

# The Break-up

A Full Hearts Novel

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Indigo Group

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# ONE

## Aspen, Colorado

“Knock, knock!”

Courtney Bennett heard the voice of her press agent, Yolanda, as she let herself into the hotel suite. Yolanda always said ‘knock, knock’ instead of just knocking, an irritating habit that Courtney had long ago learned to accept.

“We’re here to help you get ready!” Her voice had a sing-song quality today, meaning that she either met a man or she had bad news and was pretending everything was fine.

“Good morning, ladies.” Courtney poked her head out of the bathroom just long enough to give Yolanda, and her assistant, Dawn, a warm smile. “I’m just out of the shower. How are you both today?”

“Just fine, although I can’t sleep here. It’s too quiet. And the air is funny,” Yolanda answered, her voice growing louder with each word as she neared the bathroom.

“You mean clean?”

Yolanda wrinkled up her nose pretending to be disgusted. “Exactly. Not a hint of smog. It’s unnatural.”

“I like it here. It reminds me of home.”

“Eww. Canada is like this?” Yolanda waved her hand dismissively.

“The parts in the Rockies are.” Courtney dabbed at her face with a cotton pad soaked in an outrageously expensive toner. She could see Yolanda watching her in the mirror.

“Did you sleep okay?”

“Why? Do I look tired?” Courtney adjusted the collar on the plush white hotel robe so it was less revealing.

“No. Of course not. You look divine. You’re every bit *People’s* most beautiful woman.”

Yolanda turned and hissed ‘coffee’ to Dawn.

Dawn mumbled something as she made her way to the bar on the opposite side of the suite. She was always mumbling. Yolanda made all kinds of sounds—hissing, yelling, gushing. But Dawn only seemed to mumble. Sometimes, Courtney imagined the two to be a mini-orchestra of human instruments.

Yolanda handed her the bottle of photo finish serum. “So, how are you feeling about the junket so far?”

“You mean since we talked about it at supper last night?” Courtney gave her a quizzical look. “Is something going on?”

Yolanda gave her a too-bright smile and smoothed back her black bob. “What? Nothing. Everything is just fine.”

Courtney hardened her stare and waited.

“Here’s your coffee, Courtney,” Dawn muttered, handing it to her gingerly.

“Thanks, Dawn,” Courtney said. “What isn’t Yolanda telling me?”

Dawn’s eyes grew round. She swallowed. “Nothing. Things are great.”

“Now I’m getting worried. I actually heard that.” Planting a fist on her hip, Courtney gave Yolanda her best ‘you better tell me, bitch’ stare.

“Okay, so it’s *really* nothing. But it *looks* like something. I’ve already spoken with Ted and he’s all over it like white on rice. The whole thing will be dead by supper time.”

“Why would my husband’s publicist need to be brought in?”

“Again, it’s *really*...”

“Spill it, Yo.”

“Apparently, some photos were taken of Brock and Tiffany last night. They haven’t gotten out yet because the photographer is holding out for a big payout from one of the tabloids. He’s claiming it’s proof that Brock is cheating—”

“Oh, God. That.” Courtney waved it off. “Yeah, he texted to tell me they were going for dinner. She’s been having some trouble with her role and he offered to talk her through it. I guess they’ve been shooting the same scene for three days and she’s still not getting it.”

“She’s getting it, all right,” Dawn mumbled.

“What?” Courtney’s head swiveled.

“Nothing. I was just... nothing.” Dawn hurried to the desk in the far corner of the room.

Yolanda rolled her eyes in that ‘young people are so irritating’ way. “Anyhow, as usual, don’t let it concern you but *do* expect the reporters to ask about it. I’m going to prime them all before they get in to see you, so they’ll know the *real* story. If anyone brings it up, you go with the standard line, ‘everything’s wonderful, it’s a marriage made in heaven, what I’m really excited to talk about is this amazing movie...’”

“I know the lines, Yolanda,” Courtney said, feeling slightly irritated. She picked up her Dior eyeliner and began to draw a careful line along her eyelashes.

“Of course you do. I’m just jittery today. They must put extra caffeine in the coffee here.”

Courtney chuckled. “They must. Plus, they add extra oxygen in the air, too.”

“The bastards.” Yolanda stared at Courtney as she continued with her makeup.

Glancing at her, Courtney knew that her press agent had more to say. “What?”

