



7  
BROTHERS  
SERIES



ONE  
SMALL  
PROBLEM

A NOVEL



SHELLY MONARCH

One Small Problem  
A Seven Brothers Series Novel

Shelly Monarch

One Small Problem

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For Grandma, one of the most tenacious women I have ever known, and Grandpa who showed what 70 years of strength and support looks like.





# PLAYLIST

Bring It on Home to Me – Double Bass Double Voice  
Summertime Blues – Double Bass Jazz  
Perfect Duet - Ed Sheeran & Beyonce  
Girls Just Want to Have Fun – Cyndi Lauper  
Oops!...I Did It Again – Brittany Spears  
Livin' On A Prayer – Bon Jovi  
Stayin' Alive – Bee Gees  
Love Yourself – Justin Bieber  
Smoke on the Water – Deep Purple  
Somewhere Over the Rainbow – Israel Kamakawiwo'ole  
Bam Bam – Camila Cabello & Ed Sheeran  
Wake Me Up – Avicii  
Fight Song – Rachel Platten  
Say You Won't Let Go – Kurt Hugo Schneider, Joshua  
David Evans, & Madilyn Bailey  
Scars to Your Beautiful – Alessia Cara  
Slow Hands – Niall Horan  
Best Friend – Saweetie & Doja Cat  
Isn't She Lovely (Acoustic) – Callum J Wright  
Roar (Piano Version) – Daniele Leoni  
If Found, Please Return – Bitflip  
From This Moment On – Shania Twain & Bryan White

*One Small Problem* on [Spotify](#).

## **Author's Note:**

One Small Problem is the first book in the Seven Brothers Series. Each book can be read as a standalone, but reappearing characters may cause spoilers.

Please note: Domestic abuse by a secondary character and gun violence may be triggering for some readers.

## PROLOGUE

The alarms sound their never-ending high-pitched tone. Shoes squeak and thump as nurses rush to my aide. Is it a heart attack? A seizure? A stroke? I haven't been in this room long enough to know what's going on. I wasn't prepared for a crash. None of the nurses indicated it was a possibility. It's protocol for one to stay in the room if there are stability concerns.

The bleating tears at my ears. It's not something you get used to, no matter how many times you go through it. But my body reacts without thought.

*How can death deliver such a jolt of life?*

"Code blue, room four. Code blue, room four," the monotonous tone announces over the speakers.

"Is this guy a DNR?"

"Where's the EKG?"

The room is instant pandemonium. Even in the chaos there is a rhythm.

"Chest X-ray, stat!"

"Is he on blood thinners? What's his history?"

One minute ticks by.

"Let's hook up the pads. Draw up one milligram of epinephrine."

The pushed medications race through veins like water trying to extinguish fire. It's the race against destruction.

"Who has the hemoglobin?"

"Page anesthesia!"

Another minute runs off the clock.

A swarm of nurses, aids, and respiratory therapists fill the space. It's an organized frenzy all around me.

“Two minutes, Doctor.”

“Pulse check.”

Compressions stop. Hands reach for the carotid and femoral arteries, trying to find that life-giving thump.

“It's V-fib. Continue compressions. Charge the defibrillator. We're going to shock.”

“Clear!”

My chest rises and falls with the jolt of electricity meant to shock the heart back into a steady rhythm.

Anesthesiology inserts tubing to administer meds, and hands squeeze the amboo bag to force oxygen into the lungs.

There's not another shockable rhythm. Without a heartbeat, the body loses oxygen. Without oxygen, organs shut down.

“Compressions! One milligram of epinephrine.”

Tension coils up my neck. I can feel it with each passing second. Death is drawing near. This time, I'm not sure I'll win.

Death is greedy that way.

More medications are pushed. More tests are run. Blood is drawn.

“Cardio is here.”

New machines are brought to the bedside.

“Echocardiogram shows no movement.”

Ten minutes.

Nurses switch places frequently so that the compressions never waver. The slight crackling sound with each press emphasizes the broken ribs. It's physically taxing.

Twenty minutes.

Hands dig through carts for more medications. Another nurse is typing furiously, charting every move that's made—time stamps, medications, procedures, staff names, responses.

“Thirty minutes, Doctor.”

“Are there any objections to stopping the code?”

Heads shake and sag, chins to chests.

“Time of death, six-oh-three p.m.”

That's all it takes for the mayhem to end. The monitors are silenced. The compressions stop. Tubes and lines are removed. The army of staff slowly begin to trickle out of the room.

The remaining nurses start the final arrangements before the family arrives. Voices are hushed and movements are done with precision and care. Even in death each patient deserves the highest level of treatment.

The still room feels otherworldly compared to the one I walked into less than an hour ago. This man, who endured so much, now lies in serene stillness. The peaceful scene contradicts the tide of emotions and adrenaline still coursing through my system. It will take some time for my own body to relax.

I perform the death exam with sure hands and swift movements. First, I check his eyelids and see no corneal reflex. Then, I search and find no pulse. When I listen, there are no breath sounds. The agonizing ordeal is over.

Exiting the room, I see the nurse who had been keeping record staring blindly at the wall behind the nurses' station. Gently, I guide her to an on-call room.

Her name tag reads, *Molly. LPN.*

“Take a seat. You okay?” I whisper, trying not to jar her.

The woman slumps down, lackadaisical. No answer.

It's difficult in a moment like this to comfort a coworker I don't know. There's always the line you must beware of crossing as a male attending but leaving her alone isn't an option either.

I squeeze her shoulder. “Molly, are you alright?”

She blinks several times before turning to me. The makeup around her startling blue eyes has begun to run down her cheeks. “That was my first code.”

My lips press into a flat line. Words escape me, so I nod. I remember my first time, and I know this is an experience every medical professional has. There’s nothing that will soften the blow.

We stay like that, silent companions, for several minutes. Eventually, I leave, giving her space to decompress.

For me, each new code feels more routine. Systematic. I hope it never feels comfortable. That’s when I know it’ll be time for a new profession, but I’ve learned to compartmentalize better as the years pass.

I have had so many nightmares. We are all emotionally scarred—there is no doubt. I just try not to dwell on it. Everybody gets through this job in their own way.

Every coworker in that room is someone outside of it. They are moms, dads, sisters, and brothers, but those are susceptibilities that we leave outside the doors of trauma so that we can do what we do inside. Every role is critical when life hangs in the balance.

I experience things here with colleagues that my family has no idea about. My sister and brothers can’t comprehend the things I go through. The things I have seen.

I try so hard not to take my work home, but sometimes I see home at work. I see them in the young woman who was assaulted on her way to work, the construction worker who was injured in an accident, or in the small family admitted after a motor vehicle collision. The unit is full of ordinary people just like us.

It’s not just the ghosts of my family either. People I know have come through the door who we couldn’t save. Those deaths are harder to shove into a box.

If the ER walls could speak, the stories would be endless. Only, they’re not always good stories. Happy ending stories. If

you're planning for all positive outcomes in this profession, then you will find yourself struggling. Everybody finds a way to get past what they feel is as far as they can go. When you reach that line, you must have the mental fortitude to push on.



## CHAPTER ONE

### *Magnus*

The chime over the door draws my attention with each new patron's entrance. Being able to see who comes in is one reason I chose a seat facing the door. I don't know why I haven't started telling Roland we're going to meet a half an hour before I actually plan to see him. My foot taps a tattoo under the cafe table. I don't do well sitting still, unless it's behind my bass.

Hugo and Roland are meeting me for brunch, but we all know tardiness is Roland's downfall. I love my brother, but this is one of his traits that irks me the most. The cold brew coffee I ordered is crisp and refreshing on this warm spring day. My caffeine addiction is *real*. Between long hours at the hospital and the nature of the Pacific Northwest, I'm predisposed.

"Would you like another, sir?" the waiter asks with a painted-on smile.

"When the rest of my party arrives," I say.

The poor kid is working his tail off. I feel awful about holding one of his tables. I make a note to leave a large tip, no matter the service. He probably could have served and bussed this table at least once already in the time I've been sitting here.

Noting the time on my watch, I mentally vow to order no matter what if my brothers aren't here in the next five minutes. I tried to get my siblings to put one of those tracker apps on their phones, but they all refused, insisting I would use it to stalk them. It's not that I *want* to know where they are every minute of the day, but how can I be there when they need me if

I don't know where they are? Not to mention the huge help it would be in situations like this. If they're still out in Kent, there's no way I'm waiting for them. At the very least, I should be tracking Roland. That kid still needs looking after. Maybe I should try one of those, 'when you act like a grown up I'll treat you like one,' lines. On second thought, there's no way that would go over well.

The door chimes again. This time, my two youngest brothers walk in, laughing and play-punching without a care in the world ... like they aren't over forty-five minutes late. I must be scowling because their humor drops when they spot me.

*Shoot.*

I hate being the serious brother ... The father figure. It wasn't a role I ever wanted in my family, but that's what happens when your parents die too soon. Hugo and Roland were still in high school. The position was foisted upon me as the eldest. It's not that I regret it. I could never truly resent anything having to do with my family. Let's just say my parents aren't the only thing I lost that terrible day.

"Chill out, Magnus. We're here," says Roland.

I stand to hug my brothers. No matter what's between us at any given moment, we're still family, and a close one at that. My siblings would do anything for me, just as I would for them. Not everyone understands the tie the eight of us have. That's okay. It's hard to explain. For some, tragedy destroys close relationships. For others, like ours, it strengthens the connection.

"Is everything okay? Why are you guys late?" I ask.

Hugo reaches from his place at the small round table to push at the v forming between my eyebrows. "We're fine. More than fine," he says with a cocksure smile.

"Ay!" Roland drags out the sound, reaching over to fist bump Hugo. "You should have seen the women at this club last night, Mag. There might have even been one for you in there, old man."

My scoff is audible. How dare they leave me sitting here while they reminisced about their night out! I guess I shouldn't expect any more from two single, twenty-something men. It seems like so long ago for me.

“And this one,” Hugo points to Roland, “I had to wait for him to get rid of his visitor this morning.”

Roland's eyes roll. “I'm not like you, Hugo. I treat my women right. Besides, I don't mind the light of day, if you know what I mean.” I watch as his eyebrows bounce before smacking him in the shoulder. I know there is no way either of my brothers would disrespect a woman they were with, but they're treading a thin line today. Roland's reference to the daylight is a jab at Hugo's very real insecurities.

The tearing of Hugo's roll can be heard in the uneasy silence. He prefers to avoid talking about his medical condition. As a doctor, I've made sure he has seen every specialist I can. We're all doing everything possible, but it has taken its toll on him in more ways than one. Ailments like his are just as mentally taxing as they are physically.

“So, uh ... you're staying at Hugo's?” I question Roland.

“For now. There's a concert series at The Gorge I might hit up next week. Should be pretty dope.”

“You're the dope if you think I'm letting you hitchhike a hundred and fifty miles. I'll take you. When do you need to leave?” I ask.

“Thanks, Mag. That'd be great! Don't you get tired of taking care of six grown men and one recently taken woman? There's no way I could do it,” Roland says.

*No. That's my job.*

Roland might be the sole reason I started going gray at thirty. I learned years ago when to let those kinds of comments slide. He's baiting me.

“Nah. Rollie doesn't need you. I'm the sound engineer out there all next week. I'll take him,” Hugo rejoins the conversation.

“Aw yeah! This is going to be great. The Small brothers teaming up again!” Roland gives a rhythmic shoulder bob.

My head shakes and blood pressure spikes with each event they plan, but I can't ignore the way my cheeks push into my eyes at their antics. I'm so proud of their friendship, which goes beyond their brotherly connection.

My brunch break went faster than I would have liked, especially with so much of the time spent waiting for the two knuckleheads to show. I pay the check and bid my goodbye long before they finish stuffing their faces.

The rest of my shift is slow for a summer Saturday at Harborview. As an attending physician, there is a lot on my plate. I'm responsible for the overall care of my patients in the emergency department, and I also supervise and teach the medical students, interns, and residents involved in my patients' care.

My hospital is a highly specialized teaching hospital. That means it's always busy. We don't have days with fewer patients than staff. It just doesn't happen. That makes ensuring our patients receive the best care possible even more important. No one should ever suffer because their team overlooks something as they're trying to move on to the next patient too quickly. Treat the patient in front of you, not the one before or the one after.

When a life-threatening trauma rolls through the doors, it's time for game faces. You don't think, 'What if I do something wrong?' You *do* something. It's also critical to maintain a calm and caring bedside manner. My patients get the best of me, even when I'm not feeling it. That's something that can be hard to teach my staff.

Harborview is where I was an intern and fellow. Now it's my turn to help shape the next class of medical personnel, and I take my job very seriously. That's why my shifts tend to go longer than the eight hours I'm scheduled.

Like tonight.

Here I am, an hour after I was supposed to be off, five hours after sitting at the cafe with my boisterous brothers, holding the hand of a man who could be my grandfather. Hand holding isn't my general style, but I don't have the heart to pull it back from between the wrinkled hands of the man who just lost his wife of sixty-eight years.

“Don't suppose they let ya wear a ring while ya work. Are ya married, young man?” he asks me. His voice is strong, even in his pain.

“No, Mr. Walker, I'm not.”

A soft smile curves the corner of his lips. I hope to someday view the death of a loved one as this man does—as a peaceful end to a life well-lived. His paper-thin skin is soft against mine. He pats the top of my grasped hand. “One day, son, you'll know how the love of a good woman can transform you.”

*Yeah, that's not for me.*

I give him a placating smile before leaving his side.

Here's the thing. When you're a doctor, you can't let life and death dictate your own feelings. Call me detached or heartless, but if my emotions stayed with me after every death, every abused wife, every sick child ... I wouldn't be able to crawl out of bed in the morning. There are days when it gets to me, though. No one makes it through this profession without some mental health issues. I focus on the positives in my life outside of work. I have to find what resets me.

Everyone has something that restores their soul. For me, it's my family and music. I check in with all my siblings as often as possible, more frequently than the seven of them check in with me. I do whatever they need to make their lives better, whether it's a gift, a service, a kind word, or some quality time. Ensuring their happiness secures mine.

Then, I spend time with my double bass. Music lets me put my emotions into the air. It's a way of expelling them. Exorcizing them. It's my favorite form of therapy.

People are always amazed at what I can play on a double bass. The stereotypes are jazz and classical. Those things are most certainly common, but if you name a piece and give me a bit of time, I can play it. Ever heard of the Trans-Siberian Orchestra? Give me rock, grunge, country, pop, or anything else that may come to mind, and I can make it mine.

My siblings and I are all musical; even Winter (who joined us later in life) has the voice of an angel. Music was one of Mom and Dad's requirements. I'm not afraid to admit that riffing together is always fun. Our jam sessions are just one of the things that keep us together through the hard times. Come to think of it, it's been too long.

Even though we see each other on Sundays, we don't carry our instruments with us all the time. Some are just too big to make it feasible. The piano, drums, and bass are really the hardest to lug around. I consider calling one of my siblings to come over as I make my way home for the evening but decide against it when I finally enter my peaceful apartment.

Sometimes Killian and I will get together to play, just the two of us. His piano has pride of place in his living room, and I have a smaller one in my apartment. Maybe we're too moody to play with the rest of them these days.

It may be my stress relief, but Hugo is the one who has run with his music. He's a bit of a musical genius. If it has strings, he can play it. His lessons as a kid were on guitar, and I think that's still his favorite. However, he has been known to turn plucking at any instrument into a performance. He's even learned the ins and outs of recording and makes a pretty penny off his different forays into the music industry. Some days he creates jingles and radio commercials. Other times, he tours as a sound engineer with different up-and-coming bands.

*Bring It on Home to Me* plays through my fingers on my bass as Double Bass Double Voice's version sings through my mind.

*Bring it to me. Bring me your sweet lovin. Bring it on home to me.*

It's amazing how I can hear Winter's and Theodore's voices harmonizing flawlessly over the smooth notes. They complement one another as perfectly as any duet I've ever heard. My smile matches those I envision on their faces. Music with them is always enjoyable, no matter how somber the tone.

All thoughts of my shift float away on the notes. The elderly lady with a broken hip brought in by her daughter. The firefighter with third degree burns that will always be badges of honor for saving a baby in a car fire on I-5. The devastated University of Washington student with newly diagnosed HPV. The Army vet with heart palpitations after a workout much like he's done every day for the last twenty years. And of course, Mr. and Mrs. Walker. All gone like pollen in the wind.

It's not callousness. It's survival.

The days ebb and flow, but they're never dull. As the only level one adult and pediatric trauma and regional burn center in Washington, Alaska, Montana and Idaho, we don't really have slow days, but certain diagnoses come in waves with the seasons. We see more sore throats and congestion in the fall and more heat stroke in the summer. We see airlifts from all over the region, and our location on the I-5 corridor makes us central for things like motor vehicle collisions and the homeless population.

I see far too much abuse. The days when I don't have to call in social workers or Child Protective Services are great days. Well, there's still death, so maybe not a great day; I guess I've learned to consider any day as a good day when I can help someone. They don't even have to like that I helped them. The attempted suicides, the drug overdoses, and curmudgeon-y older folks who are ready to die, even when their bodies aren't ready yet.

It's essential to a medical professional's wellbeing to find a way to distance oneself from the war zone that is each workday.

*Bring it to me. Bring me your sweet lovin. Bring it on home to me.*

The calluses on my fingertips allow the time to slip away without notice. The notes act like little jolts of electricity that restart my heart.

An alarm on my phone clashes with my current piece. If I don't remind myself to sleep, I'll be lost in the music until morning. Tomorrow is Sunday. I don't work, but it would be detrimental to flip my cycle. It's too chaotic as it is without willfully reducing my sleep.

Returning my bass to its stand, I turn the lights off around my home. My bedroom is cool, and the curtains are dark: optimal sleeping conditions. If only total silence were possible in the city.

I wash my face and run a comb through my hair and beard. There is no way I'm not going to take care of it, graying though it may be. Showers are a must after every shift, but I still work through my bedtime routine no matter how recently I've showered.

Finally, I slide into my bed in a pair of pajama pants Winter bought me for my last birthday and close my eyes on another day.



## CHAPTER TWO

*Johanna*

This is my one break. The one day I allow myself to do something just for me. There are always people who look down their noses at single moms, like we aren't allowed to be adult women.

They can shove it.

So, from the beginning of April through the end of September, my five-year-old spends Friday night and all day Saturday with my parents, and I volunteer at the Seattle Humane Society. She loves it. They love it. I get a moment to be me again.

Caring for others, especially animals, is something I've always cherished. When Adelais was born, caring became more than just a volunteer position, or even a day job. It's now a full-time thing, and I love every second of being her mom.

I don't think that caring bone will ever leave my body. It's why I love being a mom. It's why I'm a LPN (Licensed Practical Nurse) still trying to finish my schooling to become a RN (Registered Nurse), and it's why I spend my one free day a week volunteering at the animal shelter.

It doesn't hurt that my new bestie volunteers on Saturday mornings as well. Our friendship was bound to flourish after our fated meeting at the shelter. Winter is kind, funny, and so good with kids. Thank goodness she loves my daughter because Adel does *everything* else with me in life, including friend dates.

Skinny arms wrap around me from behind, "Good morning, Johanna!"

I turn to find Winter and her patented bright-white smile. She's shorter than me, and much more svelte; the baby weight never quite came off for me. "Hey, hot stuff! How's Superman?" Her new boyfriend is a dead ringer for the superhero.

She swipes the back of her hand across my upper arm. "You know I'm the only one allowed to call him that, but he's good." Now her smile has matching doe eyes. I send her a wink. She's so easy to tease.

"How was your week? Did you set up that dating app we talked about?" she asks me.

"Uh, yeah. Yes, I did," I say, moving down the hall toward the storeroom to start working ... and maybe to hide my face.

I still don't know how I feel about this. I don't *need* a man. I'm doing fine without one. Honestly, I don't really want one, either. Adelais's father was a nightmare. I see no reason to complicate a life I already love. However, I do feel guilty about the lack of male influences in Adel's life. It's not fair for me to put the consequences of my bad experiences on her. My own father was wonderful, and it's always been a dream of mine for my daughter to have a relationship like that. Sure, she sees my parents at least once a week, but that's different. So at twenty-six, I'm online dating. I suppose I have to start somewhere.

The site is plastered with all kinds of quotes on love and finding a partner like, 'The best love story is when you fall in love with the most unexpected person at the most unexpected time - Unknown.'

*Gag. So cheesy!*

"And?" Winter trails me like one of the kittens looking for milk.

Opening the storeroom door, I begin the process of filling dog bowls; it's breakfast time. I release a deep sigh before responding. "I've had *several* conversations. Most were awful, but there are a couple guys I'm considering going out with."

*Who knows, maybe I'll find a friend, because I can't imagine truly dating any of them.*

“Eek!” Winter squeals. “I’ll watch Adelais. Go. Go. Go!” She’s bouncing on her toes now.

My cheeks lift. “Thanks Winter, but I can’t ask you to do that. I know how busy you are. I was going to talk to my parents about it when I pick her up later today.”

“Nope. No way. My little buddy and I are going to have a killer time while you get back out there. Besides, you won’t be able to avoid my questions about your dates if you have to see me face-to-face right after.”

She’s more excited than I am about this dating thing. That’s the problem with people in love. They want everyone else to have what they have. It’s just not for some of us. I don’t ever want to open my heart to another man after having it eviscerated so violently.

The uncertainty must show on my face.

“You know I promised that you and Adel can hang out with my family whenever you want. That’s seven amazing men for her to get to know and trust. Plus Xavier, so eight! You don’t have to force this dating thing,” she reminds me.

“Winter, I’m sure your brothers are amazing, but I don’t want them to feel obligated to befriend Adelais and me.” The sound of the dog kibble clinking in the metal bowls is loud and comforting. I wouldn’t want anyone else to overhear this embarrassing conversation.

“Oh girl ... You remember they adopted me as a moody teenager, right?”

Now there’s something she doesn’t bring up often.

“I know, and *you* know how hard this is for me.” That may have come out shorter than I meant for it to.

Winter’s hands fly up, palms out. “Hey, no pressure. I’m giving you options. If you want to go on the date, please let me play with Adel.”

*How did I get lucky enough to have a friend like her?*

I pull her in for a hug. “Of course, Winter. Thank you. For everything.”

The rest of the day is bliss. I love walking dogs, cuddling cats, and helping families find the perfect new family member for their homes. Even the not so fun parts, like cleaning up waste and giving baths, couldn't negate the love I feel for these precious creatures.

Winter and I part ways with more hugs, and I promise to let her know as soon as my first date is set. Now it's time for my absolute favorite part of Saturdays—picking up Adalais. Getting my girl back after so many hours without her makes my momma heart sing. If you've ever heard moms talk about how all they want is five minutes away from their kids, and then as soon as they get a break, they stare at pictures of their kids ... it's totally true.

Having kids is stressful, scary, and makes you want to pull your hair out, but it's also the most rewarding thing I've ever done. I love watching her laugh. Seeing her learn and grow is incredibly gratifying.

There are moments, though, some days more than others, when I'm certain I'm not doing this motherhood thing right. In those moments, I find a tiny space to curl into a ball and let the tears fall.

Memories flash by as I approach my parents' house. They live in a charming tri-level home in Mountlake Terrace north of Seattle. The drive is just far enough from our one-bedroom apartment in Miller Park that it's easier for Adel to spend the night with them on Friday evenings than for me to get her up bright and early to drive north and back south again before my shift at the Humane Society.

They still live in the house where I grew up. It's where my sister and I played dolls and learned to ride bikes. Three years ago, Lara left for school at Arizona State University in Phoenix. Now, my parents snowbird there, spending half of the year there and half here. Mom says it's so they can spend equal time with both of us, but Lara comes home to

Washington for the summer months so ... I'm not bitter about it, I simply feel the platitude is unnecessary.

My parents are amazing. I know it's hard for them to spend time away from Adel when they're in Phoenix, but they fly us down once or twice in the months they're gone. These are their retirement years. Who am I to begrudge them their time in the sun?

Mom and Dad are wonderful grandparents—kind, helpful, respectful of my boundaries. It was rough going for a little while after I told them I was pregnant with my college boyfriend's baby. Explaining that we parted ways halfway through the pregnancy was another blow.

But I rallied.

They supported my decisions, even when they didn't agree with them, and here we are, six years later, with the most precious little girl anyone could have asked for.

"Adelais, your mom is here," my dad calls up the stairs. "How's it going, Jo? Good day at the shelter?" Only my family calls me Jo. I love it, and the fact that it's just ours makes it special to me.

I'm tall but, my dad is even taller and very broad. He engulfs me in a bear hug that soothes my soul and gentles my racing thoughts.

"Good, Dad. I helped three families adopt pets today."

"That's wonderful, honey," my mother says as she descends the stairs into the living room. I'm the spitting image of her—athletically tall, long blond hair, and bright green eyes. "Adel had a good night. She ate all her dinner and took a bath before bed."

"Thanks, Mom. Did she sleep in her own bed?"

My dad's booming laughter answers that question.

"We tried, but you know how much we love to snuggle with her," Mom says.

"You, Ida! How much *you* love to snuggle with her," Dad says. "I prefer to sleep without getting kicked in the kidneys."

“See? Dad gets it!” I agree.

Mom tucks a lock of hair behind my ear that escaped my ponytail. “She’s only going to snuggle with you for so long.” Her expression is reminiscent. “I’m so grateful you’ve given me the opportunity for more.”

My mom is a sap, and I love it. I do cherish Adel and her cuddles, but it’s hard to function on the minimal sleep I get. Having that sleep interrupted makes the next day that much harder. Work, nursing school, and single parenting are all exhausting tasks. The less sleep I get, the more scatterbrained I can become. That’s not good for anyone.

“Trying to get a good night’s rest isn’t too much to ask,” Dad says, pointing his peanut butter spoon in her direction. For as long as I can remember my dad has been a straight from the jar kind of guy. Thank goodness for that, because in about three seconds Mom’s attention will shift from me to him.

“Greg, really? You better scrub the leftover peanut butter off that spoon before you put it in the sink!”

I leave my parents to the same squabble they’ve been having for thirty years, and head upstairs to find my daughter.

“Ready to go?” I ask, finding her playing with stuffed animals in my old bedroom. That’s one of the most fun things about her staying here.

“Don’t wanna go,” she says.

Smoothing down her hair I say, “I know, love. How about we stop for ice cream on the way home?”

“Ice cream!” she screams.

My stubborn daughter can usually be bribed, though I try not to do it often. I need to study tonight. I only have a few more weeks of school left before graduation. This is crunch time. Becoming a registered nurse means more money and more independence for my girl and me. Not to mention all the new things I’ll be able to do at the hospital. There are a lot of crossovers from LPN to RN; however, there is much that requires either a registered nurse or at least the supervision of

one. I know I am capable of those tasks; this has been my dream from the beginning.

As soon as I can get Adel to sleep, I'll be in for another Saturday night on the couch with my trusty books and my favorite office supplies.

Honestly, if I wasn't studying, I'd be watching reality television or reading a good book anyway. I am past the years of my life when going out on the town holds any excitement for me.

Adelais and I have cheeseburgers and the promised ice cream for an early dinner. We spend almost two hours cuddling on the couch while the latest Disney princess, Maribel, sings about her charmed house. Then, it's off to bed. Adel may be hard to put down sometimes, but once she's asleep, she's asleep.

Taking a page from Winter's book, I make myself a cup of hot tea and spread my books, index cards, pens, pencils, highlighters, and sticky notes across the coffee table. My sister says this many supplies is overkill. I think it's the perfect way to study.

I've already written my thesis papers for each class, and I feel well prepared to defend my paper for my senior project. I take a few minutes each day to read through some of the questions I have written out that may be asked of me. It's easy enough to find five minutes here and there to review them and seeing them every day helps keep the information fresh in my mind.

My licensing exams are where my real concerns lie. The NCLEX-RN is no joke. There is no way I want to be part of the fourteen percent who fail this year. Our professors have drilled it into our heads repeatedly how many will not pass. It's probably a scare tactic to get us to study more, but it's working.

By ten p.m. I'm cleaning up my things and silently crashing into my queen bed on the bottom of our modern bunk bed arrangement. Sleep claims me swiftly.





## CHAPTER THREE

### *Magnus*

**M**y curtains rise with the sun, gradually lighting my room. It's a more peaceful way to wake than from the blaring of yet another alarm; my life is already full of those. I take a moment to breathe in the morning. The temperature outside my warm sheets is that perfect kind of cool that makes you want to luxuriate under the covers, especially on a Sunday at home like this one.

Finally rolling out of bed, I make my way over to the large window. When I have time, I like to start the morning with a series of yoga poses to slowly awaken and stretch my mind and body. My gym visits are scheduled every other day, so I'll go down to the building facilities after making breakfast and picking up the kitchen. At thirty-eight I feel it's more important than ever to maintain a regimented routine.

Tonight's family dinner is at my adopted sister, Winter's. She just moved in with her boyfriend, Xavier, who we've been getting to know more in the last few weeks. She asked that we show up around five so we can eat by five-thirty. I usually try to arrive early to help whoever is hosting, but Winter threatened me upon pain of death if I intruded on the planning and execution of her first Sunday Dinner.

Her old apartment was a tiny studio. She didn't have enough space for her seven brothers and her niece, so she was never able to host. We've always rotated locations among the rest of us every Sunday. Now, Roland will be the only one who isn't on the schedule, due to his nomadic tendencies.

It doesn't take me long to vacuum, wipe down the counters, and throw in a load of laundry. I'll dry and fold it

when I get back from the gym. I have a cardio workout planned for today. It shouldn't take more than an hour—plenty of time for the load to wash. Making the pieces of my schedule fit together like this gives me such joy.

I arrive outside Bay Vista Tower hours later still thinking about the last article I read in the *New England Journal of Medicine* this afternoon. It discussed the latest threats to the nursing workforce; nurse shortages cause issues hospital-wide. We depend on their work to ensure all our patients receive the best care possible, and when we're short staffed, no matter the position, our patients suffer.

Shaking my head to clear it of the troubling article, I survey my little sister's newest home. It's only been a few months since I moved her into the little studio in Ballard, just north of downtown, but her and Xavier have had a whirlwind courtship that brought them together quicker than I would have liked. If I wasn't aware of how it'd all gone down, I would be more than worried about the speed of it, but Winter is smart, and Xavier is a good guy. Besides, if he screws up, he's got more than just me to contend with.

No one messes with our little sister.

The Bay Vista Tower is a tall white stone and glass structure with store fronts at the ground level and a visible balcony level on the sixth floor. It sits right at the corner of Second Avenue and Broad Street with the Puget Sound on one side and the Space Needle on the other. I wonder which view they have. I haven't been to their apartment yet, but I'm sure Winter would be ecstatic with either.

*She can't fault me for being five minutes early.*

I shrug the thought away, and enter the simple, yet elegant, lobby. Seeing me, the concierge asks how he can help.

"I'm here to see Winter Small and Xavier Prince."

"Certainly, sir. Your name?"

He checks my name off a list and directs me to the elevator that will take me to the top floor penthouse. I do well for myself, but the cost of a penthouse in Seattle is astronomical. I

should have known Xavier would have one. When my brothers and I first adopted Winter, this is the kind of life she was running from. It's hard for me to wrap my head around her returning to it, and I'm not sure I am ready to hand the duty of protecting her over to Xavier.

“Magnus!” Winter squeals at my entrance.

Her tiny arms are comforting. I never feel more complete than when my family is within reach.

She releases me enough to allow me to shake hands with Xavier. “Thanks for having us. Nothing like trial by fire,” I tell him.

He chuckles, a little uncomfortably if I'm not mistaken.

He didn't give us the best first impression, but we have accepted him as a part of Winter's life now. I do know that Killian still holds the same concerns that I do.

The living space of the apartment is open, with top-of-the-line appliances and furnishings. Large windows surround the room with a view that's even better than I anticipated. You can see both the Sound and the Needle with a turn of the head. Little things let me know Winter has made herself home here, like three different quirky mugs left randomly around the room. Otherwise, it's clean, and the scent of garlic fills the air.

*At least I know Winter will never go hungry with this guy.*

“Nothing too fancy for dinner. Steaks, potatoes, roasted veggies, garlic bread, and salad,” she says as she sees me taking in the long dining table. “Do you like the table? We picked it out this week so there would be room for everyone.”

Her laid-back smile doesn't fool me. She's looking for approval from her big brother. “Looks great, Winter.” I pull her in for another hug as a knock sounds at the door.

When Xavier answers, the rest of the pack pushes through the door without ceremony.

“Huh!”

“Woah!”

“Would you look at that!”

“It’s nothing special.”

“Makes our places look middle class.”

“Hey, I resemble that remark. Ha!”

“We should just eat here every week.”

“Uncle Xavier!” Emelia shrieks, racing across the room and ceasing all other conversation. Xavier squats down to catch my eight-year-old niece in his arms. Standing, he spins her in a circle, filling the room with the sounds of her delight.

Leopold’s daughter is the crown jewel of the family. I’m not sure how she’ll ever be able to date with the Small men at her back. I refuse to think about it for at least ten more years. Of course, that’s how we all felt about Winter, too, and here we are in her boyfriend’s apartment for Sunday dinner.

Emelia’s mom died just hours after she was born due to complications in childbirth. The loss destroyed us all. Watching my brother wade through the aftermath with a newborn baby in tow solidified a few things for me.

I’m not cut out for that.

My job has enough loss and heartache. It’s hard enough when I see aspects of my life show up there. It’s even harder when my job comes home like it did with my sister-in-law. Besides, I decided a long time ago that my siblings were all I needed.

So instead, I do what I can for my family. I babysit Emelia. I’m a built-in chauffeur. I’ve been known to pay a few bills when necessary. My heart comes close to bursting when my siblings let me feed and clothe them. Occasionally, they even let me share my advice. That’s all I need.

“Has she talked you into a pet yet?” Theodore asks Xavier.

“She’s sure tried,” he responds with a laugh.

Winter smiles and wraps her arms around her boyfriend’s slim waist. “He’ll give in soon. Don’t you guys think this place is big enough? At least a cat.”

We all chuckle, but Leopold pipes in next, “She’s been trying to get me a cat since Emelia was born. The little girl’s head pops up to look at her father. “No,” he says, pointing a finger at his daughter. Her little head returns to Xavier’s shoulder.

With Emelia in his arms and Winter wrapped around him, he looks like a picture-perfect family man. The sight brings visions of the couple surrounded by a gaggle of children. I know Winter has always dreamed of having a big family like ours.

The giant man whispers in my niece’s ear causing a huge smile to grace her cheeks. She giggles and nods her head in agreement to whatever he promised.

“Alright, give me my daughter back before you give her any more ideas,” Leopold grumbles and Theodore lets out a booming laugh at our brother’s expense.

I decide to join Killian at the window. He’s staring out over the Sound. The day is cloudless, so the view is clear all the way to Bainbridge Island. The green and white ferries cross slowly along their designated routes to different terminals. I bet you could spot wildlife if you sat here long enough. If this were my place, I’d want a telescope.

“Not too shabby, huh?” Killian asks in his gruff, quiet way.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “She’ll be okay, Killian. I think it’s time we give them some breathing room about it all.”

He scoffs. “I’m watching him.”

“I know, brother. How’s work?”

He sighs and turns from the view to lean one shoulder against the window. “Fine. They promoted someone into that manager position they wanted me to take. Like I would ever want to be responsible for other people. They’re all idiots.”

I point a finger at him with a small smirk. “If you’d taken the position, you wouldn’t have to take orders from one of those *idiots*.”

He bats my finger away. I know what he's thinking. He likes to work with his designs and machines. He hates collaborating. People are not his forte. Killian is a mechanical engineer. His office isn't too far from Winter's. My hospital is a couple miles from that. Most of us live and work within or around Seattle now, so Sunday dinners and quick weekday meet-ups are easier, which suits me just fine.

It's Theodore I don't see enough of. He still runs the family mine in Bellingham about two hours north. He took over after our parents died and has run it by himself since the rest of us moved away. It was hard to leave him, but once we had Winter off to college, it was time for the rest of us to return to the lives we'd begun to build before the accident.

Hugo and Roland were still in high school when it happened. They hadn't had a chance to start their own lives before the one they knew was ripped to pieces. It's why I did my best to keep us all together. Then we found Winter, and my brothers all joined me in parenting our new little sister.

I'm astounded by how well she thrived with us. She is amazing—smart, caring, and so sweet. It's Roland and Hugo I feel like I failed. Roland hasn't really found stability, and Hugo enlisted when Winter graduated high school. Maybe if I hadn't kept them at the mine, maybe if I had sent them away to college, they would have more consistent jobs and lifestyles. I'm sure Mother would have had a way to bring her unruly boys to heel.

Theodore's booming voice reaches us. He's the loudest of our bunch. "What are you two gloomy, old farts doing over here? The party is in the kitchen."

"Leave us alone, Teddy," Killian growls.

"Never, big brother. I only get to see you once a week. Besides, it's too much fun needling you." Another boisterous laugh leaves his broad chest. Theodore is the biggest of us all, both in height and in muscle. The latter can be attributed to his days spent working the mine. The manual labor seems to bolster his already high spirits. He enjoys the outdoors, even in Washington, and he's always so ... happy.

“Enough of this,” I say with a genuine smile on my face. “I need to speak with Sebastian.” The two wave me off, one in dismissal and the other good naturedly. I leave them to their own devices.

Sebastian sits perched on a bar stool at the island, taking in the room around him. I take a second to see the room through his eyes. Leopold is trying to get Winter to let him in the kitchen while Emelia is leading Hugo, Roland, and Xavier in a game of school on the couch with her as the teacher. That little girl will rule the world one day.

Sebastian is a writer, and the quietest of us. He has plenty to say if you get him in the right situation or on a topic he is interested in. Most times, though, he’s introverted, preferring to people-watch. He’s always looking for new material for his books, pulling a little notepad from his pocket to take notes whenever something strikes a chord for him.

“Hey,” I finally say.

His smile is warm. “What’s up, Doc?”

“Stop it,” I jab him in the shoulder. I get it, it’s an easy nickname, but I like to leave all that behind when I’m outside hospital walls. “What’s new?”

He shrugs. He’s shy about his life and work, never liking to talk about himself too much. I try to ask open-ended questions so our conversations don’t become stilted with monosyllabic answers.

“What new goals did you set for this week?”

“Some of the same I didn’t finish last week.”

Even still, it’s like talking to a teenage boy sometimes. “Care to share?” I ask

“I need to send my latest over to the editor, start outlining the next book, and put together something for the newsletter my personal assistant puts out,” he takes a sip from his glass, effectively ending that line of conversation.

“Seeing anyone?” I ask to push him a little.

Sebastian blushes. “No.”

The man writes romance novels, but blushes at the mere mention of a woman. I don't know how he does it. I've read a couple of his books. They're good, but not really my genre. I've bought copies of them all to support him, though. He does well for himself, even if he doesn't like to admit it. I think he'd be a hermit if we didn't drag him out of the house once a week.

"Dinner's ready!" Winter hollers, like she's calling kids in from the fields.

"We're all right here," Killian grumbles.

Her smile is wide and vibrant. This is her day, so I cuff Killian on the back of the head as he walks by. He flashes me a glare.

"Thanks for making dinner, Winter," I say.

She blushes almost as much as Sebastian, but today her joy overrides any shyness. Leopold is helping her carry heaping platters of food to the long table where the rest of us are finding our seats. Xavier moves to take the heaviest dish from her and dusts a kiss across her temple. I can't decide if it makes me sick, angry, or insanely happy for her.

The meal passes as it usually does with jokes, jabs, and lots of ruckus. Even Killian and Sebastian get sucked into it from time to time. No matter who we are by nature, we are all family. Sunday dinners allow us the freedom to be ourselves with the absolute certainty we will be loved, not judged. These are my people, and all the family I need. I would do anything for them.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Johanna*

**T**hey say a newborn baby is the beginning of all things wonderful. Well, we had twelve babies born on the labor and delivery floor today. Twelve! That's a whole lot of wonderful. So many dreams, possibilities, and hope. A new world of opportunities and adventures for those little lives and their families.

At least, I hope so, because I ran my butt off for eight hours straight. There's no sitting when we have that many patients to care for. They come in as one expectant mother, and then *BAM* they double our patient load. Don't get me started on parents of multiples. It's only Monday. Thank goodness Adel and I have a friend date planned with Winter this evening because I'm craving a warm cup of coffee, baked goods and my two favorite girls. That's the perfect recipe to unwind.

Adel attends a full-day preschool where she receives speech services before transferring to a day care until I can pick her up after my shifts. It's as close to perfect as it gets for us. I love her teachers, and so does she. She is growing so much that I'm concerned about the possible setbacks the summer break might cause. While it's not much, I do love that I still get to spend time with her before and after my shifts. That's one reason the night shift would be extra hard on me. I don't think I would see her at all during the week, not to mention the need for a nighttime nanny.

My wonderful, amazing new friend Winter Small ... well, I guess Glynn is her birth name ... took an immediate interest in Adel's life. Winter and her boyfriend, Xavier, have babysat and even picked Adel up from school several times when I

needed extra help. I think Winter was always meant to be Adelais's aunt.

“Hey, best friend!” Winter says as Adel and I find her at our favorite booth.

“Hi!” Adel shouts back without hesitation. I give the two of them a look of mock exasperation that neither sees.

*Since when did I become the third wheel here?*

Winter picks up Adel and wraps us both in her arms. She is so soft and delicate, yet she's one of the strongest women I know. Winter has been to hell and back in her lifetime. Somehow, she has hung on to all that love in her heart, and she shares it freely.

“How ya doin, love?” I ask with an extra squeeze.

“Not as good as you, hot momma! Come. Sit. I got you herbal tea, and my sweet girl gets her kid coffee.” My parents started calling hot chocolate kid coffee a few years ago when Adel wanted to join the grownups at the breakfast table. She points at me, “No more caffeine for you this late. Now tell me more about the last few dates. We haven't had a chance for you to spill all the deets, and you know I'm living vicariously through you since I found Xavier. I'll never have another first date!”

*Maybe I've just been avoiding telling you because you're so loved up all the time.*

I've been on several dates since I set up my profile on that goofy dating website I told her about. Most have been disastrous. I've been going on dates every Tuesday and Friday evening for a couple of weeks now, but no sparks yet. Winter watches Adel on Tuesdays, and I go out after I drop her off with my parents on Friday evenings. I make sure Winter has the name and phone number of every guy I see as well as where we plan to go. There is no way I will forgo any of the safety measures I have in place. Only one guy has tried to push a change on me at the last second. I canceled that date straight away. If you can't respect me from the beginning, I don't see it going anywhere productive.

The first date was with a man named Frank who was shorter than me with a receding hairline and glasses. That wouldn't be a deal breaker for me if it weren't for the rest of the evening. I enunciated my name, Jo-Ha-Na, three separate times to get him to say my name correctly but stopped trying when he still wouldn't say it right. He talked about Batman the entire date. Literally every time I tried to change the subject; he found a way to bring it back to Batman. At the end of the date, he asked if I wanted to be his Cat Woman. It's shocking to me how bad some people are at picking up on social cues. Unfortunately, he may have ruined the entire franchise for me forever.

On my second date, a lovely man named Robert took me to a Mariners' game. The terrible loss wasn't the downside to this date; no, the part that sent me running was his brother. Robert was estranged from his brother but thought a double date might be a good way to spend some time with him. His brother's date was a barely legal girl from somewhere in the backwoods of the South. She wore just a touch more clothing than what I'd imagine your average stripper wore on stage. They spent the entire game at the beer garden. At one point, Robert went to retrieve them and came back forty-five minutes later without them. He told me he had bumped into an old flame that he stopped to chat with when his brother wouldn't leave, which I wasn't super jazzed about.

