

*December 1*

Luke Grayson's phone buzzed against his chest from its resting place in the front pocket of his flannel shirt. Hefting his hammer from his right hand to his left, he slipped it back into his low-slung tool belt, and then fished his phone out of his pocket, checking the display.

"Hey, Robin. What's up?" he answered, leaning back against the cabinets he was in the process of installing.

"Hey, Luke." Her voice was higher than normal, tight and thin.

"What's wrong?" Robin's sons were friends with his son, Ethan, and she usually watched Ethan after school. He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, trying to soothe the hot, prickling skin there.

"I'm at the hospital. In the emergency room. With Ethan."

Luke's vision narrowed, his grip on his phone like a vise. "What happened?" He could barely swallow, his mouth was so dry, but he managed to get the words out.

"The boys were sliding on ice, and Ethan fell and hit his head. He seems okay, but I thought I'd better bring him in just in case."

"I'll be there in ten minutes." Forcing himself to take a deep breath, he ran a hand through his hair and dropped his phone back into his pocket. He scribbled a note to Mrs. Norton, letting her know he'd be back first thing in the morning to finish with her cabinets. He'd promised her he'd have them all mounted by the end of the day today, but he felt confident she wouldn't give him too much grief. Sometimes the single-dad angle really worked in his favor.

He tossed on his coat and stepped out into the chilly, early December air. Winter already had Cheyenne, Wyoming, tightly in its grip. A light dusting of snow covered his

truck, but he didn't have time to clean it off. The fluff would blow away as soon as he started driving, anyway. Despite the sprinkling of snow, the sun now shone weakly through the clouds, sparkling against the sparse, white flakes.

Key in the ignition, his truck roared to life, and he took off in the direction of the hospital, fighting against the urge to speed. If he got pulled over, he'd be stuck by the side of the road trying to plead his way out of a ticket instead of on his way to make sure Ethan really was okay. He knew he'd be on edge until he could see his son with his own two eyes. Ever since Angela had left five years ago, it had just been him and his little man. His little man, who had somehow become a smart, funny, loudmouthed, amazing third grader.

His foot weighed a bit heavier on the gas pedal.

He pulled into the parking lot and cut the ignition, taking a second to force in a deep breath, closing his eyes and trying to calm down. It would only upset Ethan if he thought Luke was scared. Ethan was still young enough to believe wholeheartedly in the infallibility of his dad, and Luke didn't want to do anything to take that away from him.

The sliding glass doors of the emergency room whooshed open, and after stopping at the reception desk, he was directed down a hall to one of the small, curtained-off partitions. At the sound of his son's voice, talking about the various kinds of Pokémon, he flung back the thin, blue curtain. He closed the distance between himself and where his son lay on a stretcher in a single stride. Without a word, he gathered Ethan to him in a strong hug.

He released him gently and held him away, his eyes roaming over his son. "What happened? Are you okay?"

Ethan tried to wriggle out of Luke's hold. "I slipped. I'm fine," he answered, drawing the word out on a long, exasperated sigh.

Stroking a hand over Ethan's hair, Luke turned his attention to Robin, who was sitting in a plastic chair on the other side of the stretcher. "Thanks for looking after him. I really appreciate it."

"Not a problem. Better safe than sorry, right?" She gathered her purse from the floor and slung it over her shoulder. "Ryan's looking after the boys, and I need to get supper going. You okay if I head home? The nurse said the pediatrician would be in to check him out shortly."

He shot her a grateful smile. "It's fine. You go ahead. Thanks again, Robin." She eased the curtain closed behind her, and unable to help himself, he once again pulled Ethan into a hug, gently kissing the top of his head.

"Dad. Jeez. I just fell. That's all. I'm okay."

"Oh, yeah?" asked Luke, letting Ethan go and sitting down in the chair Robin had vacated. He held up three fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Ethan flung his arms out in front of him, scrabbling at the air. "Fingers? What fingers?" A grin stretched across his face. "Oh, no, Dad. I'm blind!" With an overdramatic sigh, he clutched his head in his hands, giggling.