“Well, since you asked, I noticed that you squint a little when you apply your mascara, and it occurred to me that maybe you need to use your face less. You know, to avoid wrinkles. You’re very expressive all the time and—it’s not happening yet, you still look superbly young—but it will start to show soon.”

“Use my face less?” Courtney stopped and turned to her. “Is this about that part from Universal?”

“Well, a little, yes. I mean, it was for a mother of *teenagers*.” The word teenager came out of her mouth as though it were acid. “Plus, we found out you didn’t get Elektra.”

“I didn’t?” Courtney’s face fell.

“No, honey. They went with some new Australian tramp. Kelly said she blew one of the producers.”

“Hair Kelly or makeup Kelly?”

“Hair.”

“Damn. She’s pretty reliable.” Courtney sighed as she felt her heart drop to her knees. She stared at herself in the mirror, suddenly seeing every tiny line on her face amplified. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Oh, I am *definitely* right about this.” Yolanda pointed at her and nodded. “You’re always smiling and laughing and making goofy faces. Save that for the big screen. Otherwise, go for Angelina-stoic. I bet you could get at least another four years out of your original face.”

“My *original* face?” It was moments like this that made it very hard for Courtney to believe that this was her life. “Thanks for the tip. I’ll definitely give it some thought.”

Yolanda nodded. “Good. Just don’t wrinkle your eyebrows together while you’re thinking.” She laughed in the high-pitched cackle she used after saying something insulting. Courtney knew it was meant to soften her comment, but it really had the opposite effect.

Courtney turned back to her reflection in the mirror. Her face looked normal to her again. She didn’t look bad for thirty-nine. Sure, there were some tiny lines around her eyes, but wasn’t that to be expected? She stayed out of the sun, wore a ridiculously huge hat when she was outside, and doused herself in serums and lotions with SPF 50. She went for monthly laser peels and skin resurfacing. She hadn’t gone the Botox route yet, but she knew it was just a matter of time. For almost a decade, she’d resisted her cosmetic dermatologist’s urging for her to start with fillers for ‘preventative maintenance.’ Somehow, looking her age was slightly less terrifying to her than sporting that ‘not quite human’ look that she saw everywhere she went in L.A.

“Anyway, it’s nothing to worry about *today*, it’s just food for thought. And let’s not worry about the Elektra thing. It wouldn’t have been right for your brand anyway.” Yolanda unzipped the case containing her tablet and began going over the schedule.

“So, I checked and the premiere will end at ten fifty-two, we’ll have a limo waiting to take you to the jet. You’re scheduled for four days with Brock, then back home for your appointment with Dr. Debaggio. I want to call Zephyr to start doing your power yoga every morning again. You were really so firm when you were training with him. Dawn, don’t you think she was incredibly firm?”

Dawn nodded without looking up from her phone. “Very firm.”

“What do you think? Zephyr? Or do you want to try something else? Maybe back to Pilates? Barre? It’s really up to you.”

“Wait, can we back up? I was planning to spend a month in the Bahamas. I told you that. Brock and I really need some time together.”

“But I got Dr. Debaggio to squeeze you in. I think you should definitely come home, even if it’s just for a few days. You can always fly back after your appointment.”

“No, cancel it. I’m not rushing home for a laser peel. And if you’re suggesting I’m getting flabby, fine. I’ll...” Courtney waved her hand in the air, “... run on the beach every morning. And I can do yoga myself. Okay?”

“I’m not trying to hurt your feelings. You know that, right? This is my job. To help you eke out every last minute of your career.”

Courtney let her shoulders drop. “I know you are and I appreciate it. I think I just need a break for a few weeks, then I’ll get right back to my routine. I promise. And don’t look so worried. It’ll give you wrinkles.” She gave her a half-smile to let her know they were okay.

Yolanda beamed then went for an overly stoic look, her humor restoring the peace between them before she glanced down at her tablet. “Glad that’s settled. First up is Gordon Hughes from Entertainment Hourly. Then Nikki from CBN, then Karlee, then that new one from WBC, Kristyn, then a quick break for lunch.”

Gasping, Yolanda shut her tablet case. “I didn’t realize how late it was getting. We’ll go make sure the room is ready and prep Gordon.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, ladies. See you in a bit.”