After the game, his brother and date insisted on bar hopping. Robert and I actually had a pleasant walk by the waterfront while we waited for them. When we found them to go home, the two were inebriated beyond belief. About halfway home, the girl demanded we pull over so she could throw up and pee on the side of the road. I walked with her up the embankment because she was so unsteady on her feet. I wasn't much help though because as she tried to get her painted-on daisy dukes down her thighs, she tipped and rolled down the hill—bodily fluids included. Robert was nice. He might even be great, but I can't imagine introducing Adelaís into that family. It's the antithesis of what I'm trying to do for her through this whole process.

Then there was Jorge, Todd, Sean, and Randal.

Winter, Adel, and I spend the next hour laughing over my awful dates. Adel is aware that I am spending time with new adult friends that I'm not ready for her to meet yet. She laughs every time we do, even when she doesn't understand why. There were a couple of second date offers that Winter says I should have accepted. I can't put my finger on it, but even the seemingly innocuous guys just didn't do it for me.

Adel's glossy emerald eyes become droopy when she leans her head of long light brown hair against Winter's shoulder, and I think she might start drooling or snoring if we stay any longer. It's time to go.

"I've got to get this one to bed. Are we still on for tomorrow?" I ask Winter.

Her eyebrows bounce up and down. "Heck yes! Adelais and I are going to have so much fun, and so are you. I can just feel it. This will be a good one."

"You are the most optimistic person I know, but I hope you're right," I say with another hug before swinging Adel into my arms and out into the night.

I'm glad she's so easy to drop into bed once she's this sleepy because I'm ready to drop too.

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I used a vacation day, but a day off for a single mom like me means it's chore day, not something fun. If I don't take them every once in a while, nothing ever gets done around the house. I never manage to get through my whole to-do list in a single day, even with Adelais at school. Grocery shopping, house cleaning, meal prep, study time, and bill paying are at the top of my ambitious list every time. There simply aren't enough hours in the day for the rest.

Today felt extra rushed because I needed to get ready for my early evening date. I like for my Tuesday dates to be a little earlier because Adel has school the next day. Winter comes to our apartment to make it easier to put Adel to bed in

case I'm out later than planned, but I hate missing our bedtime routine. Adel's dreamy face is one of my favorites.

Here I am, on another less than stellar date.

"Name my fish."

"What?" I ask, baffled.

The shaggy blond-haired kid across from me is bouncing on the edge of his seat. He is super sweet, but definitely socially awkward. He's handsome in that boy-next-door sort of way.

I sip my Dr. Pepper before answering, "Dane, I really don't think I should name your fish. Maybe the next one you get if we're together then."

He meticulously cuts his chicken into bite-sized pieces. "Oh, it's okay. I'd really like you to name this one. I just got several new ones, and they don't always live super long. Might as well name one now."

My lips curve up in a smile that doesn't reach my eyes. "I'll think about it."

"Great! It'll be good to have a new name by the time I get home tonight."

"Well, I—"

"Besides, you'll want to see them when you come over to meet my mother on Saturday," he cuts me off. Clearly the horror on my face doesn't register. "She is already so excited to meet you. I forwarded that photo you sent me earlier. She thinks you're as gorgeous as I do."

"Uh, thank you, but do you mean the photo I sent you so that you would know who to look for when you got here tonight?"

"That's the one!" he says, pointing his fork at me. "She's really excited to have a new granddaughter too."

"Now, wait just a minute—" Blessedly, my phone vibrates in my pocket, and I see the picture I took of Winter doing fish

lips pop up on the screen. “I’m sorry. It’s my babysitter. I really have to take this.”

I make my way to the hallway bathrooms for quiet and privacy. “Oh my gosh, get me out of here,” I say by way of greeting.

“Eh yeah, um, you’re going to get your wish, but you aren’t going to like it. We have one small problem. Adel and I are with my brother, Magnus, in the ER.”

The slight lift in mood my friend’s photo gave me gives way to panic. “Are you okay? Is Adelais okay? What’s going on?”

“Take a deep breath. We’re both fine, but Adel fell. Mag is taking her to x-ray her arm right now.” I can hear the cringe in her voice.

“It’s okay. We’re okay. I’m okay. I’m on my way. I’ll be right there.” My habit of rambling when overwhelmed overcomes me.

“Johanna. Breathe. We will be here when you get here. Please drive safely.”

I don’t even say ‘bye’ in my rush to return to the table for my things.

“I’m sorry. I have to go. My daughter needs me. Thank you for dinner,” I say just as hastily.

“You are such a good mom. I can’t wait to have more babies with you. I’ll call you tomorrow,” he says in his dreamy voice.

“No. Just. Please don’t.”

My driving is way more aggressive than I would normally be on my drive to the ER. As a nurse, I know what a motor vehicle collision can do to you and the importance of driving with care, but this is my daughter. Logic flies out the window when I think of anything but getting to her.

I knew Winter’s brother worked in the emergency department, but I’ve never met him. We work on different floors, and it’s a big hospital. Laboring patients that are sent up

are cared for by OB-GYNs who relieve the emergency staff. I know she said Magnus, but I can't remember which brother that is in age order. Winter has so many of them. I suppose for the sake of our friendship, I should take her up on meeting her family sometime soon.

The intake nurse at reception is vaguely familiar, so I try to pull myself together. "Hi, I'm looking for Adelais Mendel. She's my daughter. The babysitter brought her in. I believe she's getting x-rays with Dr. Small right now." I rattle off what I know.

The nurse's name tag reads Grace. "Yes, she's in room seven just down this hallway to the right," she says with a look that tells me she understands a mother's panic.

Once again, I'm going way too fast. Just like driving, I know the dangers of running through hospital halls. If I took the time to think about it, I would realize a possible broken wrist doesn't warrant it, but this is my baby. She's all I have.

Steps away from the open door I hear the arguing voices of a man and a woman over the *Beauty and the Beast* soundtrack. Sliding through the door I find Winter squared off with a man in a white coat.

"How could you let her climb like that? You know better than that, Winter!"

"This is not my fault, Mag. Kids get hurt. It happens!"

Winter is tapping her foot and flexing her hands at her sides, while the doctor, who I realize must be her brother Magnus, has his arms crossed over his chest.

"I don't blame her," I say, startling them both. All eyes in the room turn to me.

*Woah! He's like, really really good looking.*

I didn't realize I had a thing for men who are older than me in real life, but this is what every woman means when they talk about silver foxes. He's only a little taller than me, but he is in great shape. It's clear by the fit of his scrubs under his coat that he takes good care of himself. His brown beard and

hair are threaded with gray, and his green eyes are the perfect match for the Evergreen state in which we live.

Turning from his sister, he offers me a hand, “Ms. Mendel, I’m Doctor Small. It looks like your daughter has a greenstick fracture of her left radius, as well as sprains in her wrist, elbow, and shoulder. We are going to put her in a cast today as well as a sling. I know that’s not the most comforting news with an active five-year-old on your hands, but it could have been much worse. One of our pediatric physicians will be in shortly to do the casting and help you both on the road to recovery. Unless you have any further questions, I’m going to step out now so that my sister can explain to you why you’re here.” Straight to the point. No nonsense.

I nod, trying to process the information—not the medicine part, I understand that. It’s the way that he said it that has me confused. He wasn’t rude or brusque, but overly concise. I can’t help but wonder if this is how he is with all his patients.

“Is he always that short?” I ask Winter.

“Your daughter has a broken arm, and the first thing you want to ask me is about my brother?” Winter’s brows are scrunched together.

I shake my head to clear the moment. “Sorry. I just didn’t expect it from your brother, or from one of our ED doctors for that matter.”

“Well, I told him you’re a nurse, so he probably felt he didn’t have to go into too much detail. It also could have been because he was pretty mad at me.” Her volume lowers with each sentence.

“Okay ... so what happened? I have to admit, I was freaking out when you called, but once I saw her absorbed in Disney princesses like always, I calmed down a lot.”

I cross the room to hold Adel’s healthy hand. My touch breaks her trance on the small television in the corner.

“Momma, look!” she holds up her wrapped arm. “Winter’s brother is a docka!”



I'm always amazed by kids' resilience. "I know, baby. How are you feeling?" I press a kiss to her forehead.

"It do not feel good, but the docka gave me med-a-sin and a sucker," she says in her perfectly imperfect way. Her smile is cherubic.

I raise my eyebrows in question at Winter and she shrugs in an exact impression of the emoji lady. "We went to the park, and she was climbing that small boulder when she fell. I'm so sorry, Johanna. I promise I was watching her. I just couldn't get there in time when she started to topple."

Winter's eyes well up. She is one of the sweetest people I know. Not for one minute do I think there was anything malicious about tonight. "It's okay. Really, Winter, I let her climb on that rock all the time. Things happen, and I don't blame you. There is a difference between normal childhood injuries and neglect. Kids get hurt. It's one of the hardest parts of parenting."

She dabs at her eyes with a tissue from the tiny box we give each patient. Those things are scratchy and stiff, but she doesn't complain. A small blow from her stuffy nose turns her pale skin pink.

I remember the first time Adel was sick. I think I cried the entire time. It's so hard to see your child in pain or suffering for any reason and not be able to fix it for them. It hasn't gotten any easier, but it is something I've learned to deal with better. Winter has taken to Adela's so quickly. Add to that the responsibility she's feeling as the babysitter, plus the way her brother dressed her down, and you get one emotional best friend.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Magnus*

The coffee mug billowing steam on my desk has a picture of a stethoscope and reads “I prescribe coffee.” Winter bought it for me when I returned to the hospital. Her drink of choice is tea, but she loves to drink it out of quirky mugs and foists them on the rest of us at every opportunity. Not a single one of us would turn down a gift from our favorite little sister.

This evening, I’m finishing a lecture for one of my continuing education courses after an already long day of work. Staying on top of the latest information, technology, and studies in my field is not just a requirement but a necessity to be the best doctor I can be for my patients. I don’t want to fail someone I could have helped because I haven’t done enough research, but there’s also so much to learn as a general surgeon. My field is much broader than some who specialize in one specific area of the body.

The doorbell disturbs my peace. My building has doormen, which means it has to be someone on my guest list, or they wouldn’t have been allowed past the lobby without a call to me first. My list is more intimate than most. It only consists of my siblings. They usually let me know if they are stopping by midweek. I’m glad they feel that they can stop by whenever, but I wish I could have prepared for whomever is currently at my door.

The soft thump of my feet as I cross the wood floors of my living room fills the silence before pounding on my door overshadows it. That alone tells me who is here without looking through the peephole.

“Hello, Killian. To what do I owe the pleasure?” I ask my brother as I open the door.

He pushes through the door, knocking shoulders with me. “They’re showing the apartment next door again, and I can’t stand all the traffic.” The light clicks on in the fridge as he opens the door to find something to eat. He grabs my container of pasta I precooked for lunch tomorrow and throws it into the microwave.

“Umm ... yeah, dig in,” I say with as much sarcasm as I can muster. I would have happily made food for him, but I guess that will do. Tomorrow I’ll grab something in the cafeteria. Luckily, we have a good menu at the hospital. “It’s a new building, Killian. Aren’t most of the apartments still empty? Even you haven’t lived there long.”

Disregarding me he says, “You know Hugo and Rollie made you a dating profile the other night at Winter’s, right?” He shoves a bite of noodles into his mouth.

“What?” His change of topic gives me whiplash.

“Yup. They think you need to shake things up. Relax a little.” He cracks the first smile I’ve seen since he walked in.

We’ve traded expressions. His grimace now mars my face. “I hope you dissuaded them...”

“Bah!” he burst with laughter. “Nope. Don’t worry, Mag, you don’t actually have to go on any dates, but maybe you’ll find a bit of fun.” He winks at me.

So much for the rest of my online lecture tonight. I’m going to need to work out the emotions this line of conversation has stemmed. “You know I don’t want or need any of that nonsense, Killian. I’m not looking for a woman. My life is perfect the way it is, no matter what you all think of it.”

*Why did Winter’s friend pop into my head the minute he mentioned dating?*

“Calm down, Mag. They’re having a bit of fun with you, and who knows, maybe there is something better out there.”

“Doubtful. How would you feel if they made you a dating profile? Did they use my email? I’m going to get all kinds of ridiculous spam.”

The corners of his lips turn down. “They wouldn’t dare. If you’re that concerned, we could get the details from them so you can see what they included.”

I shake my head as I pad toward my music space. Standing the instrument on its end pin, I press my callused fingers to the strings on the fingerboard and pluck out a few notes to check the tuning. The first and second strings are just a bit off; the humidity in the air this summer is taking its toll even inside my apartment. I turn the tuning keys, listening for the perfect pitches.

The notes for “Smoke on the Water” pound out of the digital piano. Killian has the organ effect on the Yamaha, giving the music that shaky quality. I join in with a few strums and slaps on the body of my instrument. Sometimes I miss having Roland on the drums, but I do really enjoy adding my own percussion to our jam sessions. Killian and I have played together for so long that it’s easy to pick up wherever the other starts.

When the song ends, he slides into “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” The piece is slow and languid, requiring my bow to add depth to the music. It’s beautiful, but my pent-up energy is begging for something faster. As Killian’s last notes wane, I begin the percussion introduction to “Wake Me Up” by Avicii. The cadence puts a sway in my movements as I groove to the music. I’m sweating by the time we start “Bam Bam” and work through the Latin beat.

“You’re in quite the mood tonight,” Killian says. “I need a drink after those songs.”

“You’re the one who showed up ten types of grumpy on my doorstep,” I shoot back to my younger brother.

We’re both dripping, so I grab us towels from the drawer to wipe down our faces. Killian pours us each two fingers of Brown Sugar Bourbon before handing me a glass. “Thanks, bro.”

“You really wouldn’t be interested in any of the girls willing to throw themselves at a wealthy, fit doctor?” he asks incredulously. “It’s not like you’d have to wife ‘em.”

“I don’t need an app for that, Killian. I was dating before the Internet made it a thing, remember? Besides, I don’t need the drama.” I sip my drink.

“You don’t have to remind me that we’re old,” he says. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t have some fun.”

Taking a moment, I think through his proposal instead of answering with the first retort that comes to mind. It’s been a while since I’ve been out, but other than a physical release for my body, my family meets all the needs of any other companion without the awkwardness of first dates and getting to know someone new. However, I do remember the riot of emotions that come with new relationships, and they aren’t all bad.

My traitorous conscience pipes in that I might have even felt some of those emotions the other night.

He can see me wavering. “Come on, Mag. You have full veto rights.”

“Show me the stupid profile,” I grouse.

He claps his hands and rubs them together like I made his night. It seems he might have had as much a hand in this madness as my younger siblings did. Them banding together isn’t totally shocking.

In my office, he quickly closes all my open tabs and navigates to one of those sites that advertises during every commercial break and on every popular website. They throw love in your face at every turn. It’s elegant and cheesy, boasting love on every page.

*Ugh. This is going to be a disaster. How do I let them talk me into these things?*

“I thought you said this was Hugo and Roland’s thing,” I accuse him.

His shoulders shrug as his fingers fly across the keyboard. “They may have needed some help.”

“Goodness sakes. Isn’t there like a compatibility quiz for these things? What kind of crap did you guys answer for me?”

“Don’t worry, Mag. We know you better than you know yourself.”

My hands drag through my hair and scrub my beard. I’m already regretting this decision. The profile photo they uploaded for me is a candid shot from dinner the other night. It’s surprisingly flattering which makes me wonder how many of my siblings really took part in this scheme. When would they have had time to do all of this?

“Holy crap! Look at all the matches you already have,” Killian blurts.

He scrolls through the listings. A few have messages and others state that I can ‘connect now.’ The information shared initially is limited. I see photos, their general location, a short bio, and interests that we share ... according to my family.

Right off the bat I see that most of the matches are not right for me. Too young. Too much makeup. Hobbies that don’t interest me. One match states she’s looking for a new DADDY. Shivers roll down my spine. No judgment, but that’s not something I’m into. I can only imagine the demands that lady would have for me. I don’t have time for that. If I actually do this, it’ll have to be light and easy, not a chore.

“How about this one?” Killian asks, pointing to a raven-haired woman with startling blue eyes. She says she loves comedy shows and thinks organizing is a waste of time she could spend with her friends. I narrow my eyes at him, prompting him to move on to the next.

The brunette looks sweet in her profile picture in which she’s clearly helping children in a foreign country. Maybe I could relate to her on a medical or volunteer basis. At least that seems to be a common interest. Then I read her bio. She makes it known that politics are a huge part of her life and influences many of her life choices.

*Nope.*

“Next. This is not looking promising for you, brother,” I admonish Killian. I’m giving him exactly one more chance before I kick him out of my office.

I think he can tell I’m losing patience with the whole idea because he seems to take his time scrolling through the matches before making another suggestion, though I doubt he’ll find anything acceptable.

The blonde he clicks on has soulful brown eyes with warm golden flecks. She’s lovely but ten years my junior.

She looks an awful lot like the one woman plaguing me tonight, only with different eyes. Winter’s friend had lovely green eyes.

*When did I take in that detail?*

“Killian, that woman is way too young for me,” I say instead.

He scoffs, “The site still seems to think you’re a good match. You’re the one who’s stuck on the numbers.”

Again, I think he would respond differently if it were him in the hot seat. To appease him, I continue reading through the parts of her profile that are visible to me.

“She’s got a son,” I point out my next area of contention. Wow, this woman really is very similar.

“So?” he says. “We all know you’re a good dad. You stepped in to raise Hugo, Rollie, and even Winter when no one would have blamed you for passing on that responsibility. Shoot, you’re still raising most of our siblings. At least this time, the kid is little, and you’d be an actual father instead of a big brother with a god complex.”

My hand moves before the thought registers, cuffing the backside of his head. “You know there is no way I would ever pass off my family on someone else. All of you are *my* responsibility. End of story.”

“See! That kid probably needs a dad like you in his life,” Killian argues.

Shaking my head, I turn for the door. “Enough of this nonsense for tonight.”

“I’ll leave the username and password for you to login another time.”

“Unlikely,” I mutter as I walk back down the hall.

It’s been quite a while since I dated anyone seriously. Honestly, the last time was before the passing of our parents. My life altered drastically that night. Instead of relishing the craziness of being a hospital fellow and life as a new adult, I spent it back in the family mine, shouldering the responsibilities of a family of seven, turned eight. Suddenly, bills, schooling, sports, schedules, grocery lists, and everything else took priority to the wants of my life.

I’m not complaining. I really loved the time I got to spend with my family, working and living together. However, it meant most of my desires and goals were pushed to the back burner. It didn’t take me long to come to terms with it. I decided after less than a year that I didn’t need to add anyone else to my circle. Life with the Small family was perfect the way it was ... and still is.

Adding Leopold’s wife and daughter was really hard for me, especially when the birth of Emelia meant the death of yet another family member. It was everything I never wanted to experience again. When Winter brought Xavier into the fold, I thought the seven of us were going to have to go on a manhunt. Their start was like a hurricane storm wall crashing into shore—fast and rough. Thankfully, like all big swells, the tide receded back into the ocean, leaving only the smooth sands behind.

“Hey, Mag. Look, I’m sorry if I pushed you back there. You know we all just want to help you after so many years of you helping us.” Killian has his fingers tucked in his pockets, thumbs through the belt loops as he shrugs his shoulders.

My lips form a straight line across my face, but I bob my head accepting his apology.



“It’s getting late, so I’m going to take off. Thanks for dinner and playing with me. I miss that,” he goes on.

I cross the room to my brother’s side and pull him into a hug, thumping his back twice before letting go again. “We’ll play again soon,” I promise him just before the door closes.

Once again, my apartment is quiet and all mine.

## CHAPTER SIX

*Johanna*

When Friday rolls around I'm exhausted, and half tempted to drop Adel off with my parents so I can return home to a bath and a book by myself. However, my next date, Ryan, has already made reservations for us at the Rock Box at nine, and I'm not the type to no-show.

The Rock Box is a Japanese-style karaoke club next to Cal Anderson Park in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. I've never been to the restaurant, though I've heard about it from others. Singing is Winter's thing, so I'm surprised she hasn't dragged me to the karaoke bar yet. Currently, "The Time of My Life" from *Dirty Dancing* is blaring from the front doors.

"Are you lost, little girl?" a deep voice whispers in my ear as I scan the entrance for my date. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Turning, I find the man from the picture I received earlier. Ryan is tall, built, and a year or two younger than me. He's dressed in black slacks and a black button down that hugs his muscular form. He clearly works hard for it. The look is sleek and appealing.

A nervous chuckle escapes me. "Oh. Hey, you found me."

Taking my hand, he leads me into the bar area that's packed with people. I see now why the reservation was a necessity. He points out the different private rooms available for rent if your party would rather have a more intimate karaoke experience. Apparently, it's a favorite pastime for the Japanese 'salaryman,' and it's popular here too.

The club is decorated in woods and shades of cream and brown. One hallway shines in blue lights. The whole place screams elegance, even if the patrons' singing does not. In the next room we enter, a man stands with the microphone in hand. He's glaring down at the woman seated on the bench beside him. Then the music begins and "Oops!...I Did it Again" starts to play. The man shocks everyone when he breaks out the music video dance moves during the chorus. Cheers and catcalls bloom.

My watering eyes find Ryan's to see his full of laughter too.

"Do you want to choose a song?" Ryan asks me once we're seated on low leather ottomans.

"That's not really my thing, but I like to watch. You go ahead," I tell him.

"Hmm ... I like to watch too. I could always make you sing," he says in a huskier voice than before.

I cock my head at that awkward statement. "Uh, no thanks."

Our waitress is attentive, delivering our Japanese chips and Yukari duck fat popcorn quickly. It's fun to share what we both know—or in my case, really don't know—about Japanese culture. The conversation is easy and relaxing.

Standing, I say, "I'll be right back. I need the ladies' room."

His hand lands hard against my backside. "Remember, this is mine," he says.

My eyes bulge as I spin to face him, and my retort comes quickly. "No, it most certainly is not."

In the bathroom, I take several steady breaths. Oddly enough, "Staying Alive" by The Bee Gees is playing. It's the song I learned CPR to as it has the perfect rhythm for chest compressions.

I can't help but wonder what that weird behavior was about? I hope he was joking, but that's not the first thing he's

done tonight to stop me in my tracks. Ryan has been nothing but charming and polite through all the messages we've exchanged. He's been sweet and funny, sharing gifs and memes. I did not get the possessive vibe from him at all, and I did not expect the manhandling. His behavior is giving me whiplash.

Back at our seats, he has ordered sake bombs. I was really planning to stick to my one drink of Joto Yuzu sake tonight, so I put it off for a bit. Ryan takes my hand in his as we watch the next performance, and his fingers feel nice laced with mine. The singer doesn't do too bad of a job with "Living on a Prayer," but it only reminds me of my daughter. She always sings *Lemon on a Pear* when she hears it; makes me smile every time.

Ryan's thumb runs over the pulse point in my wrist as he leans in to be heard over the uproar. "You have beautiful wrists."

"Uh, thanks?" I say with an upward inflection.

*Who says stuff like that, and how is he suddenly so cringe-inducing?*

I was optimistic for this date. We really seemed to hit it off. No major red flags. No inappropriate photos. A normal date location suggestion. He even has a golden retriever he told me all about.

"I can't wait to tie them up." His words skate across my neck like nails on a chalkboard.

I pull away, shooting to my feet. "What did you just say to me?"

"Sit down. You're making a scene. You don't want to add any more to your list of transgressions," he says sternly.

*What in the world is happening? Is he alluding to what I think he is?*

Throwing my hands up I say, "I don't know what gave you the idea you could talk to me like this, or that I might be into what I think you're saying, but I'm not, and this date is over, so goodbye." The rambling, run-on string of words falls from

my mouth like spewed lava. The heat in my voice is audible to those seated around us. I'm definitely making a scene.

"Get back here, little girl," his once velvety voice now stabs at my psyche.

I keep moving for the door, weaving through the crowds. "I'm older than you! Leave me alone, you creep." My words ring out just as I'm stepping out of the club, and the bouncer acts as a door, stepping between me and my would-be assailant.

"Thank you," I murmur as I rush for my car. This is why I always take my own vehicle. Safety 101. I'll be blocking Ryan from reaching me again in every known way as soon as possible.

By the time I get home, I realize I'm shaking. My training confirms it's shock. Looks like a Dr. Pepper for the sugar and that bubble bath I dreamed of earlier in the night are in order after all. Hopefully, I'll be able to escape into a good book and put this night behind me.

Winter is not going to believe this one, but you can't make this crap up.

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My horrifying outing on Friday night was almost enough to make me give up on my plans of dating, but I refuse to let another guy break me.

By the time I finally make it home for the night, after wrapping things up with my less than stellar date, I'm exhausted. Winter won't take off without at least a short run down of my adventure, so I have to rally for a few minutes to share a synopsis.

"Toward the end of the meal he told me that he forgot his wallet. Man, he was an idiot. He took his ID out when he ordered a drink, so while he was in the bathroom, I paid for

my meal, gave his name and phone number to the waiter, and left.”

Winter snags Adel’s backpack off the floor by the table. It’s mostly toys, but she does have a few letter and number identification and tracing pages we try to do a few times a week. Her expression says she didn’t find that as rich as I did. “I just want to remind you that you can stop this nonsense at any time. You are a great mother. You are already *everything* Adalais needs,” my best friend tells me.

I square my shoulders and lift my chin. “I know that. I just want her to have as close to a ‘normal’ life as she can get.” It’s hard for me *not* to raise my hackles when anyone mentions my parenting, especially my closest friends and family. Even the well-meaning comments leave a taste in my mouth, turning me snarkier than necessary.

“I love you, friend. You are doing a fantastic job,” Winter says, wrapping her arms around me. Her soft tone is comforting and reassuring. Physical touch is definitely part of our friendship love language.

“Thank you. I want to give it a little longer, okay?” I say in a placating tone. “She needs to know that I’m not giving up too early on something I’ve set out to do ... maybe I do too.”

Winter’s smile is bright and reassuring. “It’s up to you. My calendar has ‘Adalais’ written on every Tuesday for as long as you need.”

There’s no way she can know I’ve been thinking about her much older brother when I go on a date. Twelve years age difference and *my best friend’s brother* should be enough reasons for me to forget about the surly doctor, but for some reason I can’t get him out of my mind.

I nod my thanks. “How’s work? Xavier?” I ask to change the subject.

She lets out a contented sigh. “He’s so wonderful, Johanna. We are working on my team’s proposed jewelry line that will be out in the fall. He’s easy to work with and perfect for bouncing ideas off. We still have a few employees who give us

the side-eye in the halls, but for the most part, it seems people are happy for us.”

“And how is living with him? You guys haven’t really been together that long. Does he have a lot of annoying quirks you’re having to adjust to?” I ask. I’ve met Xavier a few times, and I like him a lot. However, I’ve been burned before, and I’d hate to see her go through something similar. She’s usually too busy gushing to get into anything real.

“You remember I lived with seven men for almost eight years, right?” she retorts with an adorable tilt of her head.

I can’t help but smile at her. What she said is true, but she doesn’t get too worked up about a lot of things anyway. “Alright. Alright!” I say, throwing my hands up. “I’m just sayin, don’t be afraid to call me when you need to bury a body.”

Her laughter is musical as she knocks the back of her hand against my shoulder. “G’night, bestie.” She hugs me again and takes off.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Magnus*

**S**tupid hospital policies. I'm forced to take today off after another crazy day yesterday and too much clocked time for the pay period. It's Thursday, and I have no idea what people who don't work on weekdays do. Thank goodness my brothers are nearby. Killian is meeting me for dinner again for a little bro time. This forced hiatus really couldn't come at a better moment after my freak out at Winter in the ER, and the thoughts about her friend that have been running on a loop in my head ever since. Maybe he'll be able to help me untangle the knots I've been tied in for days.

My water glass clanks against the counter as I set it down harder than I meant to. I'm so tied up, even the most mundane things are giving me trouble.

I'm lying to myself, and not very well. Really, I have been obsessing over the woman I met every time my mind idles, which is something I have never done before. It makes me uncomfortable. I'm torn about her. There was this intense attraction to her from the moment my eyes locked on her beautiful forest greens. I had the instant desire to take care of her and her child. Winter told me she's a single mother, but I don't know the story behind it. The little darling burrowed her way right into my heart. In the few hours she was in my ER, I learned even more about her and her mother than most kids tell me. Adel is sweet, kind, and spunky. She is more than a handful. The character of Adelais speaks to the mother who raised her.

Adelais is the type of little girl I would have loved to have some day. The chances of that died a long time ago. Besides, I'm getting older, and my job is demanding. I am content to be



the amazing uncle to my siblings' children. I don't want to be an old dad. I don't want to be sixty when they graduate high school, and I'm not looking to get someone with child right now anyway.

The woman, Johanna, is beautiful and young ... so young. It would be like chasing Winter. But I don't see this woman the same way I see my sister; my thoughts are evidence enough of that. The way I care for Winter is familial. This is ... different. I don't know what this woman is doing to me, and I interacted with her for all of two minutes. It makes no sense. Sure, Johanna's strength and confidence was evident in the way she carried herself, even when she was in a moment of pure panic about her daughter. It was admirable, but besides that, there's just something about her that draws me to her.

I lace up my boots, determined to get out of the house where I have nothing to do but ruminate. The weather's fair, which makes it a good day in the Pacific Northwest.

Johanna was out on a date when they called her to the hospital, which is why Winter was babysitting. That's just one of a plethora of reasons why I shouldn't waste another thought on her. I also can't imagine why she would entertain the idea of anything with me. She has so many options out there that aren't men over a decade older than her with crazy work schedules. There's no way I would be able to give her the attention she deserves, and I'm not looking to change my life to accommodate someone else's—or two someone's.

I can be her friend. She's Winter's best friend; that means she's practically family anyway. It's looking more likely that I won't be able to avoid adding this family member any more than I wanted to add Xavier when Winter decided to keep him. My sister won't allow it. I'm not a fan of adding new people to the fold, but it looks like I better be prepared to establish a friendship and go from there. I'm not the type of man to ignore someone the way Killian does.

The light haze and tiny raindrops don't prohibit my walk to Pike Place Market.

That's exactly what Killian will say too. He'll tell me how bad an idea these thoughts are and to move on. There is no way I'll talk to any of my other brothers about this, or heaven forbid, Winter. Best to keep this between the two of us eldest brothers, especially after the dating profile fiasco of the other night. He understands the position I've been in since our parents died. He knows the way I feel.

There is something about being the oldest when your family goes through traumatic events. I know that Killian will support my planned approach to this conundrum. Well, I hope. Maybe he'll have some advice about keeping a distance since it's clear our sister isn't going to be dropping her new best friend any time soon. I just know, if I get too close, I won't be able to let this one go.

"Magnus," he greets me with a spartan handshake outside the front door of Le Pichet in Pike Place Market.

"Thanks for meeting me."

He nods and opens the door for us. The small French cafe has been a staple in the area for over twenty years. The restaurant is one Killian and I like to visit on occasion. The entrees and wines are some of my favorites in the city.

Killian wastes no time once our dinners are ordered. "Who did what this time? I just saw you the other night, so what happened?" He doesn't mince words, but I know behind the gruff facade, he is as concerned as I am about our siblings.

I lean back in my chair with a deep sigh and run my hands through my hair before scrubbing my beard. "It's me this time." Killian's eyebrows pinch together. "I'm sure it's nothing, but you're the only one I want to talk to about this. I met Winter's friend, Johanna, and I can't get her out of my head."

He takes a sip of his wine, rolling the flavors across his tongue before leaning back to mirror my position. He's calm and collected. I didn't expect an outburst, but his deep thought gives me pause. "The one with the kid, right?"

I nod, and his index finger comes up to trace his bottom lip. This is not the reaction I expected. All I needed was a confirmation of my plans to stay away from the woman.

*What is there to think about?*

“I know I pushed you the other night, but you haven’t come to me about a woman since before Mom and Dad—”

“Killian.” I cut him off. “That’s not what this is. I just need you to tell me how to avoid her.” He chuckles at that. *Actually chuckles!* My grumpy brother can be light and funny in the right company, but it is rare. Perhaps he’s not taking this situation as seriously as I am. “Be serious. She’s twelve years younger than me and Winter’s best friend. I don’t know why I can’t get her out of my head, but there’s no other option.”

He leans forward, both forearms firmly on the table, “Listen, Mag, I think you need to calm down. It’s obvious this girl has messed you up, and I can understand why that upsets you. But I also watched Leo and Winter go through their own infatuations that turned into, well, love, I guess. I’m not saying that’s what this will be for you. In fact, I’m betting it won’t, but I do think you need to take a breath. Have you talked to Winter about it?” He’s being sincere, but it also feels like he’s needling me.

“No. Absolutely not, and you won’t either!” I say shortly. I take another sip from my glass and take a bite from the assiette de jambon de Bayonne we ordered as an appetizer. The sliced, dry-aged ham has a rich, salty flavor.

“Brother, listen to yourself. Are you so afraid of letting someone else help you?” He’s smirking now. He knows I like to be the one doing the helping. This is an uncomfortable situation for me all the way around. It’s a weakness, and there are very few people I allow to see my weaknesses. “Winter will be able to help you with this one better than I can.”

“Enough, Killian. Forget that I brought it up. I will handle the situation how I see fit. I’m capable of setting my feelings aside for the sake of my sister, as well as her friend. She doesn’t need me panting after her, and I don’t need that

either.” He’s smirking behind his glass. “Can we agree not to speak of this again?”

“As you wish, brother.” Killian has not lost his stupid smile.

He’s part apathetic, part evil genius. I love my brother immensely, so I hope he lets this go as I asked. Another of my siblings bringing this up will push the limits of my mental fortitude. This conversation that was supposed to settle me has left me more confused than ever.

*I can be her friend. I’m a good friend. I’ll be a great friend.*

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Ah! The smell of disinfectant and chaos in the morning. I’m not one for easing into the workday, so it’s a good thing my work is jarring. I’m here, let’s get things done. From the moment I step into the emergency department, I’m reading charts, learning about my patients, preparing to take over for the shift change, and picking up information on anything pertinent to the unit for the day.

“Good morning, Dr. Small. Walk with me for a moment?” The Chief formed his words as a question, but we both know they’re not. “We have an LPN graduating to RN this week. She was on the labor and delivery floor, but we really need another registered nurse down here. She’ll be joining us on Monday, and I’d like you to keep an eye on her.” He walks through the emergency department with an assessing gaze. I don’t envy his responsibilities, though I’ve gained several more of my own as an attending physician.

“Sir, isn’t that the charge nurse’s job?”

His head dips, but his charming smile reminds me that he often has to be more politician than doctor these days. He stops, turning to face me fully. “Of course. Charlene is Charge on Monday, and she will be the point person, but I know how well you care for your people. Just keep an eye out, okay?”

Now it's my turn to acquiesce. "You can count on me, sir."

The arrival of the new RN slips from my mind as my duties stack up. The line of patients is never-ending. Each new case is like another puzzle to be solved. Some are easy—a broken bone to be set or a laceration to be sutured. Others require more thought, like finding a diagnosis for sudden hair loss, acne, weight gain, and lethargy. Not every person who walks into the emergency room is a true emergency in that moment. Some people don't have a primary care doctor, so they come to the hospital instead. Others come in after the clinics in the area close for the night. A few of our frequent fliers are hypochondriacs and even more are brought in by authorities almost weekly. No matter what, each person who walks through our doors deserves the best care possible.

The way our doctors, nurses, and orderlies move through the emergency department is nothing short of breathtaking if you take a moment to stop and watch. Each has their own job to do. Each has somewhere to be. Any perceived downtime is deception.

Of course, there are cases that have staff sprinting through the hallways. When that happens, there's lots of shouting and calls to clear the way. We are so well trained that no one hesitates. Hesitation in this job can mean the loss of life.

"Five car plus semi MVA incoming, Dr. Small," a nurse cradling the phone to her shoulder at the central nurses' station calls to me. Because of our trauma level and location in Seattle, we are often the best choice for severe motor vehicle collisions.

"What do we know?" Having even a few minutes to prepare is critical in this situation.

"Three adults deceased at the scene. Four more in critical condition. One adult male with massive blood loss. Currently in a low flow state in traumatic cardiac arrest." Each sentence is punctuated with a moment of silence as she listens for more information.

"Okay team, listen up," I call loudly to get the attention of everyone within ear-shot. "We need to prepare the operating

rooms. Call down to the blood bank. This is an all-hands-on-deck situation. We have no idea exactly what we'll find when the rigs pull up. Be prepared for this one to take a while.”

I set off to prepare my own scrubs and sanitary garb. Four to five patients in critical condition require a lot of personnel. The odds of the fifth patient surviving the ride here are low, but we will be ready when he arrives.

The next several hours are full of motion, beeping alarms, lots of blood, and even more delicate procedures. All five patients are hanging on; a few by a thread. Miraculously, the male with traumatic cardiac arrest made it to us still alive, but I honestly don't know how long we can keep him that way. He spent so much time without oxygen flowing to his vital organs. If he ever does wake up, he will never be the same.

The other four are in the ICU after surgeries for punctured lungs, broken bones, lacerations, burns, concussions, a double amputation, and one ruptured spleen. The blood loss was great, and the chance for stroke and cardiac arrest are still high.

My staff now resembles the paramedics upon their arrival earlier in the day—harried and gaunt. When you experience something traumatic, your body can go into shock, even if you aren't physically injured. Your brain is stunned. It doesn't know what to do. It's like white noise and energy while you're working. Utter mayhem and then stillness. That's when you start to think about what you went through. That's when it sets in.

It's so important to know you aren't alone. We are all feeling the same things. It's okay; normal, even, to feel awful after seeing what we see. Post-traumatic stress disorder is extremely common. If you're going to have a prolonged career in the emergency services, you need to keep yourself in check. You need to know when you're nearing burnout. When to reach out to your support system. When to talk to a professional.

That is why we debrief after cases like this. We gather together to go over what happened. Sometimes, we break

down what went right and what could have been done better. Other times, the analysis has to wait, and the moments after are spent comforting one another.

We are a family here. We experience things inside these walls that not many can understand. For our own health and the health of our families, we need to know who we can talk to and lean on. No one is immune. Tonight, I'm one of the ones having a hard time.

One of the younger patients tonight looked so much like my sister that I'm struggling not to rush to her now. I know that woman wasn't her, but I need to know Winter is okay.

"Mag, it's two in the morning. Are you okay?" her sleepy voice comes across the line.

I run a hand through my hair and blow out a breath. "Yeah ... No ... I'm not sure. We had a bad one this evening, and I just need to know you're alright." I think my uncertainty gives her pause. It's rare she gets anything but strength from me.

"Do you need me to come get you?" she asks softly.

"No, Winter. I just needed to hear your voice. Dinner tomorrow after work?" I feel better having talked to her but wrapping her in a bear hug will go a long way.

"I'm so sorry, Mag, but I promised Johanna I would help her prepare for this weekend. It's kind of a big deal for her. Do you need me to cancel?"

I would never dream of something so selfish. "No. I'll be fine. And you've spoken to her tonight? Johanna, I mean?" The thought of the woman who has been haunting me being injured is a new level of agony that I can't explain.

"Just before bed. Magnus, are you sure you're okay?"

*Thank goodness.*

"Yeah. Of course. Sunday dinner, right?"

"Of course. I love you, big brother," she hums in her melodic way.

“Love you too.” I hold the phone to my forehead for a few moments, taking deep breaths. It’s time I head for home, more than seven hours after my shift was supposed to have ended.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Johanna*

**P**omp and Circumstance pumps through the loudspeakers as my fellow graduates and I funnel into the auditorium in alphabetical single file lines. The watching crowd hoots and hollers all around us. The air of celebration is palpable.

I take my seat between two other M last names as I scan the crowd for my family. The Dean drones on in a commencement speech that I'm way too antsy to appreciate. When I think about it, the list of things I have been through to make it to this point is overwhelming. There was a while there when I didn't think graduating as a registered nurse would ever be possible.

The sound of my name breaks through the din. There they are. My personal cheering section is in the crowd to my right. Mom, Dad, and Lara are waving madly in my direction. My little girl is bouncing on Winter's lap holding a sign that reads, 'You're my hero, Mom!' Even Xavier sits happily next to my best friend. My heart explodes with all the love they're throwing at me.

My phone vibrates in my dress pocket under my robe. I have been receiving congratulatory texts from family, friends, and coworkers all day. I am by no means the youngest graduate here today, but I feel like this ceremony might hold the most meaning for me. It's taken me eight years to complete my RN degree from start to finish and everything in between, but I did it!

Pulling the phone from my pocket, I take a quick peek at the new message.

First Date Dude: Congratulations, Johanna. I can't wait for our next date. Your knowledge and skills will make you a wonderful wife and mother to our children.

*What the heck?*

The guy, Dane, I went out with the day Adel was injured has been sending me progressively creepier messages since our first date. A first date that I ended by stating emphatically that he should not contact me again. The man was nice enough, but it was obvious he was quickly infatuated when he started sharing his delusions of grandeur about our future. We'd talked about my schooling, but I did not tell him when my graduation was scheduled. It appears I'll have to do something more about him, but not right now.

Dr. Barber's voice rings out over the still cheering crowds, "Now, will all the candidates recommended to receive baccalaureate degrees within the School of Nursing please stand when I call your degree? All the candidates recommended to receive degrees in the School of Nursing: Bachelor of Science in Nursing." I pop to my feet amongst more cheers and whistles. "Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing, Accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing with Early Doctor of Nursing Practice admission. Will the candidates please remain standing?" Gone are the days of tame, quiet ceremonies—if they ever existed. The cheers, shouts, and horns never really cease. Dr. Barber continues, "Dr. Emami, on behalf of the faculty, I have the honor to present and to recommend these candidates for the appropriate degree."

Dr. Emami steps up to the podium next to him. "Acting on the recommendation of the faculties concerned and by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Board of Trustees and the President of the University of Washington, I hereby confer upon each of you the degree earned, with all of its rights, honors, and responsibilities. Congratulations!" The volume roars and a hat or two goes flying prematurely. "To signify

your graduation, will you please move your tassels from the right to the left?" With the exception of birthing Adelais, I've never felt anything more gratifying than moving that tassel. "Graduates, please be seated, and then follow the student marshals as they guide you in the procession. Family members and guests, I ask that you please remain in your seats during the procession; this will ensure that all of our audience members have unobstructed views. A photographer is taking a picture of each graduate. Also, we ask that you hold your applause until all of the graduates have been called to ensure all graduates' names will be heard."

No matter how kindly she asked, pockets of cheer and raucous noise burst out around the auditorium with every name read.

It takes everything in me to remain professional as I shake the Dean's hand and pose for a picture, but as I walk to the other side of the stage, I can't help finding my family in the crowd to pump my fist in the air. My sweet daughter blows me a kiss that I promptly catch and smack against my cheek.

*Oh my gosh, I actually did it!*

The rest of the ceremony passes in a blur as the other students receive their degrees and final speeches are made. I'm as antsy as I was at the start, but for a whole different reason. I can't wait to wrap my family in my arms and celebrate how far we have come together. This is their celebration too. There is no way I could have done this without them, even Adelais.

When I reach the lobby after we have been led out of the auditorium, I'm hit by a bullet to the leg. My wiggly daughter yanks on my hands and gown. By the time she's in my arms, she's smothering my face with kisses.

"I love you, baby girl," I tell her.

"I'm notta baby, Momma. I'm a big girl!"

I press a kiss of my own to her forehead and look around the crowded space for my parents. My family and best friend are making their way through the crush. They all have smiles

as big as mine, including my mother whose face softens from the fear it held once she sees Adel in my arms.

“I knew you could do it,” Dad says, wrapping the two of us in a bear hug.

I mumble my thanks before my sister sweeps in with a hug of her own. “I’m so proud of you, sis. Now, I won’t feel so bad about you watching me walk for my degree.”

