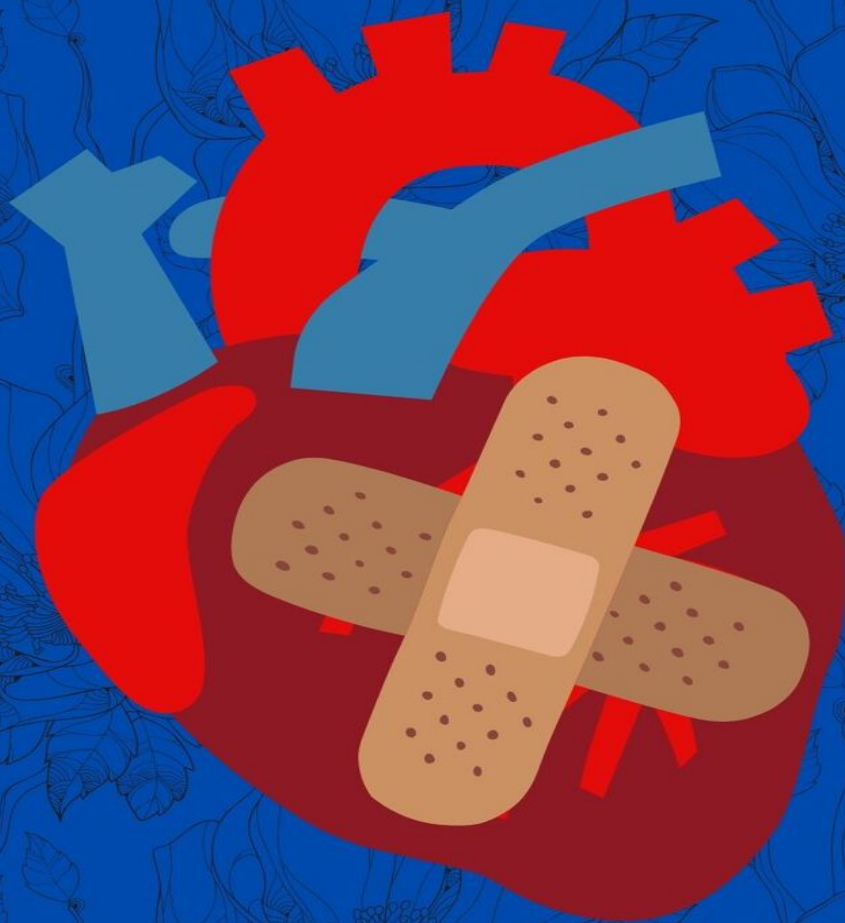


MIDTOWN HOSPITAL SERIES

LOVE. PRN

AN EMERGENCY ROOM ROMANCE

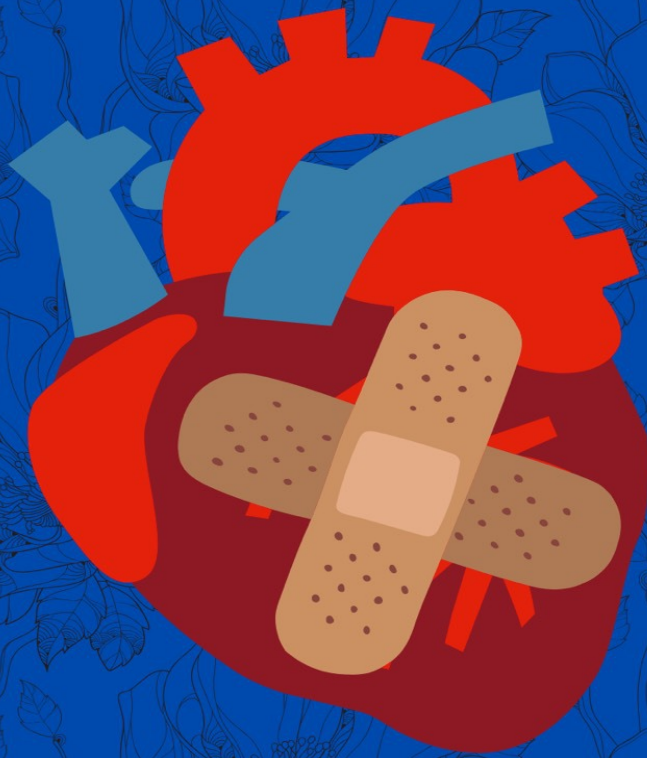


CADENCE RUSH

MIDTOWN HOSPITAL SERIES

LOVE, PRN

AN EMERGENCY ROOM ROMANCE



CADENCE RUSH

LOVE, PRN

MIDTOWN HOSPITAL SERIES

BOOK 1

CADENCE RUSH

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For all the nurses pouring from an empty cup, may you fill your well.

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CONTENT WARNING

Love, PRN is an action-packed romance for mature audiences, giving readers a realistic glimpse into emergency room nursing, including traumatic scenes on the page and flashbacks. Sensitive readers should proceed with caution—your mental health is important, and if trauma nursing and mental health struggles are not what you prefer to read in your romance books, this might not be the book for you.

The expanded list of trigger warnings (that may be spoilers!) are listed on the next page. If you do not wish to read content warnings and potential spoilers, skip the next page!

CONTENT WARNING (SPOILERS!)

Love, PRN is an exciting novel set in the world of emergency nursing and medically distressing situations are depicted on the page such as:

- death, cardiac arrest, heart attacks, strokes, car accidents, alcohol withdrawal, child neglect and abuse, mental health emergencies, loss of pregnancy, foreign body in a patient, depictions of needles, blood, and gore

Characters also experience:

- death of a parent, death of a sibling, grief, survivor's guilt, anxiety and panic attacks, PTSD

This is an open-door romance for mature audiences and (consensual) sexual content is depicted on the page.

JANUARY

“Harder,” he demanded.

The commanding order would have driven me to do unspeakable things, in another room, in a wildly different scenario. But here, drowned in the harsh fluorescence of the trauma bay amidst a cardiac arrest, I was too focused on my role to even consider another meaning. I pushed with all my might, cringing as I heard the ribs crack beneath me, my arms doing the work of the heart that had stopped minutes before. Sweat gathered at my temples as my own heart sped up to meet the demand I was placing on it.

If my chest compressions were satisfactory, Dr. Slater didn't say, but resumed spitting orders at nurses and techs who were already doing the jobs he was assigning. As if an experienced code team needed a doctor with a god complex, running a hand through his dark blond hair as if he was Adonis himself. The rage I felt at his arrogance fueled my aching muscles and I came down onto the man's sternum, again and again, desperate to do anything that would help the team.

My student badge smacked against my chest with every compression, and I knew my ass was dangerously close to Tito, the tech who had just placed the defibrillator pads and was standing behind me, ready to jump in for a round of CPR at the next pulse check. A shorter, slender man, he was one of the most beautiful

queens I'd ever seen when we'd gone out to his show at the White Elephant last Tuesday, and his heels had made him taller than me that night.

Two minutes can seem like two hours during certain activities, and I had done several of them so far today—at the gym, in the bedroom, and now at the hospital performing CPR. I was counting down the seconds until my round of compressions was up, sweat pooling in every crevice.

When Samantha, my preceptor and the RN who was *actually* running the code blue, called for a pulse check, I practically wobbled off the stool as Tito stepped up to take my place. Though the patient's heart beat steady on the monitor, Dr. Slater felt for a pulse on his neck and his groin, then shook his head.

Tito resumed compressions, triceps bulging with wiry strength, and I huddled closer to Samantha as she looked for an IV on the patient's arm, hoping she'd let me do something but terrified I'd screw up.

"They don't get any more dead if you do," she'd assured me during our first code together a week prior. Samantha was the type of person who should be protected at all costs, but like any of the other ER staff who lasted here longer than a few months, she was fully capable of protecting *herself*.

Dr. Slater stood at the head of the bed, arms crossed against his chest, next to the respiratory therapist who squeezed oxygen into the patient's lungs with a bag mask. He addressed his residents in the corner of the room, huddled together like baby birds in a nest. "Is this patient maintaining his own airway?"

They all shook their heads at the unconscious man.

"Then we need to get one. Patel, you're up to intubate him. We don't need to push RSI meds since he's unconscious. Lucky for us, because we don't have any IV access yet."

Samantha cut her eyes at him as she picked up a small medical drill and urged me to her side, next to the man's leg. "I know you've only been here a week, and haven't done an IO yet, but I'll walk you through it. We don't do them that often so I want you to get the experience. This is a perfect opportunity since we haven't been able to get an IV."

I nodded, not trusting my reply to be anything but a squeak, and found the landmark at the top of the tibia with her help. I tried not to

think of what was happening as the drill met bone. Samantha beamed when she flushed the catheter and met no resistance.

"Nice, dude."

I was fumbling with the epinephrine syringe she handed me, trying not to stab myself as I assembled it, and had just connected it as Dr. Slater called out the order.

"1 of epi."

I pushed it with trembling hands—ironic given what the adrenaline in the syringe was meant to do—and said, "Epi's in."

Chandra, Sam's trauma teammate who had volunteered to record and do the charting all morning, said "Heard!" as she clicked away on the computer behind us.

I watched as Slater guided the resident's intubation, showing her how to visualize the vocal cords with the laryngoscope. She dropped the tube with surprising finesse, and after the respiratory therapist listened for breath sounds and gave her a thumbs up, they connected it to the ventilator, taping everything into place so the tube wouldn't shift out of the lungs.

Samantha called for another pulse check, though it seemed like seconds since I'd stepped down—when one *wasn't* doing CPR in a code, the two minutes between pulse checks disappeared like smoke in the wind. Dr. Slater checked the carotid, placing two fingers on the man's neck, and in a flash of bravery, I pressed my fingers against the man's groin, searching for a femoral pulse. Dr. Slater's blazing stare in my direction made me want to hide in the corner with his residents, but I met his gaze and shook my head, letting him know I was unsuccessful.

Sam groaned as the outcome hadn't changed—the patient still had pulseless electrical activity, a bad omen. There was no shock we could give him, no medicine other than the epi we had already tried and would continue to try, because the electrical portion of his heart was working fine, the heart itself just wouldn't pump blood to his body. That was being done by Tito, who wiped the sweat from his brow as he stretched his arms out, ready to resume chest compressions.

"Go on, get up there," ordered Slater, glaring at me. "He needs relief."

I stepped up on the stool once more and began CPR, my arms on fire, cutting him a hard look for being so rude to me. Was he

forgetting there was still a gaggle of ER residents who were also fully capable of doing chest compressions in the room?

"You," said Samantha, pointing at the resident closest to us, "Get behind her. You're next." He nodded, wide-eyed, as she gestured at the woman beside him, whose glasses were nearly bigger than the rest of her face. "And you, after him."

She turned around and began speaking with Chandra to confirm everything that had been done thus far, ignoring Dr. Slater's furious glare at her for directing his residents. I tried not to smile, and decided if I had even a quarter of her backbone, I'd probably make it through my first year in the ER, before I could leave the Minnesota winters and take a travel contract somewhere tropical.

The man whose ribs were now splintered inside of his chest lay on the stretcher with a gray, ashen complexion and vacant eyes. Even as a student, I knew what this outcome would be: there was no way he'd survive this. I had to force my eyes elsewhere to stop the panic and heartbreak from squeezing in and taking over my mind. Samantha called for another pulse check finally, and I stepped down, arms trembling.

All of the residents performed one round of compressions each, getting scathing feedback from Slater, while we continued to push epi with no change in status. I wondered if he kept the code going just so he could criticize them before he finally called it and pronounced the patient.

Chandra, Tito, Samantha, and I started our post-mortem care before his family was called into the room. Once he was cleaned up, I reached for our discarded equipment but Samantha stopped me.

"Leave it. I think it helps the family to see all of what we did for him."

I nodded and washed my hands before leaving the room, pulling my hair out of my eyes. Outside of the trauma bay, chaos abounded: occupied stretchers littered the hallway leading to the EMS bay, all waiting for a room and a nurse to take over care of their patient. The expressions on the faces of the EMTs and medics were a range of impatient to seething as they all laid eyes on the charge nurse, Tara. She was graying but no older than her mid-thirties.

Nursing had that effect on people, I was learning.

She ignored them as she ran the EMS radio and answered the never-ending phone calls to her desk. The secretary beside her sent

out trauma pages to the surgeons, ICU, and operating room staff like they were invites to a party.

"There's a trauma coming to B," Tara said without looking up. "Maybe we can get him out of A before this stroke gets here in twenty. We'll have to move him quickly." My eyes followed the sobbing woman—now a widow, I realized—being led into bay A to see her husband. Samantha and I both looked away as Dr. Slater placed a hand on her shoulder and the patient rep led her behind the curtains. As difficult as it was to watch someone pass in the emergency room, it became infinitely harder once their families arrived and the raw, unrestrained grief of the living replaced the quiet, somber gloom of death.

Samantha pulled me to the next trauma bay and we geared up in full PPE: stab wounds to the chest were bound to be bloody, and I wanted no part of that on my skin or scrubs. By the time my shoe covers, scrub cap, gown, googles, face shield, and gloves were in place, the stretcher rolled into the room like it was powered by gasoline instead of two beefy paramedics.

I was only in my third week of my practicum rotation, the final semester before I graduated nursing school, so I was still learning exactly what my role would be and learning who everyone else in the room was and what their roles were, too. This became infinitely harder once the only thing I could see were shapeless figures underneath the trauma gowns, and glimpses of cheekbones and noses underneath face shields. The only person I was accustomed to seeing in a scrub cap was Chandra, who always kept her hair covered. What if someone thought I was a nurse, or doctor, or tech, or respiratory therapist, or anyone else who actually knew what was going on? I took a deep breath, fogging up the face shield.

The paramedics gave their report to Samantha, and I frantically tried to pay attention, but the patient was screaming and the room was crowded and I found myself backing into the wall nearest the computer where Chandra was poised and ready.

"Registration to trauma B NOW," she said into her phone, her voice echoing on the overhead pager. Since she couldn't start her charting until the patient was registered, Chandra grabbed a paper towel from the dispenser at the sink in the back of the room and started jotting down data as Samantha rattled it off—vital signs,

pulses, locations of wounds, breath sounds, and a GCS (whatever that was).

The patient was still screaming as two more gowned-up people walked in and ordered the X-ray techs who were standing outside the room to take a chest X-ray. The patient was flailing his arms and screaming “I’m going to die!” with such fervor that I’d be surprised if the entire department—all 67 rooms—couldn’t hear him. There was no way he was going to sit still enough for an X-ray, despite Sam’s best attempts to calm him down. She spoke with someone then skittered to the doors, blood now coating her front, and said to Tara outside of the room, “Dilaudid and Ativan.”

A pair of navy blue eyes so stunning they weren’t deprecated by the cheap trauma goggles protecting them focused on me.

“Let’s start the massive transfusion protocol, please.” His voice was so mesmerizing that for a few beats the commotion around us fizzled out and it was just me, and him, eyes locked on each other.

This was it, my absolute worst nightmare as a student: someone assuming I was actually a licensed healthcare provider able to help in an actual emergency. I tried not to think about the fact that in a few short months, if everything went to plan that was, that I’d actually be that person. I’m not sure which thought was more terrifying—that I would soon be legally able to help but unsure of what to do without being explicitly told, or that I now had to explain that I was, in fact, a useless body taking up space.

I stammered, unable to form actual words, and he whipped his head to Chandra. “She’s a student, then?”

Chandra confirmed, and I finally found my ability to speak.

“I’ll grab Samantha,” I said, and bolted to her. Whatever she’d given the patient had stopped the shouting and suddenly the room was much quieter.

“He says we need to do the mass transfusion.” I pointed to the man, now talking to the people that had ordered the X-ray.

“Preparing O neg mass transfusion,” shouted Samantha, and she typed in a code to unlock a cooler in the back of the room. “Grab tubing and saline,” she ordered, pointing to the table on which they lay. “Can you prime it for me?”

I fumbled to open the packages, and once the tubing was set up and Samantha placed it in a rapid infuser, we were replacing packed red blood cells into the patient at a rate that was hopefully faster

than the gushing blood pouring out of his chest wounds, despite the tech holding pressure on them.

"Mass transfusion started, packed red cells infusing first. Knox, are we going to CT or straight to the OR?" asked Samantha, preparing the next bag of what I thought would be blood but was a yellow substance that I'd later learn was platelets.

Those blue eyes looked to us from the conversation he was having at the end of the stretcher, and he motioned to the woman now prodding at the patient's chest, deferring his answer to her. The patient had begun moaning again, softer this time, and the woman confirmed to the man beside Knox, "Call the OR, tell them we are on our way." The man nodded, then Knox turned back to us and said, "Do you need anything else from me?"

Chandra pushed her square-framed glasses higher on her nose and said, "Sign that emergency release form, and the emergency consent for me, doc. I went ahead and ordered the trauma panel for you, it is processing."

"Y'all are the dream team. Anyone know if the family is here? I'll go talk to them if so." The patient rep, an elderly woman who came up to Knox's hip, led him out the back doors as Samantha and the tech, a girl I didn't know, wheeled the patient down the hallway, blood dripping on the tile floors behind them like a gruesome trail marker.

"Quinn, let's go," Samantha urged, and I followed her, marveling at how different that case had been than the one before it.

JANUARY

That evening, after my shift with Sam finally ended, I donned my jacket and boots and trekked across the salted walkways to the student parking area at the very top of the deck. As I brushed snow from the cracked windshield of my Honda, the cold bit at my face and exposed neck like a rattlesnake.

After all the shouting, chaos, body fluids, and general exhaustion of the twelve hour shift, I wanted nothing more than a hot bath, a clean pair of soft pajamas, and a hot meal. Thinking of the care plan assignment that was due in two days, a perceived necessity in the nursing world for some goddamn reason, I decided it could wait until tomorrow, when I could piece something together after my lab. My grades were decent enough, and I honestly didn't care about them anymore because by this point as long as I completed my practicum and didn't completely bail on my exams I'd graduate, and that got me one step closer to taking my boards and actually working, instead of adding on to my debt with each passing day.

I patted the steering wheel in gratitude as the engine cranked and I waited for the heat to rise up to its lukewarm capacity, breath fogging in front of me as I warmed up my frozen fingers. If Hondas had been cruising around the planet when the asteroid had hit Mexico all those millions of years ago, they wouldn't have gone extinct like the dinosaurs and would probably still be zooming around to this day.

If there was one decent thing about working such long hours, it was that rush hour wasn't a problem as it tended to occur both after I arrived at the hospital and before I left at the end of the day, and before the third song on the playlist had finished I was pulling in to the tiny cottage I shared with Liam, my roommate-turned-boyfriend. We'd been dating for about six months now, and had lived together for six months prior to that.

"I'm starving," I said in greeting as I pushed through the side door off the kitchen, hoping the smell of meat and spices would greet me. But the oven wasn't on, no pots were on the range, and I didn't see takeout anywhere. In fact, the living room was eerily quiet too. I sighed, walking down the hallway.

Liam was in his old bedroom, which was now a game room/study area for me, headset in place and fingers flying on the controller.

"Hey," I tried. The word came out with the fury of a woman denied food for far too long. Liam was somewhat oblivious but he wasn't stupid—he paused the game and turned around to face me. His shaggy dark hair was nearly covering his eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"Long day. I'm going to shower."

"What do you want to eat?"

"I don't want to think about that right now, I just want something. Anything."

"You're impossible," he teased, but I was in no mood for it.

"What's impossible is that you can't comprehend that I might need to be taken care of a little after what I've been through today." There was no acid left in the words, no fight to them. I didn't even want to argue with him, I just wanted to stand under the shower until I felt a little less like I'd lived a dozen people's worst days today.

When I emerged half an hour later, clad in a fuzzy robe and slippers with clean, blow-dried hair, Liam had moved to the couch and was watching an anime. He smiled at me like I was a feral animal and he was afraid to come any closer. "I remembered how much you liked Santiago's last time we went, so I ordered from there. They said it would take about an hour for delivery though."

I smacked my palm against my forehead. He was trying, he really was, but he didn't understand that I would probably gnaw on

my own elbow right now just to have sustenance and get in bed. I debated simply going to bed and skipping dinner entirely but knew the headache I'd wake up with would ruin the whole next day.

I responded to Liam not with words, but by going to the kitchen and taking a package of Pop-Tarts to the bedroom. Keeping the lights off, I ate in dark silence, the only sound muffled voices from the television and the only light seeping through the strip of carpet underneath the door. The sirens and cardiac monitors and screams of agony from the patients and families filled my head, an unrelenting chorus of misery, and when I finally fell asleep it was alone and on a tear-stained pillow.

That night, I dreamt Mom and Stephanie were still alive, and when I awoke the next morning, the awful reality of loss hit me like a dump truck once again. I almost wished I *wouldn't* dream of them, so I didn't have to feel the loss so acutely in the mornings when I remembered they were gone.

FEBRUARY

After about a month in the ER, I had learned the names of most of the day shift nurses, as well as the techs and providers. Doctors, either MDs or DOs depending on training, were who people typically thought of as giving orders, but there were midlevel providers who saw patients, too: nurse practitioners and physician assistants who were supervised by the doctors.

Prior to my clinicals, I had assumed the doctors would be in charge, but everything I'd seen thus far had proven a strange point: yes, the providers were the ones to give orders for the patients, and ultimately determine what needed to be done, but it was up to the nurses to monitor the patients, and report findings to the providers that they thought were concerning in order to *get* orders. The staff nurses oversaw the treatment and gave the medicines, coordinating with other departments for testing and treatment—phlebotomy, radiology, respiratory, surgery, physical therapy, and the cardiac cath lab. Which left the techs to actually perform most of the tasks people traditionally associated with nurses, save for giving medications: keeping the patients fed, bathed, monitored, and obtaining their specimens to send to the lab. A good tech could even tell you when something seemed off with a patient and clue you in to checking on them and reporting to the doc.

“Rule number one,” Samantha had told me, “don’t piss off your techs. If you can do it yourself, don’t ask them to. And remember for

every tech there are at least three nurses on the cube asking them to do something too. And rule number two: we don't birth babies down here. The OB ED is on the second floor, and it's nice to call ahead if possible."

I was also learning the department's physical layout—a giant rectangle comprised of smaller cubes surrounding the seven larger trauma bays, the charge nurse desk, and the Doc Box, the glass room in the center of the department that housed the providers and their scribes, the hired assistants who recorded data and completed the patient charts at the doctors' direction. The five cubes were sections of patient rooms with a nurse's station in the center, a combination of private rooms and curtained-off areas. Ambulances entered from the rear of the department through a hallway close to the trauma bays, while walk-in patients were escorted through the other side of the department after seeing the triage nurse. A fast track area that essentially served as an attached urgent care had also been added on near the waiting room, for low acuity patients, though I hadn't cross-trained over there yet.

Nurses worked in administration, too, as charge nurses, nurse educators, and as clinical coordinators, or CCs. Their job was to keep the flow moving, whether that meant helping address barriers to discharge, or coordinating to get patients admitted to the hospital floors and out of the ER.

The director of the emergency department was even a nurse. Her name was Jordan and she scared the shit out of me. I'd met her at Samantha's insistence when she was rounding through the department one morning, an imposing woman with a bleach blonde pixie haircut and a slew of stud earrings on either ear who looked like she would definitely save your life but not tolerate an ounce of bullshit while doing so.

When I'd asked Samantha why she wasn't a charge nurse or educator or CC, since she'd been a nurse for almost eight years, she'd told me she'd rather be dragged over hot coals naked. I hadn't thought to ask why.

Sam popped a mint into her mouth and asked, "So since we aren't on trauma today, what do you think we need to cover? What do you feel least comfortable with?"

Since Sam was so experienced, she worked trauma often, which was what most ER nurses wanted to do: the most high-stakes

patients, with true emergencies that require skill and experience to stabilize. We were on one of the cubes today, far from the commotion of the major gunshot wounds, accidents, stabbings, severe strokes, and unresponsive patients in the trauma bays, but I didn't feel any more comfortable with lesser emergencies than I did with a code.

"Everything," I said without thinking. I expected her to laugh, but she just tilted her head, assessing me as if *she* had failed *me*.

"It's not that I don't think you've taught me anything or anything like that," I amended. "I'm just having a hard time getting my steps organized and really putting together what I've learned with what I'm actually doing now."

"Yeah, nursing school really doesn't teach you shit, except how to pass your boards, which also don't mean shit. You only start learning once you're working."

"Comforting." My eyes followed Knox—who I now knew as Dr. Henry Knox—as he stepped through the staff entrance door, shaking snowflakes from his auburn hair. I glanced a second too long, because Samantha noticed and punched me in the arm.

"Oh my god, pull it together. Yes, he's gorgeous. And kind. And smart. But he's also engaged."

I buried my tomato-red face in my hands, shaking my head. Luckily, Knox had walked in the other direction far, far away from us. I thought the conversation had ended, but Nadine, the cube's secretary, lit up like Christmas. "No, he isn't, baby."

I froze.

Nadine had worked here longer than anyone else and consequently knew everything about everyone. Her strong perfume followed her as she gossiped her way through the department every shift she worked. She waited for the other nurses and the tech in our cube to turn around before she elaborated. "You didn't hear?"

Diwa turned around from her computer, eyes wide. The Filipino nurse had worked at Midtown for more years than I'd been alive, though her flawless skin belied her age. "Spill it, Na-Na. We don't have all day, honey. We're busy."

Nadine looked around to make sure he wasn't rounding the corner, then grinned. "They broke it off. I heard she was already dating someone else, a lawyer in St. Paul. It's a shame that three-carat ring isn't shining out in the world anymore." She glanced at

the rings adorning her own fingers, then examined her purple nails, ignoring the ringing unit phone.

"How do you know?" Diwa asked, rising from her chair to see what the woman hovering in the doorway to her patient's room wanted.

The overhead pager rumbled in Tara's annoyed voice: "Nadine, call on 3." The secretary sauntered back over to her desk as she explained that Henry's housekeeper's cousin worked in dietary and told her at church last Sunday.

I felt like I had been doused with a bucket of cold water. Henry Knox was *single*? How was that possible? Men like him barely even existed, let alone were available on the dating market. I snapped my ponytail holder against my wrist, a tic to keep me from thinking ridiculous thoughts.

It's not like he would be into me anyways—a twenty-three year old with as much anxiety as depression, a mountain of student debt, and unresolved grief and family trauma to boot. It was as much as I could do to even form a coherent sentence around him, so the thought of actually *dating* him, or even being in close physical proximity, was laughable. Not to mention the fact that I was currently in a problematic, but still active, relationship.

Samantha leaned in and whispered, "I get it though. I'd fuck him if I could. Out of anyone here, it'd be him." She paused, considering. "Although, I might hate-fuck Slater, too. He is beautiful, the bastard." She sighed. "My therapist is going to love that."

I laughed, quickly interrupted by our pager phone. The text lit up: *LEVEL 2 TRAUMA, CHAINSAW TO ARM, RM 50, 12 MINUTES.*

Samantha rose, long blond ponytail swishing. "Come on, we better get our other rooms settled quickly before it gets here. Ross just put in meds for 51, let's draw them up before he gets even more bitchy."

I nodded and followed, trying to remember what all I needed to gather to prepare my trauma room. Though we were not taking the most serious trauma cases or codes in the bays today, we still saw lesser traumas and strokes and heart attacks in the cubes, which had much smaller rooms with much less staff to help.

I had just started pushing the migraine cocktail drugs for our patient in 51 when the pager rang overhead in Nadine's cheery soprano. "*Level two trauma, room 50.*"

My gut dropped. How did they expect me to take care of *four* rooms at a time when there was only *one* of me? I thanked the heavens that my other two patients were waiting to be admitted to a hospital room upstairs, so there was nothing to be done for them for the time being. But what if they were ER patients needing an IV, meds, labs drawn, and urine samples? How would I ever do this?

Samantha saw the panic of my face and answered my unspoken questions. "For right now, you have me. You keep giving those and I'll go check the trauma in for us." Not *me*, I noted, but *us*. I smiled. I really had hit the jackpot with preceptors.

"Don't push the Toradol too fast, it burns. See you in a few." She squeezed my arm before she left.

I smiled at the patient, hoping to reassure her, but her arm was covering her eyes. The lights—of course—how had I not thought to turn the lights off? It was the first thing I did at home when I had a migraine. After I gave the meds, I tossed my syringes in the sharps bin and removed my gloves.

"I'll come back and check on you shortly," I promised the patient, turning off the lights.

Nadine called to me as I emerged from the room. "Your patient in 54 wants you."

I had to check in that ambulance. But technically, Sam was in there, so I hurried to room 54.

"What can we help you with?"

"He's really hungry," said the patient's spouse. "He's been here for hours and hasn't eaten. Can we get a meal?"

Did she really ask for a meal tray for a patient here for abdominal pain? I don't know about this guy, but if my stomach hurt enough to come to the emergency room, I don't think I'd be concerned about eating. Though I was very new to the ER, even I knew the answer to give.

"We can't allow you to eat until your tests come back, in case you have to go to the OR, or have a procedure."

"You're saying I need surgery?"

"I'm not saying that. But *if* your tests indicate that, you need to have an empty stomach. So nothing for now, please."

The patient grumbled something unintelligible and his wife stared at me, lips in a thin line.

It was easy to ignore their disappointment, because it was ridiculous and I had other more important things to do. "Excuse me, but please let us know if you need something else."

The patient snorted, but I shut the door on them and headed to my new patient's room. I didn't have time to argue with them, or dwell on the absurdity of their request. As I approached the door, one thought repeated itself: *not Slater not Slater please PLEASE not Slater*. I snapped my hair tie against my wrist again as I sanitized my hands and donned gloves before seeing our new patient.

The man was calmly lying in the stretcher in a gown. Samantha was chatting with him while applying a tourniquet to his right arm. His left was wrapped in gauze that didn't seem to be soaked completely through, which I thought was promising.

"Is it okay if Quinn places your IV, Mr. McIntyre?"

The patient smiled politely at me, crow's feet deepening, and held up his arm. He looked much too old to be using a chainsaw, but exactly like the kind of person who would refuse to stop doing so.

I introduced myself as I grabbed the stool nearest the wall, using it to steady myself as I prepped his skin with the CHG swab and primed my pigtail with a flush. His veins practically jumped through his skin.

Right as I pierced his skin and advanced the catheter, the door opened. I struggled to keep the catheter in place while retracting the needle and flushing it, removing the tourniquet beforehand so the vein didn't blow. I had accomplished everything except applying a dressing overtop when I realized the entire room was silent. I taped down my line and then looked around, bewildered at why nothing else was going on.

Dr. Slater was admittedly handsome in his black scrubs and white coat, chiseled arms and shoulders distracting me from his stern expression. Why was he staring at me?

I followed his eyes to the stool. Was he waiting for me? Hoping my face didn't show my embarrassment, I rose and kicked it his way, joining Samantha at the computer on the wall to watch her chart.

Slater took a seat and introduced himself, and began unwrapping the gauze. Samantha stopped her charting and produced a big absorbent pad that I couldn't remember the name of as well as extra gauze and tape. Learning the slang for all of our supplies and equipment was just as daunting as learning the medications and

diagnoses themselves, and it was super irritating that there wasn't a book to tell you those things.

As soon as Slater unrolled the bandage, blood began pooling in the laceration, spilling over the patient's arm and onto the pad Samantha had placed underneath it.

"Are you on blood thinners, sir? Aspirin?" Dr. Slater asked.

The patient shook his head. Slater turned to face me, knowing full well I wasn't allowed to either take or input orders as a student.

"He'll need a CTA and labs, please," he said with a gleam in his eyes, a deep teal that perfectly offset his wavy dark blond hair.

"And were you going to enter those for me and my *student*?" Sam said from behind me.

Slater smiled, his teeth matching the coat perfectly. "I'd be delighted to."

Satisfied, he turned to leave, assuring Mr. McIntyre that we'd find out the extent of the injury soon. His scribe scurried behind him like a loyal pet when he walked out of the room.

Samantha handed her phone to me. "Call phlebotomy. We need to get those labs going because we have to check his kidney function to see if he can handle the contrast dye before he goes to the scanner."

Our patient had been rather silent during the exchange, but Samantha resumed their conversation as I finished charting, and by the time we left the room and the phlebotomist arrived, he had a smile on his face once more.

"How do you do that?" I asked her when we left the room.

"What do you mean?"

"Talk to doctors like that. Make the patients feel better about everything. Not worry that we probably have more meds due on the admits. I don't know... all of it." I blew out a big breath. How was I ever going to do this?

Sam pressed her lips together. "I'm going to be honest with you. This is the emergency room. There's a reason nurses used to be required to work a few years on the floor before they could come down here. Times are different and I think overall it's for the better, but honey, it's never going to feel like you have everything finished. Your patients are always going to need something, whether it's an EKG or a sepsis bundle or a damn turkey sandwich and a warm

blanket. You have to learn how to prioritize—and I think in time you will—otherwise you'll just be drowning every shift."

I nodded, and made my way to the sink to wash up again. She was right, but why had I ever thought I was cut out for this in the first place?

Samantha put an arm on my shoulder. "You can do this, I know you can."

"Thanks," I whispered, blinking back a tear.

"Now, pull yourself together. What do we want to do now?"

"Check on the migraine girl and then see if there are any orders due for the admits. And check for the creatinine to come back so we can get 50 to CT."

Sam clapped me on my shoulder. "You're gonna be great, kid."

I gave her a skeptical look, then smiled, tears long forgotten.

FEBRUARY

That night, Liam was in the spare room gaming again, but the oven was preheated. When I opened the door, I heard his game pause and he met me in the kitchen, cautiously grinning.

“Hi.”

I closed the gap between us, reaching for him. He backed away slightly, and I paused to sniff at my scrubs.

“It’s not that. It’s just, well, it kind of grosses me out all the stuff that is probably on your clothes.”

I sighed because I knew he had a valid point, but I felt like a leper as I backed away and stripped down, tossing the scrubs into a basket in the attached laundry room.

Liam eyed me, and reached an arm out. “This, on the other hand, I can happily hold on to.”

But undressing had confirmed that I did, in fact, not smell fantastic, so I made my way to the bathroom.

“Dinner’s ready in twenty,” he called.

The shower revived me in every sense, and I rejoined Liam in the kitchen, wrapping my arms around his chest from behind. He kissed each of my hands but gently removed them. “I’m almost finished, babe. Here, I poured you some wine. Go relax for a few.”

I plopped onto the couch, spilling a few drops of the wine on my tattered black sweats, and reached for my book, a steamy historical fiction sitting atop the Adult Health Nursing book I should be

reading instead. I had immersed myself in the Scottish highlands, clan wars, and arranged marriages while I sipped half my glass, and was so engrossed in the plot that when I looked up and saw Liam standing in front of me with a plate of food, I nearly spilled the rest of my drink.

"Thanks, baby," I said, taking the plate from him. The pizza was slightly overcooked but looked incredible, and I *needed* the salad greens. We found a true crime documentary to watch and settled in.

After dinner, I peeled myself up off the couch to clean up while Liam scrolled on his phone. Once I finished, I made my way back into the living room, where I leaned down to kiss him goodnight before I went to bed. "You could join?"

He nodded and took my hands as I pulled him to his feet. He was a good six inches taller than me, skinny for his towering frame. I wrapped my arms around his waist, pulling him to our bedroom.

Liam kissed me as he removed my pants and t-shirt, hands exploring my skin in a way that made me shiver. I closed my eyes, sinking into the feeling. He flipped the lights off, and I wondered why he never wanted to do the deed with the lamp on, at least. I wanted to marvel at him, see his face while he called out and later came, but I was never able to, unless we fucked during the daytime, which was hard with our work and school schedules.

He slid off his boxers, and I kissed his smooth chest all the way down to where I wanted him most. Liam shuddered when my tongue slid down him.

"Dammit, Quinn. It feels so *fucking* good."

He was getting harder by the second, and once he couldn't take it anymore he pulled me back up to face him. He kissed me again, fingers exploring to see if I was ready, too. I never had a problem with the telltale sign of my arousal, so my traitorous body that wanted to make love and be loved in return was always telling him he had done enough to ready me when, in reality, his preparations were usually lackluster.

He slid into me with ease, cursing and murmuring my name. I moaned at the sound of it, that *I* could do that to him. The sex was decent if a little clumsy, and over long before I wanted it to be. Liam collapsed in bed beside me once he had finished.

"That was awesome," he said, running a hand through his hair that perpetually looked like it needed to be cut. I kissed his bicep in

response, then got up to pee.

We had been sleeping together for the last six months and the truth was getting harder to overlook: I don't think he even realized I never came, unless he went down on me, which he would only do after two whiskeys and usually on the weekends. The alternative was that he didn't care, and I wasn't ready to face that as an option, either.

But it was getting harder to ignore what was probably a situationship that was complicated by the fact that we were already roommates when I'd leaned over and kissed him all those months ago. Was our relationship strained by the stress of nursing school and me being broke and exhausted, or was it close proximity that was keeping us together in the first place?

I crawled back into bed right as he got up, kissing me goodnight before returning to his game.

After he left, I slid open the nightstand and removed my vibe, thinking of a pair of blue eyes wearing a kilt, like the character in my book I'd been reading. I bit my pillow to keep from screaming when I climaxed.

FEBRUARY

“You know that today is the most likely day for something like this to happen, don’t you?” said Tito to the rest of us as he looked at the status board. “Valentine’s Day, as a whole, is the most likely day for people to experiment with freaky things on themselves and their partners. They usually try to remove it at home all night after it happens, then give up, and come in today.”

Sam stifled a laugh, and I felt like I was completely missing the joke, until I logged on and saw our patient status board.

EMS, FOREIGN BODY IN RECTUM, ETA 15.

My eyes grew wide. “No way.”

“You best believe it, honey.” Tito ran a nail file over his nails while our cube had a brief moment of respite. “If people would just be honest with themselves about who they are and not use vegetables and bottles and dildos without a flared end and Lord knows what else, they wouldn’t get into these kinds of situations.”

I nodded like I understood, but I was on the edge of laughing maniacally. The flush of secondhand embarrassment was already creeping up my neck, for someone I hadn’t even met yet.

Looking to Sam for wisdom, she just shrugged. “If you want to put something up your ass, make sure it’s meant to do that, or at least has a flared base. The rectum is a vacuum, don’t ever forget it.

You might end up on the table getting an ex-lap and maybe even a colon resection if you don't."

This time when I nodded, I understood every word. I sucked in a breath through my teeth, thinking about how horrible that entire situation must be.

"There's even a cute little rhyme," Tito said with a flourish. *"If it doesn't have a flare, it doesn't go up there."*

I snickered, following Sam to grab meds for another room before the ambulance arrived. This patient was a toddler, arguably the most difficult population to give meds to, and she had screamed at us the last time we entered the room and taken her throat and nose swabs. Though I felt like I had essentially waterboarded the child with ibuprofen, Sam assured me I'd done a good job, and we stepped back into the hall.

A stretcher came around the corner to our open room, the patient lying on his side covered in sheets, and Sam and I looked at one another, schooling our features into a mask of professionalism. A quirk of a smile hinted at her lips as we foamed up with hand sanitizer, but when we stepped in the room, it had vanished.

"Whatcha got, Barry?" she asked the paramedic, a tall man with a thick mustache.

"This is Mr. Lancaster. He has a foreign body in his rectum since last night, and was unsuccessful in removing it at home. I believe, ah, he said it was a shampoo bottle."

Sam nodded, signed the laptop, and we faced the patient. "Sir, do you think you can scoot yourself over to our stretcher or do you need our help?"

He was cowered down in the sheets, face barely visible. I couldn't say I wouldn't be doing the same thing in his scenario. When maneuvered himself over to our stretcher, I noticed a gold wedding band on his left finger. He appeared to be in his fifties.

The man moaned in agony as he shifted his hips and settled into the stretcher. I gave him a pillow to put between his legs, and he thanked me.

"So it's a shampoo bottle?" asked Sam as we helped him undress into a gown.

He nodded.

"Anything else?"

"No ma'am." His voice was barely audible.

"How long has it been in there?"

"Since last night."

"Got it. Any allergies or medical history?"

"No allergies. I take blood pressure medicine but that's it."

"Are you in pain?"

"It's not exactly painful."

"Okay, then. We'll get the doctor in to see you." Sam handed him the call light. "Let us know if you need anything before we come back."

"Excuse me," he said as we were halfway out the door. "I have a request, please. Can you not tell anyone I'm here? I don't want anyone to know."

Sam assured him we wouldn't, and we closed the door. She waited until we were back at the nurses' station to say, "He definitely did this while his wife was out of town and doesn't want her to know."

I gasped. "You think?"

Tito piped up. "Most definitely. Straight men are often more gay than they want to believe."

I took a sip from my water bottle, hating that I was succumbing to the cube's gossip. But it seemed harmless enough, and let's be honest, if there was an ER bingo card, a foreign body in the rectum would definitely have been on it.

The call light went off for the station, and I answered it, taking a pillow and blanket in for another patient. Plopping back into my chair beside Sam, I checked the status board. As soon as I saw the SS assigned to our new patient as a provider on the computer, I groaned, thinking of the first time I'd met him in the trauma bay and how he'd given me hell for my chest compressions.

"How ironic that the physician on the case has a foreign body up his rectum, too," I commented.

Tito howled, and Sam buried her face in her hands, shoulders shaking with her laughter. Fritz, the uptight secretary on our cube, had a horrified look on her face as she grabbed a stack of paper from the printer. I doubled over when I saw her expression, but the grin that had spread across my face disappeared when Dr. Slater and his scribe turned the corner to see the three of us cracking up.

Fritz made a point to distance herself from us, pushing her large glasses up higher on her nose as she rifled through paperwork, and

Tito had stealthily slid into the med room, away from the desk.

Slater crossed his arms, eyeing us. "Do I need to reassign another nurse to this patient?"

Oh, hell, no. What was he getting at? Going on some power trip because we were, daresay, *laughing* at work? Rage boiled inside me.

"You know she's one of the best nurses here, so I don't think it'd be in anyone's best interest for that to happen," I said before I could stop myself. At the edge of my vision, I saw Sam's eyes grow wide. Apparently, people didn't talk to Slater like this.

He turned to face me, but I wasn't going to back down from the intimidating posture and stern glare. A small cut slashed across his cheek, stitched together in a neat line. It gave his handsome face a ruggedness that was unexpected, and annoyingly distracting.

What the hell had happened to him? More importantly, why was I now curious about it?

When he realized he'd caught me off guard, and gaping at him to boot, the corner of his mouth tilted in what would've been the start of a smile on anyone else's face. On his, it was definitely a smirk.

"All I want is a professional staff caring for the patient, so if we can all behave like adults, then let's get back to work. Samantha, would you come assist me with an exam? I don't believe the patient would want an audience beyond us."

Slater turned to leave, and knocked on the patient's door before entering. Sam stood up and walked in, giving me a sympathetic look and a shrug, and I couldn't help but feel like I had completely, royally fucked up. Even though I was curious about the case, it wasn't like I was eager to see a stranger's rectum. But if Slater could request that I not do things or observe, was this going to affect my practicum?

Maybe he had heard what I said about him. I shoved the wave of panic back down before it could swallow me whole.

When they emerged from the room, Sam grabbed my arm and pulled me into the nearest linen closet. "I don't know whether to applaud you or chew your ass."

I liked knowing she had my back, but to be up against her was another thing.

"I'm sorry, Sam. He just pisses me off so much that I said that without thinking."

She let out a big exhale, then tucked a strand of hair that had fallen from her long blonde ponytail behind her ear. "Believe me, I understand. But you can't let it get under your skin. Everything is going to test your patience here—the patients, the doctors, the staff—so you've got to keep your cool. Speak up if you need to advocate for your patient, of course, but trivial shit like that, you just have to let it go."

I stared at my shoes. She was right, of course. I knew that much. But a new surge of emotion bubbled up—I had missed having someone around to correct me when I fucked up. Mom had been gone for three years, and oftentimes, I still woke up forgetting she wasn't around anymore.

"You're right, and I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me. Although you are my student, so I suppose it does reflect on me, too." She waved a hand, as if that was unimportant. "But as your preceptor, I feel like I should tell you that that attitude might not fly with everyone around here. And we all know how...particular Soren can be. He's not the one that people usually joke around with or challenge like that. But maybe that should change. Let's just hope he didn't hear your earlier remark." She clapped a hand on my shoulder. "ER docs don't pull rank often—they have to work too closely with us to be *too* mean. I know Soren can be an asshole, but it'll probably be fine. You've got a few more months of rotation, plenty of time to smooth things over."

Sam grinned at me as a dimple formed in her cheek, and I produced a wobbly smile in return. I was still caught up on missing Mom, too distracted to take her words to heart.

She nudged me, and headed out the door. "Okay, let's go. I'm sure we've got orders now."

Slater was heading back to the Doc Box, and I hustled over to him before he sat down at his computer. I supposed I should apologize to him before it affected the rest of my rotation, though it made me even angrier to do so.

"Can I speak with you?"

He raised an eyebrow and looked at his watch. "Quickly."

I followed him down the narrow hallway between two cubes, and we stood facing each other. I made it a point to look him straight in the eyes, actively avoiding staring at the cut on his cheek.

"I'm sorry if I was out of line earlier." I tried my best to make the words sound genuine, and I was pretty confident I had succeeded, until Dr. Slater replied.

"Are you?" he asked, crossing his arms and leaning back against the wall. "How about this? Tell me what was so funny, and I'll drop this whole thing."

Oh, shit. Had he heard me say he had a metaphorical stick up his ass? I couldn't help the blush that was creeping up my neck, but I had full control of my features, which were relaxed, and neutral.

"I don't recall, actually. It's a shame, because we could use a few more laughs around here."

He smiled at me, all white teeth like an ad for a dentist. Somehow, it didn't make me feel better, with that intensity prowling beneath the surface.

"You're right about that. If you'll excuse me, I have some orders to enter."

He headed back for the Doc Box and I was left in the hallway alone, dumbfounded. I had no idea if he'd accepted my apology.

Sam gave me an expectant look when I made it back to the nurses' station. "All good?"

I shrugged. "Maybe? So what's next?"

Her face fell. "Lab can't find our specimens, so we have to swab that little girl again."

"Are you fucking serious?" I smacked my forehead with my palm, dreading going back into that toddler's room. It had been a three-person job to get the throat and nose swabs the first time to test for the flu and strep throat.

"Unfortunately, yes. I'll grab Tito, and then we'll head in there. You can do them this time since you watched us the first time."

"Super," I said, and Sam snorted at the sarcasm in my voice.

It's nice to know that if nursing doesn't work out, I could possibly go and wrangle animals at the local zoo, because that's what it feels like getting a toddler to do anything in a medical setting. Sam informed me that that's what it's like to get a toddler to do anything at all, and I suddenly had a swell of compassion for this child's parents, and all the others out there.

After a whole lot of crying and screaming (both of which I was doing internally), we packaged up the second set of swabs, apologizing to the annoyed parents. Sam asked Tito to walk them

down himself because there was no way in hell we were going to go through that again. She urged me to go with him, to learn where the lab was in case I needed to go myself, and also because we'd go by the blood bank too and it would be good for me to get my bearings.

I hustled behind Tito, who walked way too fast for my liking. "Are you performing any time soon?" I asked him, thinking of the show he'd put on at a revue last month.

"I'm always performing, darling." He cut his eyes at me, sly expression on his face.

I laughed. "You're a natural."

"Of course I am."

I'd asked him for makeup lessons the first night I'd seen him on stage, and he'd told me he would teach me everything he knew for \$100. I'd laughed but knew he'd been deadass serious—if I gave him the bill, he'd work his magic, get me looking like a bombshell. But as a student, the only thing I had more of than regret was debt, so instead of taking him up on the offer I'd pulled two shooters out of my purse, giving one to him and pouring the other into the Diet Coke I'd gotten from the bar.

We turned a corner in the back of the ER, taking a set of stairs to the basement I didn't know existed. This hospital was like a labyrinth, but instead of housing the Minotaur, it was designed to confuse new staff members as well as the visitors of its inhabitants.

In a spark of camaraderie, I decided to tease him. "So thanks for disappearing when Slater showed up earlier."

He twisted to face me, still power walking down the long corridor of the basement. "I'm not trifling with that man, honey. He's in too much of a position to make my life hell. It's something you'd be wise to realize sooner rather than later if you're planning on sticking around."

Before I could answer him, we turned a corner, and a glass window with a slew of people behind it greeted us. A counter and a small slot to exchange things back and forth, much like that at a bank or jail, lay just underneath the glass.

Tito rang the bell without hesitation to disturb the bustling crowd behind the glass. He must have noticed my surprise at his gusto, because he remarked, "We're all busy. This is the emergency department, it's not like we can dick around all day and be polite."

A petite woman that barely cleared the counter asked in a brusque voice, "What do you need?"

"Hand delivering these samples because the first time we sent them they disappeared," said Tito with equal bluntness. He handed her his badge and signed the log before leaving, not even acknowledging how awkward that interaction was as we sped back down the hallway.

"Oh, you don't know your way, do you?"

I shook my head.

"Blood bank is just down this hallway." Tito pointed down the hall past the lab. "Why they chose to put it as fucking far away from the trauma bays as possible is above my pay grade but sure is a pain in the ass during a mass transfusion," he said as an afterthought as we turned a corner. "Morgue is to your right." The placard next to the locked door said *Holding Room*. Why didn't it just say morgue? Hospitals were so confusing.

Climbing the stairs back to the ER a few turns later, after passing the enormous laundry and engineering rooms, I had somewhat of a better layout in my head of the basement, though I hoped I wouldn't have to rush to the blood bank during a trauma anytime soon.

When we returned to the floor, Sam was mixing meds in the supply room. "Hey, there you are. We've got a new patient, and it's about time you meet him. You're going to be seeing a lot of him if you end up working here."

Tito crossed his arms. "Who is it? You said he, right? Good, because I'm not putting up with Zelda today."

Sam shook her head. "It's Jerry. And he's sober."

He whooshed out a breath. "I'll take it."

I looked between the two of them, puzzled.

"Jerry is a frequent flier," she supplied. "Comes to the ER several times a month. Mostly for things like a stomachache, a.k.a. he's hungry and needs a sandwich, or a lot of the time it's cold and he just wants to sleep here for a few hours so he says his bad back is acting up on him. He does have high blood pressure, though, and sometimes we do end up treating that. He's usually okay as long as he isn't drunk. Then he's pretty difficult. Always go in with security if you're ever concerned about being alone with a patient."

"Are there a lot of frequent fliers?"

"You've met some of them. Do you remember that guy who came in with PD a few weeks ago who was threatening his girlfriend and she stabbed him in the arm?" She pointed to her forearm, as if to jog my memory. It worked—I remembered the small puncture wound, and the fact that he'd been in cuffs, under arrest despite being injured. "That's Dwayne. He's in here a lot. And Tito was talking about Zelda. She usually comes in during night shift and gets held on a 1013 order for psych treatment. She's got fire-engine-red hair most of the time, and really long nails. She's often...having a tough time when she's here. Don't let her grab you with those claws of hers."

I shuddered.

A man in a tattered canvas jacket walked up to the station, smiling broadly, and missing several teeth.

"Jerry, back in your room. You know you can't walk around the hallways for patient privacy."

He nodded. "Yes ma'am, Miss Samantha, but I thought I should introduce myself to the new girl. And make sure she knows I only like ginger ale when I'm here. Good on my bad stomach."

I grinned back at him. "Hi Jerry, I'm Quinn."

He shook my hand, his rough palm scraping against mine.

"Now back in your room. We'll bring you a tray when we can."

"Yes ma'am," he said, and ambled away towards the semi-private room he had been assigned, behind a row of curtains.

Down the hall, the patient with the foreign body was awaiting his CT results. Sam was betting this would be a general surgery consult, since Soren hadn't been able to visually see anything when they had examined the patient earlier.

Our phone rang, and Sam handed it to me. I froze, and she said, "Answer it. You have to get used to it."

"ER, this is Quinn," I said, in a version of the greeting I'd heard Sam say dozens of times.

"Is this the nurse for Mr. Lancaster in room 12?" I'd recognize that smooth, confident voice anywhere. I decided to stay on the line rather than handing the phone over.

"I'm the student with Samantha. What can I do for you?"

"Not take orders, apparently."

Bastard! I kept my mouth shut, unsure of what I'd even say that wasn't an expletive.

“But I’ll settle for a message. His CT came back, and that bottle is blocking his urethra. His bladder is full. You may notice a slightly distended abdomen if you did an examination. I just put the order in, but I am calling because I want a Foley in him now. The surgicalist will be by soon.”

He hung up before I could say anything else. Was that a barb at my initial assessment or, perhaps less likely, was he trying to teach me something useful? And if he had put in the orders, why was he calling us?

Still baffled, I relayed the info to Sam, who gathered supplies.

“I’ll place this one. If his urethra’s blocked because of the bottle pressing against it, we may not be able to advance the catheter. I’m not going to force it if it doesn’t go easily. It’s something you feel, the resistance, but you should still watch me, though, to learn the sterile technique.”

Sam was able to place the catheter, and I thought Mr. Lancaster might actually pass away from embarrassment. He gave us a confused look when we told him the surgeon would be by soon, and we assured him the doctors would explain everything.

If Slater wanted to give me a hard time, I could give him one right back, well within my scope of duties and professional, but something that would annoy the hell out of him.

I wrote on the status board:

PATIENT ASKING FOR MD UPDATE -QM

If Slater saw the message, which I’m sure he would, followed by my initials, he’d know it was me. He might not know my name yet, but he knew I wasn’t Sam. Besides, he really did need to tell the patient what was going on, because there was no telling when the surgicalist would arrive, since there was a good chance they were in surgery now.

“He’s not as bad as some of the docs,” said Sam after I wrote the message. “It’s rare we have to nag him to update patients. Some of them don’t even tell them what’s going on before admission, and just let the hospitalist come in and explain everything.”

The rest of the shift passed without incident, and that night, after a quiet dinner of boxed mac & cheese and fish sticks with Liam, I slid into bed alone while he played his game.

I spread my notes from class yesterday across my lap to distract me from the barrage of thoughts that were keeping me from sleeping. Was Slater going to make my practicum awful? Was Mr. Lancaster going to be alright? We had taken him to pre-op for surgery around five, and though I had no idea of the extent of his operation, I thought how horrible it would be for him to pass away and his wife not even know he was having surgery.

But the looming case that was bothering me, that I hadn't realized would do so during the moment, was our final patient of the day: a mother and daughter that had been in a minor car accident. They were placed in rooms on opposite corners of the ER, which meant a lot of back-and-forth between the staff who were caring for them.

Neither patient had serious injuries, and there was nothing noteworthy about them, but as I lay in bed alone that night, a nagging thought snagged in my brain like a sweater on a thorn: *I should've been with them in the car that day.*

The power that thought had to take root frightened me, because it seemed like the best case scenario would've been for me to be in the accident, too, even though it meant I wouldn't be here now, struggling through school.

How could the accident seem so fresh three years later?

My mind continued to race—horrible what-ifs about my mother and sister, unhelpful reminders of things that were due for class, worries that I had just ruined all chances of me working in the ER today by crossing Slater and upsetting my preceptor, the reminder that I had a mountain of debt to pay off—but I pretended to be asleep when Liam came to bed sometime later that night. I was too deep in my own misery, but strangely comforted by my solitary sorrow.

MARCH

Three weeks later, midterms completed and the distance to graduation shrinking with each passing day, I needed to decompress. Samantha wanted to take me out after our shift to celebrate the halfway point of my semester and kick off my spring break, though the freezer state that we lived in was barely thawing at this point of the year.

"But what about Bailey?" I had asked her. I knew childcare was difficult for single mothers, though her ten-year-old was more like a teenager each passing day, she had told me.

"She's at her aunt's now, and her shithead of a father is picking her up to take her to see her grandparents in Florida for the week."

"Can I go with them? I'd even put up with your ex to lay on a Florida beach right now."

We both laughed.

"Only if you help me make sure he gets lost at sea somehow." She snickered, but I could tell there was still some pain on her face as far as he was concerned, a barely noticeable tension in her jaw. They had been split up for eight years, but I wasn't convinced the wound had ever fully closed for her.

After all, Samantha had mentioned she hadn't seriously dated anyone else, blaming it on motherhood. Though I knew she was busy, she didn't have Bailey *all* the time—case in point, this evening.

So maybe she needed to go out, too, and meet someone. Her plan seemed like a good idea for both of us.

"I could really use a night out. I've been hitting the books so hard these last few weeks that I don't even want to read my spicy books before bedtime. That's how you know things are getting bad."

I expected her to laugh, but Samantha's face stilled, focusing on something behind me. When I swiveled in my chair, Henry was waiting politely, hands clasped. His face was amused, full lips pressed together as if stifling a smile, but he said nothing. How long had he been standing there?

"Um, can we help you?" I asked, proud that I could form words around him now, though I was no less stunned by his presence.

