

Prologue

*Virginia Beach General Hospital
December 2023*

Yvette Hepler looked at her ex-husband, Tate, lying on the hospital bed, wondering if he would live. Would she care if he lived or not?

Of course she cared. They hadn't been able to talk to each other lately without arguing, but it hadn't always been that way. She gazed at his handsome face with some fine wrinkles, his dark hair graying at the temples, but he was still as handsome as the day they met.

They had met in college at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Yvette had grown up in Charlottesville, so it was natural for her to go to UVA. She had received a scholarship to help pay for her education there.

She first saw Tate when she had walked into Introductory Biology class her first year. She had been the last student to walk into the room, and the only seat left was at a shared table for two by the windows. Tate was already sitting there, next to the windows.

He was the most handsome guy she had ever seen. He took her breath away, and she could only stare at him. Her feet stopped short and refused to move.

"Have a seat, Miss..." the male professor had said.

Yvette glanced at the professor and said, "Yvette Grant. Yes, sir."

She turned around and avoided looking at Tate as she stumbled her way over to sit down next to him.

"Hey," he whispered as she sat down, placing her bookbag on the floor beside her.

He smelled like Polo cologne. She glanced at him and caught her breath. His smile lit up his handsome face even more. She swallowed hard. "Hey," she answered hoarsely and then cleared her throat nervously.

She fumbled with her bookbag, trying to get out her biology book, a used one already purchased ahead of time, a composition book, and her favorite Bic pen with four assorted colors. Meanwhile the professor printed his name on the chalkboard and instructed them to open their books to the first chapter.

She tried to calm her breath and concentrate on what the professor was saying, but her heart continued to pound for most of the class and her hands were sweaty, making writing difficult. The professor instructed them on their first experiment, a simple one where they would record data for the phase changes of water in freezing and then melting of the water. Each table had to perform the experiment with their partner, so she had to share equipment and do the experiment with Tate.

She was a nervous wreck.

The professor set up their beakers and temperature gauge on their table and then went to the next table. Tate turned to face her and placed his hand out towards her in greeting. "I'm Tate Hepler. Pleased to meet you." His smile radiated his face. "You're Yvette?"

She shook his hand and swallowed hard before speaking, pleased that he had remembered her name. "That's right. Yvette Grant. Nice to meet you."

They conducted the experiment and talked softly about the temperature changes and their findings. Yvette often took deep breaths in order to calm herself, but at one point, she accidentally knocked the whole beaker over, test tube, ice and all, which landed on Tate's shorts and leg.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry," she said.

Ice hit the floor, and Tate crouched down to pick them up at the same time that Yvette also leaned over, and they bumped heads. She felt immediate pain in her temple. "I am so sorry," she said, half laughing. She felt mortified, but the whole thing seemed funny.

"It's no problem," he said, rubbing his head briefly, but he was grinning.

The professor came over to see what the commotion was. Luckily, the glass beaker and test tube didn't break. The professor gave them more water to start the experiment over again.

By the end of class, as everyone packed up their things and headed out the door, Yvette turned to Tate. "I am so sorry about knocking the experiment onto your lap. That must have been cold."

He smiled. "It's nothing. Already dry, see?" He pointed to his right leg.

She glanced down at his loose white shorts, which partially covered nice muscular legs. "Do you run?" she asked before catching herself.

"Yes, I do. Cross country."

She nodded and then blinked. "Do you have another class next?" she asked him.

"Not for two hours."

"Can I buy you a coffee to make up for this?" she boldly asked before she changed her mind. She smiled and tried to steady her galloping heart.

He smiled back. "Yes, I would like that." He had great teeth, she noticed. Pearly white and perfectly straight. She wondered if that came naturally or if he'd had braces. She herself had inherited good teeth from her dad, and she'd never had to wear braces. They weren't as perfect as Tate's teeth, though.

"Great," she said.

They walked to a nearby coffee shop to purchase some coffee, which they carried back outside to the large common area on campus, called The Lawn, which was a terraced grassy court partially shaded by tall trees. They leaned their backs up against one of the tall trees and talked, getting to know one another, sipping coffee, and watching other students walk past. It had been a warm morning in August but the shady lawn made it comfortable. They told each other about their lives, what they wanted to do after they graduated, and their hopes for the future. Tate was going to be a doctor, and of course, she was studying to be a veterinarian.

He told her she looked like a supermodel, which made her blush. She had always worn her long chestnut hair one length, and it reached halfway down her back, curling at the ends from pink foam rollers she used at night.

"Thank you. So do you," she said shyly.

He smiled back, and she studied his blue eyes, chiseled super-hero jawline, and watched the wind blow strands of his deep brown hair across his forehead. He wore a long-sleeved denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up over his white shorts and blue sneakers with no socks. He really did look like a model, like he had just stepped out of a catalog.

