

# Just One Chance



**JENNY  
PROCTOR**

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One  
Chance*



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 Four Petal Press



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## CHAPTER 1

AVERY MIDDLETON STOOD AT the corner of Marshall Boulevard and Station Twenty-nine, grocery bags in hand, and watched her new neighbor hoist a sheet of plywood onto the front porch of his home.

She glanced over her shoulder as Melba Newberry, Avery's neighbor on the other side, stopped beside her, her tiny Yorkie, Jasper, cradled in her arms. "What do you think he's up to?"

Avery reached over and scratched Jasper under his chin. "I'm guessing he probably watched the weather this morning."

Melba scoffed. "That storm's still ten days out. It'll turn north before the end of the week anyway."

"Probably. But even if it doesn't, does he really want to live in the dark for the next two weeks?"

"Better question," Melba said, "does he know there are panels in the shed out back to cover his windows? There's no reason to be messin' with plywood."

Avery lifted her ponytail off her neck, letting the early summer breeze coming off the ocean cool her skin. “Where’s he from?”

Melba would know. She walked up and down Marshall three times a day. If there was anything to notice, she’d notice it.

“His license plate says Illinois, and he’s got an MUSC parking permit.”

“You talked to him yet?” Avery asked.

“I haven’t seen him outside until now.” Melba shifted Jasper onto her shoulder. “He’s younger than I thought he was going to be.”

He did look young. And completely clueless.

Avery sighed. “You want to go talk to him, or should I?”

“You go,” Melba said. “He’ll enjoy talking to you more than he will this old bag of bones.”

Avery rolled her eyes. Melba was in her seventies, but she looked ten years younger. “Whatever, Melba. You know you’re still a fox.”

Melba huffed a laugh. “Maybe, but even I can’t compete with those mile-long legs of yours. You go introduce yourself and help the poor fella out.” She leaned down and put Jasper on the ground, tugging him toward home. After a few steps, she turned back. “But go easy on him, Avery. Not everybody is a child of this island like you are. Don’t make him feel dumb for what he doesn’t know.”

Avery waved at Melba and nodded her understanding as she crossed the street and approached the new guy. She paused at the end of his driveway, setting her grocery bags on the ground before pushing her hands into the back pockets of her cutoffs. “Hey,” she called out. She lifted her sunglasses and slid them back onto her head.

The man turned, the sheet of plywood he’d been holding sliding to the porch at his feet. “Hello.” His voice was low and mellow, but Avery wasn’t sure she’d ever seen anyone look quite so uncomfortable in his own skin. He shifted, looking at his feet for a long moment before raising his eyes back to her.

Avery looked at the sky, clear and brilliant blue, overhead. “You, uh, expecting a storm?”

“There’s a hurricane,” the man said, a hint of irritation in his voice. “I know it’s still a few days out, but with work, I just ...” His words trailed off. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Avery fought to hide her grin. She schooled her features into something a little more neutral. She hoped. “Like what?”

“Like you’re about to tell me something that’s going to make me feel like an idiot.”

Avery bit her lip. “Sorry. I’m not trying to make you feel stupid. I promise. Where are you from?”

The man’s shoulders rose and fell. “Chicago.”

Avery stepped a little closer. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, I wouldn’t have the first clue how to handle a Chicago

snowstorm. I've heard they're brutal."

"Not as brutal as hurricanes," he said, his tone indignant.

Avery squelched a laugh. He seemed so affronted when all they were talking about was the weather. She climbed the porch steps to where he stood, trying not to flinch when she noticed a sand dollar sitting on the porch railing, a faint yellow stain against the white paint just barely visible underneath. Poor guy. He probably had no idea he'd killed the thing when he'd brought it home.

The guy was super nerdy up close. His pants were neatly pressed, and he wore a collared shirt with all the buttons done up, but no tie. His sandy blond hair was perfectly parted and smoothed to the side, and he wore glasses that would maybe feel hipster with the right outfit, but on this guy, they just felt old school. And yet, he was still kind of adorable.

Avery moved to the window. "Look," she said, pointing to the bolt holes that lined the window frame. "See these here? There are hurricane panels in the shed out back that are pre-fitted to the windows. The bolts on them screw all around the frame. It's easier than plywood."

"Oh. Got it. Thanks for pointing that out."

"Sure. My dad built this house." Avery shrugged. "Actually, he built most of the houses around here. I'm sorry the realtor didn't show you the panels. They normally do. Especially for people who move in during hurricane season."

“I never actually met the realtor,” the man said. “I bought the place sight unseen.”

“Wow. That’s brave.”

“It’s closer to the water than I thought it was.”

Avery glanced toward his back yard. Had he seriously bought oceanfront property without knowing? “Hard to get much closer.”

“My sister picked it out.” He leaned against the house, his shoulders slumped. “She only showed me the pictures of the inside and told me it was downtown. Close to the hospital. Obviously, I shouldn’t have believed her.”

This guy’s story just kept getting better and better. “Well,” Avery said, a laugh floating through her words, “welcome to Sullivan’s Island.”

“Thanks.”

Avery held out her hand. “I’m Avery.”

“David Daniels,” he said. His handshake was firm—that was good, at least—and he offered the tiniest of smiles. He was definitely adorable. In a nerdy little brother sort of way.

“You’re a doctor over at the hospital?”

“Yes,” David said. “In the ER.”

Avery nodded. “I’ve got a few friends who work there. You’re a new resident?” If he was, he was sitting on family money, because no resident she knew could afford to buy oceanfront on Sullivan’s.

“No, actually. I just finished my residency at Northwestern up in Chicago. This is more permanent.”

Avery froze. The guy couldn't be a day over twenty-five. “What, did you start medical school when you were sixteen?”

A blush crept up his cheeks and he coughed into his fist before mumbling something Avery almost couldn't hear. “Something like that.”

“For real?” Avery asked.

David sighed, like he'd answered the question a million times before. “College at sixteen, med school at nineteen. I'm twenty-seven now. And yes, I'm old enough to practice medicine, I did pass all of the same exams every other doctor takes, and no, I've never watched Doogie Howser.”

“Sorry. I bet you get that a lot, huh?”

He shrugged dismissively. “I'm used to it.”

“Do you like it?” Avery owed the guy a subject change. “The job?”

“The job, yes. But I'm not sure I would have taken it if I'd known hurricanes were part of the deal.” David tossed a nervous glance toward the ocean.

Avery grinned. “Listen. We haven't had a major storm hit Charleston since Hugo, and that was before I was born. It seems like there's always something brewing off the coast during hurricane season, but odds are against anything hitting us head on. I think what's out there now isn't even a hurricane yet. It's just a tropical storm. It's nothing to worry about.”

David ran a hand across his forehead, then back through his hair, mussing his perfect part. “Really?”

“Most of the people on this stretch of the island have lived here a long time. When you see us getting our houses ready? That’s your clue to do the same.”

“Do people evacuate?”

Avery shrugged. “Yeah. Sometimes. When we have to.”

“I don’t understand why anyone would voluntarily live in a place that a hurricane could destroy in minutes.”

“It’s a small price to pay for living in paradise. Honestly, I’d rather take my chances with hurricanes than deal with snow every winter.” Avery moved to the stairs. “I gotta get my groceries inside, but I live right next door if you need me.” She pointed to her house. “The one on that side. With the blue door.”

She was halfway down the steps when David spoke again.

“Is it always this hot?” he called.

When she reached the gravel path at the foot of his porch, she turned and smirked. “Nah, it’s only June. It’ll be hotter in August.”

She thought she heard him groan, which was totally understandable. Charleston summers were brutal even for people born and raised in the South.

She’d only made it a few more steps before he called out to her again.

“Avery, wait.”

Avery liked the way he said her name—with three distinct syllables. *A-va-ree*. Her Southern friends mostly mushed her name into two. *A-vree*. She turned around.

“I’m sure you can tell I feel a little out of my element. Is there anything else I need to know about the island? About Charleston, in general?”

Avery smiled. At least he was trying. “If you want good pizza, try the Obstinate Daughter. Kinda touristy, so get it to go if you want to avoid the crowds. The Co-Op over on Middle Street has great coffee, and groceries if all you need are the basics. I can walk it in half an hour.” Avery racked her brain. What else could she tell him? “The next time you have a free morning, go take a walking tour of downtown. It’ll hit all the historic high points and teach you the basics about the city, which are worth knowing if you’re going to call this place home.”

Of all the adorable things, David had pulled a little notepad out of his pocket and was scribbling down notes as she talked. “Got it. Anything else?”

Avery thought for a second. “Um, don’t kill the sand dollars?”

David’s eyebrows went up, his gaze landing on the sand dollar sitting on his porch railing. “What?”

“If they have purple fuzz on the bottom, they’re still alive. It’s technically against the law to bring them home, but you



shouldn't want to anyway. If they're still living, they'll die quick and then they'll smell like death." Avery crossed back to his porch, taking the steps two at a time. "See?" She picked up the sand dollar. "The yellow stain here says this one was alive when it hit the porch. It's a toxin they release when they're handled, harmless to humans, but a good indicator that it's alive and shouldn't leave the water."

"Well that sucks," David said. "I killed it."

"Don't feel bad. They're all over the beach so it happens a lot. But now you know, right?"

"You grew up here?" David asked.

"Yep. Born in your hospital and raised right here on the island."

"I guess that's a good reason to trust you as an authority on marine life."

Avery smiled. "That, and I'm also the education coordinator at the Charleston Aquarium."

David sank onto his porch steps and dropped his head into his hands. "Which makes you doubly qualified to make me feel like an idiot."

"I told you not to feel bad! Seriously. I promise you're not the first person to make the same mistake."

David cupped his hands around his knees. "Any other innocent crustaceans you need to warn me not to kill?"

“I mean, unless you’re the kind of guy that goes around pulling legs off of crabs . . .”

“Not that guy,” David said. “I promise.”

“Then I think we’re safe to let you walk the beaches unchaperoned.” Avery moved toward her groceries, still sitting on David’s driveway, but then turned back. Why was she having such a hard time leaving? “You should come down to the aquarium sometime. I’ll give you a free tour. Just to make sure you aren’t an actual threat.”

“Clearly I need the education,” he said, his expression serious, though Avery detected a lightness in his tone that said he wasn’t all that put out by her ribbing.

“See you around, Dave,” Avery said, this time leaving his porch for good.

“It’s David, actually. Not Dave.”

Avery turned to face him, taking a few backward steps toward her house. She grinned, not even a little surprised that a guy as buttoned up as he was didn’t want a nickname like Dave. “Okay.”

“And you’ll tell me, right? If I need to worry about the hurricane?”

*Ha.* Avery and every newscaster in all of Charleston. “I’ll definitely let you know.”

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Melba was sitting in a rocking chair on Avery's front porch when she finally made it home, Jasper sitting contentedly in her lap. "Well?" she asked, not even bothering to offer a greeting.

"Well, what?" Avery said.

"Did you get the dirt on the new guy?"

"What dirt? Seriously, Melba. Why does it have to be dirt? You watch too many soap operas."

"I'm just curious, that's all," she said, though she didn't sound at all defensive. Melba was nothing if not self-aware. "A new guy moved in on my street. I'm entitled to know a little bit about him."

Avery unlocked her front door. "I don't know anything more than you do. He works at MUSC. He's from Chicago. He's super smart, apparently, some sort of child prodigy who went to college at sixteen, but otherwise, he seems like a pretty normal guy."

"Who knows nothing about hurricanes or living at the beach."

"You're the one who told me to go easy on him," Avery said. "Not everyone has our good fortune." That was maybe an understatement. Avery knew how lucky she was. The only reason she could manage to live beachfront right outside of Charleston was because her family had owned land on Sullivan's Island for more than a century. Her house had belonged to her grandmother, then to her parents, and now it

was hers. Fully paid for, which was good because the taxes alone almost felt like a mortgage payment.

“True enough,” Melba said, standing up from the rocker. “Hey, did I see that old boyfriend of yours hanging around here the other day?”

Avery tensed. Battling about Tucker was not something she currently felt up to. “It’s not a big deal, Melba. He just stopped by to say hello.”

“Avery Grace, don’t make me call your mama. That boy is trouble and you know it.”

Avery was tempted to roll her eyes, but she couldn’t exactly fault Melba her reaction. When Tucker had broken Avery’s heart a year before in the worst possible way, Melba had been her soft place to land. Avery had cried more than a few tears curled up on Melba’s couch, Jasper snuggled beside her.

“It’s not like that,” Avery said. “We’ve been texting a little, just here and there, and he said he was in the neighborhood, so he stopped by. It’s not a big deal.”

Melba snorted. “In the neighborhood? Who else does he know that lives on the island? Nobody drives out here unless they’re visiting here. You mark my words, sweetheart, he’s after something.”

Avery stepped to Melba’s side and kissed the side of her head, giving her shoulders an affectionate squeeze. “Thanks for looking out for me, Mel. I promise he was just being nice, but I’ll be careful. You don’t need to worry about me.” Even

as Avery placated Melba, a small niggling of doubt tickled the back of her mind. It *had* been strange when Tucker texted her a few weeks before, and even stranger when he'd shown up at her house all full of charm and compliments. She hadn't seen him in almost a year. For him to drop in unannounced on a Sunday afternoon was ... unexpected. If he wanted to see her, why hadn't he called? Or even just texted? His only explanation had been that he'd been in the neighborhood and wanted to say hi.

Avery knew Tucker's facial expressions, though. And the intensity in his eyes had said a lot more than just hi.

Avery pushed her door open and set her groceries on the floor inside. "You want to come in?" she asked Melba. "I'm cooking. You can eat with me if you want."

"Naw, it's too hot for cooking. Jasper and I will have sandwiches for dinner and then wine for dessert."

"Please don't give your dog wine, Melba."

Melba left Avery's porch, raising a hand and waving her fingers over her shoulder without turning back. "What you don't know doesn't hurt you," she sing-songed as she walked away.

Avery shook her head, finally pushing into the cool interior of her home. Most of the year, she hardly needed to use the central heating and air. The temperatures stayed mild enough she could open her windows to the ocean breeze and count herself lucky that her power bill was so low. But once June hit, she sealed her house up tight and relished in the cold, crisp

glory of a fully air-conditioned home. She loved her Southern heritage. But full summer heat and humidity without air conditioning? No amount of Southern pride was worth that nonsense.

As she unloaded her groceries, Avery's phone pinged with an incoming text.

From Tucker.

*Have dinner with me?* The text read. *I'll bring over some take-out and we can eat at your place.*

Avery reached for her phone and stared at the screen, her hand trembling as she thought about what to say.

Did she want to see Tucker again? Have dinner with him again?

Tucker had broken her in ways that had done long term damage. She'd been ready to commit, dive headfirst into a springtime beachside wedding with a dozen bridesmaids and a yacht club reception when he'd dumped her completely out of the blue, saying he just wasn't ready to settle down. Avery suspected what he really meant was he wasn't ready to settle down with *her*. She didn't exactly fit the mold of a proper Charleston attorney's wife, and Tucker's family was the kind of family that definitely cared about being proper. His mother had never really loved his relationship with Avery. When they broke up, she'd figured she'd finally gotten through to Tucker that Avery just wouldn't do. Not if he wanted to actually be somebody in the circles that mattered.

Avery had never cared about fitting into anybody's circle. And maybe that was the problem.

After the breakup, Tucker had ghosted her without a backward glance. No messages. No calls. Nothing. He'd completely cut her off.

But maybe he'd changed.

Maybe he'd decided to stop listening to his mama and do what *he* wanted for once. Maybe he'd missed Avery enough to forget about being the perfect Charleston son.

Melba's warning echoed in her head, but Avery pushed it aside. Dinner didn't even have to mean anything, did it? Maybe it just meant they were two old friends, reconnecting over a shared meal.

It was just one dinner. How much damage could it actually do?

## CHAPTER 2

DAVID LEANED AGAINST THE counter of the nurse's station in the Medical University of South Carolina Hospital emergency room and spared a quick glance at his watch. *Nine hours*. He'd been on his feet, working nonstop for nine solid hours. He needed food. And a bathroom break, probably. And five minutes of quiet meditation if he had any hope of making it to the end of his shift.

Most of David's colleagues had been surprised when David had chosen Emergency Medicine. He blamed Hollywood. Television shows had long since convinced American TV viewers that ER docs were both rugged and handsome, with a little bit of daring mixed in. Just because David looked like a podiatrist, all boring and buttoned up, didn't mean he had to practice boring medicine. He liked the way his brain had to work in the ER—compartmentalizing, prioritizing, deciding what patients needed what treatment and when. Every day was a giant logic puzzle that only he could sort out.

But nine hours was a long time to go without food.



In the doctor's lounge, Lucy, the only person in the entire hospital David had known longer than three weeks, sat hunched over a pizza box, her phone in her hand. Lucy had attended the same residency program at Northwestern that David had, though she had been a year ahead of him. They'd become good friends, good enough that he'd trusted her when she'd recommended MUSC as a launch point for his career.

She looked up when he entered. "Want some?" She shoved the box in his direction. "It's fresh."

He dropped into a chair beside her and reached for a slice. "Thanks."

When Lucy didn't even look up from her phone, he nudged her knee with his foot. "What are you reading?"

"A trashy romance novel. Care to join me?"

"You're still reading those things?" David asked. She'd had the same habit during residency.

"Absolutely. It's the purest form of escapism." She clicked off her phone and set it face down on the table then reached for another slice of pizza. "How are you? Settling in okay?"

"To the hospital? Sure."

"I meant the city. But I'm glad you like the job, too. I knew you would."

"The city is ... hot," David said. "And humid."

"But?" Lucy prompted, her smile wide. "You still like it, right?"

David thought of the walking tour he'd taken the weekend before at his neighbor's suggestion. It had been a good idea. He'd never been big on history—he loved the absolute nature of science a little more—but it was hard not to be impressed by cobblestone streets and buildings that were centuries old. Charleston had a story. And he could definitely appreciate that. “I like it,” he finally agreed. “My neighbor sent me on a walking tour of downtown. It helped.”

“Hey! You're meeting your neighbors. That's good.” Lucy knew him too well. Meeting people wasn't exactly his specialty.

“Just one,” he said. “A woman.” Avery's face flashed through his mind and heat pooled in his cheeks. He looked away, hoping Lucy hadn't noticed, but he was too late.

She grinned. “A woman, huh? I'm guessing by your face that she's young and beautiful and made you all kinds of nervous.”

“Stop,” David said. “It's not like that. She's beautiful, yes, but that doesn't mean anything. I don't even know her last name.”

“So ask her.” Lucy leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. “Dating would be good for you, I think.”

“Yes, because spending eighty percent of my time at the hospital makes for a great social life.”

Lucy scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Whatever. You don’t have to be here that much and you know it.”

“Either way, Avery is not the kind of woman that usually looks at a guy like me.”

“Oh, please. You mean a guy who is a doctor with an oceanfront home in Charleston? Yeah. Exactly what every woman *doesn't* want.”

“You’re oversimplifying things.”

“You’re overcomplicating things,” Lucy shot back.

“I’m not. Besides, the first time we met, I ...” He sighed, not sure how to explain the embarrassment he’d endured when Avery had caught him trying to cover his windows with plywood. For a hurricane that had ended up turning back out to sea anyway. “Let’s just say I didn’t make the best first impression.”

Lucy leaned forward in her chair, pushing the pizza box out of the way. Her phone buzzed and she gave it a brief glance before turning her attention back to him.

“Do you need to get that?” David asked, hoping she really, *really* needed to get it. The look on her face said he wasn’t going to like the direction their conversation was headed.

“It’s not urgent,” she said, with a shake of her head. “Just test results. I’ll look at them in a minute. First, tell me about this bad first impression.”

David fidgeted with the stethoscope hanging around his neck. “It was nothing. I just ... it doesn’t matter. She’s out of

my league.”

Lucy stood up and tossed the last of her pizza into the trash. “You sell yourself short, David. You always have. Just get over yourself and tell me what she’s like.”

David had often admired Lucy’s dogged determination, but he’d never been on the receiving end of it before. She was relentless. “She’s from here. Born and raised. She works at the aquarium. Her father built my house. That’s literally all I know.”

“Is she seeing anyone?”

David shifted. “We spoke for less than ten minutes. How should I know?”

Lucy chewed her lip. “The aquarium, huh? That’s cool.”

“She said she’s the education coordinator there. Actually, she told me she’d give me a free tour if I stopped by some time.”

Lucy’s face lit up. “Why didn’t you say that in the first place? That’s perfect!”

“Stop. I see what you’re doing here, Lucy. It’s not perfect anything. She was just being neighborly.”

“Being neighborly is telling you that trash day is on Mondays or pointing out the place to buy the best coffee. She did not offer a free tour of the aquarium because she was trying to be neighborly. She wants to get to know you.”

“It didn’t feel—”

“Can you just trust me on this?” Lucy said. “I’m a woman, remember? I know how our brains work.”

David sat, blinking. He hadn’t considered even for a minute that Avery had actually meant for him to come to the aquarium. But then, David didn’t have a lot of experience interpreting a woman’s motives.

“What if you’re wrong?”

“So what if I am? At the very least it could provide an opportunity for you to get to know her a little better. And from the blush I saw creeping up your face, I think you *want* to get to know her a little better.”

“But, I ...” David hesitated. “I still don’t think you understand. Avery is ...”

“Not out of your league, David.” Lucy folded her arms across her chest. Clearly she was done debating. But she’d never actually *seen* Avery. She couldn’t know what David was up against. “What time is your shift over?” She stood and pushed her chair back in, slipping her phone into her coat pocket. “You’re definitely going to the aquarium to see Avery, but I think we need to do a little tweaking first.”

“Tweaking? To what?” David ran a hand across his face. He had a feeling he was not going to like whatever it was Lucy had planned.

“Stop asking questions. Six? Seven? When are you done?”

David sighed, recognizing the inevitability of his fate. When Lucy set her mind to something, there was no arguing with

her. "I'm here until six."

Lucy looked at her watch again. "I should be finished up by then. Let's plan on leaving together."

"You're not going to tell me anything else, are you?" David leveled a stare at his friend.

Her phone pinged again and she grinned. "Duty calls, David. I really have to go." She pushed out of the doctor's lounge, then yelled over her shoulder, "See you at six!"

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Three hours later, David stood in Lucy's living room, surrounded by piles of new clothing from stores he'd never even heard of. Lucy had deployed her husband, John, on what she had called a mission of utmost importance. John had been all too happy to comply. He was that guy. The guy that always looked impeccably dressed, even when he was dressed down in denim and t-shirts. David wasn't so clueless he couldn't recognize good fashion sense. He did. And was happy to own that John had some. But he *wasn't* that guy. He wore clothes that were functional. Comfortable. And scrubs. Lots and lots of scrubs.

He adjusted the shirt John had made him try on. "I'm supposed to leave it untucked like this?"

"Absolutely," John said. "And you don't have to button it all the way to the top. Leave the top button open."

David tugged at his pants. “I just feel like these are sitting so low.” He looked at Lucy. “I wouldn’t have agreed to this had I known you were going to make me wear skinny pants. I feel ridiculous.”

Lucy smirked from her perch on the couch. “Only because you aren’t used to them. I promise you don’t look ridiculous. You’ve been desperate for a makeover for years, David. Why not now? You’re in a new city, you’ve got a new job, and now you’ve got a woman you’d like to impress. These clothes are going to help.”

If only David’s older sisters could see him now. They’d been begging him to tweak his wardrobe for years, they just weren’t bullheaded enough to *make* him do it. Not like Lucy. All they’d needed to do was stop asking him for permission.

“I never said I wanted to impress Avery,” David said.

Lucy opened her mouth to respond but John spoke before she could. “Who’s Avery?” he asked.

Sufficiently distracted, Lucy grabbed her phone off of the coffee table, swiping a few times before holding the screen out to John. “She’s David’s neighbor. She invited him to go to the aquarium with her.”

“That’s not what happened,” David said. How had this situation gotten so out of hand?

“Nice,” John said, taking the phone.

“Wait, is that her picture? Did you look her up?” David lunged forward, trying to take the phone from John. He

suddenly felt like he was back in high school. Five more minutes with John and Lucy, and they'd likely be composing messages to Avery's work email, asking her to be David's girlfriend—check yes, no, or maybe.

John tossed the phone back to Lucy before David could intervene.

“I just went to the aquarium's website,” Lucy said. “Her last name is Middleton, by the way. And her picture is great. It doesn't look like she has Facebook, but she does have an Instagram profile. She likes sailing. And dolphins. And cheeseburgers loaded with bacon.”

David resisted the urge to pull out his own phone and search for Avery's Instagram account. He also liked cheeseburgers loaded with bacon. And the idea of Avery on a sailboat . . . He shook his head. He could not get sucked into Lucy's game.

“Lucy, you have to stop,” David said. “You're turning this into something it's not. It's not a date. It was just a neighborly invitation.”

Lucy dropped her phone back onto the table and crossed her arms. “Why are you so sure of that? What would happen if you just tried? You're adorable, David. Could maybe even qualify as legit hot if you would lose the glasses and keep the skinny jeans. Any woman would be lucky to have a chance with you.”

David reached up and fingered the frame of his glasses. There was something wrong with his glasses?



“When was the last time you even went on a date?” Lucy said.

David dropped into the overstuffed leather chair that sat opposite the couch and pushed his head into his hands. He sighed, massaging his temples before looking back at his friend. “I’ve dated. You set me up with that nurse back in Chicago, remember?”

Lucy stared. “That was your first year of residency! It’s been three years since then. You haven’t dated anyone else? Anyone recent?”

“Of course I have.” David flinched at his own defensiveness. He didn’t actually have anything to prove to Lucy. She was his friend. She only asked because she cared. “Occasionally.”

Lucy raised a doubtful eyebrow.

“Fine. I never date. But it’s not like residency provided all that much free time. You and John never saw each other, and you were married and living in the same house.”

“That’s true,” Lucy conceded. “You did have a girlfriend in med school, didn’t you? What was her name? Melissa, right? I remember you telling me about her.”

David nodded. “We were together three years.”

“Why’d you break up?” John asked.

David shrugged. “It was mutual. When we graduated and left Boston, we were moving to opposite sides of the country for residency. I was going home to Chicago to start at

Northwestern, and she was moving to Seattle. The relationship just didn't seem as important as our careers."

"I totally get that," Lucy said. "It's normal to feel that way when you're fresh out of med school. And I can almost see how you could be too wrapped up in residency to have dated then. But you've *got* your career figured out now. You're settled. You bought a house. It's time you try and live a little."

John nudged Lucy over and sat down on the couch beside her, picking her feet up and dropping them into his lap. "Have you ever thought about trying contacts?" he asked. "I can help you out if you want. We could run up to the office right now. I bet I have some samples that are pretty close to your prescription."

John was an optometrist and as earnest as Lucy in his desire to help, but David had endured enough making over for one day.

He stood. "I think I'm okay for now." He looked around at the bags of clothing that filled the room. "I guess I'm supposed to take all of this with me?"

John nodded. "They're organized by outfit already, so remember that when you're adding them to your closet. I tried to pick stuff that was pretty neutral, so you can mix and match some, but if you have any doubts about whether or not stuff goes together, text me before you make any bold decisions on your own."

David looked down at his new pants, noticing how they'd stretched and moved with his body when he'd stood up. They

were pretty comfortable. “Are all the pants like this?” He looked at John who perked up, likely happy to have David do something besides scowl at him.

“Not exactly like that, but similar styles, yeah. I think I did get you a few pair of those in different colors. And you can dress them down, too. Wear them with a t-shirt and flip flops when you’re walking on the beach. Or put on a blazer over the shirt you’re wearing now and you’re ready for a date. You seriously can’t go wrong.”

David blinked. He wasn’t sure he trusted himself to take the pants from a beach look to a date look without John’s help, but he could at least appreciate the versatility.

“Don’t let it overwhelm you,” John said with a grin, clearly sensing his hesitation. “I promise it’ll get easier.”

Three days later, David stood in the middle of his bathroom and studied his reflection in the giant mirror that hung above his sink. He had to admit he *did* look better. He’d refused the contacts Lucy kept trying to foist on him—he liked his glasses and didn’t want to give them up—but he had agreed to try a different frame. And they were better. Hipper, without being *hipster*. David wore the same magic pants he’d tried on at Lucy’s, with a light blue button down, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He looked casual, but intentional. And still like David, which was the most important part. He wouldn’t pretend to be anyone but himself, not even to impress a woman.

He glanced at his watch. The aquarium opened at nine, which meant he had seventeen minutes to get there if he wanted to be there right when the doors opened. He walked to his bedroom and sat down on the corner of his bed. Should he wait an hour? What if Avery was busy doing other things and couldn't give him a tour after all? Should he have called and scheduled something, so she knew to clear her schedule? He pulled out his phone and texted Lucy and John in the group chat Lucy had started on makeover day. *I can't do this*, he typed. *Do I go now? At lunch time? What if she's busy? Should I take her something? Flowers? What do I even say?*

*No flowers!* Lucy immediately responded. *It's way too soon for that.*

*Go now*, John responded. *And take coffee. Coffee is easy. Nonthreatening.*

*Ohhh, that's a good idea*, Lucy agreed. *Do that!*

*I don't even know how she LIKES her coffee*, David typed. *Isn't that a little presumptuous?*

*Just get an extra of whatever you get for yourself*, John texted. *Even if she doesn't end up drinking it, she'll remember the gesture.*

David stared at his phone, wondering if he really ought to be taking dating advice from a couple who had started dating in high school and gotten married before either one of them had finished their undergrad. They weren't exactly a typical couple. Still, they were more qualified to give advice than he was. And they were all he had.