"I wanted to get your input on 26. Her lab work and X-rays look okay, but I was wondering about how she'd do at home. In y'all's opinion, does she have enough help at home to be discharged? Or should she be admitted?"

His slight Southern drawl, that only crept into conversation with words such as "y'all" and "ma'am" melted me every time. Did he narrate audiobooks?

Right, he was waiting on us for an answer. Samantha said nothing, eyes locked on Henry. He pulled his gaze away from her and faced me, polite anticipation on his face.

I resisted the urge to shrug and say *how in the world should I know?* But I took a breath and thought about what I knew about the patient. Samantha dipped her head, subtly urging me on.

"Well, she seemed oriented enough to answer our questions, but she could barely stand when we took her to the restroom. Mentally, she seems fine, but I just don't think she can get around at home alone. She is widowed, and her daughter lives in St. Louis. EMS had to carry her down three flights of stairs on the stretcher, too. It seems like she should probably stay."

Henry smiled, and it was downright dazzling. Up close, his auburn hair had subtle flecks of gold. "I really appreciate your input, Quinn. Could you—"

"Chart that she failed an ambulation trial?" Sam interrupted him, smiling. I gawked at her, impressed.

"You're amazing," Henry said, and when I turned to face him he was still grinning at Sam. He turned to address me, the smile fading

into polite professionalism. "Will you be working with us when you graduate?"

I was so surprised that he was asking about me that I forgot to answer him for a beat. Samantha discreetly kicked my chair.

"It's not all confirmed yet, but I hope to."

"You'd be a great asset to the team. Thanks again," he said, and left us.

When he had rounded the corner from our cube, I said, "How do you fuck up being engaged to *that*?"

Sam sighed. "Great question. So where are we going tonight?"



I had refused to go out in scrubs, unlike some of my classmates who couldn't resist posting stories in their tight-fitting, high-end sets. What if someone collapsed at the restaurant and assumed you could help? No thanks, I had decided. Besides, after a shift, there was no telling what was on those garments, and I certainly didn't want to bring those germs into a restaurant or bar if I could help it.

Samantha's apartment was three blocks away, so we walked there together and I changed into some of her clothes. We both styled with dry shampoo, and I borrowed some of her blush and applied some mascara to look less like a zombie. Sam spritzed some of her perfume on her wrists and neck, and offered me some, a feminine honeysuckle scent that was so bright, and clean, and just so *Sam*.

Donning my snow boots with the sweater dress I had borrowed from Samantha, which fit me a little tighter than it did her, we stepped out into the city. Cars sloshed through the muddy snowmelt and we stuck to the sidewalk nearest the buildings lest we get splashed. We stopped at a dark pub that Samantha assured me had cheap beer, though she insisted the first round was on her. It wouldn't surprise me if she tried to pay the entire bill before the night was over.

We settled into a corner booth, the crowd sparse on a Thursday evening. Samantha paused while raising her glass, Guinness inches from her lips. "Oh! I forgot to ask if your boyfriend was coming to join us."

I groaned and took a healthy sip of my own beer. Ever since I had realized Liam was either ignorant or indifferent to what I wanted in the bedroom, things between us had been strained. I wasn't even sure if he noticed *that*. And it wasn't like I could bring it up with him, right? Paying attention to your partner's needs should be a universal tenet of relationships, but having to *tell* someone to do so was the least sexy thing ever.

I think, deep down, I was scared to have the conversation because I was scared of how he'd respond—silent and shocked, and still not really understanding what he was doing wrong. Couldn't he just be an asshole on purpose to make the inevitable easy?

I shared these observations and thoughts with Samantha, downing my beer in the process. She sucked in air through her teeth, and went to the bar, ordering us a basket of fries and two burgers, and returned with two more beers. We hadn't talked about staying for food, but I knew she wasn't going to let this bomb I had just dropped go, and if I was going to have any more to drink, I had to eat. I had texted Liam before I left work to tell him I was going out and to fend for himself for dinner, and I hadn't even gotten a reply back.

"Quinn, honey, I'm so sorry." I gulped almost half my beer in three long sips. Samantha pushed a water glass towards me before she continued. "I know how hard it is to not feel loved."

And it was like she had punched me in the heart. Because I hadn't thought about it like that before. That's *exactly* what I felt... like I was something or someone for Liam to have around, but not to cherish. Whether it was just the fact that he and I were incompatible or that he was simply unable to meet the emotional and physical needs of a partner, I wasn't sure, but Samantha ignored the tear that fell down my face.

This was absolutely mortifying. I was seconds away from sobbing. At least the pub was dark enough that the shadows could absorb some of my shame before anyone else noticed.

"This sounds so stupid, but, like, I never thought that's what it was. I just thought, well, most twenty-two year old guys haven't yet learned the ways of women. I thought it was because I was horrible at telling him what I wanted and focusing too much on how good it felt when *I* made *him* feel good."

We were interrupted by a waitress discreetly dropping fries onto the table.

"I just...I don't know," I admitted, and reached for a fry.

Samantha doused hers in ketchup before replying, "It's not unusual to be uncomfortable expressing your wants and needs in the bedroom, not at your age, at least. You should voice those needs, though, because anyone who loves you will want to make you happy. But when you're in a love that fulfills you, it doesn't feel so much like settling." She gulped her beer. "This is also why I'm still single, probably. I left Michael for that reason, but I also haven't found anyone else."

Sam munched on another fry, contemplating. "But I couldn't bear for Bailey to be raised in a house where her parents were together but not in love. Maybe she won't be raised seeing what a happy marriage looks like, but she damn sure won't grow up seeing an unhappy one."

Our burgers arrived and we ate in amiable silence. When I excused myself to the bathroom, I stopped by the bar on the way back.

"Two peanut butter whiskey shots, please." When I slid into the booth, Samantha's round eyes grew wide, eyebrows near the top of her forehead.

"What in the hell is that?" She had to speak louder over a group of men who'd taken over the corner booth.

"You'll love it. Trust me. You aren't allergic to nuts, are you?"

She shook her head, and I raised my shot glass. "To the love that's out there waiting for us, or at the very least, the orgasms to come."

A woman at the bar exclaimed, "I'll drink to that, ladies," and raised her martini glass in our direction. We snickered as we clinked glasses and threw them back, Samantha shaking her head afterwards.

"That one is *good*. But damn if I'm not going to feel it tomorrow. Promise me something, Quinn. Enjoy alcohol now, because it will turn on you a little more every year past twenty-five. Thirty if you're lucky."

We were swept onto the freight train of full-on drunkenness an hour later after two more rounds of shots, and when I stood to use

the restroom, I grabbed my purse as I stumbled down the hall. On the toilet, I checked my phone.

Still no word from Liam.

I wanted to be angry with him but I was so *hurt* by everything that I just started crying at the sink as I washed my hands. I hated myself for accepting a relationship that clearly didn't meet my needs as much as I hated him for being ignorant of them.

A glance in the mirror confirmed I was approaching raccoon status, and I drunkenly tried to fix my mascara, trying not to give myself a corneal abrasion in the process. My reflection was somewhat out of focus and I shrugged, tossing the paper towel in the bin, and pushed the door open. I didn't realize how much force I had used until it collided with someone in the hallway.

"Oops. My bad." When I saw his face, I said, "Oh shit, it's you."

Soren Slater's pecs were unmistakable even in a tight t-shirt rather than a white coat, and I waited for his scathing remark on my ineptitude. Even in the dim hallway, I must have looked like a mess because he started to speak, then scanned my face.

His gaze softened and he reached for my elbow to steady me. Was I swaying or were we on a ship at sea?

"Quinn, what's wrong?"

I wasn't even sure he knew my name. He had never addressed me before.

But the surprise was no match for what I was already feeling. Things were bad enough without him giving me a hard time, too. My words came out between sobs, and slurred.

"The last thing I need tonight is you making me feel like shit. Go torment someone else, and leave me alone."

Pinballing down the hallway, I left before he could say anything else.

Samantha begged me to stay at her place, but I insisted on taking a cab home. It was a horrible idea to have this conversation now, but now that the band-aid had been ripped off my "relationship," I couldn't ignore it any longer. I pulled out my phone to text him on the way.

I'm comingg home right now Liam Morgan. If you even care.

MARCH

Drunk Quinn did many questionable things that evening, and if Hungover Quinn would've been able to remember all of them the next morning, it would've been helpful. For instance, did I break up with him or not last night? I know it was on my mind, but I wasn't sure if it made it out of my mouth.

Blacking out in the cab meant that flashes of the rest of the night came back to me the next morning like scenes from an old movie reel: making toast, throwing it up, seeing two of Liam in the living room, pouring a glass of water and spilling it all over the counter.

I had woken up in my bed alone, with an icepick behind my eyeballs and a mouth drier than jerky. It was 9:23 on Friday morning, which meant Liam was working at the tech firm where he was as a programmer.

Groaning, I trudged down the hall to the bathroom and plopped ungracefully on to the toilet. After I washed up and brushed my teeth, a wave of nausea hit, and I braced my arms on the bathroom counter.

There was still coffee in the pot that Liam had made, along with a note and a pastry from the shop down the street.

I'm sorry, Quinn. I know you were drunk last night but I also know you meant what you said. You deserve someone

who's going to love you the way you need. I'll have my stuff out by Sunday.

Shit shit SHIT I guess I had broken up with him. How fucking *awkward* that we were living together. Oh my god, the thought of being here while he moved out all of his things was horrifying. I knew his brother Ryan would come help, and he'd try and be polite and it would make everything more uncomfortable.

I had to get out of here. The pastry and a cup of coffee remained in my stomach by sheer will, and I popped some ibuprofen and chugged a large glass of water.

After a hot shower, I was feeling alive enough to leave the house, but I wasn't sure where to go, exactly. All I knew was that I was going to avoid this house until Sunday night, or maybe even Monday morning.

I wasn't ashamed of what I must have said in order to prompt that note, but that I'd done it while intoxicated and couldn't remember the conversation. Liam deserved a more respectful breakup—even if he was completely fucking oblivious to me, he wasn't a bad person.

I sighed, considering options. A hotel was not possible funds-wise, and I had a ton of homework to catch up on anyways. Bailey was gone for the week, and I was pretty sure Sam was working this weekend, without me. Would she mind if I stayed in Bailey's room? Would that be asking too much?

I fished my keys from my purse and locked up the house, remembering my car was at the hospital. Our—no, *my*—house was a little less than three miles away, and it was pleasantly brisk out, the sun blotting out the chill enough to make the walk enjoyable enough in a jacket, hat, and mittens. Besides, the ibuprofen had kicked in and my headache had abated, and I needed time to think.

Muddy slush coated the edges of the street and sidewalks, and I tried to gather myself as I picked up my pace. Bare winter trees and brown grass dotted the landscape of the park that I cut across, making me dream of summer in a few months, the warm sunny days where I could bring a blanket and some snacks and lounge all

day with a book. I was *so* close to finishing school and ending the hell of the last two years.

All I wanted was for my adult life to begin, to start making real money and support myself, bring myself closer to my goals of being financially comfortable and owning property someday. Settling some sort of traumatic score with myself by nursing in the setting that had claimed the life of my sister was a trauma response I'd have to confront at some point, but for the time being, I just needed to start working. It wouldn't solve all of my problems, but paying my bills and being able to start addressing my student debt was a good way to start.

In the meantime, I had a few thousand bucks left from my loans this semester, but that was going to dry up quickly with rent and utilities, groceries, and car insurance.

My uncle Chet had started a wrongful death case with an attorney across town who was supposed to be suing the drunk driver who had hit and killed my family that night, but he had told me these things take time. It had been almost a year and I'd heard nothing, so I didn't expect any money from that any time soon, or ever. I wasn't even sure how comfortable I'd be accepting any proceeds from the case, anyways, since it seemed wrong to cash a check while their ashes were in two ceramic urns in my living room.

Taking a part-time job seemed like a solution, except with two hospital shifts a week, labs, homework, and classes, I didn't have much time to spare. I sighed again, no closer to solutions as the hospital came into view.

Another potential problem hit me like a snowplow as I opened the door to the parking deck: Slater. The memory of running into him, literally, at the bar last night and essentially telling him to fuck off reared its ugly head in the line of hangover monsters working to ruin my day. What in the world was I supposed to say to him when I saw him again? Should I even bring it up? I rubbed at my elbow absently, remembering how he had grasped it, and the concerned look on his face. Had I been that drunk to imagine such things?

I hadn't had a chance to tell Samantha what had happened since we had left so soon afterwards and gone our separate ways. She would know what to do, right? When I reached my Honda, I unlocked it and slid into the seat, grabbing my phone to text her.

Lots to catch up on. Could I crash at your place until Sunday?

Only if you bring me a Gatorade the size of Texas. I'm never drinking again.

After returning home and packing my bag, I stopped at McDonald's and the drugstore for supplies to bring Samantha back to life. When I knocked on her door, it was already nudged open.

"I'm in here," came a meek voice from the living room. I tiptoed in, avoiding the boots and jacket littered in the hallway, at odds with the otherwise tidy space. One look at Sam huddled in a comforter on her couch with the trash can next to her and I blurted, "Girl, you are going *through* it."

She nodded, mascara-stained blue eyes squinting against the sunlight. I closed the curtain and she muttered her thanks.

"So, um, can I bring you anything? Coke? Or Pedialyte?"

She shrugged, and I chose the Pedialyte, pouring it over ice and sitting next to her at the end of her sofa. She took a few wary sips, then burrowed back in her blankets. God, she looked horrible.

"Put me out of my misery, Quinn."

"Um, I have some stuff to tell you? Last night got kind of crazy, and I'm not quite sure what to do about it."

"Yeah? What happened?" She sat up, pulling her blankets with her, and turned to face me at the end of her sofa.

"Well, apparently last night I broke—"

I was interrupted by her retching into the garbage can. She wiped her mouth off with a tissue, and swished some water in her mouth from the bottle sitting next to her on the floor. She sighed and laid back down.

"I'm sorry," she moaned. "I can't keep *anything* down at this point. It's been like this all day. I don't know the last time I drank that much."

I cringed, feeling stupid for buying us shots in the first place. "What can I do?"

She was sweaty and pale, far from her usual glowing complexion. Most days, Sam looked like a human Barbie doll at first glance.

"You know, now that you're here... This is kind of sketchy, but I'm running out of options to be honest. The Zofran isn't working, I

haven't peed all day..." she trailed off and looked at me, eyebrow raised, as if assessing whether or not she should continue.

I tilted my head, intrigued, and she began, "So this is sort of not supposed to happen, but sometimes when we clean out the IV fluids in the trauma warmer and they are expired, I don't exactly throw them out. They haven't been used or anything, and you're gonna tell me that a sterilized bag of fluid is no good anymore?" She scrunched up her face, considering. "Anyways, I have a bag of saline under the bathroom counter, and some tubing, and an start kit with a catheter. Can you hook a sister up?" She stuck her arm out at me.

I paused, hating that my first instinct was to ask if I could get in trouble. Seeing her sunken-in eyes and chapped lips, I answered, "Of course."

Samantha began giving me pointers as I headed to her bathroom. "I think you can set it all up yourself. Remember to wash up real good beforehand. And we'll need something to hang the bag onto otherwise it won't drip. Maybe it can hang from this light fixture out here?"

I was getting more comfortable with IVs, thanks to Samantha making me do all of them for her now, and I washed my hands and set up the equipment with ease. When I placed the tourniquet on her arm, her veins barely popped up, even the one at the crook of her elbow.

"This is going to be a challenge but not impossible. Oh, go grab a towel too, please. I'll squeeze my fist while you do that."

I returned with a dark blue towel and laid it across her lap. She took two fingers and probed her arm, assessing below the tourniquet. "I can feel it, but it's a little deep. Some ACs are like that, you have to go by how they feel rather than how they look. Come on, feel it."

I moved my fingers where hers had been and gently pressed against the delicate skin of her elbow. At first, I didn't feel anything, but as I pressed slightly harder I felt what she was talking about, the spongy spaghetti noodle under her skin. I blew out a breath, hoping I wasn't belying my confidence.

But I was getting better at IVs every shift, and I found her vein, placing the catheter and then hanging the IV set from the light fixture in the living room without difficulty. Sam beamed at me.

"Thanks, kid. Eat your lunch before it gets cold. I'll join you shortly."

We turned on some trash TV and I ate my double cheeseburger, filling her in on the apparent breakup with Liam and the reason for my visit.

She gasped. "I am SO PROUD of you, for standing up for yourself and what you need. So what that you were drunk, shit happens and nobody's perfect. I'm glad you texted me to come here so it can be a clean break between you two. You're welcome here anytime." She smiled, face brightening with every drip that fell from the bag overhead. I finished eating my lunch while Sam dozed.

We hadn't spoken much about my family and what had happened to them, but she knew my mom and sister had passed away—I mentioned it once, briefly, and she hadn't asked about it again. Though I hadn't elaborated, she was smart enough to figure out that I didn't have anyone else to turn to, either. No friend group and not even a best friend—Jessica had given up on me after six months of grief that resulted in me ghosting everyone that was left after the accident. And with nursing school, it's not like I had much time to make any new friends, either.

Once the IV bag finished, I unhooked everything and assessed my patient. She was perking up, and I dared try and nourish her further.

"Saltine?" I offered. She took the cracker and bit into it cautiously, following with a sip of Pedialyte.

"So something else happened too, at the bar, and I need your opinion on it." If I was worried about trusting her with this potentially problematic encounter with one of my future coworkers, that apprehension had vanished after I had given her an unsupervised IV.

She didn't look like she was going to vomit, so I continued. "So when I went to pee, I got out my phone to see if Liam had even texted me back and of course he hadn't. It upset me so much that I cried like a baby, and when I left I ran—literally—into Slater of all people."

"No fucking *way*."

"Yep. And he was...get this...kind of...nice to me, I think? I guess he saw how upset I was and I remember him grabbing onto my arm

to steady me, and he even looked concerned about it, and then I told him I didn't need his shit right now and then left."

"I could kiss you right now."

"Excuse me?"

"You just said what every ER nurse has wanted to say to him since he marched into the Doc Box last year. He didn't trust a single one of us to do our jobs when he started. It's gotten better since he's getting settled, but still. You were right when you said it that day—dude has a giant stick up his ass."

I grimaced. "So, uh, do you think I'll get in trouble?"

Sam laughed. "Absolutely not. You think that egomaniac is going to report a student nurse for something she did drunk and off the clock?" She took another sip of her drink, considering. "That's interesting that he was nice to you, though. I kind of have a theory about him."

I looked at her, intrigued.

"I think our friend Soren is so off-putting and seems so full of himself because he's testing people to see who can handle him before he gets too close, which is why he is always engaging in that annoying brand of semi-flirtatious workplace banter. I honestly don't think he is trying to be a horrible doc. He's great with the patients and their families, as far as explaining things and being patient with them. And he isn't the worst to work with. I mean, he does always put in his own orders, and orders everything at once instead of stringing them all along like fucking Collins does. God, that shit drives me crazy. And besides, he and Knox might be two of the most good-looking men I have ever seen in real life. It's not fair."

"Agreed. So you don't think he's going to get me fired before I even start working with you guys?"

"No way. He's probably going to like you even more now, the psychopath."

I laughed and turned back to the TV, hoping I wasn't blushing again. Ever since I had imagined Henry in a kilt, my self-love practices had been unusually successful. Now, I envisioned Slater's bare torso, and a million other scenarios developed in my mind, all of them making me flushed.

And you're single now, I reminded myself. I had to snap my hair tie against my wrist to pull myself together. Sam glanced at my arm and gave me a wry smile, but said nothing.

We napped and watched TV until nightfall, when Sam showered, changed into fresh clothes, ordered us a pizza, and put on more garbage TV. It reminded me of movie nights with my sister Stephanie, and I let the ache I permitted myself to feel sparingly flay me open once I trudged into Bailey's room to sleep, missing all the nights I'd never have with her.

I had grown disturbingly comforted by my grief, my most consistent nightly companion, and came to expect it like some sort of phantom friend every night when my life was finally quiet.

MARCH

When I returned home Monday morning, after a low-key weekend at Sam's, Liam's stuff was out as promised. He left the key on the kitchen counter, and paid rent for the entire month, even though he'd moved out at the end of the first week. Relief surged through me when I realized I wouldn't have to stress about finding a roommate just yet, and that I could process everything that happened in the peace of solitude.

But rather than peace, the solitude unearthed feelings I tried to ignore, the trauma of the past that crept in uninvited when I least expected it. With my family gone, my best friend gone, and now my boyfriend out of my life, I realized how utterly alone I was. Not just in the house, but in the world.

I felt a barrage of awful sensations—fear that I'd always be alone, panic that I'd die with no one to even find me one day, depression that I'd lost my best friend in the wake of my grief, embarrassment that there wasn't anyone with whom I was close enough to rely on anymore, and shame that I'd let those events so long ago dictate my feelings now. It even crossed my mind that *I* might be the reason Liam couldn't love me properly, and the shame spiral deepened.

I felt the panic rip through me, suffocating my lungs. I put my hands on my knees and squeezed my eyes shut, forcing air through my nose even though I felt like I was in a straitjacket. I recited anything I could think of to make the thoughts stop—deciding on

state capitals this time—and by the time I got to Atlanta, I rose up and made my way to the bathroom.

Drying my eyes and blowing my nose, I stared at the mess in the mirror, and sighed.

But no matter how bad I felt, there was still something I could do about it, I decided. It was one thing to be depressed, it was another entirely to be depressed in a clean house, freshly showered with a candle burning. So with the help of an audiobook, and a few hours of time, I scrubbed my house from top to bottom, in the company of an unbearably sexy male narrator through my headphones, occasionally wiping away tears when the emotions welled up.

When I settled onto the sofa with a clean pair of pajamas, a cup of tea, a bowl of mac and cheese, and a romance book, candle burning and a cozy Youtube background on the TV, a smug smile spread across my lips as I realized my trauma may win some of the battles, but I'd be damned if I was going to let it win the war.



Unable to work shifts at the hospital because of the break, the next day I worked on projects and studied for upcoming exams. By Wednesday afternoon, I was caught up, and the sunshine beckoned me outside. Spring was a promise at this point, and I took a walk in only a light sweater and jeans.

I decided to fill the rest of my afternoon with things Liam hated that I had missed over the past few months: walking around the museum, window shopping at the boutiques, scouring the indie zine at the coffee shop for free shows to check out.

And of course, I was curious enough about what I had been missing dating-wise. Liam and I had met as roommates and my ex before him had been a coworker at the grocery store where I had worked. I needed to mix things up, meet someone without proximity, and without the awkwardness of having to see one another if it didn't work out.

I downloaded a dating app while sipping on a latte at my favorite coffee shop. I uploaded a pic that I had taken that morning, hand on my chin, hair in a sexy bun, lip balm and mascara only. What did I have to lose?

That evening, after strolling the galleries and drooling over outfits I'd very soon be able to afford, I headed home to burrow for the night. After a hot bath, I made a box of mac and cheese and poured a hearty glass of wine, and settled onto the sofa to find a movie. I savored every minute I had to myself at home: not having to be courteous of someone else's sleep schedule, walking around naked, leaving a day's worth of dishes in the sink and washing them when I felt like it. Before I knew it, I had added another goal to my list of life accomplishments: be able to afford rent without a roommate.

My phone chimed with a match when I was nearly finished with the movie, a thriller that had kept me guessing the entire time.

You look like you'd be a good person to go eat sushi with. -
Brendan

I had mentioned it was my favorite food in my bio, so I knew he had at least read what I'd written. I was feeling bold, and he was hella handsome, with dark hair and a dark beard, and a great smile.

Interesting that you chose sushi rather than coffee.

Why is that?

Sushi is more high-stakes for someone you've never met.

The stakes have never scared me. But you know what does?
Prion diseases.

He was hot and smart? I think my vagina did a backflip in anticipation that Brendan would be making its acquaintance.

We met for dinner the following night after messaging on the app late into the night. I'd worn leather leggings and a slouchy cropped sweater with ankle boots, and blow-dried my strawberry blond hair. My makeup was slightly more dramatic than my profile pic—some brown eyeliner and pink shadow to make my hazel eyes pop, and brownish-pink lipstick. I was sipping a white wine at the bar when he approached me.

"You are even more beautiful in person," Brendan said, and kissed my cheek.

"So are you. And you're taller than I expected. Most guys who say they're six-four are closer to six feet, if that."

He laughed, and placed his hand on my lower back as we walked to our table. Every inch of my skin that he touched, even through my pants, was craving more.

He was dressed in dark jeans and a blazer, with a gray t-shirt underneath. Whoever had designed the cologne he was wearing had certainly paid attention to what women wanted in a men's fragrance: it was spicy and dramatic with a clean finish. I commented on how good he smelled, and he flashed me a smile that said *I know, everyone tells me this.*

Through our messaging, I'd learned he was a PhD candidate in microbiology, and liked to play hockey and ice fish. To be honest, I didn't see him as much of an outdoorsman, with his loafers and perfect hair.

"So are you planning on working in the emergency department when you're finished with school, then?"

We had ordered edamame to start, and the way he slid the pods in his mouth was making me want to take him to the bathroom.

"I think so, though it's not finalized yet."

"Why emergency?"

Hmm. That was a tough one for a casual date. I took the easy route and decided not to unpack my family trauma. "Who could resist the chaos?"

He laughed and leaned back in his chair, sipping his whiskey.

"What about you? What's next?"

His posture tensed, but his easy smile returned minutes later. "Might do a postdoc, might sell out and work for a lab. Gotta keep those options open, ya know?"

I'd never been in a situation where I felt like I had that many options in my entire life, but I nodded like I understood.

I ordered three rolls for myself, and Brendan ordered a steak and shrimp plate. If he was surprised at how much I had ordered, he hid it well, and I had eaten about half my food when I decided to take the rest with me. Sushi would keep for lunch tomorrow, right?

He watched me as I boxed everything up.

"If you had eaten some, there wouldn't be so much of it left. I kind of thought we'd be sharing this."

He leaned forward. "Can I tell you a secret?"

I nodded, hoping this wasn't about to get weird.

"I don't like sushi. I only wanted to take you out."

I frowned. "We could've gone anywhere, you know."

"But then I wouldn't have been able to watch you eat your favorite food in the world."

Was the bar so low that this made me want to tear up? I bit my lip, stalling the emotions bubbling up. Brendan's gaze fell to my mouth, and his gaze intensified. He misread my response, but did well enough to distract me from tears, for which I was thankful.

Our server dropped the check off, and I reached for my purse. Brendan waved a hand and pulled out his wallet.

"Thanks for the sushi feast." I smiled at him.

"Anytime."

"Where to next?"

"We can go wherever you want."

Here was my chance. Brendan was unspeakably hot, well dressed, and smelled good. I was nowhere near ready for a relationship, so I'd risk a potential relationship with him—if he were the kind of guy to judge me for it, and I honestly couldn't tell if he was—all to have his hands on me tonight.

"I live alone," I murmured, and reached across the table for his hand. "Do you?"

He shook his head.

"Well, maybe we should go to my place for a drink."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Alright."

One drink turned into two, a kiss turned into a touch, and the next thing I knew I was leading him to my bedroom. My bravado failed me as he peeled my leggings off, and my brain went down that familiar path of *what will he think of me for doing this? We barely even know each other! What if he doesn't like the way I taste?* but I talked myself out of it. Tonight was for fun, and for moving on, and though I wasn't planning on meeting my next boyfriend this evening, I was planning on starting the process of moving on from Liam, and nothing helped like another sexy person in your bed.

He kissed me fervently, asking a handful of times if what he was doing was okay, and if I was alright. It flooded me with a tenderness that was damn close to intimacy, enough to make me more than ready to take things further.

He kissed me down to my breasts, peeling off my black lace bra, and took one into his mouth, lightly grasping the other. I'd never been very turned on by having my breasts played with, but he had a silken touch that had me rapidly reconsidering my stance on the matter.

I was taut as a tightrope by the time he slid his hands down to my hips. I knew my underwear was soaked, and he was so good at foreplay I was almost hesitant to take things further and spoil a good thing. But as his lips moved south from my stomach, making me moan, I decided I really really wanted to see this through. Brendan slid down between my legs, peeling my panties off as he went.

"You're..." he began, then grunted. I felt his girth against me, tented against his briefs, as he came up to kiss me. He bit my lip as he settled himself between my legs.

"You're so fucking wet I can't believe it," he finished. The first stroke of his tongue had me fisting the bedsheets to keep from screaming. He picked up the pace and the pressure as I writhed, and I wanted to beg him to slow down, to ease up and go back to what had made me see stars, but the words never came.

Minutes ticked by, and he feasted away, but the erratic pace had my orgasm running away like it was a fugitive. I sighed, and he lifted his head to face me.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing's wrong," I lied, unsure of why I couldn't just *tell him* what to do for me.

"You're nervous, then?"

I was, but not for the reasons he thought. "Yeah, I guess so."

"I want to make you feel good," he said, and I threw my head back on the pillow. I had to give him something. He was trying, so I could, too.

"Then use your fingers."

He followed my order, sliding two fingers into me with ease. I moaned as he moved inside me, slick and steady. I felt so full of him I wasn't sure how I'd manage what was in his pants. When he sucked on me while using his fingers, my legs began to shake and I soared over the edge almost immediately.

Was *that* what I had needed all along? I needed to remember this. Stupidly, I thought of how I'd ask for it in the future, like this was some secret menu item at Starbucks.

I was panting, sweat coating my temples when he pushed himself up and laid beside me, placing a kiss on my shoulder on his way up.

"That was...something," I remarked, and he laughed. "I suppose I should see how you're doing down there."

We both looked down, his boxer briefs straining against the bulge. I made a show of straddling him in the lamplight, shimmying his underwear down and taking him in my hand.

He was as smooth and solid as a polished stone, and after a few strokes I leaned down and licked him. He bucked underneath me, and sucked in a breath.

"Too much?" I teased.

"I'll show you too much," he replied with a sardonic grin, and flipped me over, pinning me down at my hips. He then stood and picked his jeans up off the floor, rummaging through his pocket to find what he needed.

Brendan held up a condom in its package. "Do you want to fuck me, Quinn?"

I shuddered with anticipation, and nodded my head. Brendan gave me another naughty grin before ripping the foil with his teeth. He unrolled the latex over himself and gently nudged my knees apart, spreading my legs wider. He hovered over me, pausing before he entered.

"You're sure?" Brendan asked, with a hint of hesitation that only made me want him more.

"Yes," I breathed.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, and then slid inside. I gasped at the thickness of his girth. He began a steady rhythm and I rocked my hips alongside him, enjoying the friction.

If I had any chance of coming again, I was probably going to have to be on top where it was most likely to happen for me, but I was content where I was. Besides, he'd just rattled me so thoroughly that I was more than happy and anything else at this point was frosting on an already delicious cake.

His lips met my neck, beard tickling the sensitive skin. His voice was a whisper into my ear.

"What's gonna do it for you, love?"

The urgency and restraint in his words were enough to have me building again, climbing the hill towards another O. He had been so

polished, so skilled that seeing him losing his control was a turn on in itself.

"I need to ride you," I said, and he pulled out of me, grasping my hips as he launched me on top of him. I began rocking my hips, chasing another climax, but I needed to pay some more attention to my hot spot and my finger wasn't giving enough of what I wanted. My vibe was in arm's reach in my nightstand but I didn't want to go for it. I could never pleasure myself when someone else was around, too worried about feeling like a performer in an exhibit.

I got close, my breathing hitched, and he thrust his hips deep inside me, making me cry out. His own release shuddered through him, and if I had any of my own, it wasn't nearly as strong as the first one had been.

We pulled apart, and he got up to use the bathroom. When he returned with a warm washcloth for me, and leaned down to kiss my forehead, I was in disbelief but muttered my thanks. Seriously, was the bar this low for me? I was a mixture of horrified at myself and validated that ending things with Liam had been the right decision.

We lay in a daze for what could have been minutes or hours, and as I began to doze off, I felt a trail of kisses from my collarbone to my neck.

"I should get home," he whispered.

"Mmkay. This was fun."

It wasn't perfect, but I could think of much less satisfying hookups from much less attractive men.

"I'll text you tomorrow," he promised.

I never heard from Brendan again.

A few days later, I blocked him on the dating app to quell any temptation to reach out on my part. The last thing I needed was to catch feelings for someone who was a little *too* good at the pathway from matching to messaging to meeting up to hooking up.

I'd gone on a few dates since Brendan, the exception to the rule that most blind dates and app matches didn't add up in person. A few of my dates had been duds, and I'd left without even a kiss or an exchanging of numbers. Others were heavy makeout sessions in dim bar booths or in movie theaters but nothing more. None of the hookups had been quite as satisfying as Brendan, though. The bastard.

My new roommate Gretchen moved in a week later, a senior art student who had also recently gone through a breakup. I had enjoyed my fortnight of solitude, brief as it was.



My first shift back at the hospital after Spring Break had me just as nervous as when I had first started two months ago. Though now, the jitters were from seeing Slater and dreading what he'd do. I'd been drunk and exceedingly rude to him. Would he let it go? Would he even acknowledge it? Or would he make my life a living hell? Snapping at me for not doing things quick enough or the way he wanted it, putting in orders sporadically instead of all at once, asking me to show the med students how to take vitals and start IVs while I was drowning in my own assignment and still trying to learn myself?

But I didn't see him that day, nor my next shift either. If Sam noticed how on edge I was, she didn't say anything, just eyed me as I popped my rubber band against my wrist throughout the shift.

On the third day I was back, I saw his name up on the patient board on my cube, and my heart dropped.

I was expecting an ambulance any minute to my open room, and it was a possible STEMI, which would be an absolute circus of extremely time-sensitive duties.

"You know what a STEMI is, yes?" Sam asked.

I nodded.

"Then tell me. Pretend like I don't know."

"*ST-elevation myocardial infarction*. It's a heart attack, the most serious kind because it's a full blockage. So they have to put the stent in to clear the blockage if they can."

"Exactly right. What do you expect we need to do?"

We'd had one before, way back when I had first started. I thought back, considering.

"EKG first because that's what's going to confirm it's a STEMI. Let's get the machine and have it in the room."

"Good. What else?"

"MONA," I said, remembering the acronym for heart attack treatments—morphine, oxygen, nitroglycerin, and aspirin.

"Yup. That it?"

"Well they should have an IV from the ambulance," I began, but Sam cut her eyes at me.

"Theoretically, yes, but you know how things go sometimes."

"Right. Ok, so IV stuff."

"Mmhmm. And what is the most important thing to remember?"

"Answer the phone when the cath lab calls."

"You're so damn smart. Oh, and remember where the crash cart is. STEMI's can turn into codes faster than you'd think."

Wonderful, I thought. I tried to keep my head clear while I settled our other patients in preparation for the ambulance.

Sam went to the med dispenser to grab meds for one of our other patients, a woman with abdominal pain. But the migraine cocktail meds had been ordered instead. She stepped away from the med room and back to the nurses' station to investigate.

"Huh. I think he must have messed up and put in the wrong orders."

I peered over at her screen, and recalled meeting the patient, a young girl in her twenties with abdominal pain for the last two days made worse this morning, having some nausea but no vomiting. Sam was right—those meds Ross had ordered made no sense.

"He probably has another migraine patient and entered them on the wrong chart. Let's call him."

She handed me the phone, and I held it to my ear, but when he picked up the line and said, "Ross," in a gruff tone, I froze. Samantha grabbed the phone, giving me a disappointed look, and explained what we needed.

She didn't have time to chastise me for being a coward because our ambulance wheeled in as soon as she hung up the phone. The first thing I noticed about the patient was how sweaty he was, and even with my limited experience, I knew that was a bad thing. I took report from the paramedics, Sam signing off for us, and hooked the patient up to the machine for his EKG. Farrah, a tech, was in the room with us, and had her side completed before I had even unraveled half my cords. I quickly tried to place them, and Farrah followed behind me fixing the leads I had misplaced.

"It's ordered," said Sam from the computer, and Farrah pressed the button to record on the machine. When it printed out, Sam's face turned grave.

"MD to room 17," she said into the overhead pager from our phone.

Shit. This was *bad* if she was paging a doc overhead. We only did that for absolutely emergent scenarios when we needed any doctor in the room, the first available—like a code blue, seizure, or STEMI. I checked his IV line while Farrah got the crash cart. His heart rate had been trending down, though there hadn't been any telltale changes to his BP, not yet at least.

Sam said, "A lot of things are about to happen, but we are going to take good care of you, sir. How are you feeling?"

He was pale, sweat slicking his forehead. His face was tight as he said, "I can't breathe."

On the monitor, his O₂ read 95%, but Sam got the tubing from the drawer anyways and we hooked him up to a few liters of oxygen.

Slater barreled into the room, scribe at his heels.

"It's a STEMI," said Sam, and Slater nodded, taking the paper from her to confirm.

"Let's go ahead and page this out," he told her. To the patient, he said, "Sir, do you have a cardiologist?"

The patient shook his head. "I don't see any doctors."

Sam pulled me aside, and we called Tara at the charge desk, letting her and the secretary know to page the cath lab.

I missed what Soren had said to the patient, but when he turned to look at me, there wasn't an inkling of a smirk or disdain or anything else that would indicate he had remembered our run-in a few weeks ago. "Did he get aspirin already?"

I nodded.

"Then please give him a sublingual nitro as needed for the chest pain, and morphine as well. I'll order it for you."

"Okay."

To Sam, he said, "Has it been paged?"

"Yeah."

"Excellent. Let me know if anything changes, and if Cards needs anything from me when they come."

Soren stepped out of the room and his scribe shut the door behind him, leaving us to our patient.

Sam asked the patient, "Are you having any chest pain now?"

"It's definitely there."

"I'm going to get your medicine, okay? The heart doctor will be in shortly and I imagine they will take you to go get a stent. Is there anyone you want us to call for you?"

He shook his head and looked down to his lap.

When we returned with the drugs, he looked like he was about to jump off of the stretcher.

"Something isn't right," he said as we finished giving him the meds, and I was inclined to agree with him.

Someone I didn't recognize entered the room next, presumably the cardiologist. He took another look at the EKG on the table and looked to us. "What all has he had so far?"

I tried to remember everything, since Sam had drawn up and given all of the meds and I couldn't remember the dosages with the way she had drawn it up and diluted the morphine. And how many nitros had it been? "He's had, uh...well, before he got here—"

Sam interrupted, "324 of aspirin, 4 of morphine, 3 nitros."

The cardiologist nodded. "They should be ready for you in the lab." We placed his belongings on the back of the stretcher and hooked him up to the portable monitor Farrah had brought while he spoke to the patient.

"Sir, I'm Dr. Bryant, and it looks like you're having a serious heart attack. We need to get you to the cath lab to try and put a stent in to clear the blockage and minimize any more damage to your heart. We need to do this quickly, so we will be going now. Do you have questions?"

The patient shook his head, and we were already rolling him out of the room.

"We'll chart when we get back," Sam told me as we sprinted down the hallway.

As we walked back to the department, after getting grilled by the cath lab nurses about every possible detail related to his cardiac history, Sam blew out a breath. "Nice work."

"Thanks."

She eyed me, curious. "Is that the first time you've seen Slater since the bar?"

"Yeah."

"He didn't seem bothered by anything, though there isn't time to joke around in a STEMI."

"True."

Sam didn't say anything else, but the way she studied my reaction made me wonder if she was expecting something, or if she knew something I didn't. But Slater and I didn't have another patient together for the rest of the shift—he must have gone home shortly after.

Exhausted, I left that night thinking that everything would probably be okay between us if we could at least work together without issue, but found myself wondering what he would've said had we been alone and not working a true emergency together. I snapped the ponytail holder on my wrist the entire way to the parking deck, willing thoughts of him out of my system.

APRIL

I could count my remaining shifts with Sam on a single hand, an equally pleasing and horrifying thought. Barring finals, graduation, and my board exams, I was wildly close to becoming a licensed registered nurse.

Unsurprisingly, Slater still hadn't acknowledged our run-in, and it had been over a month at this point. He'd been an exemplary professional and courteous coworker every time I'd seen him, just like when we had the STEMI a few weeks ago. No teasing, no taunting, just work. It was quite disarming, a sort of Jekyll & Hyde transformation.

Had I simply met the worst side of him? Or was he treating me differently than he did everyone else? Samantha wasn't always with me now—we were using the last few weeks of my preceptorship as a trial run of me being on my own. Thus, Sam was constantly at the nurses' station, signing off meds with me when I gave them, teaching when required, but mostly gossiping and cutting up with everyone else and helping out with their patients when needed. I didn't want to bring up Slater again, worried I'd seem weird or desperate or even conceited for even thinking that he thought *I* was special for some reason.

I was eating a late lunch in the stairwell one day—graham crackers and applesauce from the patient supply drawer, which Tito

had referred to as a “prison apple pie” when he saw me eating it the first time—when a voice sounded from the landing above me.

“Sorry to interrupt.”

Turning around, I glanced up to see Slater, looking incredible in dark jeans, brown boots, and a flannel. His hair stuck out underneath his ball cap.

He grinned at me, noticing the crumbs littering my scrubs. Had he forgotten what I’d said at the bar? Or was he tired of being boring and professional?

I sighed. “You caught me.”

“Eat a proper lunch, and I won’t tell anyone I saw you stealing hospital supplies. How do you expect your body to run on that shit for fuel?”

I wanted to tell him that unlike his well-cared for physique, mine was maintained by a combination of being too broke to buy a ton of groceries and too busy to be bothered by it, but I shrugged and stood up, brushing the crumbs off my uniform before turning away.

A few hours later, he and I had our first patient together, an older woman from a nursing home who was screaming and crying and trying to either claw herself or me apart. I knew it wasn’t her fault, of course, as behavioral symptoms in the elderly were rarely deliberate, but when Soren and I emerged from the room he urged his scribe on and pulled me aside.

He had changed into those black scrubs and white coat, and I wasn’t sure which look was hotter, this, or the sexy lumberjack ensemble from earlier. Where had he been before work, anyways?

“I’m sorry, Quinn. I really am. But we have to get a sterile urine sample from her. Before I consider anything else I need to rule out a UTI.”

I nodded, wondering why he was apologizing, then his words sunk in. Sterile sample?! No way, certainly he didn’t mean for me to—

“You expect me to cath *her*?” I was perplexed. I honestly didn’t know how it would be possible considering she had scratched me when I approached her bedside and asked her what was wrong.

“Again, I’m sorry. But I know you can do it for me.” He winked as he walked away, that unreal shade of teal in his eyes mesmerizing me, distracting me from what I was about to do.

Prick.

He knew exactly what he was doing: hyping me up, using those beautiful eyes.

When I broke the news to Samantha, she rounded up Farrah, our tech, and Diwa, the senior Filipino nurse who would definitely know how to handle this, and we marched in the room with supplies, a small but mighty army to get the task done.

Farrah and Sam held the patient's legs so she wouldn't kick me in surprise, Diwa stroked her hair and sang a song so beautiful it had to be a hymn, and I miraculously remained sterile and found her urethra, the catheter draining a foul stream of urine that I was certain was infected.

After washing up, I plopped back into my chair to check on my tasks and charting. Next to my water bottle lay an assortment of items that hadn't been there before: a package of peanut butter protein cookies, some almonds, a banana, a package of grapes and cheese, and some jerky from the cafeteria. I looked to Sam, who shrugged as she took the banana I offered her. The last thing I needed was Knox or Slater to round the corner while I had a phallic object in my mouth.

I gasped as I realized who had probably left me this stuff. Sam crooked her head at me and said "What is it?" through a mouthful of banana mush. I waved a hand, as if to say, *nothing*, because I didn't want to tell her about the stairwell interaction with Slater earlier for some reason.

Our next patient was a woman who thought she was miscarrying for the third time in two years. Henry was on the case with me, and after we checked her in he met me outside of the room. His words were gentle, but his face was tight. "Could you please set up a pelvic exam for me? And I'll put in some labs for her. I'm concerned she's been bleeding for awhile now."

He looked so devastatingly gloomy, but I couldn't figure out why. Was she more critical than I thought? Or did the miscarriage strike a chord with him? We all had our patients that haunted us, I supposed, thinking about each MVC patient I had and how they were all my mom and sister to me somehow.

Ignoring Slater's message on the patient board saying *URINE SAMPLE??*, I set up the room for Knox instead. It had been awhile since I sent the cath sample, I'd give him that, but I decided I'd call

the lab afterwards. Let Slater sweat a little, learn how important it was to be nice to the nurses.

By the time we went back in the room to do the exam, Henry's face was collected and calm, with the politeness that characterized all of our other interactions. I stood near the end of the bed with Henry as I wasn't needed for moral support for my patient: she clutched to her husband as she sobbed, and he stroked her hair and whispered in her ear. It broke me in a way I didn't know was possible, and I bit my lip to keep from crying.

Unlike with presumed STDs, I didn't have to send sample swabs to the lab, so I remained out of the way, my role simply to be a chaperone while Henry did the pelvic exam. When he was finished, he cleaned up his supplies—because of course he did—and we both washed up at the sink. I assured the patient I'd check on her soon and adjusted her bed so she could get up and use the restroom if she wanted, after the speculum and gel had been inside her, but she declined and turned away from me, crying wordlessly.

Henry and I left the room, and I was dying to assess him for clues, see if he was still presumably upset, though I wasn't sure why I was obsessing over it. It wasn't like we were friends, or I had any reason to console him. We never spoke unless it was about a patient, and my crush had dimmed slightly over the last four months, though I couldn't exactly say why. Despite how obviously physically attracted I was to him, we hadn't become close in any sense, and I didn't feel like I really knew him at all.

Whereas Soren, on the other hand...asshole he may be at times, but there was something to be said for the fact that I felt like I knew what he was about. Somehow, putting his less palatable qualities had me looking forward to seeing him at work now, if only because he was becoming familiar.

As if I'd Beetlejuiced him into appearing on our cube by thinking of him, he rounded the corner, no scribe this time. "Did you get my message?"

"I was helping Knox with an exam. I'll check on it now," I said in the polite tone I was mastering thanks to my preceptor. Samantha had, probably unknowingly, taught me that the more irritated you were with someone, the nicer and calmer you should be around them. Not seeming bothered was the real way to piss people off in the workplace, and the best way to keep your job.

His eyes flashed at the mention of Henry's name. "I'd appreciate my patient being a priority," he said before leaving.

I had nothing else to say to him anyways, so I shrugged and headed back to the station to grab the phone from Sam and call the lab.

Slater didn't bug me the rest of the shift, though, and I never figured out what was bothering Henry, either. After Sam and I said our goodbyes, I took a quick shower in the locker room at the hospital and changed, not wanting to go home first since my date wanted to meet downtown.

We grabbed drinks at an upscale cocktail bar, and thank goodness someone—probably Slater, I reminded myself—had brought me the food earlier because it had held me over the rest of the shift and I would probably be able to just wait and make chicken nuggets once I got home.

A part of me was hesitant to meet someone new after the date I had gone on the week prior, where this hipster named Theo had shoved me up against a wall in the hallway to his apartment to make out. It had hurt my back and, to be quite honest, scared the hell out of me because I hadn't seen it coming.

I had been so grateful nothing more had come from it, but the memory of being so shocked and confused haunted me as I approached the bar where I was meeting my new date this evening. I took a deep breath as I pulled open the door, reminding myself that I was here because I wanted to be and I wanted to have fun, and that tonight was a different night and this was a different person and things didn't have to be like they were last time.

The guy, who I think was named Jeremy but it might have been Josh, was dressed in a suit and tie. He kissed my cheek when we spotted each other. Had he said he worked in finance? They were all starting to blend at this point.

After two martinis, I was wobbling in my heeled boots, and we left the bar arm in arm, laughing.

"Where to?" Jeremy asked. (I had ducked to the restroom after we ordered drinks to check our messages to confirm it was, in fact, Jeremy).

"I'm down for a nightcap. Your place?"

He pursed his lips for a moment, and agreed. He wasn't exactly my type physically—round face, bad haircut—but he had a mischief

in his eyes that was enticing, and he had carried conversation better than I had, to be honest.

Jeremy led me into his apartment, tidy if not sparse, with a single gray sofa in the living room, and tasteful contemporary art on the walls, a shocking change from the men I'd been seeing lately with Vikings flags and towels on the walls and empty liquor bottles on display. Did he actually have taste? Or was he in a relationship with someone who wasn't home?

"Want a drink?" he offered.

"Sure." After a beat I added, "Do you have any snacks? I'm starving."

He raised a thick eyebrow, but returned with my water and snack plate. I popped an olive into my mouth, sucking on the saltiness.

"Nice place." I eyed the industrial-style lamp in the corner, art on the walls, wine-colored rug on the heated tile floors.

He thanked me and leaned back, sipping a glass of white wine which I knew was more expensive than the gas station grog I bought. When I finished my snack, I wiped my mouth carefully, not caring that I'd taste like food, and leaned closer to him.

This was it—was he a good kisser or not? If not, I decided, I'd walk out, grab a coffee or walk around until the buzz wore off, or I'd suck it up and book a ride.

I leaned forward, hoping my breath didn't smell offensive. Up close, I noticed the freckle on his cheek and the deep brown of his eyes. Locked on me, they became insanely more attractive. I saw hunger, the kind of aggressiveness that probably made him very successful at his job. The kind that made me want to have him, right here on the couch.

I pressed my mouth to his, demanding and raw. We quickly found a rhythm and I straddled him, bunching my dress at my waist as I grabbed his face and pulled him closer to me. I felt his solid mass through my black tights.

He flipped me around, laid me out fully on the couch, and positioned himself above me, kissing me once again. "Are you okay?"

"More than."

"Do you want to take this further?"

Confirming consent! I wanted him inside me right now. "Affirmative. Do you have, ah, protection?"

He frowned, but nodded and jumped up, jeans strained against his erection, and returned moments later, tossing the foil-wrapped package on the glass coffee table.

"We'll get to that. Firstly, you need tending to."

For fuck's sake. How was this guy single? There was no way. He seemed to be quite proficient in the act of love, though his physical demeanor didn't quite match up to what I was getting to know of him. Either way, I was intrigued, and uncomfortably horny, so I wanted to come, and I wanted it now.

"I'm going to make you scream, but only if you let me. This is going to be like nothing you've ever done before."

I was marveling at how turned on I was, considering I hadn't even been that excited about this date, or that attracted to him in the first place.

"Do it, then," I challenged. He slid me to the edge of the couch, and shoved my tights down from my waist, taking my underwear with them. Once discarded, he studied my bare legs. Or was it my legs?

No, his attention was definitely on my feet.

And only my feet.

He adjusted his pants, and then knelt before me.

"Amazing. You have some of the most beautiful arches I've ever seen. Do you model?"

The words were a bucket of ice water to my arousal, and I shook my head in response.

He shrugged. "You could, you know. What are they, size seven and a half?"

Oh for fuck's sake, what was going on here?

I grabbed my tights and underwear and shot up from the couch.

"Goodnight, Jeremy."

He frowned. "What's the matter?"

"The fact that you *don't* think anything is is the reason I'm leaving. You most definitely belong in a fetish community, and you need to be forthright about your, um, preferences before it gets this far. May you find what you're looking for, whatever that may be."

I dressed at warp speed, panties uncomfortably damp, and moved towards my boots in the entryway. Balancing against the wall to slide them on, I grabbed my purse, and turned to leave.

"Wait."

I turned around, unsure of what to expect. Was he going to beg me for feet pics? Or to stay for who knows what else?

He pressed a wad of cash into my palm. "It's the least I could do for the misunderstanding. You're right. I need to be transparent about my interests. Thank you for showing them to me, by the way."

Dumbfounded, I left before I could convince myself to return the cash I so desperately needed. When I reached the elevator, I laughed uncontrollably at the absurdity. Could I now add sex worker to my resume? The wad of cash in my purse—\$500—had me rethinking my career path.

An hour later as I crawled into bed, the situation with Jeremy had gone from unbelievable to hilarious to somewhat sad, and it was casting an ugly light on the dating app culture that was becoming harder to ignore. Yes, one night stands could be fun. And that was what I wanted.

But they could also make you feel humiliated, embarrassed, empty, and sometimes unsafe, and I had experienced it all over the last month or so, all in the name of forgetting a relationship that didn't make me feel like I was enough. I had my fun, but now, it wasn't cutting it anymore.

I pulled out my phone and deleted the dating app for good.

MAY

My last shift as a student was so hellacious that it would've had me rethinking my entire career path, if I hadn't already gotten myself thirty grand in the hole in student loans trying to get there. We walked into two ICU holds in our assignment, one with hourly neuro checks and the other in severe alcohol withdrawal on the CIWA protocol. An ambulance was arriving in our third room, and the fourth had just arrived from the waiting room moments before we did and needed meds and labs drawn.

The waiting room already held two dozen patients, many of whom had waited throughout the night, and the hallway from the EMS bay was full of patients who had called ambulances hours before and still hadn't been seen by a provider.

It was a whirlwind to navigate, and I felt my chest caving in, the dregs of a panic attack. "I don't even know where to start with this."

Samantha crossed her arms. "Yes, you do. I've taught you better than that."

"It's not your fault I'm an idiot," I grumbled.

Her tone was stern. "Seriously, Quinn, let's go, which room are you seeing first?"

I blew out a breath, considering. "Ambulance?"

"Yes, but peek into neuro check room on the way. Derek just gave the CIWA patient Ativan, so he can probably wait a minute."

Bracing on the door frame, I stuck my head into the room of my patient whose tiny brain bleed was hopefully not progressing. He was reading a newspaper, waving lazily at me as I greeted him in the doorway. There was no sound except loud snoring from the CIWA room, so I was confident he could wait also.

The EMT and paramedic that were waiting glared at me like I was the only thing keeping them from finishing their twenty-four hour shift.

"How's it going, gentlemen?" I tried, hoping to ease the tension. It still made me uneasy when anyone was waiting on something I hadn't done yet, like it was embarrassing that I wasn't the most competent nurse as a student. It was stupid, but impossible to shake.

"This is a forty-seven year old female, back pain for several years, made worse when she fell in the shower last night around eleven, when she called us. The patient denies blood thinners or medical history, but states she takes pain medicine around the clock. Good luck."

Sam signed their laptop for report, and I assessed the patient. She was in a bathrobe, texting on her phone. Her pink nails were chipped in several places and she reeked of cigarette smoke.

"Ma'am, I'm Quinn. I'm a student working with Sam here and we are going to get you taken care of."

"I'm in pain," she barked, not looking up.

I was scrambling to get the computer program going, when the door opened and Dr. Ross strolled to the bedside.

"I'm Dr. Ross. What brings you to the *emergency* room," he asked, leaning back against the wall with his arms crossed.

"My back hurts."

"We've seen you for back pain nearly a dozen times in two years, Ms. Gomez. What is different about it today?"

"It just hurts. I fell and it hurts worse."

"Yes, I imagine that would happen. Are you allergic to any medication? I see here that Motrin and Tylenol are on your allergy list."

"I can't take those. They don't work."

"Not liking a medication isn't the same thing as being allergic, I'm afraid. Have you followed up with a doctor for your back pain?"

"The pain doctor."

"Any neurosurgeon or orthopedist?"

“Nu-uh.”

Dr. Ross stepped closer to her, completing a neuro assessment by having her follow some instructions.

We scampered out of the room moments later behind Ross, and I assured the patient that we’d be in to check on her shortly after we had orders.

“Where to next?” asked Sam.

“Full neuro check on 15, then meds for 16, then check on CIWA guy in 14? By then this lady will probably have gotten her X-ray and we can grab whatever pain medicine Ross orders.”

“If he even orders anything. But yeah, I like that plan.”

My neuro patient was unchanged, not showing any symptoms, and I darted out of the room. After double checking and prepping my meds for 16, a pleasant man with abdominal pain and an unfortunate tendency to get pancreatitis, I rushed into the room two doors down, where my CIWA patient had awoken and notified our entire cube that he had done so.

“WHERE THE HELL AM I!” he screamed, and I approached him cautiously, Sam at my heels.

He had thrashed around in the bed, and blankets wrapped around his limbs like ivy. Sweat poured from his forehead, and his eyes were glassy black.

“Mr. Doyle, my name’s Quinn, you’re in the hospital.”

He continued thrashing, and I stepped closer, worried he was going to both hit me but also injure himself on the bed rails. “I’m going to help you, okay? Can you calm down for a minute?”

“NO I FUCKING CAN’T! WHERE THE HELL AM I?”

Sam slipped into the room, vial and syringe ready. I hadn’t realized she had even left. “Finish your CIWA assessment, but I think we both know where he’s going to land on the score range.”

I noted how he was scratching at his arms. “What are you doing, Keith?” I asked him, voice calm and friendly as I started taking his blood pressure.

“These fucking spiders are everywhere. What kind of shithole is this?”

“You’re at the hospital.”

“I’m not sick!”

His BP read 190/117. Yikes. I asked if he knew the date or if he was feeling sick to his stomach, to which he replied, “FUCK YOU,

AND FUCK OFF."