By the time Yvette had to get to her next class, she had already fallen half in love with him. He walked her to her English class and asked for her phone number; they didn't have cell phones back in those days. You had to call from a landline. She lived on campus by the famous Edgar Allen Poe Room on the West Range, while Tate shared a room close by on the other side of The Lawn.

They met again that afternoon after their classes, studying in her room, then shared their first kiss by an old oak tree before walking down to the College Inn Restaurant for some pizza. They were inseparable after that day. Holding hands walking to shared classes, meeting each other's friends, going to football games and cheering on the UVA Cavaliers. Meeting each other's parents that first year, her parents' house for Thanksgiving, and his parents' beach house in Virginia Beach for Christmas.

They dated all through college and married soon after they both received their doctorate degrees. He proposed to her at Barboursville Vineyard in Charlottesville, and then they were married on the beach by the

big rocks on the north end, with a reception at Tate's parents' house. Honeymoon in Hawaii. They moved to Virginia Beach to be near Tate's parents and bought their own house near the beach. They took walks on the beach and became members of the Princess Anne Country Club, playing golf and tennis. It had been like a fairy tale.

But after chasing their individual careers and later having babies, somehow their marriage got pushed to the side. Their busy jobs, social activities, and the kids demanded most of their time, and they were too exhausted to take care of their relationship. Tate began extra-long hours at the practice where he was a partner with his dad, Hepler Physicians for Women, specializing in obstetrics and gynecologic, even performing surgeries on Saturdays, so Yvette rarely saw him. She herself worked as a veterinarian at Coastal Veterinary Hospital with her friend, Courtney Beck-Carson. When she and Tate did see each other, they were polite but distant. Tate stopped going to the children's events in sports and school and began going to social parties with fellow doctors instead. He started drinking a lot and even went to work once half drunk. After making a medical mistake that night, he was suspended for six weeks, and Yvette thought it would be a wake-up call and he would pay more attention to her and the kids and they could start fresh.

But she was wrong.

She came home from the clinic early one afternoon while the kids were still in school, their youngest in preschool, to find Tate in bed with another woman.

She had been crushed.

She threw everything in the bedroom at the two of them while the woman grabbed her clothes to leave. Yvette screamed and cried while Tate tried to calm her down, saying it didn't mean anything, it was just sex.

Yvette filed for divorce the next day.

She never forgave him and they argued constantly. She found out the woman that he had been sleeping with was a nurse he worked with, which made her even angrier; why, she didn't know. She didn't expect people who took care of their patients to fool around behind their spouse's backs like that.

A tear trickled down her cheek as Yvette blinked and came back to the present. She looked at Tate again, wondering once again if he would live.

He had been in a bad car accident on the highway and had been unconscious ever since. The hospital staff had contacted her. She was surprised that she was still his emergency contact. She had been at work when she got the call from the hospital.

She wondered where his nurse-lover was now. She worked at the same hospital with him for his Saturday surgeries. Yvette prayed she wouldn't see her.

She thought about their early days of marriage, how happy they had been, and she felt compelled to pick up his hand and squeeze it, wondering if she could forgive him for what he did.

Before she had a chance to decide, the monitors started beeping, all the bells and whistles signaling that something was wrong. Nurses and doctors quickly rushed into the room all at once. Yvette let go of his hand and stood up, backing away so they could take care of him.

More tears slid down her cheeks as she realized she might never get a chance to forgive him.

Tate had flatlined.

Yvette wept.

Chapter One

*Coastal Veterinary Hospital
One Month Earlier*

“So, how did it go?”

Yvette was at the veterinary clinic where she worked and co-owned with fellow veterinarian, Courtney Beck-Carson. Courtney was one of her best friends, and she was asking Yvette about her Halloween date with Clayton Walker. Clayton was an Assistant United States Attorney and worked in Norfolk on cases involving drugs and guns. Yvette met him on the Fourth of July when Courtney and her husband Owen had a barbecue at their farm in Pungo.

“It was interesting,” Yvette laughed lightly.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Courtney said.

The two of them were up at the front desk talking, having a cup of coffee before the day began. Courtney drank decaf, but Yvette had to have her caffeine to get started in the mornings. She already had one cup at home after her morning walk on the beach, before walking her son to the school bus stop in their neighborhood, and driving her daughter to preschool. She took a sip of the hot liquid before explaining the night before.

“Tate came over at a quarter till six to take the kids around for trick-or-treating on his parents’ street, which is a few blocks from our house. My house,” she corrected herself. Tate was Yvette’s ex-husband, and the two didn’t get along very well, but he was still their children’s father. So she had to deal with him often. She got the marital home and primary care of the children in their divorce settlement. “I didn’t think about him coming over to take the kids around, but I guess it makes sense. They had just come back to the house for a break when Clayton arrived at about seven.”

