go off in… three minutes." She murmured. "I'm gonna shower."

"Alright." I gave her a quick kiss, plopping back against the bed.

When the alarm went off after the bathroom door had shut, I slapped it off quickly. The baby wasn't all that I was worried about, of course. I was worried about her more than anything else and how this would affect her if the results weren't good or if something else bad happened down the line. We'd been in such a good place the past few weeks and now all of that was hanging in the air again, unclear where it would proceed. I picked up my phone to check my email.

But it's no notification on my phone that caught me by surprise to see on the tiny screen. Instead, it's the date.

March 16th, 2018.

It'd been exactly a year since the plane crash.

One year since the plane crash, and the first day that April was ending the first trimester of this pregnancy at twelve weeks along. Two huge milestones at the exact same time, yet… opposite from one another. One was symbolic of the huge catastrophe that we had been through, even if it had built up the rest of our life together. The other was a symbol of something hopeful that had come from such an occurrence, but it didn't guarantee the same build up of our future together like a pregnancy would have in most couples. It could have been that, or it could have just been yet another catastrophe waiting to rain down on us.

Dropping my phone back down again, I shut my eyes and took a deep breath, listening to the sound of the shower running in the bathroom until I heard it turn off. One year. I hadn't even realized it yesterday or the day before – a couple of days before I had realized that it was coming up, but I had been so preoccupied with the baby stuff that I had completely forgotten about it. It had almost just blown by.
"Are you getting out of bed any time soon?" April questioned as the bathroom door opened up and she walked by to the dresser.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going," I muttered, wetting my lips and getting up.

Despite that it's suddenly gone from far away from my mind to being the only thing on my mind, I don't bring it up. I don't know if April was aware of it. She had to be, right? It was hard to miss with our job – we had to fill out paperwork and keep up with the dates. Even if sometimes Monday and Tuesdays got blurred together, we usually at least knew the numerical date of the week because it was important to keep up with that. It wasn't as if we could ever rid ourselves of the date March 16th. It had made a permanent impression on our lives. It wasn't going anywhere any time soon.

Getting Harriet up and ready for daycare and listening to her babble on, there's a little relief there. At least she hadn't been hurt on a day that had changed our family's life so permanently. She'd been blissfully unaware. She didn't even realize that we weren't married, I was pretty sure. She knew Mommy and Daddy loved each other just like they loved her, even if it was in a different way. But that was all too much for her to comprehend. Hopefully, by the time that she was old enough to actually understand all of it, she wouldn't have to be confused about the fact that her parents were divorced and yet living together and dating. Hopefully, we wouldn't be divorced at that point still. I knew that I wanted to spend the rest of my life to her, even if our marriage had hurt both of us the first time. It was just hard to know when to ask.

In the car ride, though, I can't keep silent. NPR was playing quietly in the background and discussing some political something that had been done this week. I hadn't kept up with the news as much as I usually did lately. I was just too busy with other things.

"It's been a year, you know." I murmured, hands tightening on the steering wheel for a moment.

"I know," April replied. I could hear her sigh quietly.

"A year since the plane crash and you're twelve weeks pregnant. The last week of the first trimester." I reached over to take her hand as I spoke. "It's a big day for us." There was no understating that. "For all of us." Little baby boy or girl included.

"Yeah," she breathed out quietly. "Kind of weird that it lined up like that. It's not like you expect anniversaries of that magnitude to be a good thing." She commented.

"Yeah, you don't," I agreed. "But maybe this is a sign that things are turning around for us, you know? We're both recovering." Even if I'd had a nightmare. Maybe that was linked to the anniversary and my subconscious, or something. I would see what Dr. McCullough had to say about it the next time I had an appointment with him. "We're getting somewhere better together, April. You see that, don't you? I know that it's... a busy and emotional time right now, but the bigger picture is still there, even if it's probably pretty hard to see at the moment." I glanced over at her out of the corner of my eye.

She was quiet for a few seconds as she processed my words and I don't pressure her to the rain pouring outside and beating against the windshield, a gloomy day, it's a lot like the weather had been a year ago on this day, even if we aren't in a plane. It's hard to forget the turbulence that had shaken the plane – all from a simple storm.

"I want you to be right. It's just... a lot easier to say than to actually feel it." April finally spoke up. "I know that we're so much better than we were before. I was... you know, I was so uncomfortable living with you. Because I didn't know where we stood and I do know. I now that
we're together and we're in a good place and that's a good thing. But I guess I just… I wish it erased a little more of the bad than it does."

"That's fair," I nodded, understanding her completely. It was hard that the good didn't erase the bad. That I could still have nightmares even when I'm so grateful that she and the baby are physically okay. "It is and I understand. I'm grateful for where we are now, though."

"I am too," she breathed out.

"I love you." I reminded her, giving her a brief glance and squeezing her hand.

"I love you too." She replied, giving me a sweet smile.

Getting through work today was considerably easier than it had been yesterday without a doctor's appointment for April and the baby at the end of the day, knowing that the ultrasound had shown a healthy baby with such a strong heartbeat. I can still hear it in my head, that steady thudding along. A few more weeks and I'd be able to feel it kick inside of her, just like I had with Harriet. That would be the big milestone to get to, I think. Getting out of the first trimester was a big accomplishment by itself but it wasn't everything. It was enough, though. A giant piece of hope to be able to hold onto.

There's not a chance to see April like I would have liked to but it does give me the opportunity to clear up my head a little more. It's hard to really say where we are and maybe we should. Everyone in the hospital knew that we were together in some form or fashion even if it wasn't the most official thing in the world – both of our doctors, at least my small side of the family, even if I wasn't sure what her family knew and didn't know. Another conversation to be had.

But there was a more immediate one. Maybe it had something to do with the anniversary of the plane crash or maybe it didn't. Something about that particular detail was hard to clear up on my mind. Maybe it was just a reminder that life was precious and it wasn't something that either of us should have been taking for granted. We weren't, not really. Not so much in terms of ourselves but in terms of the life that we were trying to bring into the world and into our family. Still, there were a few things in our life and our relationship that were being taken for granted, things that we hadn't talked about. That needed to change. I wasn't anticipating another catastrophe – no, we had already had more than our fair share of those. There was still something to be said about taking value in the things that were right in front of us. I know I was guilty of not doing that enough.

Yet somehow, the pondered idea remains caught in my throat when we go home at the end of the day. I watch her snuggle up with Harriet as we picked her up from daycare, holding her on the opposite side of where the needle had gone in for the test yesterday. Watching the two of them, I can't keep a smile off my face. I had never been able to with them.

"There's something that I want to talk about." I don't make the announcement until we're actually at home and had both eaten dinner and cleaned up the kitchen already. Harriet was down after her pajamas, reading, and prayer time. Everything was quiet.

"About the plane crash?" April assumed as she looked at me, lips pressing together in a thin line.

"No, actually. Well – no." I shook my head. "It's not about the actual crash. But I think just… coming from a place that uh, I've been reflecting a lot today, because of it." I explained.

"Okay…" she said, brows knitting together. "Then what it is?"

"It's about us." I started vaguely.
That was the moment that I realized I didn't actually know how to say what I wanted to say. Not entirely, at least. There was a long pause as I attempted to gather myself and I could tell that leaving it there had made her just a little bit uncomfortable from the way that she shifted in bed, drawing her knees up underneath the weight of her body.

"What about us?" She spoke up.

"I know that… that we haven't really established things since Montana. I mean, we're together, but… a lot of it is still unclear to me. I know that I love you and that you love me, but we've been in a point before where even though the love was there, it didn't… outweigh the rest." I danced carefully around the topic of the divorce, not wanting to upset her now. That was the opposite of what we wanted. "It feels a little weird bringing this up actually because talking about boundaries is something that I would've expected you to bring up." I chuckled, scratching the back of my head.

"What about boundaries?" She interjected before I could get any further. "We– we are doing good. I thought that we were doing good, at least. I thought that we were in a good place."

"We are." This time, I cut her off before she could spiral in that direction. "We are in a good place, April, and I want to say in that good place with you. I don't want to leave it, ever again. No matter what happens with this baby, I want us to be together and I want us to be a family. I know that we've both screwed things up in the past and I don't want to do that anymore. Not for you, not for me, not for Harriet or this little guy you've got growing inside. So let's… me and you, let's fix this, okay? Let us do it right. Get married, have another awesome kid, be a family." I'd said similar words to her once before, nearly in another lifetime.

April stared up at me with wide eyes, bright and full of light. A light that truthfully, I hadn't seen in her since we had found out about the baby, but I'd seen it when we vacationed and the weeks between. That was the light that I adored to see in her, to cause in her. I wanted to make sure that it was there for the rest of our life together.

"Marry me again, April. Please. Will you?" I asked.

"Yes, Jackson. I will."
**Chapter 14**

**APRIL.**

It was an odd thing, wearing my wedding ring again.

Not in a bad way, not necessarily. The weight of the rock resting on my finger did feel right in a lot of ways, even if it took a few days to adjust to the fact that it was there again. The proposal had been… impulsive. Not in the same way that him standing up in the middle of my wedding to another man and running out of the church had been, or the twelve-hour drive to Lake Tahoe. This had been more thought out than that, at least. But in a way, I was glad that he hadn't prepared enough to go and buy another ring. That would have just been unnecessary.

Slipping it back onto my finger after surgery, I twist at it for a moment. There's no line around my finger to distinguish the months that I had worn it before. That had faded when I was pregnant with Harriet. Even if I hadn't wanted to wear it then, I couldn't have with how I'd swollen up everywhere. I'm not there yet – it's a tight fit, but it goes on and comes off at the end of the day without worrying about it getting stuck. I'd gotten so thin after Harriet that it had been. I'd pushed myself to lose the weight and to get back out into the dating world. Having to do a little bit of physical therapy to recover after the c-section had helped a bit, too. It made sure that I wasn't wallowing in the house with postpartum. I had to take care of my body at the minimum.

Nothing had been planned. People had picked up on the fact that we had both put on our wings again immediately. Owen had been the first person to notice mine because the rock had torn through a pair of gloves when I had slipped them on without thinking, forgetting momentarily that I had to be a little more careful than usual when it came to wearing it at work.

Everyone had congratulated us about it. Karev had claimed that he knew that it was going to happen all along. Arizona said that she'd known I was pregnant before I had, apparently, but hadn't said anything to me or anyone else out of respect for what had happened last time. I didn't know if that was actually true and probably need would unless she said otherwise, but I appreciated that she had learned this time to stay quiet. No one really seemed surprised, even if they were happy for us.

"Hey, are you just finishing up in here?" Jackson's voice drew me out of my thoughts and I nodded my head, pushing the scrub sink off with my elbow and grabbing a paper towel to dry my hands.

"Yeah," I murmured. "Got a little lost in my head, I guess. Forgot I didn't have to wash my hands forever." Both felt a little dry now but it was nothing that lotion wouldn't remedy.

"I'm coming in now," he stepped closer to me, leaning down and kissing my cheek.

"Wait–" I requested suddenly as he reached to turn on the sink again.

"What?" Jackson questioned.

Teeth gnawed harshly at my lower lip as I waited for what I had thought during surgery.

Sometimes it was hard to know what was something happening and what was just gas or bloating or nothing at all. Then it was there again. The same thing that had nearly scared the life out of me when I was pregnant with Harriet, the one thing that I had never been able to experience during my pregnancy with Samuel. It was right there.

"Just–" I don't say a word to try and explain myself, grabbing his hand and placing it on my
A beat passed before I felt the baby inside of my stomach kick again, this time responding to the outside stimuli and pushing a little foot right into where I had placed Jackson's hands. My eyes snapped up to look at his face and I could see it there that he had felt the same little magical movement inside. I beamed up at him, smiling so hard that it nearly hurt even though I could feel the tears beginning to form in my eyes. They were there in his, too, seafoam blue gaze wet with the tears in his waterline. Our baby was moving again.

Just barely site weeks, we hadn't had the amniocentesis yet. The CVS test had come back normal and there wasn't a real reason to go through with utter than paranoia – but now, I was leaning away from that, given the risk of miscarriage after what all we had been through. Our baby was moving, just like their big sister had. Kicking and responding to their environment.

"That's our baby," Jackson whispered in awe.

"Yeah," I choked out. "It is."

Both of his hands engulfed my bump completely, trying to feel every square inch of skin there was. I could feel the baby shifting inside of me and a few long seconds pass before another little kick is given. I let out a laugh as I smiled up at him. This was the sign that both of us needed.

"Dr. Kepner. Dr. Hunt is looking for– oh, I'm sorry." Deluca had walked in.

"It's okay." I smiled at him for a moment, raising up a hand to wipe away the tears. "They're happy tears. It's fine."

"Our little ones kicking," Jackson said, though his gaze didn't move from me, nor did his hands. It was as if nothing else in the world was around the two of us. Deluca's interruption didn't seem to phase him at all.

"You can feel if you want." I offered. Knowing things were going well made me want to share with everyone.

Deluca blinked in surprise. "Are you sure?" I nodded my head.

"It's pretty cool." Jackson murmured, shifting to the side slightly and keeping one hand on my stomach. The intern placed his hand on my stomach to replace where Jackson's other hand had been, waiting a few moments before the kick occurred. He smiled when it happened.

"Yeah, it is." Deluca murmured. "Uh, but yeah, Dr. Hunt needs you in the E.R." He remembered.

"I'll see you later," I murmured to Jackson, stretching up and giving him a quick kiss on the lips before beginning to follow Deluca back downstairs to the emergency room to get back to work.

The emergency room is chaotic but it was the exact kind of chaos that my mind thrived in. When everything else in my work world was falling apart, that was where I found my own place of peace. It's not harmonious, it's chaos, but it's perfect. Fixing that kind of chaos and piecing it back together, stopping what appeared to be impossible and inevitable, that was a high like nothing else. It gave me a sense of order and chaos when it seemed like there was nothing else to be found.

Order was something that I was working hard to try and restore at home.

My body was no longer entirely under my control as was normal for any pregnancy. Every day it seemed like my belly grew bigger and bigger, certainly increasing with size quicker with this
pregnancy than I had with either one before. Everything about this pregnancy was different, really. Maybe it was no more planned than Samuel or Harriet had been, but it was healthy and loved and wanted, and we were together again, deeply in love with one another. None of those things had ever lined up in the past with us. Something had always been missing. But not this time. This time, it was going to all work itself out correctly. But that didn't make everything picture perfect.

"Make sure that you check on him every thirty minutes. Check for urine in the blood." I instructed the intern firmly, waiting until they had given a scared nod of their head in agreement.

The baby moved inside of me again and I paused, resting my hand on my stomach and rubbing the swell of the baby inside of me gently. Feet seemed all too happy to patter and dance on my bladder as if it was a stage. So the bathroom would be my next stop instead of going straight back to the emergency room again.

Work was one thing that managed not to change quite as much as everything else seemed to be. Even if I had to take a few more bathroom breaks than I would have before, at least when I wasn't wrapped up in surgery because I refused to leave the operating room for something like that no matter how I wanted to dance in my pants, it was about the principal of it, work was always the same at the end of the day. Going in and saving people's lives, seeing things that most people couldn't even begin to imagine. All of it kept me focused and grounded. Not much else did.

But even our house was changing.

Putting a nursery together was challenging. It was something that we had never actually done together. My mom had flown in and ended up putting together most of the nursery for him without any of my input and… in the end, really, it hadn't mattered. I had never seen it come down but when I had gotten back from Jordan, it had just been one more heartbreak to add on. Then when I had been pregnant with Harriet, there had been two nurseries, and mine had gone unused. I'd had a distinctly missing touch in both of the nurseries for my children.

Whether or not Jackson realized that as consciously as I did, I couldn't tell. He didn't bring it up. I didn't either, letting it eat away at the back of my mind instead. It was clear to see trying to do it together, of course, that we had different taste. His taste was much more refined and modern than mine was. Mine seemed a little more kid-friendly.

"I don't… no, I think it should be the other way around," I shook my head, folding my arms over my belly.

"It wouldn't make any sense the other way around, April," Jackson pointed out. "It's stars. Stars should be white compared to a navy background." His eyebrows raised up as he spoke. He was right, of course.

"I just don't like the idea of so much darkness in the nursery…" I frowned.

"It's one wall. It's not like we're painting the entire thing dark." He countered.

I shook my head. "What if we didn't do stars?" I turned around. "We could do the moon. Moon phases, even, waxing and waning. It'd be different. Stars are… cute, but they're a little overused, you know? Our baby should have something unique." On cue, the little one inside of me moved around. "See? They just kicked in agreement."

"You can say that whenever you want and I don't know the better," he chuckled. "But… the moon could work, yeah. We can get some tape and some of those stamps to make it easier. I could knock it out one day over the weekend."
"Do you think that we could paint the crib white, too? I just don't like the wood as much as I did when we bought it."

"Yeah," Jackson nodded firmly. "I would prefer that, actually."

"Okay." I agreed, sinking down for a moment into the chair that we had bought. It wasn't a wooden rocking chair like we'd had in the past. That was still in Harriet's room. It would be a little while longer before she moved up to a big girl room which meant buying everything all over again. This time, I had wanted something a little more comfortable for nursing, something that I could fold my legs in and not press against the arms of the chair uncomfortably.

"Maybe once we know the gender, we could get a pillow for this chair in pink or blue. One of those fuzzy ones, you know, the same texture as the carpet." I pointed at it with my toe. We had gotten one with an elephant on it, gray with a white outline.

"We could definitely do something more gendered once we know." He nodded. "Are you sure you don't want to know sooner?"

I nodded. "Yes." We had known with Samuel and hadn't with Harriet. I couldn't rid myself of the association, of standing in the ambulance bay and sobbing after I had told him that we were having a boy. Maybe it was ridiculous or just plain hormonal, but I couldn't get that out of my head whenever I thought about knowing the sex.

Jackson pulled over one of the little stools that we had in the room, setting it down in front of me before sitting. He took one of my socked feet into his hand and began to rub the arches of my foot. I let out a content sigh. I knew that he liked my feet, it was a bit of a thing for him, more than it was for me. But it's hard to not appreciate that whenever he rubbed my feet at the end of the day. I was at that point where it was almost enough to just make me cry from how good it felt.

"We've never gotten to do this before, you know?" I commented, head lolling back.

"What?" He asked.

"Decorate a nursery together," I answered.