"Okay, wise guy. Point taken." He shook his head and smiled, gingerly ruffling Ethan's hair as the vise clenching his lungs finally eased. Ethan really did seem okay. Hopefully the doctor would confirm it, and they could be on their way.

The curtain slid back with a metallic scrape to reveal a pretty blonde wearing light blue scrubs and a white lab coat, a stethoscope hanging from her neck.

A warm smile lit up her face. “Well, hi there. You must be . . .” She glanced down at the clipboard in one hand before looking back up at him. “Mr. Grayson.” She stepped toward him, extending her hand. “I’m Dr. Harmon, and I’ll be looking after Ethan.” Her Southern accent was decidedly out of place, and only added to her immediate charm.

He shook her hand, and their eyes met. He could’ve sworn hers widened, just a bit, when they were palm to palm, her skin warm and soft against his. A warm, tingling sensation worked its way up his arm.

Damn. She was beautiful. Soft and feminine with long, blond hair swept up in a ponytail, warm brown eyes, high cheekbones, and a wide, full mouth. She looked young, but he figured she had to be at least in her early thirties, maybe only a year or two younger than him.

“Call me Luke.” He wanted to hear her say his name in that cute accent.

She nodded, her ponytail bobbing behind her. “Sure. Luke.”

Oh, hell yeah. He definitely liked that.

And then he realized that he still had her hand. Giving him a slightly puzzled look, she took a step back. He was staring, probably drooling. She was going to think *he* was the one who’d hit his head, not Ethan.

Turning her attention to her young patient, she smiled again. “Hi there, Ethan. Can you tell me about how you fell?”

Ethan nodded, his eyes darting between Luke and the doctor. “I was playing with Ben and Michael Hayward and there was a patch of ice, so we decided to see who could slide the farthest. I lost, but only because I wiped out. I mostly landed on my butt, but I hit the back of my head, and Mrs. Hayward brought me here. But I didn’t cry.”

Dr. Harmon nodded seriously, her eyes holding Ethan's. "You're a very brave boy, by the sounds of it. I'm going to check you out and make sure you're okay." She smiled reassuringly at him and patted his shoulder. Although Luke knew she was just doing her job, the unexpected tenderness of the gesture caught him completely off guard, tugging at something deep in his chest.

As Dr. Harmon examined Ethan, checking his pupils, his reflexes and balance, she also asked him several questions about his favorite movies and TV shows, if he liked sports, and what he was going to ask Santa to bring him for Christmas. She asked a few of the questions twice, and he realized she was testing Ethan's memory and recall. She smiled wide when Ethan informed her that she'd already asked him which Avenger was his favorite.

"Does he have a concussion?" asked Luke, swallowing around the weird lump in his throat. With a flash of clarity, he realized that it was the sincerity in her interest in Ethan's answers that was getting to him. It was strange. Lots of people were nice to his son, but there was something about the way she talked to him, the way she tilted her head when she was listening to his answers . . . He couldn't quite put his finger on it. All he knew was that he liked watching her with his son. He cleared his throat.

She shook her head. "No. He didn't lose consciousness when he hit his head, and all of his vitals check out nice and normal. He passed my little test with flying colors. Most importantly, he knew how many days until Christmas morning." She smiled and winked at Ethan, and Luke's chest tightened ever so slightly. "He'll likely have a nasty bump, though. You'll want to put ice on it, and if it's real sore, you can give him some children's Advil. If he develops any worrisome symptoms, like vomiting, confusion,

dizziness—anything like that—then bring him on back right away. But I think he'll be fine." She scribbled a few notes on her clipboard and then clicked her pen.

"Thank you, Dr. Harmon. We really appreciate it." He nudged Ethan gently.

"Thanks, Dr. Harmon. Did you know that my dad's single?"

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Huh. Christie Harmon could honestly say that she'd never met a guy worthy of being called a hunk before. But Luke Grayson was definitely a hunk. No other way to describe him. That thick, dark blond hair. Those piercing light blue eyes. That smile, with the dimples and the perfect white teeth. That square chin and granite jaw covered with a few days' worth of stubble.

Yep. Total hunk.