Sam saw the hesitation in my eyes. She grabbed the syringe from me and told him, "It's time to get some rest, Keith. Don't get out of this bed and call me when you wake up. Though I'm sure you'll notify the entire unit like you did last time."

He grumbled something but dozed off shortly after Sam pushed his Ativan. I set his blood pressure to record again in 15 minutes.

"I just...I hate when they don't want to be here."

Sam read the defeat on my face, and squeezed my arm. "I know. Me too."

"Get that airway cart ready, yous guys. He'll be on a vent by the end of the day," said Chandra as she readjusted her butterfly printed scrub cap. I'd still never seen her hair before, and I wondered if I ever would.

Sam snorted. "I can't take that bet."

Diwa looked up from her computer, and I thought for a moment she was going to reprimand us all, but a ghost of a smile formed at the corner of her lips. "We tube him by noon, you see. He's barely lasting the two hours now."

Sam sighed. "Diwa, my love, you're wrong. I'll be optimistic. Bet you a call shift he comes around by the time we leave."

I looked at the three of them, wondering what in the hell was wrong with them. Nadine looked us over and said, "You all need Jesus," before walking off with a stack of paperwork.

Sam sighed, examining me and the confused look on my face. "Oh, come on, we are just trying to make the best of a bad situation. That guy is in bad shape, and pretty soon he's going to need so much sedation we won't have a choice but to intubate him. You understand why, right? His nervous system is freaking out because it's so used to being doused in alcohol. Most withdrawal won't kill you, but alcohol can. We are trying to make sure that doesn't happen. But at some point the sedation requirements will make him unable to maintain his own airway, hence the tube. It'll be a good learning experience for you if it happens, though."

I still felt a pit in my stomach. Was I ever going to be able to handle patients like they did, without feeling their pain too? They had done this for so many years, were they heartless? Or just doing what they had to do in order to be able to do their jobs, caring for people on their worst possible days, shift after shift, year after year?

Before I could contemplate further, I had meds to give for Ms. Gomez—a numbing patch and a low dose of a muscle relaxer that was “just going to piss her off” according to Samantha—so I logged off and left the camaraderie of the nurses' station, wondering if I'd ever fit in here.

Forty-five minutes later I wrote Ross a message on the patient board letting him know she was still hurting, and Sam shrugged at me as I did it, as if to say *it's probably not going to change his mind, but good on you for advocating*.

An hour later, Ms. Gomez had stormed out after Dr. Ross refused to give IV pain medicine, screaming “This place is BULLSHIT” on her way out, and kicking over a trash can. Keith answered with “YOU GOT THAT SHIT RIGHT, LADY!” when she thundered past his room, the last coherent thing he would say before he was intubated by the ICU resident physician a little over an hour later, at 11:46 AM. We had paged them because his blood pressure was skyrocketing, his mental status was declining even further, and nothing we were doing was making any difference.

When the ICU team arrived, three doctors I didn't recognize, they grilled me for meds I wasn't familiar with, that may or may not have been in the airway cart, and I had to explain, once again, that I was a student and couldn't take orders while sticking my head out of the room and gesturing for Sam at the nurses' station. She had said she was going to grab something and would be right back but as soon as she left, they walked in the room. Meanwhile, the patient was incoherent and yelling nonsense, while thrashing around like a fish out of water.

Sam returned moments later and popped open the cart, drew up the meds they requested, called the pharmacy to prep a drip I had never even heard of, and fished out the intubation supplies they were asking for. I stayed in the corner of the room, out of the way, feeling stupider by the second. The look of pure terror in Keith's eyes before they sedated him to place the tube was enough to make me think twice before pouring a drink after my shift that evening.

Diwa was all smiles when she took her lunch break, free from her call shift this weekend. Sam, on the other hand, was visibly irritated as she charted the intubation meds and procedure.

“I never should have taken that bet,” she muttered as she clicked through the rows of info. Keith's ventilator alarmed and my eyes

shot to the machine, desperate to understand it, but the sound stopped. Sam hadn't even taken her eyes away from the computer. "Look, I just don't have time to show you how to do all this charting right now. Just watch how I do it for now, okay?"

We were getting everything done to hopefully take a lunch break soon when Nadine called our pager phone. "They're ready for you in the OR, baby."

"What?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"16. He's goin' to the OR."

Pancreatitis guy? Sam and I looked at each other, and frowned. She pulled up his chart, and damn if he didn't have an inflamed gallbladder that needed to be removed.

Sam said, "We better get him out. We'll get Chandra to keep an eye on this guy while we take the other to surgery."

Since we already had an open room with Ms. Gomez discharging herself, and now we'd have one more open, I dreaded what was going to be waiting for us when we got back. Our two holds were definitely not going anywhere—Keith was waiting on an ICU room and so was our neuro patient, but there were none to be had.

"I hate unit holds," said Sam as we left the strangely controlled environment of pre-op and wished our patient well. "Especially when you're doing a full four-room assignment. It's damn near impossible to juggle everything." She rolled her eyes. "Sometimes, I wonder why I still work in this fucking hell hole."

Our pager phone went off with a text: *Pizza in the break room!*

I was stoked for free food, but Sam's thin-lipped smile and subsequent explanation helped me understand what was really going on: it was so busy that we weren't going to get lunch relief, and couldn't take a break, so admin—or probably the docs, Sam speculated—had ordered pizzas for us to make sure everyone at least got something to eat, even if they couldn't leave their patients for a true break.

My mouth was watering and my stomach making whale calls, but we had two new urgent patients to see—paged overhead as level two. Both of our empty rooms had been filled, one with a mental health chief complaint and the other with a two-week-old baby with a fever, which was going to be "a hell of a learning experience" according to Sam.

"Goddammit, Tara," Sam lamented as she slumped back into her chair after seeing the patient board at the nurses' station. It rattled me, seeing her having a bad day like this. Because if seasoned nurses like her could have days like this, what hope did I have?

"Give me the phone," she said.

I knew she was calling the CC before she dialed.

"It's Sam. Send us someone for that neonate. We can't safely care for all four of these patients, Debbie. And I'm teaching, too. Really need you to make something happen with the unit for 14. Thank you."

I couldn't hear her reply, but Sam hung up and handed me the phone again.

"She's sending Terry to take care of the baby. Go see the patient who was triaged as homicidal—please be careful—and do your assessment. If the doc signs a 1013, you'll have to have security take their belongings. For now, just have them change into the patient scrubs and place everything in a bag. I'll watch the other two."

When I approached the room, Slater had sped up from the other side of the door and walked in ahead of me, which I thought was pretty rude considering I had been closer.

The patient, a thin man with graying hair and a shifty look about him, had shouted that he'd kill us all if we came any closer. The police officer in the corner looked to us and shrugged as the man's handcuffs rattled against the stretcher.

Slater turned around to leave, but when I approached a little closer to try and get a full assessment the patient reared back and spit at me. I froze, completely in shock at the atrocious warm feeling on my cheek and forehead. Before I could form a reaction, Slater pulled me away from him and barked, "Spit mask. Now. And get him 30 of Geodon IM."

I didn't even know where those masks were, and couldn't remember the dilution ratio to mix the drug. The restrained rage on Slater's face had frightened me, making me feel like this was somehow my fault for trying to do my assessment and that I had made everything worse by coming closer. Tears welled up in the rim of my eyes, and he looked away from me, leading me out of the room and to a sink to wash up, then disappearing without another word.

The exhaustion on Sam's face was palpable as I approached her after patting my face dry with a paper towel. "What happened?" She asked, and I hated how I felt some fucked-up sense of guilt for making the day more complicated.

I hesitated, eliciting a frown from Sam. "He spit on me and Slater asked for a spit mask, but I don't even know where that is, and some Geodon, but I can't remember how to mix it, and—" my lip trembled as I tried to finish the sentence, hoping a single tear didn't turn to many.

"Okay, hold on a second." She disappeared into Keith's room, and returned less than a minute later, asking Diwa to listen out for him. Sam led me to the sink and I washed and dried my face again, more thoroughly this time, and flushed my eyes with the fire-hose looking attachment with her guidance, feeling like I'd never get his saliva off of me. Chandra, the all-star mental health nurse, grabbed a spit mask from the supply closet while Sam mixed the drug for his shot. Chandra placed the mask, speaking to the patient firmly but calmly, and Sam jabbed his arm while he was listening to Chandra explain that spitting was assault and we were not having that today.

The patient was zonked half an hour later and I didn't have any more trouble from him the rest of the shift, which was, mercifully, only a few hours. He needed to be formally evaluated by a mental health assessor, and it was going to take hours, so Soren and I didn't speak further because there was nothing else to be done at this point.

Debbie was waiting for us at the nurses' station after we had medicated our patient, concern shadowing her usually cheery face. "We need to get some paperwork filled out for your exposure."

"Exposure?"

"Did the patient not spit on your face?"

I nodded, wondering who had told her, since we hadn't gotten around to doing so yet.

"In scenarios like this, when staff members are exposed to body fluids with the capability to transmit diseases, we have to fill out paperwork and complete testing to ensure we have done everything to prevent you from contracting any disease."

It felt like my heart had dropped down into my pelvis somewhere.

"Now usually, we get patient consent to test their blood for HIV and hepatitis, but Dr. Slater has authorized the testing in this case. If

anything comes back positive, you will be offered testing and treatment free of charge, okay?"

Tears welled up. I couldn't speak.

"Oh, honey, it's going to be just fine. I'm not trying to scare you. We just want to be sure we cover all our bases, okay?"

I excused myself to the restroom, giving myself some time to process what was happening. The worrisome tears turned to rage as I braced my hands on the sink and thought about how goddamn unfair it was that I was here trying to help people and they were dousing me in body fluids on purpose.

By the end of the shift, we had taken Keith to the ICU, shipped the baby to the children's hospital for meningitis, and rushed the brain bleed patient to surgery when his mental status changed and a stat CT showed a worsening bleed. I hadn't even thought anything was wrong, but Sam had come in with me to do the assessment and had noticed that the patient was favoring his left arm, and his speech had changed, subtle but enough for her to notice.

I felt like I had committed a crime simply because I hadn't noticed what Sam had seen, and it felt horrible to think I could miss something like that and not even know. I was nearing tears yet again after she paged the neurosurgeon, and she pulled me into a supply closet.

"Listen up. You need to pull it together. I don't know why you're being so hard on yourself but you need to lighten up. No one expects you to be perfect starting out. But we do expect you to ask for help when you need it and get another opinion if you aren't sure about something, alright?"

Somehow, she had only made me feel worse.

Once I finally got to my car I cried again, for no other reason than I couldn't believe I was walking into this career by choice. This was all I had wanted for so long, to have a career that would let me live comfortably and maybe put some good back into the world, but I had egregiously underestimated how difficult it would be.

But I was in too deep now.

Wiping my eyes and pulling myself together, I drove home in silence, a luxury I had sorely missed for the past twelve and a half hours.

JUNE

On the morning of the new hire barbecue, I decided everything I had to wear to it was unsuitable: too formal, too casual, too potentially slutty. I'd never gone to a company party before, and it was stressing me out. Not only did I have to learn a slew of names and roles, it seemed a little too much like a job interview, though I'd already accepted my position weeks ago.

I made myself two promises: one that I wouldn't get too drunk, and another that I wouldn't sleep with anyone from work. I was hoping that sticking to the first rule would make the second easier, though I'd gotten accustomed to satisfying my own needs since the last awful date with Jeremy.

Gretchen was working on a watercolor in the living room when I emerged dressed for the party, clad in the floral sundress and sandals I had bought with my "emergency" credit card. She whistled, and I fluffed out my shoulder-length hair in show. I had left my makeup dewy and minimalist, not even bothering to cover the smattering of freckles across my cheeks.

The barbecue was at a park across town, about half an hour's walk, and I didn't want to arrive looking like a melted ice cream cone. I also didn't want to drive home because I wanted to walk in the summer evening, my favorite time of year in Minnesota, so I booked a ride to the park on my phone. I was hoping Sam would

come with me, but Bailey had a birthday party to attend, so I arrived solo.

A trio of charcoal grills billowed gray smoke into the sky amidst the tables of food. A cringy banner stating "Welcome to the Chaos, New ER Hires!" hung across an archway of balloons. I walked underneath it, and was greeted by a few familiar faces: Nadine, of course, who had to get the scoop on the new hires, and Dr. Blake, arguably the most loved doctor by staff and patients alike.

Dr. Blake had worked in the department about ten years, and Nadine had dished nothing on him whatsoever after he'd warmly introduced himself to me months ago when I started my rotation. By now I knew that if she had nothing to say, it was because there was nothing to tell.

He was happily married with children, and every nurse's favorite doc to clear the waiting room with. Of all the ER docs, he got the fastest response from his consults to specialties and was quick to have any nurse's back and smooth things over with a rough patient or family member. Today, he was dressed casually in khaki shorts and a crisp white polo shirt. A beautiful woman who had to be his wife stood at his side. He waved when he saw me, and beckoned me over.

"Quinn! Glad you could make it. This is my wife, Doreen." He spoke with a hint of a Jamaican accent that crept in on vowels that only added to his charm. Doreen beamed at me, her face framed by her long braids.

I shook her proffered hand. Her skin was softer than velvet.

"Happy to meet you," I said. "Thanks for having me."

Dr. Blake smiled. "Of course! I love helping to organize these each year. I think it helps everyone get to know each other, so that we can work better together from the start." He paused, thinking. "Although, since you've been doing your rotations in the department, you're at more of an advantage than most." He smiled and said, "Please, go grab a beverage, and a plate. We'll catch up later."

I smiled at them both and then took his suggestion, wondering if I'd be able to smuggle a hot dog in my purse to eat later on. I grabbed a can of pop and balanced a plate atop it as I loaded it with a hamburger, potato salad, and chips, waving to Tito who was manning the grill. It surprised me to see him here. Somehow, his

vibrant personality didn't seem suited to the afternoon family barbecue—I had seen him crush a Lady Gaga performance in sky-high stilettos soon after we met, and the image had stuck.

Picnic tables were covered with pastel-colored tablecloths, and had fake floral arrangements in the center. I was certain Nadine had done the decorating. Since I was somewhat late, many folks had already eaten and were playing lawn games. Employees and their families were laughing and chattering away, clustered in small groups, and I managed to score an empty table, not quite ready to converse until I'd eaten.

I was halfway finished with my plate when he approached.

"Mind if I join you?" asked Henry. He had a white button down shirt on, sleeves rolled up to the elbows and blue linen shorts, not a wrinkle in sight. His hair gleamed like burnished copper in the sunshine, with the occasional gold strand blended in.

"Please do," I said through a mouthful of potato salad, trying not to ogle him as he took a seat across from me.

"Haven't seen you in awhile. Did you finish all your classes?"

"Sure did. Just waiting for my boards to post. I think I passed, though."

He smiled, spearing a piece of watermelon with his fork. "I'm sure you did. How's your summer going?"

I shrugged. "Kinda like any other season, to be honest. I'd love to take a weekend somewhere, or find a beach, but I've gotta start working first."

Henry's eyes rose to focus on something behind me. "Care to join us, Soren?"

"I'd love to, Knox." Slater sat next to me, and I scooted over slightly to give him room. He sipped from a can of sparkling water, and began cutting the meat on his plate: a hamburger patty with mustard and pickles next to two plain hot dogs. A scoop of fruit lay next to it, along with broccoli salad. He noticed me eyeing his food and said, "How's your lunch, Quinn? More filling than what we carry in the patient nourishment room, I hope?"

He grinned, and I felt a flush creep up my neck. I wanted to smack him, but I turned and looked to Henry instead, who was stifling a grin himself.

"I heard you tell Knox you'd love to travel more if you could," Soren said, changing the subject. "Where exactly would you like to

go?"

There he went again with that disarming bluntness. I took another bite of potato salad as I considered. "Honestly, anywhere on a coastline. And not the Lakes. I grew up around here, and summers were always spent on Superior. Beautiful, of course, but I always wanted to go somewhere new. See the ocean, explore an older town like St. Augustine or New Orleans or something, and then make it to California someday."

Henry's full attention on me, with an easy smile in the warm sunshine, made me feel almost dizzy. "I definitely understand the need to get away. And it would be so easy for you to take a travel assignment in the future if you wanted. Though I think I speak for us all when I say we hope to keep you on our team here."

"Noted," I said with a smile. "Where are you from, exactly?"

"Charleston, South Carolina. It was a beautiful place to grow up, and an even better place to leave behind. I do miss my family, though. And mild winters."

"I know what you mean." My smile faded as I thought of summers with Mom and Steph, camping at the Lake and splashing on the shores of Superior.

Soren stopped cutting his hot dog when he noticed my face, but said nothing and sipped his drink. After he swallowed, he turned to face me.

"Where did you grow up?" I asked, hoping to deflect the likely incoming probe into my family situation.

"I was born in Sweden, but moved to New York when I was very young. My mother is Swedish and my father was living in Manhattan at the time. They met on a project he was involved in. She was the designer and had traveled from Stockholm to Manhattan to supervise the installation. He was doing a walk through for the investors and when they saw each other, they both said it felt like the world stopped. They fell in love and that was it for them."

His eyes glinted, brighter than I'd ever seen them. Despite my instinct to taunt him, I found that I wanted him to elaborate. Just because my family had been ripped apart by trauma, and was fractured to begin with, didn't mean everyone else's was. It was nice hearing the other side of things.

"There were compromises, of course," he continued. "For instance, Dad asked Mom to move to New York, which she did eventually, but she got to choose my name." He winked at me, and my heart stuttered with how handsome he was doing it.

Henry looked between us, amused. "I'd never met a Soren before you."

"Most people haven't."

Slater was eyeing me while I sipped my Sprite. Henry finished eating, wiping his mouth and setting his napkin on his empty plate. I felt as nervous as a rat in a room full of cats, and I was twitching my legs underneath the table. I'd never spent time with either of them outside of the hospital—except my drunken run-in with Soren four months ago—so to see them in an informal environment was putting me on edge. We also didn't have the forced conversation about our patients, and I was feeling myself becoming more withdrawn by the second, afraid I'd embarrass myself somehow.

As if sensing this, Henry rose, taking his plate. "Nice talking with you both. Enjoy the party. Maybe I'll see you out on the field," he said, eyeing the lawn games.

He and Soren exchanged nods, and I waved in farewell.

I exhaled loudly before I realized I still had company.

"You've got it that bad for him, then?" Soren said, face radiating the pleasure this observation brought him.

"Oh, fuck off," I told him, and stood to leave. He laughed as I stormed away.

When I tossed my plate into the trash can, I ran into Nadine, who insisted on introducing me to all the other new hires. There were seven new nurses starting in addition to myself, and three new techs. After meeting everyone, I was ready to leave, or at the very least have a stiff drink—the bevy of introductions I'd gone through had worn out my social battery. I was starting down the sidewalk to leave when I spotted Slater, and hoping to avoid him, I turned around only to find Dr. Blake waving me over to the flag football game.

I had a hard time saying no to him, with his sparkling personality and infectious smile, and found myself kicking off my sandals and joining the team. Dr. Blake was the quarterback, and ordered me to receive. Receiving meant to catch the ball, right? In my haste to do anything but talk to Slater, I had joined the game failing to recall that

I had never, in fact, thrown or caught a football in my life. But I had played soccer for a few years growing up, so I had the footwork down, and I was still quick enough to get around, I thought.

Tito spiked him the ball and Blake dropped back, and I took off past the line of defenders. I cut back, looking for the ball, and dove towards it once Blake made his pass. Why I had chosen this moment to contend for the Offensive Rookie of the Year is beyond me. But I wasn't the only one showing out—my head made a deafening *smack* as I collided with something that had to be human. I crumpled to the ground and the crowd rushed over.

"I'm so sorry," said a voice next to me. I looked up, rubbing my forehead, to see a tall girl examining her cracked glasses, and recognized her as one of the new nurses I had just met. I think her name was Shelby. "I guess I needed a new prescription anyways," she said, rubbing her own head.

The others had arrived by now, Tito with two ice packs fashioned from hamburger bun bags. Dr. Blake knelt down beside me.

"Are you alright?" he asked, peering down to take a look at me.

"Yeah." A goose egg was forming on my forehead, and I rubbed at it, wincing at the pain.

"Are you feeling dizzy at all?"

"No." I realized the lie as I flopped back to the ground to keep the crowd from spinning. Was it from the pain?

Dr. Blake caught me and eased me down.

Someone said, "Do we need EMS?"

"Don't call anyone yet," Blake replied.

Another voice that I unfortunately recognized was by my side moments later.

"Rodney, does she need a scan? I didn't see the hit." Soren towered over me, leaning down to examine my pupils.

"I'm fine," I protested, moving to sit up. Soren lay a gentle hand on my shoulder, slowly easing me back down, and I winced when I noticed the abrasion on my elbow. A similar stinging was making itself known on my kneecap.

"Not just yet, dearie," said Blake. "Do you have any pain in your neck?" His soft fingers reached around, prodding the back of my neck and my hairline. "Any numbness or tingling in your arms or legs?"

I shook my head.

"How's your vision?"

"Better by the second."

Blake and Slater looked at each other above me.

"What do you think, Soren? I think we can spare her the scan unless anything changes."

Soren peered down at me, assessing. "She'd need close monitoring. But I suppose I'm inclined to agree with you."

"Who can we call to come pick you up?" asked Blake.

My heart sank, like it always did when this sort of thing happened. Another horrible part of moving through life alone was the lack of an emergency contact. Liam had been my contact person for a time, as my roommate then boyfriend. But not anymore.

When I'd filled out the new hire paperwork at the hospital last month, I'd put Sam's name down, after asking her if it was alright one rare quiet morning when we were on trauma. I swore tears had pricked her eyes when she noticed my flushed cheeks, the embarrassment that always surfaced when I realized I had no one in my life who would rush to my side when I needed them, but she had said yes, without any further commentary.

I knew I could call her today if I needed to, but I really didn't want to bother her while she was busy with her daughter. She was a mother to a ten year old, not a lost twenty-four year old like me.

Soren gave me an appraising look, but said nothing, easing me up to a sitting position while I rubbed at my forehead, hoping to stall the conversation and at least come up with a plausible response that didn't out me in front of everyone. I couldn't handle the pity that I knew would follow.

"Does anyone have any ibuprofen?" Soren asked the group of people surrounding us, who quickly dispersed in search of their handbags. I shot him a thankful smile for deflecting the conversation, which he subtly returned, an almost imperceptible lift to the corner of his mouth. Had he known I didn't have an answer to Blake's question? And was he sparing me the embarrassment? It didn't seem like him, but I couldn't come up with any other motive.

Nadine returned moments later, producing the tablets from her parachute-sized purse, which I swallowed with a bottle of water she gave me. I thanked her and stood, Soren and Dr. Blake letting go of my arms once I was upright. I wondered if it was so they could examine how I was walking, which was steady and unfaltering.

"I think this is my cue to go," I said. The crowd had thinned, and most people had resumed their activities, though the football game was certainly over. Shelby had already gotten up too, Henry having examined her.

Lucky bitch.

Blake had rejoined his wife in a group near the picnic tables, leaving only Slater at my side.

"Did you drive here?" he asked as I started walking away, unsure of my destination.

I cursed. No I hadn't, wanting to take that stupid summer evening walk. I stopped walking and made a face, considering my options, then decided to pull out my phone to book a ride.

Soren had stopped walking too, and faced me, brows knitted. "What are you doing?"

"Getting myself a ride home."

"And who will be there when you get home?"

"What is with all the questions?"

"Don't think it escaped my notice that you didn't have an answer to Rodney's question," he said quietly. My face fell, and rather than seeing a look of triumph on his face for figuring me out, his expression was carefully neutral. How hard had I hit my head? I was expecting him to taunt me, give me hell about it.

But just like that night at the bar all those months ago, it was like he could see right through my veil and crack open the deepest parts of me. It was very unsettling. There were parts of me even I hadn't had the courage to face, simply shoving down the unpleasant emotions so I could get on with my life after the accident. Eventually, though, everything would come to call, but the possibility of that was as implausible as a winning lottery ticket. I'd face the broken parts of me at some point, probably, but for now I resolved to keep them locked away even deeper, lest Soren or anyone else begin to smash through my walls.

But he stared at me, unfazed, crossing his arms across his chest. I suspected that he would stand there all afternoon and into the night if that's what it took for me to answer him. Was he as determined as I was? I wasn't sure how that was possible. But there was no point in fighting him now. My head was killing me, and I was definitely ready to leave this park.

"I don't want to bug Sam. She's with her daughter today. My roommate is a bartender and she's working tonight so she probably won't be home when I get back."

He pursed his lips and stared at me, eyes bright. "Your place or mine?"

He said it like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"What in the hell are you talking about?" I demanded, hands on my grass-stained hips. The movement sent a lash of pain through my skull, making me wince.

Soren slipped his hands into his pockets. "Would you rather me come stay with you this evening, or did you want to spend the night in my guest room? I'm not letting you go unmonitored tonight."

I cursed at him. Where did he get off giving me options like he had the power to do so?

He pressed on. "Of course, if you'll agree to get a CT scan that is most likely unnecessary at this point but my requirement for you to go home alone, be my guest. Though I'm sure your student insurance is absolutely piss-poor and it'll cost a fortune."

I cursed at him again, which only caused him to grin like a jester and place his hands on his hips, mirroring me.

"Patient speaking in aggressive manner but appears otherwise oriented," he mock-dictated.

I rolled my eyes, which made my head pound even more. I clasped my hand to it, and Soren studied me, his face softening in concern.

"Really, though. Shelby's wife is a paramedic and she knows what to do for her tonight and what to look for. So we were comfortable with her going home tonight. The only reason we aren't calling an ambulance is because we are reassured with our assessment at this point. I'd request that we rule out a head injury with a CT so that we can be absolutely certain, but with you being asymptomatic it's not absolutely necessary. If we had any doubt, though, we'd be putting you on a backboard and sending you to the department for a workup."

He crossed his arms again, that smirk starting on his lips. He knew he was going to win this, because he was, to my absolute horror, correct. Besides, I'd be an absolute blockhead to not accept free medical care. Even from him.

I sighed, throwing my arms up in defeat. "Fine. You win. I'll stay at your place so you don't freak out my roommate when she gets home tonight and sees you on our couch."

But instead of rejoicing in my acquiescence, he rubbed a hand across his jaw, pulling at his bottom lip as he focused on the field behind me. I hated how I couldn't stop focusing on that lip, though I despised the person attached to it.

"And you're comfortable with that? Spending the night with me? Because if you don't want to, we can brainstorm something else. I'm concerned about you, but I..." He faced me head on, the intensity of him like a thundercloud, even though his words were unusually considerate. "I want you to be comfortable, too. I don't want to bully you into a situation that you don't want to be in."

If I didn't know better, I'd say Soren seemed nervous, though I'd never seen him act in such a manner. It warmed me, somehow, to see him flustered. Weirdly, it also made me even more comfortable around him than I already was—comfortable enough to speak my mind, comfortable enough to fight with him.

The butterflies that skittered around my belly at the concern he was showing me made it hard for me to feign annoyance, but I managed, because acknowledging the unfamiliar warmth seemed unwise.

"I'm fine, Soren. Which you'll find out for yourself once we spend the evening together in whatever crypt you call home."

"That will be perfectly acceptable." He held out his arm but I ignored it and stormed away from him, irritated by his self-satisfied smirk and how happy this was making him.

I hoped I was heading in the direction of his car. Just because he was right didn't mean I had to be pleased about it. And I was most certainly going to make my displeasure known. Soren seemed to enjoy it, though, and it only pissed me off even more as he casually strolled behind me.

The chirp and flashing lights of the parked car I approached signaled I was, in fact, walking in the right direction. Before I opened the passenger door I looked back at him, several paces behind strolling along with his hands in his pockets. At the dip of his head and his telltale smirk I hopped in the SUV, a midnight navy BMW with tan leather seats.

I fumed the entire ride to his condo, so irritated that he was acting like such a domineering protective man, and warring with myself because deep down I knew he had reason to be concerned and I'd be a glaring idiot to not accept his offer to be monitored overnight, for free. And if I was being totally, completely honest with myself, some stupid, insensible part of me *wanted* to be around him, and even admitting that to myself had fueled my irritation. *Slater*, the man who had made my first code worse than it already was, and only made my student rotation more daunting as the months had crept by.

How hard had Shelby and I hit each other, anyway?

Was I suffering from brain damage?

I'd been so stuck in my own head I hadn't thought to ask him to take me by my place for a change of clothes, and it pissed me off further when I realized I'd be wearing either something he owned or nothing at all tonight, my brand new white linen sundress destroyed with grass and mud.

We said nothing on the way up to his place, the penthouse of course, and when the elevator doors opened I nearly gasped. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows to my left, the city skyline lay before us like a glittering meadow of concrete and glass.

His place was clean, and designed well, minimalistic and modern but with little touches of comfort: a cozy armchair in a corner with a lamp, soft throws across the back of the sofa, plush area rugs, prints and canvases hung on the wall in sleek frames.

Off the open kitchen and dining area we had walked into was a hallway with three bedrooms and a study. He set me up in his guest room that had enough open floor space to do a gymnastics routine, bringing me a gray pair of sweatpants and a plain black tee to sleep in.

"Did you want to shower? And I can try and launder that if you want?" He said, noticing my wrecked sundress. I declined and followed him for a tour of the rest of the condo, following behind him like I didn't want to get lost at Disney World. Beyond the kitchen and dining room, through a wide archway, was a living area, and off the living room was a terrace that rivaled my tiny house's square footage. Built-in lighting, an outdoor fireplace, and several couches and chaise lounges with a stunning view of the city made it somewhere I'd never want to leave if I lived here.

Back in the living room, I was admiring the stone work on the indoor fireplace and toying with my hair absentmindedly when a large clump of grass fell from it, plopping onto the polished oak floor. Sheepish, I told him I should probably clean up, and he agreed, amused.

Though it was large enough for four people, I stepped into the tile shower in my private bathroom alone, washing off the grass and mud stains on my legs and wincing at the soap coating the abrasions on my knee and elbow. *Wash gently with soap, he'd said, then I'll dress them for you when you're finished.*

I groaned to no one in particular, unsure of why he was annoying me so much by being nice. Was it because I had initially categorized him as an asshole, and peeling away the layers of his personality was revealing a more complex character? I didn't know, but thought about it as I used the drugstore shampoo in the shower, at odds with the luxury of the place.

After I'd towel dried my hair and gotten dressed in his clothes—putting my bra back on but forgoing my underwear, because I hated the thought of putting sweaty underwear back on—I met him in the living room.

He was sitting in the comfortable-looking chair in the corner near the floor-to-ceiling windows, glasses poised at the end of his nose as he read from a hardcover book whose spine was perched on his lap, hidden from view. He had changed into navy blue joggers and a white tee, and to be quite honest, looked explosively attractive. It hit me again how alone we were and I took a seat as far away from him as I could, on the edge of his white leather sofa across the room.

"Would you like some bandages?"

I nodded, folding my hands in my lap.

"Quinn."

Soren removed his glasses and set the book down. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and peered at me, concerned. I tried not to notice how the shift made his arms strain against his shirt.

"You don't have to be afraid. You're only here so I can keep an eye on you, okay? I won't—I'd never do anything like that. You're my patient tonight, and nothing more."

I nodded, though I resumed wringing my hands, unable to fight the apprehension. Did I have a concussion? Soren Slater was being

nice to me, and was going to monitor me overnight *in his condo*.

"And even though I can be a real prick, I always take good care of my patients, don't I?"

I laughed and shrugged, and he rose to get supplies, relief smoothing out the wrinkle on his brow.

He tended to my elbow first, examining for foreign bodies before applying antibiotic ointment to a non-stick pad and wrapping with a gauze roll.

"I know, not bad for a doc, right?" he commented after he finished.

"Actually, yeah, it's a little surprising."

"You probably don't know that I trained in wilderness medicine, forever ago. I'm no stranger to hands-on care."

When I began pulling up my pant leg for him to dress my knee, I cringed as I tried to work it over the wound, unable to pull the tapered leg of the pant over the abrasion.

He cleared his throat. "It might be easier to just pull the pants down."

"I'm gathering that." My face was the shade of a ripe strawberry, I just knew it. Why in the hell did I have to be commando at this moment? I prayed the t-shirt kept everything covered as I shimmied the sweats down my legs. He turned away while I did it.

The man noticed *everything*, I swear. Every inkling of emotion that coursed my face. I had settled the oversized tee in place by the time he turned back around, and I stuck my leg out to him.

He repeated the process of examining and dressing the wound, and when he was finished, he collected the supplies and disappeared into the kitchen while I slid my pants back up. I heard the sink running briefly, then he returned.

"I'm allowing a regular diet for the evening. What would you like?"

My mouth began watering at the thought of food, so I ignored the fact that he thought he was *allowing* me to do anything. At least I hadn't smuggled the hot dog in my purse, I thought, knowing he'd either be weirdly pissed or make fun of me forever about it. I thought of what I currently couldn't buy myself to eat for a special treat, which was most good things.

"Thai. There's a great place not too far from here."

"Thai Tower? I love that place. What's your order?"

"Green curry shrimp. And an order of spring rolls. And Thai iced tea, since I already know you aren't gonna let me drink tonight."

"Smart girl. Why not?"

"Because if I vomit you want to be sure it's because of the head injury and not the wine I wish I was drinking instead."

"Brilliant, you are."

I looked away, willing myself not to get all moony-eyed over how completely *sexy* those words sounded in his smooth, low voice.

While we waited for our food to arrive, I plucked a book at random off his shelf, playing roulette with a peek into his personality, and took it with me to the balcony, along with a throw from the back of the sofa.

The balcony was nearly bigger than my entire house, and faced the downtown skyline. I'd bet a month's rent that the other balconies off the bedrooms overlooked the river, and I made a mental note to check later, maybe catch a glimpse of whatever night sky was able to bleed through the city lights.

I settled into the outdoor chaise lounge, and took in the view. At this hour during the summer, the sun was persistent in its light, not fully setting until nearly nine. A faint pink glow remained beyond the relief of the skyscrapers ahead, and I admired it as I got comfortable with my book.

A Farewell to Arms.

Of fucking course this guy had Hemingway novels.

We were assigned *Hills Like White Elephants* in high school, and I hated every second of it, and vowed never to pick up another of his books again. But I hadn't known what I was picking up when I blindly pulled it from the shelf, and I needed something to distract me from the fact that I was spending the night at a beautiful doctor's condo. One who always seemed to get under my skin.

I was nearly dozing off when the back door opened and Soren strolled out to me, hands in his pockets. He noted the novel in my lap.

"Fan of the classics, are you?"

"I'll read any trash that's lying around, apparently."

His smile was like a cat's. "Come eat with me."

"Fine."

"Patient appears to be in good health with a hearty appetite. Conversive, if not antagonistic."

"Give it up with the mock dictation," I said, smacking him with the book. I placed it back on the shelf on our way to the dining table, grateful I didn't have to worry about spilling green curry on his white sofa, even if it was leather.

I slid into the chair across from him, marveling at how normal it seemed. Though there was some background anxiety about being alone with him, which could certainly take over if I thought about it too much, I still always said exactly what I was feeling around him, and that was freeing.

Never mind that I normally made snide and unprofessional replies to his taunting. Never mind that it had all started when I had been drunk at a bar. I could be *myself* around him, and that was huge. The thought made me smile.

"Curry that good tonight? Or were you thinking about Knox again?"

"I might think that way about you too if you didn't piss me off so much," I shot back.

My words sank in, and I reached for my Thai tea to give myself something to do other than stew on what I'd said in haste.

He raised an eyebrow as he chewed on his noodles. "Okay, then." He wiped his mouth and faced me, those smoldering eyes laser focused on me, betraying the levity of his tone. "Though I am pretty sure if we didn't have smart ass remarks, we wouldn't have anything at all."

I laughed, setting my tea down. "Maybe so."

Soren relaxed then, an almost imperceptible drop of his shoulders. "How's your head feeling, by the way?"

"Like I hit someone head-on."

"Any nausea?"

"Only when I think about you."

He reared his head back laughing, straight teeth on full display. "I'd be concerned if you *weren't* roasting me."

"Same." I stabbed my fork through a piece of shrimp, then paused before I reached my mouth. "Say," I began.

He leaned in, a subtle movement that was unspeakably attractive and not just because it flexed his arms and shoulders. It was as if he *had* to know what I was going to say.

"The first time we had a patient together..." I trailed off, wondering if it was worth bringing up. Then I remembered how

much it had pissed me off the way he had acted and I continued. "Why were you such a dick when I was doing those compressions?"

"Because you were too shallow. I saw your student badge and wanted to make sure you learned the proper depth."

"You could've been nicer about it."

He sighed. "You're right, but I was in the zone. And had residents. I like to focus on what needs to be done first, and being nice second."

"Or third, or fourth, or fifth..."

He cut his eyes at me. "You've made your point, Quinn."

"Actually, I don't know that I have. There was something else, too. You remember when we had that chainsaw injury? And you looked at me like I'd run over your puppy because I was using the stool in the room to start his IV?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "It's ringing a bell."

"What the hell was that all about?"

"I wasn't trying to be so hostile. I just always use the stools in the room because I don't like to tower over patients when I talk to them. I sit on their level, to speak with them like equals and to try and put them at ease. It's been studied, that talking to patients when seated results in more trust and comfort in the provider." He leaned back in his chair, and rubbed his jaw. "That day, I was running behind and my scribe was brand new and I was just trying to get in and out as soon as I could. You just so happened to be sitting where I needed to be. It wasn't personal."

There was one interaction in particular that had been bothering me for awhile now, and now that we were clearing things up, I had to know. "What about when that guy spit on me? You looked at me like you were really pissed at what I'd done, and it freaked me out. You just yanked me out of there and didn't even speak to me the rest of the shift. Why?"

A mask of deathly calm spread over his features, and his voice was quiet. "I nearly threw away a career I'd spent a decade preparing for and would have ended up in handcuffs myself if I hadn't dragged you out of that room after what that asshole did to you. I do *not* tolerate anyone assaulting my nurses. Especially you."

I felt a thrill course through me, but nodded and sipped my tea. So maybe he wasn't a total villain after all. But what about all the times he'd given me grief? Giving me orders when he knew I

couldn't take them, teasing me for eating the patient food? Were those things personal? Even if they were personal, and meant something else, he had insisted I was only his patient tonight, so I didn't want to take us any further into an awkward place. No further than I'd taken us after admitting my attraction to him, anyways. I changed the subject, hoping the damage wasn't already done.

"Why Hemingway novels?" I asked, curiosity getting the better of me. "Serious question. I hate how he, like many other men, can't seem to write without undertones of sexism."

"Fair point. I don't intend to justify his actions by disagreeing with you. But the man had a unique style, that's undeniable. Besides, shouldn't more men read those novels so women can tell them everything that's wrong with them?"

"We are too exhausted trying to correct the wrongs of today. We'll get to the historical sins if we have time." We both laughed, and I continued. "But seriously, I only read women authors at this point. It's my own form of protest."

"Interesting." Soren set his fork down and leaned back in his chair, resting his hands behind his head. "It's a little discriminatory, though, isn't it?"

I shrugged. "Maybe so, but it's the war I'm waging."

His eyes blazed. "I like your fire."

I polished off the rest of my green curry and rubbed at my forehead, where it had started throbbing again. Soren watched me, and I stared him down, anticipating what he'd do next as my personal physician.

"Glad to see you have a hearty appetite. Are you up for a movie? Or would you rather go to bed?" He sighed, realizing his words, and I swore his cheeks bloomed a faint pink.

Though I knew what he meant, I looked away before my own skin flushed, glancing at the buildings outside the floor-to-ceiling window. It was nearing sunset finally, and though I needed some Tylenol and an ice pack, I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep yet, from the underlying thrum that had been running through me ever since we'd left the party together.

I gasped, considering the implications. We had left a work party together in broad daylight. I was so flustered from the injury I hadn't

even considered how it would affect my career. Everyone would gossip about it, of course, but would I get in trouble?

My heart raced to think of it. I hadn't even started yet and I was already worried I was fucking up.

Soren reached a hand across the table, stopping before he touched mine. "What's the matter? Are you well?"

"I—I'm just worried about the fact that—" I blew out a breath, hating what I had to say next. I put my head in my hands, not wanting to see his face as I told him, "We left the party together, Soren. What's that going to look like? Not to mention, Nadine would win the gossip lottery if she knew I was wearing your clothes right now."

And somehow, in that perfectly inopportune moment, my tears chose to evacuate their ducts and spill all down my face as I held it in my hands. I maybe could've gotten away with it, if I hadn't been sitting across from a man who apparently has a fucking PhD in Body Language Interpretation, at least with me. I sniffed, wiping away tears, and crying even more once I realized how mortified I was.

A napkin appeared in front of me. When I wiped my eyes, I turned towards the hand that had gently grasped my wrist. Soren crouched next to me, peering up.

I sighed. "Oh my god. You are never going to let me live this down. I'm going to have to move."

He frowned, but the expression soon vanished. I had to actively avoid staring at his crotch while his pants strained against the squatting position he was sitting in as easily as if it were a chair. "Let's talk this out."

I nodded, wiping away another rogue tear.

"You're correct that we did leave the party together and that may under typical circumstances turn a few heads. But you were in an accident around a party full of emergency room workers who were all thinking about a head injury when you two smacked into each other. Shelby's wife is taking care of her, remember? And I think Rodney Blake would be very happy you were being monitored, too. He cares about you. We all do. You're one of us now."

That made me feel better, though I tried to ignore the flutter I felt at hearing I was part of the team. Everyone had to know that's why we left together, right? And they could've just thought he gave me a ride home, not put me up for the night.

Soren's signature smirk returned. "Besides, it isn't like we were fondling one another by the horseshoe pit then left hand in hand, strolling into the sunset together. I'm pretty sure everyone there saw how you were pointedly marching *away* from me as we left."

Chuckling, I wiped my nose again. "You do bring out the best in me."

"I hope..." He trailed off, and then cleared his throat before rocking forward, finally coming to rest on his heels. It was the most ruffled I'd seen him, dropped down onto his knees before me.

"I hope you feel you can trust me. To take care of you tonight. And, just..." he trailed off again, then scratched his chin for a moment before continuing. "I hope you know, I'd never speak to anyone about you staying over here. We know the truth, and that's all that matters. And, if I'm being honest, we aren't officially coworkers yet, anyways, in case you were worried we were breaking some sort of conduct code. Which we definitely aren't. Like that would even stop some of those people, anyways."

I snorted, thinking of all the combinations of nurse-tech-doctor hookups I'd been briefed on thanks to Nadine.

Soren rose to his feet, fluid and graceful as a woodland creature. I collected the dishes and took them to the kitchen. When I began to wash my plate, he urged me to go take it easy in his living room, like we were old friends instead of almost-coworkers who had been tormenting one another since January.

I snuggled against a pillow that I hoped was faux-fur and pulled one of the impossibly soft knit blankets over myself while Soren took care of our dishes. It was, surprisingly, rather easy for me to get comfortable in his home, though the ibuprofen had worn off somewhat and my head did, in fact, feel like I had collided with an adult human head-on.

Minutes later, he appeared with two tablets, a glass of water, and a gel ice pack wrapped in a terry cloth.

"Thank you. I really do appreciate it."

His eyes widened, and he sank next to me on the sofa. He put a hand up to my forehead, then peered into my eyes, though I knew he couldn't see much of my pupils in the soft lighting.

"I can't believe it," he murmured, and it made my heart race.

"What's wrong?"

"I simply can't believe you just *thanked* me for something. I had to assess for clinical change and be sure your injury hadn't progressed."

I swatted at him. "Damn you, Soren. You had me thinking something was wrong."

He cackled. "So did you." Then his eyes softened. "In all seriousness, I am more than happy to look after you. Tonight, and, well...anytime."

I swallowed, studying his face. Gone were the traces of jest and mockery, and the sincerity of it made my chest fill with warmth.

An hour later, each of us on our respective couches with cups of herbal tea, I noticed my headache had eased, and the day was finally catching up with me. We were halfway through *Casablanca*, a classic which I'd never seen or even heard of before but was definitely enjoying. Once I finished my tea and set the mug on the glass coffee table in front of me, I curled up in blankets and settled into the sofa. The exhaustion of the day had me asleep in minutes.

Some time later, he gently roused me. "Feeling okay?"

I nodded, rubbing my eyes.

"Nausea or dizziness?"

I shook my head as I yawned and made my way to the bedroom. "Think I should probably call it a night."

"Good night, Quinn. I'm right down the hall if you start to feel bad, yeah?"

I smiled at him as I shut the door behind me.

If someone would have told me six months ago I'd be sleeping over at the man's house who had made my first attempt at doing chest compressions on a real human worse than it already was, I would've asked them to kindly pull their head out of their ass and stop sputtering nonsense. But as I settled into the soft linen sheets and pulled the down comforter over me, it sunk in that things had definitely changed between us.

JUNE

The next morning, I woke from a dreamless sleep, disoriented and with a steady throbbing at my brow. The surroundings began to make sense—walnut midcentury dresser and matching bedside tables, cream-colored tufted twill headboard, sleek floor-to-ceiling mirror laid up against the deep charcoal walls—and I burrowed down deeper into the bedding, luxuriating in comfort.

My reflection shocked me at first when I peered into the mirror while I brushed my teeth—the bruise on my forehead was turning ghastly purple. When I emerged from my room, after running a brush through my hair I'd found in a drawer, the condo was empty. Sunshine streamed in through the windows out to the terrace, and the smell of coffee lingered.

A note on the kitchen counter caught my eye.

Went for a workout & wanted my patient to get all the rest she needed. I should be back by nine to take you home. Text me if you need anything.

He had included his number at the bottom. I lay the paper back down on the counter, marveling at how a single day could change the course of the prior six months. Soren and I had gone from

confirmed enemies to something like friends in less than twenty-four hours. He had intimidated me at first, annoyed me after that, and now, I wasn't sure what he made me feel. I didn't think the annoyance would ever fade—he had the uncanny ability to prod at my temper like no one else did. In fact, with most people, especially at the hospital, I was the complete opposite—too timid or anxious to even make waves. But with Soren, I always said what I felt, and I wasn't sure what to think of that.

My head still throbbed, feeling like I had drank too much wine the night before, and I threw back two Tylenol and leaned back against the counter. His home was so surprisingly comfortable, a state accomplished by little details that I noticed the more I looked for them: end tables placed exactly where you wanted to set a coffee cup, lighting soft and indirect, plush pillows and cozy throws draped on all the furniture. The gas fireplace served to both warm the room and set the mood, though we hadn't used it last night.

I recalled our conversation yesterday. Had his mother designed the place? Or did Soren inherit her eye for design and put the space together himself?

I reached for an apple right when the door to the landing opened behind me. My jaw hung open as he came into view. His hair, which seemed to vacillate between dark blonde and light brown most days, was now a dark sweaty mess, stuck to his temples. Plastered to his chest was a white tee, and his fitted black shorts revealed sculpted legs.

He surveyed me with an amused smirk, setting a paper bag and drink carrier down on the counter. I hadn't even realized he was carrying anything.

"I wasn't sure if you liked coffee or tea, so I brought both. And I know you've probably taken Tylenol, ibuprofen, or both, so I brought something to put on your stomach."

"Thanks," I managed, pulling my eyes away from his body.

"I'm going to shower then I'll drive you home, okay?"

I nodded.

"Do you want something else to change into before we leave?"

"Nah. I'll just rock the walk of shame look. You think the paparazzi are on to us yet?"

He laughed. "Didn't see them when I was downstairs, but you never know."

I stood at the counter eating the blueberry muffin he'd brought—apple be damned—and sipped the coffee. When he reappeared, I was surveying the city view from the dining room, coffee cup in hand.

"Ready?" he asked.

I gathered my purse and my dress, which he had put in a canvas shopping bag, and we took the elevator to the parking deck.

We were at my door in fifteen minutes, and I reached down to collect my bags.

"Let me see your phone, please."

Baffled, I handed it over. His car lit up with an incoming call from my number.

"I wanted to be able to check on you later today. Make sure you don't have any delayed symptoms."

"Okay."

"I suppose I'll see you at work sometime, then. You start in a week, right? On the first?"

"Yeah. But I have computer training and certifications for about three weeks I think before I go on the floor. I'm not even sure what shift I'm going to be doing, though I have a hunch Debbie is going to throw me on nights. She mentioned it was a possibility when I was hired."

"Night shift can be fun, I suppose. I definitely struggle with it, though. Well, take it easy, Quinn. I'm here if you need anything." He peered over at me, looking me over.

"Thank you, Soren. I mean it." I opened the door, and started up the short path to the front door. The BMW didn't move from its spot on the curb. "Stop acting like a creep and leave," I called to him as I unlocked the front door. Once I opened it, he drove off, honking twice at me.

The rest of that Sunday was spent laid up on the couch, ice packs and drugs to combat the headache. I got hungry after the third episode of *Gilmore Girls* and fished through my purse for my wallet to order some delivery, credit card be damned. An envelope I hadn't noticed when I'd rummaged for my keys earlier sat at the bottom of my purse. When I opened it, I froze. There was \$100 in twenties stacked neatly inside, along with a note.

I know you're going to get hungry today and worry about how you're going to pay for something good to eat. Give the junk food a rest and buy something on me.

- J

That bastard.

He was ruining every chance I had to hate him nowadays.

I ordered sushi for delivery and settled back into my sofa, much less cozy than his, I thought begrudgingly.

When my food arrived, I plated the rolls and snapped a pic, writing out a text to go along with it.

It's rude to go through a woman's purse

Nice to see you're eating a balanced diet. And I didn't go through your purse, I simply dropped the envelope inside. No rummaging!

I snickered, and tossed my phone aside as I began to eat.

That evening, restless with having laid around all day, I texted Sam to see if she wanted to meet in the park—I had to talk to someone about the bizarre day I'd had.

She arrived in hot pink running shorts and a baggy long sleeved tee, dressed in running shoes. Her legs were thin but toned, a product of the hours she spent running each week.

I had ruefully changed out of Soren's comfy clothes that faintly held his woodsy scent, throwing on flip flops and an old loose dress.

"Before you say anything, or worry about saying anything, I know already," said Sam.

Damn the ER gossip train.

I sighed, heading north across the park. "You probably don't know everything, though. Hell, I barely understand it. Maybe I did hit my head pretty hard."

Sam looked me over, noting my bandaged arm, slight limp from the knee wound, and my bruised forehead.

"I'm not sure why you decided to channel your inner Randy Moss at the new hire barbecue, but you've got a hell of a knot there." She probed at my forehead, and I swatted her away, cursing.

"I don't know what got into me. I should've had a few beers or something, but ironically, I stayed sober to try and prevent myself from making some stupid mistake with my future coworkers."

We laughed.

"Well....did you make a mistake?"

I shrugged. "I don't think so. But I'm sure some people might think I did."

Sam gasped. "Do NOT tell me you slept with that evil, gorgeous man."

I cut my eyes at her. "No, Samantha, I didn't. Actually, he was really...good to me," I finished, unsure how to explain.

But I filled her in on everything, from seeing Henry and Soren to him taking me home this morning. After I finished, we walked in silence for several paces, soaking up the last of the summer sun like it was soup on a chunk of bread.

I blew out a breath, feeling relieved to have told someone. But when she didn't say anything, my heart dropped as I filled in the gaps of her silence. What did she think of all this? Had *her* opinion of me changed?

"You have to say something at some point."

She stopped walking, turning to face me. "It's a wild story. Kind of a lot to take in."

"I know." I rubbed a hand across the back of my neck. "I don't even know what to do now."

"Do you have to do anything?" she asked, those round eyes assessing me.

"Well...no, but I feel like everything's changed."

"Maybe it has. Would that be a bad thing if it did? And besides, is there anything you can even do about it now?"

I honestly had no clue. My face must have betrayed my confusion on the matter, because Sam grabbed my hand and squeezed.

"It's not like he proposed marriage," she said with a laugh, but I was so caught up in my own head I didn't answer her. "You'll be fine. Your secret is mine to keep, okay? I won't say a word."

We continued on through the park, and the arches of my feet steadily protesting my poor choice of footwear. I focused on the high rises in the distance, the peachy smear of sunset smoothing out my worries.

By the time we parted ways, twilight had fallen, and I walked home alone, content with my own thoughts for company. When I got home, I kicked off my sandals and rubbed the blisters forming on my toes. After a shower where I winced through scrubbing my abrasions, I put Soren's clothes on again. I told myself it was because they were comfortable and left it at that, falling asleep soundly.

JULY

On my first official morning of work, I scrambled around my house like I had never set foot in a hospital before. Between worrying about the impressions I'd make on my coworkers, if the Soren story had in fact traveled through my new cohort, and worrying if I was going to make it through my first year as a nurse, the basic task of getting dressed and ready to go had turned gargantuan.

I had told myself that I only had to work as a nurse for one year, slash my student debt in half, and then if I wanted to leave, I could. If I could last two years I could pay all of my debt off, I thought. Maybe sooner if I picked up overtime.

But one year.

I could do it.

I wasn't sure what to wear, since my first few weeks would be spent completing computer training and getting my required emergency nursing certifications for advanced life support, trauma, and pediatrics.

After parking and following the directions in my email to the training lab, I arrived with a few minutes to spare. Most if not everyone was already present if my quick glance was correct, so I took the seat at the computer workstation nearest the front of the room, one of the only spots open. I acknowledged the faces I'd remembered from the barbecue. Some smiled back, others gave me a curt nod, and a few even sneered at me, making my stomach

blossom with anger as I sat down. So the story had gotten around, then. And by the reactions, the barbecue story had probably ballooned into something so far from the truth that I wouldn't even recognize it.

"How are you feeling?" said a voice from beside me. I looked up from my bag, digging for my water bottle inside. If Shelby had bruised as badly as I had, hers had healed faster—her long forehead was free of blemishes of any kind.

"I'm fine, thank you. Though I'm not dying to smack into you again, if you were wondering."

I had meant it as a joke but she just stared at me as I searched for a pen in my bag, giving me an unfriendly look. Before I could explain, we were interrupted by Robbie, our nurse educator, his energetic voice booming through the small room.

"Sorry I'm late, team. Let's get going."

He passed out a sheet of paper with login information to each of us as he continued in his chipper tone, "Restrooms are down the hall. We break for lunch at noon, and I think we should take only half an hour so everyone can get used to it. Except for you, Shelby. You already know what all this is about."

I vaguely remembered Nadine telling me Shelby had just moved from out of state and had a year of experience already. So she wasn't a new grad, then. Shelby produced a faint smile as she clicked away through the hospital-specific training modules. I hadn't even started mine yet, waiting on Robbie for some reason.

Four hours later, head swimming with knowledge that made me borderline panic about how to handle those scenarios in real life, we stopped for lunch. I pulled a soggy peanut butter sandwich out of my bag and ate it at my desk. Glancing over, I noticed Shelby's annoyingly healthy and delicious-looking green salad, with some sort of tangy-smelling dressing. I had popped in my ear buds and was scrolling through my phone to prevent any more small talk that was likely to piss me off if it involved a head injury and a barbecue.

My eyes were glossed over after spending the afternoon on neurological emergencies, and when it was time to leave, I stretched and yawned before grabbing my things to leave, letting the room clear, and then stopped by the restroom. By the time I reached the elevator, a shorter girl with cropped black hair was the only one of my cohort who remained.

"Liza, right?" I said as I stepped on.

She nodded as she pressed the ground level button. "Quinn?"

"That's right." I hoped she wasn't going to make any snide comments, and when she smiled at me, showing her braces, I became certain she had either not heard the gossip, heard it and not believed it, or simply didn't care.

"What'd you think about that training today? I don't know how much more education I can take," I said. "I thought we were done with school!"

"I know, right!" she shrieked, slapping her thigh. "All I want is a damn paycheck, though. So if they want to pay me to do this all day, fine with me."

"Me too."

The doors opened and we parted ways.

Liza sat next to me, thankfully, the rest of that week while we finished hospital orientation, and the following week, once we had moved on to certifications. Shelby wasn't present, since she probably was hired with all of her certifications already.

When Robbie passed out our twelve-week training schedules, split between day and night shift, Liza and I immediately compared, hunched over our adjoining computer stations. We grabbed each other's hands and squealed when we saw we would both be starting on nights then move to days after six weeks, not caring about the strange looks from others. Though, with Shelby gone, I had noticed the sidelong glances were slowly disappearing as well. Had she been gossiping about me behind my back, or had the barbecue story simply faded with time?

Either way, we simply hadn't meshed well, and now too much time had passed for me to smooth things over, it seemed. I hoped Shelby was starting on days, so I didn't have to work with her as much at first. It was going to be difficult enough as it was starting out as a brand new nurse, let alone dealing with an awkward coworker.

It went against all of my instincts, but on Sunday night, the night before my first night shift, I tried to stay up until dawn, then sleep during the day before work. I fell asleep sometime after Gretchen came in from work, around three that morning, with a book in my lap. When I woke around nine, disoriented as hell on the couch, I

wasn't sure whether I should get up now, drink coffee, and attempt a nap later, or try and go back to sleep.