A beat of silence passed between us as I let him think about what I was saying. One time it had been both of our faults, really. I guess the other time would have to be blamed on my mom because I didn't want to blame him for it. He had been a good husband that day by going along with it. Pleasing my parents had been pretty important to him at that point.

"I guess you're right, yeah," Jackson finally spoke up after a moment. "It's nice, though, doing it together. I wish we'd gotten to do it with Harriet." He wet his lips. "There was a lot of things that I wanted to do differently back then."

"Yeah, me too." Even if neither one of us had been willing to say that then. "Can I ask something?"

"Anything," he nodded.

"Whatever happened to Samuel's nursery?"

Another silence fell between us after the question. I was sure that it was a loaded one given that it had never been brought up in the first place, but at that point, there was a lot of things that we hadn't been talking about. We would yell at each other and maybe fall into bed together, but that had been about the extent of it when the divorce had been at the front of his mind. I wasn't resentful about it anymore. It had given us Harriet, after all, I couldn't regret a thing about that.
"I, uh..." Jackson paused, wetting his lips and take a deep breath. "I just couldn't take it anymore. Having it there and not having you or him, it was just this constant reminder, every day. It was almost Christmas and I snapped one day. I was missing you and I was missing him and I just snapped and torn it apart." He let go of my feet momentarily, leaning toward me and holding his arm up, drawing his arm along the faint scar on his forearm. "That's where this came from. I punched through the crib and broke it and caught myself on it. Warren stitched it up for me."

"Oh." I'm not sure what else to say for a moment.

"It wasn't a good time for me," He summarized, rubbing the back of his head before letting his hand rest on my swollen ankle. "But... you already know that. I don't want to say that I'm over it or it's fine, but I've... moved on past it. There's a lot of other stuff that I rather focus on."

"Yeah, I understand that," I nodded quickly. "It was... it was a bad time for both of us. But we survived. Then we went through worse stuff and survived that, too. But that time it worked out for us a lot better." In a weird, weird way.

"Yeah, we did." Thumbs dig into the arch of my foot again and I let out a moan. "We're here now."

"Don't stop what you're doing." I requested.

There was a sinful look in his eyes as Jackson looked up at me, switching the foot that he was massaging for a moment. He doesn't massage it for quite as long – instead, getting distracted by moving up the length of my leg to massage my ankle and my calf, placing a soft kiss on the back of my knee that left me breathless. His hands made their way up to my thighs as I leaned back into the chair, scooting my hips forward on it. I'm already wet by the time that his thumbs brushed against the material of my pajama shorts.

"You're so good with your hands," I groaned.

"I know." He replied simply.

A hand cupped the outside of my core and I shifted against him. I can't see his hands but I don't need to. He rubbed me through the material of my shorts and pressed his fingers into my core. I'm almost sure that he already knows exactly how wet I am. These days, it didn't take much.

"Not in here," I murmured.

Jackson took both of my hands to help me get up from the chair and led me down the hallway to our bedroom. I can't be on the bottom anymore in the way that we preferred for the sake of the baby, but there was still plenty that the two of us could do together.

Mouth on mouth, hands everywhere, clothes are quickly discarded the moment that the bedroom door was shut. Harriet would be down for her nap just a little bit longer – we still had some time. While I'm fast to get his clothes off of him and feel his bare member press against my stomach from pressed against one another, he's slow. He cups my heavy breasts in each hand and teased my nipples, sending a jolt straight between my thighs. Then he gets on his knees to help me out of my shorts and panties, kissing the inside of my thighs gently, and placing a much hotter, open-mouthed kiss right over my clit.

"G–God..." I moaned out.

"Hands and knees, baby." He requested, smacking my ass lightly.

I do exactly what he says, back arching up and pushing my ass back in the air. I'm on my elbows
instead of my hands. My back would hurt later, but it would be worth it.

And it was. Jackson positioned himself behind me and let his tongue explore every inch and crevice of my opening, lightly teasing my clit and never giving enough to push me over the edge. His fingers work together and stroke lightly, opening me up so that his tongue could explore further inside of me. Two fingers push inside of me briefly before spread my wetness further, teasing my ass. His tongue followed with a gentle flicker and I moan. It's never more than his tongue or a finger, he knew I didn't want more than that, but that was all it took to feel good.

With his tongue teasing my ass, his thumb played with my clit gently, rubbing quick circles around the nub. My forehead pressed down into the mattress and I pushed my hips back against him, begging for more physically when my voice can't find it. I was getting close and I was sure that he knew it.

"I need you, please," I moaned. "Please."

"You know I'll give you everything you need." Jackson murmured, finally pulling his mouth away from me. His cock teased my entrance, running along my slit. Then, without any warning, he pushed into me all the way, filling me up entirely.

"Oh, fuck!" I swore.

One hand wrapped around my hip to hold onto me and the other reached forward so that he could rub against my clit. All it took was a few thrusts from him and the right moves against my clit before an orgasm washed over me. My inner walls fluttered and squeezed around the length of his cock as I cried out for him, barely muffled in the covers even in my position. But he doesn't ease up this time, continuing to push into me, quick and fast. With how hormonal I had been lately, this was what I wanted, needed. He knew that.

"God, baby, you feel so good." Jackson groaned as he continued to move inside of me.

"So do you." My hips pushed back against his.

Moving fast inside of me and not holding back, he felt incredible taking me like this, able to really fill me up. It was a dominant position and I liked that, too. There was something about it that I couldn't describe but I liked it when he was rough and dominant with me, when he made it clear that he was the one in charge. I was so used to bossing things around at work that having this release was almost necessary. He could always give it to me.

When he finally came inside of me, I'm near the brink of another orgasm and even as he spilled into me, his fingers continued to move against my sensitive clit until another orgasm washed over me. By the time we were both finished, I sank forward and rolled onto my side, panting to catch my breath again.

"I love you," I murmured, nearly in a daze.

"I love you too, April," Jackson replied, pushing hair away from my face. Only a few minutes pass before Harriet cried, letting us know she was awake. "I'll go get her. You get cleaned up."

Things between us resumed to what was perhaps the most normal, couple-like thing that we had ever had. Even if it wasn't exactly going on normal dates and holding hands in the park, or whatever it was that most couples did these days, it was healthy and it was us. Our formal Friday night days had fallen off the wagon given that half of the time I was too tired to actually get dressed up and go out. They had become a mix of takeout nights, normal restaurants, and a dine-in
theatre. We get a good balance over the passing weeks. It was surprisingly nice.

But the end of each week wasn't about discussing how we were feeling, not as much as it had been when we first started it, at least. Some of the openness had been integrated more in our day to day life and it wasn't as necessary for that purpose. Instead, it had become a celebration, even if there's no wine and dancing. A celebration that we had made it another week with successfully keeping this bun in the oven. Another week of healthy growth and feeling the baby moving inside of me. Another week closer to getting closer to meeting the delightful little baby that was ours, our little boy or girl, Harriet's little brother or sister.

The only worry that I don't have about things is staying busy at work. There was always something to do with the emergency room, that was undeniable. I could keep running around no matter what. Or, well, I didn't have to. Owen was always generous about letting me take a break.

Surgery had a way of keeping me high still. Even when I'm far enough along that the Braxton Hicks come and go, it feels good to be there. In the emergency room, it didn't matter, I could walk around and that would cause them to disappear. I can't quite do the same thing when I'm standing at the operating table with someone's life depending on me to be there and focused. The focus I can take care of on my own, even if isn't always easy.

"Kepner?" Warren's voice drew me out of my thoughts.

"What's up?" I asked, looking up at him for a brief moment.

"I know the look on your face." He said it like it was some kind of warning.

"Well, it's my focused in surgery face, and we've been in surgery together, so… you should know it." I reasoned, cheeks tightening with the cramp on the bottom of my stomach. Feet were now kicking up in my ribcage instead of dancing on my bladder.

"I was thinking you look like you did when we were running around Meredith's house looking for those wedding rings, and you refused to admit that you were in labor." He countered simply.

I snorted. "Maybe you need to get your eyes checked, Warren. I'm fine. Clamp this for me, please."

Focusing on the surgery at hand, I get his focus off of it. I figured that the only reason that the contraction wasn't going away as easily as others were because I had to stand still and couldn't just take a walk around the room or down the hallway like I would any other day. I was three weeks away from my due date. Technically being past thirty-six, it was fine. But I wanted to make it to forty, or as close to it as I could get, especially given things hadn't gone well early either time.

But that changes when there's a clear splash of liquid hitting the linoleum floor beneath us. My first instinct was to check the patient for a sudden bleeder that had gone too far. The patient was just as stable as they had been before, though, just about to be closed. It's then that I realize I'm the one who's wet.

"April?" Warren questioned.

"Uh, page Dr. Hunt. Now. I'm… going to go now because my water just broke. Something about you, Ben."

In the middle of a damn operating room.

There was no way that could be good or even remotely healthy for the patient on the table given that I had pretty much just obliterated the sterile field of the room. I grimaced and handed the tools
over to the scrub nurse, slowly taking a few steps backward and being careful to not slip. This was so embarrassing. I was almost sure that it was going to be the new hospital gossip.

"Told you so," Warren commented.

"Don't say a word." I shook my head, moving quickly out of the room and stripping the gowns off of me.

Washing my hands in the sink quickly, I grabbed my phone and pager, sending an immediate message for Jackson to meet me upstairs in OB. There's no way that I'm going to stop and ask someone to wheel me up to OB. It was probably nothing.

Reaching the nurse's station the floor, when I tell them that my water broke, they were all more than happy to get me checked into one of the nicer rooms. Even if I didn't spend a lot of time on this floor, pretty much all of the nurses in the hospital that knew me liked me. It turned out that learning their names and treating them like decent people went a long way. Carina Deluca was the doctor on call – I barely knew her. She was a friend of Arizona's, a fling rather. I'd heard much more about her skills in bed than I had as a doctor.

Laying back on the bed, I don't bother to get changed into a gown just yet. There was no point in wasting one if this was a false alarm. Jackson and I weren't actually ready for this. And if things went wrong… we weren't ready for that, either.

"You're in labor?" Jackson asked, bursting through the door.

"My water broke." I clarified. "That's all and I knew you would be mad if I didn't tell you."

The female Dr. Deluca walked into the room. Jackson moved out of her way and I laid back to let her do her job, closing my eyes and trying not to critique or anything else, focusing slowly on the movements of the baby inside of me. They were strong. But the movements were a little different now that the space inside of me was completely confined with how big she had grown. But the words that she said at the end of her examination were confirmation of something that I just wasn't ready for – I was, indeed, in labor. This baby was going to come either at the end of the day or sometime early tomorrow and that was all there was. A September baby, a little Virgo.

When the door was shut, that was when the waterworks began. I would have to be closely monitored for complications given the complications of Harriet's birth and the inevitable scar tissue that aligned my uterus from it. Natural birth was something that I wanted desperately, a normal and natural birth, even if the chances of it happening were low.

"Oh my god." I blurted out, blinking tears out.

"Hey, hey, it's going to be okay." Both of Jackson's hands wrapped around one of mine.

"I don't think I can do this." I shook my head. "I don't think I can do this, Jackson. Not again. What if something goes wrong? What if… what if it's something that's my fault? What if Dr. Lin was wrong? We– we can't go through this again." Dr. Lin would be there soon. But that didn't mollify my worry. Instead, it continued to fester uneasily inside of me.

"April, stop. You are the strongest woman I know. There's not a thing in the world that you can't do. I promise. You are strong. You're a soldier, remember?" I stared at him for a moment before letting out a chuckle. I'd only said that to him once – the night before I had given him my virginity.

"What if something goes wrong?" I repeated the question.
"Then we will find a way to deal with it, okay? I promise we will. We'll do it together, just like we've done everything else together this year. We can do it. We will do it." He squeezed my hand.

A few more tears come out and his arms wrapped around me, pulling me into a tight hug and embracing me firmly. I leaned into him. It's a little easier to cry when his arms were wrapped around me and it was a lot easier to stop crying, too, to come to terms with the reality that was happening and the fact that he was there, right there. We were in a hospital and had all of the equipment that would be medically necessary if something went wrong. I already knew that this baby wasn't breech from the ultrasound that I had last week and from all of the kicks I had felt up in my ribcage and stomach. Things were looking good, according to all the facts.

There was a weird sense of gratuity for the physical pain of labor. Truthfully, it was her dot focus on my emotional worries when the pain was so intense. It was nothing like being cut open on Meredith's kitchen table but it was a different kind of pain that was still agonizing in its own way. Pacing doesn't help this pain. Jackson rubbing my back or shoulders or feet doesn't help. Instead, it just comes and goes in waves.

Catherine makes a brief appearance – she had been in Seattle for a few days now. This was supposed to be her last visit before she came for a month or so when the baby was born, but those plans had been quickly canceled when Jackson had texted her.

"You are so strong to do this without any pain medication, April. You know you don't have to." She murmured.

"I've done worse." I reminded her, sitting on an exercise ball and holding onto the railing of my bed.

Labor doesn't progress as quickly as I would have liked it to given that it wasn't my first birth. Labor was supposed to get quicker with each child that you had but I supposed both of my previous experiences were skewed enough that maybe it didn't really count. Samuel had been so early and induced and Harriet, well, that c-section was unthinkable. It was the last thing that I wanted to think about while going through labor again. It was the kind of thing that could have sent me spiraling into an anxiety attack. I couldn't do that right now. I needed to breathe deeply and keep as calm as the pain would let me.

"Oh god, this is the worst." I groaned out.

"I know, baby, but you're doing so good. You're doing so good." Jackson reminded me.

It was one more thing that we hadn't done together – going through a healthy and normal labor. Somehow, the third time was the charm. Or at least I really, really hoped that it was.

Any complaints about the pain that came from contractions are quickly thrown out when it was finally time to push upon being dilated enough. This was another searing pain, different and familiar at the same time. Boy or girl, this baby had a much bigger head than what their big brother in Heaven had.

It feels like my core muscles were ripping apart my abdomen. Time exists in its own warped plane, alternating between deep moaning and yelling. When crowning finally happened, the ring of fire had me cursing and swearing with every word in my vocabulary.

But all of that changed as soon as the baby was out.

Jackson and I both fell quiet for a moment as Dr. Lin lifted up our baby. There's no noise at first
and I could feel the dos intense panic of my life already beginning to settle on my chest, a sudden resurgence of energy making it far too easy to sit up and try to see what was going on. I can't find my voice to ask what was going on, whether it was exhaustion or panic, I wasn't sure. But it was nothing. A little sucking of the amniotic fluid and suddenly there it was – the most beautiful sound that I had heard in years, the sound of my baby crying out.

"Oh god, they're okay," I sobbed out as I fell back against the bed with relief, a hand coming up to cover my mouth and the messy tears that began to fall again. "They're okay."

"They're okay," Jackson looked at me with a nod of the head, rubbing my arm. "You did so well."

"This is my favorite part," Dr. Lin announced as she swaddled up our baby in a white blanket and moved back over to the two of us. "Jackson, April… you two have a beautiful baby boy."
JACKSON

We had a son.

I had thought those words before, but they had been different then. When April had told me that our first baby was a boy, it had been through tears and agony, knowing that we weren't going to get all of the things that we wanted with that precious baby boy, that the moments would be few and far between, if not agonizingly painful for the baby. I had known from then that there was no way things were going to go how we expected. Type 2 or 3, it didn't matter. Our little Buddha baby would not have a full and long life. Even if he would always be a part of who we were as parents, something that we would teach Harriet and this baby about when they were old enough to really understand it, it was just different than now. But it didn't pass by me that everything about this moment meant more because of the son that I had held and let go off.

This time, there was the weight of seven pounds and two ounces in my arm, sleepy eyes looking up at me for only a moment before shutting again. Barely any hair on top of his head, the nose is mine. Harriet had April's nose, but this baby had mine. His head was just a little bit squished from coming out of her but I was sure that would change a bit in the coming days as he got used to being outside of the womb. This was my son. The one that I would raise, and teach, and hold, and love. I would be able to do everything with him.

Football. That was one thing that I wanted to be able to pass down from him, whether it started early or late. I had loved it as a kid and begrudgingly wished that it was something that I could have done with my dad had he been around. But I was around. I wasn't going anywhere. We could do anything together.

Dipping down my head and brushing my nose across the wrinkled forehead, I took a deep breath. He smelled like his sister had, even if he's not quite as chubby. But he hadn't stayed in quite as long, just a couple days shorter than Harriet's stay had been. Even if he had been a little unpredictable, too, I was much happier that April had gone into labor with Warren in the middle of the operating room instead of trapped inside of Meredith's house with a storm howling outside. She was okay. Resting now, trying to recover some of her strength and perhaps sanity, but she was okay.

"There we go," I murmured as I rocked my sleeping son. "Nice and cozy."

"Oh, look at that sweet baby..." My mother's familiar voice rang in my head as she cooed over him. "Oh, Jackson, he looks just like you did when you were little. What a sweet, sweet face." She beamed.

A large smile filled my expression. "Yeah, he's pretty handsome." I agreed, holding his head.

"How's April doing?" Mom asked.

"She's resting," I answered. "It was pretty hard on her. Emotionally. She's never gotten to do this before, have a normal labor..." I took a deep breath. "Neither of us has, so I'm making sure that she gets as much rest as possible while she can," I explained.

"Good," she murmured. "This one looks like he's getting plenty of sleep. But I'm not going to be able to get any until I know what you've named my beautiful little grandson." Mom teased.
"Zac." I smiled softly. "Zachary Mason Kepner-Avery. Kind of a mouthful, I know, but Mason softens the Zachary part." That had been my pick. Mason was April's.

"I like it." She smiled as she peered down at him again. "It's perfect. Harriet and Zachary."

This time, when Zachary is finally ready to go home from the hospital after all of the tests have been run and typical vaccinations have been administered, April is ready to go home from the hospital, too. We get to go home together with a healthy baby boy in her arms. It's a fuss to get him in the car and April can't take her eyes off of him the entire time that we drive the short distance from the hospital to our house.

Everything is different when it comes to having two children under three than it had been when we first brought Harriet home. Things had been a little odd between the two of us then, constantly having both of us getting up instead of alternating like we should have, overcompensating for the awkwardness of our relationship. She hadn't wanted to be useless and I didn't want her to overexert herself while she was recovering from surgery. But this is different. I still don't want her to overexert herself, but it was a lot easier to alternate like two normal parents should have when we were on the same page and an equal footing in our relationship. When the both of us get up, it's not from a tense place or out of guilt. It's just because both of our kids are up and crying instead of just Zac.