He closed out the text thread and pulled up Google Maps, finding the closest coffee shop to the aquarium. It only added three minutes to his trip.

Standing, he slipped his phone into his pocket before moving back to the bathroom mirror for one final glance. “Hey Avery, you remember me?” he said to his reflection.

No. That was terrible.

“I was just in the neighborhood and thought you might want some coffee.”

He leaned forward. Was that spinach in his teeth?

His shoulders dropped. *Stupid smoothie*. After a quick floss, he squared himself to the mirror. “Hi, Avery. Great to see you. Want to show me the dolphins up close?”

His words—his *stupid* words—echoed around the bathroom.

*What* was he doing? Who did he actually think he was?

In one swift motion, he tossed his new glasses onto the bathroom counter, and stormed into his bedroom where he grabbed his old frames from his nightstand drawer. He shoved them onto his face, feeling at once more comfortable, and headed out the front door.

*Baby steps*, he thought to himself. New clothes today; maybe he’d wear the new frames tomorrow.

## CHAPTER 3

“HEY, AVERY?”

Avery turned to see her friend, Shelley, one of the ticket receptionists who worked out front, standing in her office doorway. “Hey. What’s up?” she asked.

“There’s a man out front asking for you?” Shelley shrugged. “He said something about a tour?”

“What, like he wants to book one? Is he from a school?”

“No, more like he thinks you’re supposed to *give* him one.”

Avery searched her memory. Had she agreed to give someone a tour of the aquarium? She glanced at her watch. She had an hour before she had to meet with her boss and update her on the new hands-on program they were launching for the local elementary schools, but she’d hoped to spend that hour going over her notes and finalizing her budget numbers. “You’re sure you don’t have any idea who he is?” she asked Shelley.

“I’ve never seen him before. Youngish. Blond. Dorky glasses?”

Avery searched her mind but came up with nothing. Who could it be? “Okay.” She stood up to follow Shelley from her office. “I’ll come see who it is.”

They walked side by side down the long corridor that led to the aquarium offices. “I actually wondered if he was your boyfriend when he first showed up, but I don’t know. I’m not sure he’s exactly your type.”

Avery looked at Shelley, feeling slightly affronted. “What? I don’t have a type.”

Shelley rolled her eyes. “You totally have a type.”

Avery stopped. She’d known Shelley a long time. As long as she’d been working at the aquarium, and they’d gotten to be close friends. It wasn’t so much that she minded Shelley having an opinion about her dating life. She’d earned that right when she’d brought ice cream to work every day for a week after Tucker had broken up with Avery. She was just surprised that Shelley seemed so certain. Was Avery really so predictable? “I need more information,” she said to Shelley’s retreating form.

Shelley turned around. “It’s not a big deal. I totally didn’t mean for that to offend you.” She must have read the not so pleasant expression on Avery’s face. “Lots of people have a type. It just means you know what you like.”

“Yeah, but what *is* my type? How can I have a type if I don’t even recognize what it is?”

Shelley sighed and leaned against the wall. “Okay. The guy you brought to the Christmas party last year. The one with the hair and the Sperrys and the pink shirt?”

Avery thought back to the party. Charlie. Or, was it Chuck? She couldn’t remember. He’d been nice enough, but they’d only gone out a couple of times.

“Then there was Wyatt,” Shelley continued. “Up in Accounting? Same hair. Same shoes. Same preppy Charleston wardrobe. Well and then, Tucker, obviously. He totally fits the same mold.”

An image of Tucker flashed through Avery’s mind. Had the three men Shelley mentioned all been lined up on the sidewalk, they would have looked like fraternity brothers. Fraternity brothers who all did their shopping at Lacoste. Avery had never really made the connection before, but once Shelley pointed it out, she couldn’t deny it.

Her shoulders dropped. “I suddenly feel so ... predictable.”

“It’s not a bad thing,” Shelley said. “I go for guys who wear boots and like hog hunting. You like yacht club boys with perfect teeth. Everybody has a preference.”

Avery hated stereotypes—growing up in the South she’d been exposed to her fair share—but she knew the type of man Shelley meant when she said yacht club boys. They were the kind of men who were privately educated, knee-deep in old



family money, and possessed lifetime memberships at the yacht club. The kind of men that were always nice to their Southern mamas and liked their tea sweet with a splash of good bourbon.

What rankled was trying to figure out what it was about *that* kind of man that made Avery take notice. Why did she pick the yacht club boys? The answer crystalized in her brain in an instant, filling her with a potent kind of shame. She picked the yacht club boys because of the first yacht club boy who had picked her. *Tucker*. Everyone else? They were just shadows of the first man she'd ever fallen in love with.

Avery thought of the dinner they'd shared the night before, sitting on her back porch, listening to the waves, feeling the ocean breeze. They'd mostly just reminisced about their relationship—they'd been together eighteen months and most of them had been pretty good—but Avery had detected the same something in Tucker's eyes that said he was maybe looking for something more. When he'd left, he'd squeezed her hand then leaned in to kiss her forehead. "I've missed you, Avery," he'd said.

What was that even supposed to mean?

Avery rounded the corner and almost bumped into Shelley who had stopped at the end of the lobby. She pointed across the vast, open space. "See him? Over there by the benches?"

"Oh!" Avery said. "That's my new neighbor." She searched her mind for his name. "David." She almost called him Dave and the thought made her smile. He'd been adamant that he

was *not* a Dave, but Avery kind of liked it. “I did tell him I’d take him on a tour, but man, he couldn’t have picked a worse day to show up.” She bit her bottom lip, glancing one more time at her watch.

“There’s a Behind-the-Scenes tour of the Sea Turtle Center at eleven,” Shelley said. “That might keep him occupied a while.”

“That’s perfect,” Avery said. “I can spend the next half hour with him, then he can do the tour, and maybe I can buy him lunch after.”

“I’ll get him on the tour and bring you his pass,” Shelley said. She stopped, tilting her head and giving Avery a knowing look. “You know, he *is* kind of cute. What’s he do?”

“He’s a doctor at MUSC,” Avery said.

Shelley’s eyebrows went up. “Really?” She narrowed her gaze, studying him from across the room. “You think he likes hog hunting?”

Avery almost snorted. She didn’t know David at all, but ten minutes of conversation had been more than enough to convince her he was not the hog-hunting type. She’d put money on it. “Pretty sure that’s a no, Shell.”

Avery crossed the busy lobby, noticing the moment David saw her coming. He instantly stiffened and cast a worried look over his shoulder like he was hunting for the nearest exit. He held a drink carrier in his hands, two coffee cups perched inside, but had there been a trash can nearby, Avery was pretty

sure he would have dumped them. He turned and placed them on the bench behind him, then immediately picked them up, before setting them down again. He moved his body in front of the cups, blocking her view, just as she arrived.

“Hey,” she said. “You came.”

“I did,” David said. “It’s my day off, so . . . here I am.” A blush crept up his neck. “How are you?”

“I’m good.” Avery looked at the bench behind him. “Did you bring coffee?”

“Oh. Yeah.” He stepped to the side revealing the coffee he’d unsuccessfully tried to hide. “I just thought . . . you know, since it’s morning, and you’re working, and people drink coffee in the morning . . .”

Poor guy. Was he always this nervous? “That was really nice of you,” she said. “I’d love some.”

David’s shoulders relaxed the tiniest bit and he picked up the drink carrier, lifting one of the cups out and offering it to her. “I just got two of what I normally drink. I hope that’s okay.”

Avery took a sip, willing herself not to make a face. The drink didn’t taste like coffee, it tasted like straight up dessert. “Wow,” she said. “That’s . . . sweet.”

David’s eyes went wide. “Is it?” He took his own sip. “Sorry. I guess I’m used to it. I always add a swirl of salted caramel and fresh cream.”

“How do ever you maintain your figure,” Avery joked.

“Here, you don’t have to drink it.” David reached for her cup. “I should have thought about the sugar.”

She moved the cup out of his reach, then took another sip. The flavors were definitely growing on her. “Oh, I’m not giving this up. I didn’t say I didn’t like it. It just isn’t what I was expecting.”

David forced out a breath. “You’re sure you’re not just saying that to be nice?”

Avery took another long sip. He’d maybe ruined regular coffee for her forever. “I’m positive. This is delicious.”

Shelley showed up seconds later, a behind-the-scenes pass attached to a bright blue Charleston Aquarium lanyard in her hand. She handed the pass to Avery, then smiled at David before turning back to the ticket counter.

“I hope I didn’t come at a bad time,” David said.

“No, it’s great,” Avery lied. He’d obviously made quite the effort to get there. If she’d thought herself capable of turning him away before, she definitely wasn’t going to now. “Come on.” She motioned toward a side entrance for employees. “I can get you in over here.” They moved in and out of the crowds until they reached the door where Avery used her ID to buzz them in. “I’m actually really glad you came. You know, I’ve given the same invitation dozens of times. No one has ever taken me up on it before.”

David stopped, something flitting across his face before he schooled his features into something more neutral. “Oh. Right.

Well, lucky me, I guess?”

In an instant, Avery realized what had happened.

The coffee. David’s nerves. He’d treated her “free tour of the aquarium” like it was some special invitation she’d only extended to him, like it was more of a date.

And she’d just told him she’d invited half the island to do the same thing. Talk about dashing a guy’s hopes.

Avery’s phone pinged with a text and she gave it a quick glance. She held up a finger to David. “Sorry, this is my boss. Give me just a sec.”

*So sorry, Avery, the text read. I’ve got to pick up a sick kid from school, so I need to push our meeting to tomorrow morning. Can you confirm?*

Avery typed out a quick response confirming the reschedule.

“I don’t mind going through on my own,” David said. “Truly. I don’t want to take you from your work.”

It was an easy out. Avery could always find something to do to stay busy, but it felt wrong to abandon David. She realized spending the day with him risked giving him the wrong impression—she definitely hadn’t considered it a date when she’d extended the invitation—but he just seemed so ... earnest.

“Actually, my boss just cancelled a meeting, so I’m free for the rest of the morning.”

“You’re sure?”

Avery smiled. “Let’s start in the first gallery.”

Shelley had been right. David wasn’t Avery’s type at all. But that didn’t stop her from enjoying their time together. He was funny. And witty. And intimidatingly smart. He asked thoughtful questions. And looked right at her when she answered, as if what she was saying was the most interesting thing he’d heard anyone say all day. Whether she was talking about the animals at the aquarium, or just sharing random things about living in Charleston, she’d never been around anyone who was so completely attentive.

The longer they were together, the more David’s social awkwardness melted away.

After they finished the Sea Turtle Center tour, they paused beside the small restaurant that was inside the aquarium. It was hardly a restaurant. More like a glorified snack bar. Still, David stopped and looked up at the menu. “Can I buy you lunch?” he asked.

Avery hesitated long enough that David quickly backpedaled out of his offer. “Sorry. I should let you get back to work. You’ve already given me your entire morning.”

That much was true, but Avery *did* have to eat. “No, that’s not it. I’d love to have lunch. Just not here.”

What was she doing? She sounded like she was flirting. She did *not* mean to be flirting.

David's expression brightened. The man's face was easier to read than a giant billboard on the side of the highway. "Did you have somewhere else in mind?"

She should back out. Fake a phone call. *Something*. She was definitely giving him the wrong impression. "There's a little restaurant down the street that I really love," Avery heard herself say. "It's not far if you don't mind the walk."

David smiled, the first full smile she'd seen from him all day. "Lead the way."

David liked her.

Avery didn't need to be as smart as he was to figure that much out.

On the one hand, she loved the attention. Which must be why she'd agreed to go to lunch in the first place. But she really didn't want to lead him on.

Avery didn't spend a ton of time sitting around imagining the guy she hoped to fall in love with. If anything, she avoided the subject whenever possible. But she was pretty sure David wasn't that guy. Sure, he was easy to talk to, but she didn't think they had a lot in common. Avery was Charleston born and bred, Lowcountry to her very core. She lived for the salt and sand, for marshy tide waters and hot, humid summers. She spent her free time paddle boarding. Sailing. Eating really good seafood.

She glanced at the menu, suddenly wondering what David would pick. The waiter approached and she ordered the

scallops—she *always* ordered the scallops—and waited with curiosity while David studied the menu. “I’ll have the shrimp and grits,” he said, folding his menu.

Avery hid her smile behind her napkin. Maybe she could give him a few points for that. But everything else? David was about as Lowcountry as a winter snowstorm.

“So tell me about growing up in Chicago,” she said later, after they’d finished most of their meal.

David shrugged. “What would you like to know?”

“What did you do in your free time? Tell me about teenage David.”

He grimaced. “I’m a bad example of the typical Chicago teenager. I mostly just ... studied.”

“That’s right. College at sixteen, right? That’s intense.”

He shrugged. “It was. I didn’t have a lot of free time.”

“What about summers?”

“I took classes through the summer.”

“Good grief, Dave. You didn’t do anything fun?”

His jaw tightened, likely from her use of the nickname she really thought suited him no matter what he said, but he didn’t correct her. “I was focused on becoming a doctor. It probably makes me sound boring, but I was pretty single-minded.” He hesitated, then went on. “I know for a lot of people work is just something they do from nine to five. Something to pay the bills. It isn’t like that for me. The science of medicine, of how



our bodies work and how medicine can do so much to keep them working—it's my passion.”

He held Avery's gaze, his blue eyes bright and focused, until she dropped her eyes to the table. Did he look at *everyone* with such intensity? She cleared her throat. “I think that's really amazing. It must make your work really meaningful.”

He nodded. “It does.”

“So why emergency medicine?” Avery asked.

David pursed his lips, a tiny wrinkle appearing between his brows. “I know this is going to sound hard to believe,” he said, his eyes lifting with humor, “based on how smooth I've been in my encounters with you, but I don't generally get ruffled in stressful situations. In the ER, you're constantly making decisions and there isn't always time to second guess yourself. I learned in med school I have a knack for that kind of quick, on-your-feet thinking.”

Avery suppressed her laugh, but she couldn't completely hide her smile. The way David had bumbled his way through giving her coffee that morning flashed through her mind. *This* was a guy making split second decisions under extreme pressure?

“I know,” David said, clearly reading her amusement. “It's hard to believe. But I know a lot more about medicine than I do about women. I don't have a reason to doubt myself when I'm at work, but I have every reason to doubt myself in social situations.”

“I don’t think you’re giving yourself enough credit,” Avery said. “You’ve done fine today.”

“Only because you’ve made it so easy. Plus, it took me four days to talk myself into coming in the first place, and I changed clothes half a dozen times before leaving my house. My friend, Lucy—she’s another doctor in the ER—decided I needed a makeover and made her husband go shopping for me. I have all these new clothes and I don’t have any idea how to wear any of them.”

Oh, man. He really was an open book. “You chose well this morning,” Avery said, looking over his outfit. “You look nice.” She hoped he sensed her sincerity. He *did* look nice. His pants fit well, and the blue in his shirt made his eyes pop in a way that had fully kept her attention all morning long.

David looked down at his clothes. “Thank you. John told me to wear blue if I wanted to make a good first impression.”

Avery fought hard not to laugh. Not *at* him, just at his openness, maybe?

“What happens if you happen to meet a woman *in* your ER?” Avery asked, a teasing grin on her face.

David scowled. “What, you mean, like a patient?”

“Sure,” Avery said. “Women do get sick and come to the ER, don’t they?”

“Of course they do. But I don’t see them as women, I see them as patients. It engages an entirely different part of my brain.”

“Even if she’s beautiful?”

“Especially if she’s beautiful. It’s important that I remain objective. Every woman in my ER deserves to be treated exactly the same, regardless of her appearance.”

Avery took the last bite of the triple chocolate cheesecake she’d ordered for dessert, impressed by how quickly he’d responded to her question. It wasn’t something he’d had to think about, and it definitely wasn’t just a line he delivered because he thought it sounded good. Even after only knowing him a short amount of time, Avery was positive about that. David wasn’t going to say anything he didn’t actually mean. “Doctor Daniels, that was an excellent answer.”

David shrugged. “I try not to bring my emotions into my work at all, if I can help it.”

Avery frowned. “But isn’t it good to engage with people? I like doctors more when they’re friendly.”

“Of course,” David said. “That’s part of the job. But I can be friendly and engaging without engaging my emotions. Think about it this way. Most of the time when people come to the hospital, they’re experiencing things for the first time so their emotions are running really high. Everything feels significant. But for their doctors, we’ve possibly seen dozens of patients that day. We’ve seen it all, heard it all, answered the same questions hundreds of times. We can’t afford to engage emotionally with every patient. It would be too exhausting.”

Avery nodded. "I've never thought about it that way, but I see what you're saying." She scraped her fork across her empty plate, wishing she had about three more bites of her dessert left. It had been delicious. "Still, I bet you at least *notice* when a woman is beautiful."

David rolled his eyes, lifting his shoulders in a semi-defeated shrug. "I mean, I'm human. An awkward one, but still, human."

Avery smiled. He wasn't as awkward as he thought he was. There was something adorably charming about the way he just said laid all his cards on the table all at once.

David cleared his throat. "I, um..." He hesitated, taking a deep breath before continuing his sentence. "I would definitely notice if *you* came into the ER." The tips of his ears turned bright pink and he gave his head an almost imperceptible shake. "Not that I want you to get sick or anything. Or come to the hospital for any reason. That's not, I mean, I wasn't trying to say—"

Avery held out a hand, stopping his bumbling explanation. "I know what you meant. Thank you for the compliment."

David slid the crumbs of his dessert around on his plate. He'd only eaten half of his and Avery felt tempted to ask if he'd mind if she finished the rest. He'd gotten something lemon, she thought. She liked lemon.

"What about you?" David asked, finally looking up and meeting her eye. "Are you always this confident and self-assured? It must make dating easy for you."

If any other man had asked the same question, she'd suspect the guy was fishing, hoping she might reveal her current relationship status in a nonthreatening way. But David? She doubted he had those kinds of subtle moves. Still, that didn't mean she couldn't use the opportunity to her advantage, creating a defined friendship boundary before David asked her out. From the number of compliments he'd thrown her way, she was pretty sure he *would* ask her out. She didn't want to just shoot him down. He was too sweet a guy for that. But she maybe could use Tucker as an excuse.

She wasn't totally sure she could call what was happening with Tucker an actual relationship. Not yet, anyway. Questions pulsed around in her brain about whether or not she actually *wanted* whatever was happening with Tucker to be an actual relationship, but she ignored them for the time being. In the context of defining her friendship with David, that part didn't necessarily matter.

"Dating definitely isn't always easy," Avery said. "But things are going okay right now. I just started seeing someone again."

David frowned. "Again?"

"He's an old friend—an old *boyfriend*. But we've been hanging out a little bit, and, I don't know. Something might be happening."

"A rekindling," David said, not even trying to hide the dejection in his voice. "That's too bad." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he started shaking his head. "No, that's

not what I meant. I'm ...” His face turned bright red. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that out loud.”

That wasn’t the response Avery had expected, and yet, when she thought about it, it was exactly the kind of answer she should have expected from David. The longer she spent time with him, the more he puzzled her. No, that wasn’t right. He wasn’t puzzling at all. He was maybe the most genuine guy she’d ever met. There was no posturing, no trying to look cool. What guy admits to trying on six different outfits before leaving his house? She’d never met anyone who had such a complete lack of *game*. And *that’s* what was puzzling. That even with all that, his compliments still made her feel all tingly inside. She couldn’t decide if she’d enjoyed being around him all day because she felt flattered by his unfiltered adoration, or if she liked being around him because she liked ... *him*.

But Tucker was still a thing. And possibly a big thing.

“I guess it’s good you let me know you’re seeing someone,” David said. “I’m pretty sure I like you enough I would have wanted to ask you out again. You’ve just saved me from a lot of unnecessary anxiety.”

Avery smiled. “Can we be friends without you feeling any anxiety? Because I’d love to be friends.”

David blew out a breath and his face relaxed. “After all the ridiculous things I’ve said to you today, I think offering friendship is pretty nice of you.”

“You haven’t said anything ridiculous.” Avery reached over and squeezed his arm. “I really like that you’re so open about everything. And I promise I didn’t make up an old ex-boyfriend just to keep you from asking me out. If the timing were different . . .” Avery’s words trailed off, leaving David room to fill in the blank however he wanted. She wasn’t actually sure things *would* be different if she wasn’t seeing Tucker again, but David didn’t need to know that. “What do you say? Friends?”

“I hardly know anyone else in Charleston,” David finally said with a shrug. “I could use a friend.”

Avery held out her hand. “Here. Give me your phone.”

David unlocked the screen and handed over his phone. Avery opened up his text messages and sent herself a text before handing it back. “There. Now you have my number, and I have yours.”

David looked at his phone, clearly amazed that it had been so simple. “Is that how people exchange numbers these days? That was so easy.”

Avery chuckled. “You really should get out of the hospital more.” She glanced at her watch and then dropped her napkin onto the table. “I’ve got to get back to work.” She stood up. “Thank you for lunch, and for coming to see me. I’m really glad you did.”

David stood up as well. “Of course. I had a really nice time.”

Something about the way he looked at her made Avery's breath catch in her chest. It was a tiny something, but it wasn't so tiny that she didn't notice, that she didn't wonder why this man, so very different from anyone she'd ever dated before, still affected her. She bit her bottom lip. "So, I'll see you around?"

He gave her that same full smile she'd already grown to appreciate. "I hope so."



## CHAPTER 4

DAVID PULLED THE CURTAIN closed around his patient and ran a weary hand across his neck. “Hey, Annie?” he said to the nurse walking toward him. “Can you call ortho down for a consult on this broken arm? Patient name Gregory?”

“Sure thing. Have you seen Dr. Wiseman?” Annie said. “Lab results just came back for her.”

“I’m here,” Lucy said, as she rounded the corner. Lucy took the results from Annie then fell into step next to David. “Hey, how was the aquarium?” she asked. “You never responded to my text.”

David grunted. He hadn’t responded because there wasn’t anything to say. Sure, Avery had given him her number, but she’d made it really clear she only wanted to be his friend. Talking about it just made him feel more ridiculous.

Lucy nudged him. “Hey. I deserve more than a grunt.”

“She invites *everyone* to the aquarium. It wasn’t a special invitation. Just something causal that she says to anyone new

to the area. And it was clear that she knew I thought it had meant something more which just made the entire thing embarrassing and awkward.”

Lucy bit her lip, obviously trying not to laugh. “I’m sure it wasn’t that bad.”

“It was, Lucy. It really, really was.”

“Did you get her number?” she asked, giving him some side-eye.

He hesitated. “Only because she’s my neighbor and she said we could be friends. But she made the *friends* part really clear.”

Lucy shook her head. “I still count that a victory. She wouldn’t have given you her number if she found you repulsive, right?”

David groaned. Were things really so bad that his success was defined by whether or not he was *repulsive*? “What an accomplishment,” he said dryly.

They stopped outside a curtained triage area. “This is me,” Lucy said, “but we aren’t done talking about this.”

The last thing David needed was Lucy hounding him about Avery. It was already hard enough to keep her off his mind. At work, he managed fine. The ER kept him engaged enough there wasn’t much time to sit around and think about his neighbor. But when he wasn’t at the hospital, it felt as though he was suddenly seeing Avery everywhere. At the little grocery store on the island. At the coffee shop next door. In

her front yard or on her porch or in her driveway. It seemed like every time David came home from work, she was outside, her sun-bleached hair and tan skin taunting him on an almost daily basis. Did the woman never go inside her house? And it's not like David worked consistent hours. He rarely got home at the same time of day. How was she *always* around? Was that new? Or was it that he was simply looking for her more than he had before?

Despite their frequent encounters, weeks went by and David never did anything more than raise his hand and wave in a friendly, *neighborly* way. Whenever he thought of their not-at-all-a-date day at the aquarium, his face still flushed with embarrassment. He couldn't quite muster the nerve to try and talk to her again. Even if she hadn't found him repulsive.

David looked over the chart of his next patient, sharpened his focus, and pushed Avery from his mind. He wasn't a lovesick teenager. He was an adult, perfectly capable of schooling his wandering thoughts. And school them he did, all the way through the end of his shift and the first two hours of his evening at home.

Then Avery showed up on his back porch, blood dripping down her leg.

He pushed open the screen door. "Hey."

She stood, slightly hunched, a rag pressed into her inner thigh. "Hi." She swallowed. "Um, I think I maybe need some stitches."

David ushered her into his kitchen and pulled out a chair, motioning for her to sit. She dropped onto the seat, extending her leg out in front of her. “What happened?” David reached for the rag Avery still pressed into her skin, noticing the softness of her fingers when he brushed against them. He cleared his throat and willed himself to focus. She smelled like summertime and sweat and the gardenias that bloomed along the hedge between their homes. The cut was high on her thigh—so high that she had to hitch up the hem of her shorts for him to see the entire thing.

“I was pressure washing the metal roofing that covers my back porch, and I slipped.”

David looked up and met her gaze. “Off the roof?”

Avery lifted her shoulders and grimaced. “Not all the way. I caught myself on the edge, but something on the gutter ...” She took a deep breath. “Is it bad?”

The cut was deep, about six inches long and definitely stitch-worthy, but the bleeding had already slowed; that was a good sign. “Not too bad,” David said. “When was the last time you had a tetanus shot?”

“What? I need a shot?” Avery sat up a little taller, almost kneeling David, who still crouched in front of her, in the face.

He leaned back, just in time to avoid the blow.

“Oops. Sorry. I need a shot?” she said again, her voice softer the second time around.

“If you haven’t had a tetanus shot in the last five years, it’d be a good idea,” David said.

“I’ve had one,” Avery said. “When I started work. I had to get a booster.”

David nodded. “Then there’s no reason why I can’t stitch you up here.”

“Really? In your kitchen?”

“Only if you’re comfortable with it. I can drive you to the hospital if you’d rather do that.”

Avery swallowed and her face paled, but she nodded. “Does it have to be stitches? Can’t you tape it closed or something? You can do that now, right? Use glue?”

David looked at the wound then shook his head. “It’s a little too deep and with its position on your leg, I worry there will be too much tension on the wound for anything but stitches.”

“So, you’re going to have to use a needle?”

David reached for her wrist and felt for her pulse, suddenly worried she might pass out. “Just take a few deep breathes, okay? You’re going to be fine.”

Avery leaned her head against the back of the chair and closed her eyes, nodding just slightly. “I don’t like needles,” she said, her voice almost too quiet to hear.

“I promise you won’t have to watch.” It was flimsy reassurance, but it was the best David could do.

She nodded her head without opening her eyes. “Okay.”

“I’m going to grab a suture kit, okay? I’ve got one in the back.” David walked down the dark hallway that led to the spare bedroom-turned-office at the back of his house. Well, eventual office. It was currently functioning as more of a makeshift overflow of everything he hadn’t unpacked yet. The disorganization killed him, but he needed more than a few hours away from the hospital to tackle it, and so far, those stretches of time were hard to come by.

At least he knew where the suture kit was. Grabbing one from a box just to the right of his desk, he hurried back to the kitchen.

Avery eyed him warily. “You just keep those on hand, huh? You have a lot of injured neighbors showing up on your doorstep?”

David chuckled. “More than you might think. But no, I don’t generally keep them on hand. Before my job started here, I had a few months to kill so I worked at this free clinic down in Bolivia. They were desperate for supplies, so I bought what I could and filled my suitcases.”

“Wow.”

David opened the kit, pulling out what he would need and setting everything up on the table. “I still have a closet full of things I couldn’t fit.”

“Lucky me, I guess?” Avery’s voice caught and she closed her eyes again. “I hate needles,” she said, her voice low. “Did I already tell you that? I really, really hate needles.”

David looked at her face, even paler than before, leaning against the back of his hard kitchen chair. “Here.” He reached out his hand and she opened her eyes. “Let’s move into the living room. That way you can be more comfortable.”

She bit her lip. “I don’t want to get blood on your couch. I’m sure I’ll be fine here.”

“You won’t get blood on the couch, and I don’t want to risk you passing out in my kitchen. I need you stable and still, unless you want a scar that looks like it belongs in a Harry Potter novel.” He motioned again. “Come on. I’ll help you.”

She finally relented, slipping one hand into his, the other pushing the dish towel she’d used to cover the cut back against her leg. “Fine, fine.”

David helped Avery to the couch, guiding her as she leaned back onto the cushions. He tried not to notice how much he liked the feel of her hand in his. He slid the coffee table a little closer. “Here. Maybe if you prop your foot up on the table ...” He pushed a hand through his hair. No matter how she sat, there was no way he was suturing a cut on her inner thigh without getting close into her personal space. Almost *too close*.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t cut myself in a more convenient spot,” Avery said with a knowing grin.

David’s cheeks flushed with heat, but he managed a smile. “Don’t worry about it. This could definitely be worse.” He retrieved his supplies from the kitchen and sat down on the

edge of the coffee table. “Not that this is bad. This is good. I mean, not good as in—”

“Dave,” Avery said, cutting him off. She held a finger out and pressed it against his lips. “Shhhh. Please just doctor me so I can stop freaking out about the needles you’re about to thread through my skin.”