An hour later, I had done neither, curled up on the sofa like a cat while I watched *Gilmore Girls*, and by eleven, I was forced upright by a growling stomach and the start of a headache. I gave in and made a big mug of coffee, scrambled some eggs and cut up some fruit, and took my breakfast back to the living room. I still had a little more than five hours until I had to start getting ready for work, and seven until I had to clock in, so what was I supposed to do with the day?

The caffeine had done its job, so I skittered around the house like a rodent, and the only logical thing to do then seemed to be to exercise. The day was pleasantly warm, and I put on some gym shorts and a tank and laced up my sneakers to take a walk to the park. Armed with an audiobook that I had found on my library app and a bag across my shoulders with water and pepper spray, I set off, and let my legs burn off my nervous energy.

An hour and a half later, dripping with sweat, I returned home, several chapters into the romance book I'd definitely be finishing. Fiction it may be, my genre of reading material always seemed to remind me of a lack of romance in my own life. After the string of horrible dates that had led me to deleting the dating app, I hadn't gone on a single date of any kind, and it had been, what, two months now?

I had at least moved on from Liam, trying my best to see the relationship as a learning experience. After all, I wasn't supposed to know everything about myself at this point, and wasn't figuring that stuff out part of the fun of your twenties anyways?

After taking a shower, blow-drying my hair, and making a protein shake, it was nearing three. I was restless to get ready for work, my first shift as a licensed nurse a gigantic cloud looming over me enjoying my afternoon, so I laid down and napped, read, and imagined every horrible scenario that I'd experienced so far as a student.

By six, I had packed a healthy lunch (or was it dinner? I'd be eating around midnight...) of a Cobb salad and an apple, plus some almonds, a small square of dark chocolate, and an iced coffee. I didn't need to clock in for another forty minutes, but I was showered and dressed and didn't think there was anything else I could

possibly do around the house to calm my nerves, so I headed out and decided to grab an espresso on the way in.

I ordered a latte with three shots, because staying awake was more important than the downside of being jittery. Besides, if I drank myself into caffeine-induced SVT I'd be in the ER already, a good place to have such a heart rhythm. When I pulled into the parking deck, my phone lit up with a text.

Have a good shift! I told Derek to look out for you or he'd have me to deal with.

I snorted. It was just like Sam to threaten someone half a foot taller than she was.

I had only given shift report to Derek a handful of times with Samantha, and my impression of him was based on a few ten minute encounters. He had been pretty laid-back, never writing anything down, just nodding his way through things. He had a big build and an even bigger beard with gray flecks, so I thought it was at least a good thing to have a preceptor who could physically withstand any of the shenanigans on night shift—all manner of intoxicated and rowdy patients.

After clocking in, I headed to the staff lounge where each incoming shift gathered for a quick huddle before the shift started. I spotted Liza across the room and grinned at her, and she waved back.

Most people were on their phones or eating a quick bite, and nearly everyone looked like they hadn't slept properly in days. When the CC finished speaking a bunch of nonsense that meant nothing to me at this point, I walked over to Derek, who was drinking a huge can of Monster.

"I don't know if you remember me, but I'm Quinn, and I think I'm with you tonight."

He rubbed his eyes and looked down at me. "Yeah, alright, I remember something about this now. Sam's...friend. Okay, that's fine."

We didn't talk the rest of the way to our cube, and I grabbed a sheet of paper to take report on our patients. When I saw that I'd be taking over for Chandra, I beamed.

"Baby nurse all grown up!" she exclaimed. I laughed as she leaned in for a hug. "It's been awhile, girl. Heard you took a spill at

the picnic but glad to see you alive and well."

"Me too. So what do you have for me tonight?"

Derek chugged his drink as I jotted down everything she said, ignoring us as he turned off all the overhead lighting in the cube. When we finished, I looked to him to see what he thought I should do first. Chandra had completed mostly everything that needed to be done at this point for everyone, bless her, but I still had to give meds and call report to the floor for a patient whose room had just been assigned.

"Do you have your login and all that?" he asked, and I couldn't tell if his tone was from boredom, tiredness, or a mixture of both.

I nodded, and bounced on my heels.

"Do you need me to help you grab those meds for 3?"

"No, I think I can do it."

"Alright, then," he said, and turned around in his chair to bring up the news.

So that was how it was going to be, then. I was flying out of the nest right from the get-go, with a grouchy bear of a man there if I absolutely insisted on it. Gone was Sam's teaching, encouragement, all of it. I knew I had it good with her, but I didn't quite expect to have the complete opposite experience right away.

Though I was only giving oral pain medicine to a twenty-something that had gotten in a car accident and was, thankfully, not seriously injured but still beat-up, I still managed to make a mistake by dropping the pill underneath the med dispenser, out of reach and unable to be salvaged. True to my luck, it couldn't have been the ibuprofen that I dropped, it had to be the Percocet, a controlled substance that I'd have to fill out paperwork on since I pulled the med out of the dispenser and wasn't able to give it to a patient.

Another nurse with long brown French braids was waiting to pull meds behind me, and I stepped out of her way, unsure of what to do next.

"You have to fill out a sheet for pharmacy," she said. "Get Derek to help you."

I peeked out to the nurses' station, where Derek was on his phone. "Uh, hey, I need your help with something."

He turned around and looked up, huge dark circles under his eyes.

"So I dropped this Percocet, and I need another one, and this other nurse mentioned a sheet I need to fill out..."

He wheeled himself over to the secretary's station, which was empty, and pulled out a form from the drawer, never getting up from his chair.

"We'll fill this out in a second. Just pull another one, and give it, and come back out here. And, uh, you might want to be careful with those blister packs."

I nodded, redness creeping up my chest in shame because I couldn't even manage to open a damn pill, and ducked back into the alcove with the med dispenser.

The patient was, thankfully, a pleasant dude who was grateful for everything and made my job a little easier. When I was finished, I rounded on my other three patients to introduce myself and see what they needed, though two were waiting on test results and the third was waiting to go up to her room. Derek didn't accompany me.

An hour later, I'd moved one patient upstairs, and discharged the car wreck guy with a set of crutches and an orthopedic follow-up. Test results had come back for my other two patients, and one was waiting on a surgical consult for an appendectomy, and I honestly didn't know what would happen to the other.

While I waited to see what the night charge nurse would put in my two empty rooms, I noticed how different the ER looked in the evenings. It wasn't just that the lights were much dimmer, though the lack of bright lights made a big impact. It was the overall vibe—less people working, as many of the specialties and auxiliary staff had gone home for the day, and a laid-back attitude that made it, well, a little easier to keep your head on straight.

The other two nurses on our cube, Charlie and Joe, were arguing with each other over where to order their dinner, though we'd only been at work for a little over an hour. Charlie, who I had ran into at the med dispenser earlier, was pushing for a Tex-Mex burrito chain while Joe, a wiry dude covered in tattoos, wanted pizza and wings.

Charlie piped up, "What do you two want?"

I replied, "I'm good. I brought something."

Her long brown braids swung as she pivoted her chair towards Derek. "And what about you?"

He shrugged. "Burrito is good."

“Yesssss,” Charlie gloated, and nudged into Joe. He gently shoved her away, but gave her his order anyway.

By midnight, my espresso had worn off somewhat, and so had the buzz that had helped me soar through the first several hours of my shift.

We took lunch, and I had the feeling that if I followed Derek into the break room, he might feel obligated to talk to me and it would make our dynamic even more awkward.

I scampered off to my secret stairwell, and sat on the cold concrete steps with my lunch bag and e-reader. It was midnight, and I wanted to eat just about everything else in sight except the nutritious green salad and apple I had in my bag.

My cube’s burrito delivery had made my mouth water. It had arrived a few hours ago and I’d been thinking about it ever since. But instead of eating a warm tortilla with meat and cheese and all manner of delicious fillings, I poked at the lettuce in my bowl. The boiled eggs made me want to barf, and the chicken was cold and chunky. I ate a few bites and then moved to the apple, which was sweet and crisp, but definitely not a warm brownie from the cafeteria. Why did I crave only junk at this hour?

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I frowned. Who was texting me at midnight?

I hope your shift is going well. I saw you as I was leaving and didn’t want to interrupt you while you were getting shift report.

I was wondering when Soren was going to text me again. It had been almost a month since I had stayed at his place, and though the urge to taunt him popped up occasionally, I had decided to distance myself from him so I could focus on my new job. Never mind that I slept in the clothes he had given me nearly every night.

You’re up with the owls. Is that your vibe then?

Not usually. I needed to clear my head, so I drove to my cabin after work. It’s a bit of a haul to get here.

Your condo is like a resort...I can only imagine what your cabin looks like.

It's different. In a good way. I think you'd like it up here.
Especially since I have all the Hemingway novels on my shelf.

You do not.

You're right. But you did inspire me to read more women authors. I haven't regretted the choice yet. I loved *The Color Purple*. And *Frankenstein*. And *The Bell Jar*. But I might need your help with contemporaries.

That is the best thing I've heard all night.

I was pretty well-versed in contemporary romance. Should I introduce Soren to the greats, I wondered?

Take care, Quinn. Hope to run into you soon.

Be careful up there. Don't get eaten by wolves or snatched by a Yeti.

He didn't respond, but I could picture his smirk like he was sitting right beside me.

When we returned from our break, a new ambulance had arrived in one of our empty rooms, so I set my things down at the desk and washed up. Charlie was on her phone, and I didn't see Joe. If Derek was back, he wasn't at the station, either, so I headed in by myself to take the patient.

A pleasant older woman wearing too much floral perfume smiled at me from the stretcher. Her right eye and nose were quite swollen, and she had a laceration on her hand that was bleeding into the dressings the paramedics had applied.

"This young lady took a spill tonight at home," said a cheery, overweight EMT with a goatee. "No LOC. A&Ox4. No allergies. We started a line on the left AC for yous guys. Sign here for me, doll."

I took his laptop and signed my name, with RN after it, which still seemed surreal, and approached my patient as he and his partner, who hadn't uttered a word, left.

I introduced myself as I grabbed a gown out of the supply cart.

"Oh dear, is that really necessary?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. The doctor will want to examine you. And you may need X-rays or a scan so we'll need to get everything out of the way."

She sighed as I helped remove her sweater and bra. "I just get so cold."

I promised her a blanket as I hooked her up to vitals, then grabbed the rolling stool and took a seat as I asked her my triage questions. "Were you feeling dizzy or short of breath, or having any chest pain before you fell?"

"No, honey. I just tripped on a rug."

I asked her to give me her name, date of birth, and the date, which she answered appropriately.

"And did you black out or lose consciousness at all?"

She shook her head. "No, but this is beginning to hurt, I'm afraid."

"I bet," I replied. "I'll bring you an ice pack when I'm finished here."

I logged into my computer and checked her into the room, assigning her a triage level 3, meaning she would probably need a CT scan and maybe bloodwork and meds but I didn't think she needed to be seen right away. When I stepped out to get her a blanket and an ice pack, my cube mates were all present.

"Need any help in there?" asked Derek.

"No, I don't think so. Thanks, though."

Half an hour later, a doc still hadn't seen her. There were less staff working overnight in our moderately-sized ER, so it was going to take some time. But it was making me nervous. I stepped back into the room to check on her, and her eye was completely swollen shut. I relayed this information to Derek, who raised an eyebrow, then slid his chair back from the computer desk and stood up, walking into the room himself. When he emerged from the room, he sucked in a breath through his teeth.

"Is she on blood thinners?"

In that moment, all *my* blood drained from my face. Derek tilted his head, studying my face with a slight frown. "What is it? You asked her that, right?"

"Oh my god I forgot to ask. And the medics didn't mention it," I gushed, panicking. A fall where the patient hit their head while taking blood thinners, especially with significant swelling, definitely should've been triaged as more immediate, and she should've been seen right away.

Derek popped his head back in the room, then I saw him nod, close the door, and reach into his scrub pocket, finding it empty. He looked at the patient status board, and picked up the landline phone on our cube.

"Hey, Blake. Got a patient over in 7 that I need you to see when you can. Fell and hit her head on thinners and she's swelling up significantly, you'll probably want to scan her soon. New nurse didn't triage her appropriately." There was a pause as Dr. Blake spoke to him, then Derek thanked him and hung up. I felt about two inches tall.

"I can't believe I didn't ask that."

Derek shrugged. "You could've asked. But it'll probably be okay. Just remember for next time. Triage is hard when you're new."

I wanted to shout that I didn't even *know* I had made a mistake because I completely forgot to ask the question, and that everyone else was busy or not around anyways, but I didn't. I nodded and turned back to the computer to check the status of my other patients and bit my tongue to keep from crying.

Dr. Blake skittered onto our cube minutes later, and when he rocketed back out of the room, no doubt to see the myriad of other patients waiting, I already had orders for a CT. Derek had them on the phone before I could even look up the number on my badge.

Derek's voice was monotone as ever. "Rusty. I need to bring you 7. That cool?"

He hung up and wheeled the patient over there himself, not speaking to me. Was he mad at me? Or just doing what needed to be done?

I tried to shake it off as I got my meds together for the next room who had also just gotten orders for admission, blood work, and IV antibiotics for a supposed infection.

Around four, I had moved my antibiotic patient upstairs to her room, and the fall lady was waiting on a neurosurgery consult. There was a tiny questionable spot of a possible subdural bleed where she was swelling above her eye. I wanted to crawl into the dumpster outside for unintentionally delaying her care by mistriaging her and forgetting to ask a very basic question. Nausea hit me in waves, and I wasn't sure if it was because it was four A.M. and my body was absolutely horrified that I was forcing it to be awake, or if it was anxiety-related.

“Shit happens,” Derek said when we got the radiology report. “They probably aren’t going to do anything with her anyways, since it’s so small and she’s not having any neuro symptoms. But you better monitor her for them and do frequent assessments to make sure that doesn’t change.”

I nodded and stood, excusing myself to the restroom. I placed my hands on the sink and exhaled, feeling like I was the most horrible ER nurse on the planet. And this was a small mishap! What in the world was I going to do when I inevitably made a bigger error? These were not questions I should be asking myself at this already difficult part of the shift.

I washed my hands and returned to the cube. Derek must have noticed the strain on my face because he said, “Don’t beat yourself up. Neuro probably won’t be in any rush to see her, so we will just sit on her for awhile. Just relax.”

I certainly couldn’t do that, but somehow the rest of the shift passed without incident, and I left at 7:15, greeted with blinding sunlight and a headache.

Once I showered, I crawled into bed, not realizing how little my curtains did to blot the sunlight when trying to sleep during the daytime. I tried to read, but only replayed the mistakes I had made or embarrassing things I had done until my mind was mush, my eyes felt like sandpaper, and sleep was the only thing I was capable of.

I woke five hours later, and it was nearing four P.M. I had slept horribly, but tossed and turned and took cat naps until it was time to get up for my next shift. My hair was still slightly damp, so I braided it, and forwent mascara because I knew I’d be rubbing my eyes all night.

Night shift was going to be harder than I thought.

Nursing was going to be harder than I thought.

But the sun was *not* going to keep me awake any longer.

Once I made it to work I ordered blackout curtains on my phone while Debbie was rattling off data in pre-shift that I didn’t give one single shit about. As far as lunch, I left the salad at home. Tonight, lunch was going to be a hot meal delivered from wherever my cube mates chose, I thought as I sipped my triple-shot.

I fucking *dared* anyone to try me, sleep deprived as I was.

JULY

Derek and I were on a cube with three other nurses—Joe from last night, a mid-shifter named Emery, and a traveler named Keisha.

Brenda, the day shift nurse whose assignment I had taken, had been nursing for probably forty years, so naturally she didn't have a damn clue what it was like to be a new nurse in the current, completely shitty healthcare climate of quality metrics and satisfaction scores and burnout and staffing shortages and record numbers of ER yearly visits. So when I asked her a simple question, on why the patient hadn't gone to CT yet, because I didn't know if I was missing something or they needed another intervention first, Brenda snorted.

"Because they haven't come to get him yet," she said. When she mentioned that another patient needed meds that had been ordered and I saw that they were now overdue, she cut her eyes and said, "You must not know that med comes from the pharmacy, sweetie."

I opened the request box and saw she hadn't even requested the med from them. I suppose she could have called, but by her attitude, I doubted it.

Who the fuck did this woman think she was? And why hadn't she gotten anything done? I know I was new, but at least I knew that half our damn job was to coordinate with other departments and make sure everyone else was doing their jobs, too. Maybe if she had seemed apologetic, or rushing to get things done, I would've had a

bit more empathy, because I knew that nursing was a twenty-four hour job and sometimes when a lot of stuff was ordered right near the end of the shift, you weren't going to be able to get everything done. But when I came onto the cube and she was ordering a monogrammed coffee mug on her phone, while all these orders supposedly couldn't be completed, I wanted to grab her by her feathered hair-sprayed mullet and shake her.

I sipped from my coffee and organized my mental list of tasks, starting with calling pharmacy to tell them I was just coming on shift and needed a med that was now overdue because the last nurse hadn't even requested it yet. Next, I called CT, and told them I'd bring them the patient that had been waiting over an hour if they were too busy, which the tech profusely thanked me for. I made sure Brenda could hear as she packed up her giant purse to leave, not giving a shit if she was irritated by me calling her out on her ineptitude in front of the whole nursing station.

An hour and a half later, I'd checked in my new ambulance, and gotten all the other patients caught up.

When things quieted down a bit, Joe said from beside me, "That was savage what you did to Brenda. The old hag needs to hear things like that. Everyone hates taking patients from her. You just said what we all wanted to say."

I hung my head. "Not my best professional showing, I'll admit that. I'm just too tired to give a fuck."

"Welcome to nights," said Joe, toasting me with his energy drink. From my other side, a hint of a smile tugged at the corner of Derek's mouth, the only acknowledgment he gave to our conversation.

"See, this is why I work mids," Emery said from behind me. "Stay out of all the shift drama. And I hate waking up early, and working all night. Gotta get a good mix of both."

"You might have the right idea," I called back to her. "Where are we ordering from tonight?"

Derek shrugged from next to me, Joe did as well, while Emery said, "I'm not balling like the rest of you, apparently. I had to bring my own meal."

Keisha, the traveler, piped up from her computer at the end of the cube, away from the rest of us. "I'm down to order but I don't know what's good around here. It'd be nice to get a break from the cafeteria."

We all made gagging noises, because as a whole the cafeteria food was horrible, though they did have good snacks and random delicious things like spicy grilled chicken wraps.

"How about Chinese?" I suggested, and my cube mates agreed. I pulled up an order on my phone and passed it around. I was going to absolutely devour my orange chicken when it arrived.

We were interrupted from our revelry by an overhead page: *"Level 2 cardiac in triage to room 48."*

I looked down the hallway like an idiot, confirming that yes, I did in fact have that open room. I jumped up, and my cube mates followed me. Emery got an IV set up, Derek grabbed the EKG, and Keisha helped the patient into a gown. The woman was paler than a vampire and sweating profusely. When we got her hooked up to the monitor, even I recognized the rhythm: SVT at a rate of 190. No wonder she looked bad, she wasn't perfusing for shit. Once Derek had the leads hooked up, I ordered her EKG under protocol and hoped a doc arrived soon to look at it.

Knox walked in next, and I immediately relaxed. I'd never treated supraventricular tachycardia before, and I knew he'd be patient with me. Though I briefly considered how Soren would treat me now that we were a little less like enemies.

"Hi, ma'am, I'm Dr. Knox. How are you feeling?"

"Awful, I can't breathe and my heart is racing."

I handed him the EKG, which he studied before replying to the patient. "We will get you taken care of. Are you allergic to anything?"

She shook her head, and Knox continued. "This is going to seem like a weird thing to do, but your heart is beating abnormally and we need to re-establish its normal rhythm." He reached into the supply cart and pulled out a 10cc syringe, removing the needle and pulling the plunger back slightly so it was filled with a little air. I was completely baffled, but intrigued.

"Ma'am, I need you to blow into the tip of this syringe as hard as you can." The patient nodded and did as he said, but her heart rate remained unchanged. "Can you try one more time?"

She repeated the task with no luck, and Henry turned to me. "We need to give her adenosine. Can you also get the defib on her?" This was just like my training I had done for ACLS, except a real human being needed my help and I tried not to think about what would

happen if I messed up. My cube mates had already brought in the defibrillator, and Derek handed me the vial of adenosine he had already grabbed, instructing me on how to draw it up while he placed the pads on her chest. Emery's IV was ready and waiting for us, though Derek did have to add a stopcock extension to push the adenosine, a drug so short-acting that it had to be flushed into the line extremely fast to be effective.

The team dynamic was incredible on nights, I was noticing. Kinda like the all-star trauma team but for every critical patient on each cube, it was like all hands were on deck.

Knox explained to the patient what we were about to do, and once the defib pads were on her chest Derek stepped away from the bedside and quietly briefed me.

"The adenosine will temporarily stop her heart when it works. That's why we have to have her hooked up to the pads and print out the rhythm strip." He must have seen the panic in my eyes, because he added, "Don't worry. It's how the medicine works. Kinda like unplugging something and plugging it back in to reset it. And by the way, it apparently feels horrible and like death when you push it, so I warn patients beforehand. You want to watch me do this one?"

I nodded, and approached the bedside with him.

"Hey there. I'm Derek, I'm one of the nurses, and this is Quinn. We are going to give you that medicine Dr. Knox mentioned, and when it goes through your IV, it's going to make you feel a little scared for a minute while it works, but then you'll feel normal again. Just breathe through it." She nodded with panic-stricken eyes, much like my own when he had told me that fun fact.

Derek pushed a button on the defibrillator and it began printing her rhythm strip, then he pushed the med through the line and flushed it right away through the stopcock. As predicted, her rhythm went from the rapid peaks of SVT to a brief run of asystole, an excruciating pause that seemed a lot longer than three seconds, before jumping back into SVT. Derek pulled another vial from his pocket and instructed me to draw up double the dose.

Knox nodded in confirmation to me, standing at the bedside with an easy posture as I prepared the med. Derek raised an eyebrow at me and asked if I wanted to do this one. I nodded—no better time to learn than the present.

I slammed the syringe in and turned the stopcock, flushing the saline in rapidly behind the med. We all watched as her heart slowed to asystole again, then resumed a normal sinus rhythm. Derek reached for the rhythm strip as it printed out.

A few beats later, the patient sighed. "It's gone. The fluttering. I can breathe now."

Knox patted her on the shoulder before leaving. "We'll check on you shortly."

When we emerged from the room, he gave me a quick grin before darting off. "Nice work, rookie."

I smiled back at him, heading back to the nurses' station with an odd assortment of butterflies: excitement from the emergency, relief that I'd treated the patient and she was feeling better, and—let's be real—a little high from the praise Henry'd given me.

Back at the nurses' station, the call light went off. Derek reached over and picked up the receiver. "No, you can't eat anything now, you're waiting on tests," he said, and hung up.

I stared at him. So effective, stating outright what needed to be said over the intercom instead of ducking in the room and politely explaining everything. Also, I saw the light above the door blinking over Emery's patient's room. Derek handling this for her was vastly unlike day shift, where someone was always trying to find the assigned nurse to handle their own patients. On nights, though, every cube was a team, and I think I liked it better that way.

As all the patients got settled, the shenanigans intensified at the nurses' station. Charlie screamed as Joe slipped an ice cube down the back of her shirt, then chased him into the med room and punched him. She emerged with a triumphant smile as Joe rubbed at his aching arm.

"Put some ice on it," she told him. "You know where it is, right?"

Derek explained to me in a somewhat bored tone that Joe and Charlie had been in a prank war for the better part of a year, hiding each other's stethoscopes, putting applesauce in each other's chairs, and disconnecting the computers.

"They act like a bunch of damn kids." A smile played at the corners of his eyes. "They need to just go ahead and date each other," he said in a quieter voice.

Hours later, I had an absurd amount of energy when I clocked out. I was buzzing from my 5 A.M. Dr. Pepper, and I knew I wasn't

going to get to sleep.

Liza called to me from across the parking deck. "Hey, Quinn! Wanna go get breakfast?"

I hadn't realized that's what I needed, but when she said the words, everything clicked into place. I hadn't eaten since my orange chicken around 11:30 last night, and I was starving. I definitely wasn't going to cook something before I showered and got in bed.

Liza and I chose a diner a few blocks from work that had greasy plates and served mimosas, the perfect combination for a post-night-shift feast.

We clinked glasses that were smudged with fingerprints. I wasn't sure if I wanted the drink to calm me down, wake me up, or put me to sleep.

Somehow, Liza's makeup was perfect and she looked like she'd gotten a full night's rest. I didn't have to look in the mirror to know I looked like one of those owls who were photographed squinting into the camera, completely discombobulated.

"How have your shifts with Derek been going?"

I shrugged and sipped my drink. "Pretty good I guess. He's a lot different than Sam, but he's not mean or anything. How about you?"

The enthusiasm in her voice might have annoyed me if she wasn't so damn likable. "Becca is amazing! She's only been a nurse for a little less than two years but she's really great! I feel so lucky I ended up with her."

Less than two years? Wow. She must be really good to already be taking students, right? I was happy for Liza, though, because I knew how much of a difference a good preceptor could make. I missed having Sam as a preceptor, but considered myself pretty damn lucky to call her a friend nowadays.

Our plates arrived and we ate like we had just been rescued from a harrowing ordeal at sea for several days.

"I'm so hungry I could eat a bear," I said. "I haven't eaten since before midnight."

"Didn't I see you eating one of those donuts Ross brought in at 6?"

I paused, fork midway to my mouth. "Huh. I guess I did." I'd completely forgotten in my sleep-deprived haze.

We ordered another round of mimosas, and speculated on what Dr. Ross must have gotten written up for that resulted in him

bringing apology donuts to the nursing and support staff, our theories getting increasingly wilder. As we gossiped and joked around, my own juicy secret about my night with Soren hung in the background of my mind. Though nothing had happened, I was certain it would rock the gossip well like an earthquake if word got out.

By the time we left the diner, arm in arm and giggling, I was pleasantly tired and ready for a shower and some sleep in my blacked-out bedroom.

Everything was going great when I got home—for once, I wasn't rehashing every detail about work since I had decompressed with Liza, I was clean and dry, the fan was on and the room was icebox cold, a glass of water was on my nightstand, and I had a full belly and empty bladder. All my needs were met, and it was the perfect recipe for a day of sleep. I closed my eyes, burrowed deeper into the blankets, and hovered on the edge of sleep, that blissful liminal space between worlds.

And then the leaf blower started at the house next door.

AUGUST

Three weeks later, I had settled into nights as best as I was going to. I'd given up on healthier habits, trying to at least bring my meals to work more often than I ordered out. My social life was pathetic; now that I wasn't overwhelmed with school or making plans with my boyfriend, I noticed how empty my life was. Other than a few texts with Sam but no definite plans to hang out, and occasional after-work breakfasts with Liza and some combination of Joe, Derek, and Charlie, I stayed home, where my world revolved around sleep: sleeping for work, sleeping after work, or catching up on sleep because of work.

Despite the sleep issue, I was no closer to figuring out if day shift or nights would fit me better. Though I was having so much fun on nights, and the laid-back vibe was better for my anxiety, I wasn't doing a whole lot when I wasn't at work. So although the shifts themselves were less stressful and chaotic for the most part, it was hell on my body, and my life outside of work. Debbie had mentioned we'd finalize my schedule closer to the end of my orientation in October, after I did six weeks on day shift. She had even mentioned that mid shift would probably be an option, coming in around noon or two P.M. I was a naturally early riser, but I didn't count on getting days. What if I had to do night shift for a year?

It was true that I had four days off during the week, but I needed at least one to sleep all day and try and get back on a normal sleep

pattern. I needed one to grocery shop and clean my house. The other two days were usually a random weeknight or a Sunday, so what was I supposed to do for *one* day that I didn't have other obligations?

The hardest part, though, was finding time for healthy habits. I always prioritized sleep, because I was so scared of sleep deprivation influencing my judgment or resulting in a mistake, so if I felt like I needed more sleep, that always won out.

And needing more sleep was usually what my body craved, because I slept like shit during the day. The blackout curtains helped, the aromatherapy in the shower helped, the increasingly helpful Benadryl right as I was leaving work helped, but I always woke up in a fog, or after restless sleep. The result was a body that was always craving some food, because I suppose the logic was *well, if you aren't going to let me rest then you have to fuel me instead*. And naturally, instead of eating veggies and fruits and good sources of protein, it was a sugar high I craved at three A.M., on shift or off.

Perhaps the only beacon of hope was that my grief had settled down somewhat, obscured by the haze that was my life on night shift. I was too tired to read, too tired to exercise, and also too tired to mourn what used to be my life. I barely managed to keep my house clean and fridge reasonably stocked, though takeout was becoming far too usual an occurrence and I had recently decided it was time to get back in my own kitchen.

One early Thursday evening, I was gearing up for my last shift of the week. Twelve and a half hours with Derek separated me from five glorious days off, and I was pumped.

But I knew something was off the moment we stepped on the floor. I hadn't paid attention in pre-shift, so what was the commotion about? Everyone seemed frazzled, even the more seasoned nurses on the cube.

"What's going on?" I asked Derek.

"Downtime."

"Say what now?"

He eyed me, sipping from his drink. "Paper charting. The computers are down unexpectedly."

"How do you—" I started, then lost the rest of the sentence. Rather, the end of that sentence had many possibilities: How do you find your orders? How do you chart an assessment? Where are your

lab and imaging results? How do you record vitals? How do you discharge a patient and print out the paperwork without a working computer?

I took a big breath, chugged the enormous coffee I'd brought from home, and took report from Sam of all people.

Soren popped his head out of a room and asked for a hand, and realizing it was my room, I moved to join him.

"Finish report for me?" I asked Derek, and he nodded, crossing his arms and nodding as he listened to Sam. I waved to her and we promised to hang out soon as I foamed my hands with the sanitizer and stepped into the room.

"I need your help with this LP."

I raised an eyebrow. MDs usually didn't do lumbar punctures. They would have a PA or nurse practitioner do it for them, or even a competent resident.

Soren read the question on my face. "I am licensed and capable of performing this procedure, but I need someone to help me collect the samples, please."

I stared him down as I put on my gloves, waiting for him to tell me why he was really doing the procedure and not someone else.

"Amber and Whitney are tied up in the fast track, and Chase just left for the evening."

That explained it. The nurse practitioners were unavailable, and the physician assistant was off the clock. I was relieved to hear Chase was gone for the night. Sam had once told me his ego didn't align with his experience, and I was too new to discern her meaning, but I didn't care for him because he always made me feel stupid or annoying for asking questions or reporting patient concerns.

"Did you get the consent?" I asked him.

He pointed to the clipboard on top of the supply cart. "Yes ma'am."

Something about him saying those words and respecting me and my job did uncomfortable things to my heartbeat. It was a surprise change from the irritation he typically engendered.

"Alright then, let's do this."

I helped position the patient lying on her side, with her knees raised to her chest and shoulders hunched forward, rounding out her spine. Soren placed a drape over the area, disinfected the skin, and then numbed her with lidocaine. He then carefully pierced the

needle into the subarachnoid space. A clear substance dripped out into the collection tubes, which I took from him, vigilant to not spill the vials before I capped and labeled them. When I turned around to clear off the work table and make sure the sharps were in the bin, it was already cleaned up.

"Thanks for your help," he said with a twinkling smile before leaving.

Had Soren Slater just cleaned up after himself? This night was going to be strange, I could tell. Was it the full moon? I hadn't paid any attention, though some nurses, especially on night shift, followed the moon phases and designed their schedules in order to avoid working the full moon and the days immediately preceding and following it, too. For a brand new ER nurse like me, every shift was a little nutty, so I didn't really notice any difference based on lunation.

I walked the samples down to the lab per protocol, because it was such an invasive procedure to get them that it wasn't acceptable to risk them getting lost in the hospital's tube system, through which we sent and received medicines, bloodwork, and urine samples, in plastic containers like the ones at the bank's drive-thru. A text popped up, vibrating my cell in my pocket.

I'm glad you're on tonight. It's going to be rough.

Against my better judgment, I smiled. I was glad he was on too, a familiar presence in the uncertainty of my workflow being completely upheaved.

When do you leave?

3. I'm not hardcore like you.

I paused on the stairwell, deciding if I was bold enough to say what I wanted to. A smile tugged at my lips as I typed.

Shame we can't grab a drink after this ordeal. I have a feeling I'm gonna need one.

There was no reply until I made my way down the labyrinth hallways and dropped off the samples, navigated the maze back to the stairwell, and opened the door to the department. Soren was

coming out of a patient room down the hall. He said something to his scribe, who paused, then strolled towards me.

Damn, he was beautiful. He approached and stood a respectable distance away, running a hand through his hair.

"You really want to grab a drink with me?" he said in a low voice, though I doubt anyone would pay attention to us amidst the frenzy of downtime.

"Yeah, I think I do," I said as I eyed him, taking in just how much I wanted him. The fit body. The jawline that looked like it had been sculpted by an artist. The way his eyes fixated on me like he wanted me, too.

Had sleep deprivation and the carefree attitude of night shift twisted my self-preservation instincts at work? There was no way this was a good idea.

He spoke in that unbearably sexy timbre, keeping our conversation only between us. "I don't think tonight is an option, but how about another night?"

I had done it now. There was no way I was going to back down to fear, even though I knew if I said no or that I didn't think it was a good idea, he would drop the subject and never bring it up again.

I nodded. "I'd like that. Text me."

He broke out into a grin, then quickly gained his composure. "Excellent. Thanks, Quinn for helping me with that LP," he said in a normal volume as our coworkers passed us.

Though the department resembled a circus, a strange sort of calm settled over me as Derek and I tag-teamed our assignment. Derek was a fucking rockstar at paper charting, and being with him was alleviating some of my stress, since I could do the interventions and he could manage the charts and going to the Doc Box to get the orders. I was hoping I'd run into Slater again if only to wind up in another situation where he could call me *ma'am*. But three A.M. came and went, and our paths didn't cross again that night.

AUGUST

I survived the downtime, most definitely because Derek and I divided and conquered our assignment and his overall personality simply prevented me from panicking. I offered to buy him breakfast as he clocked out, and he politely declined, saying he had to get home and pack for his camping trip.

I only had another week of night shift left, and I was really going to miss him and the rest of the crew. But there was also a part of me excited to resume what felt like a somewhat normal life instead of the fever dream in which I'd been living these last five weeks—no structure, no routine, no rules.

I couldn't keep eating donuts and sour candy and drinking a bottle of wine for breakfast like there were no consequences. I felt bloated, foggy, and half dead, the only positive aspect being that I was too zonked to feel the gloom that had followed me these last few years. Instead of the heartache of missing my two favorite people in the world, nothing felt real at all. Like I was living in some alternate dimension where I'd lost my grip on reality.

There were slow-moving nights at work where I swore I'd seen a glimpse of Steph's honey-blond curls in the hallway, but when I looked again it had vanished. During my booze-fueled restless daytime sleep, a mashup of dreams and nightmares featured various cameos of Mom and my sister, half-concocted versions of themselves from my memories. Though the active, towering wall of grief had

been absent, a new, ethereal veil had settled over me that I knew couldn't be healthy.

Two days later, deep into the stretch of my off days, I was walking around a riverside trail when my phone lit up.

You still want to grab a drink, or did your better judgment kick in?

My better judgment seems to vacate me around you.

Ha. Tonight?

I actually stopped walking. I had finally gotten a night with Sam planned for later, and though I was tempted to cancel (seriously, what was happening!) I had missed her so much that I wasn't going to break our plans.

Can't. Tomorrow?

Working the evening shift at 6. Bummer to know you won't be there, too.

My heart lit up like he'd just struck a match inside my rib cage. I was beginning to feel the same way about him, too—every time he wasn't on the status board when I walked into work, my mood sank a bit.

If you're off Monday, let's hang out then. Text me

He gave me a thumbs up and I put my phone back in my pocket, smiling like a muddy golden retriever with a tennis ball. Were we really going to do this? Hang out outside of work, have drinks or a meal or whatever together? And was it a date?

I wasn't going to ask him, of course, but I could certainly run the idea by Sam later.

And that I did. We had just gotten an enormous popcorn bucket and were settling into our seats at the movie theatre when I broached the topic. We were early for the 9pm showing of a new female-led action movie, and the lights were still bright as others filed in.

"So, uh, I might have a date with Soren?"

Sam continued shoveling popcorn in her mouth, eyes scanning my face. "That's a development," she said as she sucked down her

Diet Coke.

"I'm not sure if it's a date or not, but we're hanging out Monday I think."

"Why don't you think it's a date?"

Good question. "Well...we have only had a friendly relationship since the barbecue. And that night he was very adamant that I was his patient and nothing else. Since then we've texted occasionally, flirty enough, but I just can't tell."

"If it isn't a date, are you going to be disappointed?"

Who was she, Oprah? Where was she getting these insightful questions? But that was exactly why I brought this stuff up around her, because she knew how to help me figure out my stance on the matter.

"Possibly so. But I'd die if anyone knew that. There's a small part of me that thinks this is some elaborate ruse to embarrass me in front of all of our coworkers."

She snorted. "Do you really think he'd do that?"

"If you had asked me that six months ago, I would've said yes." I reached for a handful of popcorn as I considered. "But now, not so much."

The lights dimmed and the previews blasted through the speakers, and I settled into my seat, sipping my own Diet Coke. My thoughts were far from the film, aggravatingly occupied with a certain Swedish-American physician.

After Sam and I parted ways, I found I was actually tired during nighttime hours for a change, and I settled into bed around midnight with a romcom. It was Saturday night, so Gretchen was most likely working at the bar, and wouldn't be home until three or four, depending on if she stayed out with friends after her own bar closed. I basked in the quiet lamplight of my bedroom, thinking I wouldn't hate to live alone in this kind of peaceful solitude indefinitely.

The next morning, I was up by eight, which hadn't happened on an off day in weeks. I made myself fried eggs and toast and contemplated what to do with yet another full day to myself. The weather was warm and sunny, and I considered how far I'd be willing to take my Honda out of the city. It was notoriously reliable for around town commuting, but I didn't want to push my luck. I also didn't want to think about how much it would suck to have a car payment when the time came to replace it.

I finally settled on a day at the museum and then a trip to the library afterwards, taking a stack of books in my tote bag to the park to read on a blanket. I had paid way too much for a sandwich and a lemonade at a co-op, and I spread my meal before me while the sun baked me like a potato.

My fair freckled skin turned redder faster than I was prepared for, and I packed up shortly after eating, deciding to take my reading back to the house.

Gretchen was sprawled on our sofa in the arms of a woman with an eyebrow piercing and a faded buzzed haircut.

"Hey, Quinn. What's happening? I haven't seen you during the daytime in forever. Was beginning to think you were sleeping in a coffin."

I laughed. "Yeah, night shift is rough." She hadn't been around much, either, it seemed. Had she been seeing this person?

"This is Jules," she said, introducing her partner.

I gave her a quick wave and headed to the kitchen, making a snack plate. I took it back to my room and nearly spilled it all over my duvet when my phone lit up.

A drink sounds good but I'm thinking we shouldn't pass up a chance to enjoy this weather tomorrow. Do you want to go kayaking with me?

Kayaking? I hadn't done that since summer camp a decade ago. Did I even remember how to? Was that something one forgot?

Sure. If you don't shove into my boat and push me in the water.

Don't give me any more ideas.

Tip me over, and you're a dead man, Slater.

I love it when you flirt with me.

Was that what I was doing? The thought gave me a thrill. I put my phone aside and sank back into my bed, popping a cheese cube into my mouth. This time, I wasn't his patient, and had no apparent injuries or any reason to make him hold back on us being something more than friends. I knew I was risking a step into professional hell

if things went awry between us. Was this a terrible idea? Or was I following my heart to somewhere that was hopefully a little less miserable?

Deep down, I felt that the pull between us was almost unavoidable at this point—something was going to happen, whether it be blissful or disastrous, because we couldn't deny the chemistry forever. But that was the thing about chemistry. Combine two compatible substances and create a new compound, or a deathly explosion. Which would we be?

I was clearly physically attracted to him. It wasn't like we were planning a marriage or something serious, but it was a date. There was no way he thought we were just friends. He had even commented on my flirting, and I couldn't deny that's what it had been.

I'd given up casual sex months ago after mostly disappointing encounters, and I'd been satisfying my own needs since then. If Soren wanted something strictly sexual, could I handle that? Or what if he wanted more than that? I wasn't sure what intimidated me more. Either way, my mind was made up: I was going on the date with him, which was the only way I'd find out for sure.

But my body had other plans.

The next morning, I stirred to my alarm, rousing from sleep and stretching as I remembered I was meeting Soren today. But when I opened my eyes, everything seemed wrong. The light seeping through the curtains I hadn't closed last night blinded me, causing me to scrunch up my face and bringing even more attention to the pounding of my skull. I started to moan in pain, then the nausea hit me.

I made it just in time to retch in the toilet. Searching for the handle in the darkened bathroom—because the light sensitivity during a migraine was no joke—I flushed the toilet then washed my hands and rinsed out my mouth. I took a breath, dampening a washcloth and dabbing it on my head and neck, and slid down to sit on the cool tile floor.

My bowels cramped painfully, and that's when I realized—this was a menstrual migraine. The worst, and most frequent time for me to experience one. How did my period continuously surprise me when it had arrived every single month without fail for over a decade now? I groaned in frustration as I dealt with the situation at

hand and washed up, fishing my migraine meds out of my nightstand. They were hopefully going to take away the pain and nausea, but there was a price.

I texted Soren after pulling the blackout curtains.

Woke up with a migraine. So sorry I have to cancel. Let's try again soon, though.

His response pinged in moments later, and the sound rattled my ears. I turned my phone to vibrate then squinted to read the screen against the blinding pain.

I'm sorry that's how your day started. Need any meds?

I smiled, despite the way I felt.

I've got it covered. Thanks, Soren.

Anytime

I vomited again an hour later, but I didn't see the pills in the bile that coated the toilet bowl. Trudging back into my room, drowsy and miserable, I floated through drug-hazed sleep for the rest of the morning and afternoon.

I finally rose around five, less drowsy but still feeling like I had traveled to another planet and back, and drove to grab a cheeseburger, the only thing my body was craving.

My phone rang that evening as I was chopping lettuce for salads for work the next few days. What was my nursing educator calling me for on my day off?

"Hello?"

"Quinn, it's Robbie, I have some unfortunate news."

My heart began hammering and I swallowed the lump in my throat, waiting for him to elaborate. Had I been fired? Sued? Something else I didn't even realize was a consequence of my position?

"Hailey broke her leg, awful bicycling accident with an open tib-fib. She's out for the next few months, and we have had to reassign your day shift preceptor. You'll be working with Brenda Marsh. I think you've met before?"

Oh, we'd met. The mean old hag who I'd called out for leaving me with a mess a few weeks ago was now going to be my preceptor? I was too shocked to reply, and the line was quiet, except for the shuffle of papers on Robbie's desk.

"Are you there?"

"Hey, yes I am. So I'm with Brenda now?"

"That's right. I'll email your new schedule over. Since it's so last minute, please let me know if there are any conflicts, but, uh, we're spread a little thin with preceptors at the moment so I'd appreciate your flexibility to the department's needs."

I nodded before realizing he couldn't see my face. "Yeah, sure, that's fine," I said in a hollow voice. "Thanks, Robbie." I'm not sure what I was thanking him for, since he'd just thrown me into a wolves' den, even though it was my fault I'd pissed off its alpha.

Somehow, this day had turned even more nightmarish than it had started, vomiting with an ice pick behind my eyeballs. I truly did sympathize with Hailey, knowing she was in for a long and painful recovery, but I couldn't help thinking my own situation was going to be shitty, too.

Because now, for the next six weeks, I'd be working alongside Brenda.

This job just kept getting better and better.

That night, lying in bed scrolling on my phone, I came across a post that made my heart stumble. Sam's cousin Nina had tagged her in a status update letting everyone know they were thankful for all the support for her Uncle Karl and that they hoped he'd pull through his surgery. I had no idea what the post was referencing but I knew I had to reach out to Sam right away.

I texted her, letting her know I'd seen the post but wasn't sure what it was about, but that I was here for her however I could help.

Goddammit Nina. I wasn't ready for this to go public (not mad at you of course xoxo) but Dad's getting an emergency CABG as we speak. I dropped Bailey off at Michael's sister's house across town since Michael is traveling for work and I don't know how this is all going to turn out. I'll call Jordan once I know how this surgery goes. Thanks for checking on me babe. Talk soon.

My heart ached for her, and her family, and I sent Sam a heart emoji in response, feeling helpless to do anything useful for her.

SEPTEMBER

On the morning of my first shift with Brenda, I spotted her in the break room for pre-shift. Chatter was buzzing about Sam's dad since she was out on temporary leave—he'd pulled through the surgery and been discharged home after a long week in the hospital. Sam was down in Omaha helping them, but with Bailey starting school in a few days, she would soon be returning home. Sam had confided in me last night that she was secretly grateful to have the excuse to come home, since her mother had been driving her insane. I'd resisted the urge to write back and tell her I'd do anything to be able to have my mother drive me crazy again.

After pre-shift report, where we learned that the department was, shockingly, not totally falling apart, I fell into step with Brenda as we headed down the hall to our assigned cube. There was no erasing my snide comments to her in the past, but I was determined to at least try and start fresh.

"Thanks for volunteering to precept me last-minute. That really sucks about Hailey."

Brenda's rum-raisin lips spread into a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I'm happy to teach the next generation of nurses. They need to learn from someone with experience."

"How long have you been doing this, exactly?" I hoped she thought the question was rude, though I too had a smile on my face as I asked it.

"Forty-six years. I completed a hospital training program when I was nineteen, and I haven't stopped since. I've worked emergency for the last thirty years. I did labor and delivery before this."

We rounded the corner to our cube, the farthest from the charge desk and break room. "I bet things have changed a lot since then," I mused.

"The fundamentals are the same. And that's what you need to learn before you're on your own. I don't understand why they don't make you get a few years of med-surg experience before working emergency, but I don't understand a lot of decisions these days." She eyed me over her glasses, mouth pressed into a thin line.

I shrugged. "Admins and policy have run off enough good nurses at every hospital nowadays that new grads are unfortunately the backbone of the profession now. So many have gone to travel, or retired, or left hospital settings that if it weren't for new grads, the staffing situation would be much worse."

I swore I saw a hint of a smile form, but it disappeared as we approached the night nurse for report, a traveler with whom I wasn't familiar. We had a pretty uncomplicated assignment for the time being, two admissions waiting on rooms, and two empty rooms.

As if on cue, the overhead pager rang a suspected stroke from the waiting room right into my open room. Brenda beamed at me, and this time, she looked *delighted*. "You're on."

I stuffed the worries that I'd make a mistake deep down inside the box of emotions I worked so hard to squash while I was at work, and rose to the challenge. There was no way I was going to let Brenda see how intimidated I was.

The patient arrived seconds later, a pleasant-looking woman with a styled white bob, thick-framed glasses, and an unmistakable lopsided smile.

Shit.

In the ER, crooked smiles aren't endearing like they are in romance novels.

They are a big fucking issue—this was an actual stroke.

I tried to remember my computer training and the strokes I'd seen with Sam and Derek. The steps started to fall into place: IV, blood sugar check, have an EKG ready in case, chart a stroke assessment and get them the hell over to CT. I made sure I had our

pager phone in my pocket as I grabbed IV supplies and the glucometer and headed into the room. I knew damn well Brenda hadn't grabbed that stuff.

I said to her, "You get her undressed and get a line while I chart. Save me a drop for a sugar check and I'll do that afterwards."

Brenda raised an eyebrow, but nodded. I ignored her and logged on to my computer. "Hi sweetheart," she told the patient in her most cloying tone as she undressed her into a gown. "Is someone here with you?"

Just as the patient nodded, and a woman burst through the door. "Mom, I'm here." The woman helped Brenda pull her arm into the gown and they settled her back in bed.

The patient smiled again, the facial paralysis even more apparent when I looked at her flattened nasolabial fold and sagging eyelid.

Shit, shit, SHIT. This was a no bullshit, full-on stroke. I needed a doc in here to get things going, now. I was pressing the button to connect my phone to the intercom and page an MD when he walked in, all tall Scandinavian beauty and competence.

I kicked the stool his way, and he shifted his gaze to me for a moment, seeming to repress a smile before sitting and addressing the patient and her daughter, resting his arms on the stretcher. Brenda raised the bed up, either oblivious or in spite of Soren resting his arms there, and put a tourniquet on her opposite arm to start the IV. Soren eyed her but said nothing as he scooted back away from the rising bed. His voice was pleasant though I saw that quiet fury in his eyes, directed at Brenda.

"Hi there, I'm Dr. Slater. What seems to be going on?"

The daughter answered. "Mom didn't look right this morning, and can't talk right, so I brought her in right away."

Soren nodded. "When was the last time she was feeling her usual self?"

"She was normal at bedtime, but I tend to turn in early, so I saw her around nine. She likes to stay up late and snack and watch movies, so I'm not sure when she actually went to bed and if she had symptoms then."

"And would anyone else be able to confirm her last known well time?"

The daughter shook her head. "It's just us."

"And Winnie," said the patient through the side of her mouth. Her words came out in a slur.

"Who's Winnie?" Soren asked pleasantly.

The daughter sighed. "Her Yorkie. She goes everywhere with her. We got into a fight on the way up here because I told her the damn dog couldn't come to the hospital."

Soren laughed. "I'm going to ask you to perform some tasks to check you out, Mrs. Rice. Is that okay with you?" He stood from the stool and approached the bedside once more. Brenda had taped her IV, and so he lowered the bed back down to the ground, ignoring her as she watched him.

He asked the patient to repeat the phrases we always used—light, tight, dynamite—and had her confirm orientation questions, which she answered correctly, if not with a slur. I opened up the chart and inputted his assessment data as he collected it.

"Brenda," said Soren, suddenly addressing her, "Do you have my stroke scale paperwork?"

She looked to me as if I had grabbed one of the sheets from the nursing station, but I had completely forgotten. I hadn't had a stroke case since I'd been with Sam, months ago.

Brenda eyed me but addressed Soren. "No, I don't think she has properly prepared the room."

Soren's seething remark was delivered with the utmost professionalism. "Luckily you have worked here long enough that you know where everything is located, and since time is brain in this situation, I'd appreciate you promptly returning with what I need." He turned to me without waiting for a response, and I was certain that only four decades of experience kept Brenda's jaw from dropping open.

My training kicked in and I remembered what I needed to ask while Soren waited for Brenda.

"Do you have any allergies?" I asked the patient and daughter.

"Just penicillin."

The daughter was answering, so I addressed her. "Is she on any blood thinners, including aspirin?"

"No."

"Any prior strokes?"

"No."

Soren gave me a thumbs up. "Good work. Order a stat head CT without contrast for me, please, and make sure they're ready, because I'm almost finished with this assessment."

I nodded, entering the order and dialing CT to confirm I could take her right away. The patient looked between Soren and I as Brenda stepped back into the room, neurologist behind her. "You two would make a cute couple," she told us with a slur. I turned away to hide my flushed cheeks and saw Soren grinning at her out of the corner of my eye, before finishing his assessment at warp speed.

I rushed her to CT, not even waiting for Brenda to come with me. Every minute that passed risked more damage to her brain.

Within fifteen minutes they deemed her eligible for TPA, and we transferred her to a trauma bay, since she was a 1:1 patient at that point. I gave my report to Chandra, then Brenda and I walked back to our cube.

"I hope you aren't getting any wild ideas about ER doctors," Brenda said in a condescending tone. "The only people more likely to cheat on you than ER docs are firefighters and paramedics, and I don't recommend either."

"What an interesting viewpoint," I said as I looked down at my phone and read a text.

She's not the only person who thinks we'd look good together.

My insides felt like they were bubbling with happiness, like someone had poured a cold pop inside my chest cavity and the fizz was rising up. I excused myself to the bathroom just to be alone with the intoxicating and confusing feeling of being attracted to my former nemesis and willed myself to get it together before emerging minutes later, no less ecstatic about the jarring flirtation but at least a little more accepting that it had happened.

That text was the only good thing that happened for the rest of the day, other than Mrs. Rice being able to get TPA and hopefully recover from her stroke. Brenda's ass had likely made an indentation in her chair, because that's where she spent the rest of the shift, barely glancing at orders, and only helping me if I explicitly asked.

"You seemed to want to do things yourself, so I'm not going to get in your way," she had said.

Was she serious? Had I brought this on myself by attempting to take charge in Mrs. Rice's room and giving her tasks? A good preceptor would have praised my initiative, and corrected me if needed, I thought, but Brenda was far from a good preceptor. Why was she even a preceptor in the first place?

A few hours later, I was trying to figure out how to start a nitroglycerin drip on a patient with alarmingly high blood pressure when I stepped out of the room in search of her. Naturally, I was greeted by a sea of unoccupied chairs. Not a single nurse was present at our namesake station, when Brenda had been there all damn morning.

I muttered a curse and stepped back into the room. "Excuse me for a moment, I need to grab something to start this drip," I told the patient, an anxious man in his forties with no history of blood pressure troubles. I tried not to think about how my own anxiety was raring up my own blood pressure.

I rolled the IV pump out to the station, deciding I'd just grab whoever came out of a room next to help. The glass bottle containing the nitroglycerin was pissing me off, and I was trying to both figure out why in the hell it wouldn't prime through my tubing and trying not to break the bottle as I tried to peel the attached plastic loop that was used to hang the bottle from the IV pole. Once the bottle was spiked and hung upside down, I still couldn't get the tubing to prime with the medicine. I had done one of these before with Derek, and months ago with Sam, but I didn't remember having this problem then. Deciding the tubing must be faulty, I grabbed another set and the same thing happened. The call light rang out at the station, and now, even the secretary had stepped away. I knew if I answered it I was going to have to do something else, but not answering it was going to make me even more on edge.

"Son of a bitch!" I said, and Diwa poked her head out from the med room.

"What's wrong?"

I sighed. "I can't get this damn—sorry, Diwa—but, uh, I can't get this tubing to prime and I don't know why."

She came closer and examined my supplies, picking up the call light on the way. She promised the person on the other end that we'd be there soon. I hoped it wasn't one of my patients because I was so behind.

Up close, I stood a head taller than Diwa. She foamed her hands with sanitizer then took the glass bottle, peering through her thick glasses.

"Here," she showed me. "This part opens." She hooked her thumb around a small plastic release valve that I hadn't noticed. She opened it, and suddenly the medicine dripped through. Why didn't other meds need that valve? I couldn't remember this being applicable before.

I then tackled the next hurdle: trying to figure out the titration. Diwa had disappeared, grabbing a blanket from the warmer and bringing it to one of my other rooms.

"Thanks," I called to her as she went into the room.

I examined the order once more to see if I missed something about the starting dose. The medicine was ordered at a range, and I had no idea where to start. The lowest value seemed the best, because I remember Sam telling me that with vasoactive drips it was always better to start low and increase as possible. But why was the range so large? 10-200mcg/kg/min?

Hmm. I wished Sam was here. If she had actually been in the building, I would've wheeled my pump over to her and asked her. And that's when I decided: if Brenda was absent, I would just call the CC.

"ER, Debbie," said a clipped voice on the other end of the line.

"Hey, it's Quinn, I have a question about this nitro drip."

A pause. "Aren't you with Brenda?"

"Yes, but I haven't seen her in awhile."

If she didn't want to help me, I'd at least make sure someone did. Damn if I wasn't going to do what was best for my patient, and not starting a highly dangerous medicine if I wasn't sure exactly what I needed to do seemed like a great place to start.

"I'll be right there."

"Thanks, Debbie."

The cardiac monitor at the station sounded with the patient's next blood pressure: 205/124.

Christ.

Five minutes later, Debbie came and explained how I should start and titrate the med, pulling up the policy on the computer, and ten minutes later, Brenda rounded the corner to our cube.

"What's going on here?" she asked as she stirred creamer into her coffee and eyed the papers Debbie had printed for me.

"Your preceptee is starting a nitroglycerin drip," said Debbie. "It'd be nice if she had some help with the process."

"But she's been doing so well without me. I thought she was a superstar and could handle herself."

Debbie gave Brenda a smile that was anything but friendly. "Even so, it's your responsibility to guide her."

Brenda sipped her coffee. "If she can't handle herself for five minutes without me, does she really belong in the ER?"

Debbie checked her watch. "I've been with her for almost double that amount of time, and I'm sure she was looking for you long before she called me, too. Take it from here, please, Brenda. Thank you," she finished with a somewhat friendlier tone, as she gave me an apologetic look. She addressed me. "Good work asking for help, Quinn. We always want you to ask if you're unsure."

After Debbie rounded the corner, Brenda snorted. "You always make yourself look good, don't you?"