"Mama! Mama!" Distinct syllables mean it's our daughter waking us.

"I'll get her, don't worry." I murmured, pressing a kiss to April's forehead.

Sleep wasn't something that any new parents really got a lot of. But I knew in particular that I wasn't getting as much as I could be. April was the one who had to get up every two to three hours for the sake of breastfeeding. I found myself getting up more than I should have. Sleep didn't come naturally to me even when I had the chance to lay down.

I knew why. Dr. McCullough had helped make it clear. Now, I had more to lose than ever.

"Hey, baby girl," I whispered softly as I entered Harriet's bedroom. Harriet was standing up in her crib, holding onto the bars. "What are you doing up so late, huh?"

"I want Mama," Harriet whined.

"Mama's got to sleep, so you've got Daddy." I picked her up from her crib, spinning her around in my arms and listening to her giggle. "Is Daddy not good enough for you anymore? Are you and Mama gonna form a girl's club without me? That'd make Daddy sad."

"Daddy's silly." My daughter's tiny fist pounded against my chest a moment before her arms wrapped around my neck in a hug. "I love you, Daddy. Is baby sleep?"

Damn, the baby talk never stopped being adorable. "Yeah. The baby's sleeping."

"Can we play in the morning?" Harriet asked.

"Maybe. But Harriet has to go back to sleep first." I murmured, kissing her forehead. "Can you do that?"

"Yes, Daddy." She said.

I placed her back down in her bed again, tucking the blankets around her as she looked up at me with light, sleepy eyes. "Be good, ladybug. Go to sleep." I bent forward and placed a kiss on her
forehead. "Sweet dreams."

Heading back down the hallway, I made a quick stop in Zachary's nursery just to make sure that everything was alright. He was sleeping soundly. He didn't notice me standing above him, sound asleep for now. He would be up again in about an hour to feed and by then, probably a diaper change, but he seemed alright for now. A tired smile on my face, I head back to join April in bed again.

April was the thing to wake me up in the morning instead of the cries of one of my children. A gentle hand on my shoulder to give me a small shake – she was always cautious with getting me up since I had gotten the diagnosis and PTSD, since I had started the medication. We were both keeping an eye out on one another, none of that had changed. If anything, it had only increased given our situation was likely to breed stress and a few other things. I squinted at the clock on the nightstand to check the time. Seven in the morning wasn't that early. Not with two tiny children.

"Hey," I rasped out, rubbing the back of my eyes.

"Hi," April rubbed my shoulder. "I just fed and burped Zac. Harriet's gonna be up any minute and my mom is coming over. I need a little help getting the house cleaned up."

"Isn't the point of your mom coming over to have her help do those things?" I questioned, brow raising.

Her eyes rolled. "I don't want her picking up your dirty underwear."

"Then we keep her out of the bedroom. I'm sure you don't want her finding any of your little kinky toys while cleaning up, huh?" I teased her with a smile growing across my lips, pushing myself to sit up and stretching my arms out and above my head, feeling my spine pop as I did so. She groaned loudly and I just grinned. 'I'll throw things in the washer and get started on Harriet's breakfast. You want some of the steel-cut oatmeal?"

"I'll get my breakfast. I need to take a shower first. You get our girl." April leaned down and placed a sweet kiss on my lips. I grabbed the back of her neck and held her there for a moment, just lingering and brushing the tip of my nose against hers.

"You're my girl." I reminded her.

"I know. And I love you."

"I love you too, babe."

Grabbing some of the clothes that had made their way onto the floors and counters of our bedroom in the haste and back and forth that had been our life in the past week, I throw everything into the hamper, including what I'm wearing, tossing the colored clothes into the dryer. I washed my face off and put on some deodorant before throwing on a clean pair of boxers and a shirt before heading into Harriet's bedroom.

Her blanket was twisted up from the shifting that she had done during the night and both of her little arms were stretched above her head. She was still asleep judging by the closed eyes, mouth open and drooling. Just like her mother.

I gave her a few extra minutes to snooze. She was probably affected by the lack of consistent sleep in this household just as much as we were, even if her nap schedule was a lot more consistent than April or me. We squeezed in a few minutes when we could here and there, but we always made sure that our babies were getting just as much sleep a was needed and recommended. I laid out
some clothes for her, grabbing one of the little shirts that Karen had sent for her along with a few baby gifts, and a little pair of overalls and socks. Watching her for a few seconds, I took a deep breath before walking over to her, placing my hand on her stomach and rubbing it gently.

"Hey, ladybug. It's time to get up." I murmured.

"Daddy," Harriet mumbled, blinking a few times.

First thing in the morning, Harriet was a pretty accurate combination of April and me without coffee. Slow moving and quiet, she doesn't put up any fuss as I get her dressed for the day, letting me carry her from her bedroom to the kitchen and place her in her highchair. Once she's a little more awake, she's normally fussier about asserting her own independence.

"Granny's coming over today. She wants to meet your baby brother." I informed her as I cut up some bananas, bringing over the slices to her. "Are you gonna be good for Granny?"

"Granny?" Harriet muttered as she smashed a banana slice with her fingers before putting it in her mouth.

"Granny. April's momma. You don't get to see her as much because she lives far away with Grandpa. She's got red hair just like Momma. You'll remember her once I see her." I finished up with her breakfast quickly before making myself a smoothie. Coffee would undoubtedly come in a few hours. "Are you gonna be good?" I repeated my previous question.

"Harriet good." She smiled at me with food in her mouth and I couldn't help but laugh.

April came into the kitchen a moment later with dripping hair and I could still smell the shampoo, taking a deep inhale as she moved past me to the refrigerator. She was moving on autopilot. Sometimes, that was all that any of us could manage to do with the constant exhaustion faced.

"Hey, sleepyhead." I teased her. "What time does your mom's plane land?"

"Eleven," she answered.

"Okay. Is it alright if I arrange an Uber to pick her up, or do you want me to go myself?" I asked.

"Uber's fine. Just make sure you send her a screenshot with all of the information and everything so she doesn't get confused," she nodded slightly. "I figure that she'll be here around lunch. She'll want to make lunch for us but the only thing that we have in the fridge is breastmilk." She commented.

"I'll get groceries delivered." I caught her by the hips as she tried to move by me again, kissing her on top of the head. Then I opened up the fridge myself to see what all was inside of it. "You've been pumping a lot, haven't you?"

"I don't think Zac eats as much as Harriet did when she was little," April commented as she glanced over at our daughter, currently stuffing her face with the bananas. I couldn't help but let out a chuckle and shrugged nonchalantly. "But I guess that's why everyone called her our fat baby. It'll be good. Mom will want to feed him some and maybe I'll actually be able to sleep once she's here." She continued speaking. "I figure I'll adjust how much I'm producing in another week or two."

Harriet interjected. "Want milk!"

"Got it," I said, grabbing the carton in the fridge.
"Want mama's milk!" She corrected.

"Oh, sweetie," April cooed. "You're a big girl now. Mama's milk is for babies, like Zac. How about you get Mama's kisses instead, huh?"

That was the way that things had been going pretty consistently since we had brought her home. Harriet appeared to love and adore Zac but she was also a little jealous of all of the attention that the newborn got. It was necessary, of course, and we still gave her as much time as we could. Newborns just demanded a lot and there was only so much we could do sometimes.

Having Karen here today would help to alleviate that attention even if there was going to be, well, an awkward conversation to have. Awkward given the fact that I was sure that she didn't like me after we had been divorced, there had been some coldness confirmed in my direction after Harriet's birth, and I just wasn't sure what she thought about me now, nearly two years later. She always communicated with April, not me. But it was time to tell her and the rest of her family that we were engaged again, that we were having a real wedding. One that they would hopefully want to attend.

Regardless of my feelings, an uber is ordered for her to pick her up a few minutes after her flight landed, giving her time to get situated and get her luggage. The groceries ordered from Whole Foods are delivered courtesy of Amazon quickly, half of our laundry is done, and the bedroom door is kept shut to avoid any eyes there.

The doorbell finally rang to let us know that we were here. Zac had fallen back asleep for another nap and April hadn't bothered to try and use it as an opportunity to get some sleep herself, not wanting to do too much up and down with her mother around.

"Mom!" April breathed out fondly, welcoming her in with a hug.

"Hi, Karen." I greeted her more formally.

"Oh, it's so nice to see you both," Karen smiled. "Where's my newest grandbaby?"

"We just put him down again, but he'll be up in a few hours," April informed her. "He's been a real trooper about sleeping when he's supposed to, even if it's in short iterations. Better than Harriet was at his age, even if he doesn't eat quite as much." She elaborated happily. "He's a sweetheart. We can go peak in his nursery if you want to."

I let the two go and do their thing, straightening up the kitchen a little bit from the mess that had been made earlier. Our house was pretty much a constant mess since Zachary had come home but that was likely to change, at least temporarily, with Karen here.

With the baby monitor in his bedroom connected to the one on the living room table, I can hear the little conversation going back and forth between the two of them. It was about Zachary and Harriet, about what April had looked like when she was a baby and how he looked a bit more like me. It was a point of pride, honestly, knowing that everyone could see me in my little boy. I tried not to eavesdrop too much given it was a moment just between them, but my curiosity is hard to say. I just want to know if she drops a hint about the engagement. Both of us had opted to not put on our rings this morning, should she notice in advance.

"Have you two eaten lunch? I'm happy to make something. You should really be sleeping, both of you, taking advantage of Zac being such a good sleeper. I'm sure Harriet will be happy to have some time with her Granny." Karen rambled on happily as she and April came back to the living room.
"Actually, Mom, there's something that we want to tell you first," April diverted.

Her brows furrowed. "What's going on?"

"Well..." April glanced back at me and I moved toward her, letting my arm wrap around her shoulders and pulling her in snuggly against my side. "I know that you and Dad might have some mixed feelings about this which is why we wanted to tell you about it in person and not over the phone. But... Jackson and I are getting married. Again. We're doing it right this time. All of it."

Karen's mouth fell agape as she stared at us with wide eyes. "You're getting married? Again?"

"Yes ma'am," I spoke up, squeezing April's shoulder. "Letting April go was the biggest mistake of my life and if anything, the last two years had proved that to me. There's no way that I'm letting go of her again. We've been going to therapy separately and together, really working things out and... I think now we're in a stronger and better place than we have been before. We're happy together. And we would both be happy if we had your approval this time." I expressed.

"I'm stunned," Karen started. "But it's about time the two of you made things right again."

A laugh fell from my lips. "Thank you." I wasn't sure if it was meant to be a compliment but it felt like one, at least. Because she was right. It was about time we worked it out. We had two kids to worry about now.

"Thanks, Mom," April stepped away from me to give another hug and I followed, hugging both of them.

"Now I don't have to worry about you two sleeping in the same room together anymore. Which you should be doing, right now. I will get Harriet fed and played with and if you hear that baby crying, you ignore it because Granny is going to take care of everything." Karen shooed both of us away and we followed the suggestion without any fuss. Sleep in increments of an hour or two was exhausting. But, at least that little of it kept me from dreaming.

When the bedroom door shut behind us, I stepped up behind April and wrapped my arms around my waist, dropping my chin down on top of her head and taking a deep breath. I could still smell the shampoo from the shower that she had taken this morning. She smelled sweet as always.

"That went better than I expected," I spoke.

"Yeah," April agreed. "I thought that she would be more freaked out."

"Maybe everyone else could just see what we couldn't," I shrugged my shoulders as she turned around in my arms. "That we're meant to be, even if we're both too stubborn for our own good."

She laughed softly. "You're the stubborn one here."

"You are just as stubborn," I pointed out with a raise of my eyebrows.

"I'm just a lot cuter when I do it." Her shoulders lifted up, nose scrunching adorably.

"Yes, yes you are." I agreed easily and dropped a kiss down on her lips. "You're very lucky for that." I nibbled at her lower lip as I smiled down at her, letting my forehead rest against hers.

"I need sleep," April muttered against my lips.

"We both do," I murmured in agreement.
The two of us gravitated toward the bed without any effort being made to change out of the clothes that we were wearing, aware that it wasn't likely to be for too long even with Karen here to watch over both of the kids. Harriet would want us or April would get up to breastfeed. Even if we had bottles prepared for either one of our mothers, or maybe even a friend who showed up, or me, of course – she didn't want him to get too used to the bottle. I could only imagine how much of a bonding experience it was to literally nurse our son at her breast.

Curling up around her, I fell asleep with my nose pressed into the back of her neck and breathing in her sweet smell. It's always a little easier to sleep with her there, curled up against me like this. Maybe that was part of the reason that I hadn't slept as much, besides the obvious. We didn't often curl up around each other like this because of the constant up and down.

It was a crying that woke us up. That was normal. Zachary was crying and a moment passed before I realized that I could hear Harriet, too – not crying but upset, voice shrill in the pitch that she only used with tantrums. My brow furrowed and I stared at April. A few moments later, her eyes blinked awake as she processed the scene. Karen had told us not to worry but it's hard not to. Every instinct told the both of us to worry. I took a deep breath, placing my hand on her arm so she doesn't get up just yet. It's not until there was a particularly loud shriek from Zac that I give in with a nod of my head and we both get up, heading down the hallway to see what was going on now.

"It's probably nothing," I reminded her before she could lose her cool.

Karen was holding Zachary on her hip and cradling his head, whereas Harriet was sitting on the couch next to her and crying, cheeks red and puffy. She was snotty-faced and her curls were in her eyes. April swooped in with a tissue to dry her tears.

"What happened?" I asked, gravitating toward Karen and my son.

"Harriet was just a little too rough, I think." She answered with a frown.

"Meaning what, exactly?" April looked up, blinking.

"She hit him. It was an accident, I think she was just trying to play with him – like one of her dolls, of course," Karen spoke quickly. "She didn't mean any harm. It's difficult, bringing a new child into the house. Trust me. Libby was no angel when you were born, April."

"Harriet!" April squeaked out. "We talked about this. Zac is little. We have to be super, super careful with him. There's no hitting. Hitting hurts." She spoke firmly. I stepped away to sit down next to Harriet on the couch.

"We have to be gentle with Zac. Just like with your dolls, remember? We have to be nice and gentle."

"Harriet didn't mean anything by it," Karen spoke, still clearly troubled that this had happened while she was watching while it was happening. "She was just acting this way because she's too young to verbalize perfectly normal feelings that we all would have in his situation. It happens with almost any child at her age."

I sighed, scooping up Harriet in my arms. "We're not mad. At either of you." I rubbed Harriet's back.

"No, we're not mad," April echoed. "We just have to remember to be gentle, right? That's what big sisters do. They're gentle because they love their little brothers. Don't you, Harriet? You love your little brother?"
"Yes, Mama." Harriet gasped out, tiny fists rubbing at her eyes.

"I think it's time for your afternoon nap. How about Mama puts you down?" April suggested. I handed over our daughter to her, hoping that she could work some of the maternal magic.

Standing up from the room, I walked over to Zac. He had calmed down with some of the screams that he had let out earlier though his cheeks were still wet and red from the tears that had been let out during the incident. His upper arm is red, as to be expected. It would fade in a few minutes. Harriet wasn't strong enough to leave a mark or a bruise. Karen handed him over to me and I rocked him in my arms gently, careful to support his head.

"I really don't think she realized what she was doing," Karen spoke again. "It was just a little slap. I think she wanted his attention."

"It's okay, Karen. We don't blame you." I grimaced with a slight smile. "This kind of thing happens."

"I know. It happened when my girls were little, too. I just don't want to upset April." She explained.

"April's strong. She just worries a lot." I reminded her.

It was a challenging few days to have Karen there with us, no one wanted to upset each other but it was just a little difficult when everyone was tired and none of us were exactly on the same page. It was a good thing that she wasn't upset about the engagement between the two of us, of course, but that was just about the list of where it went.

April was getting a few more hours of sleep at night. I wasn't. I rather hold onto her and watch her sleep and even if I do drift out of it here and there, I'm no more well-rested with Karen there than I was without her. But as long as she was the one who was getting some more sleep, I wasn't particularly concerned about myself. What she had told me about what she had been going through after Harriet, when the two of us had almost been entirely focused on our baby and not checking in each other, particularly after I'd hired the nurse to essentially do the job that I should have been doing myself, I couldn't forget it. It only pushed me further to keep an eye on her and make sure that everything was okay. I didn't want her to half to go through it again, and if she did, I sure as hell wasn't going to let her go through it alone.

The wee hours of the morning were upon us and sun just beginning to stream in. Karen had been up with Zac about an hour, an hour and a half ago… which meant that we probably had another hour before he would be up, and before April would want to be able to feed him herself. But she was getting a little restless which meant that she was going to be up before then, I could tell. A few minutes of watching her passed before hazel hues open and she shifted again, letting out a content sigh that let me know she was awake and mostly well-rested.

"Good morning," I murmured, kissing her shoulder.

"Hi," she breathed out.

"Did you sleep okay?" I asked, running my hand up and down her side.

"Yeah," she took a deep breath and shifted against me, stretching out like a cat. "Did you?" She returned the question. I was aware of why, of course. But I don't want to shift the conversation to myself at the moment.

" Mostly." I decided on an answer. "Your mom was up about an hour or so ago. We have a while."
April rolled over to face me. "Good. I'm not ready to move or be a person yet." She said.

"Can we talk about something?" I asked, eyebrows raising at her and I propped up my head with one hand, letting her know it was something slightly more than just lazy morning conversation, even if we both had the morning breath to say otherwise. "Something serious?" I may as well be upfront about it.

"Yeah," she nodded her head slightly, a small furrow appearing between her brows. "What's up?"

"I just want to check in with you," I started. "We haven't had a lot of time to really talk since Zac was born. It's a stressful time for the both of us and I know that you're a little more rested with your mom here, but she's going back this afternoon, so… I just want to check in and make sure that things are okay. When we were talking a few months ago, you mentioned that after Harriet was born you had some issues with postpartum. Depression. I just want to make sure that if there's anything like that lingering around, you know you can still talk to me right? You don't have to brush it off because you're tired or I'm tired, or because we don't have our date nights or anything like that…” I rambled much more than I intended to. Perhaps she really was rubbing off on me.