“Got it,” he said, hoping she didn’t notice the slight tremor in his voice. What did she do to him? He was a medical professional. A man who kept his cool even in the most stressful of situations. It’s what he was known for. Yet, she turned him into a fumbling, bumbling middle schooler. He didn’t even care that she’d called him Dave.

He willed himself to forget about how close she was, how warm her skin felt, and just zero in on the actual wound.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. “Lightheaded at all?”

She shook her head no.

“Do you have any allergies? Latex? Iodine?”

Another head shake.

“Okay. This will feel cold for a minute.” He swabbed the cut down with iodine. “And you’ll feel a tiny pinch,” he said, before injecting the lidocaine, “but it will only last a second and then you won’t feel much of anything else. Maybe a little tugging here and there.”

She nodded again, but kept her eyes closed. “Just tell me when it’s over.”



David chuckled to himself. That she was willing to climb onto her roof to do a little pressure washing but couldn't stand the sight of needles? Somehow it only made him like her more.

## CHAPTER 5

AVERY CRACKED ONE EYEBALL, peeking out at David's face. If she looked at the stitches, at the actual needle going into and out of her flesh, she'd pass out for sure. But she could look at Dave's face. It was a nice face.

“Hey, you're wearing different glasses.”

David looked up and met her gaze. “Yeah. Do you ... do you like them? My friend, Lucy, picked them out. Her husband is an optometrist and said something about them better complimenting my bone structure.” His cheeks turned red again. “Sorry. That was a lot of information. I should have just said thank you.”

“Lucy was right,” Avery said. “They look good. They make you look older. In a good way, you know? More professional.”

He swallowed and she watched his Adam's apple bob up and down. “Thank you.”

She closed her eyes again, sighing as she sank even further into the couch. “How am I doing?”

“You’re doing great,” David said. “Just a few more and you’ll be all set.”

“So I’m venturing a guess that you’re not going to let me pay you for this,” Avery said.

David grunted. “Absolutely not.” He patted her leg gently. “All finished. Just let me wrap it up for you. You’ll need to keep it clean and dry for ten days. Showers are fine after the first 48 hours, just dry it well and cover it afterwards.”

She opened her eyes and watched as he put some gauze over the cut then wrapped a bandage around her leg to hold it in place. “You’re good at this.”

David’s eyes lifted, but he didn’t quite smile. “This is probably the easiest part of what I do but thank you.”

“Sure. But I can see you being very good with patients,” Avery said. “Putting them at ease.”

“Once I convince them I’m really their doctor and not a first-year med student, I think I do okay.”

Avery stretched her leg out in front of her, bending it at the knee, then extending it again.

“How does it feel?” David lowered himself onto the couch beside her.

She shifted to give him a little more room. She’d been taking her half of the couch out of the middle. “Good. I can’t feel anything, really.”

“You probably will a little later. You can take some ibuprofen if it starts to feel sore.”

Avery nodded. “Noted.” With her wound tended to and bandaged up, it was probably time for her to go. Instead, she pulled a throw pillow off of David’s couch, running her fingers over the loose weave of the yarn. “Did you always want to be a doctor growing up?” she asked, looking into the intense blue of his eyes.

“Always,” he answered, his voice sure. “By the time I was four years old, I could already name every bone in the body, and identify all the body systems by name and function. I was obsessed.”

“That’s unbelievable,” Avery said. “Your parents must not have known what to do with you.”

He grinned. “It was definitely a struggle. My father’s also a physician, so he at least had the background to answer my endless questions.”

“Are you close to your parents?” Avery maybe should have worried the question was too personal. Her friendship with David was still new, and she didn’t want her interest to suggest *more*. But he was easy to talk to. She sensed she could have asked him just about anything and he probably would have answered.

“Pretty close,” David said. “I don’t see them very often. My father recently retired, so they’re traveling all the time now, but we talk every Sunday that I’m not at the hospital.”

A twinge of something shot through Avery's heart. She liked that David was close to his parents, that they talked on a regular basis. She only had one brother, and she'd never had any cousins growing up. When she dreamed of settling down, she always imagined marrying into a family that was large and welcoming and happy. "And you have the one sister, right?" Avery said. "Is that all?"

"Three older sisters, actually. Two are married, with two kids a piece, and then the one just older than me is the one that did my house hunting for me. She lives over in Atlanta."

"So you're the baby of the family."

David nodded. "Yep. And they never let me forget it."

Avery smiled wide. The idea of three older sisters hovering over David, caring about him made her happy. It was probably fun to see them all together.

It occurred to her that she'd let her mind wander a little too far unchecked. Why was she thinking about David's big family, relative to her own desire to marry *into* a big family?

"If you aren't going to let me pay you, you'll have to let me do something else for you."

David shook his head. "It's not that big a deal, Avery. I don't mind."

"I know. But still. I'll feel bad if I don't do something." An idea popped into Avery's brain and before she could even really think about it long enough to decide if it was a good idea, she blurted it out. "Let me cook dinner for you."

He pursed his lips, lines creasing his forehead. *But you said you didn't want to date*, she imagined him thinking. *And dinner sounds very date-like.*

“Just something casual,” Avery said, hoping her enthusiasm would be enough to convince him. “Lowcountry style. When’s your next night off?”

“Um, Tuesday, I think?”

She nodded. “Tuesday works. Come over at eight?” She scooted forward on the couch. It was time to go, before she started asking David how many kids he hoped to have, or whether he was a dog or a cat person. David shot to his feet, offering her both of his hands. Avery gladly accepted his help, using him for balance as she maneuvered onto her one good leg. She took a tentative step forward, feeling a slight tugging where the stitches were, but no pain.

“You okay?” he asked. “Why don’t you let me walk you home?”

She shook her head. “I’m good. It actually doesn’t hurt at all.”

David’s expression said he didn’t believe her. “I’d feel better if you let me at least see you to your front door. It’s dark outside. I don’t want you to hobble into a hole, or something.”

“Yeah, that stretch of grass between my house and yours is pretty treacherous,” Avery joked.

David rolled his eyes. “Listen, you-who-fell-off-your-roof, better safe than sorry.”

Avery liked it when he teased her. It meant he'd completely forgotten to be nervous around her. "Fine. You can walk me home, Dr. Daniels. As long as you agree to dinner on Tuesday night."

"Right. Dinner. Eight o'clock," he said, as he led her through the kitchen to his back door. There was a hint of confusion in his voice, like he still wasn't sure why she'd asked him to dinner. That he wore it so openly rather than try and play it cool, like he'd expected the invitation, was so completely endearing, Avery almost wanted to hug him.

They walked in silence to Avery's back door, David only having to steady her once when she'd slipped on a patch of wet grass. "Thanks for walking me home," she said. "And thank you for taking care of me. For everything."

He nodded. "No problem."

She opened the door to go inside, but David called her back. "Avery, wait."

She turned to face him.

"This is just a *friend* dinner, right?"

The way he stood there, so open and honest and adorable with his new glasses and slightly mussed up hair—maybe it could be a date. Maybe she even wanted it to be. But then Tucker flashed into her mind. He'd been texting her a lot lately. *Flirting* a lot. She had to see if there was something to it.

"Just a friend dinner," she agreed.

He nodded, though she didn't miss the flash of disappointment that flitted across his face. "Sounds good. I'll see you then."



## CHAPTER 6

DAVID PACED BACK AND forth in his kitchen, his eyes glued to the glowing green numbers on the front of his microwave. 7:48. How had it been 7:48 for twenty straight minutes? He couldn't show up early. If he'd learned anything from the one serious relationship he'd ever been a part of, it was that showing up early to someone's home was not the same thing as showing up early to a restaurant or a business meeting.

Needing a change of scenery, he pushed open his back door and stepped onto his back porch, then immediately darted back inside. Avery was outside in her yard. *With a guy.*

David moved to his living room window, and peeked through his blinds, his body angled so that even if Avery looked directly at his house, she wouldn't notice him spying. The thought made him cringe and he turned away.

Was he really spying? Would he stoop so low?

Just one more look, a short one, and then he'd turn away. The man had his arms around Avery's waist, his head just inches from her ear. She smiled and laughed, clearly amused by whatever he had said, then moved like she wanted to push him away. He caught her arms, tugging her even closer in a move that looked a little too controlling to David, but Avery didn't resist. When the man leaned in to kiss her, she *really* didn't resist. There was an obvious familiarity to the way they moved together; this wasn't their first kiss. The man had to be the old boyfriend Avery had mentioned.

Jealousy flared in David's gut and he tried and failed to stamp it out. What was the point? He was in an entirely different league than the guy that held Avery in his arms. They fit together. Looked good together. Had the same sun-bleached hair and tan skin that made them look like beach native Charlestonians. David's gaze dropped to the man's pressed khaki shorts and deck shoes. *Yep*. Definitely a local.

David sighed and moved away from the window. Back in the kitchen, the clock finally read eight o'clock. He hesitated. Better to be late and avoid the old boyfriend? Or be right on time and risk an awkward confrontation?

The clock flipped over to 8:01.

David tensed. He was never late for anything.

With a final exasperated sigh, he pushed out the back door, closing it firmly behind him. He'd deal with the old boyfriend. He wasn't going to disrespect Avery by being late.

The grass in his back yard felt spongy and damp under his flip flops, something he'd learned was typical in the Lowcountry. In some places, the ground was *always* wet. Living at sea level was such a different experience than living in Chicago.

Avery was no longer in her backyard, so David angled toward the front of her house, intending to knock on her front door like a normal house guest. For a brief moment, he hoped the boyfriend would already be gone but when he reached the side of Avery's driveway, he saw them there, standing together, leaning into the side of the man's car.

Avery's back was to him, but the boyfriend saw him right away. For a split second, his gaze narrowed, but then he pasted on a practiced smile. "You must be David," the guy said. He shifted away from Avery and extended his hand. "Tucker King. I've heard a lot about you."

Avery turned to face him. "David," she said with a smile. "Is it eight o'clock already?"

David glanced at his watch. "Three past, actually." David returned Tucker's handshake. "David Daniels," he said. "Nice to meet you."

Tucker draped an arm across Avery's shoulders. "Avery told me how you took care of her leg the other day. That was really great of you."

Tucker's words sounded sincere enough, but he still rubbed David the wrong way. There was a territorial vibe to the way

he pulled Avery close to him, and a look in his eye that clearly said *mine, mine, mine*.

“I wish I could stay and join ya’ll for dinner,” Tucker said, “but I’ve got a business meeting I need to get to. Another time, though. I’d love to get to know you better, David.” Tucker’s Southern accent made his words sound lilting and smooth. David couldn’t decide if it made them more convincing or not. They seemed to work on Avery, though. She moved toward him, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’ll call you later.”

Tucker whispered something in her ear, too low for David to hear, and Avery blushed, shoving Tucker playfully. “Get out of here,” she said. “I mean it.”

Tucker grinned cockily before looking at David one last time, his eyebrows raised as if to challenge him. David didn’t so much as flinch, though it took all his willpower not to do so. He wasn’t delusional enough to think he could ever compete with someone like Tucker. But he had enough pride to hold his ground, even if he felt like dying on the inside.

Avery gave Tucker a final wave goodbye as he pulled out of the driveway then finally turned her full attention on David. She took a deep breath and smiled wide. “Ready? I bought us some oysters.”

David tensed. Oysters? When MUSC had invited him out to Charleston to offer him the attending position in the ER, they’d taken him to dinner at a raw bar downtown. He’d watched as everyone else had slurped down the oysters; David had come close, but it only took one person at the table saying

something about salty sea snot for him to abandon the cause. “If I don’t eat the oysters, I still get the job, right?” he’d asked. Everyone had laughed, assuring him his job was safe, which was all he needed to know to stay oyster-free.

But for Avery?

“Come on,” Avery said, motioning toward her backyard. “They’re on ice on the back porch. Harvested fresh this afternoon.”

David silently hoped there was also a deep fryer on the back porch. Enough breading and sizzling fat, and he could choke anything down.

“Did *you* harvest them?” he asked as he followed Avery around the side of her house.

“Nah, it’s too hot. After the end of May, the island closes the public shellfish grounds because the water is too warm. Too much risk of bacteria.”

“You say that like someone who *has* harvested them before.”

She looked over her shoulder and grinned. “Ask me in February and I’ll take you with me.” She pulled open the door to her screened in back porch, holding it open with her hip while David filed in behind her.

“Have you ever had oysters before?” She led him to a table pushed up against the back of the house and opened a large cooler that sat on top. David peered in and saw dozens of large, bumpy shells resting on a cold bed of ice. He

swallowed. “Nope. But not because I haven’t had the opportunity.”

Avery laughed. “That’s what everybody says until they’ve had oysters with me. You dress them the right way? I promise it’s an experience you won’t want to forget.”

He looked at her, at the evening sun on her hair and the freckles on her cheeks and the excitement in her eyes and thought he’d probably eat anything if she asked him to. She was mesmerizing. Stunning. Captivating in a way no woman had ever captivated him before. He cleared his throat. “So, Tucker.”

Avery stilled. “What about him?”

Good question. David had brought him up, but why? What did he really want to know about the guy? “How are things going between you two?”

“Good, I guess,” Avery said. “Stay here—I need to get all the fixings from the kitchen.” She left the door into the kitchen open, the cool air pouring out and over David. He’d almost forgotten how warm it was until he felt the contrast. Avery appeared moments later carrying a large tray full of lemons and cocktail sauce, crackers, olive oil and what looked like minced garlic. She set it down on the table beside the cooler. “I’m sorry if things got weird with him, there at the end before he left. I saw him giving you that ...” She wiggled her hands in front of her face. “That look.”

David cleared his throat, suddenly wishing he’d never brought Tucker up. “It definitely felt a little like he was

claiming his territory.”

“Which is dumb,” Avery said, not missing a beat. “I’m not territory to be claimed.”

“I agree with you,” David said. He swallowed the next part of his comment. If she thought Tucker was dumb, why was she dating him?

“So why am I dating him?” she asked, guessing his thoughts.

David let out a breath. “I didn’t say that.”

“No, but you thought it. I could practically hear the words buzzing around in your brain.”

“I’ll think quieter next time,” David said with a grin. “But truly—it’s none of my business. You don’t really owe me an answer.”

“Except, I like you, Dave. And I don’t want you to think I’m an idiot.” She lifted a few oysters out of the cooler, placing them on the countertop, and picked up a knife with a rounded wooden handle and a short, pointed blade. “Here. You take this one.” She picked up another knife, slightly smaller, then reached for an oyster. She paused, knife poised over the shell and looked David right in the eyes. “Tucker and I were really good together for close to two years. Our break-up wasn’t great, but we’ve both grown and changed over the past year, so I think we’re going to give it another go. The whole situation is still so new. I think he just felt a little weird about you and me having dinner together.”

David held her gaze. “Okay.”

Avery’s shoulders fell. “You don’t believe me.”

He sighed. “Avery, I only spent four seconds with the guy, and your relationship isn’t any of my business.” Did she want him to wish her good luck? Tell her he thought Tucker was a great guy? He really *hadn’t* spent enough time with him to form a valid opinion and he doubted Avery would want to hear his *invalid opinion*, seeing as how it was hastily formed and based on raging jealousy.

Clearing his throat, he held up his oyster knife. “So I guess I’m supposed to use this for something?”

Avery hesitated only a moment before fully embracing David’s subject change. “Yes.” She looked at the oyster still in her hand. “So you slide the knife in here, at the hinge, like so,” she said, as she demonstrated, “then slide it all the way around the edge until you can lift the top right off.” She lifted the top of the shell, revealing a shining, shimmering ... glob. David took a deep breath. He was really supposed to eat that thing? Steeling his nerves, he tried to smile at Avery. He’d seen some of the grossest things imaginable in the ER. He could handle this.

She laughed. “Oh my word. Try not to look so miserable. At least not until you actually try one.” She held out the oyster. “Here. You hold this, and I’ll doctor it up for you.”

“Wait, you’re going to make me eat it right now? Right here as we shuck them?”



“Absolutely,” Avery said. “At least this first one. I want to know what you think.”

“Right *now* now?” David asked again.

“*Now* now,” Avery said. “So first you add a little splash of lemon.” David watched as she squeezed the lemon slice over the oyster. “Then you add a little bit of olive oil, a little bit of garlic paste, and a healthy dollop of cocktail sauce.”

“And I’m just supposed to ...” David felt panic rising in his throat and he swallowed it down. The panic, not the oyster. He still wasn’t sure he’d be able to manage *that*.

“Slurp it down,” Avery said. “Except, wait.” She picked up a little tiny fork off the tray. “It’s easier if you loosen it from the shell first. That way, it falls right into your mouth.” She stuck the fork under the oyster, wiggling it gently until the mass slid forward just slightly.

David held the oyster in his hand but made no move to lift it to his mouth.

“Come on!” Avery said, bouncing on her toes. “Shake it a little, then take it all in at once.”

He held the oyster to his lips but hesitated. “I don’t know if I can do it,” he said, legit fear in his voice.

Avery laughed. “Come on!” she said again. “Trust the flavor explosion. I *promise* you’ll love it.”

Gathering his nerves, he tilted the oyster into his mouth and slurped.

It actually *did* feel like a flavor explosion in his mouth. The salt of the oyster and the bite of the cocktail sauce and the smooth nutty flavor of the olive oil combined into something that actually tasted . . . *good*. He chewed and swallowed, then met Avery's gaze, his eyes wide. "That was amazing."

She held her hands up in victory. "See? I told you!"

"I mean, the texture is a little weird. But it's totally worth it."

"You get used to the texture," Avery said. "Some people eat them with crackers so they have something to crunch, but I think the crackers dilute the flavor. This is the best way."

"I trust you," David said, surprised by how much he actually meant what he said. "Can I have another one?"

They stood on the back porch, laughing and talking as they shucked the rest of the oysters, then they took them inside where the conversation continued as they ate, right down to the very last oyster.

"The last one is yours," Avery said. "You're the guest."

David shook his head. "But you're the chef. You deserve it."

"I'm pretty sure God was the chef of these. I can't take the credit."

David dressed the oyster, then handed it to her. "You at least get the credit for convincing me to try them. I'm officially converted."

Avery grinned, then ate the last oyster, dropping the shell back onto the plate. “Get a little sun on those shoulders and we might make you a South Carolina boy yet.”

“I think I need to make it through my first hurricane before I can take that title,” David said with a roll of his eyes. “Get over my need to board up the windows when the first cloud blows in.”

Avery laughed and adrenaline surged through David’s veins. Knowing he’d caused that sound was the best kind of natural high.

“But you were so cute trying to board up your windows.”

“Very funny,” David said. Something crackled in the air between them. At least, David felt like something did, though he was far from an expert. But there was something about the way Avery looked at him, about the awareness in her gaze, that made him wonder. Did she sense it too? As far as he was concerned, everything about Avery felt both incredible and impossible all at the same time. He was afraid to look away, mostly because he couldn’t believe she was there, with *him*, in the first place.

An image of Tucker, his arms wrapped around Avery, flashed through his mind.

*Stupid Tucker.*

David pushed himself up from the table with enough force that his chair tipped backward, clattering to the kitchen floor.

Avery looked at him in surprise. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat, trying to cover his discomfort. Stupid Tucker? No. Stupid ego—his ego—was likely more appropriate. He ran a hand across his jaw. “Want to go for a walk?”

Avery raised her eyebrows. “There’s more food. I baked some halibut. And then there’s dessert.”

“Oh, right. Of course there is. Sorry.” He moved to sit back down, but Avery stilled him with a hand on his arm.

“Let’s take a walk first,” she said. “You look like you could use some air. And the food will keep.”

David’s shoulders relaxed. Air sounded good. A walk sounded even better. Spending time with Avery made him feel a little like a caged animal. His feelings were so intense, so overwhelming, it took a lot of effort to remain calm. Normal.

His impulse was to just tell her. How beautiful he thought she was. How captivating he found her smile. How much he appreciated her sense of humor, her understated confidence. It was completely ridiculous. He’d only known the woman a couple of weeks. Only spent a handful of days in her presence.

David had never experienced anything like it before. When it came to relationships of any kind, he was cautious, careful. It generally took him a long time to warm up to new people. It hadn’t taken five minutes for him to warm up to Avery. Why was she so different? It made him feel reckless, which thrilled him and terrified him all at the same time.

## CHAPTER 7

AVERY LED DAVID DOWN the sandy path that cut between their backyards to the beach. Halfway there, the path turned into a worn, wooden walkway that wound through twenty-five yards of scrubby beach flora, a natural barrier that separated the water from the homes that lined the shoreline. It was one of the things she loved most about Sullivan's. No long, concrete boardwalks, or looming hotels overshadowing the beach. Her island was wild and unpolished, just the way she liked it. The sun was low on the horizon behind them, minutes from dropping behind the island.

"It's beautiful here," David said, an echo to her own thoughts. "Sometimes when I'm working too much, I forget this is in my backyard."

They hit the beach and turned right, walking toward the lighthouse that rose in the distance.

"You ought to come out here every day," Avery said. "Make it a part of your bedtime ritual."

“Is it part of *your* bedtime ritual?” He asked the question, but then looked away quickly enough that she almost missed the blush coloring his cheeks. She bit her lip, not wanting to smile and make him even more uncomfortable. Was it just that he’d referenced her bedtime routine that made him so nervous? Could the poor guy be any more adorable?

“Most nights, yes,” Avery said. “I think it makes it easier for me to fall asleep.”

“Why? Because of the sounds?”

Avery shrugged. “That’s maybe a part of it. But it’s more about remembering that the world is so much bigger than I am, you know? It’s hard to look at the vastness of the ocean and stay lost inside your own head. Out here, I feel small. But not in a bad way.”

“No, I get that,” David said. “Like a reminder that all the little things that we make so important in our self-centered lives don’t actually matter when you think about how big the world really is. I felt that hiking the Andes in Bolivia.”

“Exactly!” Avery reached out and grabbed David’s arm, just above his wrist, excited that he understood how she felt. She’d tried to explain her feelings to Tucker once and he’d completely misunderstood. “How is feeling small a good thing?” he’d said, shooting her a confused look.

Before she moved her hand, David shifted, twisting his arm and catching her fingers with his own. It happened so fast she hardly knew how it happened, but it *did* happen, and she was *legit* holding his hand.

Heat traveled up her arm, ping-ponging her heart in places she didn't expect. What was happening to her? She wasn't interested in David. David was ... everything that had *never* been her type. Which meant she *had* to let go of his hand. She pulled her hand away, crouching down and adjusting the strap on her sandal that didn't actually need adjusting. "Um, want to look for sand dollars?"

David paused before answering, looking at his hand a long moment before shoving it into his pocket. She'd tried to be subtle, but he'd clearly felt her rejection. "As long as you make sure I don't kill any," David said, a serious look in his eye.

His eyes somehow looked bluer on the beach. With little flecks of gold that shone in the late evening light. She suddenly wondered what he'd look like with his glasses off, his hair a little more tousled, the top few buttons of his shirt undone.

"Tucker's an attorney," she said abruptly, willing the image of her boyfriend into her mind. Or would she still call him her ex-boyfriend? Maybe her newly recycled boyfriend?

"Great," David said, following behind her as she walked closer to the water. That's where they'd find the best sand dollars.

"His father is in real estate. He owns half of Charleston, and Tucker sits on his legal team."

"Good for him," David said, his voice detached.

“He really is a nice guy,” Avery said. *Why* was she still talking about Tucker? “Maybe we could all go out sometime. On a double date or something. I have this friend at work I could set you up with, if you want. Her name is Shelley.”

David stopped, leveling her a stare that was so pointed, so completely transparent that it almost took Avery’s breath away. David’s eyes said everything, like they were some kind of conduit to his innermost thoughts.

*I don’t want to go on a double date with you.*

*I don’t want to be set up with anyone.*

*I want you. I want you. I want you.*

Still, he said nothing until he raised one shoulder in a half-shrug. “Sure. If you want.”

Avery swallowed, afraid to break eye contact. “Great.”

“Great,” David repeated.

Avery could almost picture Shelley and David together. *Almost*. Shelley would agree to it, she was sure, but only because Avery had told her David was a doctor. That kind of thing had always impressed Shelley.

And that didn’t sit right in Avery’s mind. David wasn’t just a status symbol or a six-figure income. He was a real guy who had a lot more to offer than his paycheck. But then, he wasn’t exactly the kind of guy that had dates lined up at his front door. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing if status got the girl *on* the date, as long as it wasn’t the only reason she stuck around.



Avery grunted in frustration. Why did she care so much in the first place?

She didn't.

She *shouldn't*.

She wasn't going to think about it anymore.

“Should we just keep standing here staring at each other?” David said.

Avery brought her focus back to the moment. “Sorry, let's walk,” Avery said quickly, heading off again down the beach. She kept her eyes trained on the ground, looking for signs of the smooth, white sand dollars she knew they'd find hiding in the sand.

“You seem like you've got a lot on your mind,” David said as he fell in step beside her. “I can see you thinking.”

“Yeah?” As long as he couldn't see *what* she was thinking, they might make it through the rest of the night. “I guess I do. Work stuff, and Tucker stuff. Family stuff.” She reached down and pulled a sand dollar out of the sand, rinsing it in the surf that swirled around her feet. She held it up. “See? The bottom is completely smooth. No little purple hairs. That's how you know it's already dead.”

“Got it,” David said. “What sort of family stuff? If you don't mind me asking.”

“Nothing big,” Avery said. “My parents just keep pestering me to move upstate so I can be closer to them and my brother, Shawn. Shawn's wife is from Greenville, and as soon as they

had kids, my parents moved up so they could help out. I think my parents dream of perfect Sunday afternoon meals with all of us together.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” David said.

“Not at all. But, who wants to live in the Upstate? How could I when I’m used to this?” She held her arms out, motioning to the beach around her then spun around, her face tipped up to the sky. The first stars had appeared, twinkling next to the faintly red light she immediately recognized as Mars. “If you come out here in the wintertime, there’s an hour just before the sun sets when you can see four planets at once, stretching in an arc across the sky.” She pointed at Mars, then slowly traced a line across and down toward the horizon. “Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, and then Venus.” She looked back at David. “Jupiter will be out later tonight, but ...” She shrugged. “The winter sky is better.”

David studied her a moment. “You really do love it here, don’t you?”

Avery smiled. “As much as I’ve ever loved anything.”

David reached down and picked up his own sand dollar, holding it up for Avery to inspect. “This one’s good, right?”

She pulled it from his hand, her fingers grazing against his in a way that shouldn’t have made her heart skip but did anyway. “Yep. That’s a keeper,” she said before handing it back.

They walked a few more steps in silence before David spoke again. “I love that about you.”

Avery looked at him and smiled. “What?”

“That you feel so passionately about things. That ... I don’t know. It just seems like everything you do, you do it like you really mean it. I wish I could be more like that.”

“But you are like that, aren’t you? You’re clearly passionate about your work.”

“My work, yes. But you’re like that with everything.”

Avery stifled a laugh. “It got me in trouble when I was a kid. My mother used to tell me I had the ideas of a genius, but the forethought and impulse control of a drunken teenager.”

“Sounds like a dangerous combination,” David said. “But seeing as how I’ve only lived here a couple of months and I’ve already stitched you up once, maybe I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Avery bumped his shoulder with hers. “Hey, now. Don’t be judging. There was nothing unsafe about pressure washing my roof. That was just bad luck.”

“Weren’t you pressure washing your roof while *on* your roof?”

Avery rolled her eyes. “Fine. Maybe I could have been slightly safer. But there was one corner that I just couldn’t reach from the ladder. What else was I supposed to do?”

“I really do admire your boldness. If anything, I had too much impulse control growing up. It seems like all I did was

watch from the sidelines, calculating the likelihood that I might get hurt or that someone might laugh at me. I went to a pool party once and spent an hour and forty-five minutes sitting on the side of the pool watching everyone else swim. I finally found the courage to jump in fifteen minutes before the party was over. It was the best fifteen minutes I had all summer and I just remember thinking, why didn't I jump in sooner? What was I so afraid of, you know?"

Avery shrugged. "I definitely recommend jumping in the pool, but ... I don't know. I think you're pretty okay just the way you are."

David smiled and Avery's stomach tightened, some involuntary reflex that both thrilled and frustrated her at the same time. "Pretty okay, huh?" David said.

"Can I try something?" Avery stopped, turning David to face her. "Just for a minute."

David raised an eyebrow. "I don't know. The look in your eye makes me think I should maybe say no."

She bit her lip. "Just trust me."

The look on his face said he *did* trust her. He nodded slightly, permission to move forward with whatever it was she had planned. Slowly, Avery reached up and gently slid David's glasses from his face. She folded the glasses and hooked them over the collar of her shirt then reached for David's hair, running her fingers through the front, lifting it at the roots and mussing it just enough for him to look a little more casual. Finally, she unbuttoned the top button of his collared shirt.

“There,” she said, her voice soft. “Now you look like you’re dressed for the beach.” Her hands lingered on his chest for a beat longer than necessary, long enough that she could feel the pounding of his heart through his shirt.

David cleared his throat. “Dressed for the beach but too blind to actually see it.”

Avery’s eyes widened. “That bad, huh?”

“Definitely that bad.”

“Fine. You can have the glasses back. But first, give me your phone.”