I push her back. “You stinker.” I know she’s only partially joking. “Celebrating you could never make me feel bad.” Then I pull her back in for another hug.

Mom wipes at the corner of her eyes as she watches the two of us. “Don’t you start, Mom,” I tell her. I know if she cries, it will be hard for me not to.

“What’s for lunch, Mr. M? I sure could use a hot cup of tea.” Winter is not usually one for subtlety.

Though, neither is my dad. “You mean your man here isn’t treating us?”

“Dad!” I yell at him, handing Adel over to my sister to scold my two favorite people properly. “You two are the worst. Let’s get out of here before either of you embarrasses me more.”

We exit the building to find more crowds lingering in the sunny, late spring day. Adel spins in circles at my side while singing her adorable version of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.”

Winter threads her arm through mine, “I was totally joking. Xavier and I actually have a few errands to run, but I was hoping you’d join us for dinner tonight?”

I run my hands through my hair. “Sure, yeah. I mean, Adel will be with me as always.” Sometimes I feel bad that my friends, especially those without kids, have to be accommodating of mine.

She sucks in a gasping breath. “You caught me! I really just wanted to spend time with Adelais, but I felt bad not inviting you.” Her mock outrage morphs to bell-like laughter.

I play shove her the same way I did my sister minutes ago. “Whatever. Where should we meet you?”

“Poquitos at six.”

“Ewquitos! Ewquitos! Ewquitos!” Adel chants, jumping on the spot beside us.

I shake my head at her antics while Winter grabs my daughter’s hands to jump in a circle with her. “That girl is going to be the best mom one day,” I mutter to myself.

“I heard that,” a deep voice intones. Xavier stands next to me with his forearms crossed over his chest. “And you’re right, she will ... someday.”

Now it’s my turn to chuckle at his attempt to play tough. I know he wants kids as badly as she does, and if he’s going to let her have as many as she wants, they better start soon.

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Lara decided to hitch a ride back to our parents’ house with Adel and me. She enjoys rocking out to the Disney Hits station as much as we do, and by the time we make our way into the house, Mom is already cooking up a storm. Ida Mendel loves to cook more than anyone I know. She made it a little easier on herself today by starting a roast in the crockpot this morning before they left for the ceremony.

“Can I help, Mom?” I ask as Adel pulls Lara into the living room to play their favorite matching game.

She turns to me, face flushed—from happiness or the heat of the kitchen I’m not sure—and says, “I’d love if you’d toss the salad, honey. We are just so proud of you.” She turns back to the bread she is slicing and slathering in garlic butter before she can see my own cheeks turn the same shade of red.

I don’t blush often, but there is something about the praise of my family that does it to me every time. For several years, it seemed like life was determined to beat me down. Being a registered nurse has been a goal of mine for so long that it felt

like a pipe dream while I was in the trenches. It may very well have stayed that way, too, if my parents hadn't stepped up to support me when I needed them most, even when they weren't the happiest with how my life was going.

As expected, the roast is tender and falls apart in your mouth. The carrots and potatoes are succulent and cooked to perfection too. I really do need to start writing down more of my mother's recipes.

"Oh my gosh, Mom, this is, like, a million times better than cafeteria food!" Lara exclaims.

"You told me you've been cooking?" Mom inquires with just a hint of reproach. We all know how the preprocessed, deep-fried foods get you those first few years of college.

"More. I've been cooking *more*, Mom, which isn't hard to do when I used to cook almost nothing."

Dad and I both try to disguise our snorts of mirth. Lara isn't a terrible cook, but she definitely didn't get Mom's skills in the kitchen. That's why it really doesn't matter how much she's cooking; it still wouldn't be as good as the meal before us.

I enjoy cooking, but cooking for a single adult and the pallet of a five-year-old does not allow for the most creative dishes. Adel is still the best eater of any kid I've ever seen. It's rare that she won't eat what is given to her, but that doesn't mean she doesn't demand macaroni and cheese, chicken nuggets, and hot dogs daily. I'm hoping that, with fewer time constraints, I'll be able to diversify more.

Which reminds me, "Lara, do you think you'll be able to help out with Adelais again this summer?"

My sister and mother have been a huge help during the summer months when I have to work and Adelais is out of school. I could always stick her in childcare, but I prefer she be with family whenever possible. Not to mention the financial benefits of hanging out with Auntie all summer long. It's been important for me to save during the months my

family is in town so that I can pay for the childcare when they're gone without significant monetary hardship.

Lara sticks her fist out for Adelais to bump, "You know it! Little Bit and I are going to have so much fun in the sun. I also think your fancy new job might benefit us both." Her eyebrows bounce up and down suggestively.

"Don't count on it. You live here for free, and I feed you at least two meals a day when you help out."

She knocks my fork away from where I'd been pointing it at her with her own utensil. "Fine. Fine. You know I can't resist time with my sweet niece anyway."

"Yay!" Adel pumps her tiny, balled fists in the air. She's a little sponge, and I know she'd been watching the interaction with rapt attention. The things she picks up when I think she's not paying attention are astounding.

Lunch is filled with laughter and ribbing. We're a family who enjoys needling one another. "Thick as thieves," Dad always says. He's usually content to sit back and watch his girls—all four of them—but he pops in with his own perfectly timed jokes here and there. This house is made of love and happiness. It's exactly the way I want my home to feel. Sometimes it's hard to leave.

But I've worked hard to craft my little apartment into a home for Adelais and myself. We'll have just enough time to kick our shoes off and relax for a few minutes before we head out again to meet Winter and Xavier for dinner.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Magnus*

Being able to meet with my siblings on short notice is one of my favorite things about living in the city together. We don't all live in the same house anymore; Theodore does still live in Bellingham, but the rest of us are as close as traffic will allow.

We still do Sunday family dinners because Theodore misses us during the week, and my little dope of a brother, Roland, wouldn't see us at all if we didn't force him. It's a tradition I can't imagine going without.

Tonight, there will just be a few of us. Winter, her boyfriend Xavier, Killian, and I are meeting for dinner at Poquitos in the Capitol Hill district. I picked up my customary Saturday overtime shift, but now I'm behind schedule. Even if it's because of my job, I hate being late.

Making my way into the restaurant, I find Winter and Xavier canoodling at a larger table than we'll need. Maybe Winter is too used to asking for a big table or maybe that's all they had available right now. Either way, it rankles me.

"Ah-hem," I clear my throat to alert the new couple to my presence.

"Magnus!" Winter squeals, jumping to her feet to hug me. It doesn't matter how often she sees us, she greets each of her brothers with the same exuberance every time. Not even Killian will speak against it.

"Hey Winter. Xavier." I take the big man's hand in mine. He's taller than all of us, but it doesn't intimidate me. Anyone who witnesses the way he is looking at my baby sister right now would know he is a love-sick fool.



“Sorry we’re late!” trills a woman’s voice from over my shoulder. I’d know that voice anywhere. I haven’t been able to get it out of my head. “Oh hello, Magnus. Winter didn’t mention you’d be joining us this evening.”

She looks radiant. Johanna’s straight blond hair is swept up in a high ponytail that accentuates her slender neck. Her jeans show off her toned legs, and the cut of her shirt does nothing to hide the curves that I’ve had way too many inappropriate thoughts about.

“Nor I, you. I mean, you weren’t supposed to be here. That is, I didn’t know you were coming either,” I stammer through my response like a preteen boy.

*What has gotten into me?*

That’s when I notice Killian in the hallway leading to the bathrooms. His face is as dour as usual, but he can’t hide the light in his eyes.

“Great. I guess me and the kid will play tic-tac-toe,” Killian grumbles, marching to the table to take his seat next to Xavier.

I’d believe he were truly upset about it if he didn’t flex his eyebrows at me. He knows exactly who joined us for dinner even without being introduced. Maybe he even helped Winter set this up. I shouldn’t have told him anything.

“Docka! Docka, look!” Adelais chants jumping up and down and raising her arm to show me her cast. “I been taken care of it like you said.”

Crouching down to her level, I look her in the eyes so she knows I hear her. “You are doing a wonderful job, sweetheart. I am so proud of you.”

The little girl’s smile is as beautiful as her mother’s. She runs around to Killian’s side to take him up on his offer to play a game. It’s amazing how willing she is to trust the people her mother introduces her to. I can’t decide if that’s a good or a bad thing. It’s something I’ll monitor.

“How was lunch with your family?” Winter asks Johanna.

“I hope your father wasn’t too disappointed I didn’t treat,” Xavier adds, pushing his glasses up his nose. His watch flashes on his wrist, a constant reminder of my sister’s love and affection.

Johanna’s laughter is rich and deep. She throws her head back in glee. “You two really bring out the best in one another,” she says through fits of laughter.

Winter and Xavier wear matching smiles that I can’t help but mirror.

“Seems like I missed a party,” I say, hoping they’ll let me in on the joke.

My sister sighs dramatically, “Magnus! Johanna graduated today with her Bachelors of Science in Nursing. I told you that like seventeen times.”

*Oh shoot. She did tell me that. Before. She told me that before I met Johanna. That’s why it didn’t register.*

“Right. Yes. Congratulations. What’s next?” I ask the blond beside me.

“Shut up, Magnus. She just finished one thing. Let her relax a minute,” Killian comments from the intense game of “connect the dots” he and Adelais have moved on to.

Somehow, I keep screwing this up. “That’s not what I meant. I’m sorry, Johanna. It wasn’t meant to be pushy. I apologize if my question came across that way.” I run my hands through my hair and scrub my beard.

She taps my raised elbow. “Hey, it’s okay, big guy. I understood you. I actually start in the ER on Monday.”

“What?” I ask in disbelief.

“Pick up your jaw, Mag,” Killian mutters softly.

“You’re my new nurse?” My eyes must be as big as saucers.

Johanna turns away, sneaking a peek at her daughter before answering me. “I suppose I am. I didn’t know I would be working under you.”

My sip of water chokes me. I have to cover my mouth to keep the spittle from flying across the table. I've caught everyone's attention now.

"Magnus, you know that I was, and technically still am, Winter's supervisor," Xavier chimes in. His fingers are steepled on the table, and his intense stare tries to burrow into my brain.

"It's not exactly the same situation though, is it Magnus?" Winter asks me. Her expression, usually so free and open, is discerning.

My gaze swings swiftly back to Johanna. "No, not at all." I can't be sure she believes my words any more than I do.

The server picks the perfect opportunity to save me from further embarrassment. I wait my turn and order the barbacoa burrito when the waitress asks. I'm sure to meet her eyes to confirm she knows I'm giving the woman handling my food the respect she deserves.

A volley of tacos, enchiladas, and burritos are ordered. Even Adelais asks for a "cheese thing," which her mom translates for the server as a quesadilla.

Chips and salsa arrive with a tray of our drinks, giving us all something to do with our hands. I would have thought that the additions to our dinner party tonight would make more than just me uncomfortable; however, Killian seems to be getting along with Adelais just fine, if her adorable giggles are anything to go by. It's not that I'm uncomfortable exactly—just off kilter.

I wasn't expecting to share my family night with so many new people. Xavier is still a new addition. One that I have come to enjoy, but new, nonetheless. And now there are two more.

Johanna's phone rattles the silverware next to my plate a few times. When she finally flips it over to read the incoming messages, her entire demeanor changes.

"What is it?" I lean over to whisper. I can tell she doesn't want to draw attention to herself, but she's clearly upset.

“No. Nothing. It’s nothing,” she says, flicking her eyes first to me, and then to my sister.

“Would you rather talk to Winter about it? I can tell you’re upset.”

She turns, searching my face. “You actually do care, don’t you?”

*Care isn’t the word I’d use.*

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.” The lie slips out as easily as when I’m comforting a terminal patient. At least I think it’s a lie. My head must be on backwards right now.

“Um, okay.” She takes a second to tuck a strand of hair that’s come loose from her ponytail behind her ear and straightens her shoulders. “I’ve been online dating for the first time in a very long time, and this guy keeps texting me.” She’s so matter of fact that it’s hard to reconcile this sure woman with the one who wilted just moments ago.

It’s even harder for me to explain the blow I feel to my gut at the knowledge she’s actively dating, and the other night wasn’t a one-time thing. “And you don’t want him to?” I ask slowly.

Her smile doesn’t reach her eyes. “No. He was not the one for me.”

“May I see?” The only way to find a solution is to triage the situation. That means I need as much information as possible.

“Oh. Uh, sure?” she says in a decidedly unsure way.

When she hands me her phone, I can’t help the laugh that bursts from my chest. She looks startled at my outburst—the whole table does. I wave them off and turn back to the woman at my side. “You put him in your phone as *First Date Dude*?”

That puts a Cheshire smile on her lovely face. “Of course. They don’t get a name until they earn one ... even if I unfortunately remember this one’s.”

“Harsh!”

She smacks my bicep. “Don’t judge me,” she says with fake indignation.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” I glance at my arm and shoot her a wink.

Now it’s her turn to laugh. I don’t think I’ve been responsible for making someone else laugh this much in a long time. It’s endearing. It’s life-giving.

I take a few moments to read through the backlog of texts from First Date Dude. Johanna has not responded to any since the first few messages about where they would meet and what she was wearing so they could spot one another. All of the messages since have been flattering, affectionate, hopeful, and downright creepy.

This man has planned their future together, including their kids’ names.

“You need to block this guy, and perhaps get a restraining order,” I tell her in a much different tone than the one before.

“He’s a gnat. Ignore him, and he’ll die eventually.”

“Momma, what’s a gnat?” Adelais asks, breaking into what I thought was our private conversation.

Johanna looks relieved to have the conversation turn from our heavier subject to her daughter. She takes a few minutes to explain what a gnat is, going as far as to draw a diagram in red crayon on her daughter’s kids’ menu. It’s educational to watch a mother who does not shy away from questions and presents answers in a kid-friendly and age-appropriate way. All too often, I see parents brush off their childrens’ interests, no matter how mundane.

The food comes, and conversation slows. Soon we’re floating on good drinks and full bellies. Where the rest of us embody contentment, Adelais is buzzing with energy. Coloring is no longer enough activity to pacify her.

“Momma, can I dance ova there?” she points to a small corner by the window.

“No, baby. You need to stay here with us. There are lots of people here trying to enjoy their dinners,” Johanna says sternly. It’s apparent this isn’t the first time dancing in a restaurant has come up.

“Spoil sport,” Killian chides, quickly turning back to his drink when she shoots him a glare.

“How about we walk for a bit before we get back in our cars,” Winter suggests. She always has been the best problem solver. “Kill has been hogging all the time with my best friend,” she says pointedly to Adelais.

“Hey!” Killian feigns injury.

“Winter, you know I love you,” the sweet little girl says in a very parental tone.

“And I love you! Come sit with me until we pay the checks,” she commands, and Adelais moves without thought to cuddle into my sister’s arms. The two have a bond that’s clear as day.

“My turn to watch your kid is finally done. I guess now it’s Winter’s,” Killian grouses.

“Wow, you really are as grumpy as Winter described you,” Johanna says without missing a beat.

Killian leans back in his seat, arms crossed over his chest, assessing the scene. This is his norm. I’ve only seen him as relaxed as he was with Adelais when he’s with my niece, Emelia, or when he’s playing piano.

Which reminds me, “Hey, you want to come play again tonight?”

His head tilts for just a moment before he nods his agreement.

I pay my portion of the bill, leaving a well-deserved tip when the waitress returns with the folders for each of us. It kills me not to have grabbed the whole thing before it was split, but I also know that my siblings are grown now. They have great jobs. Some of them are doing even better than I am.

Old habits die hard, and it's difficult to release those responsibilities.

I clear my throat to get everyone's attention, "Killian and I are going to head out. Thanks for meeting us, everyone." I meet the eyes of everyone at the table and spend just a second longer sinking into the moss green ones beside me.

Amongst a course of goodbyes, I tell Johanna, "See you Monday."

## CHAPTER TEN

*Johanna*

Finally graduating has me feeling much more relaxed about moving to the emergency department. That, or maybe it was getting to know Magnus a little better on Saturday evening. He is warm, funny, and kind of awkward. It's endearing and knowing he's on the unit is calming.

There's a magnetism about him. It may take me a little longer to figure out if he was flirting, or if he acts that way with everyone. Whatever it is, I know I haven't stopped smiling whenever I think of him.

My first shift went fast. Full of introductions, procedures, and protocols. A huge knot untied in my gut when I connected the similarities to my last position in labor and delivery. However, I absolutely have to move at a faster speed than I am used to. I should get one of those step counters because I'm sure I'll be running marathons in no time.

In labor and delivery, we averaged three to four babies born in a day. Some days had many more, some far fewer, but those numbers don't touch what I see in the emergency room in my first few weeks. It's a good thing this is a teaching hospital, because I am learning at hyper-speed. If it weren't for the great doctors and nurses already working here, I'd be as lost as my patients. There's something about working at this level that's mentally exhilarating and exhausting at the same time. I've had to use every ounce of my ability for every shift.

"Always use your have to" floats through my mind more often than it should. Rookie of the Year is one of my dad's favorite movies. He's quoted that stupid Gary Busey line to me



since I was little, but it's effective. Give it your all, even that little bit you save in reserve for the "have to" moments.

I'm not sure what the adjustment period is, but I feel like it's going to take me forever to feel normal again. Thank goodness for my parents and Winter. Poor Adel has a zombie coming home to her every day, and I need all the help I can get.

I've had an abnormal schedule during training, which means I'm abnormally exhausted as well. It's helpful that Adel loves all the quality time she spends with her aunt. It's reassuring to know she is safe and cared for while I do my best to help others on what, for some of them, is the worst day of their lives.

The emergency department scheduled me for a mix of day, night, weekday, and weekend shifts over my first several weeks to help me become accustomed to the different cadences. Each shift is a different beast with different expectations.

My guiding light, Magnus, has been there for each step. I'm not sure if he volunteered or was assigned, but I'm thankful for him. Our different positions—he as a doctor and me a nurse—mean that we are not together every second of every shift. Instead, he is more of a go-to person when I need support.

The other nurses are phenomenal as well. Every one of them were in my shoes at some point in their careers, and they are cognizant of my strengths and shortcomings. They watch out for me in the same way Magnus does. I've only come across a few who are less than accommodating, but they're mostly easy to ignore.

By the end of four weeks, I couldn't tell you which end is up. My labor and delivery department was busy, but nothing could have prepared me for the only level one trauma center in the Pacific Northwest. My circadian clock is way off, and only the color of the sky tells me what I should be doing by the time I trudge out to my car after another grueling shift.

“We haven’t scared you off yet?” Magnus asks as we cross the employee parking lot to our respective cars.

“Is it obvious I’m about to keel over right here and never get back up?”

He flashes me his pearly whites through his well-trimmed beard. “You said it, not me.”

I playfully smack his arm.

*What was that? Am I flirting? I’ve gotten way too comfortable with this man.*

“Johanna!” a male voice calls.

Searching the cars around me, I find a vaguely familiar man jogging toward us. When he draws closer, I recognize him. It’s First Date Dude who still texts me regularly. The man reaches out as if to pull me into a hug. I step back, bumping into Magnus.

“I’m so glad I could surprise you today, sweetheart. You’ve been working so hard it’s been hard to connect,” he says, intimating that we are something more than we are.

“Oh. Hey, uh ...” I leave the comment hanging because I’m not really sure how to end it.

“Is this one of your coworkers, honey? Aren’t you going to introduce me?” he presses again.

As I turn to face Magnus, I shoot my eyebrows to my hairline. I can only hope that he’ll read my distress and go with what I’m about to throw at him. “Yeah. This is Doctor Magnus Small. My boyfriend.”

“Dane,” the man holds out his hand to Magnus. “The boyfriend. It’s so nice to meet people my little cupcake works with.”

*Ugh! How could I have forgotten that name, or how cringe-worthy he is in real life.*

“No!” I cut in. “You misunderstood, Dane. Dr. Magnus Small is my boyfriend.” I can only pray he plays along.

His big arm wraps around my waist, pulling me into his chest. “That’s right. *I* am the boyfriend,” Magnus says in his lovely baritone from just over my shoulder.

*Oh thank goodness.*

“You must be the guy I’ve heard so much about. I’m so glad you’re here so I can tell you to leave my girl alone face-to-face. Jo, here, is too sweet to let me call you the way I wanted to, so take this for the warning it is. I’m a doctor. I’m very well aware of how the body is supposed to work, and how to make sure it doesn’t.”

Shock has me turning in his arms to glimpse the sinister smile that mares his handsome face just before he leans down to press his lips to mine.

The kiss isn’t stiff or swift. Magnus luxuriates in it, pressing his plush lips firmly to mine. His whiskers tickle me as he moves to deepen the kiss. It feels normal—familiar—like we kiss all the time. I find myself slipping away into the fantasy of it.

Coming up for air takes much longer than it should. When we finally do, Mag gives Dane a wink before placing a hand at my back and walking me to my car. As if that’s something else we do every day. He takes the keys from my hand, opens the passenger door, and ushers me in. Air rushes from my lungs when he finally takes his place in my driver’s seat.

“We’ll pick up my car later. There’s no way I’m letting you drive home alone after meeting that creep,” Magnus informs me.

“My apartment isn’t big enough for you to stay over,” I say. He may have just saved me from an awful situation with a kiss I might play on repeat for a while, but that does not give him a free pass.

I’ve grown closer to Magnus in the last month. I might even venture to call us friends. However, there is a reason I have failed at dating for the last six years. I *do not* trust men. Period.

He releases a mirthless laugh, “Wouldn’t dream of it. I’ll drive us to my place—”

“I’m not staying at your place either, Magnus!” I cut him off.

He stops adjusting the mirrors to give me his full attention. “Johanna. Take a deep breath. You can drive home after you drop me off. I’m sorry that you’re on edge, but please believe me when I say I have zero expectations for you outside of friendship and work no matter what might have just happened.”

*Right. Of course, that’s what he meant. What has gotten into me?*

“Hey,” he waves his hand in front of my face, careful not to touch me. “Are you okay? You’re all stuck in your head. I can see the gears turning.”

I let out a deep sigh and think through his question before blurting out any more word vomit. The late spring heat raises the temperature inside the cab, forcing Magnus to start the engine.

Shaking my head to clear all the voices, I let it out. “I’m exhausted. The ED is more taxing than I was prepared for.” I drop my chin to my chest.

Magnus’s hand lifts from the gear shift briefly before returning to clasp it tight. “I know it can be overwhelming. You aren’t the first to come to us from a different department, but you’re doing great,” he assures me. “I would have been told if you were doing anything wrong.”

My head jerks back like I’ve been struck. “I didn’t say I felt like I wasn’t capable,” I say, squaring my shoulders.

His hands go up in a placating gesture. “That came out wrong. I didn’t mean to imply anything. I only meant to reassure you that you are where you’re supposed to be as long as it’s where you *want* to be.”

My rigid posture remains, but another deep breath seeps out. “Doing the job is physically exhausting, but I think it’s really the emotional side that is taking a toll on me. We did

lose moms and babies during delivery, but it was rare. It wasn't like this."

A dark look crosses his face before his lips turn down in understanding, or maybe it's commiseration. "May I?" He hovers a hand over mine, where they're twisting in my lap. My chin nods minutely. "I heard about the Horner case. I'm sorry I wasn't there."

Janie Horner was a thirty-two-year-old woman who came into the hospital with bruising, fractures, and a broken forearm. Injuries that are generally indicative of a fight. Unfortunately for Mrs. Horner, this fight was one-sided. Her condition deteriorated quickly. The bruising on her face was due to multiple skull fractures. By the time the CT scan detected the brain bleed and swelling, we were too late.

We have no idea how long she waited before coming to the hospital. She may have had to wait out her attacker. One thing is clear: Mr. Horner didn't arrive with her.

"It wasn't your case," I sniff.

*I refuse to cry!*

"No, but you're my charge right now, and more than that, you're my friend, Johanna. It's not easy for any of us to deal with those types of cases. The effects this profession has on our psyche is one reason the staff is so close. Those who sit on the fringe don't last long alone. If you trust no one else in the Emergency Department, I hope you'll trust me."

Rolling my hands around, I grasp his. "Thank you. My mind is already running away with me. Conjuring more possible scenarios that might knock me sideways. What if next time there is a little girl like Adalais?"

He leans in, using two fingers to lift my face to meet his. I hadn't noticed I was looking at our joined hands. "It might happen. Some of the hardest cases are those in which we can see our family and loved ones. That fear is something they will never experience, and it's one that's hard to explain."

I shake my head, blinking rapidly. I'm not even sure what I'm trying to say any more. It's all too much and not enough.

My nervous system is on high alert, yet I'm melting in my seat. How did we go from that intense kiss just a few moments ago to me breaking down in the passenger seat of my own car over imaginary patients?

"Johanna, you are a good nurse. Learning to process trauma is part of what makes us great at what we do. I have no doubt you will succeed at this just like every other challenging thing you've ever put your mind to. We haven't known one another long, but I know you're a fighter. Don't let this beat you down." His thumb rubs across my cheek, smearing the lone tear that escaped my stupid eye.

*So much for succeeding at everything. I wasn't supposed to cry.*

"Thanks Mag. Can we go home now?" I ask weakly, knowing this anxious mania isn't fully going away.

His sad smile turns upward. "Of course." He squeezes my hands one more time before returning his to the car. He flips the radio to smooth jazz and maneuvers us out of the lot.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Magnus*

It's the middle of June and full summer still hasn't set in. The weather is spastic. A few days hover around seventy degrees, and then a front moves in, knocking us back to the fifties for a week or two. Seattle is one of those weird places where summer never truly hits until on or after the summer solstice. For the most part, that doesn't faze those native to the Pacific Northwest.

Today the whole family is taking the opportunity to enjoy the sunshine at a Mariners' game. We're a large group when we get together, and it seems that number is growing all the time. I feel as grumpy as Killian when I think about it.

*Weren't the nine of us enough?*

I could never wish away Leopold's daughter, Emelia. She's our little gemstone. The day Leopold told me he and his wife were expecting, I thought my chest would explode. I loved her even then.

It was unrealistic to hope my siblings would stay single. That they would hold tight to our tightly woven family. I'm just not sure I have space for the threads they want to add to our weave.

There will be twelve of us for the game today, but even the curmudgeon in me is having a tough time complaining about the two latest additions. Johanna and her daughter, Adelais, will be there. I see the potential for that little girl to sparkle as brightly as Emelia in my mind's eye.

It's dangerous.

I empty my pockets into the white plastic bowl as I pass through the metal detector outside of the stadium. The roar of the crowd is a distant buzzing as my brain tries to process my emotional state.

It's been disorienting. I've never watched another coworker so closely. I could blame it on the Chief's order to look out for her. I could blame it on the fact that she's my sister's best friend, or that Winter told me how Johanna is hoping for more male role models for Adalais. What I should do is man up and admit that this woman is worming her way into my life ... and I like it.

That can't be right.

After Mom and Dad died, I swore I'd keep my focus on what mattered—my family. My family consists of six brothers, one adopted sister, and a stunning niece. They are my reasons for living, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

In the vestibule, a little boy begs his father for a new hat at the Team Store as I make my way to our seats. The woman next to them rubs circles around the man's back while she looks on adoringly. The sight is wholesome. It's one I can empathize with and have fought against at the same time.

When we found Winter, I saw myself in that frail runaway. Of course, at the time, I didn't know she was a lost heiress. All I knew was that I needed to protect her in whatever way she would let me. When she finally felt comfortable enough to share her story with my brothers and me, my admiration for her deepened. I'm still not sure how a girl who'd been through so much could be so strong.

“Hey there. I'm giving away free hats and t-shirts to anyone who signs up today. Come on over!” a man decked out in M's gear waves me toward his mobile desk after stepping directly in my path.

His chipper tone and physical presence interrupt my thoughts. “Thanks. Not today,” I say as I sidestep the salesman.



When Leopold found love with Mabel, it didn't take me long to see that she was everything my brother needed, but I struggled to accept that what he needed was no longer me. Losing her during the birth of Emelia just about killed us all. If it weren't for that baby girl, I believe we would have lost Leopold that day too. Somehow, he soldiered on.

"Hey Mag. Over here!" Sebastian's voice reaches my ears through the thrum of excited fans. He's in line at the beer stand, and I can't say he's an unwelcome sight.

Making my way to my brother, I offer him a Spartan handshake and the smile he always evokes in me. "Good to see you, Sebastian. How are things?"

His ever-present blush deepens. "Good. I'm back to work." Sebastian is a successful romance writer. He uses a pen name because anonymity is everything to him. I might be an introvert, but he's a hermit.

"Glad to hear it. Is there a muse for this storyline?" I can't help but tease him, even if I know the answer. That's what brothers are for. Maybe one of these days he'll surprise me and say yes.

He gives me a sour face and says, "Magnus, you know as well as anyone that the only women I've talked to in weeks are those I work with and Winter."

"Uh, you know Winter and Xavier work together, right? Who's to say you won't find your woman on the job?" I plaster on my best fake shock expression.

I'm sure one day, someone will find a way to bring him out of his shell, but for now, I enjoy that he's always available when I call. He's my go-to partner for a lot of things, and I can always count on him when I need a listening ear. He's reserved, but that doesn't mean he's apathetic. Sebastian has a personality that he hides from the world.

He digs an elbow into my ribs. "Knock it off. What are you havin'?" he asks, gesturing to the menu.

The cooler is full of microbrews and fan favorites. I like to keep it local when I can. "I'll go with the Manny's," I tell

Sebastian.

His smile for me turns flat when he faces the bartender to order our drinks. I moved to retrieve my wallet, but he's faster, tapping a card against the reader before I can even reach my pocket. He shoots me a subtle wink.

"I thought we were going Dutch?" I poke at him.

"My momma raised me to be a gentleman," he pokes back.

Shaking my head at his bad jokes, I take my proffered beer and turn toward our section. We managed to get seats in section 122, right behind the home dugout. Our party of twelve is almost large enough for the group rate.

"Over there," Sebastian points to several of our family members already seated.

Sure enough, Theodore, Winter, her now ever-present bodyguard Xavier, Johanna, and a bouncing Adelais are already here. The crew blends in with the mass of white, blue, and silver jerseys and team shirts. Theodore is sporting a throwback baby blue Ken Griffey Jr. jersey.

*Those were the days of Seattle baseball.*

I slide into the row next to Adelais as she bounces in her seat. She's mesmerized by the players on the field, and her keen eyes take in every thrown ball. The intelligence behind those eyes is clear. When she starts sharing what she knows, I think she'll blow us all away.

"Hey little lady. Can I sit here?" I ask her before taking my seat.

Her smile beams. "Docka!" She holds up her blue cast for me to see, just like the last time I saw her. It's almost time for it to come off. "You gonna sit with me?"

It's impossible not to catch her sunny disposition. "I'd love to sit with you, if that's okay?" I question her once more.

Adelais nods her head emphatically. It only takes a moment for her eyes to return to the field and for mine to find her mother's. I dip my head in greeting.

Johanna acts like an actual adult and says hello. I can't figure out for the life of me why I become preadolescent around her. It might have something to do with that less than childish kiss we shared in the parking lot the other day. "First game?" I manage to ask.

The corners of her lips drop. "This isn't my first game of the season, but I don't want to talk about my last visit. It is Adelais's first game though, so we're going to celebrate that."

I hold my hands up in understanding. "I won't ask. Does she like sports?" The answer would be obvious to anyone who watched her for even a few minutes. She's riveted by the action.

"Seems to," Johanna says, leaning back in her chair. "She's been to games in the past, but she's at the age where I'm still unsure what she remembers and what she doesn't."

"How fun to get to enjoy a new experience for the first time all over again." I'm not sure I'm talking about the baseball game anymore, and the look on Johanna's face says she knows it. Her shoulders square and chin raises.

That woman sure knows how to don her armor.

The anthem is sung, and first pitch thrown. The hype team and the ballpark organist do their best to excite the crowd with games, cheers, and catchy tunes. The experience of a Mariners' game is half the fun.

Adelais jumps with her hands in the air every time the wave hits our section. She dances to every at-bat song, and Johanna does her best to contain Adelais when her flailing arms and wiggling body cross into the seats of others. In the midst of all the commotion, she asks questions ... so many questions.

"Why'd they do that?"

"What that mean?"

"Who that?"

I assumed she would move on to the next exciting experience before Johanna has the chance to answer, but

instead, the little girl locks eyes with her mother and listens intently. She's inquisitive. Adelais has a knack for learning even when her speech acts as a speed bump in her communication.

"Docka, why'd he run with no ball?" she asks me.

This is the first time she has asked me a question directly, though it's not the first time someone other than her mother has answered. I think about the best way to answer and point to the player now on second base, "Do you see number twenty-five?" Her eyes follow my finger, and her little ponytail bounces. "Well, he was on first base, and when he ran to second base while the pitcher was still holding the ball, he stole second base."

Her eyes go wide. "Stealing is bad."

I can't help the chuckle that bursts from me. "You are absolutely right, but in baseball, it's part of the game. It helps your team, and it's up to the other team to try to catch you. It is an extremely hard thing to do because the players can throw the ball so fast. You have to be very sneaky and very fast to steal a base." It's like I can see the wheels turning in her head.

The next pitch results in a long fly ball that has the whole stadium jumping to their feet with held breath waiting to see if it will clear the wall. As soon as the ball breaks the plane, the fans go wild, including Adelais. The ferry horn blares and music plays as Emelia decides to join in the dancing. She, too, enjoys the games, and having another little girl to play with, even with an age difference, makes the experience that much more fun.

We shuffle seats to allow Emelia to take my place next to Adelais. I love my niece, so I quiet the part of me that resents being that much further from Johanna.

*Get it together, man.*

A hand comes down hard on my thigh startling me from my moment of inflection. There was a time when my brothers thought cow bites were the funniest thing in the world. It was everything I could do to finally get them to stop playing the

silly game at the most inappropriate times—nothing like a startled shriek in the middle of church to liven up the service.

I smack Leopold's hand away and give him my signature stern expression.

"C'mon, *Dad*. Lighten up a little. Besides, you were staring," he says with his widest smile.

My brows arch, "What?"

"You heard me. You were staring at Johanna, and I was trying to save you from being caught with an embarrassingly goofy smile on your face."

He looks like the cat that caught the canary, but I can't deny I wouldn't have known what to say if Johanna had found me out. I nod minutely.

"It's okay, you know. We've all been waiting for this for a long time. I know better than anyone how important every moment is with the ones you love, so don't squander it," Leopold says.

"I... Leopold..." I don't know what to address first. This is not an issue of love, and I don't want him comparing my feelings for Johanna to those for his deceased wife. My brother chuckles and stands to clap for a two-out play. I take the hint and allow the conversation to pass.

The girls sing and giggle through the seventh inning stretch. My brothers cheer for their team while Xavier and my sister go back and forth about how certain plays should have been handled. And I watch it all, joining in where I can. This is exactly the kind of joy I've worked so hard to give my family.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Johanna*

**I**t's amazing how much can change in a month. I'm adjusting to my new schedule, my finances are taking an upturn, and Adel is thriving in all her time with my sister. I haven't felt the pressure to go on a single blind date. It would be a lie to say that my best friend's brother hasn't had an effect on me, but that doesn't mean I'm ready to admit that aloud, especially when Winter confronted me about it last Saturday morning.

*"You know I'm okay with it, right?" Winter asked me while we worked at the humane society.*

*I picked up another litter pan. "With what?"*

*Winter giggled, "With you and Magnus. He's a great guy, and you're my best friend. I think you two would be good for one another."*

*The movements that were so rote moments before became frozen. "Winter, there's nothing but friendship between us," I told her.*

*Her shoulders shrugged as she returned to the kennel before her. "Well, in case there ever is, I'm okay with it."*

I shake the memory free from my thoughts as I clean a different kind of pan. Saving lives is never pretty, but in the medical profession, we accept the good with the bad in order to help others.

My patient, Mr. Luther, tripped over a curb today, breaking his right ankle and his left femur. He wasn't happy I wouldn't allow him out of bed to use the restroom, but there wasn't another option with two injured legs. Pride is one of the biggest hurdles we face in the medical field. I know it's hard for patients to understand, but we really have seen it all. It's easier to diagnose and offer aid when the patients trust us instead of trying to explain away their needs or ignore them all together.

After returning the bedpan to Mr. Luther's room, I move back to the floor to check on other patients. The emergency department at Harborview is a mix of private and non-private rooms. Our staff is phenomenal at serving our patients to ensure they receive the best care possible, and we work well together—doctors, nurses, specialists, and orderlies. Even the odd assorted hospital staff, like social workers and volunteers, know where to be and when to be there to make the ER run as smoothly as possible. That's not to say there aren't hiccups. Each severe trauma that comes in has us scrambling, but because we are so well trained, the rush is quickly handled.

“Walk you out tonight?” Magnus calls to me from across the nurses' station. It's become a tradition on the shifts we work together, which is almost always.

He says it makes him feel better to know I'm safe after the incident a few weeks ago, and I have to admit, it makes me feel better too. It was terrifying being surprised in the parking lot like that. I don't know what I would have done if Mag hadn't been there. I still feel bad about the way I sprung the boyfriend thing on him even if it was only an act of self-preservation.

I have a habit of being impulsive, but it's become obvious in my short friendship with Magnus that he's anything but. From everything I've observed, his planning is meticulous in all things. It's interesting to watch his facial cues when something throws him for a loop. Lately, that *something* always seems to be me.

“Thank you Doctor Small,” I say. Only a few of my coworkers have asked me about our relationship, but it's easy

to explain away by saying that he's my best friend's brother. One of the doctors asked me if the responsibilities given to Magnus when I first started was the reason for our friendship, which is also partially true, so I confirmed it without further discussion. I'm not one for gossip or *having a story*. I find it's usually best to give the bare details and allow people to come to their own conclusions.

I'm not sure what the fascination is. Sharing lunches and looking out for one another are things I see other coworkers do. Those are things we did on the labor and delivery floor as well. Maybe I'm being a little paranoid about the number of people who've asked about us.

Somehow, the rest of the shift is fairly uneventful. Magnus doesn't get pulled into any major surgeries, and I am able to hand off my patients to the next nurse coming on without problem.

The summer heat is stifling when we exit the sliding doors of the hospital. I should have expected it after the number of dehydrated patients we saw today, but shutting out everything outside the hospital walls is easy to do.

As we walk to our cars, Magnus asks about Adelais, and I ask after his brothers. It's become our go-to. The people that matter the most to us are the easiest to share about. I can't believe how quickly Magnus has become one of those people for me. A few short weeks ago, I only knew of him as one of Winter's faceless brothers. Now he's one of the people I talk to the most.

He tells me Roland is going to work with Hugo out at The Gorge Amphitheatre again next week, and how happy he is that his brothers are supporting one another. I know he worries about those two.

I joke that Adel likes my sister, Lara, more than me these days. The two are thick as thieves. It doesn't hurt that my sister says yes to everything Adel asks for. Magnus laughs because he's seen firsthand how convincing my daughter can be.



We both slow as we notice a man leaning against my car. Magnus wraps his arm around my waist in a possessive way. I turn to him, and he shoots me a look that says, *'Go with it.'*

The man in the tan duster straightens as we approach, lightly running a hand through his gelled hair. "Amore mio, who is this?" he asks in a venomous tone.

Recognition dawns. "I am not your anything, Alastair. What do you want?" I growl back.

He tilts his head at me as he waits for my answer like he knows I'll give in if he waits long enough. His eyes are stern, and lips pursed on his well-structured face. The man has model qualities with high cheekbones and a defined chin. He even gels his hair in a part with a slight quaff. He can be so vain.

Magnus sticks his hand into the no-man's land between us, "Her fiancé. Nice to meet you."

"No, it's not." I push Magnus's hand down. "It's never nice for anyone to meet him."

"There's no way you're her fiancé," Alastair says, all but ignoring me now. "She knows better than that." The stare-off is intense. I don't know what to do. I don't know what Magnus will do. Finally returning his attention to me, Alastair demands, "Now, let's talk about my baby."

Magnus stiffens beside me.

I mirror his posture, wrapping my arm around his waist. I'm sure he's caught on, but we've never discussed Adel's father. It's not really a story I tell. "We're not doing this Alastair. Step away from my car before we call the cops."

My ex zeros in on our movements. "What is this, Hanna?"

"Don't, Alastair," I bite out. I don't know if I'm angrier about the question or the nickname. I've never liked it.

"Com' on. You know you've always been my girl. Now where is my kid?"

Magnus squeezes me tighter. "What? Do you think I bring a child to work with me?" I snap.

“Isn’t there a daycare in the hospital, so you aren’t leaving it with some strangers while you work?”

*This douchebag doesn’t even know that Adelais is a girl.*

“You should probably leave,” Magnus says. “Johanna doesn’t want you here.”

Alastair turns to face him again. “Says who, old man? You don’t get to tell me what to do with my woman.”

Magnus pulls me behind him. Alastair may be a few inches taller, but he’s a sapling compared to Magnus’s strong build. The first has squandered his life with poor decisions, while the later has honed his body over years of hard work. “She is *not* your woman. She’s mine, and the ‘it’ you keep referencing is mine too. The paperwork is all but signed, so get out of here.” I fist my palm into the back of Magnus’s shirt, but I don’t say a word in contradiction.

The monster before us smirks and crosses his arms. “This isn’t over, Hanna.”

Magnus takes a step forward while pulling his phone from his pocket. I’m not sure if it’s the man or the phone, but Alastair holds up his hands and begins to back away. Before he’s completely gone, he uses two fingers to point at his eyes and then turns them on me.

Only once Magnus has me seated in the passenger seat of my car do I realize I’m shaking.

“Okay Jo,” Magnus says, placing his hand on my thigh. “I’m going to start driving, but I need you to talk to me. I can tell you’re in shock, and I don’t want to have to take you back into the hospital.” He blasts the heat from my air vents to combat my body’s reaction. It’s a welcome warmth against the chill that’s wracking my body thanks to the shock. His hand on my thigh massages blood back into my muscles as he slowly pulls from the lot.

“I swear this has never happened before. Then you show up, and it becomes a monthly occurrence. I promise I don’t normally attract all these lowlifes. You know what, maybe that’s not true. I mean obviously it’s not true. If it were true, I

would have found a good man by now, or maybe Adel's sperm donor wouldn't be a total drain on society. He's as awful as I remember. Maybe worse. What in the world brought him here after all this time? How did he even find me? Oh, no! Did he go to my home? I need to call Lara. What if—"

"Johanna!" Magnus shouts. I have no idea how long he's been saying my name. "I asked you to talk to me, but I didn't realize that would make you spiral further. Call Lara on the Bluetooth. We'll decide what we need to do after we speak to her."

The phone rings four times before Lara answers the phone. I think my blood pressure spikes during the wait because I'm suddenly too hot. Cranking the dial for the A/C, I ask my sister if Adel is okay.

"She's fine. Are you going to be late? What's wrong?" Lara says, alertness creeping into her voice.

"No one has shown up at the apartment?" I demand.

"No, Johanna. We fell asleep on the couch watching Disney movies. You're freaking me out. What's going on?"

My chest deflates and my heart rate slows. "Oh, um. Nothing. It's nothing. I need to take one of my coworkers home first, and then I'll be home. Is that okay?"

She's quiet for a moment before answering, "That's fine, but we're talking about this when you get here."

*Is she admonishing me now?*

"Love you, sis," I say in response.

"Love you too."

The line clicks off as Magnus hits the end button on the console.

We drive the next few minutes in silence. It seems both of us are lost in thought. The terror has not totally left me, but a dose of anger has begun to seep in. Alastair may not have gone to my apartment yet, but what's to say he won't? I talked big back there because of the man beside me. The truth is that I'm terrified of my ex. There is a good reason why he is no longer

a part of our lives. I can't believe he is trying to worm his way back in after all these years.

