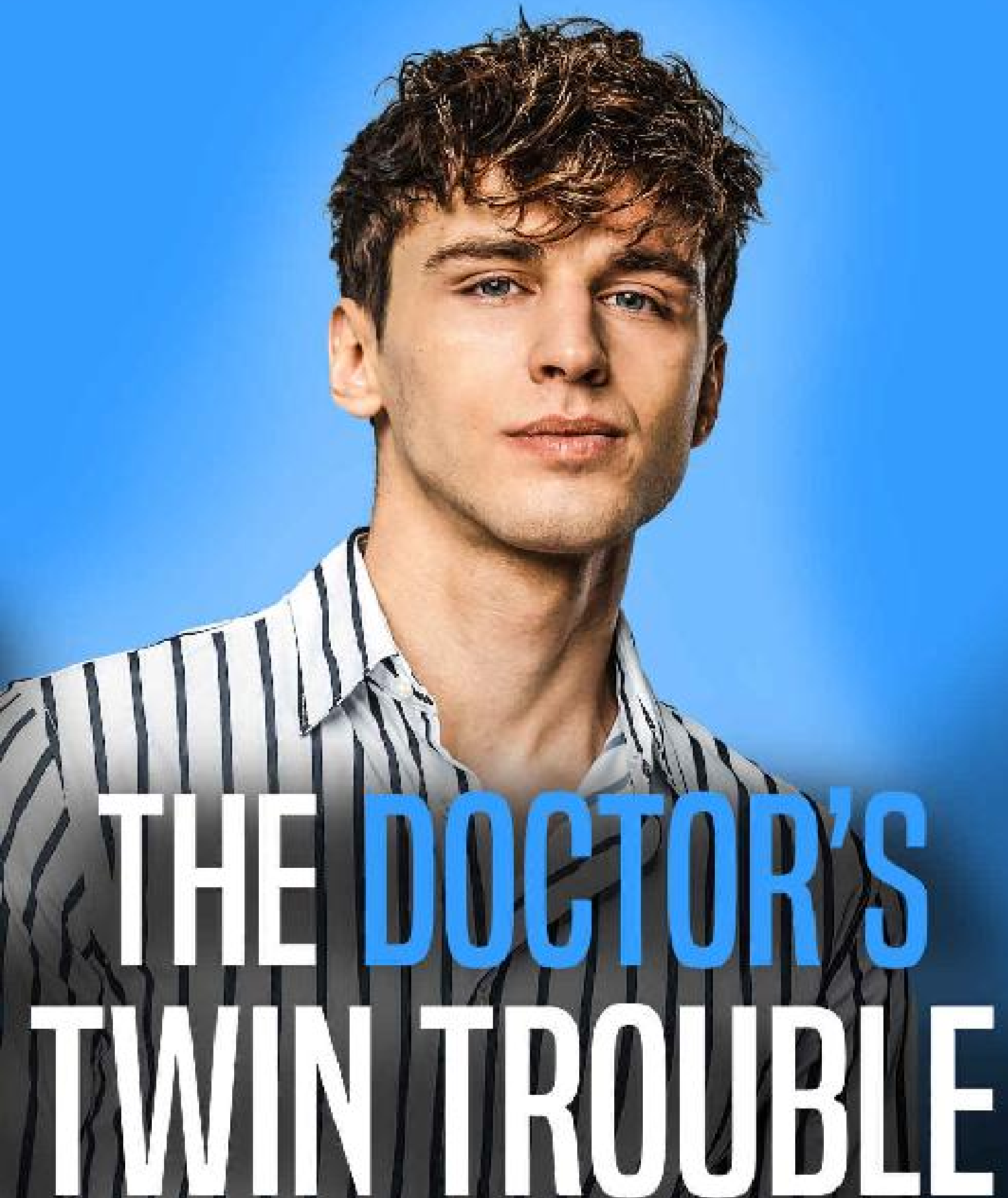


LAYLA VALENTINE



THE DOCTOR'S
TWIN TROUBLE

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CHAPTER 1

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CHLOE



Chloe Austen stood in front of her moving van, gazing up at the beautiful brownstone that was to be her new home here in St. Louis.

There were a lot of motivating factors behind her move here, most having to do with the need to get away from Seattle. It wasn't as if she had always longed to live in the heartland of America—to be honest, it was something she never would have thought about if Grace Hospital hadn't been the one to offer her a position. But now that she was here, she couldn't help feeling good about the choice.

She definitely wouldn't have been able to afford a place this nice in Seattle. Living here had its benefits.

One of the movers came up to her. "Should we start loading everything in, Ms. Austen?"

"Actually, I'd like to go up first, just take a look around," Chloe said. "Do you think that'll be okay?"

The man shrugged. "Sure it will," he said. "You're paying us by the hour, so take all the time you want."

Chloe grinned. She liked her movers, and she liked their forthrightness. And he was right—she had contracted them for the whole day, and she might as well get her money's worth.

"I'll be back down in a minute," she said.

"You've got the key to the place?"

"No, but the landlord is meeting me up there," Chloe said. "He'll let me in and show me around."

“You sure you’re good going by yourself?”

“I’m fine,” Chloe said. She appreciated his thoughtfulness, but now that she was here—in an unfamiliar city where she knew no one—she was going to have to get used to doing things by herself. It would be a while before she knew anybody well enough to really rely on them for anything.