David pulled his phone from his pocket and unlocked the screen then handed it over. Avery turned so she and David faced the same direction, then leaned in before holding up the phone and snapping a photo of the two of them together. She returned the phone, then returned the glasses.

David put the glasses on before pulling up the photo. He studied it closely, Avery leaning over his arm to look too. “I hardly look like myself,” he said.

“You look exactly like yourself,” Avery said. “Just a slightly more relaxed version. Will you text it to me?”

David nodded, and quickly sent her the photo. “Remember a few weeks back, when I told you my friends tried to make me over?” he asked, his tone a little sheepish. “They told me I didn’t need to button my shirts all the way up, not unless I’m wearing a tie. I guess old habits are hard to break.”

Avery suddenly worried she'd done a bad thing in changing the way David looked. He definitely *looked* more relaxed, but it was more important that he *feel* relaxed. And that meant he ought to be able to dress however he wanted. She wasn't shallow enough to care more about how he looked than how he felt.

"You know what? I think I messed up," Avery said, willing to own her mistake. "You should wear your shirts however you're most comfortable."

David laughed softly and shook his head. "That's just it. This *is* more comfortable. I like it. I don't know exactly how to explain it, but social anxiety messes with your head in weird ways. Dressing the same way, like I always have, feels safer. If I make a change, then I'm creating something new to worry about. Do I look okay? Am I pulling it off? Do people think I'm trying too hard? Logically, I know people don't think about me near as much as my anxiety tells me they do. But it's hard to always realize that in the moment."

"That actually makes a lot of sense," Avery said. "My brother dealt with some pretty intense anxiety growing up. That doesn't sound all that different from the things he used to tell me." Memories of the conversations she used to have with Shawn filled her mind. He'd always turned to her for reassurance, which she'd willingly given. He'd always said she'd kept him grounded.

"If it matters," Avery said, stopping in her tracks. An extra big wave washed up over her feet before she could continue,

threatening to soak her shorts. She danced out of the waves, dragging David with her. “If it matters,” she said, trying again, “I think you *can* pull this off. You do look okay, great even, and you definitely don’t look like you’re trying too hard.” She smiled up at him. “You shouldn’t worry.”

He smiled in a way that warmed her all the way to her center. “Thanks, Avery.”

When they reached the lighthouse, they turned back the way they had come and returned to Avery’s house to finish dinner. The longer they talked, the less Avery worried about whether or not she actually liked David. Whether or not she *should* like David. There was something about him that calmed her, that made her feel steady and sure of herself.

She’d been surprised when she met him to learn that he worked in an ER, but the more she got to know him, the easier it was to imagine how good he was at his job. He had a certain deliberateness that she admired. He was the kind of man she couldn’t imagine angry—the kind that measured his words before speaking them, that thought about consequences, that cared about respect. When he forgot to be nervous, she found him utterly charming. And he *did* forget. And that made Avery happy.

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“I’m not sure I understand what the problem is,” Melba said, her arms tucked securely around Jasper’s middle. “It sounds like you like him and he likes you. Isn’t that the point?”

Avery pulled Cheerwine out of the refrigerator Melba kept plugged in on her screened in back porch. She didn't need to ask. She'd been pulling Cheerwine out of Melba's fridge since she was old enough to hold the bottle by herself. Her certainty that the rounded vintage fridge with the worn silver handle would *always* be stocked with the tall glass bottles full of the South's favorite soda was as unyielding and permanent as her certainty that the moon influenced the tides, and that shrimp and grits was unequivocally the best seafood dish of all time. "But I don't like him." Avery dropped back into her rocking chair and used the hem of her shirt to twist off the top of her soda. "I mean, I do like him. As a friend. But this thing with Tucker..."

Melba scoffed. "Tucker can take his fancy deck shoes and go back to the yacht club where he belongs."

"Be nice, Mel. I loved him," Avery said. "Maybe still love him."

Melba stared out toward the water, her jaw set in a firm line. "And I love bourbon," she finally said. "The way it smells, tastes, the way it warms me from the inside out. But it almost killed me so I gave it up thirty years ago and I haven't looked back since."

Avery rolled her eyes. She'd known Melba since she was three years old. The woman had a right to speak her mind without filtering, without worrying about hurting Avery's feelings. But comparing Tucker to alcoholism? That was pushing it. "Fine, I get it. We can love things that are bad for



us. But what makes you so sure Tucker is bad for me? He's a nice guy, Melba. He was good to me."

"Maybe he was good to you." Melba watched as Jasper jumped off her lap and walked to his water bowl in the corner. "But I don't think he *sees* you. Not in the ways that matter. And that's a shame because you're something special, Avery. Inside and out."

"What makes you so sure David is any better than Tucker? What if he doesn't *see* me either?"

Melba shot her a knowing look and shrugged her shoulders. "I've been around a long time, sugar. I've got good instincts. Plus, I see the way you light up when you talk about him. Your words might be telling me one thing, but your eyes are saying something else altogether."

## CHAPTER 8

DAVID WAS HALFWAY THROUGH his shift before he had a minute to talk to Lucy. He found her reviewing a patient's chart, flanked by a new batch of medical students. He wasn't old. Not even close to old. But he still felt like the med students looked younger and younger every year. Lucy looked up and they made eye contact, David motioning with his head for her to follow him. A few minutes later, she excused herself and crossed to where he leaned against the nurse's station.

"Gastroenteritis," David said.

Lucy shook her head.

"Kidney stones."

Lucy scoffed. "The patient's only fifteen."

"Appendicitis!" David said with a snap of his fingers.

"Bingo. He'll be in surgery within the hour."

"Three guesses," David said. "I think that officially puts me in the lead."

“No way,” Lucy fired back. “You get a penalty because I told you the patient’s age. That means we’re still tied.”

The game was simple. Guess a diagnosis for the other doctor’s patients, without seeing a chart, or examining the patient. The rules made it mostly about luck and not about skill which is exactly the way they wanted it.

David pulled out his phone and tapped until the photo Avery had taken of the two of them on the beach filled the screen. He turned the phone to face Lucy.

Lucy leaned in, studying the photo with her eyes scrunched up. “That’s you!” she finally said with a gasp. “I hardly recognized you. You look great!”

“Thanks,” David said. He adjusted his glasses. Maybe he’d ask John about trying the contacts he’d mentioned.

“And Avery, she’s . . . Wow,” Lucy said, drawing the word out long and slow.

“Wow? Wow what? What does wow mean?”

“Wow means wow. She’s beautiful.”

David’s shoulders fell. If he was reading Lucy’s tone right, what she wasn’t saying, but definitely thinking, was *so beautiful, she’ll never want to date you*. “I know, I know. She’s too beautiful for me.”

“Hey, woah, that is not what I said. Do you really think that? That she’s too good for you?”

“She *isn't* too good for me.” David meant his words. He was happy with the man that he'd become over the years. He loved his job. He had healthy relationships with his family. He believed he would make a good husband for someone eventually. But he was also a realist. And in his world, women that looked like Avery didn't often date men that looked like him. “She *is* too beautiful for someone like me.”

Lucy scoffed. “That's ridiculous. Look at the two of you. You look like a happy couple. No one would ever look at this picture and think you don't belong together.”

“And yet,” David said, “I'm still firmly in the friend zone.” Even as he said the words, David wondered if they were true. When he thought about that moment on the beach, when she'd touched his hair and looked so intensely into his eyes—there was something there. She *had* to feel it, too.

“She's still dating the other guy, huh?”

David nodded. “I met him. I guess they have a lot of history together. Avery seems pretty optimistic.”

“Your tone is telling me you weren't impressed with the guy.”

“Who am I to judge? I'm terrible and awkward when I meet new people. If she likes him ... I don't know. I probably ought to give him another chance.”

Lucy reached up and cupped David's cheek. “You're too good, David.”

“I just hate that I can’t stop thinking about her, even though I know she’s dating someone else. It’s exhausting. She takes up so much space in my brain, and for what? I don’t have a chance with her.”

“I don’t know that I’d give up that easily,” Lucy said. “She’s only dating the guy. They aren’t engaged. And the relationship already failed once, which doesn’t bode well for their second attempt. Maybe you just need to wait it out and see what happens.”

“That feels sad,” David said. “And pathetic.”

“Then you could always make a move. Try and woo her away from the guy.”

David scoffed. “That feels irrational and fatalistic.”

Lucy tapped her lip. “Listen, Dr. Pessimism, I’m trying to help you here. What if you just—*wait*. I know exactly what you need to do. You need to make it easier to stop thinking about Avery by thinking about someone else. You’ve got the new wardrobe, the new glasses. It’s time, David. You need to go on more dates.”

David frowned. He didn’t like the idea of dating anyone that wasn’t Avery. Even if he did, he didn’t know anyone. And the thought of going out socially, among strangers, to try and meet someone felt like the world’s worst sort of punishment. “Like who? I don’t know anyone who doesn’t work at the hospital. Besides Avery.”

“What about Haley, the triage nurse? She’s super smart, really funny once you get to know her, and she’s got that gorgeous long hair. I think she’d be good for you.”

Daniel wasn’t sure he’d ever even spoken to Haley the triage nurse. He definitely hadn’t noticed her hair. “I got nothing,” he said to Lucy.

She rolled her eyes. “Seriously? You don’t even know who she is?”

“What do you want me to say? I don’t think about dating when I’m working.” That was mostly true. But he’d also been consumed with thoughts of Avery since the first moment he’d met her. There wasn’t a lot of room in his brain for noticing anyone else.

A nurse peeked her head around the corner. *Not* Haley. David at least knew that much. “Dr. Daniels?” the nurse said. “New patient in Exam Two. Potential—”

“Wait! Don’t say it,” Lucy said. “It’s a ... herniated disc.”

The nurse shook her head.

“A kid that swallowed a marble?” Lucy tried again.

“Nope,” the nurse said.

“Dang. I’m off my game today.”

“I’ll never not be winning, Lu. You should probably just give up.” David followed the nurse to Exam Two.

“Just think about what I said, okay?” Lucy called out after him. “We could double date if you want.”

The nurse shot David a questioning look at the mention of a date and David felt his cheeks warm. He cleared his throat. “The patient?” he asked expectantly.

“Right,” the nurse said. “Possible sprain or fracture to the left wrist.” She handed David the patient’s chart. “And just a heads up, his fiancée is a little hysterical. She’s convinced his entire arm is broken and I guess their wedding is in a few months? She’s terrified a cast will ruin all their wedding photos.”

“Got it.” David quickly scanned the patient’s information, his eyes catching on the name at the top of the chart. Tucker King. It wasn’t all that common of a name, but this patient had a fiancée. It couldn’t be Avery’s Tucker.

“Order an x-ray just so we can be sure,” David told the nurse. He entered the exam area and paused. It *was* the same guy. And the look on Tucker’s face told David he wasn’t thrilled to discover who his doctor was. The fiancée was nowhere to be found.

Tucker’s displeasure quickly morphed into what came across as practiced charm. “David, right?” Tucker said, his smile wide. “What are the odds?”

David glanced up from the chart and offered Tucker a tight smile. “Let’s stick to Dr. Daniels while we’re at the hospital.”

“Of course. Sorry about that.” Tucker looked at the door, his expression cagey. He was likely hoping the fiancée he didn’t know David knew about wasn’t going to show up and blow his cover.

David's jaw clenched. The conversation he'd just had with Lucy about Avery and Tucker filled his mind. He'd told Lucy he wasn't up for trying to woo Avery away from Tucker, but he took it all back. He'd do anything to get her away from the creep.

He dropped the chart onto the foot of the bed where Tucker lay, his arm propped up on a pile of pillows. "How'd you hurt yourself?"

"Golfing," Tucker said. "It's a stupid story, but I stepped backward into a hole and fell backwards, catching myself with this arm." He held up the injured arm. "I heard a pop, and it started to swell, so here I am."

David sighed. He didn't have to like the guy. He didn't even have to be nice to him. But he did have to be a good doctor. He moved to the side of the bed and silently examined Tucker's wrist. It was swollen and slightly purple, but David didn't think it was broken. He tested the mobility of the wrist, noting when Tucker flinched.

"It hurts like hell, man. Can I get something for the pain?"

David nodded. "You haven't taken anything yet?"

Tucker shook his head.

"I'll send the nurse in with something that will help. The good news is I don't think it's broken. We're going to send you up for an x-ray just to make sure."

"That's good news," Tucker said. "I thought I'd be leaving here in a cast."



“I could be wrong,” David said. “Let’s wait for the x-ray before we make any plans.”

Before David could make it out of the exam room, a woman with long brown hair pushed into the room, heading straight for Tucker. “How are you, baby? Still in pain?” She looked over her shoulder at David. “Have you given him anything for the pain?”

“We’re working on it,” David said, his tone flat.

“Sorry,” she said. “Where are my manners?” Her Southern accent was almost as thick as the scent of her perfume. “I’m Jessica, Tucker’s fiancée.”

“Dr. Daniels.” David shook Jessica’s hand, then looked at Tucker, his eyebrows raised.

Tucker’s eyes were strained, and he shook his head just slightly. David folded his arms across his chest, not breaking eye contact. He wasn’t about to give the guy a free pass.

“Hey, Jessica, sweetie?” Tucker said. “Can you give me a minute alone with the doctor?”

Jessica’s brow furrowed in concern. “Are you okay?”

“Sure. I just need to ask him a few questions. Will you go call my mom for me? Tell her they’re going to do an x-ray and then we’ll know more.”

She nodded, hesitant, but clearly willing to do as he asked. “Okay. I’ll be back in a few.”

Tucker watched her leave, then looked back at David. “I know how this must look.”

David didn’t answer.

Tucker shifted and ran his good hand across his closely cropped hair. “Look, man to man, all right? Avery and I, we were good together. Really good. But she isn’t quite marriage material. I’ve got to think about my future and Jessica is the kind of wife that—” His words cut off, like he suddenly thought better about finishing his sentence. “Avery and I are just having some fun. Messing around while I still can. It doesn’t mean anything.”

David scoffed. “Does *she* know it doesn’t mean anything?”

Tucker’s jaw tensed. He studied David for several long seconds before narrowing his gaze. “Dr. Daniels, I need you to not make this a problem for me,” he said, his tone firm.

David wasn’t the slightest bit intimidated. If anything gave him fortitude, it was his sense of truth and justice and Tucker’s actions dropped him firmly on the *wrong* side of truth. David wouldn’t stand for it. “I’m pretty sure this is a problem you made all on your own.”

Tucker shifted and leaned forward. “I know you’re new around here. You haven’t lived in Charleston long enough to know just how important my family is, so you’ll have to take my word for it. You don’t want to mess with me. You tell Avery about Jessica, it won’t take me five minutes to get you fired from the hospital and stripped of your license to practice in South Carolina.”

David's jaw twitched. Tucker couldn't really do that. Could he?

"When was the last time you took a look at the list of donors for the hospital?" Tucker asked. "You know the new wing they just added to the children's hospital? Look it up and see how much money Francis King donated. I'm pretty sure there's a plaque in the main lobby honoring him for the millions he contributed to the cause. Francis King is my grandfather. You know Gerald Stevenson?" Tucker moved his leg and winced but didn't take his eyes off of David.

David hated to give Tucker an inch in the argument, but he *did* know Gerald Stevenson. He was one of the hospital board members who had interviewed and hired David.

"He plays golf with my father and me every Sunday afternoon. He's known me since I was a kid. You think he'd take your word over mine?"

As if on cue, a voice spoke on the other side of the curtain. "Knock, knock," the deep voice said. The curtain slid to the side and Dr. Stevenson himself entered the small exam area.

"I was just leaving a board meeting when your father called and told me I might find you here." He reached out to shake Tucker's hand. "What did you do to yourself, son?"

"I was on the golf course. Stepped into a hole."

"That's too bad." Dr. Stevenson finally looked at David. "I trust we're taking good care of you?"

“Oh, of course,” Tucker said, offering David a smug smile. “Dr. Daniels has been outstanding.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it,” Dr. Stevenson said. He reached out and shook David’s hand. “Dr. Daniels. You’ll make sure he gets the VIP treatment, won’t you?”

David offered a tight smile. “Of course.”

David excused himself to check on the x-ray and put an order in for Tucker’s pain medication.

Frustration pulsed inside of him. *Why?* What was Tucker even trying to prove with Avery? David was trapped in a way that made rage pump through his veins. Tucker had already proven himself more than capable of lying, so he couldn’t be sure everything he’d spouted about getting David fired wasn’t just an empty threat. Though Gerald Stevenson showing up in the exam room had certainly strengthened Tucker’s argument.

Patient privacy laws did protect Tucker. By law, David couldn’t tell Avery he’d seen him as a patient. Which meant it would be really hard to bring up the existence of the fiancée he’d also met at the hospital without weaving a lie to explain where and how they’d met. But how could he do nothing? How could he let Tucker continue to hurt Avery in such a terrible way?

Lucy walked by and David reached out and stopped her. “Hey. You have a minute?”

Lucy looked at her watch. “Sure. But only one.”

“You ever heard of the King family?” David asked. “A Francis King, maybe? I guess they’re important around here or something?”

Lucy wrinkled her forehead. “Francis King. I know that name. Hold on.” She pulled out her phone, typing something, then scrolling through a few screens before holding her phone out for David to see. “I was right. Francis King is big in real estate around here, I guess. He owns something like half of downtown. He owns the building John’s optometry practice is in.”

David scrolled through the Wikipedia page detailing all of King’s real estate holdings. He kept scrolling, skimming over the historical significance of the King family. They were definitely key players in the establishment of downtown Charleston as the historical and cultural center that it was. He sighed in resignation then swore under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” Lucy asked. “What does Francis King have to do with you?”

“His grandson is my sprained wrist,” he said. “He’s also the guy dating Avery.”

“I’m still not following,” Lucy said.

David looked over Lucy’s shoulder and saw Jessica walking toward them. “See that woman right there? In the pink?”

Lucy followed his gaze. “Yeah?”

Their conversation paused while Jessica passed them, moving on toward Tucker’s exam room.

“That’s his fiancée.”

Lucy frowned in confusion. “Wait, what? I thought he was dating Avery.”

“He is,” David said, his tone level.

Lucy’s eyes lit with understanding. “Ohhh. What a jerk.”

“He just told me if I make this a problem for him, he’ll definitely make it a problem for me.”

“How’s he going to do that? He actually threatened you?”

“Technically, patient privacy laws offer him some protection. You know I can’t go home and tell Avery I saw him in the ER today. Plus, Dr. Stevenson just stopped by to check on him and make sure he was getting the *VIP treatment*.”

Lucy frowned. “Seriously?”

“I guess they play golf together or something.” David pressed his hand to his forehead, massaging his temples with his thumb and forefinger. “What am I supposed to do? Nobody knows me in this town, Lu. I can’t afford to mess anything up.”

“David, even if Dr. Stevenson wasn’t the guy’s best friend, this is a no-brainer. You can’t risk the HIPAA violation. Honestly, you can’t even risk the accusation, especially from someone like the Kings. Even if an investigation proved you didn’t do anything wrong...” She shrugged. “I’ve seen doctors ruined by false accusations before.”

“But how can I *not* tell her? He’s using her. It’s wrong, Lucy. She’s going to get hurt from this.”

Lucy looked at her watch and shook her head. “I need to go. But David, don’t do it. You know the rules. You have to let this go.”

Rules or not, David still felt like a coward. He paced around the doctor’s lounge with fire in his bones. How could he *not* tell Avery the guy she thought she was dating was marrying someone else in a couple of months? How could he let her invest her time and her energy and her heart into something that was doomed to fail? It would humiliate her. He couldn’t just sit by and let that happen.

But what choice did he have? He couldn’t tell Avery directly. That much was indisputable. But then, Avery was a grown woman, capable of making her own choices. She was choosing to believe whatever Tucker was telling her, whatever reasons he’d concocted for why he wanted them to get back together.

He remembered Avery telling him she and Tucker ran in completely different circles. They didn’t share the same friends, hadn’t attended the same schools. He was yacht club parties, and she was county beach parks. She’d said something about how opposites attract. But all that meant was that with a little bit of effort, Tucker could probably keep both women in the dark about his philandering for months. Years, even.

David dropped into a chair by an outside window and pulled out his phone. How had social media not already tipped Avery

off? He ran a quick search for Tucker's name, pulling up several profiles that belonged to him. The profiles were professional and polished, but *not* personal. Lots of posed photos at charity events and extended family group shots in front of perfectly decorated Christmas trees and holiday tables. It looked like the profile of someone who was planning to run for political office. Which, David realized, could absolutely be the case. There wasn't anything on any of the profiles that mentioned the engagement. Was that intentional?

David closed out the search and dropped his phone into his lap. If people checked out *his* social media profiles, they'd think he was still in med school. He hadn't posted anything new in years so he couldn't fault the guy for not living his entire life online. But a larger digital footprint sure would make it easier for Avery to catch Tucker in his lies.

David tapped his foot, frustrated energy making him twitchy. When he had a patient that he couldn't figure out how to treat, it was normally a lack of information that kept him from making an accurate diagnosis. When he wasn't sure, there were labs or scans he could order, tools he could use to gather as much information as possible to aid him in solving the problem.

Maybe that was the problem here. He just didn't have enough information to form an accurate diagnosis. If he knew more, maybe he wouldn't have to *tell* Avery about Tucker and Jessica, because he'd be able to *show* her, lead her somewhere he knew Tucker and Jessica would be so she could catch Tucker in the lie.



But where? And how?

David needed a plan. And quick.

## CHAPTER 9

AVERY SAT ON HER front porch and watched the storm clouds rolling across the sky. She loved a good thunderstorm, partly because she loved the way the storms cooled the heavy, humid air, but mostly because she loved the power of them, the way they riled up the sea and whipped the palm trees into a frenzy. Her older brother had never loved storms growing up. To him, thunderstorms were younger siblings to hurricanes and deserved no love and no respect. When the storms hit, he would hide inside with the dog while Avery and her grandmother sat on the porch, watching the lightning fracture the sky.

She glanced at her watch. Hopefully Tucker would arrive *before* the rain started and they could watch the storm together. They'd originally had plans to go out, but he'd texted an hour earlier asking if they could stay in and watch a movie instead. Avery didn't mind, but it seemed like they'd been spending a lot of time at her house lately. She had to wonder why.

Tucker's truck pulled to a stop in her driveway just as the first raindrops fell. He held a pizza box over his head as he darted up the walkway, ducking under the cover of her porch. "Hey," he said with a grin. He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "What are you doing out here?"

"Watching the storm," she said. "Looks like it's going to be a good one."

Tucker turned and looked at the sky. "Yeah?"

Low thunder rumbled and the wind picked up. Avery caught a whiff of salt and sea and smiled. "What happened to your arm?" she asked, noticing the brace he wore on his wrist.

"It's just a sprain," Tucker said, glancing down. "I fell playing golf the other day. Come on." He opened her front door. "Let's get inside. It's miserable out here."

Avery frowned, but Tucker was already halfway inside and didn't notice. "I'll be in in a minute," she said. The storm door swung closed behind him with a thwap and Avery stood up, moving right to the edge of the porch, close enough that rain dropped onto her arms and splashed onto the end of her nose. She turned to go inside but then paused when she saw David standing on his front porch much the same way she had been. He looked in her direction and she waved, happy that thunderstorms didn't seem to freak him out the same way hurricanes did.

Tucker was already sitting in the living room, his ankles propped up on her coffee table. She stopped beside him and he reached up, pulling her onto his lap just like he used to. She

snuggled into his arms, pressing her nose against his neck, just below his earlobe. He smelled good. Familiar.

“Are you hungry?” he said into her hair. “I had them put pineapple on the pizza just like you like it.”

She sat up and looked at him, her smile wide. “You did that for me? You hate pineapple on your pizza.”

“But I don’t hate you,” he said. He pulled her back down and kissed her, his hands cradling her face. Memories washed over Avery, everything good about her relationship with Tucker swelling inside her. They’d never lacked chemistry, and the familiarity of his touch ignited an aching in her that surprised and nearly overwhelmed her. But somewhere in the back of her brain, a warning bell sounded. She couldn’t forget the reasons they’d broken up, the ways they had hurt each other in the end. She broke their kiss and shifted until she dropped onto the sofa beside him. She would take it slow. Ask the right questions. Make sure that this time, Tucker was in for the right reasons.

She reached for the pizza, opening the box and pulling out a slice. There was only pineapple on a fourth of the pizza, not the entire thing. Good thing Avery wasn’t actually that hungry.

After dinner and a romantic comedy Tucker had been surprisingly willing to watch, Avery pulled him off the couch and hauled him toward the back door. “Come on,” she said. “The rain stopped. Let’s go see what shells the storm washed up on the beach.”

Tucker groaned. “Only tourists go hunting for seashells.”

“What? That’s not true at all. Plus there might be some sand dollars that need saving.” She’d tossed more than a few back into the water after a storm. “You love walking on the beach. Please?”

Tucker finally relented and they made their way down to the ocean. The clouds had blown away revealing a bright full moon in a deep navy sky. The moon reflected over the water and Avery marveled, as she always did, at her luck. No one, not anywhere, loved her island like she did.

Tucker held her hand as they walked, listening as she detailed the new interactive education program she’d been working on at work. He smiled as she talked, waiting when she stopped long enough to toss a sand dollar or starfish back into the water. When he pulled her into his arms just shy of the path back up to her house, she let him.

He kissed her long and deep, then moved his mouth to her ear. “Let’s go inside,” he whispered.

She bit her lip. It was too soon. Every inch of her knew she needed more time to get to know Tucker again. Find her footing without just falling back into the same relationship they’d had before. “Not yet, okay?” Avery said, her voice soft. “I just want to spend a little more time getting to know you again.”

Tucker chuckled. “You already know me, Avery. I’m still the same guy.” His hands slid to her waist and he pulled her closer.

“But I’m not the same woman,” Avery said. “I’m not saying no. I’m just saying ... not yet.”

He didn’t answer her, but when he entwined his fingers with hers, he gave her hand an encouraging squeeze before leading her up the darkened path toward her house.

Just before they reached Avery’s backyard, they met David on his way to the beach. Tucker tensed beside her.

“Nice night for a walk,” David said.

Avery furrowed her brow. David’s tone sounded cold and clipped, almost hostile. “Yeah. We thought so too,” she said, pulling closer to Tucker.

“It must be nice walking at night,” David went on. “In the dark. When no one can see you.”

What was he talking about? Why would they care if anyone saw them? “The moon is actually pretty bright tonight,” Avery said. “You can see without any trouble.” It wasn’t an exaggeration. She could even see well enough to notice David almost rolling his eyes. What was his deal?

“Risky, then,” David said, looking directly at Tucker.

Tucker pulled Avery to the side of the path so David could pass. “Don’t let us keep you from your walk,” he said. “We were just headed inside. I’ve got an important call I need to make. Actually, you’ve maybe heard of him. Gerald Stevenson? Nice guy. My father played a round of golf with him this morning.”

Avery looked at Tucker. “You have to call him now? It’s almost ten o’clock.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tucker said, pressing a kiss to her brow. “He’s on a flight to California and my father asked me to give him some information once he lands, which,” Tucker looked at his watch, “should be happening any second now. But don’t worry. It will only take a minute. It won’t interrupt the rest of our evening.”

Avery had been around Tucker enough to know that work calls were fairly common, even work calls at ridiculous hours. But why did he feel like he needed to tell David?

David looked furious as his gaze moved from Tucker, to Avery and then back again. Finally, he took a step forward, moving past them on the path. “Goodnight Avery,” he said, before shooting Tucker a glare that looked like it could wither the magnolias growing on either side of them. Seriously, what *was* his problem?

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The next morning, Avery showed up on David’s doorstep bright and early. He normally left for work way earlier than she did and he was often gone for what seemed like days at a time. She had to catch him when she knew she could.

She had to knock twice before he finally opened the door. He wore scrubs, his hair still wet from the shower. He wasn’t wearing his glasses, but he also didn’t seem to have any trouble seeing. Was he wearing contacts?

“Hi,” he said, pushing the door open for her. “Good morning.”

“Hi. Um, you’re not wearing your glasses.” It wasn’t at all what she’d come over to say. But his eyes looked so blue against the dark navy scrubs he wore, she’d been too distracted not to say anything.

“No, I’m trying out some contacts.”

Avery swallowed. “You look good.”

David glanced at his watch. “Thanks. Um, I’ve got work in a few minutes.”

“Right. Sorry.” She shook her head, grasping at the real reason she’d come over to see David. “I just wanted to ask you why you were so rude to Tucker last night. Did he do something to offend you that I don’t know about?”

David sighed and his shoulders slumped. “I didn’t say anything rude.”

“Maybe not explicitly,” Avery said. “But your tone sounded like you hated us both. And you were shooting daggers out of your eyes.” Avery had spent a long time lying in bed the night before, thinking about why David was so rude. The only thing she could come up with as a reasonable explanation for David’s behavior was jealousy. It was enough to make her feelings for David sour just a little. She did love that he was so transparent, but this took it a little too far. Petulance wasn’t attractive in anyone.



“He wasn’t exactly nice to me either,” David said, his tone defensive.

“David, I want to be your friend,” Avery said. “Truly. I don’t know if it was jealousy that motivated you last night or what. But if I have to choose between a boyfriend I’ve known for years and a new friend I’ve known for weeks, it isn’t going to be a tough call.”