Magnus breaks the silence first. "Will you and Adelais be alright tonight?" he asks.

I take a moment to think through an answer to stymie another convoluted rant. "I think so. It's Friday. Usually, Adel stays overnight with my parents. Maybe this week I'll stay over too. They always say they love having her, and I think it would help settle me."

"I think that's a good idea," he says.

At the curb in front of Magnus's building we get out to switch seats, and he pulls me into a fierce hug. Our eyes lock when he inches back. The deep green of his eyes shines in the streetlights.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," he says.

"You can't save everyone, Magnus."

"But I can save you."

His mouth slants firmly over mine, devouring me. This time is different. We don't have an audience, and this isn't a show. His arms tighten, pulling me flush again as his fingers trace up my spine and into my hair. I don't push him away, don't stop what's happening. Instead, I hold on just as tightly, testing the pressure of his lips against mine and feeling the scratch of his beard on my skin. The first bead of sweat rolls down my back as heat surrounds me. I'm suddenly itching to explore him more.

Our foreheads meet as we try to calm our ragged breathing. My lashes lift slowly to find his still lowered while he breathes me in.

"Promise me you'll be careful," he whispers.

"Promise."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Magnus*

*She's going to think I only want to kiss her when she's had a run-in with other men.*

That's not it. Not it at all. I've been trying so hard to stay away from her. She doesn't need someone like me in her life.

Someone who works crazy hours. I pick up every extra shift I can safely take on top of my already grueling schedule. My patients are my first priority.

My socked feet softly pad across my apartment as I pace. Even my bass has failed to soothe me lately. Stillness feels unnatural with the way my nervous system is sending continual bolts of electricity through my veins. The fight response has yet to simmer.

I know I'm difficult to get along with day in and day out. My routines are important to me, and my family has complained more than once about how Type A I am. I don't see a problem with being clean and tidy, but I can understand how someone who doesn't feel the same way would find it frustrating.

Winter and my brothers have told me for ten years that I'm too overprotective, that I don't need to be the dad they lost. I'm not trying to replace our father; I never could. It's just that my skin crawls and my heart stutters whenever I think about something happening to someone I love. I have to do everything I can to prevent it, and if that means being overly organized and cautious, then so be it.

That anxiety is another reason I can't allow myself to love anyone else. It's the reason I loathe bringing new members

into our family. I see loss all the time at work, but I'm not sure I could survive any more loss at home.

My fist slams into the granite countertop of my island.

I'm too old for Johanna. She needs someone she won't have to watch wither away and die before her time. Someone younger would be able to keep up with her and her daughter. She may even want more kids, and I'm already thirty-eight years old. Even if I knocked her up tomorrow, I'd be almost forty by the time a baby was born, and almost sixty by the time the kid went to college.

No. We are not a good match. Friends, that's all we should ever be. I can look out for her for Winter's sake. I can be kind because I'm a decent human being. We can never be anything more, and I *have* to stop kissing her.

But I can't seem to stay away.

My footsteps become harder as my pacing turns to stomping. I can't explain it, but she sets me ablaze. This is infatuation. It's lust. I know what I would do in this situation if it were anyone else, but it's not. Johanna is Winter's best friend and Adelais's mother. She's a coworker and a friend. This isn't a circumstance of cleansing the system. Our lives are too embroiled.

I spent most of the night following the encounter with Johanna's ex behind my bass, trying to put my feelings into notes. The tremble of her body and break in her voice when she asked her sister if Adelais was okay ran on repeat through my head as I came up with any number of scenarios in which either Mendel girl was hurt. Music didn't help then, and it's not filling my needs now either as I stop in my living room, staring down the instrument.

We've never talked about it, but my brain sure loves to guess what her ex did to put such fear in her. I don't know what I would do if something happened to either of my girls, so if this guy is back in the picture, I'll have to be even more cautious. Walking her out in the evening won't cut it anymore. I have to keep her safe ... for my sister's sake.

Pacing my apartment isn't working. My mind is just as wound up as it was twenty minutes, an hour, a day ago. Grabbing my keys from the bowl by the front door I remember that Winter bought it for me from one of the artisans at Pike Place Market. That sounds like the perfect place to get lost in the hustle and bustle of the city.

The streets are packed with locals and tourists alike. It's always enlightening to see the ingenuity of Seattle. It's early enough in the day that the stalls are still full of colorful bouquets and unique treasures. There are restaurants and more permanent store fronts as well as the vendors that set up and take down their wares every day. There's really something for everyone.

"Excuse me. How much for the bag?" I ask the shopkeeper. This family has been selling handmade bags and purses on the lower level for decades. It's one of Winter's favorite places to find something to fit her boho style.

"Twenty-five dollars," says the wizened shopkeeper.

That's doable. I just want to pick the right one. "Do you think my twenty-four-year-old sister will like this pattern?" The satchel is made of one continuous loop of blue fabric with bright flowers bursting with color. It has a pocket in the strap for her phone, and several more zippered pockets inside that will keep the bag from becoming too much of a dumping ground for all of Winter's stuff. It should fit nicely across her chest, so I no longer have to worry she'll have her bag ripped off her arm or things stolen from the book bag on her back.

"It's popular, sir. If she enjoys flowers and colors, she will like this pattern."

Nodding, I dig my card from my wallet to pay for the bag.

"One for your wife too? The bags are two for forty-five," the shopkeeper says. He's had this location for decades for a reason. I'm on the edge of proclaiming my single status when Johanna's face floats across my mind's eye. He sees my hesitation and goes in for the kill. "It doesn't have to be the same bag. Any bag you think she might like; I will give you the same discount."

I could just get two bags for Winter, she always liked to have options when she lived at home. It wouldn't be a problem to get one for Johanna. She'd like the one with elephants on it. I know she loves animals. They even have different style bags in the same fabric. Johanna and Adelais could have matching bags. That would be adorable.

*What in the world! I do not need to buy purses for all these women, and I do not need to buy more to save less.*

“Just the one. Thanks,” I tell the man.

“Do you want a shopping bag to put it in? It's eight cents extra.”

The county started requiring stores to charge extra for bags a few years ago to try to deter people from dumping more plastic in the landfills. They replaced the cheap, easily torn plastic with thicker stuff that can be reused. I'm not convinced yet if they are really keeping more plastic out or just charging citizens to put thicker plastic into the ground. I'd like to see a study on how well the initiative is working.

It's not really necessary to have a bag to carry a bag, even if it means I'll be carrying around a purse, so I decline the offer. The fabric of the purse will make it easy to roll up and tuck under my arm. The man runs my card before handing over Winter's present and my receipt.

My stomach twangs, and I know the next stop has to be lunch. Ascending the ramp, I make my way through the crowds of the main level and cross the brick lane that passes for a street to Piroshky Piroshky. The little Russian shop has over twenty varieties of handmade piroshki—both sweet and savory.

As I shuffle through the lengthy line, I have the opportunity to people-watch. There is a group of young men joking with one another that reminds me of times spent with my brothers in our younger days. A couple walks hand-in-hand carrying fresh flowers. A mother and father remind two little girls to stick together, hold hands, and watch for cars as they traverse the street. I can imagine reminding Adelais of the same things.



*Adelais? Why can't I get those two out of my mind? Why not Emelia?*

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I focus on what remains on offer in the case just inside the bakery. The Smoked Salmon Pate looks delightful with its flaky crust and artful design. The dough is pinched at the top and one end to create the look of fins.

“Good choice; wild salmon, cream cheese, dill, and onion. Anything else?” the girl behind the counter asks after I place my order.

That’s always the question. I peruse the choices once more. “I suppose I am doing a bit of extra exercise today. How about a Moscow Roll?”

“That’s one of my favorites! It’s cream of wheat blended with Bavarian cream filling in a vanilla bread,” the worker tells me. The dessert reminds me a little bit of an Italian Cannoli.

This is why Pike Place thrives. It’s impossible to visit without picking up something, or maybe several somethings. I should have known better when I decided to take this adventure into shopping central.

It’s not as though my bottom line will suffer from one morning of shopping. My finances are strictly budgeted. I’ve been saving, investing, and planning for as long as I’ve had money coming in. I may not be doing as well as Xavier, or now Winter, but not many people are.

We were all incredibly lucky when Mom and Dad died. Not that they died of course, but because they left us, their life insurance, and the settlement from the accident allowed us each a tidy sum to start our lives with. Killian, Sebastian, Leo, and I were already through school, and used some of the money to pay off our student loans. Theodore had already decided to remain at the mine and used his share to reinvest in the business. Hugo and Roland are the wild cards. No matter how many times I ask them how their finances are, they both refuse to tell me, stating that it’s none of my business.

Those of us who were legal adults when our parents passed had access to the funds immediately. Roland had to wait two years until his eighteenth birthday to pull anything from his trusts, which was for the best. I did what I could to coach and guide my siblings, but I couldn't make all their choices for them.

The same group of boys I saw earlier walks past the park bench where I've chosen to eat my meal. Once again, they remind me how far we've all come. My brothers and sister are doing well. There have been, and still are, bumps in the road for each of us, but we're each successful in our own right. Well, Roland is still a tossup, but I firmly believe that's by choice. As soon as he decides he's done playing around, he will be an instant success.

The sun has passed its zenith by the time I stop to listen to a busker playing a piano. I can't imagine how he got the upright out here. The hills in Seattle can rival San Francisco. Even on wheels, a piano is no easy thing to push around.

When he stops for a drink, I seize the chance. "How long have you been playing?" I ask as I drop a five into the old coffee can on the lid.

The man is not particularly well put together. His clothes could use a wash, his hair a trim, and when he smiles at me, I see he's missing a few teeth. His life has not been easy. "All my life. One of Ma's requirements, and I'm grateful for it every day," he says before crossing himself.

"Ah. My mother had the same requirement. I play the upright bass myself. Do you get to play with others?"

His smile is megawatt. I wonder how often people strike up conversations with him. His music is enticing but looks can be deterring.

The man takes a moment to scratch at his scalp through his scraggly hair. "Sometimes someone's got a guitar down at the shelter."

"Is that where the piano comes from?" I ask. When he nods, I go one step further. "Which shelter? Maybe I can come

down to play with you sometime.

He tucks his chin to his chest, and I hope I haven't embarrassed him. "Bridge Shelter on third."

"You push that piano three blocks?" I ask, shocked.

He looks up at a short woman with deep chocolate skin leaning against the brick wall a few feet down the street. "Ms. Selma helps me when she's got the extra time. This is the best place for tips, and I always split what I make with the shelter for letting me use their instrument."

That's a lot of sacrifice for both of them, and a lot of trust on the part of Selma and the shelter. There are so many preconceived notions about the homeless. Many of the volunteers I've met at the hospital over the years have opinions they have no problem sharing about the homeless patients we see in the ER. Not all stereotypes are true.

"Will you be there Saturday, sir?" I ask the man, making an impulsive decision. I tend to pick up extra shifts on Saturday, but I think this weekend, I'll spend my time differently.

"I ain't no 'sir.' The name's Marvin."

"Well Marvin, I'm Magnus, and if you're going to be there Saturday, perhaps I'll come by, and we can jam a little bit. Would that be alright?"

His head tilts trying to take me in. I'm fully aware of how unusual this interaction is. "Not sure what the rules are about that Magnus. You could ask Ms. Selma though."

Giving Marvin a warm smile, I fish another twenty from my wallet. "I'll do that, Marvin. See you Saturday."

I haven't taken two steps when Marvin begins his next song, and after a short conversation with Selma about the paperwork I need to complete to volunteer at the shelter this weekend, I head back toward my apartment with a skip in my step.

Johanna is going to love to hear that I'm volunteering like she does at the animal shelter.

*Winter! Dang it! I meant Winter will love to hear about  
this tonight at Sunday Dinner.*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Johanna*

Saturday mornings are my absolute favorite. I spend the time with my best friend cuddling fur babies in need of love. My daughter is my entire world, but the chance to just be me is refreshing. Adel is safe and having fun with her grandparents, while I revisit the woman I've always been but don't always get to be.

You would think scrubs are the comfiest things ever, but when you wear them day in and day out and see them covered in all kinds of bodily fluids, it's nice to wear something different. Today, I have on my favorite jeans and a simple white v-neck t-shirt. It's heaven.

Winter is humming Taylor Swift songs today. Sometimes she gets stuck on a song or a theme. At the moment, "Love Story" is her song of choice. Not that she is less than bubbly very often, but she has been radiant since she and Xavier worked out their mess.

"How's Romeo, Juliet?" I mock her.

The telltale blush that Winter is prone to creeps up her cheeks with a smile that matches her blatant emotions. "He's wonderful, thank you. You two need to come over again soon. I think I'm really close to wearing him down on getting a pet. I bet Adel could talk him into it." She eyes the long fluffy tail of a white ragdoll kitten in its cage as we pass through the cats on our way to walk the dogs.

That has laughter bursting out of me. My friend doesn't just love animals, she's like the animal whisperer. I don't know how she does it, but even our most distrustful strays purr for her. "Maybe you just need to bring him here. You know

how hard it is to walk out of this place empty handed. You'll get some adorable mutt to curl up with him, and your job will be done for you."

"Ooo that is a good idea. Why didn't I think of that?" Her excitement jumps to a whole new level with the prospect of a plan. "Who should I have him meet? How many do you think I can get him to love? Cat or dog first? I bet—"

"Woah. Woah, girl! Slow your roll." I throw my hands up in a gentling gesture. "You have to let him make some of those choices or it won't work. You can't trick him into anything, even coming here. The best thing to do is ask him if he wants to see what you do every Saturday and let it flow from there."

Winter's megawatt smile softens. "How'd you get so smart, best friend?"

"Easy. He's a man, and I have a five-year-old. Same thing."

It takes a solid five minutes for the two of us to stop laughing every time our gazes meet. I'm pretty sure it's a known fact that no one can wind you up like your best friend. The silliest thing can leave two gal pals in stitches for days.

Sometimes the funniest things came from harsh truths. Adalais is a trip. Her singular focus is commendable. I read somewhere once that a kid will keep trying up to twenty-seven times. All it takes is one yes to screw up the boundaries you've set. The random chance of reward is all they need to keep pushing. She's conniving, smart, and oh-so-tricky. It takes thinking outside of the box to be her mom.

Those are the same skills required to deal with men.

They're sneaky, conniving, and have a singular focus. It's not even a secret. Everyone knows what that is, and once they get what they want, they're out. Heaven forbid you throw them a curve ball because the world might fall apart.

Opening a kennel door, I place a small leash around the too-thin neck of a puppy. It's too soon to tell what he's a mix of. Unfortunately, unknown mixes are always labeled as pit mixes. I think that only limits the number of people willing to

adopt them. It's not always a personal preference. There have been several families that fell in love with pit mixes but were unable to adopt them due to the breed bans in their living space.

Playing with the animals at the shelter usually soothes any intense emotions I'm fighting, but my blood pressure still rises every time I think about my reaction the other night. Of course, I was scared. There is so much ugly history between Alastair and me. In fact, really horrible history, but I've dreamed so many times of giving back as good as I always got from him. Some of my own thoughts over the years have been downright dark and violent. The anger worries me, and I'm sure I should have talked to someone about it a long time ago. There are days I feel power in holding back what could be an incredible vengeance, but there would be ramifications for me and for Adelais if I went that route. And so, I rein it in, burying that part of me deep within.

Alastair screwed up my perspective on men, but when I really think about it, I've only known one decent man in my life—my father. I honestly believe it's because my mother flipped the switch on him early. She has him so wrapped up; he wouldn't know what to do without her. That's the only way to survive a relationship, and I'm afraid at this point I'd have to rob the cradle to pull a move like that.

Winter knows how I feel about men, but she doesn't know my whole story. No one does. I don't want to put a damper on the good thing she has going right now, but it'd be a lie to say I wasn't worried about her. She and Xavier have already had a falling out once, and even though there were extenuating circumstances, I don't want to see her hurt again. All I can do is be there to support her when ... if ... it happens.

Kneeling down, I pat the puppy's little head. "If, Johanna, if ... Don't put your issues on her," I tell my furry therapist.

That's why I know love's not for me. Adelais and I have a good thing going. I have friends. I have my family. Those things are all we could ever need. It's been six years since I had anything more intimate, and I'm doing just fine. And, yeah, I know I'm jaded by the events of my life, but I can't

find a solid reason to jeopardize this happiness. Adelais and I will be just fine the way we are.

“Hey, where’d you go?” Winter asks, catching up to me after scooping one of her pup’s little presents. These cuties will be adopted as soon as they’re spayed and neutered.

*Shoot!*

I always try to keep my mind from wandering, but it can be a bad habit. “Sorry. I’m meeting my family and Adel at the Seattle Center after this for a concert in the park. I was just making a list of everything I need to take,” I lie quickly. We really are going to a concert, but I packed everything last night after I dropped my daughter off with my parents. It’s always best to plan ahead when kids are involved.

“That sounds fun. Xavier and I have been talking about more things we can do to get out and about in the city,” Winter says.

I nod and bend to pick up my puppy’s little mess with a bag. “Mom found this one. She said that Adelais will like it, which means the rest of us might go nuts.”

A groan escapes me as Winter starts singing the lyrics to “Run Baby Run” by Caspar Babypants.

“Exactly!” I say.

“You’re such a good mom,” Winter says, linking her arm through mine, careful of the leashes we still hold. “So, how’s work? How’s the new job? Is Mag treating you well?”

We return the two pups to their kennel, so I use the excuse of putting a leash on another to think about how to answer her. This is a different approach than her straightforward statement last week. I can’t very well tell my best friend I use her brother to scare away men and kiss him from time to time.

“Work’s good. I think I’m finding my groove. The money is good, and I’m learning so much. There is never a dull moment in the emergency department. Oh, and I’ve still been able to help deliver a few babies, so that’s fun.”



“I’m so glad. It seems like everything is heading in the right direction again. Don’t think I didn’t notice you skipped right over the question about my brother though ... or the fact that you haven’t been on another date in weeks.”

“Hate to burst your bubble, Winter, but I decided it was all worthless. Too many awful dates with no return. I don’t need a man, and neither does Adelais. She has my family, and I’m not sure why I got a wild hair to start dating in the first place. Magnus is your brother and my coworker, nothing more. Don’t try to make more out of our friendship.” I try to keep the snap from my tone.

Her slender shoulders shrug nonplussed. “I’ll be here when you’re ready to talk about it.” Then she takes off on her next walk with her new charge.

I don’t want to talk about it, and it’s not worth trying to convince her. It’s clear she has her mind made up no matter what I tell her. This feels weird. Winter and I have never had this kind of tension, and I don’t like it.

“How about we grab dinner next week?” I ask when I catch up to Winter on the sidewalk that circles the yard behind the building. The yard is nothing fancy, but it’s a great space for potential new families to get to know their dogs. “Just you and me.”

The notes of “Shake It Off” seep from Winter’s lips as she sashays her hips to the upbeat tune. “That sounds wonderful. Spinasse restaurant on Wednesday? I’ve been craving their Risotto All’Anatra.”

“Oh man, that sounds amazing. I’ll double check with Lara to make sure she can stay late with Adelais,” I respond.

That seemed to break the tension, and the rest of our volunteer shift goes by in laughs and giggles like always. Thank goodness I have a friend like Winter to turn even my darkest moments into bright spots.

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Adel is hopped up on sugar by the time I meet my family at the park. What my sister and parents did with her for the last twenty-four hours is evident and now we're all paying for it in the form of crazy kid energy. Adelais has always been an energizer bunny. I've heard more than once how people would like to bottle it for themselves.

Setting down the bags of stuff I brought with me, I take my daughter's hand and offer to grab dinner from inside while the blankets are laid out and beach chairs set up.

"I'll go with you, Jo. You'll need help carrying food and drinks for five." Dad says from where he stands, legs spread, and arms crossed. The stance might be considered menacing if I didn't know he was a giant teddy bear.

"Thanks Dad. I'd love that." I give him a warm smile.

"Yay!" Adelais jumps and runs in circles around us. "My belly's gwallin, Momma."

I shoot my dad a wide-eyed look. "Has she eaten anything but sugar today?"

He purses his lips at me. "You know she has, but you also know how your mother and sister indulge her. She bats those pretty green eyes and we're all toast."

Laughter burst from my lips. He is right and we all know it. Adelais Mendel has every single one of us wrapped around her adorable little fingers. There are times being a mom is hard. Caring for a tiny gremlin with a death wish takes every ounce of my energy, but I wouldn't trade it for anything.

"You haven't told us about any of your dates lately," Dad says in the most leading statement ever.

I let the silence hang between us for a moment, watching Adel skip and dance to the music. "There's nothing to tell." My father's expression of joy turns sallow. "Don't give me that look. Winter grilled me earlier today. It's just not in the cards for me."

A deep sigh escapes his chest. "You have no idea how much that pains me, Jo. I think you're starting to understand as Adelais grows older, but I can tell you still don't get it. I don't

know what happened between you and that boy,” now it’s my turn for my face to turn sour, “but he was a bad egg. The only good thing he ever did was give us Adel. I always knew he wasn’t the one for you. Honey, that doesn’t mean you’ll never find the one, though.” I start to interject, but he slashes a hand through the air, silencing me. “I know you think I don’t understand. You think Mom and I are a one off, and we are ... in a way. We’re unique because we work really hard to make the two of us work. What she and I have would never work with anyone else. That’s the crux of it—she’s the perfect woman for me. It’s an experience I don’t want you to miss.”

“Daddy, I—”

“Please don’t give up on love, Johanna.”

Stopping to look into my father’s shifting hazel eyes, I nod in silent affirmation. He is a believer in love, a believer in fairy tales. It isn’t my job to dash those beliefs for him, but I’ll consider his words. There’s no way they won’t come to me in moments of silence while I’m trying to sleep at night.

Over the years, I have watched my parents’ marriage. I have seen the love they have for one another, but it always seemed to me that’s what people saw in the relationship I had with Alistair too. You just never know what really goes on behind closed doors.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *Magnus*

The weekend heat wave didn't prepare me for a cloudy Monday morning, but the sky has nothing on my mood. Living in the Pacific Northwest means you can't let the weather affect you or you spiral quickly, especially in the fall. Seasonal Affective Disorder is one of the biggest factors in our rise in mental breakdowns once the ten months of darkness hit.

I might be a little dramatic about that but not by much. SAD is nothing to mess around with, nor is any other mental illness. I have seen the terrible results of way too many panic attacks, manic phases, and bouts of depression. Our three cloudy seasons can amplify any and all of those emotional hardships.

But I couldn't be flying higher this morning. This weekend was amazing, and not just because of Sunday dinner with my family, though that's always a spirit lifter for me. No, the best part was the hours I spent at the shelter with Marvin.

Turns out there are lots of individuals and families passing through there on their way to finding safe and reliable housing—people with difficult back stories. Watching them find the joy in life was what I needed in my moment of self-pity. They danced, sang, or even brought out their own instruments when they heard Marvin and I playing. It was heartwarming.

There was a preteen boy there with his mom who was obviously running based on the visible bruises on her face. After I offered basic medical attention, the boy asked if he could play my bass. We spent the better part of a half hour talking about the parts of the instrument, finger holds, and

notes. By the end of the day, I had worked out a schedule with the staff to volunteer in a more official capacity.

Now I'm back to the grind of the emergency department. Already this morning I've had a broken arm, arrhythmia, severe dehydration with sun poisoning, and a pneumonia case. It's not glamorous by any means, but every time I'm able to take away a person's suffering and provide them answers is a win.

"Doctor Small. How was your weekend?" the Chief calls out to me as I round the corner by his office. "It's been a long time since you've skipped an extra Saturday shift."

For the first time, guilt plagues me. I know how crazy the ER gets on the weekends, that's why I try to be an extra set of hands every chance I get. "Actually, sir, that's something I wanted to talk to you about." Best not to beat around the bush. "I was volunteering at the Bridge shelter, and I think it's something I'll be doing more regularly."

The Chief stands to round his desk before clapping me on the shoulder "It's about time you found something worth doing outside of this hospital Magnus. I've watched you grow up and grow hard here."

"Sir?" He's never spoken to me like this before.

"It's not my job to be your counselor, so I've left you to it. However, I've been doing this job a long time. I know a lonely soul when I see one. You have to find something to live for Magnus, and it can't be your work. Don't for a second make the mistake of thinking this hospital will fall apart without you," he finishes with a wry smile before strolling passed me out his office door.

My phone pings from my hip, so I take a second to read through the latest emails. Our hospital pagers were upgraded several years ago to be more versatile. I try to only look at it for pages and emergency notifications, but I have a down moment now that will allow me to minimize some of this inbox. Staffing changes, upcoming scheduled maintenance, event reminders, a call to donate from the blood bank,

pharmacy reminders, and one more the chief must have just sent out before leaving his office.

Our yearly hospital incident class and test scores are due by the end of the week. There are so many codes, procedures, protocols, and emergency policies that the administration has to make sure the staff is fluent in all of it. I've been at Harborview long enough that it's second nature, but all personnel are required to log into the Online course and show a passing test score every year. New staff usually end up taking it twice their first year depending on when they are hired. Having a log of staff participation is the best way for the hospital to cover its butt if something goes wrong.

"Magnus! Uh, Doctor Small." Johanna's voice breaks my concentration on my email.

"Hey Johanna. I was just reading through some emails. I need to do that class," I tell her.

"Oh yeah, that thing's the worst," she says, leaning her head back to look up at the ceiling.

"You've done it before, right? Do you need any help?"

Her eyes meet mine as she straightens her shoulders. "I don't need your help Magnus, but perhaps you need mine." She winks.

*Is she flirting with me?*

"Hey now. I'm perfectly proficient with my hospital incident commands," I say with mock indignation, "but I'd be happy to sit through the videos with you later if you'd rather do it together."

"Now you're talkin'. End of shift?"

"Sure. Let's meet in the staff lounge at seven-thirty."

She shoots me another wink before striding off to her next patient.

Our emergency department is large with lots of staff always bustling about, but I do cross paths with Johanna often. She may still be learning but it's at lightning speed. She's an amazing nurse. She is caring and efficient. Her patients receive

optimal care with excellent bedside manner. Johanna is easy to work with too.

I've worked with lots of nurses over the years. Some can't empathize with patients, and others empathize too much. Most of them are like my right hand. I depend on them to know things about patients that I don't. Every once in a while, a nurse comes along that isn't suited to the job, whether that's working in the highly demanding ER or nursing in general.

We're on the front lines every day. The trauma is real and intense, and the number of cases of secondary trauma and PTSD for emergency staff is high. This job isn't for everyone, and it usually becomes obvious quickly who can make the cut.

Johanna could be great anywhere. I know she loved her time in labor and delivery, but I could just as easily see her in pediatrics, intensive care, or anywhere else she set her mind to. She's a hard worker who doesn't back down in the face of adversity.

I admire her.

"Sir, you need to calm down or you need to leave," an elevated voice floats down the hall from the lobby area.

"I'm calling security!" comes another voice.

The shouting coming from the check-in desk gets louder. The staff normally seated behind the L-shaped counter are blocking the hallways that lead to patient rooms.

"As soon as I talk to Johanna Mendel I'll leave. I know she works here. We need to talk about our child, and I need to talk to her right now!"

I know that voice, and it only takes a few more steps into the lobby to confirm my suspicions. Alastair is back, and he's causing a scene in the middle of the emergency department. I'm sure Johanna is with a patient right now, which makes this so much worse. She will hate having this sort of attention.

"Excuse me." I step into the fray. "Alastair, this isn't the place for this. You can't come into her work behaving this way. If you want to talk this out, we can set up something privately."

“Oh great. The fiancé is here,” Alastair says, throwing his hands in the air. His bold movements are flagrant. “Here to defend *your* woman. I got news for you, man. She’s a tricky wench who will ruin you. Run, man. Run.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” I turn to one of the nurses still blocking the hall to the staff lounge. “Sandy, I believe I saw a state trooper in the back waiting on a blood draw. Could you ask him to join us please while Michael calls security?” I turn to Michael, giving him the direct order. That’s something we do in the ER, look coworkers in the eye to give directives. It ensures everyone has a task, and the things that need to get done actually happen. “You.” I turn back to Alastair. “You will not come back here if you are going to be belligerent. You need to leave the premises. Now!”

He scoffs, waving me off. “You don’t tell me how to handle my girl. You may think you claim her, but she and that kid are mine. No one else needs to get involved in my business, which is the only reason I’m leaving. You just tell her I’m still around.” Alastair backs toward the exit doors repeating the *I’m watching you* gesture from the other day.

This guy is trouble, with a capital T.

That’s when I see her. The horrified face of Johanna Mendel watches the drama unfold from down the hall. When her eyes meet mine, she straightens her shoulders, lifts her chin, and turns away.

She doesn’t want to talk about this right now, and I won’t force her. We already planned to meet up at the end of our shift, so that’s when she’ll have to talk to me. She—*we*— can’t go on like this because if there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s that I’m firmly entrenched in this too.

I notice a few odd looks in the last hours of my shift. A few smiles and back slaps here and there that I can’t interpret. Even the odd scowl from a couple of the female staff. I’m not sure what I’ve done to garner these responses.

“They think we’re actually engaged,” Johanna says when I enter the staff lounge, right on time.



That stops me in my tracks. “What?”

“Alastair called you my fiancé while he was yelling about me and Adel. Our coworkers think we’re engaged.” She paces from the coffee maker to the fridge.

I cross the room to her, laying my hands on her shoulders to stop her movement. “Deep breath. It’s not a big deal. Alastair was clearly off his rocker today. No one will take him seriously.” She’s shaking her head up, down, side to side. She’s struggling to accept what happened today. “Let’s just talk this out.”

“He won’t leave me alone, Magnus. I’ve seen that look in his eyes before. He’s not going to stop coming after Adel and me,” she says rapid-fire.

I pull her into my arms telling myself it’s purely medicinal. Panic attacks are caused by an increase in adrenaline which causes a person’s breathing, heart rate, and blood sugar to spike. Pressure, like a weighted blanket, can suppress the response, so I have to hold her. It’s the only way to calm her down.

“I will keep you and Adelais safe. I promise. Whatever it takes.” I stroke her hair as she leans her head against my shoulder, still shaking. “Even if we have to pretend we’re engaged or some other crazy thing, I won’t let anything happen to either of you.”

She pushes back from me. “That is one lie we are not telling. You think we could do that to Winter? Confuse Adel? Don’t be ridiculous.”

I sit in the black leather chair and run my hands through my hair and over my beard. “Sorry. I got carried away,” I say through my fingers. “Of course, you’re right, but if what you just said is true, we might need to get a protection order against that guy. He doesn’t seem stable.”

“He’s not,” she says in a matter-of-fact tone. “Adel and I will move home.” She’s pacing again.

“Johanna, will you please sit down. It’s clear I’m missing part of this story. The guy has done a lot more than yell and

make demands, hasn't he? Please talk to me."

She stops to look at me. Her eyes are shining, and a few strands of her blond hair have come loose from the braid over her shoulder giving her a wild look. It's fear I see in her expression, but there's a little bit of fire there too.

Call me Florence Nightingale or maybe just a sucker, but I can't let her live this fear alone. "Let's go back to my place and talk. You shouldn't be alone, and I don't think Adalais should see you like this either."

"I think you're right," she says in a defeated tone.

We leave the hospital parking lot together for the third time, but this time, we're in my car.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Johanna*

**A**s much as I agree with Magnus about Adel not seeing me in this state, I can't stand to leave her and my sister alone at my apartment right now. I don't want her to ever feel unsafe in her own home, so I'll do what every good mom does, suck it up and hide emotions from her kid... at least for a little while.

It's a quick stop to relieve my sister of her duties. Magnus isn't letting me off this time, no matter how much I ask to curl up in bed and forget about everything that's happened today. In under five minutes I have Adelais changed into her favorite Ariel pajamas and loaded in Magnus's car for a movie night at his place. She can't wait to watch a show on a big screen.

The drive from my place in Miller Park to his in Belltown is just over two miles, but the traffic makes the drive take a solid twenty minutes. Our time is filled by the sweet sounds of Adel's out of tune singing and a slew of random questions.

"Auntie says she can run faster than you, Momma, and she wins every race. Why you so slow?" Adelais rattles off from the back seat.

"Well, that's not exact—"

"You can dance prettier than her. You have Elsa hair, Momma. *Let it go. Let it go. I never comin back ever again.*"

Magnus side-eyes me as he navigates the one-way roads and bus lanes around us. "Does she stop when she's sleeping?" he whispers.

An emphatic chuckle leaves me. "Not even then." My girl talks, rolls, and does all kinds of fun things in her sleep.

“I didn’t even make any friends today. Auntie did not take me to the park.”

I smile despite my mood. “I’ll take you on my next day off, baby.”

“I’m not a baby. I’m Adel. Maybe that boy will be there. That boy is my friend,” she says before plowing into her next Disney hit.

Magnus parks in the underground garage at his building before helping Adelais exit her booster seat. The elevator we enter is shiny in chrome and black. This building is well taken care of. He doesn’t press the button for the top floor, but we’re not far from it. I can already tell the inside of his place will be intimidating.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to let a little kid into your space? I can’t promise she won’t break stuff,” I tell him as something from *Encanto* pours from my daughter.

“You forget I have a niece. It will be fine,” he assures me. “Let’s get her set up with some popcorn and juice on the couch, and I’ll put on *Little Mermaid*.”

I give him a wide-eyed look. “You actually own *Little Mermaid*?”

“Niece. Disney+.”

It takes everything I have to keep the corner of my lips from rolling up. “Fair.”

Miraculously, Magnus is as efficient at setting up movie night as I was at getting Adelais out of the apartment. Even more unlikely, my daughter doesn’t fight either of us on any of the finer points, stating she can’t wait to watch her favorite princess at the doctor’s movie theater. Poor girl is used to the small TV we have at home; it’s a rare treat to watch a show on a larger screen. We don’t do a lot of regular screen time at home or at my parent’s place either.

“Come on,” Magnus says, jutting his chin toward the kitchen on the other side of the open plan great room. He goes straight to the cabinets to pull out two wine glasses, and then grabs a chilled bottle of white from the fridge. When he holds

out the glass for me to take, his eyes hold mine, and he doesn't let go until he says, "We're still having this conversation, Johanna."

On instinct I squared my shoulders before sagging again. "I know, but you have to understand that I've never told this story to anyone before. This is a big leap of faith for me."

"No one?" he asks. I shake my head. "Your family? Winter?" I shake my head some more. "Thank you for having this faith in me. I promise you can trust me," he says.

I let out a deep breath before taking a fortifying sip from the glass in front of me. It isn't so much that I think alcohol will help me, I'm just stalling in every way that I can. A long time ago, I promised myself I'd never place this burden on anyone.

The mossy eyes staring at me are soft with promises to cushion the fall that is sure to come. "I met Alastair my junior year of college in an elective course. Neither of us had any particular interest in Construction 101, but it hit two out of the three required humanities for graduation. We bonded quickly over studying for something that bored us." I spin the stem of my wine glass without taking another sip. "It was a whirlwind, and we were quickly inseparable. I didn't recognize the red flags. I'd never been in a relationship like that one. We spent as much time together as we could. He was fun and lively. Our relationship was exciting. I didn't realize my time with my friends and family had dwindled, and I defended him when my family questioned our romance. When I told him I was pregnant," I pause to breathe in my beautiful daughter sitting on the plush couch, oblivious to my turmoil, "he was so angry, like it was my fault. He went on and on about how I was trapping him, and stealing his life, and then he said he forgave me. Alastair wanted to move forward together even though I'd betrayed him."

"Johanna...."

"Let me finish while I still have the nerve, Magnus," I stop him before he can say the words I know will leave me in tears, no matter what they are. "When my lease was up, we moved

in together. It had only been a few months in the grand scheme of things. My parents were adamantly opposed, even if I was carrying the man's baby. They wanted me to move home. The distance between us grew even more. I didn't understand why they wouldn't support my new family."

I don't see the room before me any longer. There's no Magnus, no Adalais, and no *Little Mermaid*. Only my memories fill my vision.

"At least once a week Alastair would find something to be angry about. Unnaturally angry. The house was messy, the bed wasn't made, or there wasn't any food in the fridge. Each time he railed about how I must not love him or how I was trying to hurt him, but he always forgave me so that we'd make up. At the time, I didn't see it for the gaslighting I now know it was. I'm not sure I ever would have recognized it if it weren't for his anger over an evening I spent with a colleague studying for a biology exam in my fifth month. He accused me of cheating on him. Alastair questioned if the baby was even his."

Magnus's warm touch on my forearm pulls me from my fog. I wasn't aware I had been rubbing it. When I find his encouraging sad smile, I go on.

"He grabbed my arm and shoved me down. I like to assume he was aiming for the couch, but that's not where I landed. There was this cheap old glass coffee table we picked up on one of those garage sale apps. It shattered beneath me when I fell. There were lacerations and bruises everywhere I had exposed skin, and even some where it wasn't. My hands were a bloody mess from where I'd tried to catch myself. I will never forget his huff of a laugh before he told me he hoped I lost the brat, kicked at my scraped legs still lying in the shards of glass, and stormed out of our apartment. He didn't help me up, he didn't take care of me, and he definitely didn't apologize. It was the first time I saw him for what he was."

I drop my chin to my chest, still ashamed of the mess I allowed my younger self to get into, if it weren't for Magnus's warm hands rubbing the chill from my bones I might even throw up.

“There was no way I could tell my family. I couldn’t tell my friends. They had all been warning me about the kind of man Alastair was, and I was too embarrassed to tell anyone they’d been right while I was so very wrong. Above all, I was terrified for my baby. I didn’t care that she was half his DNA, she was mine too. I showed up to the very ER I now work in, bloody and alone.”

Still silent, Magnus pulls me from my barstool at the kitchen island into his lap to rest my head on his shoulder. I don’t protest the comfort as our drinks are forgotten and “Poor Unfortunate Souls” blares from the surround sound behind us. It is grossly poetic.

“The doctors did an ultrasound and stitched up a few of my cuts. They even did a CT and x-rays to clear me of a concussion and broken bones. Of course, a social worker came in to talk to me. I insisted I tripped. It was my own fault. No one could know how I’d let myself be manipulated by my baby’s father.”

The silence between us is deafening. I never thought I’d tell a soul about what really happened between Alastair and me. I told everyone it was a bad breakup. My determination to raise my baby was all I needed.

“I finished the semester but dropped out of the RN program in favor of the shorter LPN courses. I was basically done with the requirements, and the certificate would allow me to start working immediately. My number one priority was to care for the new life I was responsible for. I refused to accept the offers of help from my family. Adel was mine to care for.”

Magnus turns my hands over, inspecting the faint scars along my wrists and the underside of my forearms. I hardly notice them anymore, but it’s like he can see the bruises that were left by Alastair’s hands. My determination to keep my secrets means I never thought about how anyone else would respond to my story.

He lets out a soft sigh across my cheek where my head still rests on his shoulder. “Johanna, you are so strong. Your spirit

is fierce, and you have the heart of a warrior. I have been in awe of you since the moment I met you. Your beauty radiates from you both inside and out. There is nothing I can do to take away the hurt and pain that happened to you, but I can sure try my best never to allow anything like that to occur again.”

We sit there, huddled together in silence, as my sweet, innocent daughter watches the brave girl without a voice battle the wicked sea witch to save her true love. All I can think is that Disney got this all wrong. Had the silly princess stayed in the sea, had she not allowed her obsession with the world just outside of her grasp to influence her judgment, she would have saved herself a world of hurt. Prince Eric didn't really love her, or he would have known her in her time of need instead of discarding her. The real world has tainted all of my fantasies.

And then I feel Magnus's rough beard scratch through my hair before his plush lips press against my temple in the softest of kisses and the thought that maybe not every man is the same crosses my mind. Maybe not every man is blind and callous.

“What do you need?” his rough voice whispers in my ear, and it's everything no one ever asked me.

That's when the tears finally spill from my eyes, blurring my vision. I haven't cried for myself in so long that I forgot how cathartic it can be. My whimpers and hiccups are muted by Magnus's shirt as I stain it with my sadness, anger, and fear.

“Stay,” he says once my purging has slowed. “I have the space, and I'd feel better knowing you were safe under my roof.”

His words bounce around in my head, and I wonder if I could do that. Living with the super scheduled, very tidy, Type A Magnus is a prescription for conflict. Besides, I can't just be his roommate. There is too much attraction between the two of us, not to mention the two kisses we've shared. I wouldn't want to give him the wrong idea, and I'm not ready to jump into a relationship with him just to avoid my ex, no matter what he, and now my coworkers, might think. I don't want to



live under his rules and be beholden to his whims. The biggest reason of all not to move in with Magnus, I don't want to confuse my daughter.

Finally lifting my head, I stare into his eyes, seeing his truth. "Magnus, as much as I appreciate your offer, we can't stay here. Adelais needs to be in her own bed. I can't uproot her out of my fears from the past. You have been wonderful, and I don't mean just tonight. Thank you for listening to my story, but I don't need a white knight—I just need a friend." Magnus nods before lifting his glass to take only his second sip of the now room temperature wine. "When the movie is over, would you mind taking us home?" I ask.

"As you wish."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Johanna*

**M**y days at home with Adelais are treasured. We sleep in, make pancakes and eggs, and take our time getting ready for the day. Today we're going to the Woodland Park Zoo. I try to pick up the free passes from the library whenever possible. She loves the butterfly garden, and most of the butterflies emerged from their chrysalises last month. This will be the perfect time to see their brilliant colors.

The zoo is busy on a warm summer weekend, but the crowds and the heat don't bother my girl. She loves animals as much as I do. She seems to really appreciate every facet of each animal's unique beauty. Her favorite is always changing.

She spends hours wandering through the gardens to inspect the different plants and hundreds of free-flying butterflies. I dressed her in bright colors to entice the creatures to land on her clothing. She pauses each time a butterfly lands on her or someone near her, afraid to startle it away. I know I'll have to wade through way too many photos later tonight to find the perfect ones.

We wander through the butterfly lab, and I read the signs to her about the life cycles of the varied species housed in the exhibit. She's a sponge, soaking in the information like her life depends on it. I'm going to have to remember it, too, because I know she'll either ask me about it again later or try to explain it to someone else and need my help.

After a morning in the garden, we take the time to splurge at the Grove Cafe inside the zoo. Adelais has the kid's cheeseburger that's as big as her head. It doesn't matter though, my girl is going through a growth spurt, and she's

always been a garbage disposal when she eats. Her burger and fries quickly disappear before she asks for animal crackers and a T-rex juice box.

“Animal game!” she demands.

Perfect, this will keep her entertained while I eat the rest of my meal in peace. “Okay. Do you want to go first or me?”

“You, Momma.”

I drum my fingers on my chin like I’m thinking hard. “I think I’ve got it. You’ll never get this one,” I taunt her.

“Is it a dog?”

“Nope.” I take another bite of my sandwich and enjoy the enthusiasm on my girl’s face. She mimics my finger action, tapping her chin.

“Does it has wings?”

Tilting my head up to the ceiling, I consider her question. So much of being a mom is exaggerating the fun times. “Yep.”

“A budafly!” she shouts.

Smiling, I tap my finger to her nose and finish my last bite. “Very good baby. Which animal should we see next?” I begin piling our trash onto the tray, cleaning up our area for the next family.

“Bears!”

“Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” I put my hands over my face in mock fright.

My girl giggles. “Silly Mommy.”

The rest of the afternoon is spent wandering through the different exhibits. The animals are divided by region: Australasia, the tropical rainforest, the Northwest creatures, and the temperate forest. She loves the tigers, monkeys, meerkats, and penguins, while the reptiles didn’t seem to hold her interest today. I’m sure that will change on our next visit.