"Thank you." The first words that came out of April's mouth surprised me even though they made sense. She gave me a sweet smile and I returned it. "I, uh… it is a lot. But right now, I feel like I'm okay. Maybe because I've already been in counseling and been through it, and I talked to Dr. McCullough… but I don't have the same problems. I haven't really had any flashbacks about Harriet's birth. Not since I was pregnant. And that was a big part of it. I kept thinking about that and I wouldn't sleep and it made me so, so grouchy."

I breathed out with relief. "Good. I'm glad. I'm really, really glad to hear that." My arm wrapped around her waist and I pulled her in for a firm hug against me. "I'm really glad," I repeated myself. "Is there anything, though? Anything you want to talk about?"

"Not right now," she said. "I feel okay. Even if I'm just tired, I know that's normal and I am supposed to feel tired, so I am just… embracing it instead of criticizing myself for it."

That was good. Miles good, actually. I was always worried that she would criticize herself for not being good enough with this or that, some kind of bullshit excuse that didn't make sense and that she wouldn't have criticized anyone else for. April had always been her own worst critic. I worried about how that contributed to her problems. Maybe that was where some of the journalling had helped her.

"Good. 'Cause I'm exhausted too, so if you criticized yourself, you'd be criticizing me, too." I chuckled, kissing her softly.

The rest of the day managed to fly by with naps, diaper changes, feedings, cleaning, and everything else. Our house was definitely the cleanest that it had been since Zac was born with the help that Karen had put forth in getting everything straightened up. Most of our laundry was done, all of Harriet and Zac's was done, folded, and put up. The kitchen was stocked and all of the cutlery and dishes were put up. Things had even been dusted – it had definitely been a few weeks since that had happened since April had been off her feet more, and I wasn't one who remembered to do that nearly as frequently as I should have.

April drove her to the airport and left me alone with the kids for about ninety minutes. It's the first time I'm truly alone with either of them. Zac sleeps through all of it. I read Harriet a book about being a good sister and she played with her doll in front of me, making sure that I knew just how gentle she could be with it. It was reassuring.
What wasn't reassuring, however, was the bruise on Zac's arm.

I knew Harriet's strength pretty well. I hadn't minded her getting rough with me in the past. She couldn't hurt me or April and I think the worst of it was when she pulled April's hair, something that I couldn't relate to. It freaked me out that he would bruise quite so easily. He shouldn't have bruised that easily, as far as I was concerned. When April's home, I barely give her time to plop down onto the couch before I approach it.

"Hey, did you notice that Zac's arm bruised from Harriet hitting him?" I questioned, sitting next to her. My voice was quiet to not draw our daughter's attention away from her movie.

"What?" April questioned.

"Yeah. I noticed it this afternoon. It's a pretty bad bruise, too." I frowned.

"He shouldn't bruise that easily," she remarked.

"That's what I thought." I breathed out. "I mean, I know that he's only a few weeks old and maybe we're worrying about nothing. Maybe... because of Samuel, I'm jumping to a conclusion. I know you did when you were pregnant with Harriet, you told me. It just kind of freaked me out when I noticed." I explained. "I don't know. Nothing abnormal was brought up at the month check up, but, maybe we should bring it up at the two-month check-up. Before we get back to work from parental leave."

She nodded her head. "Yeah, we should. When is it, again?" She asked.

"I don't know off the top of my head," I admitted. "It's written down on the fridge calendar."

"Okay. Let's write it down. Take a picture, too. We'll bring it up with Karev and make sure that it's nothing." April grabbed her phone, typing away for a few seconds. "We're probably overreacting. Karev is going to make fun of us for it, but I don't care. I just want to make sure that absolutely everything is as perfect and healthy with him as possible."

"You're right, he's definitely going to make fun of us for overreacting," I chuckled. "I can already hear him now. Kids get hurt, Kepner. Deal with it. Your baby's fine." I mocked his voice, giving my best impression of him. "Why don't you get some sleep, and I'll get started on dinner?"

"Are you ordering take-out?" She asked, eyebrows raising.

"You know me too well."
I loved breastfeeding.

It wasn't always easy and glamorous. Actually, more often than not, it was the exact opposite. Sore nipples and heavy breasts, the occasional leak when I don't get there fast enough upon hearing him crying, a super painful latch here or there – no, it was never as easy as the glorious movie scene that shows a baby connect with its mother's breast immediately after birth and everyone was happy and smiling. But it was still one of the most unique and meaningful experiences that came with birthing and raising a child.

With Zac being such a tiny baby, it was all so sweet and warm and cuddly. He wasn't as rough as Harriet had occasionally been. As cheesy as it was, it really was a wonderful way to bond with my baby. There had been no pause or gap because I hadn't been doped up on pain medication and a plethora of other things like I had after Harriet had been cut out of me, and I was sure that made a difference. Of course, I loved my daughter and I had bonded with her. She was my little girl and there was no question about that. But there had been so many more obstacles with her than there was now with Zac. I was so grateful for that. Being able to sit down with my son and ignore the rest of the world, just having the two of us there, it was relaxation and bonding like nothing else.

With a little nipple butter, it was one of the most amazing sensations in the world.

Tiny hands grab a fistful of my hair that was barely more than a few hands, giving it a little tug. He did this a lot. My hair, a necklace, even a bra strap, he liked to grab onto things. It happened on a schedule, always right before he was done. Moments later, just like clockwork, he pulled away from my nipple and stared up at me with wide eyes.

"Hey, little man," I murmured. "All done with Mommy?"

His lips smacked together and I can't help but give a little laugh as I see the uncanny resemblance to both his father and sister. The bruise on his arm had faded and there are no new ones. Harriet had seemed to learn her lesson. It's hard to know at her age, emotions are wildly unstable and hard to control, and all of this was a confusing situation for her. But she hadn't hurt him again, intentionally or unintentionally. Jackson and I were both relieved about that after the big bruise he had developed.

Fixing the nursing bra back and buttoning up the loose shirt, I leaned back for a moment, shifting him up so that I could burp him over my shoulder. He's a snuffly little boy to hold just like this. He doesn't squirm much, just puts a little fist right over my heart. I held him and let him do his thing.

"Such a good boy..." I cooed, nuzzling my nose on top of his growing curls. "Are you ready for your doctor's appointment with Uncle Alex today? Two months. You're such a big boy. You're two months, your big sister is just about two years... my babies are so big." I swayed side to side as I held onto him gently, smiling. My healthy babies were getting big, even if two months didn't seem like a big deal. "I love you so much. Let's get you changed."

There was a cute dinosaur onesie that I had been meaning to get him into now that he was big enough for it. It had been a gift from Jo and Alex, actually. Today seemed like a good day to break it out of the dresser and get him into it. It fit well now.

"Such a cute boy." I smiled, leaning down and blowing raspberries, hearing him giggle wildly.
"Hey," Jackson's whisper caught my attention and I looked up over my shoulder, eyebrows raised. "Are you about ready to go? Alex is going to drag the both of us if we're late." He commented and I let out a soft laugh, nodding.

"Yeah, are both of the car seat set up?" It had been the first time to take both of them out at the same time, even if we were dropping Harriet off in daycare just for a little while.

"Yep." He nodded.

"Are you sure?" I questioned as I turned toward him, an eyebrow arched up.

This time, Jackson laughed. "Yes, I'm absolutely sure. They're good to go, Momma Bear."

"Well, I think it's going to be Daddy's job to get you into your car seat, isn't it?" I looked down at Zac, lightly tickling his belly. "Yes, yes it is." I smiled, looking back at Jackson.

"Alright, hand the little monster over." Jackson reached out for him. I handed him over carefully, cautious as always to make sure that he was supporting his head as if the two of us hadn't already done this before. Most people talked about being so much more comfortable as a second-time parent.

But of course, most people didn't have painful miscarriage after miscarriage in between children, not like me. It was impossible to just brush things off and pretend like this was a million times easier. Zachary was my rainbow baby. Maybe I could change diapers with one hand tied behind my back and blindfolded, and it was easier to get him latched for feeding time, I knew what brand of nipple butter and diaper creams I liked best… but it was still hard, all of it. I had to be careful all the time. I knew the grief of what could happen if I wasn't.

"I'll go get Hattie. We'll see how the two of them do in the car together." I said with a brief smile.

Parenting was always an adventure, after all.

"Alright, ladybug. Are you going to be a big girl while in the car today?" I asked her, bending down to pick her up. She feels heavy now given how much time I had been holding Zachary.

"Mama and Daddy going to work?" She asked.

"No, sweetheart," I shook my head. "Your little brother has a doctor's appointment. We won't be there long. How about we go to lunch and get ice cream, after? Huh?" If nothing else worked, ice cream was always a sure way to make sure that she would be happy to go along with the ride. Hopefully, Zachary wouldn't get too fussy with being out for so long.

Jackson and I managed to get the both of them into the back seat of the car and in their separate car seats without either one of them making a fuss. Zachary seemed to fall asleep almost the second that he had gotten tucked into and buckled up completely – no doubt for the timing of having fed him before. It's a relief. I wasn't sure how he would react to the car ride but him sleeping through it would definitely be good for all four of us.

Quiet kids in the backseat made it a quick ride to the hospital. Jackson took Harriet down to the daycare and I went ahead and took Zachary upstairs to the pediatric floor. It's noisy as always, colorful and soft. Letting one of the nurses know that I was here for Karev, I waited in the patient room.

A few minutes passed before Jackson came up to join me.
"Hey, is he ready to go?" Jackson asked.

"Yep," I nodded, rocking the car seat gently. He was still asleep in it and it had seemed silly to wake him up. "Look at our little trooper. Snoring away just like his Daddy."


"Shush!" I spat my tongue out at him.

The door to the patient room opened up and we both looked up to see Karev entering the room and shutting the door behind him, he took a moment before he looked up from the electronic chart in his hand and gave a brief smile to the both of us.

"Hey," Alex greeted. "How's the little guy doing?"

"Not so little anymore," I answered proudly, smiling as I glanced down at him. "Ready for all his shots and physical."

Of course, much easier to say as a parent than being the baby. Zachary wakes up when I undress him for the physical portion of his appointment so Alex can examine him and I'm sure that I was being annoyingly hands-on with everything, but he doesn't stop or criticize me. He had seen what the both of us had been through and the past few hours and wouldn't interfere. Our son doesn't really make a fuss until the first of the shots and he starts wailing and keeps crying until ten minutes have passed from the last shot. He had gone from the forty-second percentile up to the fifty-first.

"Do you have any questions or concerns?" Alex asked as he finished up the notes he was making.

"Yes, actually," I pulled my phone out of my purse and pulled up the picture. "So, it was a total accident, but a… a week or two ago? I think it was, I don't know, the time has been a blur. Anyway, Harriet was a little rough with him and gave him this nasty bruise. It was a lot worse than I expected. It stayed longer too and I'm just a little worried about him bruising like that because, you know, Hattie's a big girl but she's really not that strong." I rambled on.

He squinted at the phone as he swiped at the pictures. "I'll run his blood work, but you realize that it's going to come back as nothing, right?"

"Probably," Jackson chimed in with a nod. "But good luck arguing with her."

"Not gonna try," Alex snorted, getting another pair of gloves on and a blood draw kit. "One more needle little man, okay? It'll be quick." He spoke to our son. "I'll call you when we get the results."

I held onto Zachary firmly as he put up a fight to the needle with another wailing cry leaving his lips upon being stuck. My breasts ached just hearing it and I shut my eyes, holding him and rocking it the moment that it was over with, trying to soothe him back into being good and calm again. I covered the top of his head with loving kisses and Jackson rubbed his back.

"You guys are good to go," Alex assured us. "Try not to freak out over nothing, alright? See you back at work soon."

Going back to work was something that would happen in one more month, of course. We had one month of maternity and paternity leave left with Zachary and Harriet. There was also the matter of trying to plan our wedding in the next month, too, trying to get as much of it out of the way as possible. We hadn't scheduled a date. I hadn't picked a dress. Colors and flowers were just about the only thing that had been solidified. That and Jackson wanted chocolate cake. I didn't mind that
in the slightest. He would love it and the kids would love it. Most other people would, too. I was all for people-pleasing, even on my wedding day.

With both of our babies down for a nap after we get lunch and ice cream, I sit down in front of my laptop to try and figure out at least one thing. Dates and locations were usually the first things. I didn't want something similar to the wedding with Matthew nor the getaway one that we had done before. No church, for Jackson. We could meet in the middle with a secular location and my pastor giving a mostly secular talk, other than the moment of silence for prayer.

"What are you doing?" Jackson asked, coming up behind me and placing his hands on my shoulder. "You should be asleep."

"Wedding venues." I murmured. "Wanna help?"

"Sure, let me see." He said as he settled down next to me.

Passing the laptop over to him, I leaned into him and let him scroll through some of the different venue options that I was looking through. His assessment was always more critical than mine on every matter except for the price. But it was nice to do this together. When I had planned my wedding to Matthew, he hadn't displayed any real interest in the details of it.

I hadn't realized that I fell asleep leaning against his shoulder until the sound of the phone ringing woke me up with a jolt, blinking a few times as I gathered the details on my surrounding again. Jackson waited until I was sitting up on my own before he got up to grab it, answering it. Rubbing the back of my eyes, I leaned back against the sofa for a moment. Less than an hour had passed. It hadn't been that long of a nap. Jackson mumbled into the phone and I laid down, waiting until he was done to speak up.

"Who was that?" I mumbled.

"Karev," Jackson answered. "Zac's blood work was fine. Nothing weird. Just like he said."

"Of course," I replied, yawning loudly.

"Told you. He's got too much of me in him to be anything but fine." He teased, lowering himself back on the couch and hovering above me before leaning down to place a soft kiss on my lips. I let out a content sigh, allowing myself to melt into him completely.

A busy week of parenting and planning passes as the time ticked down between what was left of the leave from work and returning to it. Neither one of us managed to maintain a normal sleep schedule. Sometimes we fall asleep in the same bed together but every there for so hours, it was still interrupted by Zachary demanding either my breast or a bottle – usually, though, a breast. Just like his father, he pretty much always demanded the real thing to a knockoff version.

That same week, neither one of us managed to leave the house. It became far too easy to just stay inside when we could get our groceries delivered from Whole Foods via Amazon Prime or delivery. Everything that we needed could be done at home. It was both a curse and a blessing.

Today, though, it was feeling like a curse.

It was a sunny day for the first time in – well, I wasn't sure how long given that I hadn't paid a ton of attention to the weather unless it was a thunderstorm given that it upset both of the little ones under our roof when the thunder was loud enough to shake the house. Sunlight actually managed to stream in through the open curtains of the living room and bring a little light into the house. It almost felt like I could breathe in my own space again when I hadn't realized that I was letting it
suffocate me. I had to get out of the house.

"Let's do something," I suggested to Jackson, raising my eyebrows.

"Something?" He questioned, turning to face me.

"We need to get out of the house." I murmured, finishing wiping down the living room table. "Seriously! We've been stuck in here for days. This is so unhealthy. I don't want to be those parents that forget how to have a life. Let's get out. Go to the park. Let's do something."

His brow rose, considering my words for a moment. "Sure," he agreed. "Let's do it."

"Oh, thank God," I breathed out with a smile. "I'm gonna get Harriet dressed. You wanna get Zach?"

"Uh-huh," he agreed.

With a smile on my face and a renewed sense of being, I grabbed Harriet from her playpen to get her dressed and ready for the park. She loved to run around and get dirty, completely fearless as much as it may have driven me crazy, which meant that it would be a day for little jeans and a t-shirt that could get dirty without it being a big deal.

"Are you ready to go to the park, sweetie?" I asked her as I pulled her curly hair into two pigtails.

"Play swings?" Harriet asked, momentarily disrupting my work as she looked at me. I bopped her on the nose with a little bit of sunscreen, rubbing some across her cheeks. She had a few freckles dancing across her cheeks, like Jackson and me.

"Yes, we can play on the swings as long as you want. Let's go, munchkin." I stood up, extending my hand to her.

Another car ride for Zach is just another opportunity for him to fall asleep. Something about the motion managed to soothe him to sleep every single time that Jackson got behind the wheel with the rest of us, oblivious to the rest of the noise in the world. It was almost painfully funny given how easily he could wake up in the relative peace and quiet of our home.

By the time that we got to the park and pulled into a parking spot, Harriet was bolting out of the car the second that Jackson got her out of her car seat. We both let out a good laugh at her enthusiasm and I waved him off to chase after her, taking my time with our boy. I put him inside of a wrap so that he's nestled comfortably against my chest and I can carry his light weight there, leaving both of my hands empty. It only took me a minute or so to catch up with Jackson and Harriet. She had apparently made a beeline straight for the swings, already sitting inside of one and demanding to be pushed higher by her father.

Joy filled my heart as I listened to the happy giggles to escaped from Harriet's lips as she swung forward and back, her hands wrapped around the chains of the swing as Jackson gave her gentle pushes. He doesn't push her too hard or high, just enough to satiate the adventure-lover inside of her and balance it with the worry wart that existed inside of both of us.

"Mama! Swing!" Harriet squealed out, looking at me.

"Yeah, Mama," Jackson chimed in, reaching over and giving me a gentle push. "C'mon."

"Alright, alright," I grinned, toeing the wood chips beneath me to get a little momentum to swing gently. I didn't want to disturb or upset Zach in the process, holding onto him with one arm for
extra support as I moved a bit forward and backward.

With the sun beating down on my face although the temperature was decent enough given that it never got too hot here, I listened to Harriet laugh and squeal for at least an hour in the parking—back and forth on the swings, cackled her way down the slide, and nearly knocked Jackson's front teeth out as he held her up high enough so that she could try and play on the monkey bars like a big girl. There are no stares when I have to feed Zac, covered with a blanket, but I'm still wary enough to be cognizant of people who could stay. Things just felt right today.

"Be careful!" I reminded both Jackson and Harriet as he let her hold herself on the monkey bars, though his hands remained inches from her in case she should fall.

"We are, don't worry Mama," Jackson shot me a wink.

It was beautiful to just have a normal day together with the four of us. It was hard to say how many we would really get of these with all of the work that we did. Even if we were both happy to take three months off of leave with Zachary being born, our work was still important to us, something that we both loved and were both proud of.