David stepped back, his eyes sad, and Avery immediately regretted her words. She was maybe being too hard on him.

“I’m sorry,” David said. “You’re right.”

“I’m right?”

He nodded. “About the jealousy, about ... I’m not being fair to you. I’m sorry.”

Avery paused. She hadn’t expected him to admit his mistake so readily. “Thank you. I appreciate that.” She turned and walked toward the porch steps, but then stopped, facing David one more time. He still stood in the doorway, the storm door propped open against his arm. “Did you have a nice walk?” she asked.

He smiled. “I did. I think I love the beach the most after a good thunderstorm.”

“Me, too,” Avery said. “I always have.” She lifted a hand to wave but stopped for a second time when David called her name.

“Hey, Avery?” he said. “Do you want to come in for a few minutes? I just made breakfast. There’s enough to share. I

mean, if you want.”

“You don’t have to get to work?”

“I do,” David said. “But I have a few minutes. I’d like to spend them with you.”

Warmth spread through Avery’s body. She’d never not appreciate David’s open sincerity. “Breakfast sounds good.”

She followed David into his kitchen. “What are we eating?” she asked.

David turned to the stove and picked up a plate of bacon, then grabbed a package of croissants from the counter. “Do you trust me?”

Avery watched as he turned the stove on and cracked an egg into a skillet. “Do you cook?” she asked, hesitation in her voice.

David tossed a grin over his shoulder. “Enough that you should trust me.”

“Fine, fine. I surrender. Feed me what you will.” Avery had long since decided David was sexy in his scrubs. But David cooking in his scrubs? It did weird things to her brain. He could save her life and *also* make her breakfast?

Avery blushed at the thought. She’d come over to chastise him. To ask him to butt out of her life, or at least be nice to her boyfriend. How had she wound up sitting at his kitchen counter, fantasizing about his finer qualities, watching him assemble what looked to be the most beautiful breakfast sandwich she’d ever laid eyes on?

David slid the plate in front of her, a gleam in his eye. “Go ahead. Taste it.”

Avery raised her eyebrows. “Aren’t you going to have one?”

“Sure. But I want you to try yours first.”

Avery looked at the croissant, laden with bacon and a fried egg, over easy just the way she liked it. Avocado peeked out from underneath the egg and there was some sort of sauce David had drizzled over the bacon before topping the sandwich. She carefully picked it up, taking a bite that would have made her older brother proud. He’d always told her he loved that she wasn’t dainty about her food.

Avery savored the flavors of the sandwich, at once wondering what the sauce was that made it all taste so different, so amazing. “What did you put on this thing?” she said, taking a second bite.

“It’s amazing, right?”

“I think I might cry.”

“It’s tomato butter,” David said. “You reduce fresh tomatoes down to almost nothing, puree them, then mix in cream and melted butter.”

“Oh! There’s a restaurant downtown that does something similar with their fried green tomatoes. It’s heavenly.”

David nodded, finally assembling his own sandwich. “My mom adds it to everything. Burgers, pasta. She basically treats it like a traditional condiment.”

“I bet it works great on a burger. Seriously. This is the best breakfast sandwich I’ve ever had.”

“I’m glad you like it.” He smiled. “It makes me happy to see you happy.”

A tiny twinge of guilt pinged in Avery’s chest. Was it right that she hang out with David so much knowing that he had feelings for her? He’d just admitted that very morning to feeling jealous of Tucker. What else could that mean but he liked her? She loved being around David, but she didn’t want to be that girl. The girl that basked in attention because it felt good when there was no chance of a relationship actually developing.

Another twitch in her heart made her think that last thought wasn’t entirely accurate. Was there truly *no* chance of a relationship with David? Were her feelings so determined? She pushed the thought away, afraid of what she might realize if she let her mind keep going.

David finished his sandwich in a handful of bites. Apparently, he wasn’t dainty about his food either. He reached for her plate, placing it in the sink with his own. After throwing everything back in the fridge and giving his counters a quick wipe-down, he looked at Avery and smiled. “Now I really do have to go.”

She nodded. “Thanks for feeding me.”

“It’s the least I could do after you introduced me to oysters.” She followed him to the front door where he grabbed his keys from a table in the entryway. He held his front door open,

waiting for her to exit before closing and locking the door. They walked together down his front porch steps, pausing at the door to his car.

“Have a good day,” she told David as she backed away. She stood on the grassy strip that separated their driveways and watched as he pulled onto Marshall Boulevard. He waved one last time, then disappeared down the road.

Avery glanced at her watch. She was going to be late for work herself if she didn't hurry, but she stood there a moment longer, wondering why she felt so different. More importantly, what was she going to do about it?

## CHAPTER 10

DAVID PULLED HIS SUNGLASSES onto his face and sank low in the driver seat of his car. He didn't *think* Tucker knew what he drove, but better safe than sorry. Not that Tucker had reason to suspect David might be lurking around his downtown office. Guys like Tucker didn't worry about getting caught. They waltzed through life believing there wasn't anything their money or influence couldn't buy.

An image of Avery snuggled up against Tucker flashed through David's mind and his jaw clenched. He'd told Avery he'd be nice to Tucker if he ever saw him around, and he'd hold true to his word. It might even help him in the end. If he was nice to Tucker, maybe Tucker wouldn't suspect he was being set up. Well, eventually he'd be set up. David was still in the information gathering stages of his whole entrapment plan.

He'd nearly given up on the whole stupid idea. He was an Ivy League educated, top of his class, highly qualified physician. *Medical News Monthly* had named him the most promising young doctor of the year. And yet, here he was,

parked behind a huge crepe myrtle outside Tucker's office, hoping he'd catch him leaving so he could follow him home.

It maybe wasn't his proudest moment. But he'd sacrifice his pride if it meant leading Avery to the truth.

Still, David wasn't exactly sure what he expected to find even if he did follow Tucker home. What would he do then? Watch his house all night?

David sighed and clicked on his phone, watching the time flip from 6:59 to 7:00 PM. His hand hovered over the gear shift. The whole plan was dumb. Avery had made her feelings clear. If forced to choose, she'd choose Tucker. The thought stung more than it should. Avery didn't *know* Tucker was a cheating jerk and she did have more history with the guy. She hadn't meant her choice to feel like an insult. But David *did* know what Tucker was, which made Avery's words feel like a direct attack on his pride.

David retrained his gaze on the door of Tucker's law firm. He'd see this thing through and figure out a way to *show* Avery the truth, even if he couldn't tell her.

Minutes later, the hour David had spent waiting and watching finally paid off. Tucker walked out the front door of his firm, his keys jangling in his hand. He walked half a block down the sidewalk, away from David, before climbing into a fancy looking sports car David couldn't identify. A Jaguar, maybe? It looked European. It for sure wasn't the truck David had seen parked in Avery's driveway. Which was maybe

intentional? You couldn't exactly visit your secret girlfriend in a car as conspicuous as a red Jaguar.

David eased his car into drive and pulled out, following a few hundred feet behind Tucker. His best hope was discovering some sort of routine. Did he and Jessica go to dinner at the yacht club every week? Did they go to the gym together? If he could figure out some pattern of where they were at a specific time of the week, all he had to do was figure out a way to get Avery to the same place, at the same time.

All the way across the Cooper River bridge and into Mt. Pleasant, David tried and failed to convince himself he wasn't being ridiculous. Momentum and righteous indignation propelled him forward anyway, right up until he watched Tucker pull up to the front of a gated neighborhood where a security guard opened the gate and waved Tucker through.

No way David could follow Tucker into his neighborhood, so he kept going, pulling off a mile up the road into the parking lot of a sleek-looking coffee house. He stared at the Velvet Undergrounds sign, recognizing the chain as one he'd frequently visited during med school. He and his girlfriend, during a particularly long study session, had visited three different times. The third time, the barista behind the counter had given them their drinks for free.

It was a life that felt millions of miles away. He'd been a good boyfriend to Melissa. At least, he thought he had been. He'd tried to be attentive and present. He'd respected her, remembered her birthday, gone to multiple dinners and holiday



events with her family. Their relationship had been fine. Normal. But in retrospect, was *fine* really what he should have been going for? Fine was boring. Fine was safe.

Nothing about Avery felt safe. Which is maybe why he couldn't stop thinking about her. Why he'd just driven twenty minutes outside of the city to see the neighborhood where her jerk of an ex-boyfriend lived. Because being around Avery made his life feel exciting in ways that he'd never imagined possible.

David grabbed his cell phone from the center console and pulled up the text message Avery had sent him that afternoon. It was a picture of a baby seal recently born at the aquarium. The text that came in with the picture read: *Obviously I've gotten tons of work done today. \*Readjusts phone and takes seventy-fifth picture of most adorable baby seal ever.\**

He smiled, happy that she'd felt like texting him even after their semi-tense conversation the morning before, when she'd told him to be nicer to Tucker. He'd hoped sharing his breakfast had helped to smooth things over; it was nice to have the text validate that thought.

David shifted in his seat. Following Tucker home and plotting a way to entrap him in his cheating probably didn't qualify as *nicer*. But David knew more than Avery did. He was doing this for her.

He responded to Avery's message. *That IS adorable. I could send you a picture of the patient that came in with a steak*

*knife embedded in his leg, but I'm not sure it would have the same effect.*

She replied almost instantly. *Yeah, probably not. I'm glad you get paid well.*

Before he could come up with another reply, Tucker's red car slowed and stopped at the red light, just beside the coffee house parking lot. David's heart jumped in his chest, and he tossed his phone back onto the console, ready to follow Tucker wherever he was headed.

He didn't have to go far. Less than a mile down the road, Tucker stopped in front of a row of posh condominiums. David pulled in behind him, parking several cars down so as not to be noticed. Tucker left the car running, only getting out long enough to knock on the door of the second condo from the end. Jessica emerged almost immediately, locking the condo door behind her before following Tucker to the car.

David didn't follow them when they left. He'd already pushed his luck following Tucker as far as he did. He didn't want to give himself away. But he still called his expedition a success. After all, he'd figured out where Jessica lived, and she was the most important part of the whole plot. Because for Avery to figure out what Tucker was up to, *Jessica* needed to be present.

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Two weeks and four trips to Mt. Pleasant later, and David was mostly sure he'd picked up on a pattern. Tucker frequently

went over to Jessica's after work. Sometimes they stayed in, more often they went out. Two Tuesdays in a row, *out* had meant the Charleston Yacht Club.

One more Tuesday, and he'd know for sure it was a pattern he could count on. He'd already swung by the yacht club on his way to Jessica's condo and hadn't seen Tucker's Jaguar. His truck might have been there, but so far, he'd always driven the fancier car when taking Jessica out. David wasn't proud that he knew this information about Tucker. He wasn't proud about much of his behavior over the last two weeks. But he was too far in to back out now. Seeing Tucker's car parked in front of Jessica's front door, David pulled into his customary spot at the end of the row of parking spaces. He'd only wait a few minutes. Dinner at the yacht club started at seven, which meant if they were headed that way, he wouldn't have long to wait. If they didn't leave, he'd have to adjust his plan, see if he could find somewhere else he might set up a confrontation with Avery.

It had killed him the last few times he'd seen Tucker at Avery's house. They never seemed to go anywhere, which was surely intentional on Tucker's part, but Avery didn't seem to care. She'd rather grill out and relax on her back porch anyway. She probably hadn't even noticed Tucker never wanted to be seen with her in public.

The last time he saw them together, they'd been in the driveway when David arrived home from work. It had been a long day, punctuated by a car accident with multiple victims, only one of whom David had managed to save. His emotions

were raw and close to the surface and Tucker kissing Avery right as David got out of his car was almost enough to send him careening across the strip of grass that separated their driveways to punch the guy right in the nose.

David had never been a violent man, but Tucker was making him think that maybe he could be.

After a few months of personal training.

And some classes on boxing.

And maybe also a personality transplant.

So fine. Maybe he wouldn't actually hit the guy. But he for sure liked thinking about it.

Outside the window of David's car, a boy on a skateboard flew by, going way too fast for the narrow sidewalk. What's worse, the kid wasn't wearing a helmet or any kind of protective gear on his knees or elbows. David tensed, feeling in his bones he was about to witness an accident. Sure enough, the kid clipped the curb with his board, flying up and backwards before landing on his side, his wrist taking most of the impact.

David glanced at his phone, noting the time, and swore. If he got out and helped the kid, he'd be right in front of Jessica's condo exactly when he expected the couple to leave for the yacht club. He watched a second longer as the kid struggled to push himself up.

Instinct and training took over and he was out of the car without another thought. At least he was still wearing his

scrubs. It might make the kid more likely to trust him. He crouched over the boy, already scanning his limbs for scrapes or other signs of injury.

“That was quite a fall,” he said softly.

The boy sniffed and nodded.

“I’m Dr. Daniels,” David said. “I just happened to see you go down. Is it okay if I take a quick look at your wrist?”

The boy nodded.

“What’s your name?” David asked as he examined the boy’s arm.

“DeShawn,” the boy said, sniffing again. “Please don’t tell my mom I fell.”

David shook his head. “Sorry, man. Pretty sure you’ve got a trip to the hospital in your future. I think your arm is broken.”

Tears welled in the boy’s eyes. “She’s going to be so mad. She told me to get my helmet, but I didn’t listen.”

“Did you hit your head?” David asked. He ran his fingers over the back of DeShawn’s head but didn’t feel anything alarming.

DeShawn shook his head. “I don’t think so.” His lip quivered and he shuddered through a breath. “My arm really hurts.”

“DeShawn?!”

David looked up to see a black woman running toward them, her hand pressed against her chest. She stopped beside

DeShawn and bent down. “DeShawn, baby? What happened?”

The tears flew freely now. “I’m sorry, Mama. I should have listened.” He looked up at David. “The doctor thinks I broke my arm.”

The woman’s eyes widened, and she followed DeShawn’s gaze to David. “The doctor?” she questioned.

“Sorry,” David said. “I’m Dr. Daniels. I was sitting in my car and just happened to see him fall. I work in the ER at MUSC.”

“Thank you for helping him,” she said cautiously. “You really think he needs to go to the hospital?”

David nodded. “Unfortunately, yes. His right arm took most of the impact. The way it’s already starting to swell, I’m guessing it’s a distal radius fracture. That’s the bone just above the joint of the wrist.”

She reached down and wiped the tears off of DeShawn’s face. “How many times have I told you not to ride that thing without your helmet on? And without your wrist guards? I love you, baby. And I’ll take you to the hospital and we’ll do whatever we have to do to fix you up.” She took a deep breath. “But you had this one coming.”

David smiled. The woman reminded him of his own mom, the way she managed to both love and scold her child in the same breath.

“Are you parked close by?” David asked.

“Just right around the corner,” the woman said. “Come here, baby,” she said, reaching for DeShawn. “Let’s get you up.”

David picked up the skateboard, planning to carry it to the woman’s car, when someone behind him called his name. “Dr. Daniels?”

He froze. It was inevitable, really. He’d known if he got out of his car, Jessica and Tucker would see him. He slowly turned around, meeting Jessica’s eyes. She was the one who had called his name. Tucker stood beside her, a question in the set of his brow, and the firm line of his mouth.

“I thought that was you,” Jessica said. She closed the distance between them. “Do you remember us? We came to the ER a few weeks ago when Tucker sprained his wrist.”

“Right. I do remember you,” David said. He ran a hand across his face and willed his nerves to settle.

David still held the skateboard in front of him. He glanced over his shoulder to see DeShawn’s mom coming back for it.

“Sorry,” he said. “Excuse me just for a minute.” He turned and walked toward her, holding out the skateboard. “Go to MUSC Children’s,” he told her. “They’ll take good care of you there.”

The woman nodded. “Thank you for your help.”

David waved at DeShawn then walked back toward Jessica and Tucker, who still watched him from the sidewalk.

“Someone you know?” Tucker asked, his tone pointed.

“Ah, no,” David said. “I was just sitting in my car and I saw the boy fall.” David swallowed. “I’m pretty sure he broke his arm.”

“Oh, no!” Jessica said. “I’m so glad you were here and could help him.”

“Yeah,” Tucker said, nodding his head. “That sure is convenient. What, exactly, *are* you doing here?”

“Oh.” David wiped his palms on his scrubs. Had it gotten hotter in the last thirty seconds? It suddenly felt hotter. “I was, um, just visiting a friend. A date. A date ... friend. Do, um, you live here too?”

“I do,” Jessica said, all sweetness. “Who’s your friend? Maybe I know her.”

“Oh. No, she, she just moved in. Way on the ...” David motioned with his hand toward the back side of the complex. “Back there. She doesn’t know anyone yet.”

“I bet she doesn’t,” Tucker said.

David took a step backward. “I guess I should, um, get back to the hospital.”

“I thought you were going on a date,” Jessica said. She frowned, as if she felt genuine sadness he was going to work instead.

“Nope, nope. Got to work tonight.” Man, he was spinning lies fast. “I’m on call, so I thought I might be able to go out, but I just got called in. So. Life of a doctor, right? It was great



seeing you though.” He clicked his key fob to unlock his car then moved to the driver side door.

David pulled out of the parking lot, his heart hammering in his chest. He breathed in through his nose then out through his mouth wondering if he might need to pull over so he could throw up. What had he been thinking? How on earth had he ever thought himself capable of actually setting up some sort of entrapment? He wasn't James Bond. He didn't know how to be stealthy or secretive. And he lied about as well as he talked to women.

He pulled back into the Velvet Undergrounds parking lot and parked, dropping his head onto the steering wheel. He was an idiot.

He liked Avery.

He *really* liked Avery.

But he was pretty sure she knew that. And she was still choosing to be with Tucker. Whether he was able to ruin Avery's relationship or not, would it actually matter? Maybe he'd prove Tucker was a jerk and then Avery still wouldn't want to date David. There were no guarantees.

And if history was an indication, no matter how much Lucy insisted it was possible, women like Avery never dated men like him.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he muttered, banging his forehead against the wheel.

David drove home in silence, shame coursing through him hot and thick. It was time to move on. He couldn't keep acting like this, couldn't keep spending so many hours thinking about Avery.

He pulled into his driveway and sighed. How could he *not* think about Avery when she lived right next door? He watched as she walked up the pathway from the beach in a swimsuit and a pair of cutoffs, a paddle board under her arm. When she saw him climbing out of his car, she dropped her board onto the grass and changed her course, crossing to where he stood.

“Hey,” she said, dusting sand from her palms.

David looked toward the beach. “How was the water?”

“Warm,” Avery said. “And calm.” She pulled her phone out of her back pocket. “There was a school of dolphins just off the shore and they let me get really close.” She held out her phone. “Look.”

David scrolled through several pictures Avery had taken of the dolphins swimming around her paddle board. “That’s amazing.”

“Have you ever done it?”

“No, not yet. I’d like to try though. My friend Lucy loves it.”

Avery smiled. “It’s so fun. There’s a place over by the yacht club where it’s easier to launch because you don’t have to deal with the waves. Tucker and I used to go all the time, but we haven’t ...” She shook her head, her words trailing off.

“You haven’t what?” He handed her phone back.

“It’s nothing. You and I should go sometime.”

David’s stomach tightened. He’d love to go with her sometime. But, maybe that wasn’t the best choice if he truly wanted to stop thinking about Avery so much. If he was going to get over her, spending more time with her was the worst thing he could do.

“Actually, I’ve been meaning to ask you for some ideas about things I could do around town.” He cleared his throat. “Um, date ideas.”

Avery stilled. “Oh.” She tucked a strand of wet hair behind her ear, a trace of hesitation in her voice. “Sure. I can help with that.”

Had he made her uncomfortable by asking? David suddenly wanted to backpedal, tell her he’d love to go paddle boarding with her. He’d love to do all the things, everywhere, with only her.

But Lucy was right. Dating someone else might be the best thing to do to get Avery—and Tucker—out of his mind. “I just figure it’s time. I’m settled at work, I’m mostly unpacked. Why not try dating?”

Avery nodded. “It’s a good idea.”

Neither of them said anything for a long moment. “So I guess I’ll text you a list of ideas,” Avery finally said, breaking the awkward silence.

“That would be great,” David said. “Really great.”

Avery said goodbye and David watched as she walked across the yard to her house, stopping on the way to grab her paddle board from the grass at the edge of his driveway. He watched the muscles tighten along her back as she hoisted the board, carrying it over her head to her back porch where she stored her beach things.

He could tell himself he'd date other people. He could even pretend he wanted to. But how was any other woman ever going to compare when Avery was the standard?

## CHAPTER 11

AVERY STARED AT HER phone, unsure how to respond. She'd known David was thinking about dating, but this felt so ... proactive.

*You mentioned a friend at work once a few weeks back. Someone you thought I could possibly take out on a date? Could that still happen?*

She and David texted a lot. Not every day. But several times a week. He'd asked questions about his house and where to get the best sushi. She'd asked him weird medical questions and texted him random pictures of baby sea animals. And they'd talked about life stuff. About his relationship with his sisters, or how much her parents wished she'd leave the island and move upstate to be closer to them.

It was the kind of chatter that made it easy for her to keep David strictly in the friend zone, even as she grew more and more certain that he had feelings for her. Subtlety wasn't exactly his strong suit, but as long as they kept their conversation topics light, and veered away from anything that

got too personal, she didn't feel like she needed to stop texting him. She was always completely transparent about Tucker, and they were adults. There was no reason why they weren't perfectly capable of being friends, without any kind of romantic attachment.

For all those reasons, it shouldn't have annoyed her that David had asked her to set him up on a date. And yet, the idea made her feel ... unhappy? Unhappy wasn't the right word. Unsettled, maybe?

Why shouldn't he date, though? She certainly didn't have the right to tell him he shouldn't. And Shelley had asked more than once about Avery's "cute doctor neighbor."

She picked up her phone, chewing on her lip as she keyed out a response.

*Sure, she texted. I can send you Shelley's number. I'll let her know to expect your call.*

There. Sent. Why had that felt so hard?

David's response popped onto her screen. *You never did send over any dating ideas. Can you tell me where to take her? Dinner? A movie? I don't have a lot of practice dating.*

Avery smiled, despite her earlier hesitation. She'd *meant* to send dating ideas to David and half-wondered if her subconscious brain was trying to tell her something about why she didn't. But there was no way she could put him off now. He'd asked for specific help.

*No movie. Not on the first date, Avery responded. Dinner is good. Pick a place downtown, then if it goes well, you can walk to the pineapple fountain in Waterfront Park. You might pick a seafood place. Shelley likes good seafood.*

Avery sent the text, then reread it, making sure she hadn't missed anything. A thought suddenly occurred to her and she keyed out another message. *Seafood ... but no oysters.* Avery didn't actually know if Shelley liked oysters or not. But *she'd* had oysters with David. And he'd loved them. She kind of liked the idea of oysters being their thing.

*Got it, David replied. Thanks for the help.*

Avery was home three days later when she saw David leaving for his date. She'd heard enough about it at work that day from Shelley, she was certain that's where he was headed. Without thinking, she pushed open her screen door and stepped onto her front porch. "Hey," she called.

He looked up and smiled.

Avery padded barefoot down her steps and across the drive, instantly wishing she'd slipped on the flip flops she'd left by the front door. The ground was hot, the crushed shells in the driveway sharp against her skin. She crossed all the way to the grass that separated her property from David's, just for a cooler place to stand.

"You look nice," Avery said. "You excited?"

"Yes. No. I mean, yes, I think." David pinched the space between his eyes. "Just nervous, I guess. I'm not very good at

this.”

“You’re going to do great,” Avery said. And he would. He’d been nervous around her when they first got to know each other, but he’d relaxed soon enough and was always great company. Shelley was going to love him.

David studied his reflection in the window of his car. “What do you think? Leave the button undone on this one, too?”

Avery nodded. He wore a polo shirt this time. “Leave it undone,” Avery said. “This is Charleston. It’s not really a buttoned-up kind of city.” It was one of the things she’d always loved about the place. Everything just moved a little slower.

“Right. Got it.” He took a deep, intentional breath. “Any last-minute pointers?”

Avery shrugged. “Don’t try too hard? Just relax and be yourself?”

“Challenging when *myself* isn’t very relaxed and tends to always try too hard.”

“It’ll be fine.” Avery took a step closer and reached up to smooth a piece of David’s hair back into place. “You’ve got a lot more going for you than you think you do.” She held his gaze for an extra-long moment, until her heart twitched and she bit her lip, looking away. What was wrong with her?

“What are you up to tonight?” David asked, his voice softer, gentler than before.



“I, um, I don’t know yet. Tucker’s coming over, I think. He said something about going up to the food truck festival in Summerville.”

Avery saw David’s jaw tighten and her defenses immediately went up. But then David relaxed his features and he smiled. “Sounds fun.”

“Yeah, it should be.”

In truth, Avery wasn’t super thrilled by the idea of driving all the way up to Summerville. At first, she’d loved this new, more relaxed version of Tucker. No more traditional yacht club Tuesday night dinners or fancy charity events that demanded she wear dresses she couldn’t actually afford and wouldn’t ever wear again. It was the only bright spot in the months following their break-up—the morning she’d taken all those fancy dresses to consignment. What she didn’t understand was why Tucker resisted going to any of the places they’d loved going before.

“I just want a fresh start,” he’d told her when she brought it up the last time they were together. “Let’s find new favorite places to eat. Make new memories.”

It was a nice thought, but good sushi was good sushi. Why find a new place when you already knew where to get the best super crunch roll?

“Well, wish me luck,” David said.

“You won’t need it,” Avery said. “If I’m up when you get home, come over and tell me about it?”

David nodded. “Okay.”

Avery only just resisted the impulse to reach out and give him a hug, but that hardly felt like the right thing to do, especially when sending him off on a date with a friend. But she did spend more than a minute thinking, as she walked back to the cool relief of her air conditioning, what it might feel like to have David’s arms wrapped around her. It was a surprising thought, but those little surprising thoughts seemed to be springing into her mind with greater and greater frequency, with a particular surge right around the time she’d set David up with Shelley.

Which was totally ridiculous. Because she didn’t have feelings for David.

When Avery got back into the house, there was a text from Tucker. *Sorry, babe. Something came up and I’m not free until later. Can I come by around 11?*

Avery heaved a sigh. No dinner, no time together, but he still wanted to come by at eleven? It was a Thursday night. She had to work in the morning. *I’ve got an early start tomorrow. Rain check?* she typed out.

*Please? I miss you. I promise not to keep you up too late,* his response read, followed by a winking emoji.

Avery rolled her eyes. So far she’d held her ground with Tucker. She didn’t want to jump back into things too quick. But her defenses were weakening. The day before, he’d shown up at her house with two boxes of chocolate covered elephant ears from the bakery. She hadn’t had one in ages and the fact

that he'd remembered they were her favorites was sweet. He really *did* seem like he had changed.

Avery thought back to the conversations they'd had when they broke up. Avery suspected Tucker hadn't actually wanted to end things but felt pressured by his family to cut ties. She didn't exactly fit the mold of the perfect politician's wife his father believed Tucker needed. Her father worked in construction and her mom was a librarian. They didn't qualify as Charleston elite. But maybe Tucker had finally broken free of all that—the family pressure, the expectations.

She could let Tucker come over. She maybe even wanted to. But then she thought of David getting back from his date, and the invitation she'd issued for him to come over and tell her about it. Knowing David, he'd for sure come. And Avery didn't want to be otherwise occupied if he did.

*I miss you too, she texted Tucker. But I really need to get some sleep. Tomorrow night?*

It was several hours later when he finally responded. *I've got a work dinner, but I can come over after. It might be late.*

Avery thought about the implication of his words. If he came late, it was almost inevitable where the night might lead. Was she ready to take their relationship back to that place? She wandered into the kitchen and pulled an elephant ear out of the cardboard packaging that sat on her counter. She took a big bite, then set it down, licking the chocolate frosting from her fingers. Tucker had been nothing but charming and attentive

and solicitous of her feelings for weeks. He'd more than earned a second chance.

She went back to her phone to respond when the lights of David's car flashed through her front window. Avery glanced at her watch. Just after ten. Not too bad for a first date. She watched through her window as David climbed out of his car then hesitated in his driveway, looking from his house then back to hers. She tried not to think about what it meant when he stepped toward her house and her heart jumped in her chest.

She swung open her front door before he'd made it all the way up the steps. "Hey," she said. The night air was cool, so rather than inviting him in, she motioned to the wicker couch that sat at the end of the porch. "Want to sit out here?"

He nodded, his face still unreadable in the dim light.

She lowered herself beside him, turning her body sideways and pulling her legs up under her. "So? How was it?"

David looked at her and grimaced. "I ... don't think we will go out again."

"Oh, no," Avery said. "Why not? Is she not your type?"

"No, she was fine. Great. I just don't think we really hit it off."

Avery narrowed her eyes. There was something he wasn't saying, but she didn't want to push it. She'd get the whole story from Shelley at work the next day anyway.

"That's too bad. But you have to start somewhere, right? You're new in town, so dating at all is a big step. I'm proud of

you for jumping in the pool.” She nudged him with her arm, referencing back to the conversation they’d had about his hesitance to get in the water at pool parties when he was a kid.

He shook his head and heaved a deep sigh. “This didn’t really feel like jumping in.”

“Why not?” Avery asked. “You did it. You went. You *jumped*.”