“Uh oh,” Courtney said, anticipating what happened next.

“Like I said, it was interesting, to say the least. Tate didn’t like the idea that I had another man around the kids before telling him or asking what he thought about it. This was the first time I had invited Clayton to be around the kids, and honestly, I hadn’t even thought about what Tate would think about it. It’s really none of his business. He’s the one who had an affair. He didn’t care one wit about what I thought about that, did he?” Yvette took another sip of coffee and a deep breath. “Anyway, I was going to introduce Clayton to the kids casually as a friend, and then we would all watch *Hocus Pocus* and eat popcorn, something kid friendly and fun.”

“Did that happen?” Courtney asked.

“Did what happen?” Brooke asked. Brooke Meadows was a receptionist who came walking into the clinic. She was engaged to Dillon McGregor, who was a hired hand on Courtney’s farm. She spent a lot of time at the farm, and she even helped Courtney sell products in her farm shop on Saturdays.

“Yvette invited Clayton to come over last night for a Halloween movie with the kids,” Courtney said.

“That sounds like fun,” Brooke said.

“Tate came over, too,” Yvette added.

“Oh, I see. What happened?” Brooke asked, as she walked around the big desk to her station at one of the computers, placing her purse on the desk.

“It did not go well. Tate fussed at me in front of the kids and Clayton, and nearly punched Clayton, but Clayton said he would just leave. He was very cordial about it, but I don’t know if I’ll ever hear from him again, truthfully.”

“Give him time,” Courtney said. “If he’s interested in you, he has to think about whether he wants the whole package or not; you, the kids, and the ex.”

“That’s true. Well, after he left, Tate wanted to watch a movie with the kids, but I didn’t want to be in the same room with him after the havoc he created with Clayton. So he took the kids over to his parents’ house and they all watched a movie over there. I spent the night by myself with a glass of wine and watched *Practical Magic* instead.”

“Good for you,” Courtney said. “It’s good to have some alone time sometimes.”

“I texted Clayton and apologized. He said it was fine and that he needed to work on a case that evening anyway, that it was probably for the best.”

“What did you do last night, Brooke?” Courtney asked.

Cassie Garrett walked in and made her way around the counter. She was another receptionist at the clinic and was also Brooke’s cousin. “I know what she did. She sent me a picture last night,” Cassie said.

Brooke held out her left hand, showing off a ring. It was silver with an oval-shaped blue sapphire gem.

Yvette and Courtney both gasped, reaching for her finger and a closer look.

“That’s beautiful,” Courtney said.

“So elegant and timeless,” Yvette added.

“It was his grandmother’s wedding ring. He said it matched the color of my eyes,” Brooke said.

“Aww, how sweet,” Courtney said.

“It comes with a matching necklace, too, which he will give me on our wedding day.”

“How wonderful. I’m so happy for you guys,” Yvette said, thinking back to her own wedding day to Tate all those years ago. She was sad that her own happiness hadn’t stood the test of time but hoped that Brooke would have better luck. She hugged Brooke.

Courtney hugged her next. “Congratulations, honey.”

Cassie hugged her after that and then took a closer look at the engagement ring.

Yvette saw a car pulling into the parking lot. “Looks like our first customer of the day is here. I think it’s one of mine, right, Cassie?”

Cassie walked over to her computer station and looked at the schedule. “Yep. It’s Sherrie Frontz with her cat, Pinky.”

“Great. I’ll go get my lab coat on,” Yvette said.

She went into her office upstairs for her lab coat and looked at her phone briefly while finishing her coffee. Nothing from Clayton. There was a text from Tate, though. He wrote, *Don’t ever embarrass me in front of the kids again with any men. You shouldn’t have another man around the kids anyway. You’re lucky I don’t call my lawyer and file a petition.* Yvette fumed inside. The nerve of him. Threatening her with talk about his lawyer didn’t scare her one bit. She had a lawyer, too. And her lawyer, Larson Lopez, a friend of Courtney’s newfound cousin, Sarah, told her to ignore text threats, but to keep them for evidence.

But Yvette knew how it felt hearing about her ex bringing a girlfriend around the children. It hurt, more than it should. No, she felt like she was completely justified to be hurt. She still loved Tate deep in her heart, and so it would always hurt.

She took a deep breath, finished the rest of her coffee, and got ready to greet her first patient.

At lunchtime, Skyler, Cassie’s husband, picked up Cassie to go see her real mother’s grave since it was “All Saints Day.” Dillon came by and took Brooke on a picnic at a nearby park. That left Yvette and Courtney, who both brought their lunches. They were sitting in their shared office upstairs, Yvette eating some hummus and blue tortilla chips, chatting about their morning patients.