Days like today were just all the more valuable because of it.

Even though Harriet rarely fell asleep in the car anymore, it was a habit that she had gotten out of when she was about six or seven months old, but she does this time. I could tell that she was exhausted from all of the running around that she had done on the playground. Zachary too, much more predictably. He hadn't done running around of course, but he had gotten to look around at plenty of new things that weren't around the house. New people and noises. I was impressed that he hadn't gotten too fussy during the course of it.

When we get home, both of the kids go down for a nap without any hesitation, Zachary asleep from the car to the nursery and Harriet pretty much passing out the second that we take off her little sneakers. It was an earned silence in the house. I'm not tired, though. Fresh air had offered me some energy.

"I wish every day could be like today," I commented, plopping down into an armchair.

"No work, kids perfectly behaved? What happened to realistic expectations?" Jackson teased.

I rolled my eyes. "You know what I mean. I want them to have a normal childhood. Not two parents that work too much and that they rarely see." A worry that I couldn't get past.

"You and I both know that's not going to happen," he reminded me. "Neither one of us will let it."

"I know," I murmured. "I just wish it was easier to schedule things like that, but with our job…"

"With our job, we have to take every moment that we can get because we never know when there might be some kind of emergency." He finished what I was thinking. "And that's okay. You're too good at being a mom, April. There's no way that you're not going to be around. Every parent misses moments, one way or another, whether they work through it or sleep through it or just turn their back. It's about making the most of moments you have."

"Is that what you thought when you were a kid?" I asked, chewing at the inside of my cheek. I knew that he had dealt personally as a child, much more than I ever had. I had been lucky to have both of my parents working normal hours and frequently home.

"Not always," he admitted. "But hindsight takes up for it. And when I was a kid, yeah, it did make
those moments that I had with my mom instead of a nanny much more meaningful." He gave a slight shrug of his shoulders.

I reached for the television remote. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"I usually am." He replied cockily.

"Shh." I shushed him.

Turning on the television, I tossed it over to him so he could put it on whatever channel he wanted. There's no football game on or basketball as far as I'm aware of, which meant that I was safe from any choices of his that I wouldn't like.

Shutting my eyes for a brief moment to give them a little rest, they reopened again when CNN blasted about breaking news. Both of us had been a little out of touch with the rest of the happenings in the worlds, as was pretty consistent with life after having a baby. It had been easier in the past couple of weeks verse the ones right after Zachary had been born. But this time, the headline was one that blew me away completely and left a disgusting, nauseous feeling in the pit of my stomach.

_FIVE DEAD, TEN INJURED IN RAVENNA PARK SHOOTING._

My eyes widened as I stared at the headline, clear as day on the screen in front of us. Ravenna Park. That was the same park that we had just been at. We had only been home for a few minutes and breaking news meant that it was something that had just happened… It had to have been minutes after we had left. Kids were still there. Kids that Harriet had played with were still there.

"Oh my god." Tears blurred in my vision and I can't make it to the bathroom. I upheaved the remainder of my breakfast into the kitchen sink.

"Hey, hey." Jackson pulled my hair away from my face. "We're home. We're okay."

Another shooting. There was no denying the way that it had spiked in the last year or two and every time the headline came across the screen, it just reminded me of what we had been through when it came to Gary Clark coming to the hospital and shooting it up. Neither one of us had been hurt, but we had both lost our best friends that day. We had never been able to forget about it. Jackson had nightmares for months after it. Yet somehow, this was different. This was worse. It could have been our babies.

A wail that I don't recognize escaped me and Jackson's arms wrapped around me, pulling me in against his chest and trying to get ahead of my grief. But I can't stop it. Everything around me was a blur as tears formed in my vision and I let out another wail, this one more muffled into his chest. My chest tightened impossibly and I felt as if I was going to throw up again even though there was nothing left inside of me.

The chances that one of those five was a child, that more than one of the five… I hated to think of the odds. I couldn't focus on the noise that still came from the television as I buried my face into his chest. Mothers would lose a child. I knew that pain. Jackson and I both knew the kind of heart-wrenching pain that came with losing a child to something that was absolutely senseless and yet this was different than what the two of us had been through with Samuel. It was painful, not comparable, an agony that we knew. What happened to Samuel, there was nothing that could be done to stop it. But this was different. Senseless violence, guns getting into the hands of people who should have never had them… all of that could have been completely prevented.
"I can't believe this… we were there. We were there right before it happened, Jackson! If we had been there just a few minutes longer, I mean… that… that could have…" I can't get out the rest of what I was trying to say.

"We weren't, okay? We weren't, April. We weren't there. We're safe. Harriet and Zachary are safe and sound, asleep in their room. They have no idea. They are happy. They had a great day." He reminded me, gripping onto my shoulders firmly as he pulled back slightly. "We are both okay. We are. This did not happen to us. We have been through a shooting before, once, not twice." Logic resounded and yet it didn't seem to have any effect on me.

"I just… what do we do?" My voice cracked with the question, another tear falling.

"We keep going." Jackson leaned forward, pressing a kiss on my forehead. "We keep doing our jobs and saving lives. We keep voting for legislation and politicians who will fight against this kind of thing. We make noise so that it doesn't die down and become just another shooting."

Lifting up my hand, I wiped away some tears. "How do we do this? The world is just…"

"Do you remember that conversation you told me about between you and my mom when you were pregnant with Samuel? There was that big thing at the mall and early reports said it was terrorism." I nodded my head as he spoke. "Remember what she told you, about how the world changes?"

"Good people, raising their babies right." I was unable to forget the words. They were important.

"That's right," Jackson murmured. "And we are two good people who are raising our children right. Don't forget that."

"I haven't," I breathed out, shaking my head and sniffing. "We… we have to raise two babies who realize that gun control is necessary and that there are people in the world who don't need guns. And we have to show them by example." My lips pressed into a thin line and I took a deep breath. The tightness in my chest is still just as present. "How do you manage to handle this? To just… wrap your head around it and see it all so clearly?" I questioned, looking up at him with wide eyes.

He let out a dry chuckle, shaking his head. "I guess therapy did its job." He suggested. "I'm not sure."

"I, uh, we should call our moms. Just to let them know that we're fine and the kids are fine." I murmured.

"Yeah, we should." Jackson agreed.

I leaned into him and shut my eyes for a moment, forehead resting against his chest and taking a deep breath. He smelled like outside. So did I. His arms wrapped around my frame and gave me a good squeeze before stepping away and turning off the television. The details of it would come out later, I would have to see them, but right now, I just needed to put a little distance from myself and the inevitable grid that it was going to force me through again.

Perhaps the only good thing about losing Samuel was he would never know the cruelty of the world.

Grabbing my phone, I stepped out into the backyard to call my mom. She hadn't seen the news yet and her response is what I expect it to be – she cries before thanking God that me, Jackson, and the kids were all alright. I can't help but tear up again hearing her relief. It was nothing more than sheer luck that we had left when we did and nothing happened to us. An act of divine intervention, according to my mother, and maybe she was right about that. God and everyone else knew that I
wouldn't have been capable of handling what agony could have come our way if things were
different.

Wiping away my tears and exchanging love to my mother, I head back inside to lay down for just a
little while longer before the kids are awake and I have to put back a smile on my face and act like
things were fine. It's not a conversation that I want to have with our two year old, neither one of us
do. Based on the recollection of his conversation with his own mother, it seemed similar to my
own.

"I'm going to email Dr. McCullough about setting up another appointment," I murmured, turning
my head to look at him. "Maybe… maybe we can go together."

Most of our appointments had been separate so that we could deal with our issues individually and
come together stronger at the end of the day, though we had been open with everything that we
discussed in our appointments and made sure to keep each other in the loop. Neither one of us
wanted to repeat the mistakes that we had made in the past with dealing things on our own and
pushing the other away, then still expecting things to be fine. That was a risk that we couldn't
afford to take and wouldn't. But this was still something that I felt as if the two of us needed to deal
with together, as parents.

"Sure," Jackson agreed with a nod. "We'll do it together. Let's see if he can squeeze us in before we
go back to work."

"Okay," I said, grabbing my phone and typing up an email.

Once it was sent, I leaned into Jackson and his arm wrapped around my shoulders, pulling me in
against him. My head fit into space between his neck and shoulder perfectly, nose pressing into the
vein there. If nothing else in the world, his presence made me feel safe. There was no doubt about
that. We would both do everything in our power to protect each other and to protect our children.
Absolutely everything.

"Jackson…” I murmured, shifting my head slightly so I could look up at him. This close, I could
see every little freckle on his face, the flecked of blue and green in his eyes, the fact that his
eyebrows aren't quite perfectly tamed but he had ridiculously long eyelashes.

"Yeah?" He murmured, mixed eyes looking down at me.

"I want to get married soon. Sooner rather than later. Even if it means that we don't get to plan a
big wedding. I just… I want to be married to you, and I want our kids to have married parents no
matter what else is going on." The words leave my lips in a rush.

"Hmm?" Jackson made a questioning noise, his brow furring together toward the bridge of his
nose. "No, you wanted to do it right this time, remember? The big wedding, traditional, all of that
kind of thing. We got hitched last time."

"We're already doing it differently." I was quick to point out. "We didn't drive twelve hours to go
get married with a stranger signing as our witness. This is different. We were young and… foolish
and in love then. Now we have kids and we're still in love and we should be married. I don't need a
big wedding, Jackson. It's all just fluff and a wedding does not make a marriage or a relationship
last. I want to marry you."

He sat up slightly. "It's still an impulse, April. People do this after tragedies. They get married or
they get divorced worthy go through with something big to change, to give them a sense of
control." He was right, of course. It was hard to face that.
"What if we just… move it up? Find a nice venue and snag the closest opening or steal it from someone who cancels it?" I settled for a middle ground, chewing at my lower lip. "I just… I don't know. I mean, this isn't that kind of impulse. We're already engaged. We just need the legal side of things and the ceremony. We already live together and have kids and at like we're married, so it's not like much of it is an actual change." I'm speaking too quickly again. I took a deep breath, slowing down. "Middle ground, right? Not running to a courthouse. But something sooner."

"I think that's something that we could do," Jackson suggested, rubbing my arm gently. "We can look into it, how about that?"

"Okay," I nodded slightly, leaning back into him again and shutting my eyes.

Only a moment passed with things being truly quiet between the two of us.

"April?" This time, it was him.

"Yeah?" Eyes opened up again to look up and find his gaze.

"I love you. And I am so grateful that we're alive together and raising children together, that we're able to have these conversations together. I knew that we wouldn't be able to in the past and… I'm glad that we are where we are today, even after all of the pain and other crap that we have been through over the years. There's no one else that I rather be with at the end of the line." Jackson expressed sincerely, his hand giving my arm a gentle squeeze.

I took a deep breath, giving him a small smile. "I'm grateful too, Jackson. I love you so much."

"We're going to get through this, baby, I promise. Just like we've gotten through everything else."
"You both have very different styles of dealing with tragedy," Dr. McCullough spoke.

That was something that had been made clear a while ago.

Despite that, April and I were still seated together on his leather couch, one of my hands wrapped around hers. It was a little strange for us to be here together and I had to wonder if I was the only person in the room who thought that, but this was about something that we were had to struggle with together as parents, not healing individually from the crash. Much of that had already been done. Nightmares weren't nearly as bad – beyond the spike after Zachary's birth and again after the shooting in Ravenna Park. Beyond the scope of that, they had gone down. I'm still too vigilant any time that we go out, the grocery store or public transportation. April was, too. It made me wonder whether it was PTSD or just being a worried parent. Sometimes it seemed like the line between those two things were blurry.

A worrywart was something that April had always been but I knew that it had spiked after this particular incident for her, too. We had both made so much progress moving forward after the plane crash together and all of the trouble that had put into our life. But we had to be rational. It wasn't the only thing that we were ever going to have to deal with as people or as parents, especially raising two black children. I could only hope that they wouldn't have to deal with everything that I had, but with the current climate… I wasn't optimistic.

Research had been done to try and wrap my head around it. I had read the testimonies of people who had lived through it and the terror that they had dealt with, the PTSD. It was something that both of us could relate to after the violent tragedies that we had been through and losing our own son. Even if neither one of us really wanted to relate to it.

To have these conversations open and honestly, you need to take care of yourself as a parent. Have your own support system. I remembered reading that too clearly and I thought that we were both there – each other's support system, a plethora of other parents at the hospital who understood in their own way, as well as Dr. McCullough. Both of our parents were always a phone call away. Mindfulness and not being quite so reactionary was important. Maybe we were jumping the gun to worry about these topics given Harriet and Zac were too young to understand, but they wouldn't always be. We had kept the televisions off the news around them. We would do everything that we could to make sure that they felt as safe as possible.

Encouraging emotions was something that pretty much every article said, too. That was something that I tended to forget about given that it hadn't been terribly encouraged for me growing up. I was glad April and I differed about that, and I wanted to make sure that my children's experience wasn't identical to my own. I gave my fiancee's hand a gentle squeeze, rubbing my thumb across the back of her knuckles.

"We do, but… we want to deal with this together." I breathed out, looking over at April.

"I'm just not sure how to process all of it enough to…do it and calm down," April commented, chewing at her lower lip briefly. "It feels like I can't."

"You can," Dr. McCullough countered. "And you will. Some of these things take time. Recognize your feelings. It's common to have a range of emotions after a traumatic incident. You may
experience intense stress similar to the effects of a physical injury. That's why you have to remember to take care of yourself and find a balance so you can take a healthy perspective. What have you been doing to take care of yourself, and each other?" He asked.

"I've been focusing a lot on the wedding and all of the little last minute details coming together," April said. "It... it gives me something happy to look at. It makes me happy," She clarified. "And it's a nice distraction if I'm worn from being back at work, or with the kids."

"While she's been doing that, I've been spending more time with the kids to give her a break. Since she did a lot of the heavy lifting, especially at the beginning." Any mother had to, especially breastfeeding, and I wanted to make sure that I was putting my fair share into both of our kids. "It makes me happy, too. Unlike anything else." That was the absolute truth.

"These are both good things," Dr. McCullough said. "Jackson, I'd like to talk to you about your medication."

My eyebrows raised. "What about it?" I asked.

"I think now would be a good time to begin weening you off of it, if you're comfortable with that. I've drawn up some written instructions for you, what to look out for going forward, etcetera. I'm sure that you're already familiar with it." I nodded my head as he spoke. I was.

"What do you think?" I asked April.

"What about after the wedding and honeymoon?" She suggested. "I just don't want things to get weird for you if you have side effects and not be able to enjoy it fully."

"That is something to think about," Dr. McCullough chimed in.

"So let's do after the honeymoon," I decided with another nod of my head. That was another goal to look forward to – something good. Even if the medication had helped me substantially with getting sleep at night when I wasn't able to talk myself down in any other way, I didn't want to be dependent on it for the rest of my life.

Dr. McCullough shut and set down his notebook. "I think that you guys are both handling this well. Remember to give yourself a little more credit, and not just because one or the other says so," he reminded us.

"Thank you, Dr. McCullough," April expressed sincerely. "You've helped the both of us a lot." She smiled.

"Thank you." We both shook his hand as we all stood up.

That was the last therapy session that we would have before the wedding, only a few days away. I wasn't nervous. It was funny, actually. The days leading up to the wedding that April nearly had to Matthew, I had been dealing with a constantly upset stomach. I had hated the thought of her walking down the aisle to him because I knew that she was meant to be mine, consciously or unconsciously. But now that I knew she would be walking down the aisle toward me in front of everyone that we loved, I was ecstatic. Not nervous.

It was a quiet car ride back to our house with the backseat only containing two car seats and no actual children in them. My mom was watching both of them. She knew that we were in therapy and had been for a while. She always pushed for more details than she was ever going to get, too, which was pretty predictable.
Fortunately, Mom had given her full approval for the wedding and had been more than happy to pick out a new dress to wear. She had helped with Harriet and Zachary's outfit for the wedding, too. Harriet was going to be the flower girl for the wedding much to her delight, while Sofia would participate too with pulling Zachary in a little wagon down the aisle so that he could be our ring bearer. Having both of the kids involved in the wedding was important to April and me. Both of us were pretty sure that they would be the certain of attention at the event just as much as April and I would be, if not even more so.

"Make sure to remind her the rehearsal dinner is moved back half an hour, so she doesn't show up too early," April commented.

"She'll show up early no matter what," I chuckled. "You know that."

Just a few more days.

Pausing in the driveway for the garage door to raise up, it was only a moment before it opened up and I could see my mom holding onto a sleepy Zac and Harriet running out in the garage to greet us. April's car was between the door and the side that I parked on, fortunately, so I don't have to worry about anything as I pull into my regular parking spot.

"Mama! Daddy!" Harriet shouted enthusiastically.

"Hi, ladybug!" April beamed as she got out of the car. "Did you have fun with Grandma Catherine?"

"Yes!" She answered, running into her mother's legs until April bent down to pick her up, planting a big kiss on her forehead. "Hi," she giggled at her mother again.

"No love for Daddy?" I pouted playfully.

Harriet twisted her little body away from her mother and reached out for me. "Daddy! Want Daddy!"

"Hey, baby," I chuckled, stepping over toward her and April to lean down and place a kiss on her head. She placed her hand on my stubble for a moment, rubbing along it and laughing. I'd shave before the wedding to satiate my fiancee but not until then. "How were they?" I asked, turning toward my mother as we walked into the house.

"Perfect, as always," Mom answered. "That boy of yours poops even worse than you did as a baby, I swear," she laughed. "I don't know how you two do it."

"Yeah," April agreed. "I usually only have to get up once to feed him now, maybe twice if the diaper bothers him, but that happens… less than half of the time, I would say."

"Oh, well then he's much better than Jackson was," Mom swatted my arm affectionately as she spoke. "This one kept me up for most of the first year and I swore that I was going to go crazy. You're so lucky to have such a good baby, sweetheart." Her gaze was now on April as she spoke. "And you hardly look like you had a baby a few months ago. You are going to be such a beautiful bride. I am so pleased for the both of you, getting to do things the right way this time." She prattled on.

A blush filled April's cheeks. "Thank you, Catherine," she murmured appreciatively.
"We're both pretty glad to be doing things this way, too," I commented as I eyed April.