He scrubbed a hand across his face, clearly frustrated by something. “I know, but ... the pool, it was something I really wanted to do. And this—” He leaned forward on his elbows, nervous energy radiating off of him in waves. “Shelley is nice, but she’s not what I want.”

Avery stilled, the words he wasn’t saying hanging in the air between them. She swallowed. “Well, that’s what dating is, right? It’s just a way to help us figure out what we do want.”

He looked at her then, his eyes clear and intense. “I already know what I want.”

Avery closed her eyes. If she kept them open, kept her gaze trained on David, she might lean in and kiss him and that was absolutely not what she needed to do.

She opened her eyes.

He leaned forward, just slightly, enough for her to know he felt the same pull. She moved toward him, her resistance all but completely crumbled. “David—” she whispered, her lips just inches away from his.

“I don’t think you should be dating Tucker,” he said, cutting her off.

Avery frowned, the magic of the moment wilting in the thick, humid air. She sat back on the couch, her cheeks red from their almost kiss. “What? Why?”

David stood up and moved to the porch railing. He was silent for a long moment before he turned around and spoke, his voice soft. “He’s not good enough for you, Avery. He’s an entitled jerk that ... I don’t know. I just don’t think he’s right for you.”

Avery folded her arms across her chest, immediately defensive. Who did David think he was? He didn’t even know Tucker. They’d spoken two times and not for longer than five minutes. “You don’t get to be the one to make that call. Even if I *did* want the opinions of my friends, you don’t know him well enough to offer one.”

David scoffed. “I know...”

“You know what?” Avery said, suddenly wondering if David *did* know something she didn’t.

He turned away, shaking his head in obvious frustration. “Nothing. I *know* I don’t know him. I just ...”

When he didn’t finish his sentence, it was Avery’s turn to scoff. “You just what, David? You can’t leave that hanging over my head like it’s perfectly normal for you to have such a strong opinion about a guy you’ve spent less than ten minutes

with. I don't know what your problem is with him, but you've got to back off. I thought we already talked about this."

David breathed out a sigh then finally turned around to face her. "I'm sorry." His tone was flat, emotionless. "You're right. I was out of line." He took a step backward toward the stairs. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I won't mention Tucker again."

Halfway down the stairs, he stopped and turned. "I do have to wonder, if things are so good between you and Tucker, why you just came that close to kissing me."

Avery watched him walk across the grass to his own house, letting himself in the front door without a backward glance. She sank back into the cushions of the couch, completely steamrolled by the previous five minutes. She'd wanted to kiss David, felt a pull to him unlike anything she'd experienced in a long time. For a split second, she didn't see her neighbor, or a nerdy doctor, or a socially awkward guy in glasses. She just saw a man, a man that looked at her like he saw her all the way to her soul.

And then he'd gone and ruined everything by mentioning Tucker. If he wanted to compete with the guy, the lesson he needed to learn most was to keep his opinions to himself. He'd actually had a fighting chance until he went and opened his mouth.

Avery stomped into her house, slamming and locking the front door with enough force to make her entire house shake. Without giving herself time to think about it, she crossed to

her phone and texted Tucker. *Late tomorrow is good. I'm already looking forward to it.*



## CHAPTER 12

DAVID WORKED BACK-TO-BACK SHIFTS on Friday. Not because he'd planned to, or because he particularly wanted to. The ER had just been too busy for him to leave. He finally managed to head home just after six Saturday morning, after successfully delivering a baby in the front seat of a car in the parking lot of the ER. That had been a first, and it made for a pretty decent way to finish twenty-three hours on his feet. All he wanted now was a hot shower, a peanut butter protein bar, and twelve hours in his bed.

He reached the island just as the sky started to lighten, the wispy clouds over the ocean a stunning array of pink and orange and deep yellow. It was almost enough to lure him to the beach to watch the sunrise. *Almost*. He pulled into his driveway and turned off the ignition, his head falling forward onto the steering wheel.

"Bed," he said sleepily. "Bed would be good."

He climbed out of his car and shut the door, turning when movement at Avery's caught his eye. He froze, his blood

running cold.

Tucker's truck was in her driveway.

Tucker himself was standing on her porch, kissing Avery as she leaned halfway out her front door.

Well, then.

David shook his head and turned slowly toward his own house, too tired to care. No, not too tired to care. He definitely cared. Too tired to do anything about it? Absolutely.

He was almost to his front steps when Tucker called his name.

“Hey, David?”

David breathed out a weary sigh and turned around, his face expressionless.

“Man, you look rough,” Tucker said. “A lady friend keep you up all night, too?” He smirked.

“Yeah. She was eight pounds, three ounces and she and mom are both doing great.”

“Ha,” Tucker said with a chuckle. “Touché.”

“What do you want, Tucker? I just worked back-to-back shifts. I don't really feel like talking.”

Tucker glanced over his shoulder as if to make sure Avery was well and truly inside her house and out of earshot. David had to wonder if she was watching through a window though. What would she think about Tucker approaching him?

“I don’t know what you were doing out at Jessica’s the other night,” Tucker finally said, “but I’m pretty sure you weren’t on a date.” He folded his arms across his chest. “It’s possible I asked around and couldn’t find a single person that recently moved into Jessica’s complex. Funny, right?”

David’s jaw tensed, but he said nothing. What could he say?

“You don’t want to go to battle with me, *Doctor Daniels*,” Tucker said, emphasizing the *doctor*. “You won’t win.”

David ran a hand through his hair, his shoulders slumped. He was way too tired to deal with Tucker. To deal with anything. “What are you trying to prove?” he finally asked. He looked Tucker right in the eye. “Why do it? Why hurt her like this? She doesn’t ...” David sighed, not even sure what he was trying to say. “I know you think you’re just fooling around, but she doesn’t. She thinks this is going somewhere.”

“You don’t know anything about what Avery—” Tucker stopped and smiled, a knowing glint in his eye. “Oh, I see what this is. You *like* her.”

Was there not anything David could say to get rid of this guy? He opted for the direct approach. “Can you just leave? Please? I told you I wouldn’t say anything, and I won’t.”

Tucker took a step backward, laughing softly. “That would really be something,” he said. “*You* and Avery? I mean, I have to give you props for even thinking it’s possible.” He laughed again, a cruel, condescending laugh. “Talk about shooting for the stars.”

David turned and climbed his porch steps. Tucker had some nerve. How could Avery be so blind to the guy's obvious lack of character?

"Don't forget, Doc," Tucker said as he continued to back away, just loud enough for David to hear. "I'm having dinner with Stevenson tomorrow night. It wouldn't be hard for your name to come up."

David unlocked his front door and stepped inside, slamming it closed behind him without acknowledging Tucker's words. He was done. So done.

He dropped his phone and his keys onto his bedside table and pulled his shirt over his head. His bed called to him, but experience had taught him he'd sleep better if he washed the smell of the hospital from his skin. Minutes later, he climbed into his bed, muscles relaxed and skin red from the heat of his shower. He closed the blinds to the brightening day and checked his phone one last time.

He had a text message from Avery.

*What did Tucker want?*

David leaned back on his pillow, his phone pressed against his chest. How could he respond? For a fleeting moment, he thought about just telling her the truth. *Oh nothing. He just wanted to threaten me again, intimidate me out of telling you that he's engaged to someone else and is using you.* But then Lucy's words echoed in his mind. *You don't want to mess with the King family.* He dropped his phone onto the bed beside him and rolled over, punching his pillow a few times before

settling onto his side. Why did he even need to respond? Let her wonder what Tucker wanted. She could always ask *him* what he wanted. Let Tucker be the one to lie.

His phone buzzed with another text and he reached for it, annoyed with himself over how quickly hope swelled in his chest—hope that she'd texted him again.

*Sorry, she had typed. You've probably been up all night. I should let you sleep!*

David sighed. *It's okay, he texted. Not sleeping yet.*

He tapped the side of his phone against his bare chest. Now what was he supposed to say? Withholding information was one thing, though that made him feel rotten enough. But he couldn't outright lie. His conscience wouldn't let him.

Another message from Avery popped up. *It isn't what it looked like. Tucker being at my house. We didn't . . . nothing happened.*

Relief washed over David, even as doubt niggled at his brain. That wasn't what Tucker had said, though he was definitely more inclined to believe Avery over Tucker. *You don't owe me an explanation,* he texted back. Because she didn't.

*I know, she responded. But I still wanted you to know.*

David debated whether or not he should tell her what Tucker had said. Or implied, at least. But what good would that do?

*So what did he want? Avery asked again. He was complaining about his wrist hurting and I told him he should ask your opinion. Was that it? I didn't think he'd hit you up so soon.*

*I didn't mind, David keyed out, grateful he didn't have to lie outright. It wasn't a big deal.*

*Oh. You looked angry, Avery texted back. I was worried.*

*I worked all night, David responded. I was just tired.*

*Anything exciting? her next text read.*

David sat up, knowing he'd never keep texting if he stayed horizontal. *I delivered a baby in the parking lot. I think that counts as exciting.*

*DEFINITELY, Avery texted back.*

David stared at his phone, loving that Avery had initiated a conversation, even if it had started about Tucker.

*I hoped they'd name the baby after me. Alas, it was a little girl.*

*Davina could be cute.*

David smiled.

Another message popped up. *Or, since this is the South, Daveen.*

*Davidina?*

*Oh! I googled it. Davinia is an actual real name.*

*Actually, they named her Avery, David replied.*

*WHAT. You're joking, Avery* texted.

*Nope. Avery Jane. I like it.*

*I AM TOTALLY FREAKING OUT JANE IS MY MIDDLE NAME.* Her message was followed by several \*mind blown\* emojis.

*That's crazy. Good karma for the baby, though. I mean, you're pretty amazing, so . . .*

When Avery didn't text back, David briefly wondered if he'd overstepped. But he shook his worries away. He wasn't going to apologize for how he felt about Avery. But maybe he *should* apologize for how their conversation had gone the last time they'd talked.

*Avery*, he typed. *I'm sorry.* He deleted the words and tried again.

*Listen. I'm sorry about the other night.*

Delete.

*I'm sorry I was a jerk when we talked about Tucker.*

Delete. Delete.

*I know I was out of line, but Tucker is a cheating jerk and he doesn't deserve you.*

Delete. Delete. Delete.

*Please leave him and love me instead.*

Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete.

David heaved a sigh and rubbed his eyes. He maybe shouldn't be trusted with his phone on so little sleep. Before he could try again, another text from Avery popped up.

*I'm sorry I was so defensive the other night. Thank you for answering Tucker's wrist questions.*

Funny they'd been thinking along the same lines. *Don't apologize*, David responded. *I was the one who was wrong. I shouldn't have judged.* He didn't text that he also should have just kept his mouth closed and let her kiss him, even though that's exactly what he was thinking. They might be having a very different conversation if he'd let the moment play out.

*Still friends?* Avery asked. He'd never hated the word *friends* quite so much.

David responded immediately. *Absolutely yes.*



## CHAPTER 13

EVERY ATE DINNER AT Melba's house later that day. She reread her text thread with David while Melba rooted around in her kitchen. "You want hot sauce?" Melba called from behind the fridge door.

"And ruin a perfectly good bowl of shrimp and grits?" Avery yelled back.

Melba shuffled back to the table, the open bottle of hot sauce in her hands, and dumped a generous portion onto her own bowl. "Sometimes I don't know how you call yourself a true Charlestonian."

Avery rolled her eyes. "Oh, whatever. Drowning the flavor out of your food does not make you more Southern than me."

"Drowning, nothin'," Melba said. "This here highlights the flavor. You don't know what you're missing."

Avery scooped up a bite of the creamy grits at the bottom of her bowl, sliding them through the thick tasso gravy before moving the spoon to her mouth. Avery was a sucker for

Melba's shrimp and grits. Nobody made them like she did. Still, Melba usually only offered them up when she felt like Avery was in need of some life-directing wisdom or a swift kick up-side the head. Avery knew as much, but could never bring herself to turn down the invitation. She'd take Melba's advice if it meant eating Melba's cooking.

Melba nudged the skillet of cornbread toward Avery. "Try some. And butter it. I did something different and want to know if you like it."

Avery did as she was asked, cutting out a thick slab of the cornbread and slathering it with the butter that sat in a crock at the center of the table. She took a bite, chewing slowly as the flavors exploded on her tongue. She looked at Melba, eyebrows raised. "Did you ... why does this taste like bacon?"

Melba grinned. "Like it?"

Avery took another bite. Did she like it? It was maybe the best cornbread she'd ever had. Melba made it like she was supposed to—without sugar, in a well-seasoned iron skillet coated with enough butter to make the cornbread crispy around the edges.

"It isn't the cornbread that tastes like bacon," Melba said. "It's the butter."

"You put bacon in your butter?"

Melba raised her shoulders. "Just a touch of the grease. It didn't take much."

Avery's arteries protested even as her stomach rejoiced. It was a good thing Melba didn't cook for her all the time.

"So," Melba said, leaning back in her chair.

Avery steeled herself for the interrogation she knew was coming. Melba was as predictable as the tides.

Avery fished a shrimp out of her bowl, piling grits on top of it before putting the whole bite into her mouth. She didn't hurry. Shrimp and grits was a meal to be savored, after all. She'd let Melba ask her questions, but she didn't have to make it easy on her. "So," she repeated, when she'd swallowed her food.

Melba leaned her elbows onto the table. "I saw Tucker's truck this morning," she said. "Mite early for a visit, wasn't it?"

Avery kept her eyes on her food. A part of her wanted to lie just to spite Melba. Nothing had happened with Tucker. But if it had, it wasn't Melba's place to tell her what she could and couldn't do. But Melba only asked because she was concerned. And based on how Tucker had behaved the night before, she had reason to be. Avery swallowed her pride. "Nothing happened, Melba."

Melba raised an eyebrow. "Nothing? Was he there all night?"

"Yes. But nothing happened. He showed up at my house and I could tell he'd been drinking. I didn't want him to drive

himself home, so I let him stay. But he slept on the couch.” Not that he hadn’t *tried* to sleep in her bed.

Melba nodded her head, then looked at Avery’s phone, still sitting on the table next to her. “Well that’s a relief. I didn’t think you were the kind of woman that would share her bed with one man, when you’re actually interested in another.”

Heat traveled up Avery’s neck, pooling in her cheeks; Melba’s words struck a little too close to the truth. She reached up and flipped over her phone, face down onto the table. How had Melba seen what she’d been reading anyway?

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Avery asked. “I’m not interested in David. And things with Tucker are fine.” Well, fine-ish. Her night with Tucker hadn’t been *awful*, exactly. When she’d invited him over, she’d definitely thought about where the night might lead. But then he’d shown up already halfway to drunk. He’d pressured her in ways that had made her really uncomfortable and had been sullen and rude when she’d insisted he sleep on the couch. She’d wanted to believe that Tucker was all in, interested in making their relationship what she’d always believed it could have been the first time around. But the night before had felt a lot like their old relationship. It might just have been the alcohol talking, but is that what she wanted? A relationship where she had to ask that question?

“Avery, what’s this about? This whole idea of getting back together with Tucker?” Melba reached over and squeezed

Avery's hand. "It didn't work the first time around, sugar. What makes you think this time will be any different?"

Avery considered the question. The summer she'd met Tucker, she'd been working at the yacht club, putting herself through school, scrimping and saving every penny so she could afford to live out on the island and help her grandma cover the property taxes that made beach living so expensive. She'd always known Charleston was full of old money, but she'd never really experienced it up close. She'd grown up going to public high school, shopping at the outlets, eating seafood from the fish camps out on the islands. She wasn't a King Street boutiques and Magnolia's Sunday brunches kind of girl. She'd never felt like she was missing out, either. Not until that summer. She'd been scrubbing the dock right beside the King's sailboat when Tucker had emerged from the bowels of the boat, a cold water bottle in hand. He'd passed it to her with a wide smile, showing his perfectly straight teeth. "You look like you could use this," he had said.

Next thing she knew, she was wearing sundresses and wedge sandals, attending garden parties and symphony concerts on Tucker's arm. Every weekend, it was something different, *somewhere* different. Restaurants she'd only ever walked past. Wine that cost more than she earned in a week. Benefits that took place inside mansions she'd only read about in history books. She didn't miss the parties or the events. She'd never loved getting dressed up or pretending like she cared about people she knew she'd never see again. There were things she had missed, though.

“Is it about the money?” Melba asked.

Avery looked up. “What? No. It’s definitely not that.” And it wasn’t. At least not directly. The luxuries that came along with dating Tucker were a nice perk, but for Avery it was more about the opportunities that came from being associated with the King family. Avery had fought her entire life to get what she wanted. She’d fought to get into the magnet high school in her school district. Fought to get into the College of Charleston. Fought to save enough money to live where she wanted. Fought to get her dream job at the aquarium. But Tucker didn’t really have to fight. His name alone opened doors that would never open to Avery on her own. “It’s dumb,” Avery said, finally meeting Melba’s eye. “I know you’ll think it’s dumb anyway.”

“Try me,” Melba said.

Avery took a steadying breath and fiddled with her spoon, scraping it around the edge of her bowl. “I guess it’s about feeling important,” she said. “I felt special, you know? Tucker could have dated any girl he wanted. And he picked me.”

Melba tilted her head, her eyes narrowed. “I think you’re maybe putting that boy up on a pedestal where he doesn’t belong. He’s just a man, Avery. And one that broke your heart pretty solid if I remember correctly.”

“I know he did, but ... he’s being really sweet this time around. It’s different.” Avery pushed thoughts of the night before out of her mind. One bad night didn’t disqualify all the other times Tucker *had* been sweet.

Melba cleared her throat but didn't say anything else about Tucker. It made Avery nervous. With Melba, silence usually meant she had thoughts she'd decided were too mean to actually share out loud.

"Always choose kindness," Melba had told Avery once, when she was a little girl. They'd been sitting on Melba's back porch, Avery and her grandma, drinking Cheerwine from the old green fridge and talking about middle school. Avery was weeks away from starting the seventh grade and was convinced middle school girls were the meanest on earth.

"Child, you just be nice to everybody," her grandma had said.

Melba had nodded her agreement. "You won't be able to change how other people treat you," Melba had said. "But if *you* are always kind, you can at least guarantee that when you go to sleep at night, you won't feel regret." As far as Avery could tell, Melba had always lived by the mantra, though often enough that meant sitting through conversations in silence if she didn't trust herself not to say anything mean if she let herself say anything at all.

"Tell me about David," Melba said, giving Avery a pointed look. "What's going on with him?"

"Nothing," Avery answered, a little too quickly. She'd been hoping for a subject change, but this one felt like jumping from one hot skillet into another.

Melba shot her a look and Avery rolled her eyes. "We got into a little disagreement the other night. But it's fine. I

apologized. He apologized. We're friends."

"What was the argument over?"

Avery hated to tell her. It wasn't exactly going to help her convince Melba that Tucker wasn't a week's worth of bad news. She stalled by eating a few more bites of her dinner. When she reached for another slice of cornbread, Melba moved the pan away and shook her head. "Nope. Talk first. You'll get more when you've said your piece."

Avery huffed. "Why are you being so hard on me?"

"It took me three hours to make that supper sitting in front of you. I even walked down to Barley's and bought the shrimp fresh. They were swimming at the bottom of the ocean six hours ago and now they're in your bowl, thanks to me. I think I've earned the right to make a few demands, don't you?"

Avery pursed her lips. If she didn't love Melba so much, she might be annoyed. "David thinks I shouldn't be dating Tucker. He says he doesn't trust him."

Melba smiled. "Does he, now?"

"But it's not justified in David's case. He doesn't even know Tucker. He's only saying it because ..." Avery hesitated. It suddenly felt a little too cocky to say that the reason David didn't like Tucker was because he wanted to be dating her himself.

"Because he wants to date you?" Melba finished the sentence for her. "Are you sure that's his only motivation?"



Avery shrugged. “He’s not exactly subtle. The guy literally has zero game. He just puts his feelings out there. Unfiltered.”

“Sounds kind of refreshing,” Melba said. “You never have to wonder how he feels.”

“Maybe,” Avery said. “But it’s also totally disarming. I have no idea how I’m supposed to react when he just straight up tells me that he’s jealous of Tucker. Or tells me that he knows what he wants and that it’s me.”

“He said that?” Melba said. “That’s bold.”

“Not exactly,” Avery said. “But he definitely implied it.”

“So?” Melba scraped out the last bite of her dinner then slid the cornbread in Avery’s direction. “Go on,” she said. “You’ve earned it.”

“So ... what?” Avery lifted a pie-shaped piece out of the skillet.

“How do you feel about him?”

“I’m dating Tucker, Melba. It doesn’t matter how I feel about David.”

“Fine. Hypothetically, then. If Tucker weren’t in the picture, would you give the doctor a chance?”

Avery chewed her cornbread in silence. She *would* give David a chance, as weird as it felt to admit as much to herself. He was so far outside of the kinds of guys she typically dated. But he’d grown on her.

“I think the doctor is pretty cute,” Melba said, before Avery had a chance to answer. “I bet those baby blue eyes charm the pants off of his patients when he’s working.”

“Melba!” Avery said, laughing at her friend. “Shame on you.”

“I wasn’t being literal,” Melba said with a grin. “But you’ve got to admit. Those are some fine eyes.”

“How do you even know that? Have you met him yet?”

Melba looked affronted. “Of course I’ve met him. I ran into him on the beach. I invited him over for a Cheerwine and we sat on the back porch for over an hour talking. He made a couple of really good suggestions about how I can help the arthritis in my fingers.”

“That was nice of him,” Avery said.

“It sure was.”

Avery stood up and gathered their dishes, walking them to the kitchen sink. “Shall I summarize the messages of the evening?” she said. She gave the dishes a quick rinse, then turned around, leaning against the counter. “Tucker is bad for me and shouldn’t be trusted. David is *good* for me and has killer blue eyes. Does that about cover it?”

Melba scrunched up her face like she was contemplating the mysteries of the universe instead of sticking her nose into the middle of Avery’s dating life. “David has good lips, too, don’t you think?” she said. “Really full and kissable.”

Avery tossed a dish towel at Melba's head. "You're terrible, Melba. *Terrible.*"

On her way home from Melba's, Avery walked past David's house. His car was in the driveway, but based on their texts that morning, he was probably just waking up. For a minute, she thought about racing back to Melba's and fixing a to-go plate of shrimp and grits to drop off for him. She knew he liked it—he'd ordered it when they'd gotten lunch when he'd come to visit the aquarium—and Melba's was way better than what he'd eaten there. But then Avery's phone dinged with an incoming text and she stopped thinking about David.

*I'm sorry about last night,* the text from Tucker read. *When can I see you again?*

Avery cut between her yard and David's and headed straight for the beach. Maybe the wind and the sound of the waves would settle her nerves, help her sort out the muddle of emotions swirling through her chest. She sank onto the sand, knees pulled up and looked out at the water. The beach was nearly deserted, only a few people here and there walking through the foamy surf where the water met the sand.

So much about her relationship with Tucker felt right. But there was something niggling in the back of Avery's mind, something that told her it wasn't *all* right. She still had doubts. Hesitations. And if she were being totally honest with herself, David was a big part of that. Because she liked him. And though she'd never admit as much to Melba, she had noticed both his killer eyes, and his full, kissable lips. She wouldn't

have noticed those things if there wasn't *some* potential for an actual relationship, would she?

She pulled up Tucker's text and read it again. *I think we need to talk*, she typed. *Can you come over?*

*I wish I could*, he immediately responded. *I'm out of town until next weekend. Can I see you on Sunday?*

Avery frowned. Sunday was more than a week away. Why hadn't he mentioned that he was traveling? Is that why he'd left so early that morning?

*Sunday is good*, Avery texted. Maybe an extra week would be good for her in the end. She'd have plenty of time to mull over her feelings and decide how she wanted her conversation with Tucker to go.

## CHAPTER 14

MONDAY MORNING, DAVID WAS happy to discover he and Lucy were working the same shift. It wasn't as if there was a whole lot of time to stand around and talk during a typical day, but he still preferred working with Lucy over anyone else. Lucy didn't take herself too seriously, but she didn't let her humor interfere with her abilities as a physician. The way she was fun, without being silly was good for David. Whenever he started to feel anxious or stressed, Lucy always had a way to pull him out of his own head and get him to relax.

If only Lucy could get him to stop stressing about his dating life.

He rounded the corner just past the nurse's station and nearly ran into Lucy. "Hey," she said, looking up from her phone. "Where have you been?"

"Showering," David said.

Her eyes went wide. “Oh, no. You were in triage for the vomit explosion?”

David frowned. “It wasn’t just vomit.”

“Food poisoning, right? An isolated incident?”

“So far.”

Lucy held up an open bag of iced animal cookies. “You deserve a cookie. Want one?”

David reached into the bag, suddenly wondering how long it had been since he’d eaten. He glanced at his watch. It was almost six and he hadn’t eaten since breakfast. He grabbed a few more cookies.

“So,” Lucy said, in between bites. “I talked to Haley about going out sometime. She’s totally willing.”

David groaned. “Wait, you already did?”

Lucy shot him a look. “Of course I did. Why are you annoyed that I did exactly what you told me to do?”

“I’m not annoyed, I’m just ... worn out.”

“Worn out from what? Work? That’s exactly why you need to go on a date.” Lucy shook the bag, loosening the cookies that had fused together at the bottom. “Seriously. I’ve never tasted anything this delicious.”

She held the bag open to David and he helped himself to another handful. “It’s amazing how quickly hunger can lower your standards,” he said. After a few more cookies, he steered the conversation back to dating. “I did go on a date, if you

must know,” he said. “Last week. Avery set me up with a friend from work.”

“Wait. You asked *Avery* to set you up with someone? Isn’t that a little ... masochistic?”

“No. Why would it be?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because you’re in love with Avery and dating her friend guarantees that you’ll always be around her?”

David froze, his hand suspended over the cookie bag. His brain kept tripping on Lucy’s use of the word *love*. It felt right. Terrifying, but right. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“How did it go?”

“Terrible,” David said. “No, not terrible. It was fine. But I didn’t get the sense that she was all that impressed with me.”

“And?” Lucy shook out the last cookies, dividing them equally between them. She folded up the now empty bag and tucked it under her arm.

“What do you mean, and?” David said. “Isn’t that enough of a reason for us not to have a second date?”

“What did you think of her?”

David shrugged. “She was ... fine. Just not—”

“If you say *Avery*, I’m going to punch you in the face.” A nurse came around the corner, stopping when she saw Lucy and David standing together. “Exam Two, doctor,” she said to Lucy.

Lucy moved to follow the nurse, David falling into step beside her. “That isn’t what I was going to say.”

Lucy shot him a look over her shoulder.

“Fine,” David said with a sigh. “She wasn’t Avery. But I don’t know how to stop my brain from making the comparison. It feels like an involuntary reaction.”

Lucy paused outside Exam Two and turned to face him, her hands on her hips. “Then do something about it. Say something to her.”

David slouched against the wall. “I can’t.” He forced a breath out through his nose. “When I got home Saturday morning, Tucker was at Avery’s house. Avery told me nothing happened, that it wasn’t what it looked like, but Tucker made it seem like things *definitely* happened.”

Lucy pressed her hands against her head, frustration, or maybe just exasperation, evident on her face. “All the more reason for you to move on then. She’s clearly not into you.” She turned to leave, then looked back at David. “Wait, you *talked* to Tucker?”

“He came over to ask me questions about his wrist.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Do you realize how convoluted that is?”

Lucy disappeared into Exam Two, leaving David alone to process her response. Whatever did or didn’t happen between Avery and Tucker on Saturday night, the amount of time they were spending together was a pretty solid indication that



Avery felt *something* for Tucker. But David would almost put money on Avery feeling something for him as well. Surely he wasn't so desperate and clueless that he was making up the spark he felt whenever they were together.

David half-listened as the resident in Exam Two reported the patient's symptoms to Lucy, finishing with her preliminary diagnosis. Without eyes on the patient, David couldn't be certain, but based on what he could hear of the resident's report, he agreed with the diagnosis and was impressed with her competence.

Lucy must have agreed as well. She ordered one additional test then left the patient in the care of the resident and returned to David's side. As soon as she saw him still slouched against the wall, she rolled her eyes. "Seriously, David. You have to get over this. You look like a kid whose puppy died."

Lucy moved back down the hallway, David still on her heels. "Here's the thing," he said. "I realize I don't have a lot of experience, but I think Avery *is* into me."

Lucy raised an eyebrow. "That's confident of you. What makes you so sure?"

"I just feel like there's something there. When we look at each other, there's this ... pull. I feel something."

Lucy turned to face him, placing a hand on either shoulder. "David," she said, her tone gentle. "You know I love you. And that means speaking the hard truths even if it stings a little."

David braced himself, already knowing he wouldn't like what Lucy had to say.

"If Avery felt the same pull that you do, she wouldn't be spending the night with another man."

David shook his head. "She said nothing happened. And this situation is different. Tucker isn't who she thinks he is."

"Maybe he isn't. But do you really think learning as much is going to suddenly make Avery have feelings for you?"

"But maybe—"

"Stop," Lucy said. "I know I encouraged you in the beginning, but it's time to move on. We're going out this weekend, okay? You, Haley, me and John. Nothing big. Just something casual. Dinner and a movie, maybe."

David hated the frankness of her words, and still wanted to argue the point. But he swallowed his retorts. What did he actually know anyway? "Fine," he eventually said. "This weekend."