I wasn't sure what she meant, but I strode into the room and started my drip, hating that I had to pop my head back out and have Brenda co-sign it with me.

If she thought trying not to kill my patient was me trying to make myself look good, that was her problem. I saw no use in arguing with someone being stupid, petty, and irrational, no matter that she was old enough to be my grandmother.

After I got the drip going and adjusted, I returned to the station, where she had my patient's chart pulled up.

"I titrate differently, but I suppose you can do whatever you see fit."

"You are welcome to teach me anything, and I'd happily take the advice," I said earnestly. "I'm here to learn, even if you somehow don't think that's the case."

When seven o'clock came and I could finally leave, I had no fight left in me. I didn't want to speak to Brenda for another second longer, so I took my time gathering my things, and stopped at the bathroom for good measure.

When I got to the parking deck, the warmth and soft glow of the early September evening momentarily distracted me from the mostly

awful day, and remembering the text Soren had sent erased it entirely.

We still hadn't found a time where our schedules overlapped, and I wondered if he was waiting for me to make the next move since I'd had to cancel our kayaking date. Seeing him today had been the best part of my day, and it shocked me to realize that a few short months ago, the complete opposite would've been true.

I still had two more shifts this week, back to back, so I decided to wait on texting him to plan a date until afterwards. I drove home singing along to the radio and grinning like a fool. I was definitely into him, and he seemed to have feelings for me, too.

I was so fucked.

SEPTEMBER

Two weeks later, nothing had progressed on the front with Soren. He was working nonstop, opposite days from me, and had some sort of practice in the evenings he hadn't elaborated on and I had forgotten to ask about. During his stretch of off days this week, he was going on an elk hunting trip. I tried to hide my surprise that he and Knox were going together when he told me one uncharacteristically mellow morning at work.

"What's so surprising about that?" he asked as we walked down the hallway together. He was coming off of an overnight shift and I had just arrived at work less than an hour before, and he somehow still looked just as handsome as he did any other day. Though when I looked closer, I saw the faint shadow around his eyes.

I shrugged. "I didn't know you two were friends."

"We are. This is our first time hunting together, though."

Why was that so...cute? Was that the word I was looking for? It warmed me to think about them being friends outside of work.

"Well I hope you get one," I said. "An elk," I clarified.

"Me, too."

He ducked into the stairwell to leave and motioned for me to come with him. I had been on my way to grab my patient some juice but kept on the detour, unable to resist the urge to be near him.

He pulled me against his chest and I was enveloped by him. A pair of strong arms held me and I drank in the scent—sandalwood,

fresh fabric softener, and the undertone of his sweat.

I pulled away and faced him, both hating that I had done it and knowing I had to before someone saw us or I had the dumb idea to take it further. "What was that for?"

"You looked like you needed it," he said simply.

I hadn't thought of Liam in months, but he crossed my mind, a surprising interruption. Liam had never made me feel as understood as Soren did, with his patience and uncanny ability to read me like a book, and we weren't even officially together yet.

He ran a hand through his hair. "I know it hasn't been easy with Brenda and it's bullshit that you're being trained by someone like that, I don't care how many years she's been doing it."

"Can't argue with that."

He opened his mouth to speak then hesitated. What was going on? This was so unlike his usual calm and confident self.

"And I know you're probably off for a few days and since I'm going hunting and we can't hang out, I thought I'd just make the best of our time here." His lips spread into a timid smile.

"Thank you," I told him, placing a hand on his forearm as I stepped closer. "You always notice everything I'm going through. I don't know how you do it but it's. . . nice to feel cared for."

Soren smiled for real then, broad and dazzling.

"You're beautiful," I whispered before I could stop myself.

His eyes studied me more intensely, then he backed away. "I'll text you when I get back, okay? I'm sure your patients need you."

It wasn't crazy in the department, but I still had a lot of shit to do. "Fuck. You're right. They do."

I dashed off without another word, hoping Brenda hadn't noticed my absence, and that no one else had seen us in the stairwell.

She and I had settled into a rhythm, jarring as it was from my other preceptor experiences. I basically did everything myself, but unlike with Derek, where he was a quiet but steady presence when I needed him, Brenda was essentially a warm body at the nurses' station, and probably the coffee cart's best customer.

Every night after work, when I went home and cooked dinner or grabbed takeout and ate it on the couch, it took longer and longer for the irritation to mellow. The weather was gorgeous, which helped—summer had lingered into fall, and the days were still warm and pleasant, and the evenings cool. I had taken to walking after work to

clear my head, and the exercise helped to quell the thrumming frustration I felt at my situation.

Being thrust into what was essentially an independent nursing role a little over halfway through my training was having a strange effect on my psyche. I was developing judgment and clinical reasoning, but at what cost? My sleep was riddled with worrisome and frightening dreams, all having to do with hospital hallways and screaming patients and glimpses of my family that I'd never see again. While exercising helped me to release my anger towards Brenda, it couldn't banish my nightmares.

I thought of something my former friend Jessica had told me our senior year, which seemed like a whole lifetime ago even though only five years had passed. She'd said, "I don't know how you aren't in therapy. Everyone else I know is, and some of them even have both their parents." This was even before the accident, but Jessica had known about my deadbeat dad.

Did I need therapy?

Probably.

But it felt like a door that had been closed for so long, I was worried about what would be on the other side once I opened it. I was surviving with the lingering trauma, but how much longer could I do that?

I'd been keeping the dam from bursting for so long, what would happen when it inevitably broke loose? Would I end up like one of my patients having a complete mental crisis, dressed in paper scrubs for a grippy sock vacation to a psychiatric hospital?

Would I stop being able to work completely once the anxiety inevitably slipped into my working hours and not just my home life, sending me into a financial tailspin?



The following week, after a wine-fueled night of restless sleep and nightmares, I was sitting at my computer beside Brenda. I had taken report from Liza, hugged her and promised we'd see each other soon, and was organizing my tasks I needed to complete, checking orders and test results and figuring out what to do first.

It was a perfect storm—I was PMSing, bloated, and ravenously hungry, it was my third shift in a row, and I had just taken over for a patient with suspected *C. Diff* having horrible diarrhea.

Adding to the mess was our frequent flier Jerry. He had checked in for a headache, was violently drunk, and his blood pressure was so high it could power a rocket to the moon.

Around eleven, I had had enough. I disposed of my PPE after cleaning up diarrhea for what felt like the hundredth time, told Farrah I was stepping away for a moment but I had my pager phone, and I walked off the cube. I didn't know where I was going, exactly, but I was so tired and irritable and at the mercy of my hormones that were causing all sorts of unpleasant emotions to surface. A headache lingered, I felt the exhaustion bone-deep, and I plopped down on the stairwell to the basement, burying my face in my hands. I felt tears on the brim of my eyes, but they never fell.

Some combination of hormones, anger towards Brenda, and lack of sleep were slowly eroding at the walls I tried to keep up at work, so that the demons that plagued me couldn't seep in. But I didn't know how much more fight I had left in me.

The door opened, and I didn't even look up, not wanting to face whoever had come in for their shift. But instead of opening the door to the department, I heard footsteps behind me, coming down the stairs to where I sat.

"Hey," Soren said. "What's the matter?"

His warm hand touched my back as he sat down beside me, then traced circles over the fabric of my scrub top. The tender gesture brought the tears closer to spilling over.

I pulled myself together and faced him, feeling like my bones weighed double. "It's just been a hard morning, and a hard week, and I'm really tired," I said hoarsely, voice nearly breaking with emotion.

"Is today your last day here this week?"

I nodded, looking away as I willed my tears not to fall.

"Do you have plans this weekend?"

"No."

"Come with me to my cabin."

I whipped my neck around to face him. "What?"

No trace of any humor crossed his face, only concern. "I'm going to my cabin this weekend, and I think you should join me. It's the

most relaxing place I know of, and I think you need to decompress. You'll have your own bedroom, if that's what you're worried about."

My face blanched. I hadn't thought of that, actually, and would've probably said yes even if he told me we were sleeping in the backseat of his BMW or on the side of the road somewhere. I broke into a smile. "Okay."

His face softened, and he squeezed my shoulder. "I'll pick you up Friday morning."

When I returned to the nurses' station, Jerry was leaning against the counter, struggling to remain upright. All I saw was a preview of the future: the inevitable fall he'd suffer, the report I'd have to write about it, and the CT he'd have to get when he banged his head. With his current blood pressure, he'd be flirting with a brain bleed, too.

"Jerry," I snapped. "You're supposed to be in your room. What are you doing up here? What do you need?"

"Eh, fuck you bitch," he slurred. I dashed to find a wheelchair to sit him in, stopping when I saw her coming around the corner, jaw set like a warrior on a battlefield.

"Jerry, if you don't sit in this chair right now I'm going to have security escort you out and ban you for a month," said Brenda. She locked the wheels once the chair was right behind him, essentially trapping him between the nurses' station counter and the wheelchair. She stood to one side of him, and I flanked his other side, ready to ease him down gently if he were to step sideways.

He sighed and plopped down into the chair. "If Chandra was here she wouldn't be as mean as you two," he grumbled.

"If Chandra was here you'd definitely be in her care," Brenda assured him as she untangled his feet from underneath the foot plates.

I unlocked the wheels and pushed him back to the room. Brenda walked beside us, ready to catch him if he slid out of the chair like an intoxicated eel.

We helped him into the bed, covered him in blankets, set the bed alarm, and turned out the lights, leaving the door cracked as we walked out.

"I wasn't sure what I was going to do back there," I admitted, brushing hair off my face.

"You'll figure it out as you go. Don't give up yet, it takes time to learn how to deal with patients." Brenda's genuine smile almost

looked out of place on her stern features, and I knew my mouth was close to gaping open in shock. She noticed, and her amusement faded. "I'm sorry I haven't been a good teacher to you. I truly didn't mean to make things so hard for you, but everyone talks so highly of you to be so new that I just didn't want to feed into your ego. I wanted you to learn independently because I thought it would make you a better nurse in the long run. But there's a difference between teaching independence and abandoning someone, and that's where I failed you. I told Debbie that I didn't think I had it in me anymore to teach, though. Seemed like the right thing to do."

Speechless, I stared at her and then resumed charting. The rest of the day passed in a blur of body fluids, call lights going off, overhead pages for heart attacks, strokes, traumas, and security alerts, and a never-ending list of patients in the waiting room to be seen.

My shift was nearly over when I emerged from a patient room to see a bar of chocolate and some chips on my desk. If Soren knew I was PMSing—which I wouldn't put it past him to know that somehow—he was knocking it out of the park as a friend, or whatever he was at this point.

That night after work, I collapsed into bed around nine after a quick shower and dinner of instant ramen. I took a Benadryl and skipped the wine, wanting to sleep as much as possible, waking in a drug-induced fog the next morning. When I picked up my phone, I realized it was nearly ten. Damn, had I slept for twelve hours?

Bleary-eyed with a cup of coffee and a book on the sofa, it hit me: I was going away with Soren tomorrow for a whole weekend. My heart raced, and a wave of excitement coursed through me, followed immediately by a small twinge of panic.

What exactly had I gotten myself into with him? It had seemed inevitable at this point, but it was finally happening.

I was so fucked.

SEPTEMBER

Soren picked me up at nine on Friday morning, with a hot coffee waiting for me in the cup holder of his ancient-looking SUV, a rugged, well-loved vehicle that actually looked equipped to handle off-roading, unlike the sleek BMW. He was dressed in those dark jeans that made his ass look scrumptious, brown boots with dirt caked on the sides, and a black tee. I stashed my bag in the backseat alongside his jacket and a crocheted blanket.

"Thanks for the coffee, friend. I need it. It was hard to get up today." I sighed, rubbing my eyes. "I don't know how Brenda does three shifts in a row at her age. I wanted to sleep all day today, and I even had a day to recover yesterday."

"You can get a solid nap in on the way up if you want. It's a little over three hours, so get comfortable. Though I know this ride isn't as posh as the Beemer."

"I like it," I said, as I cozied up in the striped-khaki seat, and propped my feet on the cracked dashboard. Soren reached over and nudged my knees with his hand, placing my feet flat on the floor. A thrill ran through me and I tried my best to sit still and ignore it.

"Promise me you won't ever do that in a car again," he said, eyes focused on the road as he navigated out of the maze of my neighborhood to the freeway. "If you haven't seen the damage that can do to a femur or pelvis yet consider yourself lucky."

"Fine," I groaned, and reached for the blanket in the back. With my feet on the floorboard, and his blanket wrapped around me, he glanced over and nodded, and I couldn't help but soften into a smile myself. "Are you a music person, podcast person, or a drive-in-silence-and-brood kinda guy?"

"All three, depending on the day. Know any good podcasts?"

I clapped my hands together, bubbling over with excitement. It was my time to shine. "Oh yeah, if you don't mind true crime."

He shrugged. "In moderation."

"Probably the best practice for murder media. I could stand to remember that myself. Though I do make up for all the killing and gore with my reading tastes."

I had stocked my e-reader with a fresh batch of romances, from those rated sweet and emotional to dark and erotic. I wasn't sure what mood I was going to be in, spending the weekend lounging at a cabin in the woods with an unfairly handsome man who was blossoming into something like a friend. Heaven knows I needed one at the moment, given how bad work was bringing me down.

I sighed as my thoughts began to race to the disaster that had been the past three days, and Soren looked over at me.

"You're thinking about work, I can tell."

I rolled my eyes. "Of course you can. Are you this way with everyone, or are you just tuned in to me for some reason?" It came out irritated, though I was verging on that murky territory we had barely crossed into yet, the place where we talked about our feelings towards one another. We'd gotten close to exploring it months ago that night at his condo, but I'd shut it down then. I'd confessed that he made me feel cared for a few days ago, and that seemed to go over well, but what about now?

I looked to his face for clues, but he was focused on the highway. The autumn leaves of the trees behind him sped by in an earthy rainbow—greens and oranges, reds and golds. His face was relaxed, hint of a smile at his lips. "I don't find it difficult to read you at all, Quinn."

"I've gathered that. Am I making it easy on you, or what? How are you so good at it?"

He shrugged. "People don't always say what they feel, but they show it more often than not, if you know what you're looking for."

“Hmm. Let me see if it works on you.” I studied him, right arm on the wheel as his left rested on the window. His legs were spread somewhat, and his seat reclined just enough to make him have to extend his arm fully to drive. “Well aren’t you comfortable,” I remarked.

He glanced over and bit back a grin before looking back at the road. The contact his teeth made with his bottom lip made me want to reach over and taste him for myself. “See. It’s not as hard as you’d think.”

Two episodes of my favorite crime-ridden podcast later, we were pulling into town.

Soren removed his sunglasses as we stopped at a red light and rubbed at his eyes. “Lunch?”

“Absolutely. Thanks for driving, by the way.”

“It’s my pleasure. I love driving the Cruiser. It’s better with company, though.”

After lunch at a brewpub, we stopped at a small market, charming with its narrow aisles and impressive butcher case, and bought groceries for the weekend. I had also thrown a few bottles of wine and some beers in the cart, which Soren noted but didn’t comment on as we checked out. He positioned himself nearest the cash register of course, and had the poor fifty-something cashier blushing up a storm as he complimented her on her well-provisioned store. Is that what I looked like around him?

We arrived at the property shortly after we pulled out of town, the afternoon sunny and autumnally warm, the kind of ephemeral warmth that fades quickly at dusk, replaced by the chill of impending winter.

The cabin was rustic and cozy, surrounded by a mix of evergreen conifers and the resplendent autumn palette of the mid-September birch, maple, and oak trees. Several sitting areas faced the lake behind the cabin: a screened-in porch fit with swinging chairs off the side of the house, an open back deck off the living room with rocking chairs, and a balcony off the upstairs loft built on top of the screened-in porch. Inside, hand-hewn wooden beams lay perpendicular to the sloped ceiling, with a wooden staircase leading to the loft and a smaller bedroom and bathroom downstairs off the kitchen. A wood-burning fireplace surrounded by stone that crawled its way up alongside big windows overlooking the back deck and

lake gave the smaller footprint a bigger feel, and a connectedness to the nature surrounding it.

I set the grocery bags I was carrying down on the small kitchen island and took it all in.

"It's beautiful. Thank you so much for bringing me here."

"My father, grandfather, and I built this place the summer before I started college. It was a lot of work, but has been so worth it. I come here when I need some peace, which is quite often, actually." He placed his arms on the side of the island, facing me. "I hope you find it here, too."

My chest fluttered as he fixed his gaze on me, and I couldn't help but wonder what it'd be like to be wrapped up in those strong arms again. I'd gotten a taste at work a few days ago, but I wanted more.

I knew my thoughts were visible to him somewhere on my face or body—his sly smile told me as much. But he didn't say anything as he turned and began putting food into the fridge. I had to peel my eyes away from staring at his behind, deciding it'd be a bit more productive to go and get the rest of the things out of the Cruiser.

Soren set me up in the loft, with a king-sized bed and private balcony, and I unpacked my clothes into the dresser and plopped down onto the bed. The bedding was heavenly—soft flannel sheets in hunter green, white, and blue, with a chunky cable-knit ivory bedspread. A heap of wool blankets in browns and blues were stacked in a cedar wardrobe against the wall, along with a down comforter and extra pillows. The man certainly understood comfort.

The sheets faintly smelled of him, that woodsy, spicy scent that I'd missed once it faded from the clothes he'd given me. I buried my nose in it, like a bloodhound on a trail, then promptly stood up and walked to the balcony outside to put an end to that nonsense.

The late afternoon sun warmed me down to my bones, and I basked in it before popping back inside to grab my e-reader and a beer. Not long after settling into the swinging bench, I heard a *crack* that startled me from my book. When it sounded again, I stood up to investigate.

I crossed the porch and peered over the railing towards the source of the sound at the back of the house, and cursed the universe that life was so goddamn unfair.

Soren was shirtless and facing away from me, splitting firewood with a maul. His back and shoulders shifted with the movement and

he was so damn beautiful that I hid myself as much as possible so I could creep on him properly.

Seeing him half-naked and completing a task that was going to provide me with warmth ignited some primal mating instinct, and I wanted him in a way that was threatening to obliterate rational thought. I watched him for a few strokes longer before creeping back into the house.

Lying on those sheets that smelled like he did, with those images of his body fresh in my mind, I touched myself in all the places I wanted him to, tearing through a mind-shattering orgasm in minutes. I buried my face in the pillow to keep from screaming, feeling like I'd gotten away with some heinous crime when I slipped back outside to the porch, cheeks flushed and legs numb with a pleasant fullness between my legs. An hour later, the daylight was fading, and I was starting to think about dinner, so I went back inside and descended the stairs to find Soren.

He was freshly showered, reading on the sofa in a pair of light-wash jeans and a dark sweater. Candles were lit on the mantle and side tables, and the smell of cinnamon and vanilla filled the space. It was achingly romantic.

A neatly stacked pile of wood lay beside the fireplace. If he only knew what that labor that had created that woodpile had *really* done for me.

"Should I start dinner soon?" I asked him.

He looked up at me, removing his glasses. "You're cooking for me?"

"Yeah. I don't cook for myself much anymore, but at one point I really enjoyed feeding people."

His eyes softened. "I'd be honored."

I opened a bottle of cab, and poured two glasses, taking one to Soren. The sound of jazz filled the room as he stepped away from the small turntable in the corner, horns and piano and a woman's voice that was an instrument all in itself. I had never heard music like this before. It was more than sound filling my ears—I could feel it in my heart like it was the blood that belonged there.

"Soren," I whispered. "This can't be real."

He came closer, fingertips brushing my elbow. "Why not?"

"Because you and I...we aren't..." I lost my words, not sure how to articulate what I was feeling.

His voice was low, almost a whisper. "I didn't bring you here because I thought something would happen between us."

He swallowed and set his wineglass down on the end table, taking mine from my hand and setting it next to his. He pulled me close to him, and I buried my face in his chest, arms pushing against his abdomen. He gently grasped my upper arms, not quite embracing me.

"I care about you, Quinn. And I see it on your face every time I see you at work, how hard this job is on you. It kills me to see you that way. So I wanted to give you a relaxing weekend, because it was something I could do."

My tears were soaking his sweater, a silent stream of the stress and anxiety I'd been feeling for months now leaving my body.

When he spoke again, his voice was hoarse. "I had to do something. It's tearing you apart."

I wrapped myself around him then, not thinking about the consequences, and not realizing how much I needed to be held until he folded his arms around me in return. I couldn't remember when I had last felt this safe. Cared for. He rested his chin on my head, and I nudged closer into his tear-stained sweater.

"I can't tell you how much this means to me," I began, then snorted. "But you can probably tell."

I pulled back and looked up at him, expecting to feel embarrassed for crumbling into him and breaking down like I did. But in the absence of shame, I found peace, an unburdening of the horrors of my mind and heart that I hadn't realized had been so bottled up. I beamed at him then, heart feeling less cumbersome with each passing moment. Soren burst into a grin and reached over to wipe another tear that had fallen down my cheek.

Though I could've been content for much longer, I broke away. "Okay, enough. All this crying has revved up my appetite. Let's make spaghetti."

We ate at the small wooden table lodged between the kitchen and living room. Soren made small green salads dressed with lemon and olive oil, and sprinkled with flaky salt and freshly ground pepper. My spaghetti was savory and satisfying and the crusty buttered bread only made it even more perfect. The bold, hearty wine made every bite explode with flavor, and left my mouth feeling earthy and smooth. Jazz spun on the turntable while the fire roared and the

candles burned. The vibe was so atmospheric, so completely consuming that it made me forget.

For once, I wasn't thinking about how lonely I was in life without my mom and sister. I wasn't thinking about how much I struggled to do my job with the mental baggage I carried into every shift. And I definitely wasn't thinking about the looming burden of my student loans that basically ensured I'd be working as a nurse for a few years until they were paid off.

We talked sparingly as we ate, and the periods of silence were familiar and anything but awkward. The music filled the room, along with the clink of silverware on plates and glassware hitting the barnwood table.

After the meal, Soren insisted on washing the dishes, and I settled onto the sofa with my book, reading by lamplight. I was so engrossed with the story that when he approached me, I didn't look up at first.

"That good, huh? You'll have to tell me the title."

"Not in a million years, Slater. What's up?"

"I want to show you something."

He pulled me to my feet and I followed him through the kitchen and into the small hallway beyond it. He pushed open the door to the bathroom, where the bathtub was filled with steaming bubbles. Lavender and rosemary drifted out from the water to entice me, though I didn't require coaxing. An oversized white robe hung on a hook beside the tub, and a glass of ice water was perched on a tray across the water. Candles glowed in the dark, the only illumination.

Soren stood with his hands in his pockets, perched in the doorway to his bedroom while I took it all in. "I thought you might want some time to yourself."

"Thank you," I whispered, and shut the door behind me lest I tear up again.

I slipped into the hot water and exhaled sharply. It was rare that you actually got to feel the tension leaving your body in such a pleasing way.

I thought of nothing, just melted into the water until I forced myself to get out, wanting to exit the tub before it became a tepid, soapy mess. The robe smelled like clean linen ought to, and the fabric felt divine on my bath-softened skin.

I emerged certainly more relaxed than I'd been in months and possibly years. The kitchen was spotless and smelled faintly of lemon, and the fire continued to roar, but Soren was nowhere to be found. As I crossed the room to the stairs to get dressed—because I didn't trust myself to wear only a robe around him—a shadow crossed the glass by the back door.

He popped his head inside. "Come quick. This won't last long."

I hobbled into my boots by the door and stepped out. The night had grown cold, and I was glad I hadn't washed my hair, though I shivered against the robe. When I looked up to the night sky, I stilled. Despite growing up here, I had never seen them so bright. My family had no Northwoods cabin to retreat to when the city slush got too muddy, no quiet escape from the metropolitan grind. If we managed to duck out of town, it was for a quick summer camping trip, and then, it was always too sunny. On the rare chances that the lights were on display in the Twin Cities, the light pollution blotted out their full splendor.

But now, the aurora quite literally stopped me mid-step. I gasped in wonder, taking in the blues and greens and shimmering veil that was all at once otherworldly and strange, beautiful and comforting.

"I've never seen them like this." My teeth chattered as the wind gusted underneath my robe.

"Every time I do it's like the first time all over again. The Lights never cease to astonish me." He came closer, rubbing my arms for warmth as he stepped into place next to me. I dared to step in front of him, allowing myself to lean back into his chest as I marveled at the sky. He froze as we made contact, then began slowly rubbing my arms again. The feeling of his strong frame behind me felt as natural as anything around us—the lights shimmering off the lake, the night-darkened pines and spruces across the water, the cold wind that signaled the changing season.

I pressed into him further as my body trembled against the night, daring to get warmer. Soren wrapped his arms around my chest as we both watched the flicker and dance of the aurora. Immersed in the forest, the scent that I had come to associate with him was barely detectable layered with the crisp night air and the tree sap, earth, and grass around us. He belonged here, just as the rabbits and deer and hawks did. And it was getting harder to deny that I belonged here too, not necessarily in the forest, but in his arms.

"It's so beautiful," I whispered. "It makes everything else that seems so hard to tackle seem so...unimportant."

He murmured in agreement, then leaned down and settled his face next to mine. The contact made me feel as magnetic as the poles, as charged as the solar winds that were making this moment possible. If I turned around and faced him right now, there was a 100% chance that I'd kiss him, and a sizable chance that that would be the wrong thing to do.

Hadn't he just told me he didn't bring me here for that? But if he wasn't attracted to me, then why was he holding me, naked save for a terry cloth robe? Was he just as confused as I was about all of this?

I had to physically pull away and break the spell, because I trusted myself less and less as each moment passed. The Northern Lights, the cold autumn air, the cozy cabin and bedding and fireplace inside, the fact that I hadn't been touched by anyone but myself in five months—it was a recipe for romance. But the ingredients and proportions weren't quite right. I was too vulnerable, too crumbled from the anxiety that work had made nearly unbearable, made worse by my unresolved grief.

"I'd better get dressed," I said, and turned back into the house, leaving him alone on the deck.

That night as I settled into bed, I listed off all the reasons I didn't think Soren and I should be together, and realized I had to make some major changes. Not for my love life or for him, but for *me*.

If I was ever going to move past the grief and anxiety that was shadowing me like an unwanted phantom, I had to take the steps forward, and I had to do it for my own good. Falling for a man who had continuously proven himself to be caring and trustworthy, and, not to mention, someone I was relentlessly attracted to, was a bonus, and something that would be better to explore after I'd figured myself out.

After all, how was I supposed to love someone else when I was so crushed on the inside? If I didn't deal with it now, it was certainly going to rise up later, a latent tsunami of unmanaged anxiety and sorrow.

Not to mention Soren. I knew him well enough at this point to know that he wasn't going to make the first move. I saw it in the way he looked at me, the way he held me, the mere fact that he brought me here because he knew I needed respite and this place

was where he found his. He cared about me, that was certain. But even if he did have feelings for me beyond friendship, he'd never overstep the gulch between us. He had promised that to me the night I stayed at his condo and he'd shown me the same respect tonight.

Beyond our age difference, there was also an obvious power dynamic at work, and the other dominoes that fell in the aftermath of his position too—he was clearly more financially stable than I was, and rooted in his home and career, things that I imagine I'd have at twenty-nine, too. It made me oddly optimistic, thinking that there was a clear path to things that I wanted: peace, a sense of mental well-being, and a relationship built on trust and understanding with someone who ignited my mind and my heart, and without question, my body.

Thinking of Soren shirtless chopping wood, of being wrapped in his arms, of the way his bedsheets smelled, it was all making me hell of a lot more motivated to make a therapy appointment.

Burrowed into the soft bedding, sleep came effortlessly, and for the first time in ages, I didn't fight it to ruminate on my worries.

SEPTEMBER

When I woke, three things told me I'd slept longer than I had in weeks: the sun sat high in the sky near its peak, my body actually felt rested and ready for the day ahead, and my bladder was uncomfortably full. I yawned and crawled out of bed, wondering why the house was so quiet.

After using the toilet and brushing my teeth, I wandered into the kitchen. It smelled faintly of coffee, like a pot had been brewed hours ago. The clock on the stove finally confirmed my suspicions—it was nearly eleven. I fished in the pocket of my oversized cardigan for my phone, realizing I had left it in my purse upstairs and hadn't even glanced at it since we'd been here.

A French press sat on the kitchen counter, next to a big spoon, a can of coffee, and a note.

*I can't tell you how happy it makes me that you slept in.
There was no way in hell I was going to wake you. If
I'm not back by the time you're up, I will probably be in
soon.*

I boiled water for the coffee and stepped outside, shielding my eyes as I adjusted to the brightness. The lake was clear and calm,

trees standing still in the absence of a breeze. A mourning dove cooed in the distance, a song I had always thought was more beautiful than melancholy. I walked to the edge of the porch, leaned against the railing, and turned my face to the sun, closing my eyes and letting the warmth permeate my skin. I sat in the warmth for several minutes, until I saw red behind my eyelids and I knew my skin was thinking about burning.

Inside, I poured boiling water into the grounds waiting in the French press. The large spoon sitting beside it swirled through the coffee mixture with ease, and I placed the lid on and let it sit for a few moments before pushing the filter down.

Curiosity won when I spotted Soren's bedroom door cracked down the hallway. I edged my way inside and peered out the window to make sure the Land Cruiser hadn't crept back into the driveway beyond my notice. But the driveway sat empty, and so was his bedroom.

The bed was made, and though I wanted to burrow in it, his leather suitcase on a chair near the window called to me like a siren song. The main compartment was unzipped, so I lifted the lid and plucked the first t-shirt I saw off the top, the black one he'd worn yesterday. I wrung it up and brought it to my nose. He must have worn this after splitting those logs—the salty sweat mixed with his deodorant and pheromones drove me wild. Reason and logic were buried beneath my need to have something else that smelled like he did. I dashed out of the room, left the door just as it had been, and stashed the shirt amongst the havoc of my duffel bag.

I was sitting with my feet curled underneath me on a swing on the screened-in porch when the Land Cruiser pulled up. I had drunk two cups of coffee while reading my book, basking in the slow morning.

Soren walked in the door off the kitchen, and I called out to him from my cocoon of leisure. He came into view and leaned on the door frame, and I took in his casual look: those damn jeans, boots, and a faded Twins hoodie. A backwards cap that was making my insides do gymnastics completed the look.

"Sleep well, I hope?"

I nodded, lips curling upwards. "The fucking best sleep of my life."

A contented smile spread across his face. "Good. What do you want to do today? I have some ideas."

"Oh yeah? Enlighten me."

His eyes flashed momentarily, so quickly I thought I may have imagined it, before the easy grin returned. What had he been thinking of?

He rattled off options, counting on his fingers. "Take the canoe out. Hike the trail down the road. Go grab lunch in town. Nap and read all day. I'm at your disposal, darling."

I clenched my thighs together, wound so tight with wanting him that it was making my fingers tremble. "Um, how about a hike," I said, instead of *fuck me right now you beautiful, smug bastard*.

"Absolutely. Have you eaten anything?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. It's no biggie, though."

Soren straightened off the door frame and crossed his arms. "Do you normally go on hikes with an empty caffeinated stomach?"

I pressed my lips together and faced his stare. "Do you normally act like a total control freak?"

He looked to the ceiling and inhaled deeply, as if he was summoning some faraway deity to console him on this tribulation.

I used a weapon from his arsenal and smirked at him. "Correction—do you normally act like a *dramatic* control freak?"

He clenched his jaw. "Honestly, Quinn. Are you incapable of reason?"

Only when I'm around you, I wanted to say. Instead, I admitted, "It pains me to acknowledge that you have a point. You've already doctored me once, I'm afraid if you have to again you'll send a bill I can't afford. Though I do have somewhat better insurance now."

I rose and crossed the porch to meet him in the doorway. "What are you making me, then?"

He furrowed a brow at me but a ghost of a smile still lingered. "I think I can come up with something."

Halfway through the bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich, which was utterly delicious, my stomach began making whale calls. Oh, sweet dear baby Jesus, I had drank entirely too much coffee. Soren was reading a magazine while I ate at the kitchen table, and when I glanced up at him, he didn't notice my gaze.

My concern about the matter was so stupid. He was a fucking doctor, for crying out loud. He knew people pooped. He helped

them when they couldn't poop, he helped them when it was raining feces. I knew for an absolute fact he had digitally disimpacted a handful of patients at this point in his career. He had ordered enemas to help people who were in the emergency department solely because they were unable to shit, and we had admitted many more backed up with bowel obstructions that required NG tubes and surgical consults.

All of this being said, I still didn't want to take a horrible coffee shit in his cabin, with a *single bathroom*, while he lounged ten paces away. I also didn't want to crap my pants while on a hike, and there wasn't a gas station to stop at on the way.

This sucked. It really, really did. But it was either poo on the kitchen chair or be considerate and drop the load in the commode, so I stood and made my way to the bathroom. I turned on the fan and shut the door, hoping it would be quick and easy. For good measure, I also opened the window above the bathtub.

Because of a horrible overflowing toilet incident at my Aunt Randi's house a few years ago after the funeral I had also completed my pre-poo supply check: there was a plunger against the wall, and a water shut off knob within reach.

Sometimes I truly wondered what it would be like to live without anxiety.

Pre-trip check complete, I let loose, feeling better and worse all at once. How was it possible for the human body to be both so beautiful, and disgusting? I flushed right away and waited, unsure if there would be a second wave. I sure did love coffee, but my bowels did *not* always share the sentiment.

When I finished, I lit a match and let it burn, blew it out, tossed it in the trashcan next to the sink, and repeated the process, hoping the sulfur and burned-matchstick smell overpowered anything else. I washed my hands with the olive oil and orange soap and emerged, hoping the stench wouldn't overtake the entire cabin. From what I could tell, it wasn't too bad, but it was just unpleasant enough to make me self-conscious.

But Soren was nowhere to be found.

He knew.

Of course he knew.

Another man might have decided to complete some small household task or go outside simply to enjoy the September

sunshine, but not Soren. He was way too dialed in to everything about me, unnervingly so.

But rather than be disconcerting, it was enlightening. Between his emotional awareness and medical training, there was almost nothing I could do that would turn him away. If I said something mean, he countered with a snarky reply himself or cut through to the real reason behind my words. If my body did something gross, well, he had definitely seen much grosser things, and there was nothing to be ashamed about.

I heard him digging through a closet upstairs right near my bed and jogged up the stairs, curious. My cheeks heated as I saw my underwear on the floor with my leggings from yesterday, a few feet from where the backpack he was packing lay. At least they weren't period stained, I thought, then reminded myself again that this was a grown ass man who didn't give a shit about my underwear being on his floor.

"How long of a hike are you thinking?" I asked, watching him load supplies.

"Only a few miles, whatever you're up for, really. But I always bring a solid first aid kit. Oh, and my anaphylaxis kit. Did you know I'm allergic to wasps?"

"No, but good to know. I bet we're pretty far from a hospital around here."

"No kidding. But if anything does happen, the fire station is about ten miles back. Did you remember seeing it?"

I nodded, remembering the brick building set off the road, nestled against the trees, though I hoped I wouldn't have to navigate there during an emergency.

He saw the worry creep onto my face, and stopped packing. "I don't expect to get stung this time of year. But would it make you feel better to review what I keep in my kit?"

I nodded and sighed, looking down and picking at my nails, knowing my neck was flushed with embarrassment. Being such a new nurse, I wasn't fully confident on *anything* except the fact that I felt like I didn't know anything every time I went to work. God forbid someone collapse in a restaurant on my day off.

Soren reached out and brushed his fingertips against my arm. "There's nothing to be ashamed of. I want to show you everything I have here because this is different than being at work, okay?"

"Yeah," I managed to squeak out, feeling myself shrinking with humiliation. But Soren pulled out his emergency kit and laid it on my unmade bed.

He lay out a small case that rattled with pills and a bottle of children's Benadryl.

"Give me the liquid Benadryl first if my airway's still open and I can swallow it."

Easy enough. I tipped my head in acknowledgment.

"The pill case contains famotidine, cetirizine, and ranitidine."

"Isn't that stuff banned by the FDA now?"

He waved a hand. "Semantics. Can't be worried about carcinogens if I'm dead from anaphylaxis."

An appreciation for gallows humor seemed to characterize most of my coworkers, and me. We both laughed, then Soren turned his attention to the auto-injectors in their protective case. "Okay, now for the finale. The big guns. By that I mean the epi pens of course. Have you ever used one?"

"No I actually haven't. And we don't use those at work."

"You're absolutely right. I know you could figure it out in a pinch but it helps to just see what you're working with." He removed the auto-injector from its case. "So these are made for non-medical people. First, you pull this tab on the end to activate the needle. Then, you inject into the mid-outer thigh. Make sure you hold the syringe in my leg for a few seconds so the medicine releases, alright?"

"Okay, got it." I felt some of my apprehension vanish as his explanation continued.

"Do you know why there's two syringes?"

My eyes grew wide. "Yes! I know this one! Because the epi can wear off and we have to give it again sometimes." I thought of the young woman I had treated this past spring with Sam, who had been stung by a yellow jacket and had gone into anaphylaxis again after she'd arrived at the hospital, having already used her epi pens in the ambulance.

"Brilliant. That's right. Try and remember the time that you gave the first one and know that you might need to give it again in 10-15 minutes if the symptoms return. But most importantly, remember that even if the epi pen works we still have to get emergency care."

I gave him a thumbs up. "10-4 doc. I've got your back. Though there's definitely a little part of me that wants to stab you."

He shook his head in disbelief. "After all this, you still hold me in such contempt?"

"I don't know who said it, but there's definitely a fine line between love and hate."

Soren pulled his lips to one side, considering. "And which is it today, Quinn? Would you give me an epi pen to save my life or because you want the excuse to stab me in the leg, possibly twice?"

"I guess we'll find out if you get stung," I replied, shrugging, though I worked to keep the smile from my face.

The trail was a few miles down the gravel road towards town, and we cruised with the windows down, soaking in the sunny day. I had doused myself in sunscreen lest my fair skin decide to burn, which it was apt to do on beautiful days like this, and Soren had given me another of his Twins hats that was stashed in the Land Cruiser.

He carried our pack with water, protein bars, and first aid supplies, and I followed him down the trail, appreciating his sculpted calves and how his hair peeked out from the sides of his backwards ball cap.

"You really like the Twins, huh?" I remarked after we'd hiked for twenty minutes. I had relaxed into the steady cadence of my feet on the trail, breathing in big gulps of the clean wilderness around us.

"It's more of a sentimental thing at this point. They don't make it easy to love them, that's for sure."

"Did you go to a lot of games as a kid or something?"

"Not a whole lot, but I always remembered them when I did. My father's parents lived in Golden Valley and I visited them in the summers. Dad was always working when we were at home, but for a week every summer we came to my grandparents' place. My mother was always there, too, but she never went to the games. Now I know it was probably because she just wanted some alone time." He laughed, falling into step beside me. "Grandy would explain the game to me and I'd be on the edge of my seat, trying to remember every word like there'd be an exam at the seventh inning stretch. But I always got a hot dog and a pop, and Dad and Grandy always had a cold beer with theirs. It was a tradition."

“That’s actually so sweet. I don’t even have anything sarcastic to add.”

He chuckled. “Shocking. Grandy and Dad both died before I could have a beer with them at the stadium, though. I was nineteen the last time we spent any time up here together, the summer we built the cabin. Grandy died later that year, and Dad the year after.”

I grabbed his hand and squeezed it quickly before letting go. “What beautiful memories the cabin must hold for you, though.”

He looked over at me and smiled, but said nothing. We hiked in companionable silence for another mile, the swish of his shorts and the rustle of the backpack the only sounds.

My legs were beginning to ache with the demand of exercise, but I was enjoying myself. Nature beckoned me to enjoy its presence—the balmy September day, the colorful leaves swaying in the breeze and blanketing the trail, the smell of moss and dirt and pine needles—and I did, lost in the surroundings for countless steps until Soren stopped in front of me, holding a hand up for me to do the same.

Nothing betrays a predator in the woods like silence. The trees had gone quiet around us—no squirrels scampered up their trunks. No rabbits darted across the trail. Even the birds had stopped singing.

Soren remained very still, and I followed suit, though my eyes frantically scanned the surroundings for possible danger. He slowly slid the backpack within reach and quietly unzipped the top pocket, producing a metal can that I recognized as bear spray.

I bit back my shriek as the enormous black bear came into view, about thirty yards away, with two cubs in tow. My heart pounded against my ribs, and every instinct told me to run. But Soren remained still, slowly backing away, while blocking me from the threat. I edged backwards as he nudged me. We had taken seven steps—I knew this because I counted them in an effort to quell a full-blown panic attack—when the bear family moved on, across the trail and out of sight.

“Let’s just give them a minute,” Soren whispered.

My hands shook, my heart rattled inside my chest, and sweat beaded on my brow. But I nodded and took a breath. Three exhailes later, we resumed walking. The forest gave subtle hints that the predator had passed: critters rustled in the underbrush, and frogs croaked near the lake just beyond the trail.

A quarter of a mile later, we reached the trailhead. Adrenaline still surged through me, and I felt my pounding heartbeat in my ears, my stomach, my legs.

"How awesome was that?" Soren asked as he cranked the truck.

"I can think of about fifty things more awesome than a bear encounter without even trying."

He looked over to me as he chugged from a water bottle he'd plucked from the pack, handing it to me when he'd finished. I drank several gulps of the cold water, hoping it would shock my system out of survival mode.

"Live a little," he said, but the look in his eyes was sincere, telling me *I'd never let anything happen to you*.

I handed him the bottle back and curled up into the front seat, knees against the door panel, remembering too late that he'd forbid such a posture in his car. I straightened up, glowering. "Don't get your shorts in a tangle, Bear Grylls. My feet will be on the floorboards momentarily."

He bit back a smile as he pulled out onto the road and headed home.

Pleasantly tired from the hike, I showered and changed into a soft pair of joggers and a loose, comfy cropped tee. I grabbed my oversized sweater and headed out to my private balcony off the loft to read, letting my hair dry in loose waves in the late afternoon sun. Soren was *not* chopping wood today, and I couldn't decide if that was a good or poor outcome for our dynamic.

I watched him effortlessly lift a kayak from the boat shed and guide it to the water's edge. After gently pushing off the shore, he stepped into the boat with an easy grace that I couldn't tear my eyes from. The kayak made a slow wake in the still water, the paddle noiselessly meeting the surface in steady strokes, and he disappeared fully into the cover of trees before my focus drifted back to my book.

At dusk, I stepped back inside, eyes blurry from hours of reading. Soren was stacking paper and small twigs into the fireplace, back turned to me as I descended the stairs.

"How was the lake?"

He didn't turn, focused on stacking tiny pieces of wood into a teepee around the paper. "Perfect as always. If we hadn't gotten

those steaks I would've tried to catch some walleye. Though I wasn't sure if you like lake fish or not."

I thought of the sushi I'd bought months ago with the cash he'd left in my purse after I'd spent the night at his place and smiled. "Lake fish would've been perfectly fine. Who doesn't love fish tacos?"

The flames licked up behind him as the paper caught, then the kindling. Soren stacked two proper logs on top and turned to face me then. His eyes widened as he took in my appearance.

I frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing at all. I've just never seen your hair wavy like that." He stood and crossed the living room, closing the distance between us until he was a few paces away. He subtly raised his right arm before dropping it back at his side. Had he wanted to touch my hair or was I reading too much into it?

"When do you want to cook?" I asked, to derail the thought.

"I'll start the grill. Did you want to make the potatoes?"

"Yeah. Mom's recipe is hard to beat. Simple, but delicious. Like potatoes should be." My lips wobbled into a smile, but the heartache still bloomed, a nasty rotting thing in my chest. Though my eyes remained dry, I still felt Mom's absence viscerally, like a hollow place a missing organ should occupy.

Soren gave me a knowing look. "Not a day goes by that I don't miss Dad and Grandy."

I looked to my feet, shuffling them on the rough-cut oak floor. We'd never talked about my family before. Lifting my head to face him, I took a big breath before I spoke. "My mom and little sister Stephanie were killed in an MVC almost four years ago."

His face fell, and he shifted on his feet, holding his stance a few paces away. "That's so fucking horrible."

The words escaped my lips before I realized what I was saying. "I'm all alone now," I whispered, and with the confession my darkest demons were released, my deepest fears confirmed. It was as awful as it was liberating. If I could at least recognize what I was afraid of, then I could face it.

Soren immediately closed the distance between us, and took my face in his hands, gently grasping me behind my jaw. The small circles his thumbs made on my skin both comforted me and sent shivers down my body. His voice was low and steady, and his

tempestuous gaze pierced into the depths of my being, where the darkest parts of me lay. "No, you aren't."

Admitting I was afraid to be alone clashed with the person I wanted to be, a self-sufficient woman who relied on no one to get by in the world. But there was a difference between relying on someone to provide for you and knowing someone out there cared. It was humiliating to admit, and I searched his face for clues, waiting for the smirk or the jab or for him to say he was kidding, but he remained still and focused, steady as a soldier but holding my face in his hands like it was a delicate petal.

"Tell me you understand," he rasped. "I need you to know this about me. About us."

I nodded slightly, unable to form words. This close, his presence consumed me, a warm, strong gravity drawing me in.

Soren released me then, and heaved a breath I hadn't realized he was holding. He backed away a few steps before I reached for him, clutching his arm.

He froze.

My arms found their way to his shoulders, and I clasped my hands around his neck, reaching up on my toes.

"There's something you have to know," I breathed. This close, his mouth was so inviting, it was making me forget what I had to say. I ran a finger down his lips, unable to resist the temptation. He remained very still, as if he didn't want to frighten me.

I spoke with impressive clarity for someone so dazzled, surprising myself that I was ready to admit my feelings, since I'd spent so much time ignoring them.

"I want you. I want this." I gestured between us, if only to pull farther away from him. The proximity was intoxicating.

I swallowed before continuing. Soren's eyes followed the movement of my throat before rising to meet my lips, fixating for a moment before he met my eyes. "But there's something important I have to do first." His brows knitted, but he said nothing, giving me more time to explain.

"I am...to be quite honest...completely wrecked on the inside. After Mom and Steph died, I reacted by wanting to do something good, something positive to change the way I was feeling so I could move on. Nursing school seemed like the way to do that, since the nurses that took care of Steph before she died and afterwards were

the only source of comfort I had during that time. Mom died instantly on the scene," I added, feeling that small slice of peace that calmed me every time I thought about the fact that she hadn't suffered.

Stephanie was different. Her screams in the trauma bay haunted my worst nightmares.

Once the words had started pouring out of me, I couldn't stop. "But I'm now realizing that school and now work are ways to avoid processing the trauma. And it's eating away at me. Nursing is objectively a difficult profession, for the mental demands as well as physical, but for someone struggling mentally it's fucking impossible to cope. Anxiety is a new thing for me. I never had it before the accident, and I didn't recognize that's what it was until my mental health class. I probably have a sizable bit of PTSD, too.

"That being said, the path I'm on is *not* sustainable for much longer unless something changes. I've made my bed with my student loans, though, and now I have to lay in it. So I'm going to continue working"—his eyes lit up at that—"but I have got to deal with my demons. Other than last night, I rarely sleep peacefully, and every night after work I replay my entire shift in my head before falling asleep, wondering if I should've done things differently or if I forgot some little detail to pass along to the next nurse or didn't chart something and other trivial shit like that. It's a horrible way to live, and I can't keep doing it."

He nodded, eyes shadowed with concern.

I sighed. "So you're probably wondering what this has to do with us, then?"

"You could say I have an interest in the matter." His eyes gleamed in the firelight.

"I can't do this until I heal my heartbreak. It's the sort of all-consuming wound that won't heal unless you really tend to it. And I've just been letting things fester. And scab over. Only to be ripped away at the slightest stressor. Deep down, everything's still raw. And I don't see how I'm going to let myself feel anything *else*, no matter how badly I want to, until I deal with the stupid emotions and feelings I've buried for so long in order to cope. Does that make any sense?"

I pleaded him to understand, to not think I was crazy or dramatic or blowing him off because I was young and unable to commit. I had

serious problems that required even greater attention before I could move on for my own sake.

For our sake.

He spoke in that comforting, low voice that slid over my skin like a cashmere sweater. "Of course it does. I can't say it doesn't pain me to know how hard things have been for you." He stepped closer again, not touching me but near enough that his presence was contact in itself. "But let me be clear, Quinn. I'm not going anywhere. I've known I have feelings for you for a while now, and not the kind of feelings that flit away with a night of sex or fade after meeting someone new."

Even though I had my suspicions about the way he felt, I still felt like he had hit me with a sledgehammer. I knew the shock was ripe on my face.

He blew out a breath before continuing. "I don't say this to pressure you or scare you away, though I know that's a risk I take by saying such a thing, but just to lay it all out there. I want you. And I want the you that you want me to have. When you're ready, and on your terms."

I felt my eyes glisten.

Soren cleared his throat. "And if you start to heal and find that I'm not what you want, or you want to be on your own, or with someone else, that's something I won't want to hear but will accept without question. Just..." His voice cracked, and he paused to gather himself, those turquoise pools dauntless as his gaze fell to mine. "Just tell me if you discover it's not me that you want. That's all I ask."

I nodded as I blinked back tears, the heartfelt and happy kind for once. My own voice came out gravelly, thick with emotion. "Of course I'll tell you. But I don't see that happening."

I touched his face, bringing myself closer, daring to sample the outcome I was holding out for. But my determination weakened with each passing moment—my lips were inches from his, heart thundering in my chest. My body took over, quieting the war in my mind.

"I just want to see something," I murmured, and then pressed my lips to his.

Neither of us knew what to do next, because it felt like the pin had been pulled from the grenade we'd been holding for months

now.

He hesitated, fingertips hovering at my sides as if I were a live wire, buzzing with electricity that could zap him on contact. I wrapped my arms around his neck and deepened the kiss, telling him *I want this, I want you, and I need to know this feeling is what I think it is before I stow it away for the right time.*

His lips molded to mine, warm and soft, his two-day beard scratching lightly at my face. I moaned as the rhythm picked up, and that was the signal he needed—his hands gripped my rib cage and he lifted me off the ground and closer to him, allowing me to wrap my legs around his waist. The unyielding hardness of his body threatened to tempt me beyond what was wise.

Our tongues pressed together, bodies entwined. He tasted like mint and smelled like the forest, and it drove me wild. The kiss deepened, and his arms held me tight, a safe place I never wanted to leave. But fuck, I felt like such an asshole for telling him why we couldn't be together and then jumping his bones. I was trying, goddammit, and I hoped he could see that at least. He was just too attractive, and the pull too strong, for me to resist him completely.

But I hoped he understood that I wanted him to have a better version of me, more equipped for how serious I felt us becoming. I pulled away to take a breath, to try and halt the fire that was spreading through me, and he was as unbothered as ever—his lips easily found my neck instead. I shuddered, gripping his jaw to bring him back to my mouth.

I sucked in a breath of air that grounded me, and when our lips met again our kiss slowed into something tender.

Something chaste.

Something that promised that there was genuine affection underneath the fiery passion.

When I finally pulled away, I was breathless. "I think this is something to fight for."

Soren's voice was rough. "That's for damn sure." He planted a final sweet kiss on my forehead before setting me back down. I had to actively avoid looking down at the evidence of his arousal.

"I'll be waiting for you, Quinn," he said in a quiet farewell, before turning to stoke the fire and heading outside to start the grill, leaving me staring after him in disbelief.

SEPTEMBER

The next day, after Soren dropped me off, I threw my bag down in my bedroom and plopped on the bed. We hadn't kissed again since that explosive burst the night before, but the memory of that kiss—how right it felt, how insanely turned on I had been—sent a thrill through me every time it surfaced, which was often.

More motivated than ever to tackle my inner demons, I pulled out my phone to search for therapists that were accepting new patients according to my insurance and made a list of providers to call in the morning. I was off until Wednesday, when I had another three in a row with Brenda. The thought of those three horrible days, even though Brenda had tried to redeem herself, was still enough to make me groan.

But I spun the narrative in my head, if only to try something new. Instead of dreading how hard those three days were going to be and ruining the time off I did have, I was going to choose gratitude. To be grateful for the three days (well, two and a half since it was already late afternoon) I had now to enjoy outside of work.

And why not start right now? I put on a pair of shorts, a hoodie, and my sneakers, and headed out the door. The afternoon was windy with a chill that overpowered the weak afternoon sun, and I walked faster to warm up, too lazy to go back in and change into pants.

I popped in my ear buds and searched for a playlist, wanting a break from audiobooks and podcasts while I trekked through the park. Though I didn't listen to it often enough, music and lyrics sometimes called to me like nothing else could. I thought of the music at the cabin, drifting out of the record player and ruling the room, a subtle but persistent presence that had set the mood like nothing else could. Combined with candles, the fireplace, a cozy meal and a glass of wine, the evening had been unparalleled. Possibly one of the best nights of my life, definitely the best I'd had since the accident.

Chasing the nostalgia of that night, and reeling in the fact it could form so soon after an occurrence, I found a jazz playlist that would hopefully have that woman's songs on it. I knew I shouldn't text Soren and ask him who the artist was. Deep down, I had to agree with the annoying monster of rational thought and admit it was best to stay true to my word and pause things between us until I was ready.

Well, until *all* of me was ready to sustain a relationship. Certain parts of me were more than eager to explore the connection between us. Though I had hated him at first, I couldn't deny the attraction. Physically, of course, he was nothing short of stunningly attractive—wavy dark blonde to light brown hair, depending on the time of year. Deep teal eyes, tall, strong frame, great smile. His sense of style and comfort was such a turn-on, not to mention the way he smelled, like sandalwood and the pine forest I'd always associate with him from now on.

But beyond those characteristics, a deeper bond had forged between us based on who he was: educated and disciplined, but not too arrogant to be closed to new ways of thinking or doing things, like expanding his reading to include more female authors. Our verbal sparring was entertaining, and something I didn't think I'd ever tire of. I never felt I had to hold my tongue, or worry about saying the wrong thing, or hurting his feelings. Though I'm sure we would be able to wound one another if we tried, our prickly, sarcastically-laden banter and smart-ass remarks were a brand of flirtation in themselves and proof of our attraction to one another.

I'd also never met someone so emotionally intelligent, though I never would've thought that about him until we got to know each other. The more time I spent with him the more he seemed to read

everything I was telling him—what I said, what I didn't, what my body language conveyed. How he explained things with patience and grace, never making me feel stupid for not knowing.

But at work, things were completely different. So despite being so aware of what everyone around him was feeling, he set it aside in order to prioritize giving the best care. Though some docs seemed to be able to do both, he focused on what the patient needed, and not always the staff. He didn't pretend to be flawless, because he wasn't. And, fresh out of residency, maybe his team dynamic would be something he'd get better at with time.

He wasn't perfect, and neither was I, but we were both willing to do what we had to to give this thing between us a fair shot—he'd wait, I'd work on myself, we'd re-evaluate later.

Being scientifically inclined, I realized I was going to have to have metrics by which to measure when I'd reached my goal, being ready for a relationship. Grappling with emotions was not my strong suit, and I realized this wasn't a scientifically-controlled experiment or anything like that, but there would have to be something I'd work towards. I considered this as I strolled through the greenspace.

The leaves swayed in the wind, and I knew all the species thanks to Stephanie's obsession with trees and nature: the bright yellow of the hackberry, orange of the maple, and brilliant red of the oak. She had aspirations to work in forestry or wildlife biology. But she had only been a senior in high school when she died, and hadn't decided yet. The grief of losing her so young squeezed my heart like a vise grip, and I had to stop and catch my breath. I inhaled through it, filling my lungs with as much air as I could take in.

This was when the nightmare sequence began—her screaming for Mom, dried blood caking her face and arms and shards of broken glass on the sheet beneath her, the sound of the monitors as she'd gone into cardiac arrest. The nurse who'd escorted me out of the room as they tried to resuscitate her, for nearly an hour, but her heart had given up long before the code team had.

The memory was sucking all the air out of my lungs, and I braced my hands on my knees. To anyone else in the park, I probably looked like I needed a break from running, but this wasn't the strain of a workout. Sweat beaded my forehead and I felt like I was in a straitjacket, no way out, no way to get free of the tightness that was choking me like a poisonous gas. I needed grounding, and I

needed it right now before I screamed, so I did the only thing I could think to do and sought it at the source.

Stepping off the sidewalk, I sank down into the grass with shaking hands and legs, coming flat onto my back and spreading my limbs out around me. The smell of the fading green grass and the whisper of the wind through the trees calmed me enough to let me take a breath, and as my chest rose, I caught a sliver of a cloudless sky through the canopy. I held the breath in my lungs like I had inhaled something much more intoxicating than the air around me, and when I thought I'd burst from holding it, I blew the air out between pursed lips, deflating like an old birthday balloon.

The music was still playing in my earbuds, though I hadn't heard it while the flashback roared through me. But now, the notes and melodies came into focus. A smile tugged at my lips through the exhaustion of living through the nightmare once more when I heard her voice.