When her walking slows and her energy wanes, we head for the car. She’s not one for naps these days, but I have a

feeling she will pass out on our short trip home. It will be just enough to recharge her batteries, bringing her back to full speed. I'm always torn between letting her rest and knowing how much harder it will be to get her to bed later.

As expected, her head droops just minutes after buckling her seatbelt, which means I spend the rest of the drive softly singing along to my 'Favorites' playlist on Spotify. It gives me time to think about my talk with Magnus several days ago. Not that I haven't thought about it on repeat ever since.

The way he let me talk without interrupting was unique. When he pulled me into his lap, I felt safe, not trapped. Then when he finally spoke, he asked me what I needed instead of telling me what to do. I have never met a man like Magnus Small before. He might be a unicorn.

I'm sure it makes me a little bit crazy for denying his request of protection by moving in with said unicorn. Last time I lived with a man was Alastair, and obviously that was a disaster. Magnus and I aren't dating, we're not together. Maybe that would actually make it easier, just friends sharing a roof. I can see his care and concern for me the way I see it when he talks about his siblings. Slowly but surely that man is changing my perspective, and that scares me.

He's been great at work, not treating me any differently. We've laughed and joked. We even finished that hospital incident course together. I'm afraid to admit it, even to myself, but he's become one of my best friends, right up there with his sister.

The moment I shift the car into park, Adel's head pops up and she's raring to go.

"Momma, can I has a popsicle?"

"Yeah, baby. Let's get inside and get you cleaned up first."

Leaving Adel to brush her hair and put her pajamas on, I head to the kitchen to open a popsicle for her when there's a knock at the door. It's rare we have unplanned visitors. I take a moment to alert Adela's not to come out yet. She has a tendency to run to the door no matter what she's wearing and

try to make a new friend. I've started having her wait in another room if it's not someone we're expecting. I make it to the door, answering after the third knock becomes more of a pound.

I freeze when I see Alastair standing there in a tan duster, wingtips, and his gelled classic side part. "Hello amore mio."

He pushes through the doorway, and I pray that Adel will stay in her room. We've talked about what she should do if she hears strange voices in the apartment. Call me paranoid, but life experiences have shaped my perspective. Looks like those paranoias might be coming to fruition.

"You've managed to make this little place presentable, but we'll be able to do much better once we get you two home. You'll like our place. I have everything you will need with the exception of the right wall paint in the little one's bedroom. You never bothered to tell me if I have a slugger or a ballerina, so I couldn't decorate appropriately. We'll rectify that quickly once we return."

*As delusional as always.*

"Alastair, stop for a second. I won't even ask how you figured out where I live, but what are you talking about?" I walk to stand between him and the rest of my apartment, trying my best to herd him back toward the door.

"I'm here to take you back, Hanna. Things didn't go the way they should have, and now that you have had some time to calm down, I will take care of you. I think raising that kid alone for the last several years gave you enough time to understand how much you need me," he says, reaching out to cup my cheek with his palm.

I knock his hand away. I'm not the same girl he brainwashed and abused so many years ago, and there's no way I'm giving him the opportunity to do the same to either my daughter or me again. "Look Alastair, you've been gone a long time. If you are serious about being in my child's life, I'm sure we can talk about the specifics, but I am not going anywhere. This is my home, and there is nothing between you and me anymore."

His cheerful demeanor shifts subtly. “Hanna, you are the mother of my child. *My child*. I will take care of both of you as is my job and my right. You will no longer have to struggle and slave at some job to make these meager ends meet.” He makes a sweeping gesture to encompass my space.

I straighten my shoulders, trying not to let him get my back up too much. If he’s serious about knowing Adel, I might have to find a way to get along with him. “I appreciate your desire to help, but really, we are doing just fine. I actually really love my job, and this apartment is our home. I would be happy to schedule a time for you to meet our child at a neutral location.”

“You don’t get to tell me where and when I will meet my child. You still haven’t told me what name you gave the kid, though I’m sure you chose something acceptable.” His eyebrows climb his forehead. “Now, where are they?” He takes a step toward the closed door behind me.

There’s no way I’m telling him any more about Adel until his actions become more stable. He doesn’t need to know her, her name, or even her gender if he’s going to remain the pretentious jerk he is, but I might have to give up something if I want him to leave.

“Not here!” I interject quickly. “She, uh, my daughter is staying with my parents this evening. I work tomorrow, but maybe we can meet for dinner when I am finished.”

Alastair’s posture has stiffened, anger boiling in his eyes. His hand shoots out to grab my left wrist. “You.” He jerks me into his chest. “Don’t.” His free hand grips my chin, angling my face up to meet his. “Tell me.” Turning, he slams my back into the wall. “No.”

“Alastair, please ...” I beg. Real fear threatens to overtake me.

His palm cracks across my cheek before his grip returns, this time to my throat. “Shut up,” he growls low. “This is going to go my way.”

My breaths are coming too fast, yet there is not enough air getting to my lungs. I can feel the panic rising as my eyes go wide. I reach for his hand with both of mine, trying to make him release my windpipe. Alastair grabs my wrist again, quickly breaking my hold on his, and the accompanying *pop* turns my stomach. The hold he still has on my throat tightens before he pulls me from the wall, only to slam me back again harder. Spots form in my vision as my ears ring.

“We will have to fix this attitude. I can’t have you teaching my daughter to be this kind of disagreeable female.” He slams me against the wall a third time, and the view before me goes fuzzy.

*Please don’t come out here baby. Please stay hidden.*

Alastair releases me, and I slump to the floor, taking gasping breaths as the sound of glass shattering fills my ears and small nicks cut my skin. My grandmother’s flower vase used to sit on the entryway table. It always made me feel at home when I saw it. Even with blurry vision, I’m certain that piece is what shattered.

“You always were worthless,” he says before punching the wall beside my head. My flinch is involuntary. “You’re afraid of me? I’m sure the little brat is just as miserable as you.” This time his fist doesn’t bust the plaster, it’s my nose. Warm, sticky blood coats my lips. “I should have taken the welp before you could get your hands on her.” His foot finds my ribs. “Better yet, I should have ensured she was taken care of.” The next kick meets my gut. “What a stain, an embarrassment, you are.”

The next fist to my head turns everything black.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *Winter*

**X**avier Prince spoils me rotten. Tonight, we're at Daniel's Broiler on Lake Union. The way he lavishes me with affection and goods is adorable but intimidating. This place looks expensive. It's like entering a house decorated in white and being terrified to sit.

The decor is rich and heavy. The chandeliers are giant metal fountains of light and views of the lake are available at every table. One look at the menu tells me I'm firmly back in the world of the upper crust.

Xavier squeezes my hand, reassuring me. He knows my past, knows that I once lived this life before finding my adopted brothers to live a life so much more fulfilling. I don't need these kinds of dates, even if he can afford them. I indulge him, because I know why he's doing it. He loves me, and only wants the best for me.

We've come a long way in the last several months. We've hurt each other and built one another back up so that our foundation is solid.

"Best Friend" by Saweetie rings out from my purse and embarrassment floods my cheeks. Not the place for that song. I quickly grab the phone to silence it.

"Hey Johanna, can I call you back?" I whisper into the phone, shooting an apologetic look at Xavier.

"Winter?" a small voice squeaks over the line.

My brow scrunches. "Adel?" I ask.

"Winter, I scared," she says as her voice trembles. I can hear the fear there.



“Baby, where are you? Xavier and I are on our way right now.” When I look at my boyfriend, he’s already pulling cash from his wallet and placing it on the table. He takes my hand to pull me from my chair, as my heart rate skyrockets.

“Momma is hurt, Winter.”

“Adelais, listen to me. Where are you?” I ask, forcing my voice to stay steady. I don’t want to scare her more with my own fear.

“Home.”

“Okay sweet girl. We are coming. Can you stay right there for me?” I ask her. I need to keep her talking.

“Yes.”

Xavier ushers me into the passenger’s seat of his Mustang, closing the door, and jogging around the car to get us moving as quickly as possible. “Do you know what happened to your momma?” I ask, terrified of the answer.

“Nuh-uh. Momma is hurt.”

I can feel my limbs shaking as the car hurdles down the road. Xavier is going as fast as he safely can. “Okay baby. Xavier is going to call for help while I stay on the phone with you, okay? You might hear him talking in the background.”

“Mmm,” she hums.

Xavier dials 911 from the driver’s seat, and I half listen to him while thinking about what my best friend is going through. That poor little girl is so strong. I can’t believe she is seeing her mother in trouble and was still able to pick up a phone to call me.

“Adel, why don’t you tell me what you did today. I want to hear about your day. You went to the zoo, right?”

“Mhm... there were so many animals,” she says, still quavering. The phone is clear, but the emotions she’s experiencing makes her speech even harder to put together.

“That sounds like so much fun. I love the zoo. Did you find your favorite animal?” Having such a normal

conversation while moving on pure adrenaline is surreal.

The line is quiet for a moment before she says, “The white tiger was really pretty.”

“Oh yes, I love the tigers. They look so regal, don’t they?” I encourage her to go on. She hesitantly tells me about a few more animals. After a few minutes I can hear new voices, but she never gets off the phone with me. Xavier pulls up to the building just behind an ambulance and few police cars.

“You’re not going in there alone,” Xavier says.

“Your car?” I ask as he jumps from the driver seat.

He pulls my door open to help me out. “I don’t care. They can tow it. This is more important.”

“Adel, we’re here. We’re coming in.” We race into the building and up the stairs to my best friend’s front door.

“I’m here, Winter.”

The door is open, and uniformed personnel are everywhere. The breath leaves my lungs when the sight before me fully registers. Johanna lies on the ground in her entryway covered in blood, surrounded by paramedics. Glass and broken furniture litter the living space of the apartment.

A Seattle police officer lifts his hand to stop us from entering, “I’m sorry folks, you can’t come in. This is a crime scene.”

I can feel the color drain from my face. “The little girl. I’m on the phone with the little girl. We’re the ones who called,” I say frantically.

The man’s face softens. “She’s in the bedroom. Officer Sanchez is sitting with her, waiting for your arrival.”

“And Johanna?” I beg as Xavier squeezes my hand again.

“I’m not sure ma’am. We need to let the paramedics do their job,” the officer whose name plate reads Sheffield says.

Xavier nudges me with his palm on my back. “Go to Adel. I’ll speak to the officers about what we know.”

I nod and carefully pick my way through the trashed apartment to the bedroom.

“Winter!” Adel screams when she sees me.

The poor girl is a mess. I’m sure she didn’t allow anyone to help her while she waited for me, so her hands are streaked in what is most definitely her mother’s blood and there are tear tracks down her cheeks. My brave girl isn’t hysterical though. She’s tough.

“Come here, baby,” I cry as I wrap her in my arms. I meet the eyes of the female officer still sitting on the bed where Adel was just moments before.

“I’ll leave you to clean her up, and then we’ll have to decide what needs to happen next,” she whispers to me.

“Her grandparents live close by. I can call them,” I inform her.

She thanks me, and another nod is all I can spare the officer as I carry Adel into the bathroom to bathe and change. I hadn’t thought about the authorities becoming involved with Adalais, but I’m not parting from her for anyone but family.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *Magnus*

**T**oday was one of those rare days when I was working without Johanna ... on a Sunday. The hospital was extremely short staffed, and the family agreed to reschedule our dinner for tomorrow night. I texted Johanna at the beginning of my shift to let her know how much I was dreading it with lots of skull emojis. Goofy isn't a word most people would use to describe me, but with her it is so easy to be light and free. She has convinced me to loosen the ropes on my tightly strung life.

It's been busy, and I haven't had a chance to eat, let alone check my phone for a reply all day. A deep sigh leaves me as another shift comes to a close. I head for the staff lounge to change and head home. The hospital washes and steams all our scrubs and coats at elevated temperatures to get them as clean as possible. There's no way I would want to wear my scrubs, or even my shoes, home after a day in the emergency room.

A frown carves my cheeks as I see there are no new messages from Johanna. There's one from Killian asking about dinner and three missed calls from Winter in the last fifteen minutes. Pressing the green button, I return her call, hoping it's nothing serious. She is not one for bombarding a person.

"Mag, where are you?" Winter answers breathily.

I pop up from the bench I'd been sitting on to tie my shoes, "What's wrong? I'm just getting ready to leave the hospital. Where do you need me?"

She sniffs. "The lobby. I'm in the lobby. Please hurry." The phone clicks off after her last word.

Racing for the door, I try to slow my steps. It's never safe to run in the hospital unless you're in scrubs, screaming through the halls, with a team of others. My anxiety is through the roof. I have no idea what happened to my sister, but I know she's scared. I hope she's not alone out there.

I step back against the wall as paramedics push a stretcher through the automated doors. The patient is a blonde in rough shape. Her face is severely swollen and covered in blood. I can't be certain if she's conscious, but something about the bloody, torn clothes grabs my attention. I swear I've seen that t-shirt before. That's when realization sinks in. That is the moment when Winter's frantic call makes sense.

Winter isn't the one in trouble, it's Johanna.

Johanna is the woman being raced into the ER right in front of me. I bark at the paramedics I recognize in my all-business voice, "Stats!"

The paramedics rattle off a list of numbers as we continue moving including blood pressure, pulse, and oxygen levels. They detail a list of visible injuries, and possible injuries that will need to be further assessed.

I stay with her all the way to the trauma bay when a slew of doctors and nurses jump into action.

"Doctor Small?" Doctor Davies asks.

"I was on my way out when I passed her incoming. It's Johanna Mendel." She's being transferred from the backboard on the stretcher to the gurney.

Davies's serious face drops further. Treating one of our own is an excruciating process. We don't allow family to treat family, but other staff members don't qualify as family. That makes the prospect no less daunting.

"Aren't you engaged?" Davies asks. "You can't be in here, Small. You have to trust me to handle this."

I know he's right, even if the engagement is only a rumor we haven't squashed since Alistair's outburst, but my body won't move.

“I... I don't know if I can,” I tell him honestly.

Sympathy seeps from his eyes. “Sasha, call the Chief.”

I slump against the wall, watching as the staff runs through the checklist of things we assess all trauma patients for. A hand on my shoulder steals the smallest fraction of my attention.

“Come on, Mag. Your sister needs you in the lobby,” the Chief says.

Winter! I forgot all about her when I saw Johanna. My sister must be freaking out. There is no other reason for her to be here. I still don't know how this happened, but I have a guess. If Winter is hurt in any way, I think I'll lose my last threads of sanity. That's when a more daunting thought occurs to me, “*Where is Adelais?*”

That's what gets me moving again. My colleagues will do everything they can for Johanna. I know that. Right now, I will be most useful to Winter and hopefully, Adelais. Rounding the corner, I see Winter standing at the check-in desk, backed by Xavier who's rubbing the bridge of his nose under his Superman glasses, and holding the hand of a terrified little girl. Wet hair signifies she's recently had a bath, and Winter has dark smears on her daffodil-colored dress that are likely blood.

I can feel the Chief's presence behind me as I cross the lobby quickly, sinking to my knees in front of the little girl and pulling her into my arms. Her tiny body shakes against my chest.

“Docka, Momma's hurt,” she chokes into my ear.

Everything inside me wants to tell her that her mother will be okay, but I can't. I know how these things go, and I don't know enough about her chart right now to know what is really going to happen. Instead, I kneel there before the child who has wormed her way into my heart the same way her mother has.

Half an hour later, Johanna's family arrives in a flurry. Winter must have called them, and they're as distraught as the

rest of us. The Mendel women are clearly related with strong familial traits that send a pang through my chest.

“Oh, Winter,” the woman who must be Johanna’s mother says as she approaches us. The two hug before three new sets of eyes land on me, still holding Adelais.

“Mendel family, this is my brother and Johanna’s coworker, Magnus. Magnus, this is Ida, Gregor, and Lara,” Winter says, gesturing to mother, father, and daughter.

Shifting Adelais to my left hip, I stick out a hand to shake in the same order. “It’s so nice to meet you all. I’m sorry this is how our introductions came about.”

“If you’re her coworker, then you know how she is. Why aren’t you back there?” Gregor asks me.

I clear my throat trying to decide how much I want to explain to them right now and decide less is more at the moment. Besides, I don’t even really understand what’s going on between us. One day we’re flirting and kissing, the next we’re no different than every other coworker. “Sir, the hospital has a policy about emotional conflicts. It wouldn’t be right for me to be the one treating her.” I think I can feel Winter blushing for me, but I refuse to meet her eyes.

“I see,” rumbles her father.

Lara steps in, “Adel, sweetheart, can auntie have a hug?” Adelais wiggles from my hip and jumps into her aunt’s arms, and she walks the little girl down the hall to look out the windows.

Winter and Xavier take the opportunity of Adelais’s absence to tell the Mendels what they know and experienced tonight. It’s informative for me too. Then it’s my turn to tell them what I observed in the short time I was with Johanna after she was brought to the ER. The emotional toll is exhausting, and we all slump down in our seats. My sister’s hands are each locked in one of Xavier’s and mine, while Ida is huddled into Gregor’s shoulder. Lara holds tight to her niece as her eyes begin to droop.

Adelais is exhausted. I can't imagine how she is still upright after the roller coaster of emotions she has experienced in the last few hours.

What could have been minutes or hours later, Doctor Davies emerges with an update. "Johanna has several serious injuries ranging from bruising and scrapes to broken bones and a grade four concussion. We need to take her into the operating room to repair a few of the breaks. Doctor Carson is the Orthopedic on call, and she will be performing the repairs. I suggest you all find a comfortable place to get some rest. This will take a while."

"Doctor, will my daughter be okay?" Johanna's father asks, standing and worrying a ball cap with his hands.

Davies gives that placating half smile half frown I know so well. "Sir, we are doing everything we can, but she is in serious condition right now. We will update you as often as we can." He nods to our group before taking two steps backwards and turning to leave.

"I think Adel should sleep in a bed tonight. I'll take her if the two of you want to stay," Lara says to her parents.

At any other time, it would be comical how Johanna's mother looks to Winter, but her father locks eyes with me. I give him a firm incline of my chin to indicate I'm not leaving. The corner of his mouth ticks up, and in that moment, I have the strangest feeling I have his approval.

"We'll go too," he says before his wife can make a decision. "I think these three will keep us posted." His brows rise in question.

"Absolutely, sir. She may not be out of recovery and awake until tomorrow morning anyway. Come back first thing," I tell them.

When it looks like Ida wants to interject, Gregor stands to escort her out behind Lara who's carrying a sleeping Adel.

"Try to get some sleep," Winter tells them.

When they're gone, my sister turns to me, placing her hand on my knee. "Thank you for caring for my friend."



“Anything for you, Winter.”

“But that’s just it, isn’t it?” she says with a knowing smile. “It’s not just for me. Now, do you need me to stay?”

“I. That’s not.” I hang my head, unsure of what to say to my youngest sibling. I think she’s always been the wisest of us all.

She stands, pulling Xavier to his feet who is smirking at me with an all too knowing smile. “See you in the morning big brother.”

I’m dead on my feet, but there is no way I’ll be going home before I see this night through. Heading to the desk, I let the nurse know where Davies can find me as soon as he has information. The on-call room is small and sparse, just enough to grab a bit of stilted shuteye, but it’s substantially better than a waiting room chair.

When a hand finally shakes me awake, the clock is nearing five in the morning. Davies looks exhausted, but his smile tells me everything I need to know. “She’s in recovery if you want to see her. She is going to be laid up for quite some time while all her injuries heal properly. She has a team of doctors keeping an eye on her, though I know you will be there every step of the way. She’s up in 6SE.”

Popping to my feet I reach out to shake his hand. “Thanks, man. Thank you.” He smacks my back as I race toward the elevators.

He wasn’t lying about the team of doctors. Johanna has an orthopedist, plastic surgeon, and neurologist all listed on her patient chart. I read through the notes as I sit by her sleeping form. Her body has been through a lot, and it needs the rest. However, I won’t be able to sleep any more until I understand everything she’s been through in the last twelve hours, and right now, this chart is all the information I have.

I read it through three times over before setting down the tablet to watch the sunrise outside the windows beyond her bed. It’s hard to equate the beauty of the morning with the terrifying night I just floated anxiously through.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

### *Johanna*

I've seen way too many movies and read way too many books depicting someone waking up in a hospital gently, peacefully unaware of where they are. That's not me. I remember every second of what happened with Alastair in my apartment. I remember flashes of my daughter's horrified face as she asked me if I was okay. And I remember hearing Magnus ask the paramedics about me as I was immobilized on the backboard. Everything was pain and bright lights. Everything was too much.

As I return to consciousness this time, everything is muted. My pain levels are low, though I know how bad my injuries are. The lights and sounds are turned down, but I can only see through one eye. I'm warm under the blankets, not hot. The only thing that should feel out of place, but isn't, is Magnus asleep in a chair, bent over the side of my bed. His hand is holding mine in his sleep.

What I don't know is where my daughter is now. From the flashes I have of the attack, she only found me after. That doesn't mean she is safe. Maybe that's why my family isn't here. If she is missing or hurt, they will be out looking for her, knowing she is my first priority.

My mouth is tacky, and when I reach for the water glass sitting on the rolling table next to me, all those muted pains come shooting back. I try to stifle the rocky moan before it can slip out with no success. Magnus jumps to attention, straight to doctor mode. He checks my monitors, IV and fluids, surgery sites, and eye movement. He even checks the bruising on my neck and gives me water to sip slowly. I examine each of his test results with my own medical knowledge at the same time.

It takes a full five minutes before the mask drops and I see my friend back in his handsome expression.

“How. Are. You?” I rasp at him through a painfully raw throat, breathing deeply between each word.

His nose scrunches up, “You shouldn’t be talking right now.”

I raise my eyebrows, waiting him out.

“Fine. Terrible. I’m terrible.” When he looks at me, his eyes are pleading, for what I don’t know.

I squeeze his hand, which has found its way back into mine. “Adel?” I croak.

“Should be here with your family any time. I assume Winter and Xavier will be returning this morning too.” My face contorts in confusion, and Magnus continues, “They were all here last night before I sent them home. They didn’t need to sleep in the waiting room.”

My throat really is sore, so instead of trying to speak again, I point at him.

“I went to the on-call room while you were in surgery. I haven’t left your side since you came out of the OR, and only Doctor Davies kept me out of there.”

This man is really something. It’s obvious he cares for me a lot more than I realized. Not that I’ve friend-zoned him, but we haven’t even discussed the two kisses we shared. I haven’t wanted to because I’m still trying to untangle the emotions they brought up in me. It hadn’t occurred to me that he might be as mixed up as I am. A deep weight settles in me at that thought.

Opening my mouth to ask another question, Magnus lays a finger against my lips. He stands and leaves the room. I don’t even have long enough to wonder where he is going before he is back carrying a few items. Magnus places it all on my lap, and I realize he’s brought me a small white board with a navy marker and a tissue for an eraser.

He helps me adjust the hospital bed so that I'm seated more upright. The movements are painful as my head spins and my injuries ache. He goes slow, checking in with me as I move. I nod to him and write in my new form of communication, "*Thx. My voice? My sight?*"

Magnus releases a deep sigh and slumps in his seat. "Your occipital bone was broken, so they repaired that while you were under. I'm sure they will remove the dressing soon so that you will be able to see normally again. I don't believe your sight was permanently impaired. Unfortunately, I think that one's going to be pretty painful when the drugs wear off. Your throat is very badly bruised. We'll have to wait until the swelling goes down to see how it will affect your vocal cords in the long run. Hopefully, it won't be too long. I miss hearing your sweet voice."

I'm not sure how to respond to that last part, so I just blink up at him from where I lay. It seems I underestimated how endearing this man really is. At first, he was so brusque. I thought he was one of those alpha-holes I read about in so many of my books. Each day it looks more and more like he's actually a cinnamon roll.

He leans forward again, holding my good hand in both of his. The warmth from that small embrace comforts me. "Look Jo, I can't be your friend anymore. Well, not *just* your friend. I'm tired of fighting whatever this is between us, and I sure hope you are too. Last night proved to me just how invested I am in this thing between us, no matter how much I've tried to fight it."

His words are exactly what I want to hear and terrifying at the same time. I haven't been this enamored with a man since first meeting Alastair all those years ago. It's hard to trust the feelings won't lead me down the wrong path again, but I also know Magnus is nothing like Alastair. I replay Mag's declaration before writing, "*U've called me Jo 2'xs now?*"

"What? I—I hadn't realized I did that. I won't do it again if you don't like it," he says, looking as perplexed as I am by his use of a nickname...*my* nickname.

I scrub a tissue across the board to erase my previous notes. *“It’s OK. I like it.”*

“When you’re out of here, I want to take you on a date,” he says in more of a statement than a question. “Actually, that’s not enough. I know this is backwards, but I need you to move in with me first.”

Pulling back from him, my eyes flutter rapidly in confusion. The side of my fist scrubs across my marks, too impatient for the tissue. *“What?”*

“I’m doing this all wrong,” Magnus rubs his palms through his hair and across his beard. “Those two things are not tied together. I want to protect the two of you—you and Adelais—and I told you the other night I have the space in my home for you. Once you are settled, I’d love to take you on a date. Maybe I should have waited to ask you out until later.” He scrubs at his beard again, pausing for a moment to think through his next words. “I feel an intense need to protect you and Adelais, but I also can’t get what I feel for you, and those kisses, out of my head.”

I feel like a fish, gaping at the gorgeous doctor seated beside me.

Magnus scratches at the hair over his ears as he watches me. His beard is longer than usual, not as well-groomed as he normally has it. His hair is messy, probably due to all the times he’s had his fingers in it, and his green eyes show a mixture of exhaustion and excitement. “Would you say... er, write something?”

The blankets covering my lap are suddenly remarkably interesting. I take a few seconds to fiddle with the pen in my hand. There are two of us I have to consider before answering. When I finally make a decision, I write two letters.

“Really?” Magnus says with a bit of surprise.

I nod to confirm what I wrote for him.

“To both things?” he asks again with more emotion shaking his voice.

My head bobs multiple times.

A huge smile breaks across his face, before he stands up to lean over me. He takes the board from me, setting it face up on the table beside me. The “OK” visible to anyone who walks in the room. His large hands are soft against my cheeks, but his lips on mine are even softer.

“I’ll get my brothers to help us move you in the day you’re discharged from here,” he murmurs against my lips.

A knock comes from the door, and I peer around Magnus with my good eye to see my father watching us.

*Oh crap.*

Magnus sees my dad at the same time and stands up straight at my bedside. My eyes, or eye, swings between the two of them. Neither looks particularly shocked nor upset by what just happened. I feel like I’m missing something, but the pain in my throat makes it too hard to ask questions or make any excuses.

Dad’s large form enters the room just before Mom pushes around him to rush to my side. Her eyes are already red, and the bags under her eyes are indicative of how little sleep she’s had.

“Baby,” Mom whimpers. “We were all so scared when Winter called us.”

Lara pulls Mom back from me so that Adelais can crawl in Magnus’s chair at my side. I haven’t thought about what I look like, or what the sight might do to Adelais, but seeing me whole and alive today has got to be better than the mess of death I was when she found me last night.

“Momma, are you okay?” Adelais asks as she tries to crawl into my lap.

“Adel, you can’t squish your mom right now,” my mother says, trying to pull my daughter back from the bed.

That’s not happening. If there’s anyone I need right now, it’s my baby. Reaching both my good and casted arms out to Adel, I beckon her into my lap. She wiggles free of my mother, and Magnus helps her climb gently into the bed to

place her tiny hands on my cheeks. He supports her for me while I hug her as tight as I can.

I'm not ready to think about how long it will take her to work through what she witnessed last night, but I'm eternally grateful that she is still with me. I'll have to get the full story of what happened soon. I know she just as easily could have been injured or taken from the apartment after I blacked out. A chill runs through me at the thought.

By the time my team of doctors makes an appearance, each of my family members has had the opportunity to hug me and share their fears. I expect Magnus to stand with the team as they talk through my chart, but he stays by my side, holding my hand.

*Why do I seem to be the only one shocked by his public display of affection? Is he still playing on the 'fiancé' farce?*

I know I just acquiesced to his request to move in and date him, but the rest of the world jumping on board with that so quickly is perplexing, like they all decided without me. That's probably the least of my worries right now.

"When can she come home?" my dad asks Doctor Carson.

She speaks directly to him even though we are all waiting for the answer. "All of her vitals are good, and things are progressing as they should. We will want to keep her another night or two to make sure things are staying on track, especially with her concussion and the surgical sites. She will need to start physical therapy sooner rather than later, so the therapists will be in this afternoon to begin working through exercises with her. Her discharge will also be contingent on how those things go."

"Thank you. My girl is a fighter, so we will have her room ready for her tomorrow," Dad says.

"Actually," Magnus cuts in, holding up his phone. "She'll be coming home with me. My brothers already agreed to help move her and Adelais into my place. I'm closer to the hospital, have plenty of space, and my home is secure." He's blunt and



matter of fact, like he assumes no one will question his statement.

My dad nods to him—freaking nods to him. “Let me know when you need us, and we will be there to help.”

Magnus squeezes my hand as if he can feel my agitation. This is not how my life goes. I don’t allow others to make so many decisions for me. I’m used to being independent—in charge of everything. I wonder if my emotional confusion is all situational or enhanced by the experiences of the last twenty-four hours. But I’ve given Magnus my decision, and I won’t go back on it now. It’s time for me to accept help from the people who love me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### *Magnus*

**I**t's been four days since I've been home. I didn't leave Johanna for even a moment while she struggled through recovery and the initial therapy sessions. When I finally accepted this relationship, I was all in, and nothing could have pulled me from her side. There is never a halfway for me. Johanna and Adelais are now mine to protect, care for, and cherish.

Johanna's tiny apartment is packed to the brim with my six brothers, Winter and Xavier, and the five members of the Mendel family. It's tight quarters, but the packing and moving are going quickly. She won't need all her furniture at my place, but she doesn't want to get rid of it either. I understand her hesitancy, even if I know in my heart it's unnecessary. I've found a nice storage facility for her things, but I hope it won't take long to convince her she doesn't need to keep it.

My girl is trying so hard to be involved; however, her injuries are taking their toll. The bruises are turning from black and blue to greens and yellows. A cast still blankets her left arm, and a patch covers her eye. Where she sits on the floor in a nest of pillows, her posture is rigid and stiff. None of that is keeping her from hopping up repeatedly to direct the operation. Perhaps she's more Type A than any of us realized.

Winter, Lara, and Ida are cleaning and boxing items from the kitchen, while Adelais and Emelia demand Alexa play upbeat music so they can dance from person to person. Those two little girls are so full of life, and their giggles fill the apartment with happiness. The ladies came by while we were still at the hospital to clean up the mess left over from the incident. I'm sure it was emotional for all three of them, and

none of us wanted Johanna or her daughter to come home to that.

Gregor, Xavier, and I are packing up the living room. Books, toys, crafts, and miscellaneous goods are organized and meticulously boxed. The three of us should have split up to help the less scrupulous personalities of my younger brothers, but I'm sure it will be fine.

"We're going to have to take the legs off to get it through the door," Theodore says, as he tips the couch forward.

"No. It'll be fine," Killian barks back.

Leopold steps between my happiest and grumpiest brothers, "Why don't we just measure? Decrease the chances of having to do the same job twice." He's always efficient.

I return my focus to Johanna's small desk area in front of me, recognizing so many textbooks and notes from my own studies.

"Yes, I really do need all those clothes." I hear Johanna say. Roland and Hugo are working on the girls' shared bedroom, while Sebastian packs the bathroom.

Crossing to the doorway, I don't interject, but I meet my brothers' eyes with a stern look. They drop it and get back to work. I just hope she didn't see my involvement in shutting down what was sure to become either childish or sexist. It's not that I think my brothers are truly either of those things, just naive. They are still working on their tact.

Between organizing and carefully packing my area, making sure the itemized spreadsheet is updated, and policing everyone else, I don't think I've made as big of a dent as the others. Johanna has expressed her hesitations to me about this move, which I fully understand. I want to make sure nothing goes wrong, easing her fears. It's important I don't mess this up before the relationship has the chance to begin.

Ida comes out of the kitchen, passing through the little girls dancing like Egyptians in the living room, to take lunch orders from us all. We've only been at it a couple of hours this morning, but sustenance will be welcome. When she gets to

me, she wraps me in a hug before saying anything. It takes me a moment to hug her back, but I hesitantly drape my arms around her.

“Thank you,” she says when she pulls back.

Dipping my head I say, “We’re all just doing our part.”

Her expression is humorous, like I’m missing a joke. “No, silly boy. I don’t mean just for today, or this last week, or the safe place you’re providing for my girls to live. I mean for returning our Jo to us. I suppose you now know the details about her time with Alastair all those years ago. I suspect she’ll never share it all with her father and me, but we always knew it wasn’t good for her. I don’t think we ever suspected quite how dangerous it was. After he left, she sunk into herself. She was reserved with a chip on her shoulder. It’s been a long six years in which we began to wonder if we’d ever get our girl back.”

Reserved is not a word I can ever imagine using to describe Johanna. Fierce, strong, brave and fun-loving are the ones I would choose. “I think you give me too much credit. I’ve just tried to be her friend.”

Impossibly, her smile grows bigger. “Those are the best kinds of relationships. Now, enough of that. What can I get you for lunch? Gregor and I are going to take the littles with us so the rest of you have a bit more space to finish up.”

Looking around with fresh eyes, I see we are close to being done. Once the last boxes are taped shut, it will only take a couple of trips between the lot of us to load it all on the small truck. “Katsu Burger, right? I’ll have the Ninja Deluxe burger.” I love bacon burgers but try not to overdo it on the grease and the fat all the time. My health is important to me.

“You got it,” Ida winks and turns away to take more orders.

The four of them are out the door minutes later with a lengthy list. I tried to slip Ida my credit card, but she refused. She said she wasn’t taking money from any of us, no matter how rich we were. I didn’t miss the stare down she gave

several of us in the room. Yeah, most of the Small men are doing pretty well for themselves.

I tape closed the last box of office supplies, and join the line of brothers carrying boxes and furniture down to the truck parked in front of the building. Moving day is always like an extended version of Tetris. This time we have the added obstacle of figuring out what will be stored and what is going all the way to my place. I convince Johanna that she needs to stay with Winter and Lara while the boys and I figure it out. She's still fresh out of the hospital with strict instructions to take it easy for a while. Bruised ribs, broken bones, and all the extra bumps and scrapes are nothing to be taken lightly. Admittedly, packing the truck is not so difficult that it requires her supervision.

The one-bedroom apartment is all but empty when Ida and Gregor return with the girls and bags full of take-out containers, so we settle for a picnic style lunch. It seems cozier this way with all of us sitting so close to each other. Helping others has always been a way for me to show affection, but this is so much more than that. Supporting Johanna and Adelaís and seeing their strengths fills me with joy, too. I'm quickly realizing the list of things I'd do for these girls is endless.

"Isn't your landlord going to charge you for breaking your lease?" Killian, the Negative Nancy, asks.

Johanna finishes her small bite of burger, wipes her mouth, and smiles. "Shockingly, no. I even offered to pay a little extra, but he told me he has a file of applicants waiting for something to open. I guess since he is going to fill it quickly, he didn't think charging me was necessary. It probably helps that I look like this right now," she gestures to her beaten down state.

"He's probably afraid you'd sue him for it somehow," Hugo says. He has seen lots of injuries in his time, and I'm sure a fair number of them took things to court.

Lara digs her elbow into my ribs from her seat beside me and whispers in my ear, "Worked out well for you, huh big

guy?” It did, but a lease termination fee wouldn’t have kept me from moving my girls home. “Adel, are you excited for your new home?” Lara asks her niece.

The little girl bounces on her knees. “Yes! Docka has a big TV and *Little Mermaid*.”

I’ve tried to convince her to call me Magnus, but so far, it’s not sticking. “There will be other fun stuff besides *Little Mermaid*,” I tell her. “We can decorate your room however you want.”

Her eyes go wide like I just said the most brilliant thing she’s ever heard. “Like Ariel?”

“Ariel, Flounder, Sebastian ... whomever you want,” I assure her.

“Prince Eric?”

I bop her on the nose, “Him, too, I guess though I’ll have to talk to your mother about allowing boys in your room.” The adults around me chuckle at my joke the five-year-old doesn’t yet understand.

The afternoon goes much like the morning, except faster. My brothers needling one another, the Mendels stepping in to fill the spaces, and Johanna directing traffic. We don’t have as many things to unpack, so most of my brothers take off as soon as things are moved into the storage unit.

By dinner time, the rest of the crew leaves the three of us to settle into our new sort of normal.

“We can shop for a smaller bed for Adelais tomorrow,” I tell Johanna when she sends the little girl off to brush her teeth and put on her pajamas.

“That’s not necessary. She’s used to sleeping in a twin bunk bed, so I’m not worried about her falling out or anything.”

“New bedding then. I know she was excited to decorate,” I push.

Johanna straightens her shoulders, placing her hands on her hips. “Magnus, we aren’t expecting you to be our Sugar

Daddy.”

That is *not* the term I would have used. “Jo,” I say softly, laying a hand on her hip and gently cupping her cheek with the other. Her eyes jerk up at the nickname. “You said you’d give this a shot.”

“I know, but—”

“Let me keep you safe. Let me make your daughter happy. I’m not asking you to sleep in my bed, quit your job, or pop out babies. I definitely haven’t bought a ring. Please just let me do what I can for the two of you.”

Her head bobs jerkily as tears stream silently down her cheeks. This is where she should be, where she’s safe to let her guard down. I pull her against my chest and hold her as firmly as I dare with her injuries until Adalais comes out to tell us she’s ready for her bedtime story.

“We’re doing things backwards, and it’s freaking me out,” she stammers.

I glide my fingertips down her spine. “I’m terrified.”

A burst of laughter hiccups out of my girl.

*My girl.*

Wow, that feels good to say ... think ... acknowledge. She’s mine, and I’m going to do everything in my power not to screw it up.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*Johanna*

**Y**ou would think that living and working together would be a ridiculous start to a relationship, but the donnybrook at my apartment last week means I'm not working right now. Adelais and I are spending all our time settling into our new place. Magnus tried to take more time off, but I insisted we could get by, and he was needed at the hospital.

Winter has been over for lunch everyday. It's so nice that she has the freedom to do that. A perk of dating the boss ... or something. She spends a whole hour with us, bringing food and tunes for Adel to dance to. If it weren't for the occasional pain, nightmares, or glimpse in the mirror that reminds me of what I've been through, I could easily fall into the excitement of this new chapter in my life.

Most days either my mother or sister comes by as well. Sometimes they arrive together, and other days, one will come in the morning and one in the afternoon. I feel like they're taking shifts, checking up on us. I've never asked them to help, and they'd never admit to why they're showing up, but I appreciate it no matter the reason.

By the time Magnus comes home each evening, Adel is ready for his calming influence after a busy day full of estrogen. Truth be told, so am I. I haven't had this much continuous time with anyone in quite a while. They're my family and they are being helpful, but there comes a point in life when you move out for a reason.

"Magnus!" Adel yells when she hears the door open and close, running from wherever she is in the apartment to greet



him. She agreed to stop calling him doctor after we moved in.

Not every day, but on days like today, I feel a little too June Cleaver for my own liking. It's been three weeks now, and I'm itching with energy. I'm not made for homemaking or even a sedentary job. I'm used to walking miles with every shift I work.

The mental scars are healing little by little with each fading bruise and therapy session. The yellow-green splotches are all but gone now. My arm is still in a cast, my face is on the mend, and my ribs are tender; however, there's no reason I shouldn't be doing something more productive with my time. I'm ready to go back to work with my patients and coworkers. Lara is ready to hang out with Adelais in our upgraded pad with better views in a better part of the city. There are plenty of light duty tasks that need to be done in the emergency department to free up time for everyone else that I have been cleared to do. It's Magnus that's holding me back.

Each time I bring up the idea of returning to work he has a new excuse. Most of them are thin at best. He says my injuries need more time. He's afraid that Alastair has not been caught. One time he even tried to tell me the emergency department had been slow all week. I gave him the blank stare for that one, and he back-pedaled quickly.

He strolls into the kitchen where I lean against the counter in my apple printed apron with my daughter on his hip babbling a million miles a minute. It's a sight. She's halfway through her story about the Thai food Winter brought for lunch when they reach my side. He dips to kiss me, and I give him my cheek. I'm still cautious about PDA in front of my daughter because I'm not ready to broach the subject with her yet.

"Why don't you get your jammies on, teeth brushed, and pick out a bedtime story while I say hello to your mother," Magnus tells my little girl as he guides her feet back to the floor.

*I knew he was a smart man.*

Once she's cleared the living space, he sags back against the island across from me. "Lay it on me. I'd like to make it better."

Well, at least he's starting off right. "I want to return to work, Magnus."

His chin drops to his chest, "I know, Jo, but—"

"I just started that job, and I'm going nuts cooped up here. Adalais is my world, but I am not a stay-at-home-mother for a good reason," I cut him off. "I need you to hear me when I say this is not working for me. Even with all the visitors that I've no doubt you inexplicably orchestrated, it's not right for me here day in and day out."

I don't know when I started pacing, but when I look up again, I find myself on the other side of the island. It's all this pent-up energy I've been harboring. Sleep isn't coming easily either, and it's not because of the nightmares—though those do surface frequently. My body just isn't worn out enough to sleep.

Even on the nights when we go out or have a date for just the two of us, I'm still a ball of energy. The days Magnus is off work are better. I plan things to keep us busy from sunup to sundown. I'd do it every day if I could, but the unpredictability of the ER makes it hard to time anything on his workdays. For some reason, it's no longer the same without him on our adventures.

Magnus straightens himself from his reclined position and spreads his arms wide. "Come here."

I approach slowly, waiting for placating words about how nice the house looks or how well I'm doing at something inconsequential. One of those *but you're so pretty* moments.

"I didn't realize it was bothering you this much. What do you want me to do?"

How long will it take me to realize this man is a partner, not a dictator? "Take me to work tomorrow."

"No." My mouth pops open with his quick rebuttal. "Sorry. Sorry." He swiftly rubs his hands up and down my arms. "I

hate this. Okay. I'm ready. Try again."

I push away from his chest to look him in the eyes. "Magnus, take me to work tomorrow."

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows the retort I know he's desperate to give. "Why don't we see if Lara can sit with Adela's for a little while tomorrow while you go in to talk to HR about possible light duty options?"

A smile breaks across my face that I can't contain. "Sounds like the perfect compromise, Doctor Small."

He leans in to seal his lips with mine, and a tiny gasp echoes from the hallway that sends me startling back. This is why we tried to remain as platonic as possible around Adel. I didn't want her to get ahead of herself in case things didn't work out. I mean, we are already living with him. She hasn't asked about our living arrangement since the beginning when we explained that because Magnus is Winter's brother and our friend, he is helping us out with a safe place to live for a while.

*Ugh! This is confusing enough for me. What do I expect from her?*

"Do I get to call you Daddy now? I've never had a daddy!" her volume is turned up to eleven as always as she rockets into the room.

*Yeah. Okay. That's about what I expected from her.*

"Whoa, whoa!" he chides as she completes a lap around the open living space, bouncing on her toes. "Adel, if you want us to talk with you about this, then you'll have to sit on the couch with us. Can you do that?"

"Yes!" She hops, skips, and flops her way onto the sofa. "But you two still sleep in different beds. I know because sometimes I sneak into Mommy's bed in the middle of the night. And mommas and daddies are supposed to share beds. Maybe you aren't my daddy. I did see you kissing, and only people who *have to* do that. So maybe you are my daddy. I so want you to be my daddy!"

"Adela's!" I pull her little wiggling body in tightly next to me so that I can wrap an arm around her. "Hang on just a

second with all of that, okay?” Her head bobs with the same energy that buzzes through the rest of her. “I want to start by being clear that Magnus is not your biological father. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Momma. No way, Magnus is my biological dad and didn’t visit me before. He’s too nice. He wouldn’t have left us,” she says. He chuckles at that and shrugs when I shoot eyebrows at him.