And then they were gone, leaving Courtney alone again in silence, the symphony of humans over. She made her way to the closet, finding her blue jersey-knit dress waiting. She de-robed and stepped into her dress, pulling it up over her hips, then shimmying into it. Her tan Coach pumps were next, followed by a chunky bracelet and earrings. Finally, a quick scan of herself in the mirror. Something caught her eye. *Was that...? Dear God! A gray hair.* Her heart sank. Another one had popped up overnight right where her part-line was. Why did they always appear right up front and center? “Son of a...”

# TWO

Wes Young wiped his brow with his forearm to stop the sweat from getting past his eyebrows. He was out on the back deck of his cabin, working his punching bag like he did every morning. First the bag, then he'd go for a long jog around Cobalt Lake. Even though it had been over two years since he left the Marines, he was still a staunch believer in keeping his body combat-ready. To Wes, becoming lazy or weak would be worse than death. He let his breath slow as he removed his boxing gloves then took a long drink of water. As Wes stretched his muscular arms, he watched a golden eagle soar over the lake, looking to make an early morning feast out of a trout.

He loved it here at his home, twenty miles outside Aspen, Colorado. Wes still found it hard to believe that this calm, tranquil corner of the world belonged to him. Each day, he had to remind himself that land-mines, tear gas, and semi-automatic weapons were no longer part of his life.

Well, he did have two Glocks, an M11, and an AR-15 assault rifle, but of those, he would only need to bring the M11 when he put on his black suit and went to work later. No more fatigues for him. Now he wore Armani. Not that he gave a shit what the label said. He'd bought what the salesman had told him was on sale at the time.

Wes retied the laces on his trainers, then looked over at his orange tabby cat, Trip, who was dozing in a patch of sun on the grass. Trip was a stray that had appeared at his door a year ago. Wes had reluctantly started feeding him, then as winter closed in, he and Trip seemed to both come to the conclusion that the cat would need to start coming inside to get out of the cold. Now the animal followed him everywhere, even on his morning run. The cat stood and stretched, preparing himself for their journey.

"You ready, boy?" Wes asked, still a little shocked at himself for talking to a mangy cat. "Let's go!"

And the two were off, racing each other down across the lawn to the gravel trail that followed the water's edge. Here Wes was free. After over twenty years of following orders and giving them, of living each day knowing it could be his last, he now woke up knowing how lucky he was to be alive and whole. He had a few scars, scattered circles on his shoulder and upper chest where he had been shot, but he had all of his limbs, which was nothing to take for granted.

# THREE

“How are things, Gordon?” Courtney asked as the sound tech miked her.

“Not bad. I’m working on a book about historical Beverly Hills mansions. I’m hoping it does well so I can finally get off this fucking junket.” He arranged his cue cards while he spoke. “Like, seriously, coming all the way to Aspen for *six interviews*? There are much better uses of my time—no offense. You’re the only bright spot in my day.”

Courtney smiled graciously. “Oh, thank you. You’re certainly not the first person I’ve heard complain about being here.” Dawn rushed in and adjusted the collar on Courtney’s dress when the tech was finished. “Thanks, Dawn.”

Courtney turned to Gordon. “Anyway, let me know when your book comes out. I’d love to read it. And I’d be happy to share it on Instagram.”

He looked up at her from his notes. “Thanks, Courtney, you really are one of the good ones.”

She drew a deep breath and smoothed out the skirt of her dress, a small ritual that helped her relax. But she had no reason to be nervous. Gordon was nice, in spite of his surly mood this morning. Being interviewed by him was like chatting with an old friend.

Gordon took a sip of water. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

“Yes, let’s. I’m in a hurry today. As soon as I finish tonight, I’m leaving to go meet Brock on set.”

“Really?” Gordon looked perplexed for a moment, then a glimmer of hope replaced his confusion. “So you’re still going to the Bahamas after what happened yesterday?”

*Nooo!* Why had she brought up? “Of course I’m going. You and I both know things aren’t always what they seem.”

“Well, in this case, it looks pretty hard to explain away.”

Courtney gave him an easy laugh. “Let me try. Tiffany has been struggling with a particularly difficult scene they’ve been shooting. Brock offered to talk her through it.”

“So you don’t have a problem with them sharing an intimate dinner?”

“Not intimate. Innocent,” she scoffed. “She’s like a little sister to him. He’s been kind enough to let her benefit from his experience and things are getting twisted around as they tend to. Honestly.”