It was the woman who sang to us that night at the cabin, melancholy and genuine and so heartbreakingly beautiful I was rendered motionless on the ground, mesmerized by the song. When I glanced at my phone, her name flashed on the screen: Billie Holiday. My own personal palimpsest, able to write over the trauma of that loss, the muse able to silence my demons and bring me back from purgatory.

With the music filling my ears and fresh air in my lungs, I could see the beauty in autumn's golden leaves, appreciate the warmth of the late afternoon sun while the cool earth lay beneath me. I remembered running around this park with Stephanie, playing tag and jumping through piles of leaves.

Shuffling through Billie Holiday's catalog for the remainder of my walk, I managed to make it home without another episode. When I returned home, exhausted from the flashback and the two hours I'd spent in the park, a newfound sense of pride surged through me. Even a single step in the direction I was aiming for was one step closer than I'd been the day before.

The next morning, that sense of accomplishment was quickly dimmed by the struggle to find a therapist both accepting insurance and accepting new patients. By the fifth phone call, *I* was accepting

that I was going to have to pay for this out of pocket, because the American healthcare system has somehow disregarded the brain, eyeballs, and teeth as recognized organs requiring attention by licensed professionals. I made an appointment for next week with a woman named Imani, whose website and receptionist gave me the best feeling of all of them.

The rain splattered at my windowpane in my bedroom, and when I stuck my head out the front door to see what I'd need to go on a walk, the damp chill had me shutting the door, making a cup of tea, and cozying up on the couch instead. I had worn Soren's shirt that I had swiped from his suitcase to bed, and that heady perspiration and piney scent clung to it. I sniffed at it more than I cared to admit, like it could actually intoxicate me.

A feeling of dread crept in, halting my rumination on him. What if I'd fucked things up irreparably by pushing him away at the cabin? He'd said he would wait, but what if he met someone new?

Missing Sam, I texted her to see if she wanted to grab dinner tomorrow. An hour later, she wrote back confirming she was free, and I had another dilemma to work through: should I tell her about my weekend with Soren? She had been shocked but supportive when I told her about staying with him after the barbecue incident. But how would she react now? We'd drifted apart somewhat, with me being on night shift and her busy with Bailey going back to school. But now that I'd gone back to days for the time being, we were seeing each other occasionally, but I still missed her. And I desperately wanted someone to talk through everything with.

We met at a small Italian restaurant, with red checkered tablecloths, paper menus, and the ultimate comfort food. I ordered spaghetti with vodka sauce and Sam went for the fettuccine. The waiter brought our bottle of Chianti and once he had filled our glasses and I took a sip of that old-world earthiness, I closed my eyes to savor it.

"I fucking love this place," I said. "When I came here with Mom and Steph I wasn't old enough to order a glass of wine. Mom would've freaked if I tried with my fake."

I laughed, and a smile spread across Sam's face. "What was your Mom like? I want to get an accurate picture in my mind."

A lump formed in my throat like it always did when I thought of her, but I swallowed and set my glass down, swirling the wine

inside of it as I conjured up memories. It was somewhat easier to talk about Mom since I knew she had died peacefully.

"She had us in her late twenties. She didn't dress as casual as my friends' moms—the yoga pants and oversized tees and whatnot. She was forever stuck in the nineties and kind of a hippie, so she wore lots of printed dresses, and she was rocking Mom jeans when they were in style the first time around. Her hair was a little darker than mine, more of a red than the strawberry blonde, and she always wore her natural waves. She made awesome afternoon snacks and all my friends always wanted to come to our house after school, even though we never had enough room."

The memory made me smile, thinking of popcorn and cut up grapes and mini quesadillas we passed around on paper plates while watching TV.

"She sounds lovely," Sam remarked, pouring herself more wine and buttering a roll from the basket on the table.

Surprised at how happy it was making me to talk about my family, I elaborated. "Mom was always doing things that Steph and I wanted to do, like go to the zoo and ice skating, when I know she probably would've rather lay in her hammock in the backyard and fallen asleep with a book open on her chest. Motherhood and work took up pretty much all of her time, and we didn't have any extra cash after my dad left, but I know she wanted to be something more than she was. Craved a different kind of life with more freedom and adventure.

"We'd watch documentaries on people that lived those kinds of extraordinary lives, and I couldn't help but notice how her eyes would light up at the adventure and creativity those people got to experience. I know she wanted those things, too, but never got a chance to live that way. She fell in love young, and had two kids before she realized she'd ended up with the wrong guy. It almost makes me feel bad that we took that all away from her. If she hadn't had us, she could've started that carefree, unrooted life after they split. And his leaving wouldn't have meant that she had to work at the boring engineering firm all day just to be able to take care of us." I sipped from my glass, staring at the exposed brick walls of the restaurant, fixating on the patterns of the mortar.

Sam wiped her mouth, setting her bread down. "I didn't know your mother, but as a mother myself, I can tell you for a fact she

didn't feel that way."

Before I could ask her what she meant, our food arrived, and we were both temporarily rendered speechless by pasta, cheese, and meat. But I pressed her to elaborate after a few more bites.

"It's just that being a mom is such a complicated, complex experience that it can't be reduced to what-ifs and regrets. No matter how hard it is, it's never something that I would imagine differently. It's hard as fuck to be a parent, and I never imagined being a single mom either, but it's something that's such a part of who I am now I can't imagine life differently."

I considered her words as I twirled pasta with my fork. "Okay, but what about those moms that abandon their kids. Or the dads that walk out, like mine did."

Sam shrugged. "Nothing is ever guaranteed. But I think genetically we are programmed to care for our babies in a way that ensures their survival. There can always be hiccups, though... addiction, mental illness...you know, because we see it so often. And as far as fathers go, well, their contribution to parenthood is as simple as an orgasm and some men don't contribute much beyond that."

We laughed, drinking wine and stuffing ourselves to the brim with the decadent meal. Afterwards, we walked around the city, pasta settling in our bellies as we strolled the sidewalks.

"I think I'm catching feelings for that wicked man we work with," I said as we rounded a corner. I expected Sam to stop walking, shriek in protest, or look at me like I'd lost my mind, but she only smiled.

"Are you just now realizing this?"

I sighed. "That obvious?"

"No offense, because it's hard to be new, but he's the only doc you ever speak your mind around. And, we all know he's been sneaking you food from the cafeteria for months. Why the doctors get free food is beyond me since they make about five times what we do, and ten times the techs, but yeah, we all knew about it."

Well, I guess it was that obvious.

Sam grinned, wide enough that a dimple formed in her cheek. "And, for most of your practicum, you barely said a word to any of the other doctors. I had to call Ross that one time he messed up his orders because you froze when he answered the phone. And do you

remember when that cardiologist asked you what you'd given that STEMI patient? You sounded like you were stroking out, barely able to string a sentence along.

"But with Soren, you never had trouble speaking up, even when you should've kept your mouth shut. I knew something was different with him from the start. And after you stayed with him that night after your concussion...I had a feeling something else was going on. Not because I suspected something happened that night, but because I saw a change in *you*."

"So I guess it doesn't surprise you to hear that we went to his cabin together last weekend, either?"

Sam gasped, eyes wide. "You're shitting me."

"I most certainly am not."

She pulled me close to the building we were walking next to, out of the path of the sidewalk. "Quinn, this is huge. So are you two together now?"

"Well, no, but it's because of me." Sam peered at me intently, and I continued. "I told him I needed to get my head straight first, with everything that happened with my mom and sister. I didn't want to start a relationship in such a bad headspace, you know? Flashbacks, buried grief, anxiety..." I rubbed the back of my neck, studying the bike rack to avoid her gaze.

Sam took my hand. "Oh, honey. I hate that this was the hand you were dealt. But damn if you aren't grabbing life by the balls and facing it head on. Good on you."

She smiled, and I found myself mirroring her, warmed by her words. I hadn't realized how important it was to have someone to share this stuff with again, how much I'd missed it in the last few years.

"How's your dad?" I asked her, swallowing the lump in my throat.

Her face paled, and she chose her next words carefully. "It's almost like we have another chance now, and we've never been that close, but I feel like I have to use this second chance we've been given."

She eyed me, and I ignored her, staring at the cracks in the sidewalk as tears welled in my eyes.

"I'm sorry, Quinn. I know what you've been through and you probably think I'm such an asshole for not being close with my dad

to begin with, but god, you don't know how he was growing up—"

"Stop," I said, interrupting her. We faced each other on the sidewalk, and Sam pulled me closer to the building next to us, away from the foot traffic.

She read my face for clues, concern furrowing her brow, but I placed a hand on her arm and said, "Look, my family shit isn't the same as your family shit or anyone else's. You shouldn't feel like you can't talk about that kind of stuff with me just because of my past. I'm your friend, Sam, and you can talk to me about anything."

She smiled, her cheek dimpling, and pulled me in for a bear-crushing hug.



My mother and sister were on my mind again when I drove across town for my first therapy appointment the following week. Imani, my new therapist, had an office that was twenty minutes away from my house in midday traffic, and I spent every single one of those preparing what I'd say to her when she inevitably asked why I'd come to see her.

Moving on from the grief that had haunted me was paramount to my purpose in seeking therapy. But the havoc that nursing was causing on top of my already-present mental minefield wasn't something to overlook, either.

When I parked in front of her building and walked in, the professionalism of it all made everything seem a little too real—the nondescript concrete building with narrow windows, the industrial black rugs inside the entrance, the bright spotlight of the fluorescent lights. After years of struggle, made worse by the profession I'd decided upon, I was actually doing this. Seeking professional help to move on from the grief and anxiety and move on from my life. I was terrified of what lay on the other side of the mountain of grief. But you can see the most stars when it's fully dark—an unending, inky blanket of night. Maybe I was going to have to plunge into the darkest parts of myself in order to let the light shine.

Knowing what I had to do, why did I feel like I was already mourning letting go of everything, even if the nightmares and flashbacks were keeping me stuck in a pattern of gloom? It only

cemented the fact that I did, in fact, need therapy if I was hesitant to let go of the things that were holding me back.

I checked in with a cheery receptionist on the third floor and waited for Imani on a red velvet sofa that somehow didn't look out of place in the sterile corporate building. This suite was different—the tall lamp in the corner was sleek and elegant, bathing the room in a warm light, the colorful rug added a coziness to the space, and green plants dotted the room in a soothing array of nature that evoked a peaceful tropical forest.

These people knew what they were doing.

I had brought a book—a thriller for a change—and was plowing through a chapter, desperate to find out how it ended, when a woman's voice called my name. I looked up to see an olive-skinned woman wearing a hijab and bright fuchsia lipstick that set off her skin in a shock of color.

I couldn't help but feel relaxed as we stepped into her office, an oasis in the boring corporate desert of a building. A window let in a peek of the afternoon sun, though there was no view to speak of, and bright yellow curtains furthered the influence of the daylight.

Imani led me to a blue patterned sofa across from two camel-colored leather chairs, one of which she took. A pink and orange rug lay between us, with a white painted low table atop it. I studied her as she poured me a glass of water and resumed her seat. She wore long layers that swallowed her petite frame, a floor-length navy blue skirt with gold flats and a blue tunic a few shades lighter than her skirt. Her hijab was navy as well, and gracefully hung down her shoulders. She at once looked modern and timeless.

"What can I help you with today, Quinn?"

I took the biggest breath I could, and my shoulders sank when I released it. "I am still having trouble grieving my mother and sister's deaths from a few years ago. And I think my new job as an ER nurse is complicating things."

She settled back in her seat. "I see. What kind of things are giving you trouble?"

I found it easy to open up to her, and I didn't see the point in glossing over the more distressing details of their deaths and my responses to it. Imani's only tell was a slight flinch as I described Stephanie's protruding femur fracture and the screams when she'd

learned our mother died. The hour had nearly passed when Imani spoke up.

“Let’s see each other twice a week as your schedule allows at first. And if you’re willing to put in the work I have some exercises I want you to complete in between sessions.”

I nodded, eyes lighting up at having a specific and direct task to complete that would help me move on.

Her voice was gentle. “There’s something you should know as we begin the process of moving on from your past. Grief never really goes away, no matter how hard you try and forget it.”

My forehead wrinkled in confusion. Then why was I here?

She answered my unspoken question. “You learn to make space for it, to live with it. And then you can continue your life. Maybe not exactly as before, but with a better understanding of how to keep the ones you love in your heart, while making room for new people and experiences.”

When I got home, I studied the worksheets she had given me as I waited for water to boil. Buttered pasta and red wine were there to aid me as I tackled my warped brain, a steady comfort in this uncertain journey.

Gretchen breezed through the doorway as I plated my food. “Hey, what are you doing tonight? Wanna go see my friend’s band play at this great dive bar?”

I grated fresh Parmesan onto my pasta as I considered. “Thanks, but I’m busy. Have fun, though.”

She shrugged and headed into her room, disappearing an hour later for the night. I was somewhat relieved she would be out so I could have the quiet and space to reflect and complete some of Imani’s exercises.

The first sheet was about anxiety and control, listing several things we could and could not control. At the bottom, there was space to fill in my own scenarios. Once I put my pen to the paper, I couldn’t stop, and I filled up the entire section and freehanded on the back of the paper, as well.

It was liberating—realizing that a lot of anxiety stemmed from a lack of control and that letting go of the need to control everything around me was going to aid in coping with situations that were beyond me.

A lack of control was a huge tenet of being in the ER—the unexpected, the chaos. But the *patients* were supposed to be the ones navigating the unexpected. *I* was supposed to be the beacon of light in the scenario, the steady eye of the storm. Being new to healthcare and the ER made that task seem impossible, but if I could step back with a fresh pair of eyes, use my training and experience and let go of the need to be absolutely perfect and check every single box on the computer charting system and trust in myself and my judgment to care for my patients like I knew I was capable of, work would be a lot more bearable.

The fact that I did take my role so seriously and strive to not make mistakes spoke volumes about my ability to be a good nurse, because I understood how important it was to be a good nurse. The more I did it, the easier it would become to be the calm and competent caregiver I aimed to be, so I needed to give myself a little grace for trying.

A new sort of frustration slithered through me, that I hadn't gone to therapy sooner. Why had it taken a gorgeous, frustrating doctor to make me want to finally move forward with my life?

I doodled on the edges of the paper as I contemplated the whys and hows of where I was in my life, and decided that it was better late than never to move forward, and that beating myself up for waiting so long was unproductive, too. It was also becoming quite obvious that I was also finished with therapy-related activities for the evening because my brain felt like it had gone through a blender, and I had reached my emotional capacity.

I filled up the old bathtub, using a washcloth as a stopper, and lit a few candles to help me unwind from the awful task of unpacking my mental baggage. The 1950s turquoise tiles were cracked and chipped and the tub itself had seen better days—it always seemed to be a little grimy no matter how hard I scrubbed it. I sipped my wine until the water was tepid and the bubbles had turned into gray suds, the greater part of my torso sitting out of the water now that enough of it had seeped through the makeshift drain stopper. Despite the less than ideal bathtub situation, I still felt like I had bathed in a five star resort, such was the triumph of tackling therapy. Creeping to my room naked because I knew Gretchen was out for the night, I lay on my bed with my hair wrapped in a towel.

Deciding I deserved some more self-care for my efforts today, I reached for my nightstand. The image of a pair of strong arms spitting firewood guided me to my release, and when I collapsed into my bedding, a wry smile tugged at my lips. What would Soren do if he knew I'd gotten off to the thought of him, more than once? Probably never let me live it down, the smug bastard. I fell asleep that night feeling lighter than I had felt in years.

OCTOBER

A month later, I worked my first solo emergency room nursing shift. It was a Monday in mid-October, the kind of cool morning that confirmed that autumn was in full swing, and winter wasn't far behind. I'd basically been on my own the last month and a half with Brenda, but something was different about being fully untethered.

Though it was better for my body, and my life outside of work, a small part of me regretted not putting in for night shift with Liza and Derek and Joe and Charlie and everyone else who made me feel like a part of the team. But days would be better for me, at least that's what I had convinced myself.

The stars had aligned for Sam and I at least to be working the same shift, and though we weren't on the same cube, it was reassuring knowing she was there. Cash, the bodybuilder CC working today, had put me with Chandra, and a traveler named Chloe. Tito was our tech, and Keisha would arrive for her mid shift in a few hours to round out the cube. Overall, it was a good group, and I had to count my blessings.

I had an open room, a patient waiting on a cardiology consult, and two patients waiting on inpatient beds. So overall, it was a light load. My open room was marked reserved for an ambulance while I introduced myself to my patients and completed my assessments.

My ambulance arrived, and I headed in with Tito to get things going. It was a patient post-seizure, with a remote history of seizures

as a child, who had seized while grocery shopping. She was somewhat subdued, but could answer all of my questions, and didn't have any appreciable injuries other than some minor swelling on her elbow and shoulder where she had fallen. I triaged her a level 3, knowing there was a very good chance she'd need a head CT, but I didn't think she should be seen right away since she wasn't actively seizing. Tito put her on the monitor for me and checked her blood sugar, which was normal. I put on her bed alarm and made sure the cardiac monitor was set to alarm, too, to notify me if her heart rate shot up so I could come in and check on her if she seized again.

Done.

I felt competent, and confident in my judgment, so I left the room. Dr. Blake greeted me as I stepped into the hallway.

"Congratulations on completing your orientation. We're so happy to have you with us."

He patted me on the back and I beamed as I made my way back to the station to check on my other patients' orders and bed status, feeling like I had just impressed my favorite teacher at school. Dr. Blake had that way of making you feel like you'd accomplished something just by being yourself and showing up, and with how much I'd struggled here, I needed those morsels of encouragement.

When Dr. Blake emerged from her room minutes later, he confirmed what I'd thought. "I am going to scan her, since it's been years since her last seizure, and check bloodwork, too. Thanks, Quinn."

He rounded the corner and I contemplated my next step. The EMTs hadn't been able to get an IV on her en route, since they'd had a really short transport time and had been right down the street, and I didn't necessarily need an IV to give her any meds currently.

But I thought about what Sam would have me do. She'd say, every patient here for a seizure should have an IV, in case they seized and you had to give them Ativan. How much harder would it be to place a line when a patient was actively seizing? I hated to stick her if she didn't need it, but for my peace of mind and her safety, I decided to place a line.

I had to stick her twice, but I got a small 22 gauge in her pencil-thin veins and even managed to pull back 5 mLs of blood, hopefully enough for the grateful phlebotomist who collected it from me. The patient was also able to give me a urine sample, and I felt a sense of

accomplishment, albeit small, that I'd gotten her checklist completed as I walked out of her room after putting her back on the cardiac monitor.

My other two patients got rooms assigned in the med-surg units at exactly the same time, and before I knew it, Cash, who definitely wasn't as laid back as Debbie was in her role, was calling my phone to see what I needed in order to move my patients.

I knew the subtext behind the veiled assistance he was offering: *get those rooms cleared because the waiting room is crazy and I'm filling up hallways with patients.* I assured him I would call report as soon as I could, but made it a point to catch up with my other patients as much as possible because I knew those rooms weren't going to stay empty after the patients left them. I didn't think I'd get any hallway patients yet in addition to my four room assignment because I was so new, but anything could happen.

The transporters came for both of my patients at the same time, of course, and I filled out their transfer papers and charted them out of the room reluctantly. Within five minutes both rooms were lit up with incoming patients, one from the waiting room and an ambulance that had been waiting in the trauma bay hallway for almost an hour.

I really, really wanted to go eat lunch since it was almost one, but I checked my ambulance in instead. It was an old man in his eighties, whose wife had called the ambulance because he "didn't feel right" this morning. At his age, there was very likely something wrong, and his EKG from the ambulance didn't look alarming. I asked him how he was feeling now, and he said, "a little tight." I asked where, and he pointed to his chest. I gave the medics a questioning look, asking them, *did he tell you two that while you were waiting for a room?* They both shook their heads.

I put in an EKG order and triaged him as a level 2, to get a physician in to see him right away. With his age, I wasn't taking any chances. I didn't care if it ended up being heartburn from his sausage and egg breakfast, I was treating this like it was emergent.

And it was.

I would've known the tombstone-shaped EKG tracing meant trouble, even if the big *****STEMI***** text wasn't written across the top of the page as the machine interpretation. I turned on the pager phone intercom and said, "MD, room 40."

Dr. Ross opened the door moments later, and said, "You rang?"

I squashed the impulse to roll my eyes at how fucking annoying it was to work with him and shoved the paper in his direction. I was already getting another IV and drawing blood, and I paged the lab to come pick it up while Ross talked to the patient.

"Page it out," he told me as he left the room, and I called charge and the CC to let them know I had a STEMI.

Cash told me, "I'll send you a float if I can, but it's not looking great."

My heart sank. I tried to remember everything I needed to do to get the patient ready to go to the cath lab, and I noticed I hadn't even put him in a gown. Shit. I called Tito who told me he'd be in when he could to help.

Nadine said, "Your patient in 44 called out."

"They'll have to wait," I told her as I grabbed the code cart to ward off any evil spirits.

Tito popped his head out from another room two doors down. "Hey, Quinn, she says she's still hurting and needs something for pain."

I wanted to scream. I felt like a person being drawn and quartered. How in the hell was I going to manage all of this shit? I felt the tension build in me, as I opened the door to prepare my patient to go to the cath lab.

By the time the cardiologist came, no more than ten minutes had passed, but the patient's rhythm had already started to change on the monitor. I thought my own heart was going to burst out of my chest with worry. If this man didn't get on the cath lab table, he was going to code. Now dressed in a gown, he sat there in the stretcher calmly, a bit pale but otherwise unaffected. That only worried me more.

The cath lab called me minutes later and I wheeled him off, trying to remember the history I'd taken from him and knowing I was going to leave some stuff out. Oh well, those nurses could read a chart as much as I could, and the important thing was to get him a stent. With a stroke, time was brain, and with a heart attack like this, time was muscle. As in, every minute that passed was more damage to the heart, or the brain, depending on which was affected. It was the kind of statement intended to make you take heart attacks and

strokes as seriously as possible, and it certainly worked with me, to the point of being deleterious.

On the way to the cath lab, I was fighting a full-blown panic attack, something that hadn't happened in months and had never happened at work. The weight of my responsibilities here settled on my chest like iron, pulling me under when I was trying desperately to keep afloat, and my hands were shaking by the time I reached the team waiting for us in the cath lab area.

I quickly gave them report and wished my patient well, then ducked into a dark corner near a supply closet outside the cath lab. The panic took hold, gripping my chest like an enormous sharp claw. I felt like I couldn't catch my breath, like the room was spinning, and like I was being sucked into a vortex. My vision tunneled, and I thought I might actually be dying—I couldn't get enough air in my lungs, and it was going to suffocate me.

I slid down the wall and sat down on the tile floor, resting my back against the cool cement wall, as I closed my eyes and filled my chest with as much air as possible, even though it felt like my inhale was moving through a tiny tube that gave a shocking amount of resistance.

The feeling subsided after what was likely minutes, but felt like hours, and I stood up, brushed my pants off, and walked back into the department. I don't know how I'd gone this long without having a panic attack while at work in the ER, but my anxiety had finally won.

In a way, I was glad it had happened because a small part of me had been worried for months that a panic attack at work was going to happen and I was going to become a patient myself. Now that it had happened, and I had survived it, it had lost some of its power over me, like Imani had told me it would.

She'd said, "Anxiety is all about a lack of control. And when you let your fear control you, it digs its way in and won't let go. But you have to remember that your mind is always your own, and you control your thoughts. You can't control everything around you, especially not in your line of work, but you can control how you process and react to things."

We had talked about my anxiety a lot over the last month or so I'd been going to her office. She'd given me so much to help me move on with my life. Not only did she listen to all my concerns and

I genuinely felt like she cared about me, but she also possessed such a wide pool of knowledge on anxiety and PTSD and tools to help me overcome my struggles. I thought about her now, what she'd tell me, and I snapped the rubber band against my wrist for that familiar sting that was almost like a mental reset.

I found Sam on my way back from the cath lab and pulled her into a supply closet. She followed wordlessly, concern on her face.

"I just had a panic attack taking my STEMI to the cath lab, for the first time since I've been at work," I said, and let out a big breath.

Sam rubbed my shoulder. "Dude. I'm so sorry. How are you now?"

I blew out another breath. "Kinda okay, I think. I just had to tell someone, I don't know why."

"Can you go back to work or do you need to go home? If you aren't feeling well, you don't need to take care of patients."

"If you'd asked me that fifteen minutes ago, I would've said yes, but I think I'm okay now. Just feeling...a little defeated."

"Do you see Imani this week?"

"Yeah. Tomorrow and Friday."

She smiled. "Good. You sure you're alright?"

I was quiet for the rest of my shift, hardly talking to my cube mates, and I took my lunch—around three o'clock, when I wasn't even hungry anymore—in the stairwell. As soon as I sank down on the steps, the memories of every time I'd interacted with Soren here brightened my day somewhat, though there was still a looming emptiness.

The next day, during my therapy session, I told Imani everything. She listened, asking questions occasionally until I finally stopped talking. The trickling water on the small fountain near the window punctuated the silence, and I stared down at my hands.

"There's an elephant in the room that I'm just going to address," Imani said. "It would be pointless to ignore the fact that you are entering a profession that may not be the best fit for your mental health. And you are currently working in probably one of the most demanding environments within that position. At some point we are going to have to explore if the emergency room is the best fit for you."

I nodded as tears welled into my eyes. I plucked a tissue from the box and dabbed them as I considered her words. "Sometimes I don't

even know why I'm pushing myself to do this anymore. I mean, I need to work, but why emergency, exactly? Did I think it was going to cure me of missing my family if I could help other people the way the nurses that took care of my sister helped me that day?"

Imani gave me a sad smile. "I can absolutely understand why you would pursue nursing, and emergency care. I can only imagine how rewarding it would be. But are there other areas you could work, maybe other settings, that wouldn't push you to your limits as much?"

"I think a lot of it is just being a new nurse, which is hard for anyone, and I'm hoping it gets better as time goes on."

She nodded. "I can see that, maybe, but I think we should still explore some other options."

I considered her words, for the rest of our session, and later that day as I jogged through the park. I felt good after exercising, and even better after a hot shower and a big bowl of soup, but when I settled into bed that night, I wrote out a text to Sam.

Imani thinks the ER might not be the best for me, and she's probably right.

It wouldn't be the end of the world, Quinn. You're more of a badass than you realize, and you'd be an excellent nurse anywhere you choose to go. Run with me Friday after your session?

Yes, please.

I slid out of bed and plugged my phone in across the room, because doomscrolling wasn't going to help me whatsoever, and I settled into the cozy romance novel on my nightstand, reaching into the drawer to find what I needed to relax myself in the best way I knew how.

OCTOBER

The next day, I wasn't as lucky with cube mates: Shelby, who I hadn't quite vibed with from the start, Brenda, and a traveler named Cody. We had a newer tech named Tabby who told me she was working here to get some experience before nursing school but really had a passion for gardening instead, though she had to be realistic about what was going to help her move out of her parents' house.

The shift started like most others, finishing up patients' care, discharging or admitting them, and starting over with a new set of ailments and orders and tasks. My cube mates and I were even able to take our lunches at a reasonable hour, and I volunteered to go first around 11 to get things started.

I'm taking lunch. Come find me in the stairwell if you can

I'd seen him come in around nine so I knew he was on campus, and the department wasn't off the hinges yet, so I knew he could probably sneak away. What exactly I was asking him to sneak away for, I wasn't sure. Though I was making big progress with Imani, I still felt I had some work to do before I could really pursue this thing with him. I hated that I felt like I was stringing him along, though he never made me feel that way. As he'd told me last month at his cabin, he'd wait for me. However long I needed.

But what was I waiting for exactly? A feeling, a revelation, a glimmer of hope that my future could be less gloomy than my recent

past? Everything in therapy and the work I was doing outside of it—exercising, journaling, meditating—was helping, but I still had a panic attack at work for the first time yesterday. What did it all mean? Was it all a mirage? Had I been fooled into thinking therapy was helping when I was actually getting worse?

Soren walked through the door and my heart just *lifted*. Something about his presence stilled me, like the ripples over a pond after a stone had sunk in the water. Once he saw that my posture was relaxed, the concern knitted between his brows vanished.

“I had to see you,” I said.

He came closer, descending the steps to where I was perched at the basement level. “Any particular reason why?” he whispered in my ear as a hand caressed my waist. My breath hitched, and a mischievous smile spread across his lips. They were so close to my jaw that every time he spoke I erupted in shivers.

“Mmm, I think you know.” I sure as hell couldn’t formulate a response. My brain was unable to fire a rational thought while Soren was in such close proximity. My back was against the wall now, his arms bracing me overhead. If anyone were to come through the door and look down the stairs at us, we’d be in Jordan’s office getting an earful, and maybe a set of termination letters.

“Tell me, and we’ll find out if you’re right.” He nipped my earlobe, and planted a soft kiss on my jaw. I moaned, a soft sound that echoed off the concrete.

Soren’s grin stretched even wider, and I felt the satisfaction rippling off him.

I placed my hands on the hard planes of his chest, and he inched backwards. I had to put some space between us before I did something reckless. We’d come this far. I couldn’t back away from my promise to myself, to heal my trauma before committing to a relationship I so desperately wanted.

It was getting more difficult to do that the more I was around Soren, though. The pull I felt towards him was becoming stronger and harder to ignore, but I knew deep down that the timing was off. I’d had a full-blown panic attack at work just yesterday. The painful memory pulled me back to reality, and I ducked underneath his arm.

“I have to run,” I said as I darted up the stairs, away from him.

“Quinn,” he said in an amused tone. “Your lunch?”

Shit. I turned around and headed back down the stairs to grab my abandoned sandwich I'd set aside when he'd joined me. My cheeks were warm with desire still, and I couldn't meet his eyes. He placed a hand on my forearm, forcing me to meet his gaze.

"You're stunning when you're flushed like that," he murmured. I stared at him, took in the blazing intensity on his face that sent a surge of need through me.

"See you on the floor," I managed to say before darting back up the stairs once more. My appetite had vanished, replaced by another type of hunger that was far more difficult to deal with at work.



I brought my concerns up to Imani at our next session a few days later, after I'd had time to process the panic attack at work. I shared everything, focusing on how I wasn't sure if the therapy was helping since my anxiety was getting worse at work and not better.

"Didn't you just complete your orientation?" she asked, sipping hot tea.

"Yes. This week was the first week I was on my own."

The silence lingered between us as we both drank from our mugs.

"That is a big stressor, whether you realize it or not," she continued. "Before, you always had someone to help you, but now you're on your own and maybe the increased responsibility is causing more stress, which is heightening the anxiety, as well. How did you cope with the panic attack at work?"

I took a deep breath as the memory conjured up the unpleasant feeling. "I stopped what I was doing, when I could. Stepped away into a quiet place and forced myself to breathe through it. Afterwards, I found Sam and told her about it. She asked if I should go home, and I said I didn't think I needed that. But the rest of the day was definitely...off. I wasn't joking around with my coworkers like I usually do."

She nodded. "I'm proud of you for recognizing the symptoms and doing what you could to cope."

"Thank you." I sipped my tea, peppermint and honey coating my tongue, then addressed what had been bothering me. "But shouldn't

everything be getting better since I'm in therapy now? It's hard to accept setbacks like this, even though some things are improving."

Imani took a deep breath, and set her mug down. "People who have anxiety and people who don't experience situations in completely different ways. The rush of adrenaline you feel at work when you're in a high-stakes situation is probably pretty helpful for the most part, right?"

I shrugged, thinking of the times I'd been in code rooms with Sam. "Sure."

"But that's the same feeling of a panic attack, too. The difference is, in panic attacks, your body is responding to a threat that your mind has created, not the environment. That's one of the reasons it's so frightening."

"That...makes sense."

"And your triggering events, such as going out on your own and being a brand new nurse in a stressful environment, is bound to push you over that threshold and into panic attack territory."

"So what can I do?" I asked in a quiet voice.

"Use your toolkit. The weapons you have to face your anxiety. You have already been doing a lot of things I'd suggest, like deep breathing, removing yourself to a quieter environment when possible, telling a trusted friend about it, using your rubber band on your wrist to literally snap out of it. Reflecting on experiences and talking it out in therapy are things I'd suggest, too."

I nodded. "And if all this doesn't work and I keep having panic attacks at work?"

"I think the key is to recognize when they are starting *before* they start so you have a plan in case it happens again. But if your symptoms are getting worse instead of better, you can either talk to your physician about medication, or possibly leave that work environment to pursue one that doesn't trigger your symptoms as much."

A sigh escaped me, and I sank further into the sofa. "Those aren't great solutions, Imani. You're gonna have to do better than that."

She laughed. "This isn't an easy thing to confront. It's the hardest thing anyone can do, in my opinion. To fight back against what your mind is putting you through."

During my next session, we'd barreled through the fact that I'd worked another shift without a panic attack. She'd encouraged me to

celebrate every victory, no matter how insignificant it seemed. And lately, I had been trying to reward my mind and body by celebrating in ways that benefitted me—instead of a glass or three of wine and sweet treats, I was opting for a yoga class, a run, or a new book from the bookstore. I'd stopped getting annoyed at the fact that her suggestions made my life better, and succumbed to the fate of those whose lives were improved with therapy.

In a way, the panic attack had been the final frontier, the final boss to defeat in the chambers of my mental anguish. Because I'd always been able to keep myself afloat at work, no matter how hard life was afterwards, but now that the dam had broken, it had forced me to use what I'd learned, and apply it to a new scenario. The result: the improvement I was making by adjusting to life after grief was also helping me adjust to life with anxiety. Just like Imani had told me, the grief would never go away, I'd just learn to make space for it. The same was true for anxiety and panic attacks.

We'd had a hard-hitting session, the kind that spoke volumes about progress I'd made, and the kind of session that made me feel lighter yet empty. Afterwards, I took my romance novel to a tea shop and sipped an herbal blend to unwind. I wasn't quite ready to broach the topic of Soren with Imani, but I was closer than I'd ever been before. My heart had been shattered, but no longer lay in pieces. I was stitching myself back together, with Imani's help, and every session I was getting dangerously close to being whole again, as whole as I could be. Rather than frightening me, it flooded me with warmth, as cozy as a tattered old sweater, holes and all.

OCTOBER

The following week, I was at work, the third shift in a row I'd worked without a panic attack. Tito interrupted my musings on the subject by leaning against the counter beside my computer and staring down at me, arms crossed. "You better be coming to my Halloween party."

"What? When?"

"On Halloween, dumbass. It's Wednesday in case you had forgotten the holiday falls on October 31st."

I threw a glare in his direction. "Fine, you troll. I'll come."

He grinned. "Good. You better have a killer costume. Everyone you know and love is going to be there."

Sam and I were both off that night, and she came over after taking Bailey trick-or-treating and dropping her off at Michael's for the rest of the week.

"If I know me, I'm not going to be in any shape to parent tomorrow," she said as I focused on applying my lipstick in the bathroom mirror.

My Poison Ivy costume was fierce—a skin-tight green corset that perked up my boobs, tulle leaf-patterned skirt, green fishnets with three-inch heels. The coloring set off my hair and skin tone, and the red lipstick only intensified the look.

Sam's Catwoman costume was equally stunning. She wore the black leather bodysuit like it adhered to her skin, accentuating her

athletic body, and her thigh-high black boots made me momentarily question my own sexuality.

We made vodka tonics as soon as we arrived at the party, and it was like the summer barbecue, intensified. Day shifters, night shifters, mid shifters, even a traveler or two—everyone I would have wanted to see milled about Tito's house, spilling out into the front yard and driveway.

Everyone except the man I was going to have a hard time resisting while drinking, that is. It was probably better that way, but I still found myself scanning the crowd for him. And texting him seemed out of line, too.

"I told you this was worth it," Tito said as he poured himself a beer from the keg in the kitchen.

"I never doubted you, love." I took in his Glinda costume from the Wizard of Oz, admiring how natural he looked in it.

We danced and drank and talked in small groups, Sam and I circling back to one another every so often. Liza and I screamed so loud when we spotted one another that several people shied away, one of whom spilled their drink on the sticky hardwood floor.

She was dressed as Uhura from Star Trek, an homage to her obsession with sci-fi. I only knew who she was because she'd gushed to me about Nichelle Nichols and how important her role had been two nights ago when we'd crossed paths at work and talked about the party. I'd listened to her with a mixture of astonishment and anger, at the injustice the actress had experienced then and the overall lack of Black representation in sci-fi and fantasy films.

But Liza had just shrugged when I'd stared at her in open-mouthed confusion. "Honey, if that surprises you, you really need to open your eyes."

She wasn't wrong.

We embraced on the dance floor, my corset digging into my side, and I danced with her to the Monster Mash underneath a sparkling disco ball. My eye caught on a black cape and a set of fangs heading down the hallway, and I pulled Liza close, telling her I'd be right back.

Even without the vampire costume, I'd recognize him anywhere. I followed Soren down the hallway, pausing in front of a bedroom door in a shadowy alcove.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be here," I said. The music poured into the space around us, though it was somewhat quieter off the dance floor.

"Why didn't you text me?" he asked, frowning.

"I didn't want you to think..." I trailed off, staring at my shoes. This was so hard to admit because I was afraid I was right. "I didn't want you to think I'm just dragging you along. I thought I should give us some space until I'm ready."

Soren reached for a strand of hair that had fallen from my braid, face softening as his fingertips touched my cheek. "I meant what I said at the cabin. I'll wait as long as you need me to. And besides, I care about you. You can always text me."

I reveled at his touch on my skin, closing my eyes. When I opened them again, his gaze was fixed on my mouth. "But you don't have to be perfect for me, sweetheart. It's no secret that I have my flaws. We're all working on something about ourselves."

A grin spread across my face that softened the hunger on his. "I don't strive to be perfect. Just a little more whole."

He mirrored my smile, creases forming at the corners of his eyes. "More of you to love when the time is right, then."

Fireworks exploded in my rib cage, but I stepped out of his arms, heels clicking down the hallway as I rejoined the party. Though my body begged me not to leave him, the shred of reason won out. This wasn't going to be some casual hookup. Our feelings ran deep, deeper than I'd ever felt for someone before, and I couldn't go there right now.

Two cups of punch later, I was feeling loose and laughing and dancing, tricked into thinking I'd always be this comfortable and carefree. Sam and I were on the makeshift dance floor in the living room shaking it underneath the disco ball like Outkast intended when I spotted Knox through the doorway to the kitchen. I tried to subtly get her attention, but in the manner of drunks, I ended up shouting over the music, "Level 1 hottie, kitchen, right now."

Sam howled, until she noticed him too, and she pulled me into the quiet of the hall bathroom. In the unflattering glare of the lights above the mirror, my makeup looked a lot less sexy than I'd imagined. I dabbed at my eyeliner as Sam spoke. "I honestly don't know what to do right now."

"Whaddya mean?"

"Knox! He actually came. I want to talk to him. For real. But I feel so stupid. Like I don't know how. Even though we've known each other for like four years now, and we—"

I slammed a hand onto the sink, looking at Sam through the mirror's reflection. "Do it! But maybe don't be mean to him. I think only Soren likes that." My words were running together in a barfly's stumbling cadence.

Sam chuckled, and pulled me out of the bathroom. "Let's get you some water, little sis."

We strode into the kitchen arm in arm, where Knox was leaning against the counter, sipping on a beer as he scanned the crowd. Even in my state I could tell he was uncomfortable.

"Glad you made it," Sam said.

He turned to her voice, beaming once he spotted her. "Sam! You look incredible."

His eyes scanned her from head to toe before he shook his head and quickly addressed me. "Quinn! Love the costume!"

"Thanks, Henry," I slurred. "I like your Superman, too." I stopped myself from admiring his physique because, well...it just felt wrong now. Because I knew what it was like to be held by a certain vampire, and he'd captured my heart, whether I liked it or not.

Sam found me a cup and filled it with water from the sink. I took it, and downed it in a few gulps, sloppily wiping my mouth afterwards. Henry sipped from his beer to cover a grin, but I saw the amusement in his eyes, and turned to Sam, confused.

She burst out laughing and told me to go to the bathroom. When I got there I completely lost it at my reflection, the smeared lipstick of a very convincing Joker.

When I rejoined the party, Sam and Henry weren't in the kitchen. I realized I had lost Liza, too, and didn't recognize a good number of people at this point, though the costumes made it hard to tell.

I also really wanted a burger. Of all the liquid hospitality Tito had provided, there had been little of sustenance—the kitchen table was littered with empty chip bags and plates of apps that had been devoured hours ago.

I pulled out my phone, unable to resist the urge any longer.

Are u still here?

Missing me?

Drunk Quinn doesn't want to answer that. But will u take me to McDonald's?

Meet me at the front porch.

I shot a text to Sam to let her know I was leaving as I made my way out the door, knocking square into a Godzilla on the way and apologizing profusely.

Soren waited on the front lawn with his hands in his pockets, ever the handsome brooding vampire.

"The fangs are really doing it for me," I blurted.

He gave me an appraising look. "After you."

I followed him down the sidewalk to the Beemer, not giving a damn who saw me leave with him this time.

At this hour, the clubs were still fuller than the drive-thru, but a small queue had formed. I reached for the radio knob, turning up the volume so I could embarrass myself singing rather than saying stupid things.

I scanned the radio until I found a pop station and bounced along to the song. Soren peered over at me, smile tugging at his lips. When it was our turn, Soren asked what I wanted. I shouted over him, "#3 with Sprite!"

We pulled into a parking space, chowing down while the radio filled the silence. When I finished eating, I leaned across the console, resting my chin on my palm.

"Thanks, friend. Tomorrow is already gonna be better."

"Course," he said, but he didn't meet my gaze. "Am I taking you home?"

I froze.

"To your house?" he clarified.

"Yeah." I snuggled down into the seat. My feet came to rest on the dashboard, and I hummed to the tune on the radio. I realized we weren't moving from the parking space and looked around us, confused.

Soren drummed his hands on the steering wheel. "Don't make me, Quinn. I—" He sighed. "I shouldn't touch you right now."

His words hit me like an anvil. Somehow, him refusing to touch me was making me even more wild for him.

I wanted him.

I wanted his hands to touch every inch of me that was pleading for it.

But after everything we'd been through, it seemed wrong to give in now. I wanted to remember every second of our first time, and it was debatable if that would happen at the moment. Besides, I was pretty certain he wouldn't take me to bed in my current state.

At a glacial pace, I slid my feet to the floor, as if I didn't want to spook him with sudden movements.

"It won't be too much longer I don't think," I whispered, whether to myself or him I wasn't sure.



The next day, I awoke with a throbbing head and a mountain of hangxiety to go with it. I groaned into my pillow and forced myself to breathe through the incessant stream of flashbacks, things I had said and done while inebriated. Choosing not to worry about the things I couldn't remember was a small mercy I allowed myself.

A shower hotter than the depths of hell was the first step to letting go of last night and starting a new day. A full bottle of water and cup of coffee came next. And the final step was to reach out to Soren, something I was both itching to do and dreading. He had been endlessly patient with me, but how much longer could it last? Surely he didn't think I was stringing him along, right? I hated the way I felt. Alcohol and anxiety only mixed well in small doses, it seemed. Too much, and the booze was fuel for a worried mind.

Thanks for last night. Sorry I was so smashed.

I set my phone on the table, hoping I'd hear the chime of an incoming reply. But my phone was silent, and remained that way until mid-afternoon.

I was moving through a yoga sequence, hoping to wring out the last of the party's remnants, when I heard the phone. I nearly fell out of my triangle pose trying to reach for it.

I'm glad you got home safely. Hope you're feeling okay today.

What did I expect him to say, exactly? I sighed and settled back into my sequence, breathing through the chatter of my mind while focusing on how my body felt instead. I had a session with Imani tomorrow, and I found I was actually looking forward to it. After yoga, I wrote in my journal and took a long walk, thinking about what I wanted to talk about with her tomorrow.

Since I had started sessions six weeks ago, I had already noticed a change in how I saw the world. How I processed things and remembered Mom and Steph. It was getting easier to remember the good times, and not only the accident. Writing in my journal and talking to Imani had afforded me the space to process my feelings, alone and with support. Committing to exercising on all my off days and even some of the days I was on shift was producing a marked change in my body—it was harder to worry when you were physically tired, and ready to go to sleep. Leaving my phone across the room and silenced at night was also helping me sleep better. Although it seemed I took a few steps back any time I drank to excess.

Before our session the next morning, I was nervous like it was a job interview. Imani's presence always soothed me, her mixture of empathy and insightfulness, and the warm, soft lighting in her office always unspooled my mind in the most serene manner.

When she welcomed me in, I sat with my back straight, legs crossed at the ankles.

"How's it going today, Quinn?"

She eyed my stiff posture, but relaxed into her chair across from me, hands folded in her lap. I focused on the water feature, a trickling stream that cascaded down sculpted pebbles. It reminded me of the stream Soren and I had hiked across during that incredible weekend with him at his cabin, relaxing me and giving me the courage to address what I had been preparing for today.

"I'm well, thank you, Imani. I have some ideas about today, because I think I'm ready to move forward with something I've wanted for a long time now."

She faced me with that patient smile, and I wondered how equipped therapists would be to lead a CIA interrogation. I was thinking they'd be pretty good at it, considering how successful they were at holding out for patients to open up.

"My goals in coming here have been to work through my mother and sister's deaths. And to learn to manage my anxiety. You have been so incredibly helpful with that." Imani's face softened even more, and she sipped from her tea. "But there is another goal I have, and that's to feel ready for a relationship. There is someone I'm interested in, but I didn't want to start our relationship in such a bad headspace. Things have been so much better lately, but I just want to be sure, you know?"

"That's very mature of you, Quinn. And very self-aware. We can certainly talk about what concerns you have about a relationship."

Fifty minutes later, I walked out of her office with a mountain of things to consider, but surprisingly, my eyes were dry.

I grabbed sushi for lunch and took it back home. Gretchen was drawing at the kitchen table, and I slid in the seat across from her, carefully setting my plate down amidst the pencils and erasers scattered about.

"I've been meaning to talk to you," she said, and by her tone, I knew what was coming.

I popped a roll in my mouth to mask my reaction. "What's up?" I asked around a mouthful of salmon.

"I'm moving out. In about two weeks. I can pay half for this month if you don't mind."

My eyebrows shot up. She was really leaving that quickly? Gretchen wasn't in a lease like I was so she could technically leave whenever she wanted, but still, wasn't it nice to give a little notice?

I realized I hadn't answered her. "Oh, that's okay, I guess. Are you leaving town?"

Her face lit up. "Jules and I are going to New Orleans! I can't do another winter here for fuck's sake."

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped. "Honestly, I can't blame you." My curiosity got the better of me and I asked, "Do you have a job down there already?"

"Actually yeah, a friend has a graphic design studio and she's invited me to take some projects for them. I definitely prefer pencil drawing rather than digital, but I can't really turn down the opportunity at this point."

"I really love that you're going to be working in art. Your talent is too bright to keep hidden away."

Gretchen beamed. "Thanks for understanding."

After I ate, I went to my bedroom and plopped onto my bed to ruminate privately. It wouldn't completely devastate me financially to pay the whole rent, but things would be tough if I didn't want to live with someone else. Gretchen had been a pretty awesome roommate, and I wasn't ready to find out if someone else would work out. Not yet at least. I'd have to pick up a few overtime shifts to cover her part of the rent, but that wasn't unbearable. Except for the part about how I couldn't stop reliving my shifts in my head after work, even with therapy. Maybe I could do some partial shifts and it wouldn't be so bad?

I sighed and put on layers to run in the park. The day was cold and gray, and I needed to pound the pavement to work out everything else Imani and I had talked about during our session.

Beginning with a slow walk while my food digested, I paid attention to the space around me. The trees were mostly bare, some with wet leaves that still clung to the branches, refusing to fall. I both admired their tenacity and wondered if they knew they'd be better off just letting go, succumbing to their fate.

This morning Imani asked what I was afraid of in a relationship, and I'd said "losing him" without even thinking. She gently pointed out that this was a reasonable reaction to what had happened with my family—beginning with my father stepping out on us years before—but that these thought patterns were holding me back from my future happiness.

She said, "You may never have realized how much your father's leaving impacted you until your loss was compounded with the deaths of your mother and sister."

"I don't understand how I can miss someone I barely remember."

"No one said this stuff is easy. You've gone through some horrible things, Quinn. But remember that you've survived them all. You've lived through all of your worst days and haven't been bested yet, even if it feels that way sometimes."

I nodded, trying to absorb everything. "It's a definite possibility that he could leave me, too."

"Yes. It's possible. But you're on your own now, aren't you? Even if your relationship didn't work out, you've been on your own before. And you can take care of yourself just fine, right?"

"I guess so."

"You're here, which means you care enough about your well-being to want to understand your past trauma and move through it. That speaks enough about your capabilities."

I smiled. "If you say so."

"So what's another outcome that could happen with a relationship, other than him leaving you?"

The grin that spread across my face made my cheeks warm. I stared down at my hands. "We could be happy. I could leave him. We could mutually decide to not be together."

"Interesting. Being vulnerable enough to be hurt is a frightening place to be. But maybe it won't be that way. Maybe it will. There's no way to control other people's feelings and decisions, and we can't help every bad thing that happens in our life. But we can choose to make decisions for ourselves that speak to our inner peace. And you have to decide if the risk of possibly getting hurt is worth the potential happiness you could have. And no one can answer that but you."

Thinking back on her words, all I could think of was how my heart sang when my mind stumbled onto Soren. Which it was doing at an increasingly alarming rate lately.

But now when I thought about being in a relationship with him, I wasn't thinking of how I'd inevitably screw things up with him. The good parts came to mind—nuzzling up against him on the sofa after a long day at work, lazy mornings in bed, spontaneous trips to the cabin, cooking dinner together. Even if things didn't work out, I was ready for us. Ready to see where the connection would take us, because I'd been fighting it for too long.

I was finally ready for a beginning, instead of mourning endings. I was completely capable of taking care of myself and navigating through life alone, but I no longer wanted to. And what I wanted was waiting for me across town.

NOVEMBER

Can I come over tonight?

His reply came minutes later.

I'm on till eight. That too late?

Mercifully, I had another day off tomorrow so I could stay out as late as I wanted without recourse.

No. I can cook for you?

Really? I'd love that. But you'd have to come by here and get the keycard.

Okay. Meet me in our stairwell at six and I'll grab it and get groceries afterwards.

He sent me a thumbs up. I could have combusted with happiness. It was really happening—I was going to go over and tell him how I felt and see if he felt the same. My intuition told me he did, as did every interaction we'd had since the cabin, but there was a sliver of doubt that I couldn't shake. Not until I saw him in person.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur of comically ineffective distractions including but not limited to: reading half of an impressively dirty vampire erotica (that only ended up reminding me of Soren's Halloween costume), showering until the hot water

ran out and shaving what seemed to be about 75% of my body, spending half an hour combing through my wardrobe to find the perfect outfit then remembering we'd spent an entire weekend together and finally settling on leggings and a giant hoodie.

At half past five, I headed towards the hospital, giving myself enough time to park and walk over to our side door.

My stomach was somersaulting as I approached the side door and badged in. I'd seen him sober the day before the party at work and really drunk the night of, and in the days since so much had changed with my mindset and overall outlook, thanks to therapy and a whole lot of introspection. But after so much thinking about myself, and about him, I wanted to see him. Hear his voice. Put my hands on him, though they might tremble.

I paced on the landing for several moments before sitting down on the steps. I read a webcomic to calm myself while I waited. I hoped he wasn't in a code.

The door to the department swung open shortly after, and I turned to face him. He was as striking as ever in his black scrubs and white coat. When he spotted me, his face relaxed into a comfortable familiarity that made my heart stutter, because I knew my expression was conveying the same feelings to him. We approached one another, and he pulled the keycard out, handing it to me.

"Thanks." I suddenly felt nervous, the weight of my feelings for him making it difficult to appear casual.

"I have never wanted a shift to end more than I do right now," he said in a low voice, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "See you in a few hours?"

I nodded, and in a flash of fearlessness, I reached up and kissed him, a quick press of my lips against his.

When I pulled back, I gasped. Soren's smile was like starlight bottled in human form. In all the months I'd known him, I'd never seen him so happy. He was the king of the sly smirk, the teasing grin, but this was none other than pure, unrestrained joy.

He squeezed my hand before darting back up the stairs, and I watched him until his perfect ass disappeared into the doorway on the landing above.

I picked up ingredients to make pan-fried chicken cutlets with garlic green beans and jasmine rice, and a bottle of French white, hoping it was good based on the label and price.

The penthouse realized I had arrived before I had time to process it—lights switched on as I stepped off the elevator with my grocery bags, dim and inviting, and the city glowed through the dining room windows. I made my way to the kitchen and sat the bags on the island, and got acquainted with the space once more. The evening was cool so I switched on the gas fireplace, and lit candles in the living room and kitchen to set a relaxing mood as I prepared to cook.

I found a music channel with soulful oldies on the TV, and as it played softly through the speakers in the kitchen and living room, I felt myself relaxing into the evening too. Gone were the jitters, at least for now—I was home.

Prepping the food gave me a task to occupy my hands so my mind couldn't take over. I flattened the chicken breast, coated it, and set it on a plate, ready to fry, then chopped the ends off the green beans and diced the fresh garlic to sear them with. I measured the rice and water and turned the pot onto a low heat, checking the time to see when I should have everything ready. It was nearing eight, but Soren might have to stay extra if he was waiting for any labs or scans or consults to make a disposition. I poured myself a glass of wine and settled into the living room, into the chair near the bookcase where he had sat all those months ago, assuring me I was safe with him.

His scent enveloped me as I sank into the chair, woodsy and familiar. I honestly didn't know if it was his pheromones, his laundry detergent, his deodorant or an aftershave. I just knew that the smell made me feral, and I wanted to climb him like a ladder when he walked through the door.

A deep breath grounded me, and I rose to my knees and turned around, examining the books on the shelf. Though I hadn't looked too close, I could almost be certain that his library had become more diverse since my scathing Hemingway discourse this past summer. The thought warmed my heart, and I cuddled up with *Pride and Prejudice*.

A few chapters in, the elevator startled me. Soren emerged, and when he spotted me in the armchair, he stopped and studied me, giving me a pleased expression.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi. I like you in my condo when I get home."

I rose to meet him, crossing the living room on soft steps. "I like it too."

He dropped his bag and pulled me into him, kissing the top of my head as I buried my face in his chest. "How are you? I've missed you," he whispered into my hair.

"I'm good," I said, and meant it. "Therapy was so hard but worth it."

"I can't tell you how happy that makes me to hear you say that." He squeezed me tighter, then pulled back, and I studied his face. His jaw was set with an intensity that matched those gorgeous eyes. He ran a thumb across my jaw, a subtle graze that made me shudder.

"I haven't cooked yet," I managed to say. "I wasn't sure if you wanted to shower first."

"I think I will," Soren replied, and the way he studied me made me want to follow him into the bathroom.

But I made dinner instead, and he emerged once it was nearly ready in a pair of joggers and a white tee, matching me in comfort.

"Wine?" I asked, and he nodded, taking the glass I offered him.

"Looks like you found everything you needed," he remarked, giving me a smile that was so uncharacteristically shy it melted me.

"I did. I guess I am pretty comfortable here."

He said nothing, sipping his wine and setting the table.

"This meal is incredible," he remarked as he bit into the chicken.

"Thanks. I really liked The Food Network when I was younger. Cooking just comes so naturally to me. I think of flavors much like I imagine an artist thinks of colors."

"That's a beautiful way to put it. I'm happy to enjoy the fruits of your labor. And that you get so much enjoyment out of something that you're so skilled at."

"I can't help but feel that my place is far away from a hospital," I said without thinking.

"So maybe it is?" Soren challenged. "What then?"

I sighed, setting my wine glass down. "Student loans have to come before anything. And if I want to buy a house, I'll need some cash for that, too. But really it's the loans. I have to knock those out while I have a nurse's pay before I can even consider anything else."

I hadn't realized how my face had fallen while I'd spoken it until I saw the concern on Soren's.

"It's fine," I reassured him, spearing a green bean onto my fork. "It's only a few years. I have plenty of time to do something that I enjoy. If I ever figure out what that is."

He gave me a weak smile and cut a piece of chicken, dropping the subject, though I could tell he wanted to talk about it more.

After dinner, we settled onto the couch, close enough to pounce on one another. My fingers itched to touch him, but I clutched onto the remainder of my second glass of wine. Was he waiting for me to give him the green light? Or did he know that I was ready to be with him by the fact that I was here?

The music filled the space, and I focused on the glow of the candlelight on the coffee table in front of me, a faint vanilla scent wafting with the flame. The track changed, and the opening melody of the next song made me gasp.

"Billie Holliday!" I exclaimed. "She was the singer on that record at the cabin! I put on this huge jazz playlist, trying to find out who it was, and she just popped up on it one day, and I've been obsessed ever since."

