

*Corey*

After three days at the hospital, the house is a wreck—unopened mail piled on the dining room table, a mountain of laundry in the basement, and the innards of two pillows that fell victim to Rambo’s boredom blanket the family room. Why did Paul insist on down?

It was easy enough to ignore the mess late last night after another uneventful day at Taylor’s bedside. I even pretended not to see it when trudging to the kitchen for my early morning coffee fix. But I can’t ignore the pristine, white feather floating on my mocha-laden concoction before I even have my first sip.

Tears well, an overreaction for sure, unless you’re Sarah Bernhardt. It’s not just the coffee or the mess, I swear. But Rambo, my sensitive Westie, is repentant. He drops at my feet, resting his chin on his front paws with an apologetic whine.

“My fault.” I crouch down and scratch his perky ears. “I should have found someone to keep you for a few days.”

Rambo rolls onto his back, offering up his soft belly for a rub. I know when I’m beat.

“We going to the hospital?” Michael stands in the kitchen doorway, dressed in baggy jeans and a wrinkled T-shirt he must’ve collected from the laundry pile.

“*We’re* not going to the hospital.” I stand to reword Paul’s command before leaving earlier. “*I’m* going—you’re headed to school. You’ve missed too much as it is.”

“I can get the work from Dan. I want to be there if Taylor wakes up.”

“Even if she does, she won’t know you.” I can at least rest in Dr. Nielson’s prediction that Taylor will wake any day now, even if he says she won’t recognize us.

Michael's jaw clenches and rebellion lights his eyes before he opens his mouth. "It's Dad, isn't it? He's the one saying I gotta go to school."

I stifle a sigh. Here we go again. The battlefield is occupied by opposing forces, and I'm playing mediator-in-the-middle. "Taylor's going to need you more when she's home, Michael." I'm talking to a dolomite rock here. "I'll need you more when she's home."

"You know I can make up the work. It's a cinch."

I'm tempted to call him on it but bite my tongue. That's Paul's strategy. We both know Michael could pull off straight A's without breaking a sweat. So why doesn't he?

"Come on, Mom." The little-boy whine is reminiscent of his four-year-old self.

Shaking my head, I spot a backpack on the kitchen table. Taylor's backpack. Ignoring Michael, I step over to the table, and my stomach clenches. "Where'd that come from?"

"Dad brought it in last night. He picked it up from the impound lot yesterday."

That's right. How could I forget he went to look at the car? I reach for it, but hesitate. Did Paul look inside the backpack? Did he find *it*? Maybe, but if he did, he didn't let on. I'd have known. His kiss...his touch...something would have clued me in.

"What's wrong, Mom?" Michael's brows draw together.

"What?"

"You look—"

"No...nothing." I scrape my hair behind my ears. "You need to get to school."

"What about the hospital?"

"I'm going. A little later. When Dad gets done with a few things at church." After I do a thorough search of Taylor's backpack.

"But what about me?"

“Huh?” Even if I find the paper, then what? How can I explain it to Paul?

“Breakfast?”

“What? Oh, yeah.” I snatch a brown banana from the fruit bowl and slap it into his hand.

“That’s it? No French toast?”

“You’ll be late for school.”

Shaking his head, he mumbles something about child abuse and leaves. If he only knew.

I wait, breath held, until the front door slams. Plucking up the backpack, I set it on the table, my heart beating like I’ve just completed the fifty-yard dash. *Oh, God, why did this have to happen? Why now?*

The *pzzzt* of the zipper is loud in the sudden quiet of the house. Rambo hops up onto the chair and watches with the fascination reserved for the neighbor’s three-legged cat.

“Here goes nothing,” I mutter, pulling out the contents and placing them on the table. A physiology textbook, a bright red binder with pictures tucked into the plastic cover, a tattered green notebook. That’s it? I tip the backpack toward the window and search its innards. A folded paper lines the bottom. Breath short, heart beating in triple time, I reach for it.

The doorbell peals, and I jump. Rambo goes into watchdog mode, tearing across the kitchen, barking to warn the invader he’s on the job.

Paper clutched to my chest, I groan. Who in their right mind shows up at someone’s house before eight? My tattered robe isn’t the most flattering—only exemplifies the extra

ten post-pregnancy pounds I've settled into over the last fifteen years. Maybe I can pretend I'm not home. It's not like anyone can hear me over Rambo's incessant alarm.

"Corey!"

It can't be. I cram the paper in my pocket and schlep across the kitchen on slippered feet to peer around the corner. Rambo stands at attention in front of the door, tail wagging, body shuddering with each bark. Even though the figure is as distorted as a Picasso painting through the leaded glass, the blonde bob is impossible to mistake for someone else.

"Tricia?" Speaking her name dissolves my emotional fortitude. I rush to the door and throw it open to be swallowed by a warm embrace and Oscar De La Renta.

"I got here as soon as I could," she tells me over my sobs. "It'll be okay. Everything will be okay."