“Technically, sweetheart, I’m not your dad in any way. Maybe one day, but your mother and I have a lot of hoops to jump through before getting to that point,” Magnus explains.

Adel’s little face morphs through every emotion. She’s an open book, a cinch to read. That explanation confused her, and she didn’t like it.

I pull her onto my lap so we’re face to face. “Adelais. Magnus and I are trying to decide what kind of relationship we want to have. It’s possible that one day he may step into the role of your father, but it is also possible he might not. That is why we haven’t said anything to you. We didn’t want to get your hopes up while we were still trying to figure it all out. I’m sorry if you felt like we were lying or hiding something from you.” I’ve always tried to be as direct with her as I can while still communicating information in an age-appropriate way, and I’m not going to change that now.

Her brows smooth out then bunch back together. “Well, how long will that take?” Her eyes bounce between us as she waits for an answer.

Magnus takes one of her tiny hands in his giant paw before saying, “We don’t know for sure. There’s no set timeline for these things, but I do know one thing for sure. No matter what your mother and I decide, I will *always* be your friend, Adelais. You can call on me anytime, anywhere, for anything, and I’ll be there.”

She crawls from my lap and into his, just one cushion over. “Okay. You tell me when you want to be my dad. I picked a good book. Ready to read?” She’s so certain he will be her father one day that she mostly slides past it.

“Certainly. Let me guess.” He makes a show of scratching at his temple. “Did you pick *Itty Bitty Kittycorn?*”

“How’d you know that?” she asks in her adorably stilted speech.

Magnus has caught on so quickly to her speech patterns that I rarely have to translate for him anymore. Even I don’t catch one hundred percent of what she says, but it’s nice to have someone else who picks up as much as I do.

Her speech improves every day, but there are still letters that she has trouble forming. In those cases, she does one of three things; she massacres them, she leaves them out entirely, or she replaces them with something random. She does the last two with zero predictability. For example, you never know where an *n* or *d* might randomly pop up or if the *st* blend is going to be said correctly.

He tickles the small girl in his lap and rises to his feet with her in his arms. Their shrieks and laughter carry to me as the pair move down the hall toward the ocean themed bedroom of her dreams.

I know that in a few minutes, he will finish the story and come out to tell me she’s ready for me to tuck her in. She’ll tell me all about the voices he did, and what a wonderful day she’s had. It’s predictable. It’s comfortable. The whole thing scares me because there is no way this man isn’t too good to be true. I’m having trouble stepping away from the edge, always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

There are a few things I just don’t understand. Magnus is thirty-eight years old, which means we have a significant age gap. He should be looking for someone his own age whose life is more put together. If he’s looking for someone young, he deserves someone with less baggage. It’s hard for me to believe he’s been sitting around waiting for this train wreck to roll into the station.

Not that he’s alone in this relationship or whatever it is, but he’s cultured, seasoned, dignified. I’m none of those things. He should be running away, not taking me out on dates and moving me in with him. I know all those scary negatives are

amazing pluses. It's just so hard for me to accept that this isn't going to go horribly wrong.

But it's good. It's so, so good. He makes me laugh and feel safe. He's my friend, and we communicate well. Magnus is amazing with Adel through all her ups and downs. Not for a single second have I felt looked down upon for any reason. The relationship is actually healthy.

Strong arms circle me where I sit on a barstool at the island, lost in contemplation. His beard combs through my hair as he presses his lips to my cheek. "Your turn," he says.

I lean into him for just a moment, basking in his warmth. "K, but we have to talk about what just happened."

"Because you're freaking out again?"

"I'm not freaking out again ..." He chuckles. "Fine. Yes, I'm freaking out again." I move to stand, not wanting to get into it before making sure Adelais is fully tucked in. She'll come back out if I don't go see her soon.

"Can I tell you a secret first?" He waits for me to nod. "Me too," he says with wide eyes before softening the look with a wink.

My eyes close as my cheeks round, and I shake my head back and forth. He kisses the tip of my nose and turns me by the shoulders to send me down the hall.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### *Magnus*

There is now a distinct divide in my life—all the moments before Johanna Mendel entered my life, and those after. I have to say, I'm loving the moments after so much better. I feel like the living embodiment of the song "I'm Walking on Sunshine." My life has been given fresh air and a solid dose of light. It makes me wonder how I could have thought I had all that I needed before.

Before her, I refused to listen when my family told me I worked too much. Now I see my division of time clearly. Before her, I thought my quiet house was a safe haven. Now I see how empty it was. Before her, I felt fulfilled and satisfied with my life. Now, I see how little I really knew of the world.

After her, well, I think that just about sums it up perfectly. Everything that has come after she arrived in my life is better, like she's healed something I didn't know was broken. There's a level of joy I never would have fathomed. The bonus is that she comes with a miniature, and that miniature is all that is good in this world.

It feels like I went from a confirmed bachelor to a complete family man in the blink of an eye. This new life is one I dreamed of, but never thought would be possible for me. I was so against it, so sure it wouldn't happen—that I didn't want it to happen—that I stopped trying.

My sneakers squeak as I walk down the hall of the Harborview emergency department. This is not the moment for a bubbly profession of love. I have to remind myself frequently that our relationship has been fast and furious, and to slow down with my grand plans and declarations. I know

how those things would have sounded to me a few short weeks ago.

“Heads up, Dr. Small!” a nurse shouts as she rushes past me pushing a cart.

*Shoot! I’m lost in my head if I managed to be in the way of my staff.*

“Where are you headed?” I ask, trailing the nurse whose name escapes me. That, too, is so unlike me to forget a name.

“If you’re asking if I need help, then the answer is yes, please.”

She continues at a brisk pace, turning left at the next intersection. Two doors down, she bursts into a scene of clear emergency. A heavily pregnant woman is writhing on the bed with red spots on her pastel blue dress. The man at her side is clutching her hand, trying to keep the hair out of her eyes while his are wild with panic.

I grab the tablet to look at her chart, speed reading to gain as much information as I can. At this point my concerns are infection, placental issues, and uterine ruptures. I can’t tell if she is only in pain or in labor from her outward appearance. I quickly absorb the essentials:

**Nest, Kathy**

**Twenty-six-year-old**

**Primary pregnancy**

**Nial, OB-GYN**

**Peterson, Pediatrician**

**Thirty-four weeks and five days**

**Typically developing male fetus**

**Spotting started an hour ago and has increased in that time along with abdominal and back pain. OB-GYN has been notified and is en route.**



Mallory, the nurse whose name finally comes to me, is preparing an ultrasound machine. The images will give me a better idea of what is happening, but if her bleeding becomes any heavier, we will have to take her straight to the OR.

Best case scenario, I see nothing wrong with the placenta or the uterine lining and can determine the bleeding is caused by an infection that's treatable without early delivery. Worst case, she has a ruptured uterine wall which is life-threatening to both her and the baby.

"Okay Kathy, I'm Dr. Small. I know you're in a lot of pain right now, and I'd like to help. I'm going to do an ultrasound to take a look at your baby. To do that, I need you to help me, okay?" I tell the pregnant patient in my doctor voice. It means business, but also that I'm calm, collected, and here to do what is best for them. I try to inject it with compassion.

She opens her eyes for the first time since I walked into the room, and I can see fear and pain in the mahogany depths. Kathy nods vigorously, cinching her jaw.

"Here we go then." I squeeze the gel onto her belly, using the wand to spread it as I begin searching for answers. "Kathy, have you decided on a name for the little one yet?"

Distraction is the name of the game. It is safer for the baby when the mother is calmer, and this situation is riddled with anxieties. Directing her thoughts to happier things can help diffuse the tension she is feeling.

"Davey," the man with her says. "It was my father's name."

The pair smile at one another, and when he lifts her fingers to kiss them, I see the wedding bands on their fingers.

"What a lovely tribute," I commend.

There's blood in the uterus, but I don't see any in the abdomen. That puts us somewhere in the middle. I need to find the tear in the placenta to assess how bad the bleed is. If it is mild, we may be able to monitor while administering medications to help the baby's lungs mature in case we have to deliver early. If it's more severe, we may need to induce labor

or do a cesarean. I'd like to let little Davey bake as long as possible.

"Is it bad?" Kathy asks, voice wobbling.

"I need to look at a few more things. It's possible we'll be meeting little Davey today, but I'm hoping to keep him in his comfy home for a bit longer." I shoot the pair my most reassuring smile. My demeanor is like a mirror for most patients. What they see in me, is what they adopt for themselves. I need to project peace and reassurance.

"Magnus, Dr. Small, they sent me in because this is a labor and delivery case. How can I help?" I hear Johanna's voice behind me. I honestly didn't think they would put her back to work today, but she must have made a convincing argument to the HR director. I forgot what a pleasure it is to have her work a case with me until this very moment. Three weeks was too long without her.

*What was I thinking not wanting her here with me?*

"I'm glad you're here, Johanna. Can you help Dad get into some scrubs? It looks like we need to move upstairs," I say in an excited voice. It's one all emergency personnel understand, while keeping patients in the correct mindset.

When I meet her smile, I match it with a more real one of my own. That woman could make a burlap sack look beautiful. Her scrubs are wrinkle free, her hair is braided to the side, and her green eyes shine.

"Certainly, Doctor," she says, and I swear she almost curtsied. She's ecstatic to be back.

She ushers Dad out to get the papery scrubs we have for significant others to wear during c-sections. It will help keep the environment sterile while allowing him to experience the birth of his child.

The ultrasound showed a moderate abruption of the placenta. Kathy's pregnancy is viable, and I'm not willing to risk the baby with this level of tear. It will be safer for both Kathy and Davey to deliver now. I dictate to nurse Mallory the notes I want placed in Kathy's chart as I work.

Kathy's breathing increases the minute her husband steps out of the room, so I take her hand to speak to her as I clean the gel from her belly. "Kathy, we are going to deliver Davey today. I want to make this procedure as safe for the two of you as I possibly can. This situation is demanding my attention. His heartbeat is still strong, so I would like to deliver him before conditions deteriorate. If we wait, I only see this becoming more critical. We have a tremendous team and the NICU unit is incredible. Are you ready to meet your son?"

Her expression is a mix of fear, excitement, and discomfort. It's understandable. "Let's do it," she bumbles. She has tried to suppress her whimpers and moans, but I know she is feeling increasing amounts of pain.

Standing from my spot by the bed, I head into the hall to begin prepping for surgery. Johanna meets me outside the door with a gowned-up Dad in tow. "Looks like you're ready to hold a newborn," I tell the man. I never did catch his name.

"Yes, and Dr. Nial is here. He is reading your notes and prepping for surgery," Johanna advises me.

*Am I going to think about how wonderful this woman is every time I see her? Is that what my life is now?*

"Great. You know the drill." I turn to Dad. "Johanna here is a wonderful labor and delivery nurse. She will guide you through the next steps while I help Dr. Nial prep." I shake his hand and leave them to it.

Dr. Nial will take over the case from here, but I need to catch him up on my findings. I'm sure he has read my notes by now, but a first-hand account is always preferable. I have worked with him on a couple of previous cases. He's a great provider.

After my update, I return to the floor, and the cases come in a steady flow. There's a leg laceration, a hand burn, a case of pneumonia, and a severely dehydrated patient that spent the morning on the lake.

When I finally take a moment to sit at the nurses' station, I find myself next to my girl.

*That's never getting old.*

“What have you been up to?” I ask her.

“Not much with this club hand.” She holds up her casted arm. She still has several more weeks of that. At least Johanna and Adalais had something else to bond over this summer. “I’m mostly doing check-ins, directing patients, and running errands. I’ve done a bit of charting too, but that’s harder with half the number of fingers I’m used to.”

I swivel my chair to face her. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

She tilts her head at that. “You are?”

“Of course. It’s better with you. I know I fought it, but I was just afraid. This is definitely better. Are you staying for a full shift, or will you go home early to rest and be with Adalais?”

“I’m back on the schedule for full shifts. I’ve been cleared for everything that doesn’t require two hands.” She raises her eyes at me in challenge.

I know what her restrictions are. She let me read through her records and keeps me up to date on what her physicians and therapists tell her. I also know she’s ready to be herself again. My fears are my own, and it’s not fair to place them on her.

“That’s wonderful. Lunch?”

“Love to.” She winks at me.

*This woman.*

I leave the nurses station before that little tête-à-tête becomes anything it shouldn’t.

It’s amazing how my brain has learned to compartmentalize. Aside from the medical emergencies I’ve dealt with, this has been a wonderful day. I woke up to breakfast with the most adorable jabber-jaw, my girl’s beautiful smile is just around the corner from me at any given moment, and tonight I’ll get to sit down with the two of them to hear about their days over dinner. And after that, I get to

read to that same princess who woke me up this morning with a crown and tiara made of construction paper and jewel stickers. These two Mendel girls are filling holes I didn't know were there.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### *Johanna*

The Small family is not new to me. In fact, this isn't even the first Sunday dinner Adelais and I have attended with Magnus, but this is the first time they will all be in Magnus's apartment since the two of us moved in. I have interacted with some of the brothers more than other because they are closer to Magnus either physically or emotionally.

He likes to think he is the go-to for all his brothers, as well as Winter, but the simple fact is that each of them has a sibling they spend more time with than the others. It's not out of dislike for the others. The divides vary in reason, but age, season of life, and physical distance play a role in all their relationships. It's easy to see from the outside, and I doubt it's even a conscious thing.

As I fill the zucchini boats with a mixture of squash, breadcrumbs, Parmesan cheese, garlic, and sausage, I listen to Adelais trying to explain to Magnus why Rainbow Dash is the best My Little Pony. She has a multi-point argument that's well thought out for a five-year-old. That girl is going to run the world one day.

It's so great to have her back after her Friday night and Saturday time with her grandparents. Of course, that gave Magnus and I a chance at a real date night without having to worry about when we need to be home or if Adel would wake up. He took me to see the Avett Brothers at the WAMU theater just south of Pioneer square. He sang every word of "Distraction #74" and "January Wedding" to me. We joked about how we both feared for our lives while eating street food afterwards. A hot dog with cream cheese was a first for him,

but I took immense joy in watching him try it with much success.

Our dates remain pretty tame. He's such a gentleman, and I think he might be afraid of pushing me too far too fast, especially when my injuries are still so visible from Alastair's attack. I'm enjoying our time, but I'm wondering how long he'll stay so reserved. There's a fire in his eyes that I'm itching to feel the heat from. I can't imagine he'll keep it contained for much longer—at least I hope not.

On Saturday morning, we had breakfast together before going our separate ways to our volunteering adventures. Magnus went to the Bridge shelter to help with medical needs and play music, while I cared for tiny and not so tiny fluff balls at the Seattle Humane Society.

Winter, of course, had grilled me about what is really going on between her brother and me.

*“Just don't tell me anything that will gross me out,” she'd said.*

I slide the pan of zucchini boats into the oven while thinking over the weekend. They should be ready when everyone arrives in the next half hour. I need to set the table and take another look in the mirror. I'm sure the heat of the kitchen has melted away some of my makeup.

Magnus offered to help me cook, citing my cast as a handicap, but I wanted to do this one on my own. Him playing with Adel is really the best help ever as I'm usually juggling all the tasks as well as her attention. I can see he has a white board out now. It's ridiculous, but so very him. The two of them are charting the attributes of each of the Little Ponies. He's angling for Twilight Sparkle, but that's such an obvious choice.

*Noob. Everyone knows Pinkie Pie is the best.*

The Small family is well prepared for having Sunday dinner each week. A large kitchen and dining room is a basic requirement for each of their homes. Every Small house I've been in so far has a table that seats twelve. With the addition

of Adela's and I, every seat is now taken. If any of the other boys start bringing guests, we'll have to add a kids' table.

I'm surprised by the level of finery these boys go to each week. Tables are set with care, and meals are made with skill. This isn't a group who settles on hamburgers and hot dogs once a week just to get together. Though I wonder how long this pomp and circumstance of the tradition will remain if their numbers continue to swell. I think it's only a matter of time, but what do I know?

The doorbell rings while I'm still folding silver linen napkins. Adel streaks across the living room to answer the door. It amazes me how quickly she has adapted to her unfamiliar environment. Another shriek comes from the hall when it's opened, and Emelia tumbles through the doorway in Adel's arms. The girls roll around on the ground, a pile of spindly arms and legs, as Leo steps over them.

I've quickly caught on to the Small brothers' preferred nicknames, even if Magnus refuses to use them. It makes it that much sweeter when he calls me Jo. He is free with the endearments for Adela's and Emelia, so I'm not sure why he is so against using them for his siblings.

Once Leo steps through into the apartment it's like the seal is broken, and more guests continue to pour through the front door. Winter joins me in the kitchen, setting out the silverware and napkins, as I plate the garlic knots and cilantro lime rice. She's looking especially adorable in a new collection of jewelry that matches her summer floral print dress. I have no doubt she designed it.

Kill and Bash are stoically standing by the windows overlooking The Sound. Our views aren't what Xavier and Winter have in their apartment, but they're leaps and bounds better than what mine used to be.

Teddy has joined in with whatever the girls are playing now. Their shrieks of laughter are joined by deep throaty chuckles. Hugh and Rollie are late, as usual. I can hear Magnus and Leo discussing it by the table.

"I'm sure they're fine, Mag," Leo says.



“I just wish they’d let us know when they’re going to be late. They do this every time,” he gripes.

It’s interesting to see the change in his personality when his siblings are around. The fun-loving character I’ve gotten to know turns into a staunch patriarchal figurehead. He looks so stressed, and I hate it.

Crossing to him, I rub circles around his back. “What happened to My Little Pony guy from a few minutes ago?”

He purses his lips at me. “Adelais is a little girl. My brothers are grown men acting like little boys.”

“Mag, you did your part. It’s time to have faith in what you’ve taught them,” I tell him.

Tucking me under his arm he kisses my hairline. “And how did you get so smart?”

“Just something I remember hearing my father say to my mother once. It’s what I hope to remember when Adel tries to go all wild and free in the next ten years,” I say.

His face loses all color, and I can see he was planning for her to stay little forever. Leo and I burst with laughter at his expression which becomes grumpier with each passing second. He’s acting an awful lot like Killian right now.

“I see you’re working wonders on my big brother,” Leo says. “You’ll let us know when he’s fully humanized, right?”

“Alright, alright, alright!” Magnus grumbles.

“Hey! Who invited Matthew McConaughey?” Hugo shouts from the front door.

Magnus scoffs, “I’m not having you fools over here anymore.”

“Did you hear that everyone? That’s cause for a real celebration!” Roland joins in on the ribbing of his brother.

This could go on for a while once they all get started. I’ve seen it at Sunday dinner before, and I’m not prepared to wait it out this time. “Dinner’s ready,” I interrupt. “Everyone take your seats.”

Adel seats herself between Killian and Magnus, her two new leading men. Emelia claims the seat next to Winter and Bash. The rest of the crowd fills in the spaces in between, and we begin passing the dishes of food clockwise around the table.

“Magnus let you return to work, Johanna?” Xavier asks me.

“Were you under the impression it was his decision?” I retort. Fake sounds of whips cracking and ‘ohs’ reverberate down the table.

“He wouldn’t dare,” Winter chirps, squeezing Xavier’s bicep.

“Winter’s right,” Magnus says. “We all know who really runs any house worth its salt.” With that, he flashes Xavier the stink eye. He has told me how he worries about Winter no matter how much he likes Xavier. It’s hard for him to let go.

This group is so easily diverted. “To answer your question, Xavier, yes, I am back to work on light duty. It’s mostly charting and intake work, but I’ve missed the rush of the hospital these last few weeks.”

The conversation dissolves as small discussions break out. Dinner receives several compliments that Magnus directs my way. He’s gracious and steadfast at my side. He jokes and smiles even when he follows it up with earnest questions or by trying to fill a need. This is the man I’ve gotten to know. I wish I could get him to show his goofy side more often.

### *Goals.*

“Momma, can Emelia come over this week? We are making a dance,” Adel asks me with a mouth full of rice. We’re still working on the swallow-before-you-speak thing.

“That sounds like a question for Magnus and her dad, sweetheart.”

“Can she?” She turns her puppy dog eyes on the two men. She even sticks out her bottom lip and wobbles her chin. It’s her begging face, but I call her a gerbil whenever I see it.

The smile that lights Magnus's face is luminous. He runs a hand through her long locks. "I think that sounds great, kiddo."

"Emelia, Dadda said yes!" she yells down the table at the other little girl, and the whole room goes silent, except for the two small voices.

"That's okay, right Dad?" Emelia asks Leo.

I can feel the eyes of all the adults on Magnus and me. He squeezes my thigh under the table, reassuring me that we will handle this. I have no idea what to do. Thank goodness for Leo.

He clears his throat and looks at his daughter. "Yeah, that sounds great. Your uncle and I will talk about it later." It's clear *it* isn't just the dance party.

Killian scans the still quiet room, over the bouncing little girls, and says to me, "Well that was unexpected."

Leave it to Kill to sum up that awkward moment so succinctly. We'd had the conversation about who Magnus was, and I thought that would be the last of it for a while. I guess Adel took that to mean she'd do what she felt was right—per usual.

My little girl dances to the beat of her own drum. I just hope Magnus can hear the rhythm. Little crinkles by his eyes show excitement, but the tightness of his lips speak of apprehension.

We have talked about our dreams for the future. I know that a family is something he always dreamed of even though he thought it would never happen for him. We've also been really open about our fears and hesitations. Things have happened so quickly between the two of us that we both worry it's only lust—infatuation.

Secretly, I know it's so much more.

The silverware stops scraping, shoulders lean back in chairs, and satisfied groans fill the air. The food is gone, which will make clean up even easier. Pushing back from the table, I begin to clear plates with my one good hand. It's my chance to

hide the heat in my cheeks that still lingers from Adel's earlier proclamation.

Magnus sets down another stack of plates next to mine on the counter. He bumps his shoulder into me. "It's okay. I'll talk to her at bedtime tonight."

"What if we crush her?" I plead.

His long fingers on my chin, coax me to face him. "Jo, it's going to be okay. I'll do whatever it takes to convince you of that." His stance is firm, both physically and emotionally. My eyelashes flutter on my cheeks. The open floor plan of the apartment means we don't have the privacy I want right now. If we did, I know I'd have already felt his lips on mine. "I promise I'll talk to her. Don't let this be a roadblock for us."

Straightening my shoulders and raising my chin, I summon all my strength and release a deep breath. "It's fine. It's going to be fine. It's all fine."

"Did you just quote a meme?" Magnus asks.

That does it. Laughter erupts from deep in my chest.

"Get out of here. You cooked, and cooks don't clean in our family. I'll help the old man clean up," Kill breaks into our reverie.

"Two years. There's only two years difference between us, Killian," Magnus grouses.

I step away as the two brothers—the two leaders of the family—start a new spat, and head back to the rest of the dinner party.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### *Magnus*

The cashier smiles sweetly at Adel as she slides gummy snacks, chocolate donuts, and Lucky Charms onto the conveyor belt.

“Special shopping trip with Dad?” the lady asks her.

“Yes! He said I could have whatever I wanted for my dance practice tonight. Isn’t he the best?” Adelais blathers out in her adorable, stilted speech.

The cashier looks at me with raised eyebrows when I shrug my shoulders. I don’t correct the woman. Besides, I’m not always this irresponsible with Adelais’s eating, but Johanna is working a longer shift today which leaves me to hang out with the rugrat. It was the perfect opportunity for Leopold to bring Emelia over to play. I invited Killian too. I need to speak to my brothers about what transpired at Sunday dinner. Plus, it gives us the chance to play a little music together. The girls will probably love dancing to live music instead of recorded stuff the whole time.

I did grab a few extra groceries to make a proper meal. I think Leopold would have my head if I didn’t. He’s the foodie of our family. Leopold manages a restaurant, but his true passion is cooking. He might not even let me do the cooking tonight. It doesn’t matter whose kitchen it is; he has trouble staying out of it.

Tossing the groceries in the backpack I brought, I take Adelais’s hand to make the walk back home. It doesn’t matter how long the girls have been living with me now, I still see apology in Johanna’s expression every time she asks if I can hang out with Adelais when she has something to do like

work, and every time, I assure her that I love doing it. It's not a burden. It's not babysitting. I love every second of it. I suppose that's telling of how all-in I am with this relationship.

This is what I want to talk to my brothers about. Every day I'm fighting the urge to push our relationship along versus giving her plenty of space and time to let things grow in the way she needs. I can't imagine the trauma she is still working through from both her recent attack and the ones in the past. Besides, I don't even know if I'm what she really wants for the long haul. It's possible these intense feelings I have are still one-sided. I'm not prepared for that.

Adelais chatters about everything she sees on our walk. She tells me about her favorite pieces of community art and points out every new piece of graffiti she notices. She tells a woman at the crosswalk how much she loves her polka-dotted dress. Adel even stops to dance in a circle for a moment next to a man playing the harmonica.

As I take in the joys of childhood, my mind continues to turn over the problem of my relationship with her mother. It's not that Johanna acts cold or indifferent toward me, but there are moments when I feel she is holding back. We've talked about her fear of jumping in too fast. She worries about confusing Adelais, though I think that ship has sailed. I've been open with her about what I see in our future. What we haven't settled on is how far into the future we see our relationship going together.

"Is that what you're wearing for dance practice?" I ask Adelais when we set down our groceries in the kitchen.

She looks down at her little romper with a tense expression. She is adorable. "I think I need to change." She takes off down the hall like a firework, lighting up every new space she enters.

I have no idea what she's going to come out wearing, but I can't wait to see. She'll have a long explanation for it, teaching me new names for pieces of women's clothing. Winter and Emelia have been the only women in my life for so long, and neither of them have ever felt the need to teach me

anything about fashion. If anything, these last few weeks have given me a serious appreciation for what Leopold does as a single dad.

Taking the phone from my pocket I start a Spotify Daily Mix over the apartment speaker system before putting the groceries away. I'll do a light meal for dinner. The five of us don't require anything too formal to hang out. I need to start cooking because they'll be here soon, and a hungry Killian is an even grumpier Killian.

Placing several strips of lemon pepper chicken in the oven to bake, I move to the sink to wash the arugula and blackberries. This will be the perfect hearty summer salad, even Leopold won't be able to complain.

Adelais enters the kitchen wearing a new dress. I listen to her explanation of how the dress is a *spiny one* that also has a ballerina on it as I break the blue cheese into crumbles. Her logic makes perfect sense to me. When she asks to help, I set her to shelling pistachios. The concentration it requires from her puts a tiny v between her eyebrows like I've seen on her mother before.

The last thing to do before the chicken is done is to mix up the honey mustard dressing. My babbling sous chef has moved on to her favorite parts of summer. I've spent so much time with her now that I probably understand eighty-five to ninety percent of what she says. Johanna tells me all the time how much her speech has improved in the last year. I try to parcel out every word as I throw the ingredients into another mixing bowl: stone-ground mustard, honey, rice vinegar, olive oil, shallots, and a touch of salt and pepper. A quick spin of the immersion blender does the trick. Leopold may be the chef of the family, but I'm just as capable of using the Internet as the next guy.

When I stepped in to help my brothers get through the last few years of high school and college after our parents passed, and then again when Winter came along, I learned a thing or two about feeding people. Teenage boys *never* stop eating. Neither do twenty-something year old men, come to think of it.

A knock at the door sends Adelais scurrying with a fist full of nuts. Killian steps through, bending to pick up the little girl with one arm while holding a bag with the other. He spins in a fast circle making her giggle fiercely and tuck her face into his neck. My brother struggles to connect with adults most of the time, but those issues don't trickle into his relationships with children. I think it's because he can excuse them for their silliness. He doesn't tolerate much from adults.

"Food almost ready?" he asks as he sets the bag on the counter.

"I hafta take the shells off the nuts. Help me so it's done faster," Adel commands him.

He takes a bottle of wine and a bottle of Martinelli's sparkling cider out of the bag before he sits down next to her to work. Nodding in thanks to my brother, I turn to take the chicken from the oven. I join the two at the island to cut the strips to smaller chunks on a cutting board and add them to the salad bowl. Between the three of us, we have all the ingredients in the bowl, ready to be tossed with dressing as soon as Leopold and Emelia arrive.

"Want to help me with the piano now, little one?" Killian asks Adelais. Her bubbly smile lights up as she jumps from her bar stool to cross to our instruments.

I take the opportunity to lean back against the counter and watch the pair together. Adelais is such a happy child. Everyone she comes in contact with is infected without her trying; it's clear Johanna is a wonderful mother. I can't fathom what it's like being a single parent, but I also can't imagine walking away from my child either. It makes me angry every time I think about men like Alastair, both for what he did to Johanna, and for leaving Adelais to spend so many years without a father ... not that he would have been much of one.

This time I answer the knock at the door to find Leopold with his own bag, and an equally adorably dressed Emelia. I side arm hug my brother before giving my niece the same treatment Killian gave Adelais. She throws her hands up in laughter as I spin her in circles. My brother goes straight to the



fridge to put his items away. From my place by the door with Emelia it looked like ice cream and some kind of cake. I'll have to peek in a few minutes.

"You make this, bro?" Leopold asks using the bear claws to toss the salad in the homemade dressing.

I set Emelia down so she can join her new friend and uncle at the piano. "Of course. Does it meet your standards?"

He's trying to make a Chef Ramsey face, but he can't pull it off, not with me anyway. "It'll do."

Crossing to the kitchen, I give his shoulder a mock-punch. "And what did you bring?" I ask, opening the fridge.

*Mmm, tiramisu!*

"Can we eat now?" Killian asks as his fingers move through "Isn't She Lovely." He is such a cheeseball. One of these days, those little girls are going to *out* their sweet uncle to the rest of the world. The girls, who are usually bouncing off the walls, sit mesmerized on either side of Killian on the bench as he plays effortlessly.

Leopold and I take it upon ourselves to plate the salad for the girls. Killian might be the one complaining about being hungry, but he's the last one to the kitchen. The five of us sit at one end of my large dining table. Even a party of five can feel small and intimate at a table as large as mine.

"Dad, can Adelais and I pick a song for our dance after dinner to practice our moves while you guys learn to play it?" Emelia asks.

"That would be so cool!" squeals Adelais.

"That may be a tall order," Leopold says.

Killian stabs his fork into his salad more aggressively than required. "Oh, come on, Leo. You know we can do it. Let the girls have their fun." He doesn't even look up from his plate.

My eyes bounce back and forth as I watch the conversation progress with the girls becoming increasingly excited with each of Killian's pronouncements. I can't decide if he wants to

be part of their fun that much or if he's just enjoying winding Leopold up.

Adelais eats just about anything you put in front of her, and because Emelia has Leopold for a father, so does she. The girls finish their chicken salad quickly, clear their plates, and take off for the bedrooms. I've learned it's not always so easy, so when they eat and clean up after themselves without having to be asked, I recognize it for the blessing it is.

"Okay, so what's this *Dadda* thing about?" Killian asks the moment Adelais's door clicks shut.

I take a moment to sip my drink before answering. "Right to it, huh?"

"We've already been here an hour, Mag," Leopold says.

Running my hands over my face and through my beard, I release a deep sigh. "I know. Okay. Well, I don't know. I ..."

Leopold knocks his knuckles on the table. "Whoa, slow down I can see you spiraling. Start with Adel calling you 'Dadda.'"

Nodding, I meet my brothers' eyes. "She saw me kiss Jo and asked if I was her dad. We had a whole discussion with her about it, and I thought it was settled, at least for the time being. We were just as shocked as the rest of you when she said that on Sunday."

"Did you talk to her about it again?" asks Killian.

"Of course. She told us it just felt right and handed me the book she wanted me to read for bedtime. End of discussion. I'm not sure Jo knows what to do about it anymore than I do," I say.

Leopold tops off my wine glass before asking, "Well, do you want it to change?"

I take a moment to contemplate his question. This whole time I've only thought about it in terms of what I *should* do, not what I *want* to do. Being called Dad is something I've always dreamed of. "No, I don't want it to change. I like it."

Leopold flexes his eyebrows at my response, and Killian gruffs a “Well then ...”

“I guess it’s not an issue. Congratulations, Daddy. It’s a girl!” Leopold teases.

My open palm meets the back of his head. “Knock it off. This is not something I ever expected or planned for.”

Leopold’s jovial tone sobers. “It’s insightful, actually. If I ever meet someone else, this is what it will be like for them.”

“Maybe they’ll have kids, too, and you’ll both be in trouble,” Killian chimes in.

I gloss right over that comment. “Are you ready for that?” I ask Leopold.

He leans back in his seat, stretching. With how much he works and does to keep up with Emelia, I’m not sure how he’s even still awake. “About as ready as you were for Johanna and Adel. I don’t really have time to think about any of that right now. Enough about me. Can we talk about what it means that you call her Jo?”

“Well, he likes her,” Killian says.

Leopold knocks his knuckles a few more times. “Is that all it is, Mag? You like her?”

“I don’t know. Guys, I’ve never been so confused about a woman before.” I scrub my face again before sliding my fingers through my hair. “I like working with her. I love having her in my home. She’s funny and sweet. Talking to her is as easy as breathing. And when she lets me kiss her ... Besides, it’s hard to even remember what it was like before Tornado Adelais ran this apartment. My fingers trace down the back of my neck, smoothing the ends of my short hair as the unfinished statement hangs heavy in the air.

“So, what’s the problem?” Killian asks, taking another sip of his drink. “You’re clearly in love with her, with both of them. Sounds like wedded bliss to me. Yadda, yadda, yadda. Not like she’s some pesky woman driving you nuts.”

Leopold shoots him pursed lips. “He’s not wrong, Mag, even if he stated it in a less than stellar way. I’m really happy for you!” He claps a hand on my shoulder.

“But what if it doesn’t work? What if she leaves? What if we break that little girl’s heart in the fallout?” I ask all my biggest fears.

“Drama,” Killian scoffs.

Now it’s Leopold’s turn to cuff Killian in the back of the head. “Why are you here?” he asks him before turning back to me. “Those are all valid concerns. As a single parent, they’re concerns I would have too. However, you’re putting the cart before the horse here big brother. What if it all works out? What if you die in each other’s arms one day? What if Adel remains blissfully happy with you as her father? You can’t keep living in this limbo of self-doubt. Love is a risk, but it is well worth it with the right person,” my younger brother says, and I’m reminded of the love he had with his wife.

That was the forever kind of love. It’s been eight years since she died, but he’s never said anything about dating or another woman. I’ve never pried; it seems like too private and delicate of a conversation for me to have with him. I’ll leave that to Winter.

I nod my understanding. “Thanks, brother,” I say to Leopold and turn a scornful eye on Killian, “You, too, I guess.”

He barks out one sharp laugh.

“Roar!” yell two little screaming girls as they skip, hop, and jump down the hallway. “We want to dance to *Roar* by Katy Perry,” Emelia says.

With that, the three of us head to our instruments as the girls play the song over the sound system for us to get used to. We spend the next hour working out the notes and changing the arrangement to our liking as they flit and dance about the living room.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### *Johanna*

**W**hile helping a family do the intake for an older woman having severe abdominal pains, I take in the love of her children. They're here with her on what is probably one of her worst days. They help answer questions she doesn't understand or doesn't hear. Her son explains to her what we'll be doing to help her. It's refreshing to see a family member be firm, yet calm with their loved one who is either confused or stubborn.

We see that a lot in the older patients that come in. They are either confused, stubborn, or just can't hear us. My guess is that it's a combination of all three. It's always helpful when we have someone who can be a sort of interpreter for both us and them. That's not always the case though.

Many times, having the family present makes the process harder. They either don't understand the situation themselves or are too emotional to be helpful. Emotions are always big in the ER. There is a lot of fear, sadness, confusion, and even anger. When they're angry, I have to remind myself that nine times out of ten it's not really me they're upset with. It's another piece of our profession we have to navigate as part of a care team.

"How's the typing?" Magnus's deep voice whispers in my ear as the son tries to convince his father to eat something while we care for his mother.

The cast is getting easier to navigate, but it still prevents me from doing a lot of the aspects of the job. I'm getting a little tired of all the secretarial work, but there's not much I can do about it. I'll be free in a couple more weeks.

“Slow, but it’s better than sitting at home,” I lean my head back against the chair to look up at him.

“You’re doing great, Jo. Lunch?” he asks, pressing a kiss to the middle of my forehead.

My face scrunches at his blatant show of affection as I think about his offer, “I don’t know. I was hoping for a date with a hot doctor...”

“Cheeky,” he says with one more peck before leaving me to my work.

He’s been freer with his affections this week. It’s thrilling to share our relationship so openly. It feels more real, less like an act or an idea.

“Handsome,” says the older lady sitting before me. “You better hold on to that one.”

My smile is automatic. “You don’t think he’s too old for me?” I tease.

The woman cackles, though a wince crosses her expression as she moves a hand to her abdomen. “I’ve been around a long time. My husband and I have been married for almost seventy years. What I can tell you is that all that stuff doesn’t matter. All that’s important is that you love and respect one another, even on the hard days, and I don’t think that man will *ever* be hard to look at,” she says with a wink.

“Thank you, Mrs. Forrester. I’ll keep that in mind. Now, what’s say we get you into a room, so we can try to get this pain under control, yeah?”

Our private moment is broken as her daughter interrupts to ask if she can get her mother water or anything to make her feel better. I can tell she’s the type that hates to be helpless. She would feel better being in motion, doing something to improve the situation.

“Why don’t you help me take your mother to her room?” I suggest, and her brow smooths slightly.

The morning moves much the same way. One patient after another. Some patients come with family or friends, but more

often than I would like, walk in alone. Paramedics bring in a steady stream of patients from accidents or medical emergencies that prevent the patients from bringing themselves in. We even have a couple of *involuntaries* brought in by officers.

I'm still doing a lot of the more menial tasks; delivering heat and ice packs, food and water or ice chips, grabbing extra blankets and grip socks. It gives me a chance to see more of the comfort side of the ER when so often I have been focused on the procedures. To be effective, medical attention requires both.

At lunch-time, I find Magnus finishing up stitches on a man's finger. Looks to me like he's lucky he didn't lose that finger. Magnus is so good at reading his patients. He has a way of knowing what kind of emotional as well as physical care they need. It looks like these two are dude-bros already.

"That your lady, Doc?" the man asks him when I pop in through the curtain.

Magnus smiles at me. "Sure is, and I'm going to take my all-too-short lunch break with her."

I'm not usually a blusher, but I can feel the heat in my cheeks right now. "Let me know if you need anything and take your time. I'll be ready when you are," I say before stepping back out of the curtained divide of the non-private room.

"Lucky you," I hear the man say.

Minutes later, we walk hand-in-hand to the cafeteria. The food isn't super high quality, but it's pretty good for cafeteria food. It's so convenient when we don't have time to pack lunches, which happens more often than I would like when trying to keep up with Adel and our busy schedules. Sometimes I'm just too tired to pack them. I'd rather spend the extra five to ten minutes with Adel or Magnus instead of in the kitchen.

"What do you think Adel is up to right now?" Magnus asks as he pulls a chair out for me at a small table.

The laugh that bubbles from my lips is based purely on the image in my head. “Oh, I’m sure she and Lara are drawing pictures for your home office. They’re probably full of glitter and stickers. She’s probably pulled all of your books off the shelves and clogged the toilet.” His frown grows. “I bet Lara used all the dishes to cook macaroni and cheese for lunch and left them in the sink.”

“Okay. Okay! Stop it!” he mutters, shivering at the perceived horror.

I’ve learned that my confirmed bachelor is a bit of a neat freak. The first couple of weeks he followed Adel around picking up every spare toy and scrap of trash. His face would get all red when we ran late for anything. We’re all adapting. My daughter and I are doing our best to be a little tidier and more considerate of Magnus’s preferences. Magnus is learning to relax and trust that we will clean up any of the messes we make in due time.

Another laugh slips out. “I’m sure they’ve already been to the park and watched Bluey. She probably asked for chicken nuggets for lunch. They’re having a grand ol’ time as always.”

His smile is back. “I bet she’s trying to convince Lara to practice her dance moves. She and Emelia really planned it out the other night.”

*By the time I walked in the door, the three brothers were banging away on their instruments and the girls were mirroring one another’s moves.*

*Twists, jumps, and jazz hands made up the core of their dance. Maybe we need to think about actually putting them into classes. I’ve learned that Emelia loves sports and being active—thanks to Leopold—and I’m sure Adelais would love it too. It’s something I want to talk to Magnus about. Adding more to our schedule would require a commitment from both of us.*

*“Wow! Look at my graceful ballerina,” I said as Adelais spun right into Emelia who lifted her arms into the air. The*



*crash is spectacular and adorable, leaving the girls in a fit of giggles. "Ouch, okay, Prima, time to get ready for bed."*

*Within minutes, we'd all said our hellos and goodbyes, and I had my new little family all to myself once again.*

"You have to admit that it's absolutely adorable. I was thinking that we should get her in some actual classes," I tell him.

He takes a bite of his sandwich, chews, and swallows. I love the way he gives my ideas real thought before answering. "I was thinking the same thing. Has she ever done anything like that before?" I shake my head around my own meal. "Then we should look into it. It would be fun if she and Emelia could take them together, but I'm not sure they would be in the same age group."

The girls are three years apart, and it seems that most age groups tend to split right around seven. It's something about kids who have been in school before and those who haven't or have only been in kindergarten. Children who have sat in a classroom with more strict expectations are able to handle more in other settings as well.

"I think she'd enjoy it, even if she wasn't with Emelia. She's getting so much better at making friends now that her speech isn't as big of an obstacle. She's less self-conscious, and other kids are more willing to try to work through what she says to them."

The steam rising from his cup of coffee obscures his face momentarily. "You're right. She will love it. I can ask Leopold if he has heard of any good dance schools close by. He gets a lot of information on extracurriculars from the school."

"You realize this means we will have to work together to get her to and from classes? The reason I've never put her in anything like this before was because I couldn't handle the time constraints," I tell him. I don't want to beat around the bush with this one. This will be one of our first big co-

parenting decisions, so he needs to be on board with my expectations.

“Hmm. Yes, I can see what you mean, but I’d love to take her. I think she is going to be so cute in little leotards and tights. Of course, you are going to have to do all the hair and makeup.” He runs a hand through his beard. “That stuff is still beyond me. Winter was old enough to do all that by herself when she came to us, and Leopold has always done wonders with Emelia. I never had a need to learn it.”

Taking his hand in mine, I ask, “Do you want to? Learn I mean? I can teach you some easy things like ponytails and braids.”

What a difference. I can’t imagine a single one of those men I dated this summer wanting to spend time at a child’s dance class, let alone learning how to do hair. I didn’t even tell all of them I had a child. It just didn’t seem worth it if I knew there wouldn’t be more than one date.

I remember when my father tried to curl my hair for school once when my mother had to leave home early. That day I earned a painful dark red stripe on my forehead. He didn’t try anything too fancy after that. What he did do was ensure he always had a brush and hair tie for me should I need it. That’s all I ever really needed.

It’s novel. This relationship seems more like an alliance than an autocracy. Obviously, the time I spent with Alastair became progressively more one-sided the longer we were together, until he felt he had the right to physically demand things from me. Then there were the one-and-done dates I went on that would’ve required me to be a mother figure to a grown man. That wasn’t appealing either.

I didn’t know it could be like this. At least, not for me. I’m still not convinced it won’t all turn to crap. If I dwell on every negative thing, I know I’ll ruin what we have all by myself. Cuts heal, bruises disappear, but trauma taints your life forever. It’s my life’s gloriously sad motto.

“Sure, I do,” Magnus says, bringing me back to the moment. “It’s another way I can care for my two girls.