While she was talking, Courtney could see Gordon’s assistant out of the corner of her eye. She handed Gordon an iPad.

“I have a little sister,” Gordon said, looking down at the screen. “This is not how I kiss her.”

He turned the tablet to face Courtney, giving her a clear view of her husband, head tilted to the side as he leaned across the small table to kiss Tiffany. Gordon swiped the screen, revealing a shot of Brock’s face buried in that long, youthful neck, their arms wrapped around each other as they stood outside the restaurant. Now they were laughing. Now they were kissing on the mouth again as they held hands. Then he was staring down at her with that look that he used to give Courtney when they first met—the one that said she was the only woman on earth who mattered. The one that melted her heart.

Courtney felt her knees go weak. Her heart pounded in her chest and she could feel a cold sweat breaking out across her hairline. She had no idea what she was doing with her face. She only knew she wanted to throw up.

The screen was whisked away and she looked up into Gordon's face. It had changed. He looked like he felt nauseated, too, which meant she must have looked as horrified as she felt. He whispered 'sorry' to her. Courtney stared at him, her eyes begging him to save her from this awful moment. But she knew he wouldn't. He couldn't. He was doing his job. And now she had to do hers. She plastered a smile on her face. "It's all part of the process..."

# FOUR

Wes flopped down onto the lawn while Trip made a bee-line for his water dish. Moments later, he returned to Wes's side and rolled onto his back to rub his furry head against the cool grass. The sun had warmed the crisp fall air, making what Wes considered a perfect day.

He would eat a six-egg omelet, have a long shower and get ready for work. It had been a busy week for Wes at his job providing protection services. A group of A-list celebrities had come to town for some film festival. Most of the time, he felt like a glorified driver, but there was always that slim chance that a crazed fan or maybe even a stalker would up the evening's excitement level. That thought kept him going.

That, and the hope that he would find an investor for the security software he was working on. He'd already found a programmer, Albert Schwimmer, to bring his concept to life. He hoped to sell the software to every nightclub in America when it was ready, but he needed a large infusion of cash to get his idea off the ground.

The day before, Wes had received a fifth rejection letter. Each one was a little harder to recover from, but he wasn't about to give up. He knew the software would work and would make him a very wealthy man. He just needed to keep going until he found the right investor, someone who could see the value in his idea.

The promise of breakfast had Wes dragging himself up the steps to the house. He had just finished placing his trainers neatly in the closet and tucking in the laces when his cell started to ring.

He swiped the screen. "How's my favorite sister?"

"I'm your only sister. And I'm freaking exhausted." Harper made a sniffing sound. "Plus, I just realized that I honestly don't know when the last time it was that I showered. Two babies is *a lot of babies.*"

"Yeah, I kind of noticed that when I was there last week." Wes chugged a glass of water. "It's like a war zone in your house and the babies are winning."

"You've got that right. Two grown-ups are no match for two babies. They've got us beat down, Wes. They don't need to sleep at night but we do," Harper complained. "Half the time I feel like they're trying to kill me."

Wes grinned, knowing she was just blowing off some steam. "It's a far cry from your life in New York, isn't it?"

"Yes. Stupid falling in love and getting married. I had no idea how good I had it at the magazine. No idea, Wes."

"But at least you and Evan are in this together, right?" Wes opened the fridge and took out a carton of eggs and some spinach.

"Yes, I suppose..." she conceded.

"Are you saying you regret marrying my best friend?"

"No, of course not," Harper huffed. "Can't I just call my big brother to whine once in a while?"

“Not if you expect sympathy. Man up, Harper. Those are the cards you were dealt. You gotta play ’em.” He cradled the phone to his ear as he started cracking the eggs into the pan.

“Well, that was cold-hearted.”

“You knew who you were calling when you dialed.”

“True.” Wes heard a clanging sound in the background, then his sister saying, “Whoops. No, baby. You can’t have that.” Pause. “Anyway, what are you doing today?”

“That film festival is still going on, so it’ll be another night of celebrity babysitting for me.”

“I’m sure they’re among your favorite people.”

“Pampered actors and actresses? You know me. Nothing I like better than self-absorbed, vain, useless people,” he said.

“Tell me how you really feel,” Harper laughed. The sound of a crying baby interrupted the conversation. “Oh, crap, Little Megan just bit Matthew on the cheek.”