Soren took my hand, pulling me up. "Dance with me?"

I nodded, and he took me into his arms, pulling me close.

"You really like this music?" he asked, with a trickle of hesitation.

"I've really never heard anything like it. It touches the shadowy parts of my soul, I think."

His eyes gleamed in the candlelight. "I've always felt the same way about it."

We inched closer to each other, and before our lips met, he paused. "This is what you want?" he asked me in a husky voice, and I knew he wasn't talking about the dance, or the music. He was talking about the two of us being together, and I finally had my answer.

My voice was little more than a whisper. "Yes."

"Say it," he ordered.

"I want you. I want to be with you and only you."

Soren cradled my face, tenderness shining through his eyes. When his lips met mine, slow and full, our mouths found a rhythm of their own. My tongue explored his, and his hands cradled my face, holding me close. When his teeth caught my lip, I groaned, and arousal flooded me. Soren nipped at my collarbone in response, which made me grind against him.

"I don't want to wait anymore," I gasped.

Soren rested his forehead on mine, patient and steady. "I've wanted you for so long Quinn, and I've never wanted anyone like this. It's more than sex with you, and it's more than I thought possible." He swallowed. "I can't believe it's happening."

He kissed me on the forehead, and damn it was sweet, but I'd been waiting for so long and been so damn good about it that I wanted one thing and one thing only at the moment.

"If you don't fuck me out of my mind right now I'm going to *lose it*."

He scooped me up without further delay, carrying me to his bedroom, and I kissed his neck, grazing his ear with my teeth and eliciting a growl. Despite the animalistic sound, he gently lay me down on his bed and knelt before me, placing his arms on either side of my hips.

"This goes as far as you want it to," was all he said before removing his shirt and joggers, leaving black boxer briefs that gave me a very exciting glimpse at my future.

I studied his gorgeous body. A bruise ran up the side of his rib cage, purple and swollen, distracting me from pouncing on him like a mountain lion.

"Hockey game," Soren supplied.

Of course this gorgeous Swedish-American man also played the sexiest sport I could think of.

"I'll have to come see you play," I said as I leaned forward and ran my fingers over his contusion. It seemed wise to experiment with touching him first, ease into what I knew was about to happen. My heartbeat hammered in my ears and my fingers shook as they met his skin. I remembered the sexy, distracting cut he'd had on his face all those months ago and realized it was probably a hockey injury, too.

"You definitely should. I probably should've invited you last season, maybe it would've changed your opinion of me sooner."

I bristled. I'd read enough hockey romances to know what he was insinuating. "I'm not some puck bunny."

Soren cut his eyes at me. "I know that. You just found out I play hockey, and you were into me long before that. Long before you'd admit it to yourself, even." I smacked his stomach, avoiding the bruise, and he laughed. "But the truth stands that it's a fun sport,

and there are always a lot of women in the stands. I want *my* woman there to watch me. You should come, and you should bring Sam, too. Did you know I play with Knox?"

"I didn't know that but I'm not surprised." The thought of Soren on the ice, aggressively going after the puck and body-checking his opponent like I'd seen the players doing on TV, did in fact make my pulse race and remind me why we'd come to the bedroom in the first place. I wanted him even more now—hell, maybe I was a puck bunny. He could call me whatever he wanted, I decided, as long as he did it naked.

I pulled my hoodie and t-shirt off before shimmying out of my leggings. Soren feasted his eyes on my black matching set like he was a starving man and I was a three-course-meal.

"I was wondering what was underneath all of those layers," he murmured, sitting down beside me on the bed. My feet dangled off the side while his were planted firmly on the rug.

He ran a finger up my outer thigh, the touch doing nothing to quell my ravenous appetite. I had lusted for this man for *months*, and we were finally laying it all out on the line. I didn't want to wait a second longer. I leaned over and straddled him at the edge of the bed as I grabbed his face, my thong no doubt giving his lap an indication of how ready I was for this. Our kiss was urgent, erratic, an orchestra of teeth and tongue and lips crashing against one another. I pushed him onto his back and kissed down his chest, feeling the hardness of his arousal as I sank back on my hips.

I toyed with the waistband of his underwear.

"You first," he grunted, moaning as I kissed him below his navel. "C'mon, Quinn," he urged, sliding out from underneath me and flipping me around so that my legs straddled his shoulders as he knelt on the side of the bed. He popped off my bra in one easy swipe, freeing my breasts, then slid my panties off with deft fingers. The sight of him on his knees, inches away from making me the happiest woman alive, was enough to make my legs shake.

He gave me a catlike grin. "May I?"

I bit my lip and nodded, and he kissed me between my thighs, sending a million nerve endings into an absolute frenzy of pleasure. I collapsed backwards onto the bed, gripping the sheets to hold on for the ride. His mouth was soft and warm, tongue exerting enough pressure to make my breath hitch.

"It's so good," I moaned, and he gripped my hips, pinning me down.

"I know, baby." A hand released me, and I heard him suck his fingers before easing two inside of me. I cried out at the sensation, biting my palm and shaking as sweat began to bead at my temples.

I was nothing but the sensations I felt, weightless, thoughtless, in a pure state of ecstasy. He made slow thrusts with his hand while his mouth kept pace, and I was rapidly losing control. "Soren, I'm going to—" I started, then screamed as my climax tore through me like a tornado. His tongue never stopped as the waves crested through me, my muscles gripping his fingers like a vise. When I could finally take a breath again, I groaned, and he climbed on to the bed, lying beside me and making light strokes down my arm.

"How are you so good at that? I have *never*, and I mean *never*, had a man make me feel that way." I was panting, barely able to make words.

The feline smile returned, and I climbed atop him once more, determined to make him feel just as satisfied. I ran my hands over his chest, marveling at the sculpted pecs and abs beneath them. My finger slid down below his navel, through the line of hair that ran south to my intended destination. He shuddered as I eased off his briefs. I licked my lips and took in the sight of him in all his glory.

I took him in my mouth, and he growled, running a hand through his hair. Since I had plenty of him left even as he reached the back of my throat, I used my hand in tandem, eliciting a string of curses from Soren that were anything but proper. Bolstered by his reaction, I took him deeper, and slid my teeth ever so slightly against him. He cried out, and his hands gripped the sides of my head.

"I don't wanna go yet," he sputtered, and pulled me up to him, taking my mouth with his. His fingers trembled in my hair, and I thought of how good they had just made me feel.

"I have an IUD. And I've been tested since my last partner."

"Me too," he rasped.

"Then I want just you."

He nodded, and kissed my forehead before easing me back onto the pillows at the headboard. "My lady gets what she wants." I could've melted into a puddle right then and there. His fingers slid between my legs, and he cursed. "You're so fucking ready for this, aren't you?" he said incredulously.

"I've wanted this for so damn long," I confessed. He hovered above me, balancing on his forearms, looking to my face before continuing. I nodded, and he eased into me, evoking a curse of my own.

"Okay?" he asked, and I kissed him, urging my hips toward his. He settled into a cozy cadence, slowly filling me before pulling back and repeating the motion. The comfortable pressure made me gasp.

"Harder," I urged, and Soren committed himself fully with his next thrust, inducing another cry of satisfaction. The angle was just right to trigger another orgasm, and I bit my lip as the pleasure built inside me. I dug my heels into his back, and my nails into his shoulders as the tension increased.

"So beautiful," he said as he looked down at me with hooded eyes. The weight of his body atop mine was exquisite, a warm, solid wall of strength. I ran my hands all along his arms and up behind his shoulder, clasping them behind his neck. I brought my face closer, pressing my lips to the salt-slicked skin over his collarbone, working my way up his neck.

Soren whispered in my ear. "I can't hold out much longer, baby. You feel too good."

His words were a silken caress, rumbling over my skin and bringing every physical sensation I was feeling to the place deep in my core where the magic began. With his next thrust I came apart, letting go in a shattering swell of bliss, and Soren cried my name as he reached completion around me. We collapsed next to each other, and I settled closer to him to fight the chill against my slick skin.

"At one point it would've infuriated me that you are actually that good in bed because you're so damn cocky at work. Usually men like that don't measure up where it counts."

Soren laughed. "And how does it make you feel now?" Through the levity of his statement, I understood what he really meant: *Now that we've done this, how are you feeling?*

"Now, I'm ecstatic that I'm the one you're sharing your bed with."

He kissed my brow. "I feel the same."

Sex and love had been mutually exclusive things in my life thus far. I had had great sex with men I didn't love, and loved men that didn't set off fireworks in the bedroom. Having both of those things

simultaneously—being loved by a man that could absolutely ravish me—was a feeling that was indescribable.

But I knew I was lucky, and the peace I felt as I lay on Soren's chest confirmed that there was no place I'd rather be. My gut had led me to the right decision, and for that, I was wildly grateful.

I showered while Soren did the dishes, using his bathroom this time, and slipped on his t-shirt that he'd left on the floor. The sound of cabinets and drawers opening and closing and silverware clinking together greeted me when I found him in the kitchen, shirtless. I could stare at him for hours, my own personal artwork on view.

When he saw me, he paused, plate halfway to the cabinet. I sidled into the kitchen and hopped onto the island to face him, bare ass on the countertop. The coldness of the stone made me shiver and brought a wicked grin to Soren's face.

"You look so good in my clothes."

I grinned. "That's convenient because I have a few of your shirts now."

He gave me an amused look. "I knew I had lost one that weekend at the cabin. I thought I was imagining things at first."

I hung my head. "Guilty. But it smelled so good I just took it without thinking. I wore it until your scent wore off. That was a sad day."

"Well I guess we'll have to get you another one then. Feel free to bring them back over and I'll recharge them as needed."

I laughed, and Soren stepped closer to me, pinning his arms at my sides. His pupils dilated as he took me in, and he let out a big breath as he slid his fingers under the hem of the shirt and found nothing else.

"Fuck, Quinn. I just had you and I want you again."

"Same," was all I managed to say before he picked me up off the counter, kissing me deeply. I untangled my legs from his waist and he set me down, looking down at me with love in his eyes and a determination in his jaw.

"Here?" he asked, and I nodded. "I don't know why I even asked," he muttered as he lifted the shirt over my head and tossed it on the tile floor beside us, adding his pants to the pile shortly after. "If you asked me to fuck you on a stage in front of everyone we know I'd probably do it, I'm so crazy about you."

I had one thing on my mind, and I made it known.

"Fuck me right here," I ordered, and turned around, bracing myself. The thought of him filling me from behind hadn't let up since I first imagined it in the shower minutes before.

My hands gripped the edge of the island countertop and Soren kissed me on my shoulder blades and spine before squatting down. He pressed his lips to the backs of my calves as his hands caressed my ankles and slid upwards. When he got to my ass, he nipped at it, and his fingers found the two indentations above it on my lower back that had always made me self-conscious for some reason.

"I fucking love these," he growled as he pressed his thumbs into them and wrapped his arms around my hips. He lifted me onto the countertop, facing away from him, and I bent my knees into a kneeling position. Insecurity rippled through me at the thought of his face being so close to my ass but arousal won out after he tilted me forward and I rested my weight on my arms.

I moaned and cursed as he licked his way to my most sensitive tissue, gripping my hips to firmly keep me in place. Bucking against the sensation, I edged away from him, and his hands pulled me back.

"Sit on my face," he ordered in a gruff voice.

"I—Are you sure?"

"Fuck yes I'm fucking sure."

"Can you breathe?" I wondered aloud.

"I can, but even if I couldn't, that's a hell of a way to go and I'm ready for it. Smother me."

Something in the way his urgency and insistence to get to know every square inch of my body released me from all of my uncertainty on the matter, because I wanted to acquaint myself with every millimeter of him, too. I sank my hips back towards him, and rose up from my forearms as he decimated me from below. I needed something to hold, to anchor me as his tongue lashed at me like a tempest, and though I briefly considered pulling his light fixture off the ceiling I braced my arms atop of his hands that were resting on top of my thighs, keeping me in place as I bucked like a bronco.

Every place where he touched me felt like it was electrified. His tongue was working at a steady tempo that was going to break me apart. "Oh my fucking god, Soren, you're going to make me come."

"So come, baby," he murmured between licks.

His hands squeezed my hips tighter as my limbs became taut, and when the peak of ecstasy washed over me I let out a moan that echoed off the tile and glass. Soren gently eased me down, and even though I felt like his mouth had fucked me into another dimension, I wanted more.

Facing him, I reached up and kissed him on trembling legs. He closed his eyes as I came closer, lashes touching his cheeks, and made a small noise of satisfaction as I pulled him to me, lips tugging into an easy smile.

Seeing Soren so fully spellbound locked into place my feelings towards him, something so suspiciously like love that I knew was written on my own face every time I looked at him. This was it—the fearsome place I hadn’t dared venture, the path that meant my heart could end up shattered. But I’d put it back together once before, and I knew I could again if I had to.

Right now, all I *had* to do was get this gorgeous, patient, and well-endowed man behind me.

As I pressed closer to him, his dick settled against my lower abdomen, and I groaned, thinking about it inside me, the exquisite tightness I’d feel as Soren hit me from behind. I loved kissing him, but I wanted a different part of his body connected to me instead, so I broke away, and sank down into a squat to take him in my mouth.

Soren’s hands slid through my hair as I licked him like an ice cream cone, taking the rest of his package in one hand and working him down to the base with the other. When I put my whole mouth around him, he hissed, bracing an arm against the counter above me. I took him in slow strokes, pausing to suck along his length, making him curse. He pulled me away, gently cupping my jaw as I rose up to standing.

I ordered him where I wanted him in a merciless tone that invited no recourse. “Behind me. Now.”

He obeyed, and I braced against the island as he lifted my hips to meet his. He teased my soft, slick skin before easing in, slow enough to give me the pleasure of feeling every rock-solid inch of him fill me. I gripped the marble harder, the stone as firm and unyielding as the cock that was now inside me. Soren continued the tantalizingly controlled momentum, and I wondered if he wanted to hear me beg, hear me demand for him to up the tempo. For now, I closed my eyes

and focused on every thrust, marveling at how my body could make room for him in such a sublime manner.

My breath caught as he slid a hand across my hips, inching towards that delicate place that his tongue had become so intimately acquainted with minutes before. His fingers worked slow circles on the outside, as he grazed my inner walls with every smooth motion, and I felt another orgasm blossoming like a springtime flower.

I moaned his name, and he picked up the pace, each stroke building upon the last to bring me closer to oblivion. His fingers never let up, a metronome to my release, and my arms shook against the counter as that tide swelled inside me, threatening to spill over.

When I cried out in bliss, Soren kept his fingers in place, dutifully finishing out my orgasm. I sucked in a heaving breath that I hadn't realized I was holding and he inched his fingers upward, taking a breast in one hand as his other grasped my hip.

I knew I was in for it when his hand made its way back down from my chest to my hip, a reinforcement to keep me exactly where he wanted me as he fucked me like there was nowhere else in the universe he'd rather be.

He gripped me tight as he sank his hips into me, calling out my name alongside a string of curses as his own orgasm loomed.

"You've ruined me," he gasped as he thrust into me one last time, shuddering his release.

I was absolutely, completely unable to move afterwards, and Soren scooped me up and took me to the couch, draping me in a blanket and settling in beside me.

"I don't think I'll ever get sick of this," I told him.

Mischief glinted in his eyes. "I hope not."

I studied him, face relaxed, arms resting on the back of the couch. "So when did you know you had feelings for me?"

Soren scratched at his jaw, focusing on the flames dancing in the fireplace. "I knew you were special from the first time you glared at me in the trauma bay. You had a fire inside of you, I could tell."

I laughed, remembering the bitterness I had towards him. "And that was what did it for you? Me giving you scathing looks?"

He nudged me. "No, smartass, it wasn't the *looks*. It was that you weren't afraid to show precisely what you were feeling around me, unlike your peers. And you said exactly what was on your mind, damn the consequences. I respected that about you. Still do." He

brought me closer to him, kissing the crown of my head. "And of course it would be foolish to deny that I was attracted to you in other ways as well. You're stunning, Quinn. That was never up for debate."

I replayed those memories from all those months ago, seeing them through a different lens, basking in the warmth of his words and contentment of being held by him.

"It definitely took me longer to recognize that what I felt for you was something bordering on passion," I admitted. "You really stressed me out for awhile. And I was too busy to consider if it meant something, not to mention the emotional dumpster fire I was living through at the time."

"Fair enough. But when did things change for you?"

"Things started to change after I stayed at your place the night I had my concussion. I began to think maybe you weren't completely soulless."

He laughed, rolling his eyes.

"But really, it was the weekend at your cabin. I knew then that what I was feeling when I was around you was how I wanted to feel all the time. Safe. Happy. Like the world wasn't going to crumble around me."

He kissed my forehead, and I settled closer into his chest.

"You made me realize that I wanted to move on from the accident. That I wanted a future, instead of drowning in the past. And when you said you'd wait for me, I knew you meant it. You gave me an anchor. Something to steady me, ground me when I needed it the most. Knowing you were on the other side of things gave me the courage to confront everything."

Soren held me tighter, and we watched the flames flicker in the fireplace until we both felt drowsy, before making our way back into his bed. He wrapped his arms around me, and we were both asleep in minutes.

NOVEMBER

Sometime near dawn, I awoke to a sensation that brought me pleasantly from sleep. Soren brushed my hair from my face and kissed each of my temples as I opened my eyes. His mouth dipped to my collarbones and neck, soft kisses that nearly belied the intentions of the solid mass that brushed against my thigh.

A smile spread across my face as I stretched my arms wide. I was awake, alright, and ready for more.

“Good morning,” Soren said between kisses. He drifted down my abdomen and found my center, his tongue lazily drawing circles. I thrashed against him, stretching and yawning from sleep in the process, and nudged him away from me once I could feel myself ready for him. There were still a thousand different ways for us to come together, and I hadn’t yet felt him in one of my favorite positions.

Soren let me push him onto his back, a wide, impish grin on his face. Pleasantly sore from last night, I slid on top of his hips, fitting his solid length inside of me. To accommodate him, I had to ease down slowly, exhaling sharply as each perfect inch filled me. I looked down to see us join, marveling at the sheer miracle of how I could make space for him. When my ass came to rest against him and we were fully bound to one another, he groaned in pleasure and I watched his eyes fall closed.

"You're mine, Soren Slater," I whispered as I tilted forward, brushing my breasts in his face. He hissed, and closed his hands around my flank, guiding me as I rocked back and forth. I squeezed my legs tighter against him, finding that perfect angle to grind against his pelvis, and within minutes I felt my peak approaching. Soren grasped my hips tighter, and thrust into me with a powerful stroke. I gasped, and rode out the flood of my orgasm, his own following suit.

"I love the way you ride me," he said as I came to rest next to him.

"Oh it was my pleasure," I quipped, drawing patterns onto his bare chest with my fingertips. My eyes locked on his. "We have so many other ways to explore each other, how are we ever going to find the time to do them all?"

His eyes darkened, jaw setting into a firm line. "I can fuck you again right now if that's what you want. And on our next off day together, I'll fuck you sunup to sundown, for a start."

I met his molten gaze, unflinching. "Why wait for a whole day?"

He flipped me over and pulled me back against him, rough and urgent. His hips pressed into my ass, and he was already getting hard again.

"I want to show you just how much I want this, just how crazy you make me. Do you want it rough this time?" His words were spoken gently, though the meaning was anything but.

"Yes," I moaned, already trembling with anticipation. I trusted him without question, and I knew this was going to be astronomically intense.

He was harder than granite and I hissed as he entered me, adamant and possessive and nothing like the slow and gentle way he'd eased inside of me every other time before.

"You're fucking *mine*," he growled as he smacked my ass, and I screamed in pleasure and surprise. I didn't think Soren could get any hotter, but possessing me wholly with his body and having his way with me took things to another fucking level. The lack of restraint, the need to devour me and assert his claim was awakening a kink that I was pleased to discover made my legs shake and my brain momentarily stop firing.

I knew I was my own person and belonged to no one, but the heady, primal feeling of being utterly consumed by another person

to the point of possession was thrilling. The fact that I absolutely wouldn't stand for this kind of thing outside the bedroom only made it that much sexier behind closed doors.

"You're being a good girl taking all of me," he said roughly. My knuckles whitened around the sheets that were balled in my fists, as I pressed my knees as far into the bed as they'd go. A back-breaking orgasm was building inside me, and I knew when I came, it was going to make me see stars. With each thrust Soren slid against me expertly, brushing against the wall that was going to make me unravel. I arched my back towards him, and the change in sensation made him curse.

"Fuck, Quinn," he ground out, then reached for my hair.

"Can I?" he asked, and I was beyond words, but I nodded, and the movement produced a prickle of pain that made me gasp. He slowed his pace as he wrapped his arms around my chest, raising me up so his lips could meet the back of my neck. Goosebumps followed where his lips touched my skin. Somehow he still fit inside of me with us both upright, though the tightness made me bristle as I adjusted.

"Is this too rough?" he whispered.

My voice came out hoarse. "No. More. I want you to own me."

Soren cursed, and shoved me back down onto the bed, where I braced myself with my hands. He slammed into me again and again, steady and sure, filling me with such exquisite fullness that I thought I was going to burst. His hands gripped my hips like he did, in fact, own me, which only brought me closer to the edge. I was going to freefall off the cliff of my orgasm any fucking second now, and it was going to be divine.

Soren grasped my shoulders, pulling me up closer to him again, then took two fistfuls of my hair in his hands, tugging it away from my scalp. It shouldn't have surprised me that he knew how to pull my hair in the way I wanted—securing the hair near the nape and taking it in thick handfuls so he didn't pull the smaller strands in true pain—but the sensation, coupled with the steady strokes from behind, shattered me. I exploded around him, and he pulled me closer to him by my hair, reaching his arms around to cup my breasts as he thrust into me one last time in his own release.

We were both breathing heavily when we collapsed onto the white sheets.

"Holy fucking shit," I muttered as I wiped a sweaty tendril of hair from my forehead. Soren kissed me softly before making his way to the bathroom, returning with a warm washcloth moments later. I cleaned myself up then nuzzled into him, pulling the soft down comforter over me.

His heartbeat rang in my ears as I lay on his chest, a reassuring, steady rhythm that slowed my own racing heart. After months of teasing, taunting, dodging our feelings, and waiting for the right time, we had finally come together. I thought I just might die from happiness, or maybe my heart would just give out completely from the multiple orgasms that had ripped through me these last twelve hours.

"I'm going to shower," I told him, "then I want to make you breakfast. Do you have time?"

He leaned over to look at his bedside clock, a modern version of the illuminated red-numbered digital clock my mom had insisted on using, despite having an alarm on her phone. "I have a little less than an hour before I need to leave for my shift," he said reluctantly. "And as much as I'd love to spend that time with you naked, I do need to get ready for work." He cut me a longing glance, remorse written on his face. "But breakfast sounds amazing. I'll make coffee while you shower then I'll take one after you."

I nodded, kissing his chest before rising.

He pulled me back to him, and whispered, "If I get in that shower with you, I'll damn my responsibilities and stay in bed with you all day until we fuck ourselves raw. My overworked partners are the only thing stopping me."

"I suppose that's a good enough reason," I murmured into his ear, straddling his lap before climbing off of him and tiptoeing to the bathroom. "Though I'd like to be your overworked partner, too. And I don't mean in your practice."

"Not going to make this any easier, are you?"

"Never," I said, as I closed the bathroom door behind me. Soren's crooked smirk and bare chest taunted me from the edge of the bed.

After a quick breakfast of a veggie omelet and a protein-shake to go for Soren, I sipped coffee leisurely in the expansive condo. The day was blustery and cold, wind unrelenting from the thirtieth floor terrace. I quickly decided not to have my coffee outdoors and snuggled up near the indoor fireplace instead.

The thought of going back to my empty house and sleeping alone tonight seemed heinous, but it was probably for the best. I had a three-shift run starting tomorrow, so I really needed to grocery shop and prep some meals. And at the rate we were going, I wouldn't be getting a whole lot of rest if I was in bed with Soren tonight. A workout seemed like a good idea, too, though I wasn't ready to face the elements in the park today. I eyed the immaculate gym as I exited the building, accepting that I'd have to do a mat workout at home or join a gym of my own for the upcoming winter.

I didn't leave his key in the condo and stashed it in my purse instead, the thought that I'd be coming back soon enough to need it tugging my lips into a smile.

By noon I had returned home and chopped an endless array of vegetables and cut up a rotisserie chicken to make into rice bowls and salads. The entire time I prepped food, oldies blared through the speaker in my kitchen and I replayed every scene from the last twenty-four hours, smiling to myself as I packaged up bowls for my dinner and lunches.

I received a text as I was loading my dishwasher.

I definitely should've stayed in bed with you this morning.

I agree.

I hesitated, then typed another message.

I'm so stupidly happy about all of this. I feel like I'm living in a fantasy world. Things like this don't happen to me.

They do now.

Another message followed.

I'm happy too, Quinn. Indescribably so.

I put my phone down on the counter and turned around, sliding down the cabinets until I came to rest on the floor. I brought my knees to my chest and squeezed tight, letting out an embarrassing squeal. After years of anguish and stress and anxiety and heartbreak, I was finally getting my happy ending.

But the small voice that lived in that receding pit of blackness inside me whispered *we'll see how long this lasts*.

NOVEMBER

The next morning, I dragged myself out of bed after a sound and dreamless sleep. When I was pulling into the parking deck, still bleary-eyed in the first light of dawn, my phone lit up.

Hope you have a good shift. My condo was so empty without you last night. Not to mention my bed.

A smile crept across my face as I parked my Honda and trudged into the hospital. I was taking patients from Charlie, and her appearance told me everything I needed to know—it was a damn shame I was coming into the nightmare instead of leaving it. Her eyes were ringed with dark circles and her hair frizzed out of her braids, like she'd been running her hands through it all night.

"Ok, here goes nothing," she said, rattling off info. "29 is a 1013 hold and we hit him with a B-52 about half an hour ago—you're welcome for that, because he tried to rip my skin off my face—and that being said, the rest is fucked because he kept me busy for awhile." She sighed, eyeing me with remorse. "30 needs this metoprolol—" she produced a syringe out of her pocket and handed it to me—"31 is waiting for a urology consult to see if they want a Foley or to be admitted for a workup, and 32 is a total fucking asshole and of course is a stepdown hold for DKA and on q1hour blood sugar checks and an insulin drip." Charlie hung her head. "This sucks, I know. But I tried."

"Sounds like you've had a hell of a night," I said, hoping my tone came out supportive. I had been there, that's for sure, and less challenging assignments than this one had made me want to cry in the bathroom during a shift. I was certain I would have done that with the kind of night Charlie had had, especially with the exhaustion from staying awake. "I've got this," I told her. "Get out of this dump."

She smiled as she grabbed her backpack from underneath the counter, squeezing my shoulder with a firm grip as she stepped by me. "You're a goddess. Thanks, babe."

I blew out a breath and started to unravel the chaos that was my patient load. Our cube tech was nowhere to be found so I grabbed the glucometer and headed in to check my patient's blood sugar and see just how charming he was for myself.

When I knocked on the door and entered the room, he didn't stir from underneath his blanket. I introduced myself as I turned on the light.

"I'm Quinn, your day shift nurse. Time to check your blood sugar." He grunted and stuck out an arm covered in faded tattoos. His body odor hit me like a sneaker wave, a harassment to the senses I wasn't expecting. Thankfully he couldn't see my face with his back turned to me, and I gathered my composure and professionalism. Breathing through my nose was not an option. I took small breaths through my mouth and tried not to gag.

The patient had been getting considerable IV fluids for his diabetic ketoacidosis, and I inquired if he had used the urinal perched on the side of the bed.

"You guys want to ask about my piss but I can't have a fucking breakfast tray, yeah right."

So maybe he was a jerk, then. I shrugged and pricked his finger, squeezing the drop of blood onto the test strip.

His blood sugar was coming down gradually, and currently read 431, a worrisome result but an improvement from his admission lab glucose of 617. I logged on and inputted his reading, which gave me the insulin drip parameters I needed. I stuck my head out of the room and searched for a nurse to sign off the titration with me.

Because the universe had been smiling down upon me lately, Sam was also on my cube with me and marched right in when I flagged her down in the hallway. After we adjusted my pump and

signed off on the chart together, I murmured to her, "We have a lot to catch up on."

She practically shrieked and as she darted out of the room, no doubt gleaming that I was talking about Soren. I hadn't yet considered what our relationship would mean for work. It wasn't like I was going to announce at the next staff meeting that I was fucking the brooding yet insatiably handsome physician, though picturing the horrified, jealous, and scandalized looks on my coworkers' faces was an amusing thought. It hadn't escaped me that Nadine probably already knew we were together somehow.

And together we were. Last night, and especially this morning, had made that perfectly clear. The memory made me shudder as I settled back down at my computer to figure out what to do next.

My patient's blood pressure alarm at the station dictated my next move for me: 195/120. I strolled into the room with the metoprolol syringe Charlie had given me, pulling up the order to scan the med as I introduced myself to the patient.

He was a graying, weathered man, probably a farmer or construction worker. Whether the sun or his cigarettes had done more damage to his skin was uncertain, and his hands were calloused as he shook mine.

After I gave the med, I headed back for the nurses' station, ready to tell Sam about me and Soren. A man in khakis and a white coat who I didn't recognize was waiting there, speaking with her. As I approached, she gestured to me. "This is Quinn, the nurse you're looking for."

I said hello and asked what I could do for him.

"About Mr. Russell in room 31," he said over glasses that sat at the bridge of his nose. "I'm going to need the urology supply cart to place his catheter. Can you please retrieve that for me and give me a hand in the room?"

I nodded, looking to Sam. She led me to a supply closet on the other end of the hallway and pulled me inside.

"Which one is the urology—"

"Hold on," Sam interrupted. "Tell me what happened first!"

I grinned. "I have a new boyfriend."

She whooped and hollered, and pulled me into a hug. "No fucking WAY," she practically screamed into my ear as she hugged me.

I laughed and pulled back. "I'm so happy, Sam," I said in a whisper, tears threatening to spill over.

"Good. You deserve it," she said adamantly. "Now come on, let's take this stuff over. Urologists can get really pissy when they have to wait."

She looked to me to see if I had gotten her joke. I rolled my eyes. "You're ridiculous, Samantha."

By the time I took lunch, my psyc patient had miraculously not awoken yet, but I knew my time was dwindling. I briefly wondered how long it had been since he had slept last, and hoped for a miracle that he'd sleep the rest of my shift, too. I was running myself ragged managing the insulin drip, and treating and discharging the string of low-acuity patients in room 31 after the urologist placed my patient's catheter and then sent him home with a follow-up appointment.

At lunch, I took my rice bowl to the stairwell, and pulled out my phone to text Soren.

If you would've told me in January that I'd be wishing you were working the same shift with me so we could sneak away and make out in the stairwell I would've thought you were insane. But I do wish you were working with me. Or doing anything with me, tbh.

He replied minutes later.

Glad we worked through your first impression of me, then.

Same. When are you on again?

On shift, Friday. On you, hopefully sooner than that.

Damn. I felt a jolt low in my belly as I wrote him back, anticipating when we'd see each other again.

I'm just starting my three in a row. Horrible timing but I'd risk a sleepless night for you.

My phone dinged moments later, and I froze with my fork halfway to my mouth.

Good girl. That's what I want to hear. Your place or mine?

He'd said those words to me months ago, and they'd confused me then pissed me off once I realized what a stubborn ass he was being about the concussion, insisting I be monitored overnight. Now, he was making me uncomfortably horny in the middle of an emergency nursing shift. The bizarre change of dynamic between us made me laugh, and I finished eating with a stupid smile on my face.

Despite the chaos I had inherited at the start of my shift, I had ducked and weaved through it with surprising efficiency, and when I left work that night, shortly after seven with Sam, it hit me when I got to the parking garage that this was the first shift I hadn't panicked or wanted to cry or would go home and replay everything in my head as I tried to fall asleep.

Sam had pulled up the DKA protocol and walked me through the steps in addition to managing her own assignment, which had been super helpful. Soren's texts had distracted me from work long enough to give me something to look forward to, and maybe I was genuinely getting better at my job.

"You wanna catch up tonight, or no?" Sam asked as I approached my car.

"We could..." I started, fidgeting with my keys.

She shot me a vulpine smirk. "You want to go see him, don't you?"

"No comment."

"Dish me the dirty details later, then. I want to go for a run, anyways."

She bounced away to her own car, ever full of energy.

I considered my options: head to Soren's, have multiple orgasms and sleep in his arms, enveloped by that intoxicatingly woodsy man-smell, and go to work completely exhausted but smiling tomorrow, or sleep alone tonight and see him tomorrow, giving me something to look forward to after my shift.

I texted him to let him know I'd come over tomorrow night after work instead, giving me this evening to pack a bag so I could leave for work from his place for my third shift Thursday.

Rest up 😊

The butterflies in my stomach didn't let up until I had zoomed out of the deck and onto the city streets, heading towards the

solitude of my empty little house.

NOVEMBER

I was a damned fool for not seeing Soren last night. If I had gone over there, I'd have come so many times that my baseline cortisol would probably have been negative walking into work, maintained by the delicious texts he'd send me as the morning progressed.

But I was most definitely *not* okay. My stress was through the roof and driving me into an early grave, a headache was forming behind my eyeballs, I was tearing up, and my damn hands wouldn't stop shaking.

At a little after two P.M., on November 5, Betty Wallace, sixty-eight years old, was found dead in her hospital room.

By me.

Her nurse.

This had been a horrendous discovery for several reasons, the most obvious being that death is something we typically try and avoid in hospitals, merciful as it may be at times. Secondly, Betty came into the ER for a laceration she'd sustained cutting up celery to make chicken salad, and not even a bad cut at that.

So when I walked in to give her discharge paperwork after the PA had stitched her up and Dr. Blake had stuck his head in the room to check on her, I was definitely not expecting for her to be slumped over and blue. I hadn't had her on a monitor or anything, and was debating if I even needed to get a set of vitals before she left.

After those first seconds of disbelief, training warred with the panic in my head until I could remember what to do. I rushed over and shook her, but knew she wasn't going to rouse. With trembling fingers, I felt for a carotid pulse and tried to tell if she was breathing.

She wasn't.

Ever feeling lonely in a hospital? Slam the code blue button on the wall, and marvel at how quickly the room fills up. I flattened the stretcher and began CPR, making sure I pressed hard enough and let the chest recoil between compressions. As a student, I'd been in the trauma bays with Sam constantly, and it was a revolving door of patients in immediate life-threatening scenarios—cardiac arrest, trauma, stroke, etc.—many of whom did require CPR.

But as a new graduate nurse, I'd been taking the less-presumably-urgent patients. It didn't mean I didn't have my share of sick people, but I wasn't experiencing multiple codes a shift. Come to think of it, this was my first patient code since I'd been on my own.

Dr. Blake and Chandra entered the room at the same time, followed by Tito and Debbie.

"What's going on?" Dr. Blake asked in a puzzled tone. Last he'd seen the patient, she was giving him a chicken salad recipe and laughing, a gown haphazardly slung over her t-shirt. I hadn't made her change it, thinking she'd maybe get one quick x-ray and then head home after her sutures.

I explained what had happened, huffing with the exertion of giving compressions. Tito nudged me out of the way and jumped in, while Chandra logged in to chart everything and Debbie undressed the patient, cutting her shirt with trauma shears, and hooked her up to the defib pads.

"Okay then, let's see what we've got for a rhythm when you finish the cycle, Tito. Quinn, can you bag her, please?"

I grabbed the ambu-bag Debbie tossed at me and tilted her chin to open her airway and give breaths, avoiding my patient's glassy, lifeless eyes.

After a few rounds of compressions, switching with Tito while Debbie tried and failed to get peripheral IV access, Dr. Blake announced he wanted to move the code to a trauma bay. Chandra called the charge nurse and within seconds we were wheeling her

out of the room, Tito on her chest doing compressions as we moved down the hallway.

When we made it to the trauma bay, I gave report to a bored-looking nurse named Tristan. I recounted the information as diligently as I could, counting on Chandra to pipe in with the approximate times of everything, and within moments I was escorted out of the room by Debbie.

She pulled me back to the nurses' station and we sat down at my computer. "You okay?"

I nodded, not sure what I was even supposed to do next. "That was a surprise."

"I suppose it was, honey. Do you need any help with your chart or anything?"

"Uh..."

"Bring her up, and we'll go through it."

Debbie helped me write a note in the chart that was objective and factual, and I closed the chart and tried to calm my shaking hands.

"Do you want me to watch your patients for a moment while you collect yourself?"

"Yeah, thanks. Everyone's settled and awaiting results besides that room we just left, which needs to be cleaned of course."

She squeezed my hand. "Take a minute, sweetheart. Go take some deep breaths and unwind."

I bolted for my stairwell before I started crying, sinking down onto the cold concrete steps with my head in my hands. I inhaled until it hurt, held it in for a few moments, then blew every square centimeter of air out of my lungs, willing the stress to leave with the CO₂ I was exhaling. I repeated the process until it switched my sympathetic nervous system off. When my hands had stopped shaking somewhat, I turned and leaned against the wall.

I wanted to talk to someone...Sam, Soren...someone who would understand how horrible this situation had been. I knew for an absolute fact that I'd be replaying everything in my mind later tonight and probably the rest of the shift, too, even though there was nothing I could've done differently.

But it didn't sit right with me. I was the last person to talk to her alive, and she goes and dies, just like that? Rational thought urged me to consider the facts, which were pointing to the conclusion that

death is simply an inevitable part of life and death beckons people at the most unexpected times. After all, I knew I had nothing to do with her passing, but something was eating away at me and it was going to settle into some horrible misplaced sense of responsibility at some point.

She didn't seem particularly sick, but who knows? We had briefly discussed her medical history, but she had denied any medications and chronic health conditions when I'd asked her. For all I knew, she could've had some crazy terminal cancer and didn't want to tell me about it since she was only here for a cut.

I had no idea how long she had been down, and guesstimating from the last time I had been in her room it could've been, what, twenty minutes or so since her heart had stopped? If she did manage to miraculously survive the code, what kind of meaningful recovery was that?

Then I remembered what Betty had told me as we were talking about how she hurt herself. She had been making chicken salad for her daughter's baby shower.

And the thought that Betty had a family that would probably never see her alive again destroyed me. After heaving sobs until I could barely breathe, I stood up, leaned against the cold concrete wall, wiped my tears, and headed back to my assignment.

I knew my eyes were rimmed red and my cheeks were probably splotchy when I arrived back on my cube, but my cube mates averted their eyes when they noticed me. They were all gossiping about the drama of my patient, because juicy stories like that is why half the people still worked here and endured the bullshit of the emergency department year after year, but I sank down next to Debbie and caught back up on what my patients were needing.

A few hours later, my empty room still hadn't filled, and Betty was marked as deceased on the status board. It was nearing five when I finally saw my incoming EMS patient pop into that open room—a two-year-old suspected DFACS case.

My heart dropped. Not only did I hate having babies and children as patients because they terrified me, but any possible law enforcement or court case always prickled my nerves because I was worried every single thing I said or didn't say was going to be examined by the harshest of judges, attorneys, and jury members.

Like I was the criminal for some reason. I *despised* the pressure of charting in such instances.

The shift is almost over, I told myself. I can do anything for two hours, then I'll go home to Soren.

The thought almost worked to calm me, until my patient wheeled in. A look from a coworker can speak volumes to the tone of the situation you're walking into, like Charlie's look had the day before, and like Sam's countenance had warned me countless times during my rotation with her.

This EMT's face was a mixture of horrified, depressed, and really pissed off. I was not looking forward to going into the room.

The child was calm, which was a dead giveaway that something was wrong. Two year olds hate doctors, and hospitals, and anyone who isn't their parents for the most part. Anyone who gets close and squeezes their arm with a blood pressure cuff or pricks their arm for a blood sample or looks into their nose or ears or throat is definitely not going to be welcomed. But this child blinked up at me, face blank, and resumed playing with the portable pulse ox the medics had placed on him.

"What's going on?" I asked them.

The woman whose face had made me want to walk in the other direction blew out a big breath. "This is Brayson. He's two and a half, and his aunt called us for a welfare check. His mother has apparent addiction problems, and since she hadn't heard from her sister in awhile, the aunt went over to their apartment to check on the kid and found no one there with him. She wasn't sure how long he'd been that way. The place is an absolute dump, like uninhabitable. He wasn't crying when we entered with PD, just sitting in a playpen in the living room completely unattended. Aunt didn't mention any pertinent medical history for him. We have no idea the last time he ate or drank, but he seems at least a little dehydrated. We changed his diaper, which made me want to fucking punch the mother in the throat, because it had been on for at least a day or two. He's got the worst case of diaper rash I've ever seen."

I eyed Brayson, noticing his stained shirt and detached demeanor. He paid us no attention, simply fisted the sheet on the bed and played with his sock.

"Hi sweetheart," I said in my most soothing voice, squatting down to his level. He eyed me briefly but resumed pulling at his

sock. I tried to remember developmental stages, determine what I should expect from him. "Does he talk?" I asked the EMT.

"Hasn't said a word." That seemed odd. Maybe he was shy or nervous, but a two and a half year old should be talking.

"Vitals okay?" I asked, and she shrugged.

"Little tachy, but pretty much fine. We didn't want to poke him in case yous guys were gonna draw blood here. Didn't want to traumatize him any further."

I signed her laptop. "Makes sense."

The medics disappeared, her tall partner not saying a single word the entire time. I wondered if he was the type to have such controlled rage that he had to remain silent, lest he explode. It certainly would've been justified in my opinion, but the person or people that had done this to him were nowhere in sight. They may never resurface from whatever chasm they'd descended to.

I sighed and got a set of vitals, which Brayson didn't fight me for. Something was definitely off with this little boy, and I felt my heart splintering into tiny shards as I examined him. His belly was too concave for a toddler's, and I could see his ribs. Remembering what the EMT had said about the diaper rash, I unfastened his pants and peered down to take a look and see how bad it was.

The skin on his groin was watermelon-red and blistered, and it was, without question, the most horrific thing I'd ever seen. Mind you, I didn't have a whole lot of experience with children, but even I knew it was wrong. I felt my resolve weaken with every passing moment, and I pulled it together to triage him and get a doctor in here.

It was nearing six, so I had one more hour to do this.

I could do this.

I know I could.

I'd gotten through every worst day I'd had so far, and I would get through this one, too.

A glimmer of hope surfaced when I realized I had made it through this entire horrible shift without a panic attack. I couldn't wait to tell Imani.

When Henry walked through the door, I was holding Brayson against my chest while silent tears poured down my face. Henry stopped, asking his scribe to remain outside the room for a moment, and approached me.

"Quinn?" he said, uneasy. "Are you alright?"

I sobbed, and he came closer, taking the toddler in his arms and looking him over as I collapsed down onto the stretcher.

"This is fucking bullshit," I said, and he handed me a tissue, balancing Brayson against his hip. He was a natural with kids.

Henry sat down beside me, and I wiped my eyes, regaining my composure. "I'm sorry. Today has been hard, and this is just...too much."

"This is the absolute hardest thing about our job. The other thing you dealt with in this room earlier is the second hardest thing. Give yourself a break. You're doing great, and this isn't easy on anyone."

I smiled at him, then briefed him on what the EMT had told me. A DFACS social worker would be showing up soon, we hoped, and I stayed with Brayson after Henry left, not wanting to leave him in the room alone. I called Debbie to see if she could send me a sitter or tech or social worker of our own until the county worker arrived.

By the time I left his room, my shift was over, and Liza took report from me. Two of my other three rooms needed interventions but I simply explained to her that I'd been with the unaccompanied toddler and she'd given me a shrug as if to say, *makes sense to me*. I'd missed working with Liza on nights, though we'd gone our separate ways—her to the fun and laid-back vibe of nights that wrecked your life outside of work, me to the somewhat more stressful vibe of days that helped to preserve a sense of normalcy beyond the job. I still wasn't sure which was the best shift to work, or if there even was a winning option, though I was beginning to think that there wasn't really a good shift to work at all since they could all rip your heart out at any given moment.

Brayson would haunt my waking hours and my dreams, I just knew it.

I hadn't even really thought about whether or not I wanted kids, and I had a lot of time to decide, but holding that neglected child had activated the maternal instinct in me, and as I stared at the closed door to his patient room, it shocked me to realize I would've taken him home with me tonight, if it meant he was safe and warm and cared for. When I reached my car and started the ignition, I bawled again, ugly, hot tears spilling down my cheeks.

My phone was wet against my ear when I dialed him.

Soren answered on the third ring. "Hey, you. Are you heading this way?" His voice was silken, soothing, and calmed me like a dose of Valium.

"Yeah," I said, sniffing and wiping my nose.

An edge had gathered in his voice. "What's wrong?"

"It's, well..."

His tone had gone from wary to lethal. "Are you hurt?"

The protectiveness warmed me, made me feel cared for in a way that I hated to admit I needed right now, and I sighed and rested my head against the seat. "No, Soren, nothing like that." I felt his exhale of relief through the phone. "I just had an absolutely horrible day and I'm really shaken up and I... I just wanted to tell you so it isn't a surprise. Or to see if you thought I should just go home instead, if you're not wanting to deal with all this."

"Baby," he said, deep voice rumbling into my ears. "I *want* to be the one who gets to hold you after a day like today, smooth your hair and catch your tears while you tell me everything. Okay?"

"Okay." I sniffed loudly. "Do you want me to pick up something on the way home for dinner?"

"No, sweetheart. I'm going to make something for us. Come home to me," he said, and we disconnected after I assured him I was fine to drive and didn't need him to come pick me up.

I turned up the volume and screamed out my frustrations and heartbreak to angry emo music as best as I could before I got to Soren's.

The silence when I shut off my car in the parking deck to his building was deafening, after driving through the city with the volume blasted as loud as it would go.

Rage quelled, angry tears dried, I felt empty, like a hollowed-out turtle shell washed up on the beach. Imani and I had talked about my tendency to catastrophize with my anxiety and I recognized it coming on as I approached the elevator.

Could I do this job for the time I had to if it was causing me this much distress? Was the fact that such horrible things existed in the world and nurses were needed to help people going through them enough of a reason for me personally to keep destroying my own emotional well-being and happiness? Was it up to me to be part of the solution, one of the helpers? Or should I look out for myself first?

Both options seemed terrible.

Therapy had helped me work through my grief and panic attacks, but it was still there of course, packaged inside of me in an encapsulated pocket that would never really go away, but walled-off to prevent it from exploding and wreaking havoc on me, like some emotional cyst. But that anxiety, ever-present even though I was learning to live with it, changed my threshold for stressful situations and trauma.

And I wasn't sure the ER was a place that was healthy for me, all things considered. I wasn't even sure hospital nursing as a whole was a feasible option, long-term, though those were the jobs that paid the most, naturally. And a lucrative travel contract in an understaffed facility? No paycheck was worth it, not to me.

I sighed, exasperated at the situation I'd gotten myself into with my student loans as I slammed the PH button on the elevator, scanning the keycard. Beyond the loans, I was definitely going to have to get a roommate if I left the hospital and maybe even if I didn't—if I couldn't pick up an overtime shift every pay period the rent was going to become a problem, too.

But when the elevators opened into the penthouse, I immediately felt like a new day was dawning. The condo smelled like vanilla and lemon furniture polish, and the hearty smell of garlic and herbs wafted from the kitchen. Candles were lit on nearly every surface I could see, and soft music drifted from the living room.

Soren rushed to me, lighting up to see me like I was his sun, taking me in his arms and kissing my hair, my forehead, then finally my lips. He set my bag on the floor and brought me into an embrace that we held for several seconds before I pulled back to look at him.

A crease formed between his eyebrows as he peered down at my face, then the rest of my appearance. "How hungry are you, love?"

I considered, tracing a finger along his bicep. "Not ravenous at the moment. I'm not as shaken up as I was, but my appetite hasn't come back yet."

"Do you want me to keep you company in the bath or would you prefer to decompress alone?"

A bath sounded *heavenly*, and I had eyed the massive tub in his bathroom with envy when I'd showered here the last time.

"Sit with me. I want to talk to you. It's all I've wanted to do all day."

His teeth flashed in a radiant grin, and he leaned forward to kiss my forehead. "I'll pour you some wine while you start the water."

"Yup. Gonna need a glass of that, I think. But probably not much more, that would just make things worse."

"Good point," he said as he disappeared back into the kitchen.

I padded down the hallway and into his bedroom, still feeling somewhat like an interloper. I snorted when the thought struck me: *all the things he did to you here last time and you still don't feel welcome? Shame on you.*

The water was hot enough that I had to ease slowly down into it, inch by inch as I adjusted to the scalding temperature. Soren watched me from the chair he'd pulled in from his bedroom, a mixture of amusement and something more sensual grazing his features.

The heat and bath salts began to unravel the stress in my body, and I let it release, taking deep breaths and closing my eyes. Soren was quiet from his chair, the room dim and only lit with candles along a shelf next to the tub. I sipped from the glass of champagne he'd poured me, delighting in the bubbles. "Are we celebrating something?"

A corner of his mouth lifted. "I thought you'd like the cold wine in that ridiculously hot bath you're taking."

"How'd you know I'd want such a hot bath?"

"I followed you in the shower the other morning, remember? When I turned on the faucet I thought I was on fire for a few moments."

"Poor baby. Did you have to go to the burn center afterwards?"

He tilted his head, eyeing me with amused irritation.

I smirked. "That's what I thought, then. You'll adjust, I'm sure."

He laughed. "Actually, babe, you may want to consider some cold therapy. Swedes practice ice bathing—*kallbad*. The benefits are well-known. Inflammation reduction, mood boosting, memory improvement, you name it. I really think it might help."

I was intrigued enough to try it. "I suppose I should cool down after boiling all my internal organs in here."

He grinned, but the smile fell after a few moments. "I hate to bring it up, but do you want to talk about today?"

I gulped my wine and sank lower into the bath, focusing on the wall in front of me. That familiar knot formed in my chest, and I

breathed through the squeezing sensation. White and gray ribbons skated through the black tile on the wall, and the pattern mesmerized me. I focused on it first, to drown out the roaring in my head.

Then I told him everything.

About Betty coding, and feeling like it was somehow my fault for missing something that was a subtle clue that something was wrong, even though I knew it was absurd. About Brayson, and how he was obviously neglected and malnourished and very likely developmentally delayed, too. I even told him what I'd thought about in the elevator, how I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep picking up overtime shifts after days like today, and if I couldn't do that, then I'd need a roommate. And if I couldn't handle the emotional demands of the ER and the physical stress it caused me, I'd have to leave. I didn't feel like I'd fit in anywhere else in the hospital—cath lab was too stuck up, I was intimidated by the OR, or the ICU, and the poor floor nurses were way too stressed out, too.

Soren didn't make a sound, letting me ramble and organize my thoughts and sitting quietly in his chair across the bathroom like my guardian in the shadows. When I stopped talking, he crept closer, and squatted down next to the bathtub, resting his forearms on the side. He reached a finger to me to smooth a tendril of hair that had fallen down my cheek. "Thank you for telling me. I know it's hard to relive a horrible day over again, but I hope that your heart is lighter for doing so."

"I think it is. I have some tough decisions to make, though."

He sucked in air through his teeth, eyes wide. "That you do. But *det är ingen ko på isen*."

I crooked my head to the side, as if it would help me understand his words better. "Come again?"

Soren laughed. "Well, like most regional expressions, it doesn't really make sense. I think the English translation is something like "there isn't a cow on the ice." But really, people mean it to say "don't worry." I just really think things are going to work out for you."

Charmed by the sentiment and the excitement he always showed when he spoke of his family's culture, I smiled at him. "Maybe you're right," I said, feeling hopeful myself.

Dinner was a bowl of comfort—chicken and veggies in an herb broth, with crusty bread on the side. Every bite was a warm hug,

and when we finished, I settled into the couch against Soren, belly full and heart content.

We watched the Vikings play Thursday Night Football, neither of us particularly interested in the outcome, and when I began to doze off, he carried me into the bedroom.

"As cute as that was, I still need to brush my teeth." I'd already completed my nighttime skincare right after my bath, otherwise I probably would've skipped it entirely. I fetched my toothbrush and flosser out of my overnight bag, groaning at the scrubs I had packed and the reminder that work tomorrow morning was, in fact, a thing I had to do. Soren's apartment was a bit closer to the hospital than my house, though 5:30 would be here before I knew it. I wondered if Soren would get up with me, since he wasn't working until 3 the next afternoon.

When I settled back into bed beside him, he beckoned me to lay in his arms. His bare chest was so warm and inviting I snuggled against it, settling my face on his chest as I slung a leg over his hips.

The only other night we'd spent together we'd hardly slept, months of attraction and desire exploding like fireworks once the fuse had finally been lit. Like two galaxies who had finally collided after approaching one another for some unfathomable amount of time.

But tonight wasn't fulminant or frenzied. As my cheek lay against his warm, broad chest, a calm settled into me, our hearts glowing next to each other with the soothing luminosity of the night sky. We had already experienced the impact of our collision, and now we were forming a new arrangement of two galaxies meshed into one.

Soren made slow trails down my arms with his fingertips, and I kissed his chest, savoring the feel of him despite knowing I needed sleep. I was exhausted, and still somewhat heartbroken from my workday, but I was also safe, and fed, and warm, and clean, and lying with the one person who made it so easy for me to feel all of those things simultaneously. A surge of gratitude for Soren soon turned into longing, and I climbed on top of him, eliciting a surprised grunt. He pulled me close, pressing my breasts against him, and I soon felt a growing hardness between my legs where I perched on top of him.

Our kisses were slow and unhurried, his full lips dancing with mine. Soren's hands glided up my back, taking my shirt with them as they skated upwards, and I tossed it on the floor as he marveled at the sight of me, a mixture of stormy desire and sweet affection on his face. I smiled and eased back down onto him, truly in awe that he was *mine*.

But as I kissed him again, my brain was assaulted with reminders of the horrors of my day—Betty's blue lips and gray complexion, Brayson's horrible rash and blank stare. I pulled away and, and Soren's hands paused their roaming on my backside, no doubt about to slide down my pants.

"What's wrong?" he whispered, sitting up and bringing me into his chest. My legs curled around him like a vine.

I heaved a breath, willing myself to stop this useless rendering of misery, but it wouldn't stop: images flashed in my mind, and I was helpless to stop them: the hollows between Brayson's ribs, Betty's excitement for her first grandchild as she'd spoken about her daughter's baby shower, and, inevitably, Stephanie's screams when she learned Mom had died, hours before she'd crossed over the veil to meet her.

"I'm sorry," I said as I jumped out of bed and sprinted down the hallway, outside and onto the terrace. In my haste to escape the flashback, I'd run out topless, and my skin pebbled with the chill. Snowflakes fell around me and my bare feet would freeze to the pavers if I left them like this much longer, but I hugged myself with my arms and cried, hating that such hurt existed in the world and hating even more that I couldn't stop myself from reliving it. I'd been doing *so well*, using the thought exercises and journaling, but it wasn't enough.

The type of pain that would cause me to spiral was unavoidable in the ER.

And that was where I spent my working hours.

The door slid open and Soren stepped in behind me, much like that night we'd seen the aurora at his cabin. It was the first pleasant thing my mind had conjured since the episode began, and I blew out a breath, fog gathering in front of me.

Some combination of the cold air, snowflakes, and Soren's warm body behind me had calmed me into clarity. Maybe the Swedes were onto something after all with their cold baths.

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“Älskling,” he whispered in my ear, wrapping his arms tighter. “Has it stopped yet?”

I nodded and turned to him, unable to ignore the needling cold in my feet any longer. Taking his arm, I pulled him back inside.

“The cold was kind of a reset,” I admitted. “I think I needed that.”

“And just as important is the warming up after,” he said, heading to the kitchen. He made me hot chamomile tea and we settled back onto the couch with our mugs, gas flames dancing in the fireplace I’d switched on.

“How do you do it?” I asked him, stirring the honey into my tea.

He knew my meaning, and eyed the fireplace as he gathered his words. “I can’t say it’s gotten easier to witness the horrors we see in our profession over time. I’ve had to compartmentalize my work life, exercise my body until the stress has no space to occupy it, and spend my off days doing the things I love to balance things out.” He reached an arm to me. “But I don’t know a single colleague who has the exact same answer as me. Everyone’s different. We all have our reasons for being here and choosing to do such a thing, and it affects us all differently.”

I nodded. “Choosing emergency medicine was a trauma response for me. It’s becoming more obvious since I’ve started therapy. I work in the ER to turn all my horrible memories from that day into something useful and productive. Instead of working through my grief, I decided to put my grief to work. 0/10 by the way, definitely don’t recommend it.”

We both laughed and watched the shadow of the flames dance on the wall. We hadn’t bothered to turn on any of the lights, and the nightscape crept through the windows beyond the dusting of snow.

“No one could blame you if you took a day off tomorrow,” Soren said quietly.