Lucy nodded. "Be sure to say something to Haley about it." She finally released his shoulders. "Tell her you're excited to go and ask her if she has a preference for dinner. Make sure she's not vegan or something. I was hoping we could go to Lewis's for barbecue."

David rubbed his temples, wishing he could muster up actual enthusiasm over the prospect of another date. "I'll ask her."

“Now go find a patient or something,” Lucy said, as she moved down the hall. “Your brain clearly needs the distraction.”

Two days passed before David saw Avery again. He was at his mailbox when she strolled up, grocery bags in hand. The second he saw her coming up the road, his stupid heart started racing like he was in middle school, watching his crush approach from across the room. Mentally, he’d agreed with Lucy. It did make sense to move on. But that didn’t mean he could get his heart to comply. Not with Avery living right next door.

“Hey,” Avery said, lowering her shopping bags to the ground. “Anything interesting?”

David looked at the stack of mail in his hand, all advertisements and credit card applications. “Does anything interesting come in the mail anymore?”

“My great aunt Virginia sends me twenty-five dollars on my birthday every year,” Avery said. She lifted her hand up to shield her eyes from the late afternoon sun.

“I guess that counts,” David said. Silence settled between them and Avery reached down to pick up her groceries. “How are you?” he asked, not wanting her to leave. “How’s life?”

A shadow of something flitted across her face before she smiled. “Good,” she said. “Everything’s good.” David had the same feeling in his gut that he always got when a patient wasn’t telling him the whole truth about whatever medical incident/accident/stupid behavior had landed them in the ER.

He'd gotten pretty good at weaseling his way to the truth, but he sensed Avery might not appreciate the same treatment. She wasn't obligated to tell him anything, after all. Not like his patients were.

"That's good," David said. "I'm glad."

"And for you?" Avery said. "You're good, too?"

"Yeah, yeah. Busy. But good." The small talk was killing him, but he'd endure it if it meant keeping her in front of him for five more minutes.

"Are you headed into work?" Avery looked pointedly at his scrubs.

David looked down, following her gaze. "Oh. Yeah. I work at seven."

"The night shift, huh? It's seems like it's been a lot of those lately."

David tried not to dwell on the fact that she'd noticed. "I'm on nights another week then I'll shift back to days."

"That's too bad. I was thinking about getting a pizza and was going to ask you to join me."

David's heart fell to his stomach and he glanced at his watch. It was already twenty past six. Too late for him to squeeze dinner in before he left. But just the fact that she'd invited him would keep him feeling buzzed all night. "Another time then," he said, hoping she sensed from his tone how much he would love for that to happen.

“Yeah,” she said, finally picking up her bags. “I’d like that.” She took a few backward steps. “See you later?”

David nodded. “Yeah. Of course.”

She made it halfway to her porch before she stopped and turned around. “Hey. What do you like on your pizza? Just, you know. For next time.”

David figured he’d eat anchovies and dill pickles on a pizza if it meant sharing it with her, but he couldn’t exactly say that out loud. He settled for the truth. “Pineapple,” he said. “Lots of it. And enough Canadian bacon to fill up all the extra space the pineapple hasn’t already covered.”

Avery shook her head, her smile wide. “You’re kidding.”

David shrugged. “I know. My sisters think it’s disgusting too. But pineapple pizza got me through med school. I can’t help it.”

She shook her head again, clearly amused about something, though David couldn’t pinpoint what. “Have a good night, Dave.”

His heart warmed at the sound of the nickname she’d given him that first day they’d met. He climbed into his car and drove to the hospital feeling more optimistic than he’d felt in days. Lucy’s wisdom and council had never steered him wrong. But this time? He was going with his gut. He wasn’t ready to give up on Avery.

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David glanced at his watch for what must have been the four hundredth time. Lucy shot him a look, her eyes wide and scolding, and he forced his arm under the table, where he might not feel so tempted. It wasn't that he was having a terrible time. Haley's company was pleasant, and he always enjoyed being with Lucy and John. He just felt restless. Impatient for the date to be over already so he could figure out a time to actually have that promised pizza with Avery. It didn't seem fair to give Haley the impression he was interested in something more when his energy was clearly focused elsewhere.

Lucy had insisted it was too late to back out, and he ought to give Haley a chance. Maybe he'd be surprised by the chemistry they felt.

So far, he hadn't been surprised by anything.

Haley was perfectly nice, had a lovely smile and made him feel exactly nothing.

After the meal, Haley excused herself to go to the restroom and David breathed deeply for the first time all night.

"That bad, huh?" John asked.

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Don't encourage him, John. He ought to be giving this woman a chance."

John shook his head. "I know the look in his eyes. He's way too hung up on somebody else for Haley to have a fighting chance."

Lucy looked at David then, compassion in her eyes. “I don’t want you to get hurt, David. I just have this feeling things aren’t going to end well if you stay on this course.”

David shook his head. “You’re wrong, Lu. I appreciate you worrying about me, but she’s the one for me. I know it.”

Lucy sighed. “Okay. If you say so.”

The group had decided on the newest superhero movie after dinner, and they drove down to the movie theater in Mt. Pleasant for the more comfortable chairs and stadium seating. While they waited in line for popcorn, David froze. On the other side of the lobby, *also* in line for popcorn was Tucker. *And* Jessica. David quickly turned his back on the couple, spinning in such a dramatic way that he almost elbowed Haley in the head.

“Whoa,” she said, ducking out of the way. “You okay?”

“Sorry,” David said. “So sorry. I just um, sorry. Do you want butter on your popcorn?”

She eyed him, clearly confused by his behavior, but it’s not like he could explain. “No butter,” she said. “I’d rather not have the extra calories. And a diet soda.”

David made a mental note of her preferences, trying not to make yet another comparison to Avery. Avery liked butter on her popcorn. So much that she’d listed buttered popcorn as one of her favorite foods in a text thread they’d shared one night, back before he’d made things awkward.

Fresh oysters. Watermelon. Navel oranges. Buttered Popcorn. Hushpuppies. And donuts from The Donut Shop over on King Street.

His nearly photographic memory had been an asset in medical school, and always helped when it was time to analyze lab results or recall patient symptoms. When it came to Avery, it just made him see her everywhere. In everything. Reminders of her constantly pinging the places in his brain where he stored everything Avery.

A quick glance behind him showed that Tucker and Jessica were still a few people back in line. He suddenly wished it was Avery he was seeing a movie with. Then all he'd have to do was point Tucker out and she'd know everything she needed to know.

Except, maybe he still could point Tucker out. He'd just have to get Avery to the theater.

John nudged him from behind. "Hey. David. You're up."

David looked around, finally noticing that the concession line had moved forward without him. He closed the distance between him and the counter and ordered Haley's popcorn and diet soda. He was too preoccupied to think about eating himself.

"Seriously?" Haley said. "I'm not going to sit beside you and eat popcorn while you have nothing."

David had never been so irritated by another human being. Which was grossly unfair. It wasn't Haley's fault, though he



did find her strict adherence to her calorie count more annoying than attractive.

He looked at the kid behind the concession stand. “Add another popcorn, *with* butter, and a Cherry Coke to that, please.”

Haley smiled. Probably happy that David was not just eating but eating more calories than she was.

Seconds after their butts hit the seats in the theater, David jumped back up, claiming he wanted to go to the bathroom before the movie started. He made it back into the lobby just as Tucker and Jessica were finishing up at the concession stand. Now all he needed to do was figure out which theater they were going to be in, ask an employee how long their movie would last, calculate the time they’d most likely be leaving the theater, and then somehow convince Avery to come *to* the theater at the same time.

David tried not to dwell on how ridiculous the entire plot sounded. Or on the lie he’d have to tell Avery in order to get her to the theater. But the opportunity was too good. She’d learn about Tucker and Jessica, and if he played it right, Tucker wouldn’t even know that David was at the theater which meant Tucker would have no reason to follow through with his career-related threats.

Of course, that meant Avery would have to *not* mention that the only reason she came to the theater was to meet David. Or maybe pick up David? He hadn’t quite decided what his lie was going to be. But that was a risk he was going to have to

take. The first step to having a chance with Avery was getting Tucker out of the picture.

As Tucker and Jessica approached the long hallway that led back to the theaters, David ducked into the alcove right outside the women's restroom door. A woman coming out of the bathroom shot him a look, and he grimaced. "Sorry. Just waiting for my friend." It was a pitiful explanation. Who waited for a friend six inches from the actual bathroom door?

"Creep," the woman muttered under her breath.

David winced at the insult but didn't have time to dwell on it. He turned his back as Tucker and Jessica walked past, then darted out behind them, hoping against hope that they didn't turn around. They went into the theater two doors down from his own to see a slasher movie he was almost positive Jessica would not have picked to see on her own. Once they were inside the theater, he backtracked to the lobby, asking the first employee he saw what time the slasher movie started and ended, then compared those times to the ending time of his own movie. There was about a twenty-minute difference—Tucker's movie ending first—which meant David had to figure out a way to get Avery to walk into the theater at the same time Tucker's movie was letting out. And she had to do it without seeing David, or at least without *Tucker* seeing David.

David pressed his forehead into his hand. There were too many variables. Too many things that could go wrong.

"David?"

David looked up to see Lucy approaching him.

“What are you doing out here? The previews are almost over.”

“I, um, I got distracted.”

Lucy looked around. “By what?”

David looked over his shoulder before answering. He felt cagey and uncomfortable, like he was already seconds away from getting caught even though he technically hadn’t done anything worth catching. “Tucker and Jessica are here,” he whispered to Lucy.

Lucy furrowed her brow. “What? Where?”

“In the next theater.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Whatever you’re thinking, David, stop. Don’t do it.”

“If I can just get Avery here, she’ll see for herself what Tucker is doing. She’ll see what I *can’t* tell her.”

“It’s a bad idea.”

“Why?”

“Because a million different things could go wrong.”

David huffed, but he couldn’t disagree with her. His list hadn’t gotten quite to a million, but he’d already thought of at least a dozen ways how proceeding with his plan could backfire in his face. But if it all went right? That potential outcome was worth the risk. “If I love Avery, I have to try and make things right for her.”

Lucy froze and her face softened. “You love her? Are you serious?”

David sighed. “I don’t know. I think so. I know I’ve never felt this way before.”

“What if Avery already knows about Tucker’s fiancée and she doesn’t care? What if she likes the lack of commitment, the no-pressure nature of that kind of relationship?”

“Avery’s not like that,” David shot back, fire in his voice.

“Are you sure? Has she told you?”

David thought back through all the things Avery *had* told him about Tucker. He’d always thought she sounded like it was a relationship—a real one. But she’d never really talked about the true nature of their relationship. Probably because David had always been so confrontational whenever Tucker came up.

“She’s a grown woman. And you’re meddling like you’re still in high school.”

David’s jaw tightened. He wasn’t *meddling*. He was helping out a friend who needed to learn the truth about someone she needed to be rid of. The sooner the better. “I’ll be in in a minute, okay?”

Lucy shook her head. “What am I supposed to tell Haley?”

“Don’t tell her anything. I’ll be right there.” David pulled out his phone and scrolled through his texts until he found the last message from Avery. When he looked back up, he saw Lucy disappear back into the theater. Glancing at the time, he

did a quick calculation of the exact time Tucker's movie would be out, then tapped out a text to Avery.

*Hey. I'm at the movie theater in Mt. Pleasant and I need a ride home. Any chance you can come and get me? Movie will be out at 10:40.* He hit send, then held his breath.

She replied almost instantly. *That's soooo late. How did you even get to the movie theater if you don't have a ride home?*

*I'll explain later,* David texted back. *Please? Just come.* He hoped the added gravity to his message would inspire her to make the trip without asking anymore questions, and that when she realized the real reason he'd asked her to come, she'd forgive the lie.

## CHAPTER 15

AVERY PULLED INTO THE movie theater parking lot just after ten thirty. She'd almost told David no, but something about that text he'd sent—she could tell he needed a friend and was happy he'd called her. She'd been thinking about him more and more ever since her conversation with Melba and had all but decided she'd call things off with Tucker to more fully explore the possibility of dating David.

She pulled out her phone and sent David a text. *I'm here. Parked toward the back.*

She leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes but opened them right back up when her phone dinged with a text.

*Actually, can you come inside? There's someone I want you to meet.*

Avery stared at the text. Someone he wanted her to meet? At the movie theater? What on earth? Why was he being so vague? She looked down at the yoga pants and oversized

sweatshirt she wore and sighed. I mean, she still looked decently cute. She'd made a tiny bit of an effort because she was coming to see David, and suddenly that had more significance than it did the week before. But she was still dressed way down.

*It will only take a second,* David texted again.

“Fine, fine,” Avery mumbled to herself before climbing out of the car. On her way inside, she hesitated when she noticed a black sedan with an Illinois tag that looked a whole lot like David's car. If he had his car, why would he need her to give him a ride?

She stopped right inside the theater door, looking for David's blond hair. A bunch of people were funneling out of the hallway that led to the theaters, so she trained her focus there. It didn't take long for her to find a familiar face, but it wasn't David's.

Tucker was walking toward her, his arm around a petite brunette who wore a frightened expression on her face, whether real or imagined Avery couldn't tell. Tucker hadn't seen her yet, but he would, any second. A second is all it took for a flood of understanding to fill Avery's brain. All the semi-weird behavior from Tucker she'd been dismissing and excusing suddenly made a new sort of cruel and ridiculous sense.

He always wanted to stay in. Always came to her house and never brought her to his. He didn't take her to the yacht club,

or to any of the old restaurants or bars they'd frequented back when they were dating.

Because they *weren't* dating. She wasn't anything but a side piece for Tucker. The woman on his arm? She was the real girlfriend.

As they moved closer, Avery noticed the giant engagement ring on the woman's finger.

Fiancée, then.

Avery wanted to crawl under the bench that sat behind her against the wall. How could she have been so stupid? Anger and embarrassment flared to life inside her. She wouldn't hide. Hiding meant Tucker would escape unscathed. And there wasn't anything fair about that.

Avery took one step to the left, right into the path Tucker was taking to exit the theater. When their eyes met, he startled. "Avery," he said, eyes wide.

The woman looked at him closely, her eyebrows drawn down in question, but didn't say anything.

"Tucker," Avery said. "Funny running into *you* here since you're supposed to be traveling."

Tucker looked from Avery, to the woman beside him, then back to Avery. "I got back early," he said cautiously. "Avery, I'd like you to meet Jessica, my fiancée." He shot Avery a look, a clear plea for mercy, but she was done with his entitled behavior.



Avery took two steps forward, stopping right in front of Tucker, but then turned and looked at Jessica instead. “Ask your husband-to-be where he was last weekend. Ask him, and don’t give up until he tells you the truth.” She looked back at Tucker then and called him a name that fifteen years ago would have made Melba threaten to wash her mouth out with soap. But in this instance, she was pretty sure even Melba would let it slide.

Jessica turned on Tucker and pushed his arm off of her shoulders. “Who is this woman?” she hissed. “What is going on here?”

Avery backed away, not wanting or needing to be a part of whatever drama Tucker had ahead of him. Adrenaline raced through her veins and she suddenly felt sick. She lowered herself onto the bench she’d only just contemplated hiding under and pushed her face into her hands. She was pretty sure their little confrontation had earned an audience—she could still feel eyes on her—but she couldn’t bear the thought of making eye contact with anyone. She wanted to disappear. To hide in her bedroom for two weeks, to shower over and over again until the feel of Tucker’s skin against hers had been scrubbed out of her pores and forgotten.

What were the odds that she would run into Tucker at a movie theater she never even went to on the one night she happened to show up? And then the final piece of the puzzle clicked into place in her brain. Odds were pretty high, actually. Because it hadn’t been a coincidence at all.

Avery stared at the floor long enough for Tucker and Jessica to make their escape. She kept sitting, unwilling to look up, to let anyone see her burning face or tear-filled eyes.

A man sat down next to Avery on the bench. She didn't have to see him to know that it was David.

"You knew," she said, her voice quiet, her tone even.

David sighed. "Yes."

Avery swallowed. "How?"

"I can't really tell you that."

Avery scoffed. "You can't? Or you won't?"

"I made an oath, Avery. I can't."

She turned her face to the side, finally making eye contact. His posture mirrored hers, his elbows propped up on his knees, his body leaning forward. "So you saw him at the hospital then?" Another lightbulb lit up in her brain. "He went to the ER when he hurt his arm. And you were his doctor."

David didn't say anything, but the steadiness of his gaze told her she was right. "And Jessica was with him?"

Finally, David nodded. Apparently patient confidentiality didn't extend to girlfriends. Wait. *Fiancées*.

"So that's why you called me here?" Avery said. "Because you knew they'd be here? How much spying did that take? Did you follow them here or something? Just waiting for a public place where you could reel me in and out them?"

“I swear tonight was a total coincidence. I was already here and just happened to see them.”

“Still. You lied to me. That’s your car in the parking lot. You don’t actually need a ride. Why didn’t you just tell me about her, David? Why go through all this trouble?”

David squirmed, running a hand across his scalp and mussing his always-perfect hair. “Tucker is a *King*, Avery. He plays golf with the entire hospital’s board of directors. Gerald Stevenson, the doctor who hired me, came to see him while he was in the ER, checking to make sure I was taking good care of him. Tucker basically threatened to have me fired if I told you anything.”

“And you believed that he could actually *do* that? Over something as insignificant as this? All you had to say was ‘Avery, I can’t tell you how I know, but Tucker’s engaged and you shouldn’t trust him’ and I would have believed you. You could have trusted me.”

“I tried to tell you,” David said. “Or at least hint at it. But you always shut me down.”

“Because you didn’t give me any information,” Avery shot back. “You just tossed out self-righteous judgements without any justification.”

A group of people stopped just to the left of the bench where they sat. David stood up, taking a step toward them before looking back at Avery. Two people in the group were clearly a couple; the other was a woman who kept looking expectantly at David. Had he been on a *date*?

“Oh my gosh.” Avery stood up. “You were on a date when you set all this up? What is wrong with you?” She was halfway to the theater exit when David called after her. “Avery, wait!”

She turned around. “No. I don’t want to talk to you anymore. You just humiliated me in front of a lobby *full* of people. You embarrassed me in front of my ex-boyfriend and his fiancée. You lied to me. You manipulated me into a situation that I never would have chosen for myself. And worst of all, you completely neglected another woman who came into this evening believing she would have your undivided attention in order to set it all up. You screwed up, David. Big time. From now on? Please, just ...” Avery’s shoulders slumped and she shook her head, the fire in her finally ebbing. “Just leave me alone, all right?”

Back in her car, Avery gripped her steering wheel and took three slow, intentional breaths, feeling the need to calm down before trusting herself to drive. Fury over Tucker’s betrayal coursed through her, hot and thick. How had she let him back into her life? How had she forgotten all of the things that had led to their breakup in the first place? Then there was David. He had known that Tucker was engaged. And *that* betrayal almost stung as much as Tucker’s.

David’s arrogance was maddening. She could almost see how a threat from Tucker regarding his career could coax him into silence, but there were so many other things he could have done to solve the problem. He could have just come home from the movie theater and said, “Hey, I saw Tucker at the

movies and he was with someone. You might want to talk to him and see what's going on." He could have trusted Avery to be tactful, to not bring David into the conversation at all. Armed with the right knowledge, she could have just dumped Tucker, no explanation needed. Was David really so insecure and socially inept that he couldn't finesse a way around Tucker's flimsy threat? Was he really so clueless to think that Avery would be okay with a public humiliation if it meant learning the truth about Tucker?

Even worse, had he expected her to go running into his arms, grateful that he'd finally helped her see the error of her ways?

Avery shifted her car into drive and pulled out of the movie theater parking lot.

Maybe David could feel good that he'd bested Tucker without jeopardizing his career, though Avery was pretty sure Tucker's words had been more hot air than actual threat. But she wondered if, in the end, he'd think losing Avery's friendship had been worth it.

Because Avery?

She was done.

## CHAPTER 16

DAVID PULLED INTO HALEY'S driveway and cut the ignition. He should say something, anything to try and fix the horrible turn the night had taken, but what *could* he say, really?

"So, tonight was really horrible," Haley said.

Well, then. That about covered it.

"I'm so sorry, Haley," David managed. "I got distracted and then I ... I don't know what happened. I lost my head."

"That's actually what surprised me the most," Haley said. "After watching you in the ER, I thought it was impossible for you to seem flustered. But, wow. Did you ever prove me wrong?"

David almost laughed. His social self couldn't be any more different than his doctor self. "It's different at work," he said. "At work, I'm in control."

"But you're not, really," Haley said, turning slightly in her seat. "You never know what's going to come through the ER

doors. It's more like the opposite of being in control. It's trusting your instincts and making split-second decisions without second guessing yourself."

"But those split-second decisions are made based on the knowledge and experience that I've gained. It's not as if I'm just guessing."

"But sometimes you do have to guess."

"But only if I've eliminated every possible solution otherwise. I'm not guessing blind, because before I guess, I've used deduction and reasoning to narrow my options down so significantly that the guess is less like a guess and more like a calculated risk."

Haley raised an eyebrow. "You do all that deductive reasoning even if you only have five seconds to make a call?"

"My brain works very fast."

Haley shook her head and laughed. "So smart, and yet you still screwed up tonight in such a big way."

David nearly winced at her words. "Screwed things up with *you*?"

"Me? No," Haley said. "I'm a nonissue. You're nice and all, but I more than recognize my cue to bow out gracefully. You're clearly hung up on ... Avery? Was that her name? I'm not stupid enough to hang on when you're clearly into someone else. I mean, you must be in order to do what you did."

“Then you understand what I was trying to do,” David said, suddenly hopeful that maybe he hadn’t just made the most colossal mistake of his life. “I was just trying to help. And since I couldn’t tell her, I just wanted her to *see*.”

“Wait—I didn’t say I understood. I mean, I’m only piecing details together here, but from what I gathered, you knew the guy she was dating was cheating and rather than just tell her, you had her come to the movie theater so she could see for herself?”

“I couldn’t tell her,” David reiterated, though the more he said it out loud the less he actually believed it. He could have told her. He *should* have told her right from the start. “I only knew about the guy’s fiancée because I treated him at the hospital. And he ... he threatened me.”

“Sounds stupider every time you say it out loud, huh?” Haley said, her tone flat.

David looked up, surprised by Haley’s candor. “Thanks for the pep talk, Haley. This has been really fun.”

She smiled at that. “Look. I can almost see where you were coming from. Your mistake is that you plowed forward with a plan without any consideration for Avery’s feelings. You thought about how *you* would feel if she knew her boyfriend was cheating. You thought about how the truth might help *you* out. Because she can’t date you as long as she’s dating the other guy. But did you ever really stop and think about how knowing might *hurt* her?”



“You work in medicine, Haley. You know that if we only prescribe treatments that don’t hurt, we’d lose twice as many patients. Sometimes the right course is the most painful one.”

“But when it’s really going to hurt?” Haley said. “We use anesthetics. We numb people so they don’t have to feel how much it hurts to get better.”

David paused, trying to understand Haley’s point. “So you’re saying what I just did to Avery is akin to performing surgery on someone who’s still awake,” David said, a statement, not a question. He didn’t need Haley to confirm because he felt the truth of his realization all the way down to his bones. Logically, knowing was the best thing for Avery, even if it hurt in the moment. But he hadn’t done anything to prepare her, to protect her, to ease the pain of learning that truth.

“Exactly,” Haley said.

David shook his head. “I’ve really ruined things, haven’t I?”

Haley shrugged. “Tonight was definitely not your best work. But I don’t think I’d give up if I were you.”

“No? She told me to leave her alone from now on. That feels pretty final.”

“She was angry,” Haley said. “And rightly so. Just give her some time.”

It wasn’t lost on David how ridiculous it was to be having a conversation about working things out with Avery at the end of a date with another woman. Particularly when he’d treated

her so badly. He'd walked out of the movie twenty minutes before it ended so she could find him in the lobby with another woman. That was the kind of bad date you tell stories about.

And yet, she was still being nice to him. Giving him advice. Helping him sort out his feelings.

"Thank you for being so understanding," David said, hoping Haley recognized his sincerity. "I've been awful to you. I want you to know I realize that. You deserved a better evening, a better date."

Haley unbuckled her seatbelt and reached for the door handle. "Honestly? It's fine. Lucy begged me to give this a chance but dating doctors has never really been my thing."

David tried not to feel affronted. Not that he wanted to go out with her again, either. But to be dismissed over his profession? "No?"

"It's not personal. Work just already consumes so much of my time. I want to date a teacher. Or a botanist, or something. Someone that doesn't also smell like the hospital when they come home. Does that make sense?"

It made total sense. Avery smelled like sun and salt and sand and the giant gardenia blooms that lined the side of her house. He'd take that over the smell of the hospital any day. "I get it. So, I'll see you around the hospital?"

Haley opened the car door. "Sure. Good luck with Avery," she said before climbing out. "I think you're going to need it."

David drove home in silence wishing he could rewind the last three hours of his life and live them all over again. How had he been so stupid? So clueless to how his impromptu ambush would feel to Avery? Haley's analogy, about surgery without anesthetic, had driven the point home hard. Good doctors didn't just solve problems and make diagnoses. They solved problems while also caring for the emotional well-being of their patients. They made eye contact. They explained what they were doing and why. They answered questions and made each patient feel comfortable and secure in their doctor's competence and ability to take care of them.

David had treated Tucker's presence in Avery's life like a disease that needed to be rooted out and eradicated. But he failed to treat Avery like a patient—like someone who deserved communication and respect.

He owed her an apology. Big time.

Haley had said Avery needed time, so he resisted the urge to walk straight to her house once he'd pulled into his own driveway. But the idea of doing nothing didn't sit well either. He felt antsy and uncomfortable, like he'd never be able to settle down if he didn't *do* something to fix things.

He needed to apologize, yes. But not just with words. He needed a gesture. Something that showed Avery he realized he was wrong and was sorry he'd hurt her. A gift, maybe? Or a letter? Back when he was a teenager, his parents had taken him to a therapist to help him work on his social anxiety and awkwardness. One of the things his therapist had told him was

that if he struggled to express himself in person, he might try writing letters. Letters could be revised, after all, so it meant there was no reason to stress about saying the wrong thing. It had worked before, so maybe he needed to write Avery a letter.

At the very least, that was something he could do *now* instead of later. And he wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep until he'd done *something*.

## CHAPTER 17

EVERY HEARD A KNOCK on her door just after eight on Sunday morning. She tiptoed into her living room and peeked through her blinds. She'd honestly been surprised David hadn't shown up the night before, anxious to try and talk things through. She was prepared to ignore everything—knocks, texts, calls—but she hadn't heard from him at all. It had been a blessed relief. She was in no mood to try and navigate his bumbled attempts at apologizing.

Through the blinds, she *did* see David, but he was walking away, already down her steps and crossing the lawn back toward his own house. Curious, she moved to the front door and swung it open. On her doormat, there was a huge basket tied up with a giant bow. She hefted it—the thing probably weighed twenty pounds—and carried it into the kitchen. A watermelon filled up the left side; that's what had made it so heavy. Next to the watermelon, Avery found three beautiful navel oranges, a box of fresh donuts from the downtown bakery she loved, a gift card to the Darling Oyster Bar, and a

to-go box of Darling hushpuppies. The hushpuppies and the donuts were both still warm. The donuts she could understand. The bakery opened at six-thirty every morning. But how had he managed fresh hushpuppies? At eight in the morning?

Avery dropped onto a barstool behind her. It was a basket of all of her favorite things. Nestled into the middle of the basket was an envelope, Avery's name written across the front. She sighed and reached for it, laying it flat on the counter beside her. Before she opened it, she poured herself a mug of coffee and opened up the box of donuts. Cinnamon with a vanilla drizzle. Her favorite. Except, she'd never told David her favorite flavor. Had he guessed that part?

Adequately fortified with caffeine and sugar, Avery finally opened the letter.

*Dear Avery,*

*I wish that I could apologize to you face to face. Hopefully sometime soon, I'll do just that. But since I'm notoriously terrible at getting my words right, I hope you'll accept this letter as a first step. I'm not sure how I miscalculated so badly when it came to handling the situation with Tucker. The only thing I can figure is that I was blinded by jealousy that he was the one dating you, and furious that he would use you like he did. When he threatened my position at work, I lost touch with reality, an evidence of my continued insecurity in my profession. I am too young. Too logical. Too clinical to be a good doctor. These are the worries that still haunt me. Coming here, accepting this job at such a renowned hospital felt like a*

*reach and a dream and Tucker played right into my fears that I might lose it. That I don't deserve it after all. Those fears clouded my judgement and influenced my actions. I'm so sorry. I should have worried less about myself, and more about you. I did not think about how my interference might make you feel. I'm sorry I embarrassed you. I'm sorry I didn't respect you enough to tell you right from the start that I knew about Tucker's fiancée. I realize it might take a long time for me to earn your trust again, but I hope you'll give me another chance to be your friend.*

*I've probably done enough to scare you off as it is, I can't write this much already without telling you how I feel about you. I'm in love with you, Avery. I almost decided not to tell you. My pride didn't want you to know of my feelings unless I was certain you felt the same way. But I figure it can only help my case when it comes to justifying what I've done. It has to be better to just own it, openly, honestly, without posturing. Of course, I'm also motivated by a likely vain and ridiculous hope that you might consider the possibility of loving me back. Someday, at least? I don't deserve you; I know that much. But I feel the feelings just the same and believe you deserve nothing but the truth from me after all I've put you through.*

*From the first oyster you made me eat, I've loved you. You mesmerize me. You fill me up in ways I've never imagined possible. You inspire me. You make me laugh. You make me want to be better at everything I do.*

*I'm so sorry I hurt you.*

*I'm sorry I can't say these words in person.*

*I love you.*

*Yours, David*

Avery read the letter through once, and then again.