"Yeah," she nodded. "And I'm glad that you'll be able to be there, too. It'll be good for all of us. And you're sure that you and Richard don't mind watching Hattie and Zac for a few days while we're on our honeymoon? I'm sure my mom wouldn't mind staying in our house with them if you change your mind or if something else comes up," the redhead rambled on.

"Oh, hush now. You know that I don't mind at all." Mom answered quickly. "I will take all of the time that I can get with these grandbabies. You'll be lucky to get them back." She laughed.

"We'll have to fight you on that," I chuckled. "But thanks for today, Mom."

"Anytime," she replied. "Call me if you need anything, you know that."

I walked her out to the door and her car, making sure that she got in it and pulled away safely before heading back inside the house. Zachary seemed a little more awake now that he had been passed over to his mother's arms and I could see that he had already managed to get a handful of her braid caught in his tiny fist. Harriet was in front of the living room table, showing April the drawings that she had done while the two of us had been gone.

"Show Daddy what you drew, baby." April waved me over to the two of them.

"Look!" Harriet held up her picture proudly with both hands so I could see before placing it back down on the coffee table and pointing it out individually. "Mama, Daddy, Hattie, baby." She still struggled a little bit with pronouncing the Z in her little brother's name. All four of us were scribbled out in crayon, April and I clearly bigger.

"That's beautiful, ladybug." I beamed down at her. "Do you want to put it on the fridge?"

"Yeah!" She ran ahead of me toward the refrigerator and I held back a chuckle as I followed her. I grabbed one of the empty magnets and used it to put her drawing on the center of the fridge, just above her head so all of us would be able to see it. "Thank you, Daddy." Her arms wrapped around my legs as she gave me a big hug and I patted her on top of the head.

"Very nice," April chimed in. "Hattie, do you know what time it is?"

"No," she answered.

I glanced at the time on the stove. "I think it might be nap time for someone," I said in a sing-song voice. "Why don't I take Zac?"

"Okay," April agreed with a nod of her head.

As she took our daughter off to her bedroom, I grabbed a bottle of milk from the fridge and warmed it gently. Once it was done heating, I tested the temperature on the back of my hand before walking back to the nursery and seating myself in the chair that April normally took. Our son doesn't make much of a fuss of taking the bottle in his mouth and I rocked him gently as he fed on it. I knew this experience was different for April and I, on a biological level, but there was something unanimously soothing about holding him while he ate.

By the time that he finished with his bottle and burped, Zac was ready to go down for a nap of his own. It doesn't take him very long to fall asleep once he was set down in his crib and swaddled up in a blanket. I rubbed his stomach until he fell asleep and quietly left the nursery, careful not to accidentally wake him up.
It didn't take as long to get Harriet down for a nap, most of the time at least, as it could with Zac. She had a lot more energy but she also used up all of that energy without a lot of hesitation. She was one of those kids who was constantly doing around, never quite content to be glued in front of one thing or another. For the sake of keeping her away from screens for too long, which was important to both of us, that was a good thing. It was also nice when it came to putting her down.

"Hey," I murmured, pushing open the bedroom door. April was sprawled across the bed.

"Hi," she smiled back at me.

"So, we have a few hours while the kids are down…” I started, lowering myself onto the bed next to her slowly. "And still a few more hours before I have to head to that bachelor party." Nothing big or fancy was planned, but we figured it would be good to do all of the little traditional things this time that we hadn't done last time. Like some kind of sprinkle of good luck.

"We do," she said as she propped her head up with her elbow, cheek resting on the palm of her hand and looking at me. "I was thinking about taking a nap."

I hummed, eyes sweeping over her. "That's not what I'm thinking about," I smirked.

"What are you thinking about?" Her eyebrows perked up.

"You…" I started slowly, reaching out to her thigh and running my hand up the back of it. She'd worn a casual, loose-fitting dress today. It makes it easy to reach the hem of the spandex beneath. "And me…” My gaze flitted up to hers. "And definitely not this spandex in the way." I grinned.

"We talked about this." April started slowly, lips pressing together in a thin line. But it doesn't hide the hint of the smile that still managed to bring light into her eyes.

"No sex before the wedding," I rolled my eyes at her but maintained a smile. "You said that last time."

She nodded. "And we agreed that we were doing things different from last time."

"I don't think that really counts when we already have three kids together, babe." My hand ran back down her thigh, fingers ghosting across the back of her knee. "And I really don't think it counts when we were already married once before." I laughed lightheartedly.

"Hmm…” she hummed. "I don't know. It's not very different. I remember that night in the motel room."

"So do I. And I'm pretty sure that you lost track of how many times you came." I grinned. "How about… I go down and get a sweet taste of you, and then we'll see what happens from there, huh?" I suggested.

Her lips pressed together in a thin line but it was clear that she was still smiling. That little crinkle around her eyes was right there as always. "Okay," April finally breathed out as she laid flat on her back, a pillow propping up her head enough so that she could still look down at me.

Victory in my path, I rolled onto my stomach and pushed her legs apart so that I could fit in the space between them. Both of them lifted up for a moment as I pulled off the spandex that she was wearing and the panties beneath quickly followed, pushing up her dress so that I didn't disappear beneath it. I placed a few warm, open-mouthed kisses on the inside of her thighs, the few freckles that were littered there. She had them absolutely everywhere, even on that dimpled her ass. Another kiss was placed on the patch of light hairs that covered her mound.
"Sorry, I have to grow it out to get it waxed for the wedding," she apologized.

"Don't be," I nipped the inside of her thigh gently. "I like both." I liked her any and every way.

Parting her folds gently, I placed a soft kiss on her clit, loving the little gasp that immediately escaped from her. The noises became less innocently as I began to lick and suck at every pink fold until she was dripping wet of her own accord, feeling her hips buck against my face. My arms wrapped around her thighs to keep her pinned down and under my control, my cock hard against the mattress. I shifted my own hips for a little friction of my own.

But my focus was far from on my own pleasure. April was sweet, she always was, in a way that was different from any of the other women that I had ever been with in my life. That was true of a lot of things with her.

I buried my face in her pussy as if I would never leave it and moaned against her entirely, letting her feel all of it as her thighs trembling on either side of me. Licking over her in broad strokes with the flat part of my tongue, her hands found my head and began to hold onto it, short nails scratching my scalp pleasantly. I could have stayed there forever with how good she was – so intensely, overwhelmingly, so fucking good. Her hips bucked into my mouth again and I no longer hold back. Teeth and tongue both focus on her clit and the salacious sounds that teasing it provoked. Before long, she was fisting the covers and crying out loudly enough to wake up either one of our children, a powerful orgasm washing over me and her thighs clenching me.

"This could be another moment where you lose track." I looked up at her, massaging her thigh.

"I'm– already exhausted…" April breathed out, stroking my head. "You're too good for me."

A laugh escaped. But a moment later came a noise that didn't come from either one of us but instead accompanying the little light on the baby monitor that sat on the nightstand. The other end of it was in Zachary's rooms which meant that her noises hadn't been heard solely by me. Each one of us paused to see if it would be a one-time thing, but quickly, there was another one. We'd have to get to him before he woke up Harriet.

"I'm not sure which one of us should be apologizing for that," I remarked as I sat up quickly.

"I'll get him," April offered. "You need to shower and get dressed for the bachelor party and uh, take care of that," she gestured to my crotch, where my cock was clearly straining against my jeans. Yeah, that.

"Thanks," I caught her for a quick kiss before she could go, making sure that she tasted herself on my lips. "And feel free to join me if he doesn't take too long."

That was something that I couldn't hold her to when it came to either one of our kids, though. I undress and toss my clothes into the dirty clothes hamper, turning on the shower. Glancing at myself in the mirror, I could use a shave, but it seemed senseless to not just wait it out until the big day. She always went back and forth about whether or not she liked to have a little scratch down there.

Stepping into the shower once the water had heated up to the temperature that I like, it's pretty easy to take care of the problem standing between my legs. Eyes shut and thinking about April's mouth, about how goddamn perfect her lips were and how soft they were, about how she knew exactly what to do as if she was a pro when she had only ever been with me... it's a damn wet dream, and that's my reality. That's the woman I get to spend the rest of my life making love to. Pumping along my shaft and with a grunt, I finish against the tiles, making sure to wash it off before continuing.
with the rest of my shower and cleaning up.

Once everything was taken care of, I twisted off the knob and stepped out of the shower and onto the bathmat, grabbing a towel to dry off my body and tying it around my waist. Steam covered the upper half of the bathroom mirrors. April had Zachary in the bedroom, I could hear them.

"Hey, you two," I greeted as I walked in to grab a fresh set of clothes.

"Hi Daddy," April replied, her voice pitched higher than usual for our baby's benefit.

Grabbing a pair of boxers from the dryer and pulling them up, I untie the towel and did another quick dry off of the upper half of my body before tossing it into the hamper. I put on a pair of clean jeans and looped a belt around the waist, buckling it comfortably.

"Are you sure that you'll be okay tonight?" I asked April as I shifted through the closet.

"I'll be fine," she chuckled, waving her hand. "I got to have my bridal shower a few weeks ago and you were fine with the kids. I'll be fine too."

"If you want me to stay, I will," I slid my arms into a button-up shirt as I spoke. "I'd be more than happy to finish what we started before the little man woke up." I grinned at her as I buttoned it up, laughing in my head at the sudden flush that filled her cheeks.

"You deserve a night out," she replied. "We'll see what happens when you get home from it."

"Alright," I chuckled. I walked over to the nightstand to put my watch back on and leaned down to give her a quick kiss. Zachary was laying on his stomach, his head lifted up just enough to look at the both of us. I smiled, bending down again all the way and placing a kiss on the thickening wisps of hair that were on top of his head. "You're not going to be my little man for very long, are you?"

April laughed. "No, he's definitely not. He'll have grown another inch by the time you get home."

"Probably," I agreed. "There's still leftover lasagna in the fridge, right? You're good for dinner?"

"Uh-huh," she nodded her head. "Go, have fun. I'll see you later tonight. There will be a glass of water and some aspirin on your nightstand waiting for you when you get home."

"Alright," I grabbed my phone. "I love you. Text me if you need anything. I'll see you later."

"I love you too." She replied.

A moment is taken to dip my head into Harriet's room and make sure that she was still sleeping soundly. She was. Carefully, I walked over to her bed and leaned down to press a kiss on her forehead, not wanting to disturb her but wanting to take a small moment just to say goodbye to my daughter.

Grabbing my car keys from the hook that I knew April had put them on given that I had left them on the table below in the entryway, I prevent myself from hesitating even more. There wasn't anything wrong with the group of guys that I was going out with, and it wasn't like I was dreading it. I just liked spending time with my wife and kids. Other parents talked about needing a break from their kids and to me, that break was work. I spent plenty of time there getting to do some of the most challenging things possible. Most of the time, I didn't feel like I needed a break from any of them in any other way.

It doesn't take long to reach the parking lot of the bar across the street. Something more elaborate
or fancy could have been done, but I didn't have an interest in any of that. Karev had joked once or twice about strippers but I knew that nothing was going to come from that. Maybe a couple of years ago, sure, but he had calmed down a lot since he had become serious with Jo. A good thing, definitely.

Heading inside, it was decently crowded for a Friday evening. I went up to the bar to order a pitcher and a couple of glasses before grabbing a table. I was the first one here but by the time the beer had arrived, so had Alex and Owen.

"Hey," I greeted both of them.

"Hey," Alex replied as he began pouring from the pitcher.

"Hey," Owen spoke as he sat down. "How's April and the kids?"

"They're good," I started. "I tried to see if she'd let me stay home with them tonight and she wouldn't. Zac's growing like crazy and he seems to be really doing well with the adjustment at daycare. He's still a little fussy in the morning drop off, of course, but Harriet's doing a really good job at keeping him adjusted." She was doing a great job at being a big sister. I couldn't have been more proud of her for that. "What about you? I mean, the whole fostering with, how's that going with Amelia?"

"It's…" Owen hesitated, taking a deep breath. "It's good. I love it, actually. I knew that being a parent was something that I always wanted to do but I never realized how good it was going to feel until I actually got the chance to do it." He expressed.

Alex chimed in. "Yeah, and Amelia's finally moved out of my room and back into your house."

"Yeah, well," Owen chuckled. "She's got the thing with Betty and… it all kind of feels like we're this weird little family. But I'm good with that. I don't want to use it. We're just taking things a day at a time for now. I'm not in a rush with any of it."

"Well, I think I'm proof rushing into it isn't always the best idea." I shrugged, taking a sip of my beer.

"At least you and Kepner didn't completely screw things up," Alex chimed in.

"We got lucky," I commented.

That much was the absolute truth. We had gotten lucky that we had managed to fall back together in one way or another, but it hadn't come after something easy. The plane crash had nearly killed both of us and changed our lives permanently. Scratching at the back of my ear, I can still feel the implant against the pads of my finger from my hearing aid. It did its job. Maybe eavesdropping on other people in the bar wasn't an option in the same way that it had been before everything else happened, but I could hear my group of friends speaking around me without having to struggle. I got to hear my kids laugh and play, my soon-to-be wife sing in the shower, and everything else that I needed in my life. It gave me focus on the most important things.

"Hey." Ben interrupted as he pulled out a chair and sat down next to us, wearing a shirt from the fire station. "Sorry that I'm late. We had a call go a little longer than expected," he apologized.

"Don't worry about it," I brushed off with a wave of my hand. "Have a beer. You've earned it."

He chuckled. "Thanks," he said as he poured the remainder of the pitcher into his glass. I turned over my shoulder to grab Joe's attention and signal him for another pitcher to be delivered our way.
We were unlikely to get too wasted, but a few beers wouldn't hurt.

"What about you and Wilson?" I turned my attention to Alex, wrapping my hands around my drink. "You thinking about marriage?"

"Eh, sort of," Alex answered with a slight shrug. "Not lately. We haven't really brought it up since the trial got tossed out." I nodded. That was fair. It had been a messy situation for everyone even remotely involved with it. That surgery on Deluca had been far from minor from me to perform especially given that April had been under the knife hours before and I had wanted to be with her instead. "I figure that she'll come around to it eventually. I don't want to push her about it."

"That's smart," Owen spoke up. I think we've all made the mistake of moving too fast before."

"Not me." Ben chuckled, taking a sip of his beer. 

Alex snorted loudly. "Yeah, well, we know who wears the pants in that relationship." All three of us laughed.

"Hey, I've still got the strongest success record here. You all should be asking me for advice." He pointed out.

"Yeah, well, April and I are coming for you this time. I think you're old enough that we won't have too much of a problem topping your record." I commented and gave him a gentle nudge of the elbow, friendly smile splattered across my face. There was no way that April and I were going to ever separate again, I knew that much. We were set for the rest of our lives together like Ben and Bailey were. I knew the two of them got into fights here and there, just like April and I did, but they managed to work it out. Now, we were both in the same kind of secure place.

"Good luck with that," Ben said.

Joe brought over a fresh pitcher of beer and all of us thanked him for it. He clapped me on the shoulder and congratulated me about getting married to April – again. I'd gotten more than my fair share of again jokes regarding our upcoming wedding. There was no harm in that, I had pretty much earned it.

"He's got a better chance than the rest of us," Alex remarked. "Even though Hunt and Shepherd right copy you in the married, divorced, and married again trend." He gave a side glance at Owen with a smirk. "She talks way too much about the two of you banging."

"Yeah, she's... something else." Owen laughed but there was a genuine smile on his face.

"I think all of our women are," Ben commented.

"Yeah, but we wouldn't be anywhere without them," I spoke.

All three of them chimed in with an agreement.

A week from now and a few of us would be gathered again for the sake of running through the wedding rehearsal and making sure that it would all go out smoothly. We had stuck to small parties on each side – Ben was going to be my best man and Arizona was going to be April's maid of honor. Keeping it simple was better for everyone involved. Our parents would all be there, and Harriet and Sofia would get a chance to see how everything would play out before the actual wedding.

And the day after that, the two of us would be married again, like we should have been this entire
damn time. that was something that was hard to maintain any level of patience for. This would
finally be fixing the mistake that I had made over two years ago and letting the rest of the world
know that I realized how much I had screwed up when I let a woman like that walk away from me.
Never again was I going to allow that to happen. For better and for worse. This time when the
words were said between the two of us, I would mean it entirely. We had always been through both
together and survived, even if the paperwork and legal status hadn't been there. This time, going
forward, it would be.

I couldn't fucking wait to marry April Kepner.
Chapter 18

APRIL

I could hear the roar of the waterfall as I delicately sprayed the last spritz of perfume on my inner wrist, rubbing both together.

Hidden in the heart of the Pacific Northwest at the top of Snoqualmie Falls was a relatively small lodge and resort that Jackson and I had decided to have our wedding. It was about a forty minute drive from the city and covered in utter nature, a completely beautiful location that I would have never picked on my own but he liked it, too. I had thought that he would have wanted something more central to the city that we both lived in and loved, but this break of fresh air was perfect. It reminded me a bit of the small vacation that we had taken over a year ago now with Harriet, breaking away from the monotony of everything else to do something marvelous for ourselves.

Because this wedding was for us, for both of us. Maybe a sprinkle or two of it was for our parents but it was primarily for all of the things that we had missed out on the first time. Speeches and cutting the cake, walking down the aisle toward him, a proper photograph session, a video to show Harriet and Zachary when they were older. We would have all of it.

Fixing the pleated tulle skirt of the snow white dress that I was wearing, the skirt falls just a little beyond my width. It was fixed at the waist with a silk white belt, and above that, the upper half was a lace top, sheer above the teased sweetheart neckline with a simple scoop neck and long sleeves. It was sweet and modest, comfortable given the cool fall weather that had settled in. It complimented my hips nicely given that extra curves that sat there since Zachary's birth but I was happy with my body, content with the stretch marks and the little bits that hadn't always been there. They were a reminder that I had been able to carry through with my son and bring him into the world safely, that despite the odds stacked against me, I had overcome. But in this dress, my hair done in long curls and just a piece at the front pinned back to keep it out of my face, I feel beautiful.

All of this was much more intimate than the wedding I had planned with Matthew. I couldn't compare it to my previous quick reception with Jackson, because that had been next to no one. Now, we had all of the people that we cared about here, our close friends and family. My sisters had helped with my hair and makeup while getting ready but I had sent them out so that I could have a few minutes just to myself before the rest of the evening proceeded.