Besides, I think she'll really get a kick out of it." He flashes a Cheshire smile.

My lips curl up. "Then I guess we've planned our next date. How would you feel about watching the movie *Hairspray* at the same time?" I chuckle at his groan.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### *Magnus*

**A**del spent the entire weekend with her grandparents, allowing Jo and me three whole days and two nights alone together. It was a major turning point for us. Sure, we've been on dates, and we've had time together while Adel slept. What we haven't had is a significant stretch of time to be two adults with no other responsibilities or interruptions.

We took advantage, and it was everything I've been dreaming of for months now. My girl is beautiful with her long blond hair, jade green eyes, and strong build. Even though she is young, I knew she wasn't breakable. She's not the kind of woman I'd have to be careful of my every move with. I thought being with her would be special. I thought she would be passionate. I thought the connection between Johanna and myself would grow even stronger after finally coming together physically. I was right, but it was so much more.

Mentally, I've flipped and flopped so many times about our relationship. I've acted like a teenage boy, not a grown man. But my heart ... my heart has always known. If only I'd listened, I would have known from the first moment I saw her rushing into the emergency department for her daughter with a broken arm. Sheer stubbornness on my part has created a speed bump where one wasn't needed. I could have closed this gap between us so much faster if only I had trusted myself to let the unimportant things go.

I make a few more notes on the case in front of me and lean back. A severe MVA (motor vehicle accident) came in at the end of my shift. It took some time to get the patient stable, and then there was still clean up, reports to make, charting to be done, and my own bit of debriefing. It always takes a bit of

time for the adrenalin to wear off after an intense case. It's best for everyone if we do what's necessary to bring ourselves back down to earth before stepping back into the real world outside of the hospital doors.

Johanna is still here too. She isn't back to full duty yet, so she's probably stocking the supply carts from the closet, filing, or something of the like. She isn't one to sit idly by when there's

stuff to be done around here. We drove in together today, so I know she is still here. There's no way the woman is sitting around somewhere waiting for me. She's incapable of sitting still.

I shoot off a quick text, "5-10 min. Ready?"

"Headed your way." I read her response as soon as my phone chimes.

Just then an all-call announcement comes across the hospital PA system. "Code Silver. Repeat: Code Silver."

An expletive hisses through my lips. Code Silver, not to be confused with a Silver Alert for missing elderly, indicates an armed intruder or hostage situation. It's not a code I thought I would ever hear. We don't give locations, and we're supposed to lock down whatever room we're in as quickly as possible until authorities release us. It's supposed to make it harder on intruders to find what they're looking for or to harm more people. The staff just completed the yearly online training a few weeks ago, so I know it's fresh in everyone's minds.

What the code doesn't do is take into account that we're first responders sworn to help others. I know that Johanna feels the same way, which is what terrifies me even more. My girl is out there in this dangerous situation. Code Silver is not issued lightly, as shutting down an emergency department can be life threatening to patients inside.

Yanking open the door to my office, I sprint down the hall toward Johanna's last known location, checking that patient rooms are locked as I go. Her text said she was headed my way, which means I should bump into her any moment. The

unit is large, but it's not like I'll have to cross the whole hospital to find her.

That's when I hear it—two quick pops.

Growing up in the wilderness of the Pacific Northwest and spending a lot of time out at the mine gave me experience with firearms. I'm not an avid hunter by any means, but I have done it more than once in my life. Those were definitely gunshots.

Three more room doors are locked. I move on after each one. I'm concerned for my patients and coworkers, but Johanna is still at the forefront of my mind.

A nurse comes sprinting around the corner with a look of horror on her face. Tears streak through her makeup. She is maybe thirty, and I remember she just returned from maternity leave. She barrels into my chest, burying her face in my shoulder. I pull her over to the nearest door, grab my key and open the door before pushing her in.

I am usually the senior attending physician on shift, so I have a set of keys in my office that I grabbed on the way out, knowing I might need them. It was a risk. The keys will let me lock and unlock doors from the outside for safety, but if I lose these keys to the intruder, everyone is in trouble. I just have to make sure that doesn't happen.

The Chief will be angry if he ever finds out, but I know he's doing the same thing right now.

Another nurse comes around the corner just as I'm turning to continue my search. This nurse has a cast and the most beautiful golden braid I've ever seen. A collective gasp leaves both of us as we fall into one another's arms.

"I need to get you somewhere safe," I say against her hair.

She nods, and we move back toward my office gripping hands. Before we can get there, we hear another round of pops and accompanying screams. Whoever they are, they're closer now than they were before. There's an on-call room down the next hallway that we have a better chance of getting to than my office or the lounge.

Finding blood in the hall, I use the key to get us into the locked room to find two terrified coworkers. Jake, another ER physician, is bleeding from his calf. An orderly, Easton, is applying pressure to the wound, but I can tell he is freaking out. Johanna and I move immediately to help. I apply a tourniquet, while Jo helps to get him situated in a better position. The gunshot wound isn't life threatening as long as we can stop the bleeding. I think he will be fine, but it makes this all that much more real.

“What happened, Jake?” I ask.

“Didn't see the shooter, just felt the shot that took me down. Thank goodness for Easton here,” looking to the orderly who is pale white, “who dragged me in the room and locked the door. Hearing your key in the lock about killed me,” he says.

Nodding, I'm trying to find my equilibrium between doctor and coworker. I know how important it is to keep them all calm, but Jake is a good doctor. He knows exactly what's happening right now, so there's no need to give him anything in layman's terms. More of my friends could be out there, needing help. I can't stay here.

“Johanna is going to stay here to help Easton with your leg. I know she's down a hand, but between the two of them, you'll be just fine,” I tell him, gesturing between the pair.

“Wait, what?” Jo squeaks.

“I can't leave them out there,” I tell her. “There are undoubtedly more people who need my help.”

She shakes her head fiercely. “*I* need you. You can't go back out there.”

I squeeze her hand where her death grip clutches my forearm. “You've got this. You don't need me here.”

“That's not what I mean, Magnus! You are not on the SWAT team. There is someone out there with a gun. Why are you downplaying this danger? Isn't this proof enough that this isn't a game!” She whisper-shouts, near hysterics as she gestures wildly at Jake.

I pull her back into my arms, holding her tight. “I know, Jo. I took an oath to help and that’s what I intend to do.” Her whole body shakes. “Listen, one day I’m going to die; today is not going to be that day. I want to make sure it’s not that day for as many people as I can. Promise me you’ll stay here to make sure Jake and Easton are okay.” I lean down to whisper just for her, “Jake needs you, and I think Easton might go into shock.”

“Why can’t we go together? We’re a team,” she says with pleading eyes.

“No,” I say too quickly. “You know why I can’t let you out there. If anything happened to you, it would gut me.”

She steps back so she can look at me more fully. Jo puts her hands on her hips and squares her shoulders. “And what about you, Magnus? What do you think it would do to me if something happened to you?” she cuts back.

Truthfully, there’s no good answer to this problem and arguing is getting us nowhere. I can feel the other two staring at us. “I think we should all stay put,” Easton says, and Jake readily agrees.

Jo and I turn to face the pair before turning back to one another. “What about Adel?” I ask her.

“She can’t lose her father,” Johanna says.

A moan slips out. She knows that’s not what I was getting at. What I said before is true. I don’t think I’m going to die today, but if something does happen to me, Johanna and Adela have survived this long without me before. They’ll be okay.

“You still have a cast,” I try a different tack. “You may not be able to help as much as you’d like. It would be better for you to stay here and help where you can.”

She doesn’t like that either, but her face falls in defeat at my reminder of her injuries. I know Johanna hates that she isn’t back to herself yet. Pulling her back into my arms, I kiss her, heedless of the others in the room. This is a dangerous situation no matter what assurances I give her. There’s no way



I'm *not* going to kiss her the way I want to before I go out there.

“Come back to me,” she demands.

“I'd do anything for you, Jo,” punctuating my statement with another kiss.

When I turn back to the others, they're giving us somber expressions. I lay my hand on the door handle and say, “Take care of one another, lock the door behind me, and do not come out until the all-clear is sounded.” Two stoic nods and one stern expression look back at me.

I listen at the door for a moment before peeking my head out to scan the hall. There's blood everywhere, but I don't see any bodies—alive or otherwise. I slide out of the room and down the hallways I know so well. Occasional bursts of gun fire bring my slow steps to a stuttering stop, trying to pinpoint the direction of the danger.

The next corner takes me to the main lobby. This must have been where the intruder entered because there are bodies everywhere. I've never seen anything like it. A lot of horrible things come through the doors of this emergency room but being on the scene is a different experience. I check every person; those I know and those I don't. There's nothing I can do for any of them.

New screams echo down the hall from the back of the department.

I didn't think about securing the patients not already in rooms. We tend to have patients waiting in hallways for an open room, their next treatment, or for any number of other reasons. It's crazy, but that's how busy our department is. We don't have enough space. I have no idea if the rest of the staff managed to move them into rooms in time. There's nothing I can do here in the lobby. I left Johanna alone in that on-call room to help, so that's what I need to do. I have to get to those patients.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### *Johanna*

The silence left behind by Magnus is deafening. After the lock clicks shut once more, the only sound is our deep breaths and the pops of gun fire. Whoever they are, they're still out there. Still shooting, and likely killing, my people.

Jake's bleeding has slowed. The bullet wound went all the way through his calf. At least it's not lodged in the bone, but it could still turn bad if he loses more blood or it gets infected. I'm not sure when he was shot, but it couldn't have been too long before we got to the room. Everything happened so fast, and yet it feels like time is dragging.

Easton seems to have calmed since Magnus and I arrived. The color is returning to his face. I think he was afraid of more than just the shooter. Being responsible for another person's life is a terrifying thing. He works here at the hospital, but he doesn't administer medical care. Easton would have only been able to do his best to follow Jake's orders. If the doctor had passed out, Easton would have been all alone with that responsibility.

"How are you feeling, Jake?" I ask.

He raises his eyebrows at me, "Well, I was shot, Johanna."

"I—"

"I'm going to be okay," he waves me off. "We've stemmed the bleeding. Sure, I'd love to have a sterile environment, sutures, and antibiotics, but we're safe here for now. That's actually a whole lot to be happy about."

I nod with a smile that doesn't reach my eyes. "Can I get you anything? I could get to the supply room for whatever you might need. You'd probably scar, but I could stitch you up and get an IV of antibiotics started."

Easton gasps.

"You are not going to take that kind of risk," Jake says. "I want you alive, even if it costs me my leg."

This time I shake my head vigorously at his statement. "The three of us don't know each other well, but you are about to learn quickly that I'm not the sit around and wait type. I can't not help someone who is injured." I turn to Easton. "I will be right back. Keep pressure on the wound, change the dressing if it gets too full of blood, and keep him awake. You've got this."

"Johanna," he rasps.

I lay a hand on his shoulder, looking deep into his eyes. "You've got this!"

Following Magnus's lead, I put my ear to the door to listen before opening it. I don't even know how effective that is with how thick these doors are. The hall is empty except for Jake's blood that is starting to dry and darken in color on the once white floors.

I was just in the supply room less than a half hour ago. It's hard to believe it was only that long ago that I was restocking and counting supplies. The positive is that it means I know exactly where everything I need is without having to search high and low through the whole room.

Creeping down the barren tile floors, I try to keep my gym shoes from squeaking with every step. My destination is not far, but I have no idea what I might see or who I might run into along the way. My mind is running away with how I'll deal with all the possible situations I could encounter. If I find someone else who is injured, I'll have to decide if I can move them, what I can do to help, and how to get back to Jake and Easton with the materials needed to suture Jake's wounds.

Unfortunately, most of my anticipated scenarios don't apply when I come across my first body. They aren't in scrubs, and I don't recognize them. That means they were either a patient or visiting. The gunshot wound to their head indicates they didn't suffer, which is only a small comfort to me as I move past them.

Reaching the supply room door, I release a deep breath I didn't realize I was holding. I'm thankful I didn't come across any more victims. All these images will forever be seared into my mind. The door is locked as always but passing my badge over the scanner will unlock it just the same. It looks like no one thought to shut down the entire system yet, which is good for me, but that means I need to be extra careful among the shelves in here. The armed intruder is still unknown to me, and if it's a disgruntled employee they might still have a working badge.

When I enter the room, the automatic lights flick on. I ensure the door shuts and clicks locked behind me before whispering, "Hello? Is anyone in here?"

*A whispered greeting isn't going to prevent them from shooting you, Johanna!*

I brush the hair from my eyes that has escaped my braid waiting for an answer that doesn't come. I can't fathom the alternative to me being alone. Quickly, I move toward the shelves holding gauze, iodine, IV tubing and needles, and suture kits. It would really be better if I could take a cart but that seems unlikely for this situation. I'm going to have to stick to what I can carry. Medications are kept in a separate locked room, especially the controlled substances, so I'll need to go to the med room to get bags of saline and antibiotics. I'm trying to run through all the checklists and possibilities as I've never done this kind of front-line triage before.

Several more gunshots ring out. They're much more sporadic than they were at the beginning. It makes me sick that I'm still hearing them at all. I wonder where security is and when help will arrive. It's obvious the shooter was here in the ER based on the body I saw and the still audible gun fire, but I

wonder if they are planning on moving into the rest of the hospital.

I have to focus. The most important thing is to stop the blood flow. I know that blood loss is more critical than an infection or even the pain Jake is experiencing right now. The next thing to decide is if going to the med room is worth the risk or if I should go straight back to the on-call room. If I can get there, the medications I can pick up will make this whole operation that much easier. However, if I don't, Jake doesn't receive anything he needs.

What would be nice is if the supply and medication rooms were right next to one another. Unfortunately, that's not the case. The exam rooms are stocked with commonly used supplies and there are carts stationed in strategic places. At shift change, we ensure our areas are fully stocked from the goods in the supply room for the next shift. The medication room is used with much higher frequency and is therefore more central to the unit.

Straightening my shoulders, I make a decision. I can't let Jake die. The first thing I need to do is stitch him up before he loses too much blood. If we get through that, I'll make a second trip for the medications. I need him to walk me through as much as he can before he passes out. I'm more medically trained than Easton, but I'd still rather have a doctor's guidance.

I place my ear to the door to listen for any bangs or footsteps to indicate the intruder might be close. When I hear nothing, I poke my head out of the door for a sweeping look before rushing out. I trace my steps back the way I came. At the corner I slow before barreling into the next hallway. It's where I saw the person on the way here, so I steel myself, knowing I'll have to walk by the body again. Two turns, that's all I have to make to get back to the on-call room. Two turns.

There's a shuffle, like the rustling of fabric that stops me in my tracks. I sneak a look around the corner to see a tall, lanky man. He's facing away from me, so no other details are immediately apparent, but the guns in each of his hands have me scuttling backwards as quickly and quietly as possible. I'll

have to take another path back or wait him out back in the supply room. At least now I know the intruder is male ... unless there's more than one.

*Crap! Why do there have to be so many variables to consider?*

The emergency department has quite a few hallways that make for several twists and turns. It's conceivable that I could wind my way around to where I need to be, but I think the safer option here might be to hide. I know he's close, and I've already seen that he's willing to kill.

I listen as closely as I can for footsteps as I slink back toward the locked room I can get into, praying that he wouldn't be as careful with his steps as me. It would be so much easier if I could hide in one of the rooms I pass along the way, but I know they're locked. I wouldn't want to knock or yell through them right now anyway. He's too close.

The small security light flashes green just as the suction sound of shoes on laminate reaches my ears. I already know that sound will haunt me. It's not quite a squeak but more like Velcro or tape being peeled away. His shoes are sticky with blood as he moves from heel to toe with each step.

I shove through the now unlocked door, trying to close it behind me before he sees me, doing my best to shut the door with the handle turned to avoid the clicking noise. I don't think he was all the way around the corner before I pushed in the room. The locking sound can't be helped, so I move to the side of the door. Everything screaming inside of me is telling me to hide in the back of the room, but from there, I won't be able to hear what's going on in the hall. I need to know if he moves past or if he tries to get in.

My mind runs away with me as I wait. Setting down everything I've just gathered, I grab a scalpel from a bin, preparing to stab him with it should he make it through the locked door. I'm not going down without a fight. If there's a chance I could end this for everyone else, I'm taking it.

Seconds pass. Maybe a minute. My breathing is erratic in the quiet room as adrenaline races through my system. It's like

each new thing I see makes this more and more real. First was the call for lockdown that had me rushing to find Magnus. Then, finding Jake and Easton with all that blood. When I found that body in the hallway, I was gob-smacked. Now, I've seen the killer with my own eyes.

This is not a drill. This is not a video game. This is not someone else's news story.

I hold the scalpel up like a sword or gun by my shoulder, ready to turn and strike. The numbers run through my head. These incidents have become all too common, and the statistics are readily available. I know that most mass shootings end in less than ten minutes. Of course, that means nothing to someone living it, as I now know. I paid special attention to what reports said about hospitals, and roughly four percent of active shooter cases occur in medical facilities.

*Lucky me!*

The door handle just a few feet from me rattles and shakes. What sounds like an open palm strikes the wooden barrier. The sticky footsteps begin to move away as whoever's there doesn't waste their time trying to get in once they've found it's locked.

The rise and fall of my chest slows, but not completely. It's going to be a long time before I can convince my nervous system it's allowed to calm down. I credit my profession for my steady hands that keep the scalpel from shaking under all the stress.

Listening once again at the same door, I wait for the footsteps to disappear. That was terrifying. Almost terrifying enough to have me curled in a ball in the back corner of this room until someone finds me, but I refuse to give up on getting back to Jake. I promised I would be back to help before I left, and I will. There might be others out there who need my help; however, I know for sure where one patient is, and I'm determined to do my job as both a nurse and a friend to help him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### *Magnus*

The halls are deserted of staff and patients alike. My team has done an excellent job of locking things down, even though the lobby shows how quickly things can go horribly wrong. I can only hope the halls were cleared and secured the way we have drilled in the past.

Knowing my staff, I'm probably not the only one out here looking to help either. I can't even be certain Johanna stayed where I left her, no matter how much I pleaded before I left. Unsurprisingly, she never promised that she would stay put. She's so independent and strong. I'd never want to change that about her, but it still makes me crazy.

On my way to the back of the unit, I come across the staff lounge. The handle has clearly been shot at, and the door is cracked open. It's a chilling sight. Whatever is on the other side of that door cannot be good, but I have to check in the same way I've been checking every other door. This just happens to be the first one I've come across that is open.

The lights blaze on the lockers housing our street clothes. A small seating area with chairs and sofas is situated near a counter with assorted kitchen appliances and a vending machine. Those once gray chairs are now stained red with the blood of their occupants, and a couple more colleagues are down by the lockers.

I don't know if the shooter planned it, but he came right around shift change. Twice as many doctors and nurses are here, trading places and picking up where others left off. From the mangled door and the massacre before me, it looks like the shooter is seeking out hospital staff.



Doing my due diligence, I check the wounds and hope for a pulse on each body. I'm not exactly in the position to save anyone with a critical GSW, but if I find anyone with similar injuries to Jake's, I might be able to help. There are casings and bullet holes everywhere. It doesn't look like the shooter was aiming so much as spraying bullets across the space at roughly chest level. My heart breaks, knowing there is nothing I can do for these people.

Four more lives added to the death toll.

Footsteps race by outside the door as more screams sound from somewhere in the unit. My goal was the back end of the department, and I need to get back on track. I'm useless here. As I leave the lounge, pulling the door closed, even though it won't lock, I hear another gunshot.

I can't remember what time it was when the Code Silver went out, but it seems like it's been hours, though I know it's probably been more like minutes. There's been so much death and destruction in one fell swoop. It's inconceivable how much longer this could last. Of course, I don't have all the facts. I don't know how many shooters there are or what their motive is. It's possible they barricaded doors, preventing help from getting in. The intruder may have thoroughly planned out this attack, or perhaps they're flying by the seat of their pants.

My hair is already disheveled when I run my fingers through it. My beard feels unkempt as I scrub at my face. It feels so confining that I might have to shave it all off when I get out of this. Looking down, I find my hands are caked in blood from when I checked the dead, which means my hair and face now are too. I'm going to look like some Viking warrior to whomever sees me... or maybe just the walking dead. My scrubs and sneakers look like I've been through a bad code. This is when I would normally take the time to shower and change before returning to the floor. That's not an option now.

I'm numb.

My body is fighting itself, and I can feel the results of the war—shock, hopelessness, fear, adrenaline, and the desire to

keep moving. My brain isn't processing it all, so as a result, I feel like I'm moving on autopilot. I just checked my coworkers, people I've worked alongside for years, for signs of life. My girlfriend is hunkered down with another one of my associates who's fighting for his life. There's still a very real chance I won't survive this attack.

Moving back into the hall, I turn toward the back of the ER in the direction of the last screams I heard. That's still my goal even though each step feels like a mile. Farther down the hall I see another doctor in her white coat helping a nurse lean against the wall. Upon closer inspection she has a graze to her hip and a wound in her shoulder. She took two bullets tonight, but she's still hanging on. Using my key, I usher the two into a room, ensuring the terrified patients inside are well before locking it behind me again. They will be safe in there, and the cabinets have lots of the things Dr. Palino will need to help the injured nurse. This is one of those situations where people really rise to the occasion, so I have a feeling the patients will even jump in to help.

It's amazing to see the kindness of people in dire situations. I have the fortunate, or maybe it's unfortunate, opportunity to witness human behavior on what are often the worst days of their lives. The span of emotions is vast, but far and wide the stories that come out of tragedy are heartwarming. It's not like these people set out to be heroes. They're just as human as the next person, but their compassionate souls are what make all the difference.

Just last week, in fact, I treated a young man for smoke inhalation who had come across a house fire before firefighters arrived. He went into the building and pulled out five children who are all okay because of his efforts. He didn't know these people. He didn't even know if there were people in the building when he found it, but he risked his life on the behalf of others time and again to pull out those kids.

Reaching the back halls of the emergency department, I find three nurses trying to move the last few patients and family members into lockable rooms that are already occupied by others. I rush into the fray, working as quickly and as

quietly as everyone else. Miraculously it seems the shooter hasn't found the area yet. The fact that this place is a bit of a maze might be our only saving grace.

"How many are left?" I ask the nurse to my left.

Outwardly, she is calm, her movements steady, but her eyes are harried. "These are the last two." She gestures to the other bed that the other two nurses are working on.

"Are they alone?"

"Got their relatives to wait in the rooms we're moving them to," another nurse whispers as she hangs an IV bag on a pole attached to the bed.

The patient she's working with is asleep—thank you morphine—but the angry brown and black blisters on his hands and face tell me he was about to be moved to the burn unit. The patient I am helping with has lots of fluids attached to her IV, and the state of her eyes and nose tell me she's pretty ill.

I need to get them, and my nurses to safety. "Okay, let's move," I urge them unnecessarily. We all know the stakes here. Once I ensure the bed is fully in the room, I remind the nurse to shut and lock the door behind me.

"Dr. Small, you cannot mean to go back out there," the nurse says.

"I do, but don't you dare leave this room again. They need you," I say gesturing to the wide-eyed faces in the room around her. I plaster on the comforting and consoling face I use when I'm trying to reassure patients' families.

Back in the hall, an officer with his gun held at his shoulder says, "Sir, you need to return to the room with everyone else. More help will arrive soon." His radio chirps softly on his shoulder every few seconds—the airways are clear except for vital communication. The officer moves on in his search, expecting that I'll follow directions, but I have a job to do just like he does.

I remember seeing him waiting with an *invol* for a blood draw earlier in the evening. Unfortunately, sometimes blood

draws are low priority, and they end up waiting around for a while before we can get to them. Troopers and Seattle PD are around frequently, especially during the night shift. I knew a lot of them by name when I worked that shift back in the day. The night shift was always interesting, and as a bachelor, I didn't mind working it.

Continuing my rounds, I move on to the next door, testing the handle. Each door that doesn't open is reassuring, but those with streaks of blood have me fearing what's on the other side. I can only hope there are medical personnel inside the rooms to help the injured however they can. From what I've already come across, I know the death toll will be high. This murderer is getting what he wants.

The silence is broken by another blast reverberating through the unusually quiet halls. This time, I hear a body hit the floor. The shooter is close, but I need to get to that person as soon as possible in case I can still help them. I creep along the wall, trying to make my footfalls as silent as possible while keeping my ears open for the movement of others. Hopefully, the shooter has moved on.

For the first time since the Code Silver was called, I think of my siblings: Killian, Sebastian, Leopold, Theodore, Hugo, Roland, and Winter. My niece Emelia's sweet little face crosses my mind's eye. Then there's the two girls I haven't stopped thinking about, Johanna and Adalais. If this is it for me, I know I've lived a good life, a fulfilled life made that much sweeter by their love and affection.

*That's what this is. I love them.*

If I make it through this, I won't hesitate to tell them. I want so badly to wrap them in my arms and never let them go again. It's amazing how my life has changed in the span of a single summer. Life has a funny way of messing with your best laid plans.

The unit is a series of squares, making for lots of turns and different hallways. It can be a labyrinth until you become familiar with it. At the next intersection, I peer around the corner to see Doctor Carson on her back holding on to her

stomach. Just weeks ago, she was putting Johanna back together after her traumatic encounter with Alastair. Now, here she is with a GSW to the abdomen. My heart shatters. Without an operating room, there is no way I'll be able to save her from this.

I slide on my knees across the once white flooring into the blood pooling beneath her. Her eyes are open, showing her pain and understanding, and when they focus on me, they widen more.

"I'm so sorry," I say, squeezing her fingers in my hand.

"So'kay," she mutters with a gurgle. A line of blood seeps from her mouth proving she's choking. "You have to go. He's looking for Johanna," she rasps.

"I don't know what to do for—wait, what?" I ask, as what she said fully registered.

Her lashes meet her cheeks for a long second before fluttering open again. "Asked where Johanna was," she says.

"No. No. No. You misheard him. I—"

Panic floods my veins as a lump forms in my throat. It has to be *him*, back to finish what he started. A restraining order is just a piece of paper if the person doesn't care about the consequences. The detective in charge of Johanna's case checked in a few times, but they were never able to find Alastair after we made the report. He disappeared, and the police don't have enough resources to track him down.

The fear must show in my eyes because she squeezes my fingers to get my attention before mouthing her last word, "Go."

## CHAPTER THIRTY

*Johanna*

“**Y**ou can do this, Johanna,” I tell myself out loud.

I’ve decided that trying to get to the meds room is akin to suicide. Having the shooter at the door right next to me put a lot of things into perspective. For a moment there, I wasn’t sure I would be able to go back out there at all, but I’d never forgive myself if Jake died because I didn’t go back to the on-call room.

My shoulders straighten as I take in and release three big breaths in an attempt to settle my nerves. There’s no way that was actually going to work. I crack the door open before exiting. I swear I haven’t done this much sneaking and peeking since playing hide-and-go-seek as a child. That’s what this is—just a much deadlier version.

Based on where I saw the shooter before, I know where he came from, and by the thud of his shoes, I know where he is headed. This time, I’m not going to take my time moving slowly through the halls. Getting back behind a locked door is all that matters.

I don’t slow at the first corner. I don’t slow for the unknown person dead in the hall, and I don’t slow at the second corner. The on-call door is in my sights when another gunshot rings through the air. That wasn’t far. It’s hard to tell when everything echoes, but it might have been just around the next corner. These stupid halls all wind around on themselves. The emergency department, usually so full of noise, amplifies every sound in the now quiet unit.

My already fast pace increases for the last few steps it takes to reach the door. I knock softly twice, wishing I had

worked out some kind of code with Jake and Easton before leaving.

“Guys? It’s Johanna. I’m alone. Let me in,” I whisper-beg through the seam of the door.

“Johanna?” Easton’s voice scratches. “I’m afraid to open it.”

My fingers spread across the door, trying to feel through to the other side. “I know, Easton, but you have to. I have supplies to help Jake, and I need to get out of this hallway. Please tell me Jake’s still okay.”

The lock clicks before the door opens a sliver. Easton’s eye comes into view as he searches my face and the space behind me before creating enough space for me to slide through the opening. I set the supplies on the bed as Easton locks up behind me. With my hands free, I move to Jake’s side. His chest still rises and falls, but his eyes are closed.

“Jake. Dr. Stenson?” I ask, trying to coax him with a hand on his shoulder.

This procedure will be a lot easier with his knowledge guiding my hands. When he doesn’t respond, I’m torn between trying again and knowing the pain will wake him when I start. Maybe I should let him rest for another couple of minutes while I set things up.

I take his pulse and listen to his heart with my stethoscope to be sure my eyes aren’t deceiving me. It’s slow, but still there. I need to stitch him up to prevent any more blood loss. Easton did a really wonderful job with the tourniquet and makeshift bandages in the short time I was gone, but that won’t suffice for much longer.

“Easton, I’m going to need your help.”

Ideally, this would be done while Jake was face down, but I don’t have the right table for that. Easton is going to have to help support Jake’s head and keep him immobile. That’s a tall order with no pain medications.

“We need to lay Dr. Stenson flat so that I can work on the back of his leg. I really need your support to make sure he

doesn't suffocate while he's face-down or flail while I'm trying to stitch. I'll already be doing this one handed, and I'm not sure if he will stay unconscious through the procedure," I tell the wide-eyed man.

It's clear he's still in shock, but with my direction he moves to do as I ask. I grab the sheet from the bed, laying it out on the floor to cover the space where we plan to roll Jake. It's not exactly sterile, but it's the best I can do. Once we have him where I want him, Easton places a pillow under Jake's turned face to support his head.

"Okay, I'm going to start. I need you to watch his breathing and keep him calm if he wakes up. I wasn't able to get any pain medications, so we'll give him something to bite into if we have to. It'd be better if he stayed quiet."

The tourniquet and pressure bandages have done a wonderful job slowing the bleeding, so I don't think he's nicked any major blood vessels. Now, I need to remove that wrapping to examine the wound. I didn't get a great look at it before, as Magnus was the one to apply the bandage.

Once I see if the bullet is through-and-through or a graze wound, I'll know what I have to do next. I've watched this done several times in the ER, and new moms receive sutures after deliveries frequently. I know the techniques, but my hand isn't practiced. Saving Jake's life and his leg are more important than how pretty I make it look.

Easton is monitoring Jake's airway and breathing. I hate the less-than-ideal conditions I have for laying him down. I'm worried it will cause bigger problems than the blood loss. His heart rate is steady, but slightly slower than I'd like. There is still a pulse in Jake's foot, which is a great sign. As soon as I can get him awake, I'll check the mobility in his foot and leg as well. I can't take x-rays to look for breaks in the bone right now, but nerve damage is always likely after a gunshot wound to an extremity. Movement would help tell me a lot about what is going on under the skin.

"How's he doing, Easton?" I ask to check on my patient, but also to keep my helper talking.



“Good, Doc. Still breathing evenly,” he assures me in a stronger voice than I’ve heard from him. Purpose has given him strength, and I take his nickname in stride.

Bouncing my stare between his eyes, I imbue all my confidence in my words, “We’re going to survive this. All of us.” He nods back to me, holding onto Doctor Stenson’s shoulders. “As soon as I have everything laid out, I’m diving right in.”

He needs to be ready. There’s no more time to stop and explain what I’m doing. Grabbing the supplies from the bed, I lay them around me on the sheet Jake is on. Using the scissors, I cut away his pants, and then use iodine to clean and sanitize the area as best as I can. The bullet punched through the calf muscle leaving clear entry and exit wounds. Thankfully, it looks like the bleeding has slowed significantly, and I think the bullet missed the bones completely based on the location of the holes. The wounds will definitely need to be stitched closed though. There are so many suture techniques that I’m afraid I will choose the wrong one.

*This can be temporary. This lock down will end, and someone will fix it if you do it wrong. You just need to close the wounds.*

I give myself the pep-talk I need to get my hands moving. My gloved fingers grip the forceps and needle driver, picking up the curved needle in the middle to start sewing. I grabbed Vicryl thread in my haste, so I hope the absorbable thread will do the trick. I think the horizontal mattress suture is my best bet to close the gaps. It’s a series of four bites through the skin with the needle in a circle across, down, and back across the laceration before tying off the stitch. One side of his calf has a more irregular and larger wound than the other, which means that’s more likely the exit point. I’m not sure I’ll be able to get either wound to pull together correctly without bunching the skin. Better make sure I use the words *battle scars* when I talk to him about it in the future.

Jake moans beneath me, signaling he is rousing. “Dr. Stenson, I’m going to start closing your wound now. This may

be painful, but I need you to be very still please,” I say, trying to make eye contact through his fluttering lashes.

His face is pale, which worries me. I have no idea how much blood he’s lost, but he grunts and moves his head against the pillow in what I’m going to assume is an affirmation.

Instruments in hand, I rotate the needle through the skin at a ninety-degree angle and bring it back through the center of the hole. The wound is like a pipeline through the muscle. I wish I could be certain there were no bullet fragments left behind and that the bleeding has all but stopped. I’m afraid he will continue to bleed internally even if I suture the outer wounds. Jake tenses with my movements but doesn’t protest. I continue working the needle through his skin to finish the four-puncture suture, locking it in place with an instrument tie I’ve seen doctors do and three throws, or knots to secure it all.

It’s not exactly even, but it’s done. Now that I’ve gotten the feel for the tension in his skin and the instruments, I can make the next one better. I work in a trance, closing the layers of his skin before moving to the spot where the bullet exited for the second set of sutures to completely close the wounds.

“How ya doing, Jake?” I hear Easton ask him. He’s still helping to support his chest and head. Each time I look at him he gives me the thumbs up to tell me Dr. Stenson is still breathing normally.

“This. Sucks,” he moans out each word in the understatement of the year.

“Almost done and then we can sit you up on the bed, sir,” I say as I place the last suture. I’m almost certain the skin will invert outward and all the holes I poked through his skin will leave tracks behind that will scar him.

*You did great ... for a nurse.*

I clean up the area as best as I can in our limited space; removing extra materials, gloves, and tools as well as bloody and cut clothing. Easton helps Jake sit up, moving him gingerly to the bed as I wrap everything in the bed sheet we had on the floor in an attempt to sterilize the area.

“How ya doing, Jake?” I ask once I’m seated on the edge of his bed.

He runs a hand across his forehead. “Pretty light-headed. Thank you for closing me up.”

“We’ll see if you thank me once you see my work,” I try to joke.

A small smile lights his face. “Johanna, I can’t believe you went out there for me. It doesn’t matter what it looks like; I’m still alive.”

Easton has shifted back to his somber mode, leaning against the wall. I think the ebb and flow of adrenaline is really messing with his system. It’s something I understand from my own experiences.

Footsteps sound in the hallway, breaking the silence just as the door handle shakes. My eyes close and my shoulders quake. I just did this without panicking, I won’t panic this time either. Turning to my companions, I place my finger against my lips, urging them to remain silent.

The handle jiggles again.

“Stop!” a voice yells in the hall.

Shuffling sounds outside the door before a voice I know too well responds. “Ah, just the man I was looking for. The man trying to steal my child and my girl. Pretty brave of you to come charging in like a white knight. Must mean Hanna is around here somewhere.”

His voice is smooth, his cadence even. Now that tan duster I saw the shooter wearing in the hallway registers for me. It was one of Alastair’s favorite coats. He’s here for me, and Magnus is offering himself up on a platter.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

### *Magnus*

I've given up all pretense of sneaking around as I sprint down the hallway. My only concern is getting to Johanna. I have to reach her before the shooter. Alastair is the only one I know who would be after her, and I can't let him find her. I can't lose her, not when I just found her.

Around the next corner, I spot the lanky man with the tan duster. The coat is marred with blood, and his hair is disheveled, coated in muck and grime. I can see at least two weapons that he's carrying. Who knows how many more he has hidden under that jacket. The number of rounds I've heard and bodies I've seen indicate he's already reloaded more than once.

"Stop!" I yell as I see the mad-man pull on the door handle to the on-call room Johanna is hiding in. That may not have been the best approach, but it's the first thing that comes out of my mouth. I can't let him get through that door.

Alastair turns at my voice, raising one of his guns toward me. "Ah, just the man I was looking for. The man trying to steal my child and my girl." He shakes the pistol in my direction, waving it wildly. "Pretty brave of you to come charging in like a white knight. Must mean Hanna is around here somewhere." He spreads his arms wide, gesturing to the space around him while showing off the rifle in his other hand.

Two guns to none. I'm in trouble here, but if I can keep him talking, I might have a chance.

"You don't have to do this Alastair. Killing me ... killing her, that's not going to get your daughter back," I try to reason

with him. I can feel my heart racing as my adrenaline thrums through my veins.

He steps closer to me, his gun still trained center mass. There are so many survivable gunshot wounds. I just have to make sure if he pulls that trigger, he doesn't hit anywhere vital. And I *have* to get those guns out of his hands.

I know the three rules of an active shooter. We've been force-fed the training. I spit in the face of the first two rules: run or hide. The third, which is supposed to be used as a last resort, is to fight, and that's something I'm ready to do. Taking this guy down is for more than just the other souls on the unit. I'll have to wait for just the right moment.

Alastair is taller than me, but I have him in mass. Years of working the mine with my family built muscle that I've worked hard to keep as I've grown older. Music and exercise are the two things I use to fill my time outside of work and my family. Now there's Johanna and Adelais, too, and I'll use every ounce of strength I have to protect what is most important in my life.

"I'm past the point of no return *my friend*," he sneers, gesturing to the destruction of the emergency department around us. "But there's no way I'm not taking you with me. You've ruined my life. Because of you, I have no chance of getting *my* family back. They're supposed to be *mine!*" he shouts at me as he steps closer.

The closer he gets, the better chance he has of placing a killing shot, but I also have a better chance of disarming him. I raise my hands in the air, showing him I'm unarmed. My white flag is a red herring. I'll never give in to this murderer. My fingers are shaking slightly in my hyped-up state. I hope it looks like fear.

"It doesn't have to be this way, Alastair. We can find a way for you to meet her, get to know her," I try appealing to his fatherly desires. Maybe there's still a chance to end this without more bloodshed.

His face contorts with anger. "I'm sure you two have brainwashed her against me. Maybe she doesn't even know

about me. Does she think you're her daddy?" he asks, spittle flying from his lips as he finally closes the gap between us. The barrel of the gun jabs firmly against my chest. "You, Mr. Fiancée, parading around with my woman and my daughter. Pretending to be one big happy family."

Oh, how I wish that were all true. If I survive this, that's my new life goal.

"Tell me this, why are you letting her live in that dump of an apartment if you're a doctor? You must be loaded. Can't be bothered to provide for her until she makes it official? Unlike you, I'll use the fortune I've amassed to put her up in a nice house she'll never need to leave. She'll stay right where I want her at all times. I understand your hesitancy; she's slippery. I made the mistake of not locking her down when I had her under my roof before. Now, she's run off on me with a bearded mountain man."

The gun jabs into my chest with each of his statements. His rambling stream of consciousness is so convoluted that it's hard for me to follow it all. I actually have no idea what he thinks I do or who I am, but it would be futile to try to correct him on any of his points.

Sane people don't murder people.

"You." He pokes again. "You probably don't even know how to handle a wild thing like Hanna. I bet my daughter is a brat too. You have to have a firm hand with women like that. You look too soft." He runs the gun down my chest to push it into my solid abs.

"That's enough," I grit out. I can't let him demean them like this. Listening to his threats of physical violence against either of my girls has my blood boiling. "A real man doesn't have to use his size. A real man respects the strength of his woman and cultivates it," I retort.

Alastair throws back his head in laughter. The gun pulls away from my chest as he bends over in his ridiculous bout of glee. "She walks all over you!" he roars through his chuckles.

This is my moment; the chance I need.

I bring my knee up to bash his nose in his bent position. Blood gushes and his laughter turns to screams. He curses as he pulls back from my attack. I don't let up, charging forward with my shoulder lowered. In his attempt to cover his face, he dropped the rifle, but that's not my goal. I want to detain him, not shoot him. This scumbag doesn't deserve an easy death, and it's not something I want on my conscience either.

The hand still holding a gun raises, and a bullet streaks past my ear. The explosion makes my ears ring and deadens all sound. I ram into his chest, knocking the two of us to the blood-covered ground. The flash of the muzzle and the jolt of his arm tell me he fired again, but the shot goes wide. My hearing is completely gone in my left ear while my right is ringing like a five-alarm fire.

Blood dripping from his nose sputters from around his lips as he curses me again, covering us both in the gore of the break. I may not be able to hear him, but the words on his lips are easy to read. "You're dead." His hips buck as he tries to dislodge me from atop him.

My hand presses firmly against his inner forearm, forcing the firearm away from my body. I don't see his left arm in my periphery as a fist smashes into the side of my head. The blow knocks me off him, and we roll once again. Now it's my turn to yell as I struggle and fight to regain higher ground. Roaring, I can feel the sound ripping through my vocal cords as I use the added strength it provides me to keep our momentum moving. Alastair slams into the wall when he continues all the way over me.

Scrambling to my feet I try to kick at the gun in his hand. He hasn't lost his grip on the pistol, and he swings it wildly in an attempt to get me in his sights. My foot misses his hand only to connect with his stomach. His body jerks in on itself as the air leaves his lungs. As his muscles tense, his finger pulls the trigger again. He wasn't aiming, it wasn't voluntary, but the pistol fires just the same. This is the one I wasn't prepared for. I didn't duck or spin. I didn't shift away from the muzzle. It happens quickly as my leg is continuing the arc of its swing.

Pain explodes through my shoulder as the bullet rips through my chest. The force knocks me backwards, sending me stumbling across the hall. Another burst of pain shrouds my vision when my back hits the wall, and I slide to the floor. A second bright flash fills the air as the echo of another gunshot reaches my one ringing ear.

I wait for the burst of pain accompanying the explosion, but nothing registers. I think my nervous system is so overloaded that I'm beyond feeling the trauma. The second shot wasn't instant death, and I don't know if that's better or worse. There's no one here to help me, and I know my wounds are fatal. Dying quickly would have been preferable, I think.

This is it. Just when I have everything I never dared to hope for right in my grasp, it'll all be gone. At least I had the chance to know a good woman; to love a child. My one regret is that I didn't get to tell them. I hope she knows. I hope they both know what they mean to me; how irrevocably they changed my life.

Pressure forces a grunt from my lungs as the pain radiates throughout my chest. My blood has made the wall and floor slippery, and I feel myself slide to the ground. The pain has blinded me as much as the explosion by my ear deafened me.

What a way to go.

If only the pain were masked, too. I'd welcome the dark, silent nothingness. I'm sure that sweet peace is not too far away, but it hasn't come yet. The pain in my chest and back only increase as I feel the weight of the world press down on me. My heart pounds against my ribs, reminding me I'm still alive. My breaths send sharp pains up my spine with each rise and fall of my chest. It's getting harder to pull in air through the pain and compression of my lungs.

My muscles shake as my systems struggle to maintain their functions. I'm aware of what is happening to my body right now, but I never could have imagined the way it would actually feel to die. It's not a slip into the ether. It's agony and torture and the desire for it all to stop. I must be getting closer



to the end. This can't last too much longer. The misery has to be over soon.

*Why hasn't Alastair finished me off? Did he leave me behind to search for Jo?*

For a moment, her beautiful face swims in my vision. So pretty. So sad. Tears stream from her glossy emerald eyes. The streaks carve paths down her summer-tanned cheeks. Dream Johanna's mouth moves inaudibly as blond wisps of hair fly around her face. I'd give anything to hear her voice one more time.

The mirage blurs before everything fades back to black. As I'd hoped, there's no sight, no sound, and the pain fades as easily as the vision did. There's nothing.

Peace.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

*Johanna*

**N**o. No. No. No. No!

The panic floods my system as I register that Magnus is the first voice I heard, and Alastair is the second. It shouldn't really be shocking that Alastair has taken things so far; I've always known he was crazy. What I can't understand is why Magnus is out there and confronting the man with the gun. There's no way he can fight back. I can't believe he's putting himself in the line of fire.