She finished her donut, ate a second one, and then ripped open the to-go box of hushpuppies and ate those as well. Nothing said comfort like fried cornbread, and she needed comfort. When the hushpuppies were gone, she read the letter one more time.

It wasn't that she was mad he'd said so much. It was maybe the most eloquent letter she'd ever read. For all of his talk of being a terrible communicator, his letter was Jane Austen novel-worthy. But what was she supposed to do with all those feelings he'd shared? How was she supposed to respond? To react? She didn't love him back. She knew that much. She liked him. She'd thought about the possibility of dating him, but how do you date someone when you know from date one that they're already in love with you? Talk about pressure.

Avery reached into the basket and pulled out an orange, ripping into the peel. It was the middle of freaking July. How had David even found beautiful perfect navel oranges in the middle of the summer? And in the middle of the night? It was almost as impossible as fresh hushpuppies.

Avery ate the orange, which tasted perfect, of course, and paced around her kitchen. A walk on the beach might help clear her head, but if she went outside, she might run into



David. And she still had no idea what to say to him. So she paced around her kitchen some more, periodically glancing out her window toward his house to see if he was still at home. A few more laps and she couldn't stand to be indoors any longer, so she headed to the back door. It wasn't David's beach. She had just as much right to walk on it as he did. If she happened to see him, she'd just keep on walking.

She pushed through her back door, nearly running headlong into Tucker who stood on her screened-in porch.

She jumped and stepped backward, a hand flying to her heart. "Geez, you scared me half to death. What are you doing here?"

"Sorry," Tucker said. He sounded out of breath and looked awful. He still wore the clothes he'd had on the night before, his shirt untucked and sweat stained, and his eyes were bloodshot. "I parked down at the IOP county park and walked."

Avery narrowed her eyes. It was close to three miles to Isle of Palms. "Why? Is Jessica tracking your car?"

"My phone, actually," Tucker said. "I left it in the car."

Avery rolled her eyes and pushed past him. "Please leave, Tucker. I don't want to be a part of this."

"I know, I know. I just came to apologize."

She turned around. "For what? For using me? For making me think you actually wanted to get back together? For lying

to me over and over again? Fine. You've apologized. Now get off my property. I never want to see you again."

"Avery, come on. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"But you did. And I was an idiot to let it happen. Lesson learned. When all of your friends say you're dating a jerk, it's probably best to listen."

Tucker's eyes narrowed. "Did David say I was a jerk?"

Avery turned on Tucker. "Don't even try to bring my friends into this. You *are* a jerk. Your behavior more than justifies anything that any of my friends might have said about you."

Tucker was silent a moment, his hands propped on his hips. "He told you, didn't he? He followed me once before. He must have done it again last night and then called you and told you I was at the movie theater." Tucker swore. "I knew that guy would rat me out."

"Stop it, Tucker. David doesn't have anything to do with this. I was at the movie theater and I saw you. That's all there is to it."

Tucker shot her a look. "Alone? In Mt. Pleasant? I know you well enough to know you'd never go see a movie alone."

"You don't know me at all, Tucker," Avery said. "Not anymore."

Tucker turned and looked toward David's house. "Is he at home right now? I feel like punching somebody's nose in. His will do just fine."

“Tucker, stop. I mean it. This isn’t a mess David made. This is a mess *you* made. And if you think I’m going to stand by and let you sling mud at him or wreck his career over something *you* did? You’re wrong.”

“So he *did* tell you,” Tucker said. “You wouldn’t know I’d threatened his job unless he did.”

Avery’s stomach sank, realizing too late that she *had* implicated David by what she had said. She had to think fast.

“Fine,” she said, her tone even. “Go ahead. Attack David. Ruin his career, get him fired from the hospital, whatever you want. Then I’ll go straight to the Charleston Chronicle. I’ll give them an exclusive on the aspiring young attorney whose political hopes were dashed when he got caught with his ex-girlfriend only weeks before his wedding. I know how much you protect your social media image, Tucker. Don’t think for a second I won’t go online and do everything I can to tear it all down. I wonder if there are other women who might come forward. You know how it often goes. One person has the courage to speak up, and then the others decide the hush money they’ve been paid maybe wasn’t worth it, after all. The truth is more important in the end, isn’t it?”

Tucker’s jaw tightened. “You wouldn’t do that to me.”

Avery scoffed. “Go home, Tucker. Please. Just go live your life and let me live mine.”

An hour later, after a long shower and two more donuts, Avery pulled out her phone and texted David.

*Did you ever follow Tucker home from work?*

*Yes, David replied, almost instantly. A few times. But I never did anything else. I realized I was being impulsive and reckless and I needed to leave things alone and try to move on.*

Avery stared at his text. He'd tried to move on. Which is why he'd asked her to set him up with Shelley. And probably why he was on a date with the other girl, as well. The poor girl who had witnessed the whole movie theater debacle.

When Avery had asked Shelley about her date with David, Shelley's response had been straightforward and short. "He was nice, Avery, but he's clearly in love with you. The whole date, all he did was talk about you."

Avery sighed. It was too much. His feelings were too much. That he had gone to such lengths, that he felt so intensely . . . it was more than she could process. She typed out a response, reading it over and over before finally sending.

*Thank you for the basket. I understand why you did what you did, but I need some time to process and think. Don't text me for a while, okay?*

## CHAPTER 18

DAVID DID HIS BEST to give Avery the space she needed. At first it was a daily battle not to give into the doubt and regret that threatened to overwhelm him whenever he thought about her. Regret that he'd behaved so poorly in the first place. Doubts over whether or not he'd told her too much. But then days turned to weeks and the ache in his chest subsided to more of a dull pain, so dull he could almost forget about it if he stayed busy enough.

The easiest way to stay busy was to pour himself into his work. He practically lived at the hospital. He picked up extra shifts whenever he could, often opting to sleep in the on-call room rather than drive home. It was easier that way. Easier to keep working. Easier not to see Avery at all.

“Hey,” Lucy said as she dropped into a chair across from him in the doctor's lounge. “How are you holding up?”

“Good. Great. Never been better.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Sure. I buy that.”

“Really. I’m fine,” David insisted. And he meant it. He’d started to appreciate the new routine of his days.

“David, you’re always here. Do you realize that? Have you even worn anything besides scrubs in the past month? Go home! Take a walk on the beach. Go see a movie. Do something besides work.”

“Scrubs are really comfortable,” he argued, though he did wonder how long it had been since he’d worn real pants.

“Is there seriously no hope for you?”

David only shrugged.

Lucy’s expression softened. “She hasn’t reached out at all, has she?”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“I’m sorry, David,” Lucy said with a sigh. “But it’s her loss.”

Their phones went off at the same time with the familiar chime of the hospital’s paging system. “An accident,” Lucy said out loud, as David read the same information she did. “Multiple victims, on their way here. Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER 19

EARLY TUESDAY MORNING, AVERY walked along the beach, pulling her sweater tighter around her. The September air wasn't quite cold, but there was a bite to the early-morning breeze that was new. She welcomed it. It had begun to feel as though summer might never end.

She paused when she saw David sitting a few paces away in the sand. He wore the scrubs she'd grown so used to seeing him in and looked as though he'd been sitting there a good long time.

She paused a few steps away. "David?"

He looked up, and Avery's heart lurched in her chest.

He looked exhausted. His eyes were bloodshot and surrounded by dark circles, and he wore several days' worth of beard growth.

"Are you okay?"

He didn't say anything, just turned his gaze back to the water. Something was wrong. She sensed it in the air around

him, could see it in the set of his shoulders and the way his head hung forward.

Even though she hadn't talked to him in weeks, she moved to his side and sat down, leaning her shoulder lightly against his. She didn't know what had happened, something at work, probably, but her gut told her he might benefit from a little bit of human company. She didn't say anything—what could she possibly say?—instead hoping her presence might be comfort enough.

In truth, she wished she *could* talk to David. She'd done more than her fair share of thinking about him over the past month. Not at first. At first, she'd spent a solid two weeks nursing her bruised ego and feeling nothing but anger. At Tucker, at David, at everybody. But as her anger started to fade, she'd realized how much she missed having David to talk to. More and more frequently, she thought about the times they'd spent together and all the ways he'd made her smile and laugh. She'd read the letter he'd given her so many times, she could almost quote the thing word for word.

But figuring out what to say to him was a different thing altogether. She'd picked up her phone to text him a dozen different times but could never get anything to sound right. *Hey. Thanks for loving me. I think you're cool. Want to come over for pizza?* The longer she waited, the harder it felt to reach out. What if she'd waited too long? What if his feelings had started to change?



David cleared his throat beside her, pulling Avery fully into the present.

“I, uh ...” David sniffed and cleared his throat again. “I lost a patient last night,” he finally managed, his gaze still trained on the horizon. “I’ve lost patients before. That part isn’t new. But this time, it ...”

Avery didn’t say anything, instead lifting a hand to his arm, giving it a gentle squeeze.

He shook his head. “You try really hard to keep things clinical, to keep your emotions out of it. But sometimes, it ...”

“Sometimes it really sucks?” Avery said.

“Sometimes it really sucks,” he repeated.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Avery wasn’t sure she was ready to hear it if he did. She could only imagine the kinds of things he dealt with at work every day. But she was determined to be what he needed. If that meant listening to hard stories, she’d listen all day.

He closed his hand over hers and squeezed her fingers. “I don’t, really. I’ve been thinking about it all night, and now I think I need to let it go. But thank you for being here.”

“You’ve been out here all night?” Avery said, wishing there was something, anything she could do to make him feel better.

“Mostly,” he said.

Avery leaned her head against his shoulder and offered up a silent prayer of gratitude for people like David who sacrificed

so much to take care of other people.

They sat together in silence another few minutes, watching the birds as they swooped up and down over the water.

“I don’t want to wait anymore, Avery,” David finally said, giving her hand another quick squeeze.

She sat up and looked at him, meeting his steady gaze. There was a certainty in his eye that surprised her. “You don’t want to wait for what?” she asked.

Before she even realized what was happening, David’s hand was on her face and he was kissing her, his lips warm and soft against hers. Surprise kept her from responding at first, but then something inside her ignited and she kissed him back, her hands sliding over the planes of his chest, then moving up and over his shoulders. Clearly encouraged by her response, David’s kisses turned from gentle and searching to hungry and intense. He *wanted* her, and Avery realized with desperate certainty, she wanted him, too.

Finally breaking the kiss, David leaned back just slightly, his hands still cradling her face. “It’s now or never, Avery. Life is too short, and I can’t wait anymore. You either want me or you don’t.” He kissed her one more time, this one quick and a little more hesitant, more like a question, then pushed himself off the sand and walked toward home, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Avery sat for a long time, long enough to watch the sun rise into the sky, to see the tide roll slowly toward her. She couldn’t

stop thinking about David's touch against her skin, about the feel of his lips on hers.

The last person she'd kissed before David was Tucker. She almost felt sick at the thought.

To think that she could have had David all along. She couldn't believe how blind she'd been, how hard she must have worked to ignore how perfect David was for her.

But now she knew. And she had the power to do something about it. Happiness surged in her chest.

She had to find him. She had to find him and tell him that between now or never, her answer was irrefutably *now*.

Melba was on the back porch when Avery made it back to her house. She hardly acknowledged her on her way in, leaving Melba to follow her inside, Jasper in tow.

"What's got you all worked up this morning?" Melba asked.

Avery didn't answer. She was too busy thinking about what to do first. She needed to talk to David, but she probably ought to take a shower before she did. Even though he'd already seen her once that morning, she was suddenly self-conscious and wanted to look her best when she told him she loved him, too.

Her heart jumped at the thought. She *did* love him. How had it taken her so long to realize it?

So, shower. That was the first thing on her list.

She glanced at the clock. It was just past nine, which meant she was officially late for work. She'd been so caught up with her thoughts out on the beach that she'd completely lost track of time. So *that* was the first thing on her list. Call in and take a sick day. A twinge of guilt filled her chest, but she shook it away. She *never* took sick days. And knowing her boss, and the way she fawned over her own marriage and family, she'd likely consider being *heart sick* a perfectly justifiable reason to stay home.

Call work. Take a shower. Find David.

Avery's stomach growled loudly and Avery amended her list again.

Call work. Eat food. Take a shower. Find David.

"Are you ready to tell me what's going on inside that brain of yours?" Melba said. She leaned against Avery's counter where, bless her, she'd already started a pot of coffee.

Avery rifled through her purse that hung over the back of one of the chairs at her kitchen table and pulled out the letter David had given her when he apologized. She pulled the letter out of its well-worn envelope and handed it over to Melba. "Here. Read this."

Avery had told Melba about what Tucker had done and about David's involvement in how she had figured it out. But she'd never told her about his apology. She'd never told her about the letter.

Melba gave her a quizzical look but took the letter and read it without asking any questions.

Avery bit her lip, growing antsy while she waited for Melba to finish.

When she looked up from the letter, Melba's eyes were misty. "Child, why are you standing here with me when there's a man close by that feels this way about you?" Melba gave the letter back. "When did he give this to you?"

"A month ago. Right after everything happened."

Melba frowned. "And you never did anything about it?"

"I didn't know *what* to do," Avery said. "I was angry at him, Melba. I needed time to sort out how I felt, plus I had to give myself a little time to get over Tucker, to get him out of my system."

Melba huffed. "Bet that didn't take long."

Avery's pride wouldn't let her admit it out loud, but Melba was right. It hadn't really taken long to get over Tucker. She could still work up some anger if she thought about him for too long, but she didn't miss him.

"He kissed me this morning," Avery said.

Melba's eyes went wide. "Who? David?"

Avery nodded. "He was out on the beach and was feeling pretty emotional, I guess. He said he lost a patient last night. I just sat with him for a little while, figuring he probably didn't want to be alone, and then he kissed me. He told me life was

too short and he was tired of waiting. It's now or never. I either want him or I don't."

Melba couldn't stop smiling. "Well, which is it? Do you or don't you?"

Avery grinned. "I do, Melba, I really, really do."

"Land sakes, I thought you'd never figure it out. I'm so glad you finally have."

After a shower and a meal and two full cups of coffee, Avery finally felt settled enough to find David. Since he'd worked the night before, she expected him to be home, but by the time she was ready to go, his car was no longer in his driveway. Hoping he'd only made a grocery run, or gone out to get coffee, Avery waited an hour, and then another.

Still, he didn't show.

Melba had gone home when Avery had gotten in the shower, but she texted every twenty minutes or so, wanting to know if Avery had found him yet. It wasn't helping. It made Avery feel as though she needed to be actually searching, rather than just *waiting* for him to come home.

She paced around her kitchen. Should she call him? Text him to check on him? He'd been pretty raw that morning. Maybe she needed to wait a little while? But waiting felt impossible. Now that she'd owned up to her feelings, she couldn't bear the thought of living one more minute without telling David how she felt.

When two more hours passed and David still didn't return, she decided he had to be at the hospital. Maybe a Tuesday afternoon at the ER would be slow enough she'd be able to see him. Did they let people do that? Just show up at the hospital and ask to see specific doctors? Would she need to fake an injury to get anywhere but in the lobby? Maybe she could show up at the hospital and then text David and see if he had a minute to spare? Something about that last option felt wrong. She didn't want to text him. She wanted to *see* him. See his reaction to her. See if he noticed that she was different.

She pulled into the hospital parking lot ten minutes later and made her way into the ER. The waiting room was mostly empty, which she hoped was a good sign. Avery stopped in front of the desk.

"Hi," she said to the nurse. "I'm hoping I might be able to see Dr. Daniels. Is he available?"

The woman gave her a tight smile. "That's not exactly how the ER works. Why don't you tell me what's going on and we'll get you checked in. Whatever doctor is available will be able to take care of you today."

"Oh no, I'm not sick," Avery clarified. "He's a friend, actually. A good friend. I just, really need to talk to him."

The woman lowered her glasses and studied Avery. "While he's working? Saving lives?"

Avery's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "I definitely don't want to interfere with any life-saving. Can you just tell me if he's working right now?"

“If he’s such a good friend, wouldn’t you know whether or not he’s working right now?”

Avery sighed. This woman was not making things easy for her. “You’re right. But, you see, we had a little bit of an argument and ...” Avery paused when a familiar face floated into view. She couldn’t quite remember her name, but it was the woman David had been on a date with when the entire movie theater fiasco had happened. “Oh!” Avery said. “Her! She knows me. Can I talk to her?”

The woman must have heard Avery’s words because she approached the desk, giving Avery a questioning smile. Her nametag read *Haley*. “Can I help you?”

“Hi. Sorry. You maybe don’t remember me. I’m Avery? David’s—I mean, Dr. Daniels’s—friend?”

“Ohh, right. How I could forget?” the woman said, her tone a little less friendly than Avery would have preferred. But it wasn’t like she could blame the woman.

“I know you probably don’t have a lot of reason to want to help me, but can you tell me if David is working right now? I really, *really* need to talk to him.”

“Talk to him in a ‘I’m going to make him even more miserable than he is now’ kind of way? Or in a ‘maybe I can snap him out of this funk he’s been in for the past month’ kind of way?”

Avery’s heart jumped. “That one. The last one. At least, I hope.”



Haley took a deep breath. “Give me a minute. He’s here. Let me just see if he can talk to you.”

Avery walked back to the lobby and perched on the edge of a chair, too anxious to really sit and relax. Everything—all of her emotions—made such perfect sense now, she couldn’t believe it had taken her so long to figure things out. Now that she had, she felt ready to explode.

Fifteen minutes later, a woman in scrubs and a lab coat came through the large double doors that led into the ER. She looked right at Avery. “Hi. Are you Avery?”

Avery nodded.

“I’m Lucy, David’s friend. Come with me.”

Avery followed Lucy back through the double doors and through a number of confusing turns she hoped she didn’t have to repeat on her own before they finally stopped in a curtained exam area. Lucy pulled the curtain all the way closed around them and turned to look at Avery, her arms folded across her chest.

“I’ve known David a long time,” Lucy said. “Since residency. I care about him a lot, and I don’t like to see him hurting.”

“Okay,” Avery said with a nod, unable to manage much else. The woman was intimidating as all get out.

“He’s been hurting a lot the past few weeks.”

Avery dropped her gaze to the floor. “I know.”

“I get that his feelings can be a little intense sometimes,” Lucy said. “There’s not a lot of middle ground with David which sometimes makes it hard for him to navigate relationships.”

Avery offered a wobbly smile. “I get that, too.”

“But Avery, he’s the best there is. He is loyal and trustworthy and good all the way to his core. There’s no one in this world that will treat you better or love you more.”

At that, Avery smiled again, wide and true, the stupid tears that had kept her company off and on all morning filling her eyes *again*. “I know. That’s why I’m here.”

Lucy finally smiled. “You know, I told him he should give up on you.”

Avery sniffed. “I probably *would* have given up on me. But I’m really glad he didn’t.”

Lucy nodded, apparently satisfied with Avery’s answers. “Let me go get him. He’s with a patient now so you might have to wait a few minutes, but no one should bother you in here.”

Avery nodded. “Thanks, Lucy.”

Avery kept herself busy, playing mindless games on her phone, too preoccupied to do anything that required brain power. When she heard David’s voice coming toward her, her heart lurched, and she dropped her phone into her bag before clenching her trembling hands into fists. When the curtain slid

back and David stepped into view, her heart nearly fell to the floor.

He wasn't wearing the typical scrubs she'd grown used to seeing him in. He wore dress pants, a shirt and tie, and a lab coat, a stethoscope draped over his neck. He looked so achingly handsome, Avery almost couldn't breathe. "Hi," she said, her voice catching in her throat.

David smiled. "Hi." He stepped more fully into the room, pulling the curtain closed behind him. "I was told I was seeing a woman with a heart condition?"

Avery laughed. "I guess you could say that."

David pushed his hands into his pockets and looked up at her through his lashes, his expression sheepish and adorable. "I'm really nervous right now, Avery."

She smiled and laughed, then walked toward him, reaching out both her hands for his. "Don't be nervous. I came here with something very important to say. I just need you to listen."

He nodded. "Okay," he said, his voice barely a whisper.

Giving his hands a squeeze, Avery moved them to the small of her back, so she stood in the circle of his arms, her hands pressed gently against his chest. He felt warm and solid and real under her palms. She kept her eyes down, certain that if she looked at David directly, she'd probably start to cry. "I came here thinking I was going to tell you that it was time for

you to just jump in the pool already, but then I realized you already did. You jumped when you sent me that letter.”

“That letter felt a lot bigger than jumping in a pool,” David said.

Avery laughed softly. “Just go with the analogy, all right?” She slid her hands up to David’s shoulders, finally looking into his eyes. “It isn’t you that needs to jump in the pool, it’s me. I was scared, David. Scared of feeling too much, too fast. Scared of forever, which I’m pretty sure this thing between us has the potential to be.” She shrugged her shoulders. “You said it was now or never, so I choose now. I mean, if you’ll still—”

In one swift movement, David pulled her against him and lifted her chin, cutting off her words with a kiss. Avery gave in completely, letting him lead, opening herself up as he deepened the kiss, his arms wrapping fully around her. Several moments later when he pulled away, she had to lean against him for how dizzy she felt, for how intensely her blood pounded through her veins.

“I think this definitely qualifies as a heart condition,” she said softly.

David pressed a kiss against her temple. “Want to get out of here?”

Avery looked up. “You don’t have to work?”

He shook his head. “I only came in for a meeting with the hospital board.”

“Which is why you’re so dressed up,” Avery said.

He nodded. “There’s a new initiative they want to implement in the ER to improve response time and overall patient care. They’ve asked if I’ll head it up.”

Avery smiled. “That’s amazing.”

“It comes with a little bit of a pay raise, so I’ll take it. Though at first it will mean less time with patients, and I don’t love that. Hopefully that will just be temporary. It was Dr. Stevenson who recommended me for the job,” David said. “I didn’t expect it at all.”

Avery thought back to her conversation with Tucker when she’d threatened to go public with his raunchy behavior. Was it possible her threat had something to do with David getting a promotion at work? Maybe. But she’d never say as much out loud.

“Let’s go celebrate,” Avery said. “I’ve got a gift card to the Darling Oyster Bar that I still haven’t used.”

David threaded his fingers through hers and led her out of the ER. “Oysters, huh?” They stepped into the parking lot, and he turned, pulling her into him and wrapping his arms around the small of her back.

“They do say oysters are an aphrodisiac,” Avery said with a knowing grin. She leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed David with all the longing she possessed.

“Actually,” David said, breaking the kiss, “that’s a myth. There’s not anything in oysters that would make someone more inclined to romance. Research indicates it might be the

slurping motion of eating raw oysters that turns people ...” His words trailed off and he cleared his throat. “I should stop talking and just kiss you again, shouldn’t I?”

“Yep,” Avery said, her tone matter of fact. “That’d be good.”

And it *was* good.

That time, and the next, and every time after.

## EPILOGUE

AVERY STOPPED AT THE end of the wooden walkway that led to the beach behind her house and took off her shoes before stepping onto the sand. She didn't see David, but she'd find him soon enough. They often met out on the beach after work, and his text had told her he'd be there. The sun had long set, but the moon and stars were bright enough overhead, it was easy to find her way without a flashlight.

Someone had built a fire in the distance, and Avery could see groups of people gathered around the dancing flames. The closer she got, the more she thought she recognized someone standing around the fire. But it didn't make sense. The person she thought she recognized was her brother. And she'd know if he was in town. Another few feet closer, and someone broke from the group and ran toward her. A very tiny someone.

Seconds later, her three-year-old nephew jumped into her arms. "Aunt Avery!" he said, burying his head into her shoulder.

"Charlie! What are you doing here?"

“I came wif Mommy and Daddy,” he said. “And Gwa-ma and Gwan-pa.”

Avery looked back to the bonfire. “They’re all with you? Right now?” She lowered Charlie back to the ground.

“Hmm-mmm.” He tugged on her hand. “Come on.”

Avery let her nephew lead her to the bonfire, immediately seeing her brother standing off from the rest of the group, watching their approach.

“Daddy, I found her,” Charlie said.

“Good job, man,” Shawn said. “I knew you could do it.”

Avery gave her brother a hug. “What are you doing here?” she said. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Come on. Everyone’s here.”

Shawn really had meant everyone. Shawn. His wife, Ellie. Charlie. Mom. Dad. Melba. Shelley. Avery’s boss, Nancy. Avery’s two best friends from high school. Her college roommate. Lucy and John. Even Haley from the ER was there. The only person missing was David.

Avery made her way around the group, greeting the people she hadn’t seen in a while, growing more and more puzzled when no one would answer why they were all gathered together, or where her boyfriend was. She spoke to Melba last. “You know what’s going on here, don’t you?”

Melba only grinned. “Of course I do. We all do.”



“Is anyone going to tell me?” Avery wasn’t exactly frustrated, but she hated being the only one in the dark.

Melba motioned over Avery’s shoulder. “I’m guessing he might.”

Avery turned around, finally seeing David as he approached the group. He wore dark jeans and a white t-shirt, a button-down shirt over top, untucked and open at the front. It was a relaxed look that suited him.

When they’d officially started dating six months before, it hadn’t taken long for Avery to realize she was desperately in love with David. She would have claimed early on that it was impossible for her to ever love him more. But every day, their love seemed to grow, eclipsing anything she’d ever experienced before.

David stopped in front of her, a smile on his face. “Hi,” he said, before leaning in for a kiss. “I hope you don’t mind that I invited a few people over.”

“How did you find my college roommate?” Avery asked. “This is crazy.”

“That took some work,” David said, “though it wasn’t quite as tough as fresh hushpuppies from the Darling at eight in the morning.”

Avery shook her head. David still hadn’t told her how he’d managed that one.

“I don’t understand,” Avery said. “What is everyone doing here?”

“You know I’m not very good at getting my words out. Not when I’m nervous.”

“I know,” Avery said. “You know I don’t care about that.”

“I know. But tonight, I wanted you to be surrounded by perfect words. No ...” he swallowed and closed his eyes for a moment before starting again. His hands trembled slightly and Avery squeezed encouragement into his fingers. She was pretty sure where this was going, and knowing David like she did, he needed all the encouragement he could get. “No hesitations,” he said. “No false starts. Just all the reasons why everyone loves you. So I asked for some help.”

David dropped her hands and turned her around so she faced her family and friends, his hands resting lightly on her shoulders.

One by one, everyone in the group stepped forward, saying a few things that they loved about Avery. Her mom told a story about when she was a little girl and guarded a nest of sea turtle eggs night and day for a solid week; her dad said that he’d never known anyone to live with as much passion and find as much joy in the ordinary things as Avery; Charlie stated that no one on the whole planet gave better hugs.

By the time it was Melba’s turn, Avery was already in tears. She sniffed. “Oh man, now I’m really going to fall apart.”

David gave her shoulders a reassuring squeeze.

“Avery, child, I’ve loved you like you were my own since you were a tiny little thing, running around this island in

nothing but a swimsuit, a rash of freckles across your cheeks. I've seen you at your best, and I'm rightly sure I've also seen you at your worst. Which means I can speak on good authority when I say that the man behind you? He brings out the very best version of you. I've seen that kind of love one time before, when your grandma fell so hard for your grandpa." Melba smiled wide. "She's proud of you, child. I'm sure of it."

Avery crossed the sand and gave Melba a big hug. "Thanks, Melba."

She turned back to David, heart-full and happy.

Their eyes met and he took a steadying breath. "Avery, if I say too much, I'll probably screw something up. So I'll just say this. I love you. Completely." He dropped to one knee and looked to John, who tossed him a tiny, black jewelry box. He caught it smoothly with his long, capable fingers and opened it up. Looking at Avery, the firelight dancing across his face, he smiled wide. "Marry me?"

Avery dropped into the sand in front of him and kissed him, the cheers of all the people she loved erupting behind them. "Yes," she said, tears flowing freely now. "Absolutely yes."

THANKS FOR READING!

Thanks so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed David and Avery's story. Looking for your next romcom? Check out my newest release, How to Kiss Your Best Friend, or dive into my complete Some Kind of Love Series, pictured below!



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenny Proctor grew up in the mountains of North Carolina, a place she still believes is one of the loveliest on earth. She lives a few hours south of the mountains now, in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. Mild winters and of course, the beach, are lovely compromises for having had to leave the mountains.

Ages ago, she studied English at Brigham Young University. She works full time as an author and as an editor, specializing in romance, through Midnight Owl Editors.

Jenny and her husband, Josh, have six children and almost as many pets. They love to hike and camp as a family and take long walks through the neighborhood. But Jenny also loves curling up with a good book, watching movies, and eating food that, when she's lucky, she doesn't have to cook herself. You can learn more about Jenny and her books at [www.jennyproctor.com](http://www.jennyproctor.com).