She and Courtney had met when Yvette first opened the clinic. After paying off college debts, Tate and his parents helped her get a loan for the building. She had advertised for another vet, hoping for a female vet.

Courtney was the first person she interviewed, and the two hit it off instantly. They both had a passion for animals and similar personalities and interests. When they were able, they hoped to pay off the debt. Tate's lawyer tried to get back some of the loaned money in the divorce settlement, but luckily the judge granted her to keep her money and business as it was.

She had been appalled that Tate would stoop so low as to do that to her. Why did he want to hurt her so much? Hadn't she been a good wife? No, she wasn't going to go there.

Her mind went back to the argument with Tate the night before, and what Clayton had to hear. Tate had said, "How dare you bring a lover around the kids. I would never bring Laney around you or the kids."

Yvette had cringed at everything he said, including calling Clayton a lover, which he wasn't, and the mention of Laney, Tate's lover. "I didn't know you were coming here though, did I?" she'd said. "And don't tell me you haven't had *her* around the kids. They told me about her being with y'all when you took them to Busch Gardens last weekend. What about that, huh?" She had hated the whine that crept into her voice. Their son Brayden had said he didn't like Laney, which made her feel better.

"Of course I would want to spend time with my kids on Halloween," Tate had said.

That's when Clayton spoke up. "Yvette, it would be better if I just go."

Tate walked up close to Clayton. "Yeah, why don't you do that." It was a suggestion, not a question.

"I'm sorry, Clayton," Yvette had said.

She sighed and checked her phone again to see if Clayton had texted back. He hadn't. She didn't want to seem needy, but she was worried about Clayton. The two had been dating, once every couple of weeks, going out to dinner or local festivals. They had only kissed, nothing else. She enjoyed his company and his attention more than anything. She felt like she had ruined everything by having him over at the house.

The front door of the building was locked during lunch, but there was a security camera with a doorbell. The doorbell sounded while Yvette crunched a hummus-topped tortilla chip. She looked at Courtney. "Wonder who that could be? A delivery?"

"Could be. You want me to go down?" Courtney offered.

"No, you sit. You're in a delicate condition," Yvette said.

Courtney had lost a baby previously and was now pregnant again, due in the spring.

Yvette walked down the stairs and was surprised to see Clayton behind the glass door, peering inside. She unlocked the door and let him in.

"Clayton, what are you doing here?"

He put his arms around her gingerly and kissed her on the lips briefly. "I just wanted to say that I'm sorry about last night, about leaving."

She smiled, relieved, and they both dropped their arms. "It's my fault. I should have known that sharing a holiday with my ex would make things tricky."

"Indeed," he said, laughing lightly, his blue eyes twinkling.

"But truthfully, I didn't know he would be there. I would never have invited you over if I thought he was coming."

"No problem. How about I make it up to you? There's a great burger place just up the road, and it even has my name in it."

"Oh yeah? What's it called?"

"Clayton's Counter."

"Oh, I haven't heard of that place. Sure, let's go."

She quickly trotted up the stairs to grab her purse. "Clayton is taking me for a burger," she told Courtney.

"Oh, yummy. Enjoy," Courtney said. She looked comfortable with her feet propped up on a round stool.

"I'll be back soon, I promise," Yvette said.

Clayton drove her to the little restaurant in a strip shopping center off Oceana Boulevard.

Between bites of butter burgers, Yvette said, "I was worried my ex may have scared you off for good."

He grabbed her hand. "Nonsense. I have an ex myself, so I understand completely."

"You've been married? Why have we not talked about that before?"

"Have we not? I don't know. I don't like talking about her really."

"Tate cheated on me," Yvette said, as if that explained everything. Which it should.

"I'm sorry about that. He was a fool," Clayton said.

Yvette blushed. "Thank you. What about your ex? I hope I'm not being too personal."

"Of course not. We just drifted apart. She asked for the divorce, but as far as I know she wasn't seeing anyone else. She is a museum curator and also paints."

"Ah, okay. Any children?"

"No, we didn't get around to that. I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to meet your kids. Brayden and Ella Grace, right?"

"That's right. Me, too."

"Ella Grace looked adorable in her Taylor Swift costume."

Yvette smiled. "Yes, you should hear her singing all the songs. She knows almost all the words."

"I would love to hear that."

"I will talk to Tate about you and let him know that you are part of my life now, and that I should be able to have you around the kids. He has already had his floozy around them. Sorry, yes, I am bitter."

"Do you still love him? Tate, I mean?" Clayton asked.

She hesitated. Should she tell her new boyfriend that she still had feelings for her ex-husband? Would it scare him off, for real this time? She thought it was probably better to be honest, though. "I will always love him deep down, but I certainly don't love what he did to me. I don't think I could ever forgive him for cheating on me."