*Real professional, Christie. Down, girl.*

"Did you know that my dad's single?" At Ethan's question, she found her eyes darting to Luke's left hand, which, sure enough, was devoid of a wedding ring.

"Ethan." Luke's voice was low and full of warning.

"You should ask her out. She's so pretty and nice. I like her." Ethan turned his attention to Christie, and it hit her that he was a mini version of Luke. Same blond hair, same blue eyes, same dimpled smile. Ethan leaned toward her and cupped a hand over his mouth. "He's probably nervous because it's been a really long time since he went on a date."

Christie bit back a smile as Luke cringed. "You're a terrible wingman. Let's go." He tipped his head toward her. "Thanks again, Dr. Harmon."

"It's Christie."

Something flared in Luke's eyes, and he looked at her again. Really looked at her, the way he had when they'd shook hands. The way that made her stomach flip and her heart flutter.

"Thanks, Christie." The way he said her name sent heat rippling over her skin. She clenched a fist against the urge to fan herself.

"You're very welcome. Take care, Ethan." She raised her hand in a wave, tearing her eyes from Luke to smile at her young patient. She stepped to the side to give Luke and Ethan room to pass in the small examination space, but Luke stepped at the same time. Awkwardly, she stepped again, and so did he. It was the dorkiest Texas Two-Step anyone had ever seen.

"Smooth, Dad. Jeez." Ethan rolled his eyes.

Luke laid one large, wide hand on her shoulder and her arm went boneless at his touch. The pen she'd been clutching in her left hand hit the floor, skittering over the tiles. She racked her brain, trying to think of something, *anything* to say, but she came up empty. Relishing the excuse to literally duck out of the interaction and get out of their way, she bent to retrieve her pen. Unfortunately, Luke picked that exact moment to do the same, and their foreheads crashed together.

"Oh, my God. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" he asked, rubbing his own forehead and extending a hand toward her.

She nodded weakly, more embarrassed than hurt. "Yeah. I just wanted to make sure y'all had matching lumps." He stared at her blankly for a second, and she felt even more blood rush to her cheeks. "Sorry. That was a joke."

A smile spread across his face. "I know. It was cute."

Oh, dear Lord. Based on the heat coming off her face, she probably looked like a damn strawberry.

“You sure you’re okay?” His eyes searched hers, and she nodded again.

“I’m sure. Are you all right? I think I got you good and hard.” She closed her eyes briefly and pursed her lips together, praying for the ground to swallow her up as she realized what she’d just said.

His eyes held hers, heat sparking in them. “You sure did, but I’ll survive.”

“I’m just gonna stand here and let you two leave without my hindrance. Have a nice evening.” She stood back, fiddling with the stethoscope.

“Bye, Christie.” He turned his attention to his son. “C’mon, dude. Let’s go home and get some ice on that bump.”

“Do I have to go to school tomorrow?”

“Of course you have to go to school tomorrow. You heard Dr. Harmon. You’re fine.”

“You should’ve asked her out.”

As they walked away, Luke pulled Ethan into him, hugging him to his side as they walked. “No more playing on ice, okay buddy?”

She found herself smiling as she watched them make their way to the exit doors, a warm, melting sensation filling up her insides at the sight of them together. Quickly, she caught herself, giving her head a shake and jamming her pen back in the front pocket of her lab coat.

She exhaled slowly and tried not to laugh at herself for thinking she could ever be good enough for a man like that. Kind and warm and . . . God, he was gorgeous. And



watching him with his son? All funny and tender and worried? Holy hell. She'd have to go for an ultrasound just to make sure her ovaries were still intact.

She gave her head another shake. She'd taken this job in Cheyenne to start over after what had happened in Tulsa. A wave of nausea rolled through her along with the memories of the humiliation she'd had to endure, how she'd had no choice but to run, leaving behind friends and a job she'd loved. All because of a stupid, impulsive act. A decision with consequences that she'd foolishly thought she could outrun.

But she'd been wrong. Because even now, in a new city, in a new job, she felt the weight of what she'd done pressing on her shoulders. A small voice whispered, "They're not for you," and she swallowed thickly. Adjusting her stethoscope, she pushed them from her mind as she went to find her next patient.



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