We were getting married. This time, we were doing it the right way.

That's all I had to think about to smile.

Walking over to the window, with old heels clicking against the wood, I push it open and take a deep breath. The dress was new and the heels were old. The garter on my thigh was blue and borrowed from my youngest sister, Alice. She'd been married a few years now, successfully so.

A knock on the door caught my attention. "April!" My mother's voice called out. "It's almost time!"

Breathing in the fresh air a moment longer, I pulled the window shut and picked up the skirt of my dress so I could move without dragging it too much. It was time to marry the love of my life. It was time to do things right.

"I'm ready," I announced after opening the door.
"You look so beautiful, baby," my mom said as she caressed a curl of my hair gently, fingers smoothing over the sheer lace that covered my shoulder and upper arm. "I'm so proud of you. You found your way back to where you were meant to be."

It was a small party of people waiting to go down the aisle. My mom would be first to let people know that things were beginning, then Jackson. I had to wait until he was gone before I could come out and see how adorable Harriet and Zachary must have looked now that they were all dressed up. Catherine had taken charge of that, fortunately. I was sure that they looked adorable between the little dress and tuxedo that had been picked out for the two of them. Arizona gave me a smile before heading down the aisle.

She doesn't disappoint, of course.

"Oh, look at you guys!" I squealed out upon seeing my children and Sofia. "So, so beautiful."

Squealing with a smile so wide my cheeks ached, I squatted down to kiss both of my babies. Harriet was in a beautiful maroon dress that poofed out at the skirt with black Mary Jane's and neat white socks. Her hair was pulled up in two buns on her hair, each with a silver scrunchie. Zac was wearing a baby tuxedo with a matching crimson bowtie, looking absolutely dapper.

"Are you all ready?" I asked, smiling at them. "Just like we practiced."

"Yes, Mama!" Harriet chirped.

"Yep. We've got it." Sofia confirmed confidently.

"Alright, off you go," I waved them forward with a proud smile.

Music could be heard on this side of things given that the venue was small enough for just fifty people. It was called the hidden terrace of the resort, small with lots of natural lighting streaming in given one length of the room was just sliding glass panels.

"You look very beautiful, April," Dad complimented me, stepping forward and taking my arm.

"Thank you, Daddy." I smiled at him.

I placed my head on his shoulder for just a moment. My dad was a quiet man and always had been, spoke up when was necessary but usually didn't offer much more than that. Despite that, I had always been a Daddy's girl. And I was glad to have him walking me down the aisle to the right man this time.

As the traditional bridal march began to play from the speakers inside of the room, I could feel a change in the atmosphere. Taking a deep breath, I smiled at my father once more before the two of us stepped into the room together, side by side. Everyone had turned back to stare at me and I was greeted with the warm and loving smiles of the people that I loved most in the world. But none of them take my focus as much as Jackson does. He looked at me as if he had never seen anything so magnificent in his life, tears sparkling along the rims of his lashes.

There was a flutter in my heart, but this time, it's not butterflies in my stomach. It's excitement, adrenaline pumping through me. A wide smile stretched across my lips as my father and I moved slowly down the aisle, a short one, given that it's not the biggest room and the crowd had been kept small. Yet every second that I'm not holding onto him felt like a long one.

"You look beautiful," Jackson murmured as my father handed me off to him.
"Hi," I whispered back.

"Please, sit," the pastor began. "Thank you, everyone, for joining us here on this celebratory commitment."

The pastor began with his traditional words of welcome and other opening remarks, but I could only half listen to everything that he had to say about the wonders of marriage and what it meant to him. Fortunately, my pastor had always been accepting of our divorce, and just as accepting of the fact that we were getting married again. I was glad to find someone who aligned up so easily with my views given that my family didn't always. But listening to him recount everything that we had been through, our tragedies and our beautiful family together, it made my heart swell with joy while standing up there.

"I believe that the mother of the groom wanted to recite a brief poem." He stated at the end and I looked to Catherine as she stood up, smiling at her fondly.

"Life has given you this new chance. Your positive thoughts now must enhance. It's time to be more responsible. Progress only then will be possible. It's the result of your past good deeds. Remove from your life all useless weeds. A good life partner will give you courage. Success will be at your door throughout the ages. She will enlarge your beautiful family, and the boat of your life will sail very easily. My good wishes will always be with you, and happiness will come in a break-less queue." Catherine read off promptly, placing her hands on top of our connected ones and giving them a firm squeeze.

Catherine's approval meant a lot to me, as did my own parents. I knew that she hadn't approved of what had happened the first time around and that she seemed to occasionally go back and forth on how she felt about me, but she had my utmost respect. Her approval made me feel like we really were doing the right thing.

"Jackson, April, I believe you decided to write your own vows." The attention turned back to us.

"April," Jackson started. "I believe in you, the person you will grow to be and the couple we will be together. We've seen where we have been and what we're capable of. With my whole heart, I take you as my wife, acknowledging and accepting your faults and strengths, as you do mine. We've known each other such a long time and yet things between us have old gotten better as we've grown together. I promise to be faithful and supportive and to always make our family's love and happiness my priority. I will be yours in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in failure and in triumph. I will dream with you, celebrate with you and walk beside you through whatever our lives may bring. You are my person—my love and my life, today and always."

Tears sparkled in my eyes as the loving words came from him and I had to wonder how I was possibly enough for this wonderful man standing in front of me. Yet at the same time, he was a reminder that I was. That we both were.

"I, April, take you, Jackson, to be my husband, knowing in my heart that you will be my constant friend, my faithful partner in life, and my one true love. You are my best friend. Today, I promise you this: I will laugh with you in times of joy, and comfort you in times of sorrow. I will share in your dreams. I take you as you are, loving who you are now and who you are yet to become. I promise to listen to you and learn from you, to support you and accept your support. I will listen to you with compassion and understanding, and speak to you with encouragement. Together, let us build a home filled with learning, laughter, and light, shared freely with all who may live there. Let us be partners, friends and lovers, today and all of the days that follow."

It's nearly impossible not to cry. I had always cried at weddings.
Everything else seemed to move in a blur. I couldn't entirely focus on all of the magical words of wisdom and praise that were coming from the pastor as I stared up at Jackson, looking into his beautiful eyes and holding his hands, only breaking to look down as he slipped the ring on my finger. Our old wedding rings had been engagement rings – but he had talked me into something new to symbolize our new start. His taste was as magnificent as ever.

"You may now kiss the bride." The pastor announced.

Jackson bent down, letting go of my hands and both arms wrapping around my waist to pull my body against his, feeling tiny in comparison. My chin stretched up and my spine curved against his front, kissing him back hard. Cheers and applause fill the room noisily and I smile against his lips, nipping at the lower one briefly before pulling away to beam up at him.

"Am I allowed you call you Mrs. Kepner–Avery now?" He teased, nose brushing against mine.

"Only because it matches the kids." I beamed.

There's a little time between the ceremony and the reception, solely for the sake of getting some real, professional shots taken between the two of us and with our children. We step outside, past the sliding doors. The roar of the waterfall dozens of yards away was loud but it was a beautiful background for the shot. The photographer takes their time with making sure that we get everything that we could possibly imagine, shots holding each other and kissing, him looking at me and me looking at him, and of course, dozens of adorable shots with our children.

"Mama, can we go swim?" Harriet asked, pointing at the waterfall. Jackson burst out laughing.

"Since when do you know how to swim, silly?" I asked.

"I don't." Pink lips pouted at me.

"One day, sweetheart," I answered, smoothing a hand over the back of her head. "How about, for now, we got inside and eat and dance? How does that sound?"

"Okay!" She agreed without much hesitation, charging back inside without any hesitation.

Jackson's hand found mine. "It's like she doesn't know a thing is different," I remarked.

"Yeah," he agreed. "But that's a good thing. That's what you wanted, right? The two of them to never really know that we weren't always together?" I nodded my head. It was simplified. They would know, of course, we wouldn't try to hide the truth from them. But I didn't want any of those messy complications to affect their life whatsoever.

"Yeah, it is," I breathed out and smiled up at him dreamily. "They'll remember Mommy and Daddy together and happy. They'll have a good example for their own relationships one day."

"Oh, god," Jackson groaned dramatically and shook his head. "Maybe when they're thirty."

"Maybe," I bumped my hip against his. "I think they're waiting for us to come in. Shall we?"

He offered me his arm. "We shall."

The doors back into the reception were already opened for us and I could hear the rustling of my dress as we moved back inside. People clapped upon seeing us again and I could feel the blush on my cheeks. This was all new. A flow of congratulations came in from all of the different people in our attendance, my family and his mother and Webber, Ben and Miranda, Owen and Amelia. The
acknowledgment from everyone that we had loved and pride filled me with warmth. They knew that this was the right decision in the same way that we did.

While the ceremony had remained relatively traditional aside writing our own vows, the reception afterward was more casual. Food was served from the caterers shortly after we came in. Neither one of us wanted a stream of speeches to be made. Or at least, that was what I thought. But instead, once everyone had champagne and food, Jackson stood up and clinked his glass to say a few words.

"Now, I know that we already agreed to no speeches, but… this isn't the first or last time that I've surprised April. On a serious note, I'd firstly like to say a big thank you to everyone who helped make today possible, whether it was babysitting one of the kids or running errands for us. A big thank you goes to all the parents, as we wouldn't be here today if it weren't for them." Jackson paused as he looked down at me, smiling fondly.

"It was my first day of m intern year when this awkward, loud mouth girl started spouting off about being from Ohio and excited to be near the ocean. I thought that she couldn't have been more annoying. And then… a tragedy brought us together, after the shooting in the hospital, when both of our best friends died and we found new best friends, in each other. Tragedy has played a big part in our lives, both for better and worse, but we've proved what we're capable of coming through. So this is to my wife, April. I love you, April. I love all the things about you. Even the things I hate, I love." Oh, Jackson. "When I saw you walk down the aisle, I thought to thank God you agreed to marry me, just because you're rubbing off on me. It's not the first time I've seen you go, but this time, I'm glad I was standing at the end of it instead of interrupting. You're the one person who knows all my faults, everything about me and loves me just the same. You look absolutely beautiful today and I want to thank you for marrying me. I know this is the start of a lifetime with you and a wonderful future ahead of us, not forgetting the other stars of the show, our daughter Harriet and our son Zachary. Thank you, again, to everyone."

Applause started up again as he sat down and I leaned into him, blinking back tears to try and keep from ruining my makeup. Tragedy had played such a horrific role in so many aspects of our life, but ultimately, ending the right way to recover from it and communicate afterward had brought us back together again.

"You should have told me you were going to do that," I whined.

"Then it wouldn't have been a very good surprise." He murmured, turning his head to kiss the top of my hair. "You smell good."

"So do you," I replied. "Though I think we both smell a little outdoorsy now."

Chatter is kept casual as people come and go and we try to get the opportunity to eat some. We were spending the night here before taking an early morning flight. It would be the first time that we got on a plane together since the crash had happened.

"I think it's about time for our first dance," Jackson nudged me, glancing down at his watch.

I nodded my head in agreement and he stood up first, offering me his hand to follow. As the two of us began to move out onto the dance floor for everyone to see, a gentle hush began to fall over the crowd as their eyes turned on me. The only voice that stuck out particularly was our little girl's as Harriet cheered for the two of us enthusiastically from her seat on my father's lap. I smiled up at him as Frank Sinatra's voice began to play over the speaker.

Love is lovelier the second time around,
Just as wonderful with both feet on the ground.
It's that second time you hear your love song sung.
Makes you think perhaps that love, like youth, is wasted on the young.

As the smooth vocals played over the rodeo and the orchestra flirted in the background to accompany him, Jackson took my hand and moved with me slowly across the dance floor, swaying side to side. He spun me out once and pulled me back in against his chest, my back resting against it. My eyes shut and I embraced the moment for everything that it was. My family's proud eyes watched us and Harriet looked completely enamored by the sight of us dancing together.

Love's more comfortable the second time you fall,
Like a friendly home the second time you call.
Who can say what brought us to this miracle we've found?
There are those who'll bet love comes but once, and yet
I'm oh, so glad we met the second time around.

Another spin was given and the skirt of my dress twirled with me. This time when he pulled me back in I was facing him again, but there was hardly any space between the two of us. I could see every perfect detail of his face as I looked up at him.

"I love you," I whispered to him, watching his eyes sparkle.

"I love you too."

Caught up in the moment, it was easy to spin the remainder of the night away even if it's not always in the arm of my husbands. We both dance with both of our children, bouncing Zachary with us and spinning around with Harriet. I get my traditional father-daughter dance and my father takes the opportunity to remind me of how proud he was about how far I had come, and I nearly cry in front of everyone again. Almost everyone had a chance to spin around with me throughout the course of the night and the words of praise and congratulations that come our way is unlike anything else the two of us had ever experienced together.

Exhausted by the end of the ceremony, by the time the two of us retire to our room together and he helps me get out of the dress, I get another whirlwind of energy.

It's not like the first time. Sure, I had been more confident than expected the first time that we had fallen in bed together because of the adrenaline rush and Jackson had always known exactly what he was doing. It's better than that – it's better than every time we've been together, as if all of that built up culmination had anticipated for the right time, the right night after the right wedding. I lose track of time and all other senses of being other than the sensation of me and him together, moving as one. At the end of the night, nothing else mattered besides me and him.

Waking up after a wedding is something else. It's not the first time that I've woken up next to the love of my life and been able to call him husband, but it's a different feeling this right. We had jumped from point A to point B last time. This time, we had gone on the road less traveled – not because of a proper ceremony, but because of everything leading up to it. And it was worth it.

"Good morning," I peppered the back of his shoulders with kisses as I stretched out my body.

"Hey," he rasped out, his voice tainted yet sexy with sleep. "Wifey." He grinned, yawning loudly.

"We've got things to do, we can't sleep all day, hubby." I reminded him, finding a little piece of joy in such a silly and affectionate nickname. I learned over and pressed a kiss against his lips.
"Are you sure? Because we have sex anywhere. We can stay." Jackson teased, hand finding my thigh.

"I'm sure," I chuckled. "You said you wanted to take me on a proper honeymoon, so you are."

Our bags were already packed from days before to make sure that we didn't have to worry about anything in case we overslept from alcohol or sex or a combination of both. The only thing that needed to be tossed into it was toiletries and makeup, but that was to be done after a quick shower.

Or at least, it would have been a quick shower, had Jackson not joined me in it. There's something undeniably sexy about him picking me up and making love to me against the shower wall, the slipperiness, the thrill that things could have very easily gone wrong, the literal steam… It stretches out the shower considerably longer than it would have taken had we just taken our own showers to clean up. But he still always takes the time to make sure that I'm clean after. He was nothing if not considerate.

Blowing my hair dry quickly and putting on just a little bit of makeup to cover some of the tiredness from the night before and adding back a little color to my face, I braid my hair for comfort before slipping into his favorite pair of leggings that accentuate my curve especially well since I'd had Zachary, and a simple v-neck beneath my jacket.

"Are you ready to get going?" I asked as I walked out of the bathroom, stuffing my makeup bag into my duffel.

"Yeah, it's actually a quick drive to the airstrip from here," Jackson answered with a nod.

"Well, come on then, Mr. Kepner–Avery," I stretched my hand out to him as I spoke, "I think it'd be very rude to keep your wife waiting on your honeymoon." I teased him.

"Yes ma'am," he retorted with a cocky grin.

Taking my hand, he grabbed both of our bags and refused to let me carry my own. We checked out at the reception area with another round of congratulations from the staff who knew or had been there last night. Jackson loaded up the car with our bags, suitcases for the actual honeymoon already there, and we both got into the front seat. For a moment after starting the car, he just sat there and I stared at him curiously.

"What is it?" I finally asked.

"Just thinking," he replied, looking over me. "At least this time I didn't get ketchup on your dress."

I laughed loudly, leaning over to elbow him playfully. "I think I would've killed you if you did."

"You love me too much for that," Jackson retorted, leaning over to kiss me firmly.

"Yes, yes I do," I confirmed once he had pulled away for air.

The drive to the airstrip was short like he had said, just a small private airport outside of the city where the Avery jet was waiting for the both of us. He had never used it for personal travel like this before even though it had always been allowed. After the first plane had gone down, that had been reason enough. We had only gotten on it going to Montana for professional reasons and we had both been at each other's throats. But now, we couldn't have been more in sync with one another, and what this meant to the both of us.

There had been a lot of discussions back and forth about whether or not we would go somewhere
local that we could drive to, or if we would try something else. But we couldn't live our life holding back, staying in the same place. We would have to fly again eventually and it was better if we could do it on our own terms. We would do it together.

Shifting the gears into park as we pulled up, there's another moment of stillness between us. It wasn't like a regular airport where we would have to go through security and sit around for at least half an hour before waiting to board. It would be much faster than that.

"Are you ready I asked him?" Taking a deep breath, I looked over at him.

"I am with you, yeah," Jackson answered earnestly, reaching over and giving my hand a squeeze.

Grabbing our bags from the car, this time he let me carry my own bag. I let him take care of all of the business when it came to getting things checked in and arranged given that was all under his name and his business. I hadn't decided until recently whether I was going to get my name changed, but I thought that hyphenating it would be the best thing to do. That way it would match some with all three of my kids. That had been one hard part in the divorce, knowing that Samuel wouldn't have my name and I wouldn't have his. But now, I had the opportunity to change all of that. I would be April Noelle Kepner–Avery.

Everything gets set up shortly and our bags are taken for us as we walk out to the runway. It's cool outside and the wind was blowing gently, but there was no sign of a storm anywhere in sight. The plane engine could be heard from outside of it, already fueled up and ready to go.

"Hold on. I need a minute." Jackson paused, hand squeezing around mine tightly.

"Okay." I agreed.

Admittedly, I could feel my own stomach beginning to church with the plane actually in sight. It was completely different from the one that we had been on before, different make and model, different staff. A different flight pattern, we would be going south for a slightly longer duration of time instead of west and through the mountains. All of it was very different.

But anxiety didn't seem to give a damn about how different it was and how unlikely, statistically speaking, it was for this to happen to us again. Statistics were something that used to bring me some comfort because of how black and white they were, and yet in this instance, it didn't make much of a difference. I took another deep breath through my nose and released it through my mouth. God was here. Dr. McCullough had given us plenty of tips and techniques to get through spikes of anxiety and panic that were caused by almost anything. We were going to be able to get through anything else in the world that was going to be thrown our way.