Stupid, infuriating man!

Their words become muffled as they move away from the door, but that doesn't stop me from holding my ear to the jam. I can't *not* know what is happening.

"Stay away from the door, Johanna. A bullet would have no problem puncturing that wood," Jake warns. He's still gritting his teeth as the sweat on his brow glistens from the pain he is in.

"Please, Johanna," Easton begs.

My frown meets their gazes as I try to concentrate on what's happening in the hallway. I don't think I'm in danger of him shooting at the door since their voices have moved away from me. My guess is that Mag has all his focus now. They're still out there, but I can't tell what's happening. Seconds tick by as I wait desperately for any indication of the result of the face-off.

Alastair's haughty tones grate on my eardrums even without the words attached. I don't hear Magnus at all, but I haven't heard a gunshot either. He has to be okay. I can't

fathom the alternative. All he has to do is keep him talking until help arrives. The police have to get here soon.

I can hear the blood rushing through my ear where it's cupped against the wood like the sound of the waves in a seashell. I know it's really the vibrations of the trapped air in the space, but the phenomenon is well known. Sometimes it's easier for my brain to focus on the random things I know than the scary unknown.

"What do you hear?" Easton asks. The fear has never completely left his face, but it did ease there for a few minutes.

My head shakes minutely. "I can't tell," I whisper.

A pop from the other side of the wall has me reeling backwards. I catch myself just before losing my footing and crashing back into the injured doctor and terrified orderly. Scanning the space, I see we're all okay. The bullet didn't enter the room. There are no new injuries in here, but that doesn't mean all is well in the hall.

I can't ... I can't stay in the on-call room any longer not knowing what's happening between my past and my future. I don't know how I'll handle it no matter what I find out there, but not knowing is sure to push me off a cliff.

Another bang sounds and Jake yells, "Johanna, no!" as I reach for the door handle. There's a chance I can put an end to this bloodshed. I know why Alastair's here. He's here for me ... me and Magnus.

"Lock it!" I yell back to Easton as I yank the door open and slam it shut behind me as I step out into the fray.

My imagination was no match for the scene before me. Magnus is straddling Alastair's prone form on the ground, pinning his arm that holds the firearm against the ground. Blood covers them both. Before I can warn Magnus, Alastair's fist smashes into the side of his head, knocking him to the side.

It's chaos and loud with shouting filling the air. The men groan, curse, and bellow at one another while struggling for

the upper hand. I feel a biting pain as my fingers claw through my hair. My own shrieks join their scuffle.

The pair rolls and tumbles across the red-stained floor. I'm afraid Alastair is going to get the upper hand, but Magnus propels the skinnier man all the way over him and into the opposite wall.

I'm still screaming but Magnus either doesn't hear me or he's ignoring me. I don't want to distract him from the life or death battle he's in, but I can't hold back the sheer panic spilling from my lips.

Magnus jumps to standing, pulling back his leg and striking forward. His foot connects with Alastair's midsection causing a whoosh of air to leave him. My ex curls in on himself as his muscles tighten in reaction to the blow. His fingers clench around the gun still in his hand. A flash and a bang light my senses. Fear strangles my voice.

Magnus's body jerks and blood splatters from his chest. He stumbles backward, smacking hard into the other wall.

I'm moving before my mind can catch up with the action. Alastair is still groaning, but his eyes are focused on the slumping Magnus. A heavy weight fills my right hand, and when I look down, I see the larger rifle there. I don't know how it got there.

Shooting weapons is not a part of my resume, but that means very little to me when Magnus's life is on the line. My finger twitches on the trigger just as I see Alastair raise the pistol again. More blood sprays, hitting my face this time as I stumble back several steps. The weapon falls from my unsteady hands when I see my ex's still form missing a considerable chunk of his anatomy from the bullet I fired at such close range. My stomach curdles, but there's no time for that.

Magnus. I need to get to Magnus.

My shoes slide on the slick floor as I make my way to him. His eyes are unfocused, and his body is limp. I slam into his

chest when my knees give way at his side. My hands press hard where his chest is pulsing blood.

The bullet hit between his shoulder and collarbone on the upper left side of his chest. It missed his heart, but he's bleeding out fast. There will be no time to run to the supply room this time.

"Help!" I scream. "Jake! Easton!" I yell as loud as I can. "I need help! The shooter's dead, but a doctor's down!" I'm still yelling when new hands join mine on Magnus's chest.

"Lay him down," Jake says to Easton from his new spot next to me.

Easton must have helped him out of the on-call room when I called for help. The injured doctor is seated on his backside, trying to stem the flow of blood. The orderly does his best to gingerly lay Magnus flat on the dirty floor. It's another less than acceptable place for a procedure, and this time, none of us are even wearing gloves. Blood is filling my cast.

"Try to keep him conscious, Johanna. I need you to help me put pressure on this, Easton," Dr. Stenson says. His directives are clear as he assigns jobs to each of us.

My fingers push the hair off Magnus's forehead before skating down through his beard. His eyes flutter, but never find focus. "Magnus?" I ask. When he doesn't respond, I don't stop trying. "Magnus, please open your eyes. We've got you. Help is here." I assure him, trying to pull his attention to me.

His eyes finally open, finding my face, but I can't be sure he's really seeing me.

"Magnus, can you hear me? Dr. Small, can you respond to me? I need to know what you're experiencing," I know I've been trained how to communicate with patients in critical situations, but all of that has flown out the window in the face of losing this man. "I can't do this without you, Mag. I need you to stay with me," I cry.

His lips curve up for a moment before falling slack again.

The hallway around me is quickly filling with people and new hands join the effort. I can't look away from the face of

the man who has become so important to me in such a short amount of time. Shoulders jostle me as they work to sustain his life.

The calls and directives around me are familiar, but my brain can't track them. The static of radios crackles in the background as uniforms swarm the area working to secure and evacuate the scene.

When strong hands pull me away from him, a gurney has arrived to transfer the still fighting Magnus to the operating room. The staff has been rotating through CPR rotations. An IV line runs from his good arm, and the bullet wound has been packed. An oxygen mask blocked my view of the lower half of his face several minutes ago. His vitals are poor, but he's still alive. He's still with me.

I don't want to let go. My fingers grip his hair, trying not to lose contact with his body even as they move him. If I don't let go, he can't leave me. There's no way I will let him out of my sight.

"Ms. Mendel," the voice attached to the hands on my shoulder murmurs. "Ms. Mendel, you have to let us do our job." My head shakes as my feet move alongside the gurney. "Johanna. He trusted us to help you, now it's your turn to trust us with him. We all love him as much as you do, and we're going to do everything we can and more."

My eyes flash to the man at my shoulder for just a second. It's the Chief. I don't know where he was during the lockdown, but I can see the sincerity in his eyes. This is gutting him too. I caress the warm cheek under my hand before pulling away from the bed, allowing the working staff to fill the gap, and fall back into the Chief's arms.

We've reached the OR floor, so when I step away, the man behind me leads me to the waiting room. The horror from downstairs could be a bad nightmare in the pristine seating area. The chairs are in the right places, the pamphlets sit neatly in the holders on the wall, the television on the wall plays the latest Seattle sports news, and the only visible blood is from our footprints on the floor.

“I—Johanna. I don’t know what to say,” he says as he seats me by the window. He takes the seat next to me, never letting go of my hand. “You and I both know what is happening behind those doors, and what Dr. Small’s prognosis is. I don’t know exactly what happened, but I know you might have saved his life with your quick actions.”

That’s truer than he knows. Only two people alive know what really happened in that hallway, and one of them is fighting for his life in the OR right now. Sure, Easton and Doctor Stenson probably have a good guess, but a guess is all it is.

Nurses, doctors, and hospital staff filter into the waiting room, sitting and standing as the chairs fill. The mood is somber and only soft whispers fill the space.

I don’t realize I’m staring at my lap, watching the tears drip onto my scrubs, until the Chief squeezes my hand. “Johanna, the police need to talk to you. Would you like me to come with you?” His sad expression burns into me.

I shake my head, squeezing his hand back in thanks, and stand to meet the uniformed officers waiting for me. Their expressions are impossible to read as they turn to lead me somewhere quiet to talk. My steps hesitate as the pair turn down the next hall.

“Ms. Mendel?” one of the detectives questions.

“I’m not leaving him,” I say with more strength than I feel.

A look passes between the two before they nod their heads in agreement. “Can we talk here then?” the taller one asks. The name on his uniform reads Lincoln.

“We know this is hard, Ms. Mendel, but we need to know what happened,” the shorter one, Black, says gently.

My brow furrows and my lashes flutter trying to blink the tears from my eyes. I don’t know if they’ll ever stop falling.

“Ms. Mendel, there are cameras that we’ll be able to watch, but we need a statement from you,” Lincoln says.

*Why do they keep saying my name?*

“I know this is terrible timing, Ms. Mendel, but the sooner we get your statement, the sooner we can leave you alone,” Black this time. The way they bounce back and forth it’s like they’ve practiced.

“He was going to kill him,” I stutter.

The two nod, waiting for me to go on, but I don’t know what else to say.

“Johanna!” a female voice calls to me.

My eyes find Winter as she barrels down the hallway with several of her brothers behind her. Kill, Bash, and Leo look like severe bodyguards as they track Winter’s steps. Her arms wrap around me, unconcerned for the blood I’m covered in or the police questioning me. Three more sets of arms wrap around us. It feels like they’re holding me together.

A throat clears, breaking apart our makeshift huddle. Killian stares the officers down, “I think you can talk to her another time. Right now, we need to take care of her while we wait for my brother to get out of surgery.” That grumpy face has never been more welcome.

The brothers step between us as Winter wraps her arms back around me. I’m so thankful they answer some of the more mundane questions about their brother that I just can’t. There are no more words left in me, and moments later, I find myself seated in the waiting room again, staring at my knotted fingers and bloody cast.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

*Johanna*

The world around me moves slowly and too fast all at once. People flow in and out of the waiting room, but there's no update from the operating room. I'm not entirely sure how long Magnus has been in surgery. Time lost all meaning when that Code Silver was called. I guess the fact that they haven't given us any bad news is, well, good news.

Words are too hard. Moving from this terribly uncomfortable seat is too hard. I'm frozen and the shock of everything that happened today is crashing down on me. At one point, someone draped a blanket over my shoulders because my whole frame was shaking. I knew it, but I couldn't stop it.

Winter answers my phone when I ignore the buzzing coming from my hip. I can't grasp every word of the conversation, but it sounds like she's talking to someone in my family. "She's okay, but Magnus ... No. Don't come ... Adalais for the night ... Keep you posted."

She's still seated by my side as are her brothers. Hugo and Rollie arrived a little while after the first group, and Teddy walked in much later. If he made it all the way down from Bellingham, I guess Magnus has been in the OR longer than I thought.

"Cronut?" a deep voice asks, and when I look up from my twisted fingers, I find Xavier crouched in front of me.

His hair looks as though he's been running his fingers through it, his blue eyes are haggard behind his thick black glasses. The smell of the cronut he holds out to me reaches my nose and turns my stomach.

Jumping from my seat, I race from the room toward the closest bathroom as several people call after me. The stall door bangs open as I wrench into the porcelain. My midsection pinches and twists as the bile burns its way up my throat. The floor is cold on my knees where I kneel.

One warm hand rubs smooth circles over my back as another keeps the pieces of my hair that came loose from my braid out of my face. I don't know who followed me, but I hope my vomiting ends soon so that they don't have to witness any more.

I cough a few times and spit, trying to clear my mouth. The hand on my back moves, handing me toilet paper to wipe my face. That's when I notice the hand is male. I thought for sure it would be Winter or one of my female coworkers. Maybe the silent presence should have been a giveaway. Turning, I find Killian at my back with his signature frown on his face, but this one is full of sadness.

"Couldn't let you be alone," he says. "You're a part of our family now, and Smalls don't leave anyone behind." My brows furrow as my head tilts at his words. "Doesn't matter if you're not married yet. We all claim you," he goes on.

*Yet.*

The word reverberates in my mind in a way that has me craving the permanence it promises instead of the fear the thought used to cause me. I open my mouth, trying to think of what to say to Kill, but my brain-to-mouth functions are still not working.

"Come here," Killian beckons, opening his arms wide.

I fall into his chest right there on the bathroom floor. My cheek rests against his chest as he wraps his strong arms around me. He lays his head on mine, just like his brother does but in a familial way. It's the comfort we both need.

"We could have lost you today," he whispers into my hair in a shaky voice.

He's more strung out about this than his outward appearance has let on. He looked taciturn and angry as always

when I first saw him. The man holding me now is on the verge of breaking down. I wouldn't blame him for even a moment if he did. What we experienced today—are experiencing now—screws with you emotionally. There's no shame in that.

“Think you're okay to go back?” he asks.

I guess it's physically taxing as well. A deep breath fills my lungs, giving my brain a fresh hit of oxygen. I take a second to assess my nausea. Three more breaths assure me my stomach has settled enough to get off the floor even though the ringing in my ears hasn't really lessened.

Pulling back from Killian's chest, I nod my agreement, moving to stand. He's faster than me, helping me to my feet with a hand on my forearm. The tiny stall is too small for two people making our movements tight, but he leads me to the sinks, allowing me to wash my face and hand before leaving the bathroom. I need to get someone to remove this cast.

This is the first look at myself I've gotten. My hair looks like a bird's nest, the bags under my eyes scream exhaustion, and my scrubs are still covered in blood. Someone must have wiped down my hands and arms while I was comatose because the only blood on my hand and arms is in the deepest cracks and under my nails. Between Doctor Stenson and Magnus, I know I was coated. I scrub until every speck is gone before trying to braid my hair again. It's so unruly I decide to throw the tangled mess into a bun and be done with it. There's nothing I can do about the state of the rest of me, so with one more clarifying breath, I turn from the counter.

Kill tucks my hand into his elbow as we pass through the door to walk back to the others. Being violently ill was no fun, but it helped to clear some of the fog in my head. Many of the faces filling the chairs and lining the walls are now recognizable to me. I'm not surprised how many people are waiting for Magnus. He is special to more people than he realizes. I wish he knew that no matter how much he guards his heart, he still attracts love everywhere he goes.

Even with all the people lingering, my seat remain empty. Magnus and I've never really bothered to squash the

engagement rumors, only brushing it off when it was mentioned. Our extra time together and carpooling to work has only solidified the thoughts in our colleagues' minds. Some know we live together too. In my selfish way, I am glad because it means people are allowing me the extra freedoms of a spouse in this awful time.

“What can I do?” one of my fellow nurses asks.

I shake her off, not knowing how to answer. She's out here, not in the OR with him. There's nothing she can do. The same question is asked by every single person who stops by to hug me or hold my hand. A few offer food or coffee, but just the mention sends me back to the restroom every time. My mind is rejecting anything that might keep me alive in a physical way while I know he might be dying.

The boys grumble and pace. Winter oscillates from crying to a piranha, demanding to hear updates from whomever might listen. It's a weird conundrum trying to figure out who to ask. So many in the waiting room work here, but the chain of command is so broken. The Chief checks in every now and then, but he is responsible for helping the police sort through the catastrophe downstairs.

“This is ridiculous, someone needs to tell us something,” Hugo says, pacing in front of me and running his fingers through his hair.

“He's still alive, man. They would have told us by now if he wasn't,” Rollie responds from his slouched position a few seats down from me.

“That's good enough for you?” Leo bites back.

The longer we go without hearing any news, the higher tensions rise.

Winter squeezes my hand. She's been holding it whenever I'm not throwing up. “I can't take this,” she whispers.

Xavier stands from his position beside her, moving to the middle of the room. “Please, can someone please find out what's going on in there?” he addresses the room at large.

Heads swivel as staff look around trying to figure out who the most senior representative is.

I let go of Winter's hand to stand and walk from the room. Someone always follows, but this time I wave Bash away as he stands to take his turn. I've wallowed long enough. This is not who I am. I've always been able to set my emotions aside to do what needs to be done, and I won't allow this time, when it's so critical, to be any different.

Instead of going to the nearest facilities that have been my second home for the last several hours, I head to the women's locker room. I need to clean myself up. My clothes and body are still caked in blood and grime, but first, this cast has to come off.

Cutting and removing the solid material is difficult with one hand, but I make it work. My left arm feels free and weak at the same time. Removing the rest of the blood from my body will be cleansing.

Rushing through a quick shower, I pull my hair back into a clean but tangled bun and find a new pair of scrubs. My next stop is the scrub room. I refuse to take any chances when it's my man's life on the line, so I'm not skipping any steps.

The operating room is organized chaos. An anesthesiologist sits near the head of the table, monitoring the drugs keeping Magnus sedated. Two surgeons work diligently through the beeping monitors and rush of movements. Circulating nurses hand tools to the surgeons, watch the vitals on the monitors, change out IV fluids and blood bags for the transfusions he needs, and switch out linens. It's a well performed dance.

Magnus is unrecognizable beneath the sheets, wires, and intubation making it easy for me to think of him as any other patient, though deep down I know who lies before me. The pile of blood soaked linens and dirty tools, as well as the used defibrillator pads tell me a lot about what has been happening while I sat in the near-silent room outside.

Approaching the scrub nurse I ask, "What can I get from the supply closet? I can tell you're running low on things."

She startles for a moment at my appearance. “Ms. Mendel, you shouldn’t be here.”

“I can’t sit still anymore.” I shake my head fervently. “Please let me help, if only in a small way.”

She sighs, gives me a list of materials to grab from the sterile supply room and shoos me from the room. It feels good to be moving, to have purpose. My thoughts have something to focus on besides the what ifs that only resulted in further spiraling. I fill a cart with what is needed and return to the operating room.

“Can you call down to the blood bank?” the nurse asks at my return. “Luckily, he’s AB, so we can take whatever they have, but we need more. He’s already been through so much.”

I nod, ready to complete my next task. Magnus is by no means out of the woods but seeing him and having something to do has calmed me significantly. This I can understand. My brain knows how to process what’s happening in this room. The not knowing was so much worse.

The call is one I’ve had to make before when assisting with emergency cesarean sections. I repeat the script I’ve used in the past, and they promise to send over the needed supply right away. I don’t have to mention who it’s for. They know Doctor Small is in here, but it wouldn’t matter if it was one of our own or not. Delivering blood to the OR is not something they take their time with.

Harborview is such a large hospital that I don’t know all the staff, so I’m not sure which surgeons are doing the operation. After I made the call for blood, one of the nurses let the lead surgeon know I was there. He didn’t seem too happy, but he didn’t have me removed either, allowing me to hear an update on what has been done over the last several hours.

By the time the blood arrives, the surgeons are working to close up the wounds, having fixed his shattered shoulder blade, reattached blood vessels and nerves, and cleaned up all the fragments left behind by the destruction. Magnus lost a lot of blood, and they had to restart his heart twice. He’s

extremely lucky the bullet missed his heart and lungs, or he wouldn't have made it this far.

“Do you want to go tell everyone we'll be moving him to recovery soon?” one of the nurses asks me.

I shake my head, not willing to take my eyes from Magnus again. “No. I'm sorry, but I'm not leaving him again. Can someone else go?” I ask. It's only now I realize I didn't tell anyone where I was going. I wonder if they've been looking for me.

“I was planning to go, so don't worry about it. I will give the update. There are probably a lot of people out there,” the assisting surgeon says before exiting the room. She'll have to take off all her sterile gear before making her way to the waiting room.

Magnus is intubated and lots of machines are working hard to keep him alive as the remaining doctor works to close his final layers of tissue.

“Will you be sitting with him in Recovery?” the lead surgeon asks. When I confirm he goes on, “I know you're aware of what we will be looking for, but we'll all be watching right alongside you. Dr. Small is a good doctor and an even better man. We're going to do whatever it takes to get him through this.”

“Thank you,” I say, waiting patiently while they finish cleaning Magnus up and prepare to move him. Now that things have begun to slow down, the stress is creeping back in. I know I will have to clean myself up as well, but I can't stand to step out of the OR until I'm sure he will. He already died twice today, and it's entirely possible it will happen again. He's not out of the woods yet.

In the recovery room, I sit by his bed in my clean scrubs sans gown and hold his hand with my bare one. His cheek is bruised from the blow he took to the head, and a small line of dried blood still sits below his ear. He must have burst an eardrum. It doesn't matter to me. He's still my Magnus.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

### *Magnus*

The peaceful nothingness I had welcomed greedily is slowly being ripped away from me again. The first thing that registers is a fuzzy heaviness, like clawing my way through the dirt after being buried alive. It's suffocating and scary. My whole body aches, not allowing me to locate a single point of injury. The next thing that registers is a faint beeping and the whoosh of air moving around me. It seems too quiet for the maelstrom that's happening inside me.

I try desperately to move my paralyzed body, causing more bolts of shooting pain in my appendages. My brain is screaming that it's trapped—body frozen. When I finally feel like I'm making progress with the fingers of my right hand, a new pressure holds those still too.

*This can't be death. Pain is for the living.*

That's when the yelling starts. I've never felt such terror, but I know I can't give up. "*Help! Someone help me. I can't move!*" I don't think anything is penetrating the barrier surrounding me.

"Shhh," a soothing voice hushes against my ear. "You're alive, Mag, but you need to stay still until we can be sure you won't injure yourself further."

I'd know that voice anywhere. It's the voice of an angel. My personal angel. Johanna is here with me, wherever I am, and she's telling me I'm alive—that we're both alive. Her words don't match the last memories I have of being shot and facing certain death. What could have happened to get me to this quiet room, in a body that won't follow my orders? It's possible I'm paralyzed. I never felt the second gunshot that I



heard before the darkness took over. Maybe I never felt it because I couldn't.

“The worst is over, but you're not out of the woods yet. Please don't leave me,” her soft voice continues to breathe words of comfort into my soul. “Everyone's here, and they're all waiting for you to wake up. I'll have to let someone else in soon, or they'll barge their way in anyway. I just can't bear to leave you.”

I try with everything in me to reach her, but everything around me is still black. I don't want her to leave either. She can't walk away from me. How will I have any idea what is going on or if she is safe? Pressure on my fingers again registers this time as a squeeze. She's holding my hand, grounding me.

She shushes me again. “I won't go. They'll just have to accept that more than one person will be in your room at a time.” The breath rushes from her lungs, ghosting along my cheek. “Your vitals changed for a second when your fingers twitched. You can hear me, can't you? I'll make them see how unsafe it is for me to be anywhere else but right here with you.”

Her words are a balm to my frazzled spirit. I'm not trapped if she knows I'm in here. I don't know what my body went through, but I do know that every patient is different. It can sometimes take a while for them to fully wake up after surgeries and procedures. The hardest part is having enough patience to wait them out without letting your own emotions get the best of you. For the first time, I'm experiencing how frustrating it is to be on the other side.

A tickle and a plush force land on my cheek and glide across my eye. I'm elated that I'm feeling so many things. The movement triggers a new response in my nerves that convinces the lids to crack. The dim light of the room stabs through my retina after the darkness I was floating in. It's so blinding that it takes a few moments for anything more than patches of light and dark outlines of fuzzy images to come into focus.

Then an image very much like the last one that floated through my head hits me like a ton of bricks, taking my breath away. Johanna is beautiful. Her hair is still falling out of an up-do, but it looks more like the blond I'm used to than the blood-streaked mess I saw before. Her cheeks are still stained with tear tracks, but her lips are upturned instead of down. Her eyes glisten with moisture and love. If I could design only one piece of art to look at for the rest of my life, never could I have come up with something so perfect.

"Hi," she says, gracing me with a closed-lipped smile.

She reaches around me to push a button on the inside of the bed rail. I know she's trying to let someone know I'm awake without leaving me, just like she promised. Her fingers lace through my weak ones and her lips press to the corner of my mouth. If only I could turn into that kiss.

Another familiar face slips into the room. Doctor Bashar smiles at me, raising his eyebrows. "You like to make things interesting don't you, Dr. Small?" He crosses the room, beginning the battery of exams that need to happen. "You tried to die on me several times, but I knew I'd have to face all those siblings if I didn't bring you back. That's not even mentioning the waiting room full of friends and staff still sitting out there."

Doctor Bashar and I did part of our residencies together. He's a few years younger than myself, but he caught up to me while I was at home with the family after Mother and Father died. He immigrated here for his undergrad and decided to stay when his family encouraged him not to go back to the Middle East. He has always been light-hearted, good for a laugh. I don't know how he's managed to remain so joyous after all the things we've seen, but he's always been a breath of fresh air.

"He hasn't spoken yet," Johanna says from beside me.

Bashar laughs, "Look how alert those eyes are. Give him a minute. He always has been too serious. He's probably trying to figure out all the ways he can critique my work."

"Nnn," the guttural denial tears through my tender throat.

“Ah, see. There he is!” Doctor Bashar cheers. “Now be quiet. You were intubated for a long time, and we can’t give you any more pain medications than you’re already getting. If you wouldn’t have stopped breathing so many times you might be able to reprimand me now.”

My nose scrunches at his jab. I doubt Jo thinks it’s funny, and I’ll really give him a talking to if he upsets her. Her light touch glides the length of my forearm, calming me. I’m not used to every bodily change being monitored and giving away my true feelings.

“Buck-up, Doc. Your siblings will be in momentarily. I’m surprised they aren’t already in here with the way they’ve been watching me like hawks,” Bashar says.

My chin hits my chest in understanding. My brothers are ruthless when it comes to protecting our family, and Winter is worse. She won’t relinquish any of us easily after claiming the seven of us so fiercely when we took her into our home. I’m sure she’s going to read me the riot act when she gets in here. I hope no one told her any details of the shooting or I’ll never hear the end of it.

“Can I get you anything?” Johanna asks.

Tentatively, I lift my hand encasing hers to my lips before running it down my throat. With a bright smile she leans forward to press her mouth to mine. It’s soft and careful, life-giving.

“I’ll see if I can get you some water when your family comes in,” she says with light in her eyes. She looks so much more helpful, less tense.

The door jerks open in perfect timing. A parade of Small family members parade through the door including Winter and Xavier. The tiny room is packed by the eight of them, so Johanna stands to leave. I don’t let go of her hand, scared to let her walk out of here. Last time we left each other I almost died.

Her green eyes sink into my matching ones. “I wouldn’t go if they weren’t here. I couldn’t bear it. I’ll be right back,” she

says.

My throat is too raw to respond, and my eyelids are becoming heavy. I do my best to send her my mental images. The fear I felt when I learned the shooter was Alastair. The pure panic seeing him at that door induced. The agony on her face in my pain-induced dreams. I don't want her to worry about me, but I'm terrified for her.

*So, this is trauma.*

With another peck to the lips, she's out the door, leaving me to face my siblings alone. At least I have the excuse of not being able to talk back.

"What happened?"

"I thought we were going to lose you."

"Johanna was a mess."

"What were you thinking?"

"How are you feeling?"

"Is there something we can do to help?"

"Glad to see you awake, man."

The questions and statements come rapid fire. My family never has been particularly good at taking turns. Loud and boisterous is the way we like it, but right now, it's overwhelming. I close my eyes to process all the noise. When the room comes back into focus, I see the faces of those I hold most dear; worried, tired, grumpy, concerned, and upset. Only Theodore is wearing his signature jovial smile while the rest look a little strung out.

Xavier pats my bed, "We're here for whatever you need. There's no way I'll be able to force Winter to leave anyway." His wink at the end is forced. The big guy and I have grown closer in recent months, and I think he's just as fond of me as I am of him.

Killian scoffs. "You had no reason to be in that hallway, Mag. Do you know what it would have done to us, to Johanna, if you died? It's a good thing you're too stubborn to die." My

brow creases at that. He's always been sour, but I can tell his anger is out of fear this time.

"Alright, everyone," Theodore cuts in. "How about we celebrate the fact that he's alive with his eyes open right now? We can get the rest of it out of him once he's had some rest." I knew he was my favorite sibling for a reason.

Using the hand that Jo had been clutching, I flash him a thumbs up. As much as seeing them reassures my weary mind, my limbs are feeling heavy again. I don't think I'll be able to stay awake much longer.

Johanna reenters the room with a small cup complete with a lid and bendy straw. She cuts through the room like she's parting the red sea to place the straw between my parched lips. The nurse in her shows as she reminds me to take small sips. It's a command I don't want to follow once the first cool drop hits my tongue. I want to guzzle the liquid down. The infuriating woman takes the cup back before I can follow through. That's either a sign she's good at her job or she can read me really well.

"Thank you all for being here with us, but he needs to get some more rest," she informs the room.

*Us.*

Man, do I love that.

The morphine pump kicks in, and I spend my last few wakeful moments watching my family step from the room. In the hazy path to sleep I think I hear the words '*I love you.*'

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

### *Johanna*

The forty-plus hours a week I work here makes the hospital like a second home. Over the last few weeks, I've lived here with Magnus. Adelais is staying with my parents and sister, but they bring her to visit every day. Mag's brothers and sister visit often too. There's almost a constant stream of visitors. We have been truly blessed by the support of our families.

The first week was rough. He spent a lot of time sleeping and working through medications and treatments. Another blood transfusion was required to increase his hemoglobin levels. Magnus is having a lot of nerve trauma and pain in his left arm and shoulder, which was to be expected with a GSW like his. I know he's worried how it will affect his future as a doctor.

After he stabilized and was moved from the ICU, the physiotherapist visited every other day in a professional capacity and as a friend the other days. It's been amazing to witness how our peers have rallied around us as a community. We've wanted for nothing.

Magnus is in good spirits most of the time. I think that's what surviving trauma has done to him. It's a new fervor for life. He has his moments when the physical and mental exhaustion get him down. His recovery has not been easy even though there've been very few complications. He's still in a lot of pain, and they've been weaning his medications more each day. The therapists really put him to work, so he's often sore and exhausted.

“I don’t need to talk to anyone, Jo. I have you,” Magnus barks at me.

I know his anger isn’t directed toward me, but it’s hard not to slip into stringent nurse mode when he falls into a grumpy mood. “Magnus.” I run my fingers through my long strands of blond hair that’s flowing freely today. “That wasn’t just any shooting. You aren’t a soldier returning from war. That was a man hell-bent on killing both of us. You know I’ve been talking to someone HR recommended, and I really think you should too.”

He’s sitting up in his hospital bed watching the Mariners’ game while eating his lunch. “That’s just it. I’m not a soldier. I’m a doctor—an ED doctor. I deal with trauma every shift. I’m just fine.”

Sure, we have training and coping strategies that are drilled into us. It’s kind of a necessity for the job. However, most of those focus on witnessing trauma and dealing with grief. That’s not what happened to us.

“Okay. Then you’ll be *just fine* while I sleep at home tonight,” I say, knowing neither of us would survive that right now.

His face crumbles. “You can’t leave me.” His words are soft.

I’d been staring out the window at The Sound, but I cross the room to take my seat at his bedside. His hand is warm and strong in mine.

“No. You’re right. I can’t, and we both know it. Magnus, we’re both having nightmares almost every night, and you panic every time I leave the room. This is not healthy. If you want, I’ll go with you. We can talk to someone together. At least until you’re comfortable enough to go alone. You can’t fully heal if you don’t address all of the symptoms.”

His eyes bounce back and forth between mine. I don’t know what he finds in my expression, but he lets out a long breath and leans his head back against his pillow. “I know that you’re right, but that doesn’t mean I like it. You know I’ve

always been the one to care for those around me, and now I'm utterly dependent on everyone else. What in the world am I going to do when they send me home? When you and Adel leave me alone again?"

The last question sends me for a tailspin. I thought we had agreed to give this relationship a real go. We have talked about things in the long term. I've told him I love him, even if I do only say it while he's asleep. It never occurred to me that he'd kick me out now that the threat of my ex has been neutralized.

His hand releases mine so that his knuckle can knock against my chin to close my mouth that's gaping wide. "What'd I say?" he asks sincerely.

"You want us to move out?" My voice is brittle.

Now it's his turn for his mouth to gape. "No! I ... Well, I guess I assumed you'd want your own space back now that it's safe for you."

For a moment I take in his floppy hair and beard, both in need of a trim. His white t-shirt is taut across his chest and arms. He demanded he be allowed to wear his own clothes instead of a hospital gown as soon as he could. His deep green eyes look so uncertain.

"Mag ... Magnus, you have to know there is nowhere else the two of us would rather be," I say with a slight shake to my head.

"Come here," he says, opening his arms to me.

I've been climbing into bed with him a lot in the last few weeks. As a nurse, I know it's frowned upon, and I understand why; however, I think there's a lot to be said for the effect it has on both our mental states. It's healing in more ways than one.

Climbing under his arm, I lay my head against his uninjured shoulder. His arms wrap around me, holding me to him. I can't understand how he thinks either of us could give this up.

"If it's up to me, neither of you are going anywhere." I open my mouth to respond, but he goes on before I can.



“That’s not my fear speaking, Jo. I’ve known for some time, way before the shooting, that I was playing for keeps. I’m sorry if I didn’t express that to you in the way I should have.”

“Oh Mag,” I whisper, straightening up to get a good look at his face.

“Let me make myself clear now. I. Love. You. Both of you,” he says before pulling me in for a soul-searing kiss.

“I love you, Dadda!” screams Adel’s unexpected little voice, as her feet pound across the room and she climbs into bed with us. She’s learned to be careful with his injuries, but she crawls all over him each time she visits.

“Uh, knock knock,” chimes Winter’s voice from the doorway. “We didn’t mean to intrude, but I couldn’t hold her back any longer.” I’m beaming at her. At Magnus. At my family. “They said you’re getting released today, old man,” she prods to cover her embarrassment at witnessing our private moment. Though nothing can cover the blush flushing her face.

“Yay!” Adelais cheers. “Time to go home, Dadda.”

My little sweetheart has been enjoying her time with my parents, but she’s been asking for over a week now about when she’ll get to play in her *Little Mermaid* room and sleep in her *big girl* bed.

“That’s right,” I say. “It’s like we’ve traded roles. The physio said he should be cleared to return to light duty work in a few more weeks if he keeps up with his exercises, but he’s cleared for all other physical activities.”

Winter blushes again and fills the room with laughter. “Get your head out of the gutter,” I chastise her.

“I’m going to have to have a talk with Xavier,” Magnus mutters.

“What’d I do?” the Clark Kent look-a-like asks as he strolls into the room. The three-piece suit he’s wearing means he must have had meetings today. He’s always fashionable, but I know he prefers to be more comfortable when he’s designing and creating jewelry.

Magnus places his hands over Adel's ears before responding, "Turned my sister into a heathen, and I'd actually rather *not* hear about it."

I lightly slap his good shoulder. "Oh Magnus, get over yourself. I, for one, am glad he's making her happy."

This time both Winter and Xavier's cheeks flush.

"Right. Well, let's get this show on the road," Xavier says with a clap of his hands, awkwardly trying to change the topic.

While Magnus spent more than a week in bed after his surgery, his injury was to his arm, so he has been up and about a lot. Unfortunately for the grumbling doctor, it's still hospital policy that he rides out of the building in style. Those wheelchairs are the height of hospital fashion, and his sister makes sure he knows it.

"Xavier, don't you think he would look fabulous with a bedazzled seat belt? Or maybe encrusted spokes for those big wheels?" she razzes.

"Har har. I'll remember this when it comes time for you to give birth," Magnus says.

"What?" Xavier and I shout together.

Winter scowls through a blush. "He means in the future. I'm not pregnant ... you overgrown pin cushion." She flicks his ear as she walks beside him.

"I did make you something," Xavier says. "It's not much. I was messing around with molds the other day, so you're kind of the guinea pig."

He looks nervous as he pulls a small box from his pocket to hand to Magnus who looks dubious himself. Magnus is not the jewelry wearing sort, so I can only imagine he's trying to steel his response. The soft black velvet box fills the palm of his hand as he turns back to gauge my reaction.

"Don't look at me. I don't know anything about this. Just open it," I tell him as I maneuver us through the hospital.

He uses his good hand to clasp and lift the lid of the box. Nestled inside is a stunning titanium circle with a caduceus

emblem. It's an ID badge reel. The craftsmanship is evident in the detail. We wear our badges every day, all day, so I'm envious of his new accessory. I doubt this one will wear out or break like the cheap plastic ones do all the time.

Magnus turns, head and shoulders, to the big man beside him. "This is really beautiful work, Xavier. It's clear you spent a lot of time on this. I will wear it with pride."

Xavier gives him a firm nod in the way that all men do when they don't want to show emotion.

"Oh perfect! You can wear it over you bullet hole as a reminder to never be so stupid again," Winter says in a way that's only sort of a joke.

I may have accidentally spilled the beans on that one. I didn't realize Magnus hadn't told any of his siblings the full story, but Killian tricked it out of me. They assumed he was a victim like all the others in the ER. We asked detectives that the end of the ordeal not be widely broadcast. The only information released to the public was that medical staff were able to stop the shooter.

The media tried to dig for more, but with so many interviews conducted by detectives, they couldn't pinpoint who the intervening staff was. That's just the way I wanted it to be. I'm dealing with the outcome in my own way, and I don't need the media to play a part in that.

If it hadn't been recommended by both the detectives and the HR department, I would have found my way to therapy on my own. What I did that day went against the very oath I swore when entering the medical field, but I have to believe that even the Greeks would have agreed that my actions actually upheld the Hippocratic Oath in stopping my deranged ex.

Baby steps.

Magnus and I are learning together, and it seems we both are still very enthusiastic about wanting that to continue. Our first step in the rest of our lives is returning home ... our home ... with Adalais.



## EPILOGUE

*Magnus*

4 Years Later

**M**y tight circle now includes seven more people. It took an ordeal and many hard bumps in the road, but my world has expanded. It all started when Winter forced Xavier on us. He hasn't been so bad ... okay, truthfully, he's been wonderful for my sister. However, the real stars are Johanna and the rest of the Mendel family: Gregor, Ida, Lara, and of course Adelais. Adel has become the highlight of every day.

"What's that dreamy expression for?" Jo asks as she snuggles into my arms.

We're sitting on the sofa in the living room watching another Disney movie we've seen a hundred times. Adelais is sprawled on her belly on the plush white rug with her head propped up on her hands. She's entranced by the music and colors. I've learned to play a whole new collection of music since she moved into my home for good.

I smile down at Johanna and place a kiss on her temple. "Thinking of all the things I have to be grateful for, Mrs. Small."

"That's *Doctor* Small to you, sir," she beams.

"Nope. You'll always be my Mrs. Small," I say against the crown of her head, showering her with more kisses.

With each press of my lips, I whisper her name again.

“Mrs. Small.” *Kiss*. “Mrs. Small.” *Kiss*. “Mrs. Small.” *Kiss*.

“Ew, Mom, Dad, can you stop that. I’m in the room, ya know?” Adel’s speech has come a long way since I first met her. She still has some issues with pronunciation, but she’s soaring. She has so many friends and no longer fears her peers won’t understand her.

She’s in third grade, and her quick wit and stellar smarts make her a force of nature. There’s so much will in her that I know she’s going to run the world. She challenges her mother and me at every turn, but she’s great with her little brother.

Lukas came to us as quite the surprise. Johanna and I had discussed kids of our own, but I’ve never wanted to be an old dad and she wanted to go to medical school. Adelais was always enough for us. Turns out, the universe had other plans. We never would have made it through without the village surrounding us. And, of course, my wife is a champ.

She’s starting her first year of residency this July at Harborview. It will be great to have her back in the same hospital with me. She became a big part of my day while she was one of my nurses in the emergency department. Now, I get to work with her in a whole new capacity. Stolen lunch breaks without the kids will almost be like dating my spouse again.

Lukas is two and loves spending his time with Grandma, Grandpa, and all his aunts and uncles, but he is a Momma’s boy through-and-through. When we get home in the evenings, we each have an adorable little monster that glams onto us. The sight overflows my heart.

“Turn your volume down, Adel. Your brother is sleeping,” Johanna chides Adel.

The little girl dips her shoulders and smiles sweetly, “Oops! Sorry.”

She’s still loud, and her apology is too quick. The fast *sorry* before immediately moving on to whatever she really wants to do is something we have been working on lately.

“It’s your bedtime next,” I tell her. “We have a big day tomorrow celebrating your mother’s birthday, so you need to get your rest.”

It’s difficult extricating myself from my wife’s arms, but I know the only way I’ll get Adel to bed now is to continue our tradition. I started carrying her to bed years ago, and I’ve never stopped. Time is running out on how long I’ll be able to keep doing it, which makes it all the more special now.

After a long goodnight routine with my daughter, I slink back to our bedroom to find Johanna curled up with her kindle. She spends so much time with her head in medical books that she’s taken to reading a lot of fiction in the evenings to clear her mind. She calls it her escape.

“What are you reading tonight? Are there dragons and portals or is there a man nipple on the cover?”

She smacks her kindle down on the covers. “Magnus!”

“I’m just saying. There’s a reason romance books have started switching to *discreet* covers, and that reason is man nipples,” I tease her.

Her face is unappeased.

“If you must know ... it’s an urban fantasy with a tough as nails chick who saves the world from demons.” Her head tilt is challenging.

She loves to read about strong women who take on the world. Women who take no grief and support their men, even when they’re being dumb. Or so she says. I love it too. She’s my fierce warrior ... unstoppable ... and I’m just along for the ride. One of my greatest joys is to be able to support her dreams; to bolster her and help her get places that might not have been possible by herself. She doesn’t let me do the work for her, but she does accept the leg up when needed.

“Hmm I bet there’s a hot demon though, right?” She’s too fun to tease, but she gives as good as she gets.

Her eyes roam my frame from my bare feet to my hair that’s showing more than just hints of gray these days. She sets

down her kindle, closes one eye, and moves her hands closer and farther apart like she's measuring me.

"I'd let you be a stand-in, I guess," she says with an impish smirk.

"Woman!" I admonish before jumping on the bed, trapping her beneath me. Her beautiful mane of glossy blond hair fans around her pale skin and sharp green eyes. A small growl rips up my throat. "All those book boyfriends are my stand-ins. We've written our own love story, and you are mine."

My lips meld with hers, and she softens beneath me. Her fingers on my back dig in as she pulls me closer. When she pulls back, sucking in air, her cheeks are flushed, and her lids are heavy. There's nothing I wouldn't do for this woman. Something we've proved to one another in the hardest of ways.

"I love you, Dr. Small," she says.

Our noses slide against one another in a butterfly kiss as I say, "I love you, too, Dr. Small."



## **Thanks for Reading**

Amazon reviews are extremely helpful for authors, and I would be so grateful if you would honor me with one! Your support is everything to me and provides the feedback I need to give readers like you exactly what you want. I read every single review, and they mean so much. So, tell me what you like, what you love, and what you want more of! Thank you for taking the time to support me and my work. Don't forget to share your review on social media with the hashtag #TheSevenBrothersSeries and encourage others to read Magnus and Johanna's story too!

## Acknowledgment

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### **Help is available**

National Domestic Violence Hotline

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<https://www.thehotline.org/>



## **About the Author**

SHELLY MONARCH and her family go wherever her husband's high-speed career takes them. From the Pacific Northwest to the warm coasts of the Gulf, she is never quite sure where she will be when she pens her next great story.

Her hubby, two crazy young kids, and two unpredictable old rescue dogs keep her busy most days. Lazy mountain hikes and glorious days at the beach refresh the soul. Shelly devours books like all good little bookworms, especially those books with even a hint of romance. Oh, shoot, and she does housework. Don't forget the housework!

Shelly's varied tastes in literature fuel her writing. She loves finding new authors to stalk and stories to enjoy. She has big plans for future novels in different genres such as twisted fairy tales, romantic comedy, paranormal fantasy, and science fiction.

Stay tuned for more cinnamon roll men and the strong females who save them from themselves. Happy reading!

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