I made an incredulous noise. “Debbie would probably show up at my house.”

“And she wouldn’t find you there, if I have any say in the matter. I can think of many relaxing things we could occupy ourselves with here tomorrow morning instead.”

Soren’s eyes shone, and I smiled archly back at him. But neither of us pounced on the other, content to sip tea in the firelight. At this point, I didn’t even know if I could muster up the energy to fuck

him, though if he were naked beside me I'm sure I'd find it difficult to hold back. Seeing his bare chest, arms, and the unholy cut of his abs was hard enough to resist, but if he removed his pajama bottoms, it would be the endgame.

I sighed, setting my empty cup down. "Let's try this again. I really do want to sleep tonight, and I'm going in tomorrow." He gave me a confused look. "I mean it. I went back to work the day after Mom and Steph's funerals, too. It's just what I do. I can't sit around and avoid what I'm supposed to be doing because then the monster wins."

I stood up and headed back to the room, and Soren followed. "Besides, rent is due next week and I still haven't bothered to get a roommate, and I'll lose my OT pay for my extra shift Sunday if I call in."

He didn't respond but I saw the unspoken words on his face, a tightness to his jaw that told me he really wanted other things for me. Well, that made two of us.

We fell asleep in each other's arms in minutes, and my dreams were riddled with dark hallways and something prowling behind me, a phantom that managed to stay hidden in the depths of my nightmares.

NOVEMBER

Debbie was somewhat surprised to see me at pre-shift the next morning, eyes wide behind her glasses. She hurried over to me after she gave us the rundown—cases of the flu were already starting and we were expecting a horrendous upcoming flu season, inpatient beds were tight, the ICU was full, and we may have to go on ambulance diversion today if the situation didn't improve.

"Are you doing alright today?"

I put on my best fake smile. "Yeah, I'm alright."

Her eyes narrowed somewhat, but she didn't push it. "Okay, but please call if I can help with anything." She patted my arm and disappeared in a cloud of lilac perfume.

My assignment was on a cube with Brenda and Shelby. Maybe I should've called out, after all. I was texting Soren this as I walked down the hall from the breakroom when Shelby stepped in beside me.

"Heard you had a rough one yesterday," she said, and I instinctively turned my phone from her prying eyes as I finished typing my message.

I took a deep breath and remembered how amazing my morning had been, and how all the time I spent with Soren was characterized as such, before I punched her in the throat or said something equally scathing back to her.

I wasn't going to let her rattle me, refusing to give her that power over me. "I did," I said calmly. "It's never easy to lose a patient." I didn't give her a chance to reply as I threw my bag down and headed over to take report from Derek.

The shift was surprisingly smooth given that I had two of my least favorite nurses working my cube with me. Farrah was our tech, angel that she was, but I could never find her when I needed an extra hand—Brenda immediately flagged her down to have her check a blood sugar for her while she read the morning paper on her phone at the desk, and the shenanigans only continued from that point on.

Meanwhile, I had an incontinent nursing home patient with a GI bug who needed brief changes basically every hour while she was stuck in the ER waiting for an inpatient bed to open up, and I tried to do most of them myself.

Around eleven, I was grumbling to myself because Brenda had commandeered Farrah to collect a urine sample, get her an EKG, and help her clean a room before her ambulance arrived, and I was going in to change my patient alone again.

The door opened while I was grabbing supplies from the cart in the corner, and my face must have registered the shock of Shelby coming in to assist, because she gave me a defeated smile.

"I'm not *that* horrible," she said as she put on a pair of gloves. I laughed and she added, "Working with Brenda is illustrating the type of nurse I don't want to be more strongly every minute that passes, and it's making me a better nurse because of it. So there must have been a reason we were all put together today. The Lord works in mysterious ways, I suppose."

I don't know how much I believed in Jesus, but I know how much I felt that sometimes things happen for a reason, so I didn't argue with her, just shrugged in agreement as we raised the patient's bed to not strain our backs.

The patient was watching the news on television, and barely registered our presence, probably used to the procedure of having her brief removed, being cleaned up, and rolling side to side to remove everything—she'd had a recent femur fracture and couldn't stand quite yet. She was so old and frail I worried her bones were hollow like a bird's and I was going to unintentionally break one by shaking her hand or something.

When I checked her brief, which was definitely in need of changing, she muttered in an embarrassed tone, "Thank you. I'm sorry."

We assured her we were happy to help her, and we were sorry she was sick, and she relaxed a bit.

As we washed up and left the room, I caught Shelby's attention. "Thank you," I told her, every bit as genuine as I felt.

"Welcome." She gave me a shy smile, so at odds with the brash and audacious side of her I'd seen so far. "And I'm sorry for giving you a hard time before. I guess I was jealous that everyone thought you were hooking up with Slater after the party, and I thought he was going to give you special treatment at work. I didn't want my chances of making it to the trauma team skewed by who was fucking whom."

I tilted my head, confused. "Aren't you married?"

"Not to Slater," she said, and we both laughed as we made our way back to the nurses' station. I could only hope the blush that crept into my cheeks was attributed to us cutting up.

When I took lunch, I crept down to the stairwell with the tote bag Soren had packed me this morning—the soup from last night, which I'd heated up in the break room before disappearing to my hideout, a bowl of cut-up berries, a peanut butter protein bar, and a string cheese.

And that was just what he'd packed me for lunch.

He'd mixed me a chocolate protein smoothie for breakfast, and it had been phenomenal. The thought of being so taken care of made me smile into my book, the indescribably comforting feeling bolstered by the way I'd felt this morning waking up in his condo.

The lights had been dim and soft, the fireplace crackling, and I'd sipped coffee on the sofa with a throw wrapped around me while I read my book by lamplight and tried to pretend I wasn't exhausted and dreading work today. The street noise didn't carry all the way up to the thirtieth floor like it did at my small house, and it had been quiet enough to make me wonder if I was even still in the city, evoking the stillness of the woods and lake by Soren's cabin. We definitely didn't have time to get up there anytime soon, but at least I had a day off tomorrow, before my OT shift Sunday.

Soren had emerged from the bedroom shortly after I did and sat with me on the sofa, drinking lemon water and reading a newspaper

on his tablet. "I only drink coffee after my workout," he'd told me, and I'd given him a sleepy-eyed look that conveyed the confusion that statement warranted at such an hour. He'd laughed and kissed my brow before heading into the kitchen.

I hadn't realized he was making me meals for the day until I'd come out of the bedroom dressed and ready to leave and he'd handed me the tote bag. The astonished smile I'd given him had made his own face radiate joy, and if I ever worried I didn't show him how much I appreciated him, looks like the one he had given me obliterated my doubts.

After lunch, the clock crept closer to three each time I glanced at it. Knowing Soren was coming in for his shift in two hours had butterflies dancing around my insides. It was odd, I knew, to be feeling so nervous about it when I felt the opposite when I was around him, but we hadn't worked together since we'd become a couple, and I didn't know how to navigate it.

He'd told me months ago that we wouldn't technically be breaking any sort of employee conduct rules if we were to date, and we certainly wouldn't be the first to do so, but I didn't want to become the talk of my coworkers again, especially since it seemed to take weeks for the barbecue incident to dissipate. (A nurse practitioner named Whitney had taken the brunt of the gossip a few weeks after I did when a rumor swirled that she'd broken up with her fiancé after she got caught with Dr. Ross of all people.)

But it was no secret that I was a struggling new grad, and I didn't want anyone giving me any more shit at work because I was fucking an attending. What we did after work and on our own time was our own business, though the thought had me wondering how in the world we would manage to hook up while on shift. I was so busy, especially on days, that there was absolutely no time, and no privacy, to make that happen.

I was working on the blue cube, right near the side door, so when Soren walked through it at 2:50, I spotted him right away. We shared a knowing look before he donned his professional mask and headed for the Doc Box, my heart doing somersaults inside my rib cage like his hands had been all over me rather than his eyes, looking me over with that sly smile I could never get enough of.

Half an hour later, Brenda asked if I would watch her patients while she stepped away to grab a coffee, and I rolled my eyes at her

as she walked away. Soren cracked up laughing as he strode down the hallway to see a patient in one of Shelby's rooms. When she entered the room behind him, she shot me a *what in the hell was that?* look, and in response, I shot her a puzzled look. My shoulders shook with suppressed laughter when she disappeared behind the door, and Farrah studied me with an expression that was polite with undertones of *these fucking people are crazy*. It only made me want to burst out laughing all over again at the absurdity—Soren smiling at work, and me trying to pretend that I didn't know why.

Sam stopped by our cube shortly after, the rare event when she was between traumas. Her presence couldn't have come at a better time.

"What are you up to tonight?" I asked her, and her face stilled for a moment before she answered.

"I've got Bailey."

My brows knitted in confusion. "Doesn't she go to Michael's most Fridays?"

She brushed off her scrubs, avoiding my eyes. "We had to switch some things around this weekend." She wasn't telling me something, that much was certain, but I had omitted much from her too recently, and I knew she'd tell me in time what was going on, if she wanted. Badgering her certainly wasn't going to help.

I softened my face, hoping I didn't seem too suspicious of her. "Are you free sometime tomorrow? Or Sunday for brunch?"

She perked up. "Tomorrow! Brave enough to run with me? Then we could go grab lunch?"

I exhaled dramatically, scrunching up my face. "I'd probably just hold you back, you know."

She punched my arm. "Toughen up and let's do it."

"Fine," I conceded.

"Sorry about your luck with cube mates today," she said conspiratorially, leaning closer to me.

"Shelby has actually been helpful."

Soren emerged from the room he had been in, and I got to ogle him freely because Sam was busy typing out a text on her phone and the cube was otherwise empty. "Meet in the park around 10:30 or so?" she said as she darted off, and I shot her a thumbs-up.

Tara's voice sang through the intercom, "*Level one trauma team, bay C, ten minutes.*"

Soren gave me a wink that I'm ashamed to say made my neck flushed before he turned the corner, still laughing at me.

Shelby came out of the room in time to hear him laughing again, and pulled me into the med room with her as she grabbed stuff for their patient.

"I don't know what has gotten into him lately. For the past week or so he has been the nicest person. I mean, he was always good to the patients, but he just said please AND thank you to me, and you heard him laughing, didn't you?"

I nodded and pressed my lips together, worried I was going to give something away.

"What do you think's gotten into him?"

I was thinking about all the different ways he'd fucked me, but instead I said, "Maybe he started psyc meds?"

Shelby contemplated. "Nah. He's fucking someone new."

We burst out laughing as she handed me a bag of fluids to spike and tubing to prime.

The rest of the shift passed without incident, and when I finally clocked out, I was looking forward to an evening of hibernation.

Soren was working until eleven, and I'd probably be sound asleep by then given that I felt like I'd been ran over with a zamboni of exhaustion after the last three shifts in a row. I skipped takeout and heated up the last of my rice bowls I had made a few days ago after a shower so hot it emptied my hot water heater in less than ten minutes. Remembering Soren's affinity for ice bathing, I cranked up the cold water again and stood until it made me shiver, breathing heavy against the chill.

Though I felt like an icicle, I was somehow more revived and relaxed all at once when I stepped back into the living room in sweats and one of my boyfriend's t-shirts.

The thought put a smile on my face as I settled onto the sofa with my dinner and a book. The printed pages and utter silence soothed me. After a crazy run of shifts, I couldn't even stand the TV sometimes after work. I needed complete silence to reset my brain from the cacophony of the emergency department—the cardiac monitors, my pager phone, the sirens that blared from the ambulance bay—a horrible, jarring refrain that would probably take months if not years to erase itself from my brain, if I ever did leave.

NOVEMBER

"I don't know if I can tell you everything when I can't breathe," I huffed to Sam as I trailed her on the sidewalk the next morning. Running was always going to be a challenge for me, despite the fact that I'd been exercising more regularly for a few months now.

"If you're talking, you're breathing," she replied, always the ER nurse.

I stopped, putting my hands on my knees, feeling like my lungs were on fire. "How do people enjoy this?"

Sam noticed me fall back, and jogged over. "Now isn't what I enjoy. It's afterwards. Nothing quiets my head like running does."

"You sound like Soren," I grumbled.

Sam grinned at me, and I matched her expression.

"You're in love with him, then?"

"I...I think I am," I said evenly, trying to keep the excitement and panic from my voice. We had only gotten together a matter of days ago, but I'd admitted my feelings for him at the cabin back in September, and I'd known they were brewing since the barbecue back in June, maybe even before that. And since then, with every text, and every run-in at work, my heart had grown softer and more full for him, molding into something like affection over time. Since our spark had been lit on a mile-long fuse, now that we'd gotten to the end of it, we were dynamite.

I tried explaining this to Sam as we started jogging again, and she was silent through my ramblings.

"What is it?" I asked her finally, out of breath and sick of hearing myself talk, even though I was recounting some of the best experiences of my life. Falling in love with Soren had been a sinuous and jagged road, but those types of stories were the best to tell. I'd left out more of the intimate details, giving her just enough detail to make her understand that my needs were more than met.

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I guess...well, I guess I thought you might have something to say about all this." Telling Sam about my relationship made me nervous, like sharing what we had with someone else would give them the power to crumble the towering structure we'd built. But Sam wasn't just someone, she was my closest friend and my de facto big sister, so her opinion mattered more than anyone else's to me. As long as Sam supported me, and supported us, I could handle what anyone else had to say.

Though I wasn't sure if I'd ever be ready to tackle a hundred coworkers and defend our relationship to them. Or the ER administration. A trickle of sweat that had nothing to do with running trailed down my back thinking about sitting in Jordan's office, explaining that I was dating one of my supervising physicians.

We stopped to cross the street, waiting for the light. Sam studied me, hands on her slim hips. "If you're wondering if I support you, the answer is always." Her tone was blunt, no affection, just fact. "But if you're wondering if I think it's moving too quickly, or if I'm worried you're going to get hurt, the answer is, no and no."

I blew out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. "You mean that?"

"Absolutely. Soren is a good man, if not intense. And he brings that intensity to how he feels for you. You two have been dancing around your feelings for one another for, what, almost a year? So yes, it sounds like things have progressed rather quickly since you told him you were ready for it, but that doesn't mean things happened in haste. Or that you're diving in without testing the waters first. You've been tiptoeing in the shallow end for far too long, Quinn. I think you knew what you were doing when you finally dove off the ledge."

She gave me a smile as the light changed and jogged off, not giving me a chance to respond. I'm not sure what I would've told her anyways, because I was smiling like a fool, running after her on wobbly legs that were definitely going to be sore later.

After Sam and I had lunch, I bolted home to shower and peruse the web for something to cook this evening. Soren was working the Saturday evening shift, 6pm-2am, and I wanted to see him before he went in. Cooking for him was the easiest way for me to show him I cared (clothed at least), and it sparked a joy in me I hadn't felt since I had cooked for my family, a nostalgic comfort that I had missed.

The night was wet and cold, and I decided to make chili and cornbread. The peppers, meat, and garlic greeted Soren as he stepped through the front door.

"It smells incredible in here," he said as he kissed me. His hands reached for the small of my back as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. He buried his face in my hair, which was loosely braided down my back, and I inhaled his scent through his shirt, the two of us like a pair of TSA dogs embracing on my threshold.

"Why do you smell so fucking good to me," I breathed into his chest.

Soren pulled back, giving me a megawatt smile. "A lot of research suggests that your partner's scent is a powerful aphrodisiac, and has an evolutionary basis. Psychologists have even studied long term couples, and reported that couples who ended up breaking up report changes in their partner's scent over time."

"That's fascinating." I nudged my nose against his chest again. It drove me completely mad, like I could rip his clothes off at any moment. "So there's a scientific reason you make me so horny?"

He laughed. "Yeah, I suppose so. I could say the same about you."

"What do I smell like?" Plucking my shirt with my fingers, I brought it to my nose. I didn't smell much, just the faint smell of fabric softener.

Soren grasped my braid and brought it to his nose. "Your hair always smells like coconut." His fingers skated across my arms, mouth dipping to my collarbone. "Your skin smells like the lavender in your soap, and you must use some sort of laundry detergent that smells like fresh linen." He spoke between kisses, making me moan. "And beyond that you just have this unique scent that's hard for me

to place, it's just *you*, no commercial fragrance or anything like that. Together, it's all quite intoxicating."

Blushing, I invited Soren to sit at my kitchen table—no dining room in this house—while I finished up, scooting my laptop that I'd been searching recipes on over to make room for him. He looked just as comfortable on my secondhand furniture in my shoebox house as he did in his penthouse condo, and it made me wonder if he thought the same about me at his place.

The scent of earthy spices made my mouth water as I stirred the pot, checking for salt. I popped the cornbread in the oven, and opened the fridge to look for a stick of butter to slather on it once it finished baking. I'd used the last of the butter I kept on the dish on the counter to sauté the onions, peppers, and garlic, so I was shit out of luck for the cornbread.

"Babe," I said, and Soren looked up from his phone, studious expression on his face. Unlike normal people, he didn't scroll social media or play games on his phone. He read medical journals and science magazines for Christ's sake, and I knew he was knee-deep in some research article. "I need to run out for some butter. You wanna watch this stuff for me? Cornbread's on a timer and the chili is just simmering."

"You're sure you don't want me to go out?" he asked, studying his watch. I could tell he was trying to be relaxed about it, but he didn't want to be late for work.

"It's okay. You stay here. I know this side of town so well, I'll be back before you even know I'm gone."

"If you insist," he said, and resumed reading. I kissed his temple before throwing on my puffer jacket and boots, perplexed as to why he hadn't pressed the issue of me going out in the horrid weather, or at least insisted on coming with me.

When I returned and walked through the side door into the kitchen, I knew by the smell that hit me that the chili was going to be phenomenal. I had to take a Pepcid with it, but it was damn delicious.

Soren leaned back in his chair after eating, linking his fingers together and resting them on his abdomen. "That's going to get me through tonight, no doubt. Thank you, my love."

Seeing him so content warmed me, more than the meal, more than the sweater I was wearing. "How much time do we have?"

He studied his watch. "I have to leave in about five minutes."

"Plenty of time for what I have in mind."

Soren's eyes locked on me, studying my every move like a lion on the savanna.

He was wearing the black scrubs that made his arms look like chiseled marble. I sidled over to him, and he turned his chair away from the table to face me. Placing both my hands on the wall on either side of him, I climbed into his lap. He let out a groan that I felt low in my abdomen.

"Four minutes," he hissed, and his cock grew hard against my thigh.

"So pushy," I scolded, lifting up his shirt and kissing his chest, his rock-hard abs. I had to hop off his lap and squat on the floor in front of him to get what I wanted, though.

If he were to get an erection at work, there would be no hiding it in these scrubs. His dick was fighting with the scrub pants to get out, making my job a bit easier.

Deciding I'd dragged this out enough, and I really needed to get going if I was going to suck him off before he had to leave, I took him in my mouth. He cursed and moaned as my lips and tongue enveloped him, sliding in and out in smooth strokes.

One of Soren's hands gripped the table and the other found the back of my head, guiding me up and down. I dared to glance at his face, wanting to see how turned on he was, and the furrow of his brow and intense gaze made me suck harder. In response, his jaw went slack and he grunted my name as his head lolled back against the chair. My cheeks hollowed out as I sucked him again and again, jaw muscles working to maintain the suction. As I picked up the pace, his hips thrust him deeper into my throat. "Baby, I'm going to come soon so if you don't want it in your mouth—"

I cupped his balls and used my other hand to grip the base of him as my mouth came to the tip, lightly skating over it with my teeth. The next time I took him in, he cried out, fisting my hair as he filled my mouth.

I pulled away in triumph, wiping my mouth with the napkin that lay beside his empty bowl. He exhaled, and ran a hand through his wavy hair. "How the fuck am I supposed to leave you?" he muttered as he pulled me into his arms before standing to leave.

NOVEMBER

Since I had made so much progress, Imani and I had scaled my sessions back to once a week from two. It was mind-boggling how different my life was now. Instead of wallowing in grief and drinking to excess, I was getting stronger each day, my mind and body thriving with the work I was putting into them.

It didn't hurt that I'd taken to the weight room in Soren's building, since I was spending so much time there now. We had settled into a comfortable routine around each other over the past few weeks, where I would sleep over at his house for a few nights each week, but never before a shift. He was keeping me awake far too late into the night for me to be rested enough for work, though he'd always made the sleep-deprived mornings worth it.

Sometimes, he stayed at my place. I was expecting him any moment when I opened my laptop to pay my student loan payment. Though I always had the money in my account, I had refused to set up auto drafts, fearing that I wouldn't be able to make the payment one month and it would overdraft me.

When I logged into the website to make a payment, the oddest thing happened. My account showed a zero balance, when it had been almost thirty thousand the month before. A barrage of possibilities crossed my mind. There could have been a processing error on their end. Maybe I had accidentally paid the whole balance and my bank had, erroneously, let the payment go through? Or

maybe my account had been hacked by some vigilante on the dark web who was crusading to erase student debt?

My heart raced as I logged onto my bank's website. The balance was what I expected, and I checked the transactions for the past month. The last student loan payment had posted four weeks ago, for the amount I had intended.

So what else could it be?

I perused my account history on the student loan website, and found the answer: a one-time payoff that had posted from a bank I didn't recognize two weeks prior. I was still trying to piece together what had happened when I heard a knock on the door.

Soren was resplendent in his white tee and jeans, with a thick flannel to fight the late November chill.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he stood on my front porch, hands in his pockets.

"I'm not sure." He stepped over the threshold and into the living room, studying my face. "I was just going to pay my student loan balance but there isn't one. There's a zero balance."

He froze, then masked the reaction with what he was hoping was an easy smile. If I didn't know him as well as I did, he would've fooled me. I hadn't originally suspected him, because I hadn't thought there was any possible way someone would do that for me, but his reaction gave it away. I had to hear it from him, though. "And do you know anything about this, Soren?"

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "Yes. I did it. On your laptop when you left to go get butter that night. I was going to pretend like I didn't but that wouldn't have worked."

I crossed my arms and faced him. "No, it wouldn't have."

I had no idea what I was feeling, or rather, there were so many conflicting emotions I didn't know how to triage them appropriately—disbelief that he would do that for me, anger that he did it behind my back and eliminated my independence on the matter, some fucked up version of gratitude that he'd eliminated the final hurdle to my finances and ultimately my mental health.

Suddenly, it was all too much. I backed away from him, away from what this meant. Had this man just seriously thrown thirty thousand dollars at my loans? Talk about a fucking change in power dynamic. Whether he had intended to or not, he had just shattered

the equilibrium between us, which was already skewed to begin with due to where we were in our lives.

He mirrored my posture, arms crossed against his chest. What he had to be defensive about, I couldn't discern, and it bristled my already growing unease. "I can't believe you did that without asking."

His jaw flexed with tension. "I know it was wrong to do that without talking to you first. But you are so damn stubborn I know you would've begged me not to, without thinking about how free it would make you."

My blood boiled. "How can it make me *free* when you basically bought me off like some livestock at an auction? Free from loans, but tied to you! Is that what you want?"

Soren's eyes flashed with what might be anger. But the way his face fell told me he wasn't angry. He was hurt. His voice was soft, laced with controlled defeat. "I don't want you to be obligated to be with me in any way. And you aren't. I don't give a fuck about that money, Quinn. You could send me out the door and never talk to me again and I'd still know I did the right thing."

He paced around my living room, staring at the walls. "You have been dealt a shitty hand in life and you were just trying to do what you could to make it better. But this job is *killing* you. I see it in the tension in your shoulders, the way you're constantly trying not to cry when you're at work. The way you try and hide just how much you're struggling in the set of your jaw. The way you replay your day and make sure you've done everything you possibly could for your patients. I'd do *anything* to take that pain from you. And I can. So I did." He threw his arms up in defeat. "And well, if you hate me for it, so be it, but god damn if I wouldn't do it again." He came closer then, cupping my jaw with a feather-light touch. Tears flowed in a stream down my cheeks, from anger or love or hurt or some combination of the three, mirroring the emotion welling in his eyes. "*Jag är kär I dig,*" he whispered, and I didn't need to know Swedish to know what he meant.

"I love you, too," I told him, but I didn't reach for his face or bring his mouth to mine. I braced my hands on his upper arms as I pulled away. "But this is a lot to process. I think I need some time to myself in order to give this a fair shot. If we continue this conversation now...I don't trust myself not to explode."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them. I knew he'd honor my request, without hesitation, but sending him away was like parting with my own heart. My home.

Soren let out a big breath, and backed away from me, running a hand through his hair. He didn't meet my eyes. "Okay, then."

I swore I saw tears pricking the corners of his eyes, and it cooled the rest of the fire in me. "I'll call you, alright?"

He pulled me close to his chest, squeezing me against him in what felt a lot like a farewell. The featherlight press of his lips on my temple only confirmed my suspicions.

Did he think I was breaking up with him?

And did I have any other choice after what he'd done?

My heart sank, and tears of my own welled in my eyes. Before I could say something, anything, to assure him—or myself—that this wasn't the end of us, he turned to go, leaving me alone in my too-quiet house.

I crumpled onto the couch and sobbed until I felt nothing but the bone-deep weariness of his absence. How was this the right move when I felt so hollow? I had the next five days off, and I had to figure out what in the hell I wanted to do next.

NOVEMBER

The next morning, I rose at dawn and put on my running shoes without thinking too hard about it. Running had once made me feel so alive, so free, that it shocked me to think that I'd let that part of me slide away so easily with the pressures of school and now work. By the third mile, my mind had quieted and my legs were aching. I slowed to a walk and took the cool air deep into my chest, burning my lungs.

I didn't see Imani until next week, but we had worked together enough at this point that I was able to tackle my problems with the tools she'd given me, at least enough for now.

After a shower, I sat at my kitchen table with a mug of hot tea and my journal. My pen met the paper, and that ink was a catharsis of every feeling that had surfaced since I'd discovered what Soren had done. With several pages full of the scrawling mess, inked in my haste to complete the damn task, I sat back and considered.

Everything was out in the open now, but what was I to do with it?

I sighed.

I knew I'd be calling Sam at some point, but I wasn't ready to talk with her. It wasn't because I feared she'd sway my decision, it was just that I needed to process things of my own before anyone else's input confused me further.

The doorbell rang around noon. He hadn't come back, had he? If he had ignored my request and come back here, there was no way I wasn't letting him know how much that pissed me off. Who was he to ignore my wishes? That was *not* how this was going to go with us.

I threw open the door, startling an overweight man with a gentle smile. "Ms. McConnell?"

I huffed out a breath as I noticed the bags in his arms, flowers peeking over the top of one. "Yep."

"Sign here for me?"

I scribbled out my signature and took the items from him, slamming the door with my foot as I maneuvered the bags inside. What had Soren done now?

Setting them on the table, I began to unpack. Besides the wrapped pink carnations, there were assorted chocolates, containers of sushi from my favorite restaurant, and a letter.

I plated the food and took it to the couch, turning on the TV while I ate. I followed my meal with a few pieces of chocolate, still hungry after my run, and ignored the letter on the table. Did he think he could buy my affections again? Absolutely not.

Not wanting them to go to waste, I arranged the flowers in a vase my aunt had sent after mom's funeral, one that I'd had to dig out of a hall closet. By nightfall, the letter loomed on the table, beckoning me to read it. I was angry with Soren, there was no question about that, but the anger had mellowed into a confusing pool of feelings that I had still not sorted out after acknowledging them in my journal.

I still hadn't reached out to Sam, but I figured she probably knew by now. Soren had gone to work today, and I thought Sam was on shift too, and for some reason, the thought of the two of them talking about me warmed my heart, if only because I knew they both cared about me, and it seemed unfathomable that I had those types of bonds in my life again.

The surge of affection I felt for Soren in that moment helped me to tackle my emotions. I thought about what my friends would say if I called and told them what happened. Though I didn't want to actually talk to anyone else yet, it helped to gain perspective.

Sam would tell me to call my own shots, and do what made me comfortable. You know what that was? Not having any fucking student loan payments.

I thought of Liza, who would tell me to secure the bag by any means necessary, though I felt that mine and Soren's relationship was much more than some sort of transactional situation. The thought of Liza's boisterous reaction if I did tell her—which I definitely wasn't going to—made me laugh out loud, and helped me to distance myself from the initial rush of anger that bloomed when I thought of him now.

Surprisingly, I also thought of what my Mom would've said. Her brown eyes would've creased at the corners, and she would've squeezed my arm and told me to make sure I wasn't rushing into things, because she couldn't bear to see me make her same mistakes. Though I know if she had met Soren, she would've seen the love he had for me and known I'd found my person. And knowing that, she would've pulled me tight, and whispered in my ear, *That man loves you, Quinn. But you still don't owe him or anyone else anything you don't want to give. Find your own way with him, and settle into what feels right for you, not what you think he or anyone else wants from you.*

A stupid tear ran down my cheek, springing up against my will. Soren had changed the course of my life. Without those payments, I could work wherever I wanted. I could save for a new car. I could live on my own, depending on what job I was working, ER or elsewhere.

But he had taken away that choice from me, and I didn't know how I could forgive him for that. Even in a relationship, my independence was not something that was negotiable. I was fully ready to commit to him sexually and otherwise, but no matter how we were associated, I was still *me*, responsible for my own life and my own choices, and that couldn't change, no more than day could change to night at will.

How was this going to work between us if he had that same uncompromising resolve? Though Soren's determination was quiet and deep, a stark contrast to my bold fire that could spark instantly, how could two fiercely independent people make a relationship work? Wouldn't there always have to be some sort of give and take between us, a battle of wills that would be never-ending?

Hoping to understand him more, and how we were ever going to work together, I stopped to consider how we'd dealt with things so far. When I'd told him I needed space to deal with my issues before we could be together, he'd backed off and given it to me without

question, constantly, even as I'd battled with myself over wanting him and wanting to give in. He'd exercised patience and restraint, when I was drunk on Halloween, when I was emotional at his cabin, when I'd impulsively pulled him into the stairwell that day at work because I simply wanted to be near him, but hadn't been ready for more. And when I had finally felt ready and went over to his place that night, he'd insisted I tell him exactly what I wanted before we hooked up.

And how had I repaid that patience? By kicking him out of my house at the first misstep. Albeit, it was a huge transgression, one that I think anyone would reasonably be upset over, but I still had told him goodbye instead of trying to work things out. I hope he knew it was because I was trying to extinguish the rage that had burned hot at discovering what he'd done, and that I wanted to talk to him calmly, after I'd had time to process things. But regardless, it had always been my choice with him.

Until now.

Soren's steely resolve had resulted in him committing a cardinal sin against my independence and my control over my own choices. It was problematic, but was it really *that* surprising? If he was as well off financially as he'd said, and that money really didn't make a difference to him like it did to me, was this as big of a deal as I was making it?

The only thing left to think about was what *I* would do in *his* position. If our roles were reversed. The answer popped in my head right away—I would've done the exact same thing. If I could remove the source of stress from the person I love, without hardly any consequence to myself, I'd do it without question. And if I thought that person would try and stop me, I'd do it anyways.

Just like he had.

Though it pained me to admit he had a point, I still smiled as I ripped open the envelope to read his letter.

Älskling—

I bet you've let this letter sit on your table for far too long, deciding that you'd deal with me after you've eaten

your food, and begrudgingly put the flowers in a vase so they didn't spoil.

Well this was already annoying. Was he spying on me?

Don't be angry with me for knowing who you are, love. There's much more pressing things to be pissed off about. But I've gotten so good at knowing you all these months that it shouldn't surprise you. I know you like I know my own heart.

I also know that it's not easy for you to admit that what I did opened up possibilities for yourself that you never expected, and a new set of problems that you maybe didn't even want, like feeling like you've been bought off.

I'm fully aware that I control you no more than I control the seasons, but I understand how what I did rattles us, and your feelings for me.

Suffice it to say, if our goodbye yesterday was for good, I'm willing to leave so you don't have to see me at work anymore. Say the word, and I'll speak with my partners and go to Jordan immediately.

Selfishly, I hope you won't give up on us, but not just because of what it would do to me. What we have is rare, Quinn, and ending things now seems like putting down a good book in the first quarter and leaving so much of the good stuff out. But I respect you enough as a person—all

of your headstrong bones, that sharp tongue, and the heart that's bigger than you would ever want anyone to know—to accept your choice no matter what it ends up being or how much I wish I could change it.

Sit with your anger, but when it fades, please talk to me. I deserve one hell of a lashing, however you intend to dole it out.

-S

He was right. I was angry, but it was more than that. I was irritated by how well he knew me, though it sometimes still shocked me the way he understood. But if he was so good at reading me, why did he do something that would truly jeopardize our footing? He was only a man, not some perfect paragon of goodness, and I knew that of course, but to be so smart, he really was acting stupid.

I was no closer to figuring out what to do after reading the letter, and I was exhausted from all the mental gymnastics of the day, so I headed to bed in the hopes that things would be clearer after a night of sleep.

NOVEMBER

Half past six the next evening, my phone lit up. I panicked, thinking it was Soren, because I still had no idea what to do. Was I just holding out as some sort of power play? I was pretty sure I knew what I wanted, and that was a debt-free life together with the sexiest man I'd ever met, but for some reason I couldn't jump to the outcome.

It was like I thought I was giving up a part of who *I* was as a person if I allowed him to have that sort of control over my life or something. Even though what he did was something that quite tremendously gave me an advantage in life that I would've never had otherwise. *Why* did I have to be so stubborn and independent?

But Soren hadn't texted me. Sam's name flashed on the screen instead.

I've given you your time, little sis. But we need to talk. We're coming over after my shift. See you soon.

We? Did she mean herself and Soren? My heart dropped. I knew if he was on my doorstep my stupid primal urges would take over and I'd think of his tongue between my legs or his hands gripping my hips or his—

I showered and changed into a pair of tight black pants and a top that made my tits look amazing. If Sam was going to bring Soren over, I was going to make him pay, starting with looking like a snack

and not letting him have a taste. I used the rest of the half hour I had left to blow dry my hair and put on some makeup.

When her car pulled up at a quarter to eight, I rose from the couch, ready to answer the door and face him.

But Soren wasn't standing on my front stoop. Standing next to Sam in jeans and a hoodie, it took me a moment to recognize Henry.

Where the hell had he come from?

The confusion was plastered to my face, because Sam grinned at me like she'd played the ultimate trick.

"Mind if we come in?"

I stepped aside to let them pass, closing the door behind me and feeling like I was in a parallel universe.

"Why are you two—" I started, then Sam held up a hand.

"Are you two together or—" I began again, and she cut her eyes at me. Henry studied her face intently, as if he too was curious about her reply.

"Not now," she replied abruptly, and sat on the couch next to me.

I swore I saw Henry's face fall before he settled into the armchair across from us and addressed me.

"I know it's probably a surprise that I'm here, but Soren asked me if I would...well...talk to you, since you weren't ready to talk to him."

"And what did he ask you to say to me?"

Henry sighed, resting his forearms on his knees and leaning towards me. "I just thought I could shed some light on the situation since I have known Soren a little longer than you. In the past year, we've become pretty good friends, and after everything he helped me through with my personal life, I...I just thought I could maybe help him out here. It's what friends do." He smiled at me tentatively, those navy blues lighting up.

Sam was a damned fool if she wasn't sleeping with him.

I almost felt bad for how much I was taking my feelings out on Henry since he was the man that had shown up and *not* the one who had crossed me, but I didn't feel bad enough to let him off the hook. He had to have known what he was getting himself into by coming here.

"So enlighten me as to why it's okay for my boyfriend to go behind my back, hack into my personal accounts, and simply make *enormous* financial decisions for me *without even asking me first?*"

Henry held his hands up and eased back into the chair. "I'm not saying that what he did doesn't constitute an enormous financial decision for *you*. He never talks about this stuff, but did you really not know when y'all got together that his father left him several commercial buildings in Manhattan that he rents out, and his mother's family is pretty well-off in Stockholm, too? You can look it up if you want to verify for yourself. I just, uh, thought everyone did that kind of thing nowadays and that you already knew."

He politely waited for me to reply, but my jaw had apparently been wired shut with that information. Were people really googling their lovers nowadays? And what did my results say? Not that I had any assets or holdings or anything that made me important like he apparently did.

Henry continued. "For him, paying those loans off was like paying for a movie ticket or taking care of the check at lunch. He is very wealthy, but generous with it. His family has a large nonprofit in Sweden, and he has on more than one occasion covered a bill from our practice to people who were uninsured and unable to pay. He never admitted to it, but we began to suspect since it all happened with anonymous donors after he started with us. Usually, it was young people or single parents who he probably didn't want to see ruined by medical debt. It wouldn't surprise me if he started another nonprofit here, too. But he just started with our practice. I think he wanted to get his footing first."

I let out a huge breath, sinking into the sofa.

Sam squeezed my knee, and gave me a pitying look. "Was what he did really that bad? Because if you don't want it, I'll give him the login to my account instead."

I smacked her. "It's not the gesture, it's the control and loss of independence for me. I'm worried if I let this slide he's going to feel like he owns me, or like he can do this kind of thing again."

Sam sucked in air through her teeth. "I do NOT think that's going to be an issue going forward if you decide to stay with him. He's got a pretty formidable personality, but I also think you have him by the balls right now. If you told him to streak through the ER with a banner apologizing to you, he'd probably do it with a smile on his face. And everyone else would be smiling, too."

Henry laughed. "Honestly, I've never seen him like this. He was begging me to talk to you. Pleading with me to make you

understand that he knows what he did was wrong. Of course, it's your choice, Quinn. And we support you in whatever that is." His eyes tracked to Sam, and a small smile formed at her lips. Had she noticed how he'd thrown *we* in the conversation? She stared at him for a few beats before settling her focus back onto me.

Did they really not know they were in love with each other? I made a note to have an equally humiliating intervention with them when Soren and I made up.

"He meant it, you know," Henry continued. "He'd leave the practice and probably Minneapolis too if you asked him to. And our hockey team is probably going to make the playoffs again this year, but he'd still go if you asked him. That's how you know he was serious."

"I know," I grumbled. "Why does he have to be so fucking generous and I'm the crabby one who's complaining that my rich boyfriend paid off my loans?"

They laughed, and I begrudgingly joined in before standing, addressing them both. "Okay, leave me alone, I have somewhere I have to be."

Sam pulled me into a hug while Henry squeezed my shoulders, addressing me. He knew he was using his charm as a weapon, and I respected the hell out of him for being such a good friend.

"Give him hell, Quinn, but try and remember he means well."

"Thanks. Now go and be all moony-eyed somewhere else. Preferably naked so all this tension can melt between you two."

Sam shot me a wide-eyed glare while Henry turned crimson. I ignored them and pulled out my phone, locking the door behind them as they left.

Are you home? I'm coming over if so.

I was already packing an overnight bag. His reply was immediate.

Yes. Please do.

My hands were shaking as I pulled into the parking garage across town. Why was I so nervous? I had sat on the man's face for crying out loud.

When the doors opened to his condo, Soren was waiting, pacing around the kitchen. He looked up at me, a mixture of worry and relief on his face.

NOVEMBER

"I'm so sorry," he said as I threw down my bag and rushed over to him. I wrapped my arms around his neck and clung to him like it had been weeks instead of days since we'd last seen one another. The verbal ass kicking I'd prepared on the way over faded into oblivion as my body met his.

"I know," I whispered, burying my face in his chest. He stroked my hair, and we held one another for several heartbeats while the intoxication of seeing each other again wore off.

I finally pulled away, stepping back to give myself the space I needed to speak clearly. "First off, before I say anything else, thank you, Soren. What you did was many things, including generous, and it'd be horribly rude for me not to express how much I appreciate the kindness. Truly, I do."

He gave me a shy smile and rubbed the back of his neck, a gesture so at odds with his usual confidence.

"That being said, if you ever act on my behalf again without talking to me, I won't forgive you."

His face fell, and he nodded. "I know, Quinn. I *know* how important it is for you to be your own person, and take care of yourself, because I feel the same way about my own independence. I never intended to take that agency from you. I just got so swept up in wanting to make things better for you, that I really didn't stop to think just how much it would change things for us. Or how far I had

overstepped. And I know how hard it must be for you to forgive me. I've never bent my will to anyone else, either. But when it comes to you, I just..."

He splayed his palms towards me, while he considered his words. "Being right and being in control just doesn't matter as much to me. I've *never* been like this with anyone, and this kind of... shamelessness is something I never thought I'd feel. And it's so unfamiliar and strange that I'm still trying to figure it out myself. So I can't hold it against you if you're having a hard time moving forward after this. Because with anyone else, in any other scenario, I'd feel exactly the same way."

He couldn't have laid his heart out any more bare unless he'd ripped it from his chest and placed it on the counter next to me. And in that moment, I understood. Any remaining doubt about our relationship vanished, because I knew how we would make it work. Together, against everyone else, we would be the two independent pillars of force, of uncompromising will. But privately, amongst ourselves, we'd negotiate like generals in a situation room, until we were both content.

Neither of us had to give up who we were to be with one another, we simply had to take into consideration our partner's needs, which wasn't a bizarre thing to do in a relationship. I had just never been with someone long term who lit that fire in me like Soren did, someone who was bold enough to challenge me. But there was a downside to all that passion and smoldering chemistry, and we were learning firsthand how to face the consequences.

"I know what you mean," I said. "This doesn't have to change things for us in a bad way. We will just have to learn how to bend our wills when necessary to sort out our disagreements. Even though I'm not sure my will is even made up of a bendy substance. Mine might be rather inflexible, I'm afraid."

He laughed, then came closer, pulling me into him again. I spoke into his chest. "I know what we need. Some peace, and quiet, and a hell of a lot of makeup sex. I'm off the next few days..." I started, and Soren pulled up the weather report on his phone before I had even thought to check it.

"There's a big snowstorm this weekend, but we could go for a day or two. I think I have enough groceries in the fridge to take with

us if you want to leave now and wake up there in the morning. I love driving up there late at night. It's a totally different experience."



Even though we'd made up, and I was happy with my decision, for some reason my mind still raced with the implications of what he'd done, the thoughts persisting like a stubborn splinter as we left the city lights behind and flew up the winding roads to the cabin in the pitch black of night in the Land Cruiser. Regardless of what happened with our relationship, Soren had removed a significant barrier to my adult life, and the ripples of that decision would trickle down into the rest of my years.

I'd be able to save for a house.

I could work pretty much anywhere else now.

I could travel.

But the uneasy feeling that surfaced when I thought of how it shifted the power dynamic between us caused me to squirm in my seat. I pressed my hands in front of the heat vents to give them something to do, and rather than comforting me, the warm air from the vents only made me feel claustrophobic. I cracked the window, gulping in the cold night air, which was like a reset for my noisy mind.

"You're thinking about the money again," Soren said. Not a question, just a statement.

I sighed. "You got me."

"I can take it back if you want. Have my attorney draw up a repayment contract if you'd prefer."

His taunting tone had me crossing my arms and glaring at him. "Hell, no. You wanted to hack into my account and play banker, you get to live with the consequences."

Soren laughed, and I followed suit, all tension vanishing with our banter. He then reached a hand over and stroked circles on the inside of my knee. It made me want to squirm for another reason entirely.

"It's unsafe to drive without both of your hands on the wheel. I'd think a control freak like you would follow those kinds of rules."

He snorted. "When your passenger is as devastatingly beautiful as you are, it can be distracting."

"Are you going to let me out here, then? So you can get to your destination safely and I can hitchhike back to town?"

He cut his eyes at me.

"And now you're not even looking at the road? Pull yourself together, Slater."

Soren kept his eyes on the road, but both of his hands were *not* on the wheel. The fingers of his right hand crept up my thigh, leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

"Keep going like that and you'll find out just how distracting I can be."

He let out what I can only describe as a growl. Visions of exceedingly dirty acts I could do while he was driving flooded my thoughts. I knew he wouldn't let me do *that* in a moving vehicle, though. No matter how much it drove him wild.

When we arrived, Soren started a fire to warm up the cabin that was much colder than it had been last time.

"Luckily we are sharing a bed already this time," he told me. "The fireplace helps, and so does the wood-burning stove, but it's definitely more of a summer cabin. I was actually planning on winterizing it soon, so I might just do that tomorrow while we're up here."

I had no idea how to do that, but I was intrigued. "I'll help. But you'll have to show me."

He grinned so broadly it caused my chest to tighten in a surge of affection. His true smile, when he was unmistakably happy, was blinding. "You'll have to learn sooner or later."

His words bloomed in my chest. Of all the things he'd said to me, of everything he'd done, the fact that he saw me coming back to this cabin season after season hit the hardest. That he saw us as a perennial, something lasting year after year.

I pulled him onto the bear-skin rug and we made love in the firelight, slow and tender, as if our souls had entwined. Afterwards, we dressed and sat on the porch, hoping to catch the aurora before bed. We were wrapped in a thick wool blanket, me on his lap as we gazed at shooting stars. My breath fogged in front of me, and I snuggled closer, savoring the warmth of his arms wrapped around me, and his chest on my back.

"I can't believe we saw the Lights last time," he remarked. "It's much more common to see them this time of year. But the Leonids

are happening now. It's past the peak, but we still may catch a glimpse."

As if on cue, a meteor streaked across the sky.

I gasped. "Did you see it?"

He kissed the side of my head. "Mmmhmm. What are you going to wish for?"

Tears pricked my eyes. After everything I'd been through, the loss and hurt and loneliness and struggle, I had survived. More than that, I had healed my grief and anxiety, learned to live with it, and made space in my heart to love again. I'd never get to see my Mom and sister again, not in this lifetime anyways, but that didn't mean I wouldn't know what it meant to be loved. Soren had made damn sure of that. And even if love couldn't fix every bad day or banish every nightmare or flashback, it was the greatest comfort, a steady balm for my tortured heart.

"I don't have to wish for it anymore. I have it."

I turned around to face him, curling into his lap. We kissed underneath the stars, and I felt like we were in our own private universe, far from the pressures of our lives that would eventually come to call.

But I wasn't afraid of what the future would bring, for better or worse.

No matter what, I could handle it.

Because I wasn't alone anymore.

With his hand in mine, I'd walk anywhere.

And no matter what came our way, we'd face it together, side by side, hearts full with the love we'd fought for.

EPILOGUE

SOREN

Five Months Later

"Happy birthday, sweetheart."

My lips press into Quinn's temple, and she leans into my touch, wrapping her arms around my waist.

She takes in the party, the one that Sam had secretly helped me to organize and insisted would be a good time, even though I wasn't sure how Quinn felt about surprises.

I'd want to turn around and walk right back out of the cocktail lounge's private room, but Quinn gazes at the attendees in wonder.

"I can't believe they're all here for me," she muses as Sam appears at her side.

"Don't flatter yourself, they're here for the free booze and apps." Despite her teasing, she brings Quinn in for a crushing embrace as they laugh, her affection for my girlfriend undeniable, but nothing compared to what I feel for her. "I'm joking, my love. Happy birthday! What are you drinking?"

Sam motions to the bar and Quinn shrugs, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek before trailing after her.

Quinn's been distant for over a week now, and it's been eating me alive. It's not just that our schedules have been chaotic and we've been spending less time together. She's been pulling away, retreating to her solitude like she's apt to do when something's on her mind.

She's been texting me less than usual, and though she often will meet me at my place after my shifts on her off days, she hasn't come over for two days in a row.

I want her all to myself, and not just because I want to fuck her until she sees stars.

I'd brought her to the party on the premise of a birthday dinner, and now she has almost twenty people to socialize with, making our chances of talking privately slim.

Nothing points to a breakup, and she still looks at me with her usual tenderness and adoration—except for when we're glaring at one another and giving each other a hard time, of course—but my worry won't ease until I speak with her.

I wonder if her mental health is suffering again.

She's been doing better as she's adjusted to ER nursing, but I still wish she'd find another position that doesn't stress her out as much.

In my wildest fantasies, she moves in with me and does whatever the fuck she wants every day instead, but I know getting her to agree to that would be useless.

I'd have better luck taking a lasso and trying to wrangle the moon out of the sky.

Henry approaches me, offering a beer. "You think she likes the party?"

"I think so," I say as I watch her roll her eyes and laugh at something Liza says across the room. Her mirth is short-lived, fading off her face as she sips from her wineglass.

Henry's eyes follow Sam as she flits around the party. "Please don't help her plan a surprise party for me," he says, and it's my turn to laugh.

"Noted. We still have a few months until your birthday, unless there's anything else to celebrate before then."

Knox grins, and takes a sip from his beer.

Quinn makes her way around the room, greeting our guests, most of whom are coworkers. Tito stands next to Tristan, another nurse in the department. The two are rumored to be a couple, but it's hard to picture Tito's boisterousness with Tristan's reserved demeanor. Quinn kisses Tito's cheek and nods politely at Tristan before moving to Shelby and her wife Trish. After a quick chat, Quinn and Shelby embrace and she moves to a table, taking a seat next to Joe and Charlie, her coworkers from night shift.

Quinn had practically shrieked in excitement when she heard they were finally dating, and the newness of their relationship hasn't

yet faded—Charlie is practically in Joe's lap, and his arm drapes possessively around her.

Sam weaves through the crowd to join us.

"Something's wrong with Quinn."

My gaze darts to her. "So it's not just me, then. I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse."

Sam purses her lips, contemplative. "I think the anniversary of the accident is coming up, and that's always hard for her. I don't want to ruin her birthday by asking her to talk about whatever it is, but you know how she gets if you don't ask. She'll just go through it alone."

"You're right, it can't wait," I tell her, mind made up.

I approach the table where Quinn's socializing, and her face softens as she spots me. She gestures to the empty chair beside her, but I shake my head.

"If you'll excuse us," I say, and offer my hand.

I give Joe and Charlie a curt nod before taking Quinn's hand and leading her through the lounge and outside to the patio. The night is cool despite the outdoor heaters, and Quinn insisted on wearing a short dress with tall boots and no tights, so it's not ideal for us to talk out here, but it's quiet.

Quinn misreads my motives—she grasps the lapels of my blazer, tugging me close as she backs against the building, offering privacy from the windows and doors that bracket us. I'm powerless to stop, the hunger in her kiss calling to my own. Our lips dance with one another in an easy rhythm, and heat pools in my groin when Quinn moans.

I lean down to haul her up against me, arms cradling her thighs, never missing a beat as the kiss deepens.

"Is this what you want?" I grit out. "Me to fuck you against this wall where we could get caught at any minute?"

She whimpers, eyes wild with lust.

"Fuck," I mutter, fighting against the desire that ripples through me.

For an agonizing moment I consider listening to what my cock wants and following through, but I pull in a deep lungful of air, kissing her forehead before releasing her.

Confusion draws her brows together.

"Baby, what's wrong?" I ask her, cupping her face in my hands.

"Other than the fact that you won't fuck me? On my *birthday*, at that?"

"Don't. Don't try and banter your way out of this. I know something's been bothering you. And so does Sam. You can tell me, or you can tell her, but please, baby, tell one of us. Will you talk to me about it?" I say, and because I never fight fair, I bring her closer and place a gentle kiss on her temple, her cheek, her jaw, and then her neck. Her carotid pulse beats frantically beneath my lips, and her skin is flushed. I love teasing her *almost* as much as I love fucking her, but not quite.

Quinn shudders, then lets out a curse under her breath. "I love you with every fiber of my being, but I can't fucking stand you sometimes."

I huff out a laugh, loving how riled up she is. Suddenly, she wraps a hand around my wrist, and shoves it underneath her dress. I feel her slick heat, and my face relaxes into a satisfied smirk.

"I can't help what you do to me," she whispers.

Need courses through me like wildfire. I inch closer to her, so she can feel what *she* does to *me*.

She emits a strangled plea when she feels the ridge in my pants against her abdomen. Her hand moves to touch me, but I stop her.

"Talk to me."

Quinn groans.

"Talk to me, and it's yours. Anything and everything you want."

Her eyes flare, and she dips her head, satisfied with the bargain. She takes a deep breath, hazel eyes looking up at me with uncertainty, like she's trying to decide what all to tell me.

Gently, I ask her, "Isn't the anniversary of the accident coming up?"

"The 30th," she confirms. "But that's not what's been on my mind. It's just..."

Quinn trails off, peering at the fake greenery on the latticework next to us. I remain silent, letting her gather her thoughts.

"I interviewed with Stella Zhang," she divulges. The plastic surgeon is one of Henry's friends, and in addition to being a hell of a surgeon, in the rare event that she's consulted in the ED for complex sutures and burns, the patients have all loved her. I'm ecstatic about the idea of Quinn working for Stella.

"I've been mulling things over ever since the interview. I'm not sure I deserve such an amazing position. Every nurse wants a job like that."

"Why not you?"

Quinn sighs. "Because I only got the interview because Sam told Henry I applied. It was a mistake telling her."

"I've got some bad news, darling. That's how the world works. Connections trump experience in every industry. It's always been that way, and it'll always be that way. Whether you accept it or not, it's still the truth."

"Fuck," Quinn laments. "I hate it when you're right."

"I'd think you'd be used to it by now."

She shoots me a hard look, but the corner of her mouth twitches in amusement she can't fully suppress. "And I told myself I'd work at least a year in the ED, and it's only been nine months. Jordan hired me, and they spent so much time training me, and I...I feel bad. And besides, pretty much everyone at this party is a work friend. In some weird way, I don't want to leave this dysfunctional family, even though it's not where I belong."

"You belong where you decide you want to be. I'd prefer if that was permanently by my side." I brush her hair from her eyes, losing myself in them momentarily. "But as far as your career goes, you're fully capable of deciding what you want. You're less likely to let yourself *have* what you want, however. Your life will get immensely more enjoyable once you realize you deserve whatever you're brave enough to go after."

"What the hell, Soren? Where do you come up with this shit?"

"Tell me I'm wrong."

"I can't. It's the worst."

I smile, taking her hands in mine, thumbs tracing circles on her skin.

"Have you interviewed anywhere else?" I ask.

"Yes," she admits. "An inpatient drug and alcohol detox center."

"How'd that go?"

She shrugs. "I want to help, but I...I think that'd be hard on me."

Clarity shines through like the sun emerging from cloud cover. "You want to help people like the man who killed your family."

"I do."

My heart breaks for her, for the twisted vines that grief wraps around her conscience. It isn't enough for her to just suffer, she is determined to transform her emotions and experiences into something useful. I can't watch her do this again, work somewhere that challenges her empathy in ways that agonize her. It hits me with a bone-chilling realization that if she hadn't done that once before and accepted a rotation in the ER, we never would've met.

The thought roils through me, making my pulse race with unease.

But now that she's mine, I can't watch her tear herself apart again to further alchemize her grief.

"There's other ways to help the detox center than working bedside," I offer, and her head tilts in consideration. "And besides, Stella's the best reconstructive breast surgeon in the Twin Cities. She helps so many women after their breast cancer diagnoses. You'd be helping those patients, too."

"You really are too smart for your own good," she remarks as she buries her face in my chest. "I'll call Zhang's office and accept tomorrow. Thank you, Soren," she whispers into my shirt. Quinn's happiness amplifies my own, and my chest expands with contentment.

I pull her closer to me to fight the blustering night air, reluctantly releasing her so we can rejoin the party.

"We talked," Quinn reminds me as I reach for the door handle.

Her expression is untamed lust, and I release a breath so forcefully it sounds like a hiss.

"I am a man of my word," I say, resting my hand on her lower back in the exact place I want to grip her hips as I drive into her. "And you've been such a fucking good girl, on your *birthday* no less, that I can't deny you any longer. I saw a wine cellar on the way in..." I begin, gauging her reaction.

Quinn arches an eyebrow, her eyes darkening with pleasure, and leads us inside, marching straight through the party without a second glance to anyone in the room.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for going on this journey with me. I wrote this book as a love letter to nurses and my obsession with romance books, and I never intended for anyone to read it, so sometimes I can't believe that it's out there, getting read by people around the world. (I can't think about that too much or I'll never publish anything ever again—Quinn's anxiety was certainly based on my own experience!)

It means the world to me that my words can make readers feel seen and understood. Kind comments and messages and reviews are what keep me going on the hard writing days, and I am so grateful to my readers!

If you loved reading this chapter from Soren's POV, you're going to love the next book in the Midtown Hospital series...

I'm thrilled to announce the next title will be *The Doctor Falls First*, and it will explore Soren's character development from his POV as he adjusts to attending life, his new home in Minneapolis, and the complete upheaval of his romantic life after meeting a smart-mouthed nursing student in a code.

I'm so excited for this book. You can expect yearning, angst, and a whole lot of spice!

My [newsletter](#) will have the latest information about release dates and pre-orders, so please sign up to ensure you receive the latest announcements! This time, I'll have both the paperback and e-book available on release date! I'm learning, y'all.

All my love,
Cadence

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cadence Rush is a nurse and romance writer. *Love, PRN* is her debut medical romance based on her ER nursing experience, and the first book in the Midtown Hospital series of interconnected standalones.

When she's not writing or reading, she enjoys spending time in nature, and daydreaming about projects she's not supposed to be working on.

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