

# 1

“You left me for Demi Moore,” Helen screamed, throwing a white, ceramic mask, barely missing Dr. Harold Previn’s head and smashing the entryway mirror.

“What are you talking about? I don’t *do* Demi,” Previn said, bracing for another attack.

He’d never wrecked any of Helen’s paintings. That his wife would start breaking his sculptures stung.

“Whatever,” she said.

The broken pieces crunched underfoot as he stepped up to her. “It’s four a.m., goddamn it!” he said. “You go missing for hours. Hurl my work in my face! This is ridiculous.”

“I was driving, something I do when I’m *unhappy*.”  
Had she been unhappy? “I’ve got surgery in two hours,” he said.

She charged him again, hitting him with her fists. Her red bangs fell across her face and her blue eyes were blood shot, which gave her a wild look. He fended off most of her blows.

“Helen!”

“I lost the baby today,” she said, crumpling into a nearby armchair. “And you left me for Demi Moore.”

He sighed. “I told you, it wasn’t Demi. I don’t do Demi. I’ve never done Demi!” Not that he wouldn’t. “In any case, I had patients. I couldn’t leave...cancel appointments.” He bent down to pick up a piece of the mask she’d smashed and held it in his hand as though it were a sick bird.

“Is that all you care about?”

“You told me you’d lost the implantation days ago.”

“It wasn’t for certain until today. And you weren’t there!” She looked at him with red-rimmed eyes. “I called you. Left a dozen messages.”

“You know I have consultations all afternoon.”

“God forbid you weren’t there for them. Demi fuck’n Moore? Come on!”

Although Helen was only thirty-seven years old, they’d nevertheless found themselves making countless visits to a fertility specialist. Helen’s idea. She was very sensible about such things. If it’d been left to him, they’d have woken up one day childless and without hope. He didn’t like to think about infertility. What man did? It was a source of great stress and inadequacy, and Previn was damned if he was going to let anything make him feel inadequate. Yet it wasn’t him having his body biochemically prepped and altered for pregnancy. To assure the implantation took hold, he’d assumed the thankless job of sticking her in the stomach and butt several times a day with syringes flowing with steroids and hormones. So if she seemed a little irrational and hormonal, it was because he’d been injecting her with what amounted to emotional PCP.

But Previn wasn’t crazy enough to tell her that.

He watched from the sidelines as she’d started taking repeated pregnancy tests days before they could have possibly been effective, observing her obsessive behavior with a professional detachment that made her want to scream, which she often did. Several mornings she’d cried in bed over the results of the pregnancy tests, which were so clearly premature he couldn’t begin to match her disappointment. She kept telling him she wasn’t pregnant when he knew she still might be. By the time she found out she wasn’t, it seemed like settled law. Of course, she wasn’t pregnant. Hadn’t she told him so days ago? Why wasn’t he listening?

He chose to keep his head down. Focus on work. That was something, at least, he could control. This only made her feel like he didn’t care. Of course, he wanted to have a baby with her. Why couldn’t she just relax about it?

They’d get there.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Previn said. “I haven’t slept. Haven’t changed my clothes. You run out of here. I don’t know where you

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are. You don’t answer your phone. You’re making me a wreck. People depend on me. This is big stuff. I’ve got surgery in—”

“Two hours.” In evident discomfort from striking at him, she squeezed her wrist. “I came back to tell you I’m leaving you, Harry. We’re done.”

He stared at her as he felt the life drain out of him.

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Helen heard Harry at the front door letting himself in and braced herself. She tried to imagine telling him she was pregnant. Him turning on his blue high beams and grinning shamelessly as he opened his strong arms so he could pick her up and swirl her round, laughing...giddy.

“I’ve scheduled the movers,” she said as he appeared at the kitchen door.

They hadn’t spoken in the two days since their fight largely because she’d avoided him the whole day before. What more was there to say? And it wasn’t like he’d actually sought her out. Who knows where he’d been hiding, and it only pissed her off more.

He flushed. “What?”

She thought about the baby...again. She burst into tears and for some misplaced sense of decorum, call it the last vestige of self-dignity, ran from the room. She couldn’t talk to him. There was nothing more to say.

In their ten years together, she’d never so much as raised a hand in anger. Yet having let that violent genie out of the bottle she knew there was no putting her back. If anything had come of the night of their break-up that felt therapeutic and right, it was taking a swing at Harry. It made her feel like she’d finally come out of herself.

She went into the master bedroom and closed the door behind her. She expected Harry to follow her. To pound on the door. To fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness. She threw herself down on the bed and cried as she waited for the man she'd first fallen in love with so many years ago. He wouldn't have disappointed her like this.

10 FRANK STRAUSSER

When she'd first met Harry, he was a resident. She wasn't quite sure what that meant because even then Harry didn't look at all like he had anything to do with the medical world. His Mandarin collar sleeveless wool vest said anything but the-doctor-will-see-you-now.

Harry's boss had bought a painting of hers that he'd seen hanging for sale in a restaurant a block from his hospital. He'd invited her to his home the evening he hung it in his foyer. There must have been nine people there and Harry.

As they were leaving, Harry turned to her and said, "Do you think Wallace knows what a good painting he's bought?"

Looking back on their exchange, she must have had trouble taking the compliment because she replied, "I have a distinct feeling his wife doesn't like me."

He stopped and faced her. His hair was very dark and only slightly longer than his designer stubble. He slipped his hands into the two small pockets in his vest, which seemed to say he was feeling very at ease. "But she praised the painting."

"Do you know anything about women?"

He smiled. "Nothing at all. You'll have to teach me."

"I don't think I have the time."

"We all should give back a little. Make the world a better place." She smiled. "I don't think this has anything to do with the world." "No. But it could." He touched her elbow. It was the slightest ges-

ture, but it sent a shiver through her.

She deflected. "Wallace said you work for him in his surgery."

He also said you're a very talented artist."

"I didn't hear him say that."

She felt herself blush.

"Were you asking Wallace about me?"

He'd caught her. "It's just that I don't think of surgeons as artists.

It's like salt and pepper."

"The scalpel is a tool. When I started to sculpt, I realized that its

true purpose is not to cut, but to shape. I've also held a patient's face in my hand and kneaded it like clay. We're creators, Helen."

He knew her name.

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Harry wasn't at all what she'd expected. She'd never had an interest in doctors. Although she was quite happy to sell a painting to one, she'd never imagined herself going out with one, much less going home with one, as she did that night.

She wanted *that* Harry to open their bedroom door, but now some ten years later, he was a no show. She'd have settled for the newer, shinier version because somewhere underneath it all there'd always be that man she'd fallen in love with. Or would there?

It'd been a while since she'd taken to their room. He evidently wasn't coming. She opened the door. From somewhere deep within the house she could hear his voice. He was on the phone. She waited. When the conversation seemed like it was going to continue, she went back into the room and waited some more. After another forty-five minutes she walked onto the landing again, this time close enough to feel Harry's intensity. The urgency was new...and frightening. He seemed shaken. She tried to make out what he was saying, but couldn't.

Had she done this to him?