The crying grew louder, causing Wes to pull the phone away from his ear. He listened as his sister shushed her son and soon the offending noise died away.

“Gotta go! Megan’s making a break for the stairs and I forgot to close the gate. I need six hands for this. Bye, bro!”

Wes chuckled to himself when he hung up. In spite of his sister’s complaining, he knew she had never been happier. She was the only one of the three Young siblings to have taken the plunge into domestic bliss, which to Wes, made Harper the bravest of the family. He and his brother, Craig, had kept as big a distance as possible from anything to do with commitment.

Sometimes, Wes marveled at the fact that Harper had managed to get through to the other side after how their mother had abandoned them. But Harper had, and something about it gave him a sense of peace—knowing his sister was safe and loved with his own best friend at her side. He had been more than a little pissed when their relationship had started, but Evan’s sense of loyalty and honor was as solid as any Marine he had served with, and Wes had no doubt in his mind that he would take care of her.

Their father, Roy, had never been happier in his life, either. Being a grandfather suited him in a way few things had. He lit up when he saw the kids, and they, him. There was a bond there that was simple and clear and perfect. Those two little people somehow managed to give their grandfather a new purpose in life right when he needed one. And for that, Wes was grateful. For once, he felt like everything was exactly as it should be for his family. And after the long haul they’d had, they deserved it.

# FIVE

“What the fuck just happened?” Courtney whisper-yelled as soon as the door to her suite closed behind her.

She looked down at her hands and saw that they were now shaking. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes but she fanned them away, willing herself not to get emotional. She had made it through the first three interviews, each one of the reporters trying to get a reaction to Brock’s infidelity, each time Courtney finding it harder to hide her devastation.

Dawn handed her a bottle of water with the top removed, then shrunk into the background.

Yolanda gave her a confident nod. “You’re doing great. Fabulous, actually. You’ve got four more interviews, then the premier, then you’re free and clear.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not doing great. This is a disaster! Gordon got the footage of me being completely blindsided.” Courtney’s voice rose. “In fact, if we turn on the TV right now, it’s probably playing on a fucking loop already.”

“It’s honestly not as bad as you think, though. I promise. Plus, the team in L.A. has already started on damage control. We’ll bury this thing by the end of...” Her voice trailed off with the glare Courtney was giving her.

Dawn walked over to Courtney carrying a salad in a plastic carton. “Are you hungry?”

Courtney gave her a glance, then dropped onto the couch with a heavy sigh. “No, Dawn. I’m not. I just found out my marriage is probably over. I feel sick.”

“Sorry.” Dawn nodded and removed the offending greens.

“Don’t be. None of this is your fault.” Courtney attempted a reassuring smile. “I need a few minutes alone, okay?”

Yolanda leaned over her and put her hand on her shoulder. “Are you sure, Courtney? Maybe Dawn could run downstairs and get you a smoothie or some green tea while I give you a nice neck rub.”

Courtney shook her head, staring out the window. “No, thank you. I need to be alone so I can call my husband.”

“All right. We’ll be back in about twenty minutes to help you get ready for the next set of interviews.” Yolanda urgently waved Dawn toward the door and the two exited.

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The silence that had been so welcome a few hours ago now threatened to swallow Courtney up. The mountains outside the window mocked her. At one time, she would have considered their relationship that solid, but if she were really honest with herself, it had started to crumble years earlier.

The beginning had been good. Very good. They met on the set of *Made in Heaven*, the first film in which she had a leading role. After a few weeks of shooting sex scenes and romantic dinners, they started having real ones. Everyone had been thrilled—her manager at the time started releasing

carefully staged photos of them together; the studio benefited enormously as they do when they are given millions of dollars in free publicity. But no one was happier about it than Courtney herself. Her prince had finally come along and she was going to get her own happily-ever-after. They married a week before the film was released and the media went nuts. They dubbed it ‘the marriage made in Heaven.’

Before meeting Brock, she had played a bit part in a spring break film, *Party Girls*, and then had co-starred in three seasons of a sitcom, *The Valley Girls*, a spin-off of the movie. The show had just been canceled when Brock took notice of her, and having him fall in love with her propelled her to the top of the A-list.