And we would be able to get on this plane together.

"We can do this." I took one of his hand in mine, squeezing it and rubbing my thumb across his knuckles. "We can."

Name the fear. Understand fear and embrace it. Visualize success. There were tons of different techniques to come over the fear and anxiety, to accept it and try to act normally. There's a fight in my chest, heart pounding, but my breathing wasn't impossible. I could still breathe just fine. My feet weren't frozen in place.

Fear exists to keep us safe. Feeling afraid was natural, and even helpful, in some situations. The emotion was hard-wired into all creatures. The brain reacts instantaneously by sending the proper signals to the physical body so it's in a position to face the dangerous or threatening situation. They
were all facts that had provided a little more comfort than some of the statistics, or at least some sense of validation. It didn't make either one of us crazy. It just made as human, animals, like anything else breathing.

"Okay," Jackson took a deep breath and released it in a sigh, squeezing my hand back. "I'm ready."

"Of course you are," I leaned into him to nuzzle him affectionately for a brief moment.

Stepping forward hand-in-hand, we approached the large private jet. His last name, or what would be our last name, was painted in bold black letters on the side of it. I supposed that this was mine just as much as it was his now. There had been no need for a prenup this time.

As we reached the bottom of the flight of stairs, he paused to allow me to go first. I knew that it wasn't out of fear but instead, just him being a gentleman. Slowly, I placed my hand on the railing of the staircase. For a brief moment, I can feel the scars in my abdomen again from the surgeries that I had after the plane crash, feel that same weakness in my bones. Squeezing my eyes shut, I shook the thoughts away as quickly as I could. I didn't want to get caught up in them. One step at a time, I moved up the flight of stairs to the plane, hearing them squeak behind me as Jackson followed me up.

One step into the plane, I paused and looked over my shoulder to see that he was right behind me. He didn't look terrified or like he was about to throw up. I felt a little nauseous, to be honest, but it would settle once we sat down. I smiled back at him for a long moment without saying a word. Then and there, I didn't need to.

"Mr. and Mrs. Avery, can I take your coats?" A perky flight attendant stepped up to the both of us and I nodded, stripping off my jacket and handed it over to her. Jackson did the same. "What about something to drink before we take off?"

"Champagne, please," Jackson answered. "We're celebrating still."

I looked at him with another smile. "Yes, yes we are."

Stepping back into the room, the interior of the plane was fancy and extravagant, two large, leather and reclining seats taking up a good portion of the room. There were television screens and remotes at the ready, headphones and blankets sitting out, looking much more comfortable than anything that I had ever seen on a commercial aircraft. In some ways, it did look similar on the inside to the last one. But the color scheme was different, seats wider. It was different.

"Aisle or window?" He asked me. I hesitated, lips pressed together.

"I'll take the window." I used to like being able to look at it, seeing everything appear so small below.

Both of us sat down and I leaned back, squirming to adjust slightly and make myself comfortable. The seats were incredibly nice and I pulled the blanket over my legs, though it wasn't cold. It was just more comfortable that way. Jackson did the same, setting his hand up for me to hold. I took it.

We sat quietly through take off, belts seated low and tight across our hips. There are the normal vibrations and I chewed at the inside of my cheeks to keep my ears from hurting as we took off, popping them myself once the altitude had climbed high enough. My eyes shut and I let out a content sigh. My heart is still high, but I can handle it. I was handling it. I was a little nervous, but I wasn't terrified. I wasn't obsessively thinking of all the possibilities that could go wrong as I might have with every other situation. It was just normal anxiety, the type that a lot of people got when
they were flying.

"How are you feeling?" I finally questioned once we had reached cruising.

"Okay," Jackson answered. "I, uh… I turned down the hearing aid before we got on so it wouldn't be quite so overwhelming and I think that made all the difference in the world. I'm ready to get there. I'm excited to get there. To start our marriage off on the right foot."

"That was a good idea," I remarked. "I'm… I'm pretty calm too, all things considered. I don't feel like I'm about to scream or lunge into the cockpit and ask them to land as soon as possible."

"You know how Montana was kind of what I needed? The thing with my father?" He asked.

I nodded my head.

"I... I feel like this is kind of what I needed now, too. To be with you and to get on a plane again. No flashbacks. Yeah, I'm a little... hypervigilant right now. But I don't know how anyone couldn't be. The way that we view the world isn't going to be constant across a lifetime and of course it's different after going through something like that," Jackson explained. His thumb drew circles on the back of my hand soothingly.

"In your eyes, the world can be absolutely anything that you want it to be," I recited the words that Dr. McCullough and taught me and I had taken it to heart. Our perception was powerful. Our influence was, too. The world could be what we wanted to make of it if we decided. We just had to be willing to be strong and brave, and take charge of it. We had to take the reins back on our lives. That was what Jackson and I had done together, finally. We had managed to take control when life had left us feeling otherwise powerless. We hadn't let it win, and we still wouldn't.

"In your eyes, the world can be absolutely anything that you want it to be," Jackson repeated the words, looking over at me. "I like that."

In our eyes, we had made the most of it. And we would continue to do exactly that.
"Mama!"

Harriet's loud voice could be heard calling out from the living room as the two of us did a bit of food prep for the week, caterwauling over the television that was currently playing *Moana*. She wanted something. If it wasn't clear from the little needy whine that she got in her voice whenever she was about to ask something, then it was clear from the fact that she was calling out for April and not me. It was very clear which one of us was the surface pushover parent. We both were, really. I'm just a lot better at maintaining a stoic exterior than April was.

The two of us shared a look as I turned my head toward her, finishing cutting up the cucumber and swiping the slices off of the cutting board and into the Tupperware container waiting. She knew just as well as I did that a request was coming.

"Yes, sweetheart?" April called back.

"Can we go to the park?" A full, polite question from our daughter – a pleasant surprise. Her speech was developing quickly.

Even so, I can see the sudden tension in April's shoulders at the mention of the park. The shooting that had happened at Ravenna Park hadn't been forgotten by either one of us even if we were going forward with our lives. But there was something different about the two of us going forward as individual adults and dealing with our own trauma, and dealing with it as parents. We wanted to do everything we could to protect our children from the world. It was hard to know that sometimes we couldn't. We were human and we couldn't control everything going on around us. There were certain things that we just had to learn to live with. We had active kids, kids that we both wanted to encourage to be outside and to be active. For most kids, that meant going to the park.

"What do you think, Mom?" My eyes were trained on her as I spoke.

"Well..." Her eyes drifted out the window as she started. There were clouds in the sky but no forecast of rain the last time that I had checked. "I suppose we could go for a little while if you help your little brother tidy up his toys." She countered.

"Okay!" Perhaps the only way to make an almost three year old excited to clean up.

An easy chuckle came from me as she scooted herself off the couch and onto her little legs again, walking over to Zachary in his playpen where colorful blocks and letters had been strewn about. Lately, he was testing his ability to throw things. Hopefully, it was a sign of good things to come with a future football career, just like I'd had in my school days.

"That was easy," I remarked as I washed off the knife and put it in the dishwasher.

"For her or for me?" April asked as she turned in toward me, her eyebrows forming perfect arches.

"Oh, definitely for her," I shrugged my shoulders, stepping forward and placing my hands on the curve of her hips. "But, you said yes without making a fuss. I'm surprised," I remarked honestly.

"Yeah, well.." she started, taking a deep breath that was released moments later in a sigh. "I'm always going to be a little bit of a scaredy cat or a worry wart or whatever label fits best that day.
But I don't want her to be one, so I can't hide her away from it whatever." The words coming out of her mouth were true, of course. Even if we wanted to try, it would have failed one way or another. Friends, family, babysitters. Avoiding the public sphere wasn't an option. "But it'll be fine and it's a nice day out. Do you want to get Zac ready to go out?" She asked.

"Sure," I nodded my head.

The kitchen wasn't much of a mess given that we had been cleaning as we went, so I didn't feel guilty leaving what little of it was left to her to join the kids in the living room. Our clean up system in the living room was simple enough – two woven baskets on the ground level of the bookshelf that slid easily in and out for them to eventually take care of on our own.

"Are we all cleaned up, ladybug?" I asked Harriet, squatting down to check.

"Yes, Daddy." She smiled up at me innocently with her mother's smile, hands held behind her back and swaying side to side. She knew exactly how to win me over.

"Good job," I praised, reaching forward to kiss her on her forehead. "Why don't you go to your room and get some sneakers on? I'm going to get your little brother dressed, and then we'll go once everyone is ready."

Harriet nodded her head and bounded off excitedly to her room, chanting the same word. Park! Park! Park! I can't help but give a laugh and glance up at my wife, catching that matching grin beaming across her features as she aired out a dishtowel before folding to over the sink. Just like that, our little girl's enthusiasm had seemed to erase some of the anxiety that had been wearing at her only moments ago. Kids were magic like that. All of the things that life had chipped away, the ways that we were both traumatized, we were made whole again by the two of them.

"Alright, little man," I scooped Zac up from his playpen. He seemed oblivious to his sister's energy. "Let's get you fresh and ready to go."

Heading back to his nursery with him securely in one arm, I can't help but notice how much he had grown since he was born. Compared to Harriet, he had been a small baby – not really, by all other measures, he had been average and it was just the fact that his big sister really had been a big baby. But now, he was climbing his way up the growth percentiles, putting on weight just like he was supposed to. It's impossible to resist the urge to blow raspberries on his belly as I get him changed and he squeals with loud laughter, the most magical, delightful smile filling his expression.

"You ready for the park, huh?" Another raspberry. Another loud laugh. "I think it's time for the swing sets. What do you think?" Laughter is my answer, of course. "Yes? Yeah, me too buddy."

He was a quick change into a little pair of baby jeans and a t-shirt, a little hoodie going on top for good measure. His curls were plentiful now, growing out marvelously, and he didn't need a beanie in the same way that his sister always had when she was his size. Harriet was already in the living room waiting for the two of us.

"Slow!" She accused with a pointed finger. "Daddy's slow!"

"Yes, yes he is, baby girl," April teased and ruffled her hair. "Does that mean that you're ready to go?"

"Yes!" Harriet yelled, jumping up and down next to her mother's legs.

"Alright, out to the car with you two," I made a large swooping motion with my arm to usher them toward the garage door. "We'll see how slow Daddy is. Who do you think can get in their car seat
first? Mommy and Hattie, or Daddy and Zac?" I challenged with a playful waggle of my eyebrows.

"Mommy and Hattie!" Our little girl enthused, running through the garage door once it was open.

"I think that sounds like a challenge," April replied with a laugh.

Of course, I'm happy to let her win, pausing to set the house alarm as we head out to the car and getting Zachary in his car seat. I double check both his and Harriet's just to make sure they're as secure as could be. Both of them are.

I never have to doubt myself or April doing it consciously, but that urge to double check and be vigilant is still there. It's one symptom of my PTSD that I haven't gotten rid of completely, and probably never would. But I had learned how to control and manage it, and that was the important part. Dr. McCullough had made many things clear about how mental health wasn't as black and white as regular medicine could be, which was something that both of us occasionally struggled to wrap our heads around. It was about the process just as much as the end goal, which was almost the complete opposite of my work as a plastic surgeon. It challenged my way of thinking. Despite where it came from, it was a good challenge. It kept me on my toes.

Middle of a Saturday afternoon, the roads weren't particularly crowded to get there but the park itself was. It was full of life – children shouting and running around wildly, parents gathered in groups on the sideline and observing carefully. April has to chase after Harriet the second that she's out of the car and I wave her off, trailing after the two of them a few moments later with Zac in his stroller.

"Alright, little dude…" I spoke out loud as we approached an empty bench. "Where's Mommy and your sister?"

With the dynamic red hair that my wife sported, though, it doesn't take long to spot her among the crowd of children and other parents. Harriet had gone straight to the monkey bars. Those had been her obsession lately, swinging through them and trying to do it properly like a big girl. It seemed like she was ready to be some fancy Olympic gymnast from the way that she acted. It wasn't the kind of sport I would have guessed, and I knew April was always worried about her falling, but she loved it.

Once Harriet had pooped herself out with trying to swing from bar to bar, and April standing by her every step of the way to make sure that the didn't fall too far and hurt herself on the wood chips below, I watched the small swing of my wife's hips as she made her way over to the two of us.

"Hey, strangers," she greeted us playfully.

"Hi there," I smiled up at her, stretching my arm across the back of the bench for her to join.

April smiled back at me but paused for a moment to bend down in front of Zachary in his stroller, adjusting the visor to make sure that he wasn't getting too much sun and fiddling with his sweatshirt, slightly, from what I could see. She was letting the perfectionist inside come out just a little bit. That part of her tended to come out the most when she was stressed about something. I knew that coming here was hard on her. It was for me, too, but I had always known that bad things happened everywhere. It didn't matter if it was a rich or poor area of town. Most of the issues for me in the past had been race-based, but growing up with that mindset had made it a lot easier to apply to this kind of situation.

When she settled down, she curled up next to me on the bench and leaned against me, her head fitting perfectly in the space at the crook of my neck. I could still smell the shampoo fresh from her
shower this morning, breathing in deeper.

"She looks happy," I remarked as we observed our daughter.

"She is," April chirped, barely nodding against me. "One of her other park friends is here. The girl with the fishing hat." She pointed out.

"So she has a sixth sense for when her friends are at the park," I commented. "Wished I'd had that when I was a kid. Back before you could just text or look at some social media app."

"You sound old and grumpy." She laughed.

"Who says I'm not?" I questioned, raising my brow and glancing down at her. "So are you."

"Am not," she rolled her eyes at me, elbowing me gently.

A smile rested on my features with the easygoing banter between us. "You got stuck trying to get the WiFi to hook up to the television the other night, babe, remember? I think that qualifies you as old now." I teased her lightly.

"Well, at least I'm not as old as you," she replied haughtily, giving me a pointed look. Her hand reached up for my face and her fingers lightly scraped against my jawline where stubble was beginning to grow out properly given that it had been a few days since my last proper shave. "I see those little gray hairs."

"Feels the same," I reminded her. "See?"

To prove my point, I dipped my head down and captured her lips in a soft kiss. They tasted like the cherry chapstick that she carried around in her diaper bag, no doubt freshly applied from the quick drive in the car. I intentionally tilted my chin forward and let the stubble scratch against hers, feeling the laugh that escaped from her moments later vibrate against my lips.

"Told you," I muttered against her lips, nipping at her bottom one gently before pulling away. We were still in public, after all. And Harriet always had plenty to say about us and our cooties whenever we kissed too long in front of her.

"Mm, I suppose so," April sighed out dramatically. Her nose brushed against mine.

My arm settled comfortably around her shoulders and I pulled her in tight against me. She fit against me perfectly. My head fell on top of hers easily and my gaze sought out our daughter, catching her as she flew down one of the spiral slides. She roared with laughter with her arms stretched out above her head, enjoying every second of it.

"She looks like you do when you laugh," I remarked, rubbing her arm.

"How so?" She asked.

"She throws her head back. Just loses it and goes with the moment. Unrestrained." Other situations and the description might not have been a good one, but in this particular case, it was magnificent. "I hope she doesn't grow out of it."

"We'll make sure she doesn't," April suggested. "Somehow, I didn't."

"You're right," I murmured. "I do believe that I promised Zac some time on the swings. Better stick to my word."
"I'll come with you," she said.

The two of us stood up together and I stepped over to the stroller, pushing back the visor and undoing the straps that held our son inside. With Zachary securely in my arms, the two of us headed over toward the swing set while no one was occupying it. As Harriet saw us coming over with her little brother, she was quick to make her way down another slide and run over to the three of us.

Getting both of them settled into swings intended for smaller children and making sure they're secure with their legs through the appropriate slots, April stood behind Zac and I stood behind Harriet. Harriet's tiny hands were balled around the chains on the swing, tugging at them.

"Push, Daddy, push!" She demanded loudly.

Giving in to what she wanted easily, I began to push Harriet in the swing, standing slightly to the side to make sure that she could go all the way forward and back without bumping into me. April was doing the same for Zachary though didn't give him quite the same range of motion that our daughter got, just letting him get used to the back and forth and making sure that his head didn't end up rolling around everywhere as he adjusted to it.

"Higher!" Harriet squealed excitedly. "Zac higher too, Momma!"

"I think Zach's happy where he is," April commented. "Look at that smile."

It was true. There was a beaming, toothless smile coming from our little boy, looking around with wide eyes and awe as he swung in a small parabola forward and back. He looked completely blissful.

So did April, of course. She had a wide smile of her own rested on her features as her gaze flickered between both of our children, reaching her eyes easily and adding an extra little sparkle there. She was happy. I was too. Everything that we had been through, even being here at the park again, nothing was capable of taking away from all of the joyful things that our children gifted us.

Whether it was her God or something else out there pulling strings in the universe, or nothing at all, I was grateful. It was a gratitude that couldn't be given solely to me or her, but to something else that I couldn't necessarily name or label. Grateful to have her in my life again, as my wife and as my partner for raising these two magnificent little children, to have both of these little nuggets growing and learning, curious and enthusiastic, everything that a parent could have hoped for in their children. Harriet and Zachary were both wonderful, beautiful presences to have in our life. They made everything better and easier. Even with less sleep and time for just the two of us, they did. Nothing else in the world compared to the joy that parenting brought upon us.

"Why don't we go get some ice cream, huh?" I suggested, looking between April and Harriet.

"Yes!" Our daughter squealed.

"That sounds like a great idea," April smiled at me.

Lifting up each one of our kids out of their swings, Harriet quickly ran ahead of us as we stopped to get Zachary's stroller. April carried our little boy and I swept my arm around her shoulders to hold onto the both of them, keeping them close.

"I love you," she reminded me, glancing up.

"I love you too," I breathed out with a smile. "You and the kids, more than anything else in the
world."

Not a single ounce of doubt existed in my mind about that much. Though there had been rollercoasters in our relationship, both before we were married and during the first marriage, even during the period where we had been divorced, doubt had been heavy. Whether it was about being with or without her, I had always struggled to be firm in a decision, one way or another. But now, I was surer than I had ever been in the extent of my life. I was meant to be with her and our kids, and no one else in the world.

At the end of the day, the three of them were the only things that mattered.

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