Even more than that, she had been over the moon with the fact that such a commanding, put-together man like him would want her. He told her he would make her a star, that she deserved it, and that together, they would become Hollywood royalty. And they had. Her career and love-life both fell into place at exactly the same time and it was all because of him. She had agreed to move over to his publicity team, all of whom gushed over her, treating her like she was the most important person on the planet. This was a stark contrast to her own manager, who had much bigger clients than Courtney to watch over. She’d fallen hard for Brock and she’d fallen for all of the promises he made, without knowing the price.

Courtney stared at her phone for a full minute, working up the courage to pick it up off the coffee table. This was the beginning of the end and she knew it. Twelve years of marriage was about to turn to dust and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She knew their relationship was far from perfect. At times, he was downright neglectful and on a handful of occasions, she had seen a much darker side of him, a side the world would never believe existed. She had thought about leaving him over the years, but just when she was ready to give up, he would seem to come back to her and shine his light on her again, and she would forgive him and bask in the warmth of Brock’s glow, telling herself it had been worth the darkness and hoping it would last.

This time was different. She had felt him pulling away from her for the past four months since he started filming *Pirate Cove Three*. Courtney had tried to brush it off as just the way things were when their schedules had them living apart, but deep down she knew it was something more.

She dialed his number and waited.

“Hey, Court,” he answered.

“Hi.” Courtney’s words got caught in her throat at hearing his voice.

“You’re going to have to speak up. It’s a little loud here. We’re on the ship about to shoot.”

“I saw the pictures, Brock.” She managed to get the words out.

“What?” he yelled.

“I saw the pictures, Brock.” She used her stage voice so he would hear her.

“Oh, shit. Give me a sec.”

She could hear his voice, now muffled, then a long pause. Courtney felt a cold sweat above her upper lip. She dabbed at it while she waited.

*‘Oh, shit. Give me a sec’? Was this the sound that a marriage made when it ended? A casual ‘oh shit’?*

When he spoke again, there was silence in the background. “Court, listen, I didn’t want you to find out like this. I was going to tell you in person when you got here.”

“Where are you right now?” she asked, her mind choosing to protect her for an extra few seconds by asking something completely irrelevant.

“What?” Brock sounded confused. “I went down into the ship’s galley. I can’t talk long. The entire crew is waiting.”

Courtney sat, numb and silent. So many thoughts invaded her mind, each one competing for top billing in her mouth, but she was incapable of turning any of them into an actual sentence.

“Babe? Did you hear what I said?”

“So, it’s real this time. You and what’s-her-name are…” She couldn’t bring herself to say the words.

Brock sighed loudly. “Yes. We are.” He paused, but Courtney waited him out. “I never meant for it to happen. It just… did. She’s so… well, with her… I’m *so happy*.”

“Happy?” Courtney whispered. “You weren’t happy with me?”

“I was. For the first few years especially, but you and I both know things haven’t been good for a long time.”

A sob escaped Courtney’s throat. *What was he saying?* She couldn’t register anything. “It’s just because we’re spending too much time apart. If we—”

“No, Court, it’s over. I’m sorry.”

Courtney could feel her hand losing grip on the phone. It was clammy and wet, and she had to tighten her fingers around it to keep it from falling. Her mind raced, searching for something to say that would make him change his mind but nothing came. No reason. No memory. No private joke that would remind him of what they once were.

“With Tiffany, I’m just really *alive*.” A loud knocking stopped him from going on. “Be right out!” he shouted. “Part of you had to know this was coming, right?”

“Not really.”

“If you’re honest with yourself, you’ll realize you weren’t happy, either. I don’t know if it was just that we weren’t a good fit or if it’s something you’ve been going through. It’s like… aging in Hollywood really hasn’t brought out the best in you and let’s be honest, it’s only going to get worse from here.”

Courtney’s mouth hung open. Was he actually blaming this on her? “It was one offer. I turned it down.”

“What? Oh, the Universal thing. No, it’s not just that.” There was another knock at the door. “Listen, that’s time, Court. I have to get back on deck. I hope you’ll find happiness like I have.”

“Brock—wait!” But he was gone.

# SIX

And just like that, her mountain began to crash down around her, threatening to suffocate her under the rubble. Everything they had together—the history, the secrets, having someone who understood the pressure and loneliness at the top—it had all being ripped from her in a two-minute conversation. The earth had opened up and she was falling into a deep, dark, never-ending void. Panic set in. He wasn't just her husband. He controlled her career, her money, her future. Tears poured out of her eyes so quickly they formed rivers down her cheeks, taking her mascara with them. Somehow, she ended up on the floor with her knees curled up to her chest. She dissolved, a sound coming from her throat that she hadn't heard since she was a child.

Ten minutes later, two pairs of legs stood in front of her. She heard voices but didn't register anything they were saying. It was all muffled nonsense. None of it mattered. The interviews, the premier, none of it.

"We need to get her calmed down," Yolanda whispered, urgently gesturing to Dawn. "Go get the bag."

Courtney's eyes followed Dawn's legs as she scurried to the closet, returning with a black carry-on. She set it on the coffee table and Yolanda dug through it. "Which ones did Dr. Jeffrey say were to calm her?"

Dawn mumbled, causing Courtney to bark out an insane laugh.

Yolanda tapped her lip with a finger. "Red means stop, green means go, yellow is to slow?"

"Umm, I think it was yellow is *too* slow," Dawn muttered.

"That's what I said," Yolanda snapped. "Go get her a water." She took out two yellow pills and crouched in front of Courtney. "Honey, I want you to take these, okay? They're going to help get you through the afternoon."

Courtney looked up at her and laughed again. "It's all so absurd. You're giving me pills from a baggie... from a doctor who goes by Jeffrey."

Yolanda opened Courtney's fingers and put two pills in her palm, then handed her a bottle of cold water. "Come on. You just have to get through this afternoon, then we can get you out of here."

She turned to Dawn. "Go tell them we're running about twenty minutes behind."

Dawn disappeared.

"Take them. They'll make you feel better."

Courtney nodded. "All right, Yo." She popped the tiny yellow pills into her mouth then sucked back a long gulp of water.

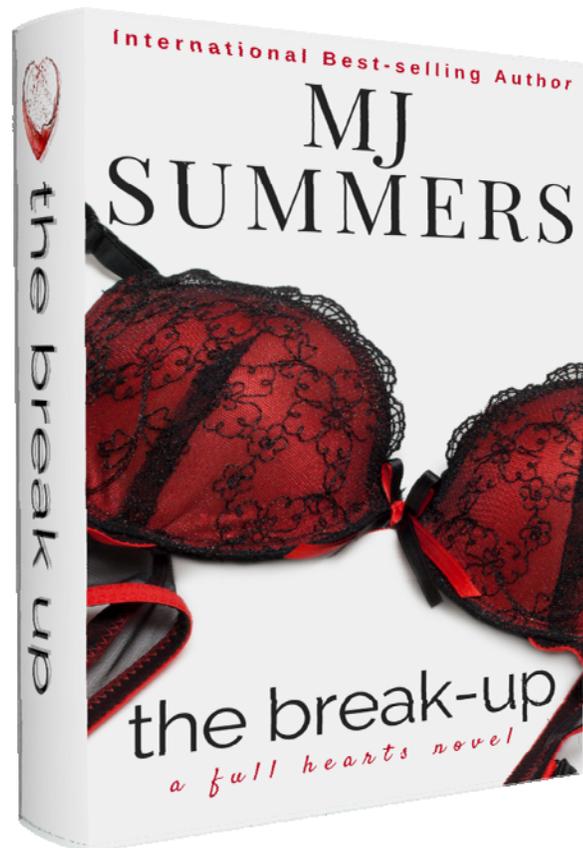
A moment later, Yolanda sat in front of her on her knees with a make-up case and wipes. She started gently wiping Courtney's cheeks. "It's okay, honey. We'll get you all cleaned up. You're going to be absolutely stunning when I'm done with you."

Courtney's bottom lip quivered and she could feel the tears coming on again. "I can't. I'm sorry, Yo. I can't do this. It's real this time. It's just too humiliating. He's leaving me for that... slutty slut." Sobs shook her entire body as she collapsed again, giving in to the pain. She felt Yolanda seat

herself next to her on the floor, then a comforting arm wrapped around her. She dropped her head onto Yolanda's shoulder and let it all go.

Somewhere in her mind, she could hear Dawn again. Then a drink in a tumbler was held to her lips. The liquid burned on the way down but she sucked it back anyway. Anything to rid her of the pain that seared through her. She continued to cry until she felt herself detach from the room. Now she was floating above it, feeling nothing. She laughed. "Slutty slut..." she heard her voice say.

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