That was okay. Being on her own would be a challenge, but it was definitely better than being back in Seattle.

Back where Greg had been.

She felt a stab of pain at the thought of him, and did her best to shut down that whole line of thought. It would do her no good to think about Greg right now. All right, yes, there had been a time in her life when she’d believed they would be together forever, but he had shown his true colors. She had never been a part of his plan. Or rather, the life she had wanted to live had never been compatible with the life he had envisioned for the two of them.

If he needed me to give up on my career to be with him, then it was never really me that he wanted, she reminded herself. Becoming a doctor had been everything to her since she was young. But Greg had been adamant that his own medical career was the priority, and that she should give up her residency in order to support him. When she had refused, he had ended the relationship.

After that, staying in Seattle had just been too painful. Everything was just a reminder of the life she had dreamed of—the life she would never have now.

St. Louis was unfamiliar, but that was a good thing. She needed to start over.

She hurried up the steps to the front door of the brownstone and knocked at the door. The man she’d spoken to about the rental, a Mr. Butler, had agreed that he would meet her here and hand over the keys, and she knew there would likely be some papers that needed to be signed as well.

For a long time, there was no answer to her knock.

Chloe frowned. She had texted Mr. Butler from the road to let him know what time to expect her, and she was right on schedule. He should have been waiting for her. Was it possible he had stepped out?

She knocked again.

A moment later, she heard the sound of a lock disengaging, and the door opened.

A blonde woman, probably in her forties, in an apron stood before her. It was obvious she was in the middle of cooking. Chloe could hear the sound of a TV from inside the house.

“Hi,” the woman said. “Can I help you?”

“Maybe I have the wrong address,” Chloe said, confused. “I’m sorry. I thought this was 413 Delaney Street.”

“No, it is,” the woman said. “Are you looking for someone in particular?”

“I...well, I’m supposed to be renting this place,” Chloe said. She gestured to her moving van. “I’m supposed to move in today.”

The woman shook her head slowly. “No,” she said. “My family and I live here. You must have made a mistake.”

“I was supposed to be meeting the landlord, Joseph Butler,” Chloe said, the back of her neck breaking out into a sweat. This was a bad start.

“Never heard of him,” the woman said. “That’s not the name of our landlord.”

Chloe bit her lip. She wasn’t sure what to do. She pulled up the last email she had from Butler on her phone and showed it to the woman. “This is this address, isn’t it?”

“It is,” the woman said. “But the pictures here aren’t of the inside of my house. Maybe you’d better call this person. It seems like he gave you some bad information.”

Chloe nodded, sort of feeling as if she might cry.

“Do you want to come inside?” the woman asked. “I’ll get you a glass of water and you can make your phone call.”

“That’s nice of you,” Chloe said. “Yes, I’d like that.”

The woman led the way inside. “I’m Helen,” she said.

“Chloe.”

“Don’t worry, Chloe. We’ll figure this out.”

“Thank you for being so nice about it. I just drove down from Seattle,” Chloe explained. “I don’t know anybody in Missouri.”

“Maybe you’d like something stronger than water?”

“I’d take a beer, if you have one?”

“Definitely.” Helen went to the refrigerator.

“I really appreciate you being so nice to me,” Chloe said. “I know it must be weird, having a random stranger knock on your door with a moving van full of stuff, saying she’s supposed to move into your house.”

“I’m guessing it’s a little weirder for you than for me, though,” Helen said sympathetically. “You drove all the way here from Seattle, you don’t know anyone, and now your information is wrong. You must be freaking out.”

“A little bit,” Chloe admitted.

Helen set a can of beer down in front of her. “I’ll give you some privacy to make your call,” she said.

“Thank you,” Chloe told her gratefully.

Helen gave a little smile and stepped out of the room.

Chloe tapped the phone number in the email from Joseph Butler. She had never spoken to him on the phone—all their communication had been via email. And, of course, there had been the matter of the first and last month’s rent that she had sent to him via a cash app...

Now that she thought of it, that didn’t seem very professional. Why hadn’t he wanted a check?

An uncomfortable suspicion was beginning to fester in her mind.

The phone rang and rang, but nobody answered. Chloe waited for a voicemail to pick up—at the very least, she could leave a message—but then the line buzzed and went dead.

She felt a weight in the pit of her stomach.

Helen leaned into the room and held her hand up to her ear to ask if Chloe was still on the phone.

Chloe shook her head. “I think the line was disconnected,” she said.

“Are you serious?”

“I don’t know. The call just dropped.”

Helen sighed. “Where did you find this place listed online?”

She was carrying her laptop, Chloe saw. She put it down on the table and pushed it over to Chloe. “Go ahead,” she said. “Pull up the website.”

Chloe nodded and typed in the name of the place she’d searched.

Site not found.

She shivered.

“I’ve heard of this happening,” Helen said gently. “There was a report on it in the news a few weeks ago.”

“I don’t understand,” Chloe said.

“People set up fake websites and use pictures to collect deposits on properties they don’t own,” Helen said. “They con people into believing they’re renting, and then when the people show up, the fake landlords have completely disappeared.”

“You’re saying you don’t think Mr. Butler was legit?”

“I’m saying that probably wasn’t even his real name,” Helen said.

Chloe felt her eyes fill with tears.

She was humiliated. She didn’t want to cry in front of this stranger.

This was the first part of her new life, and she had done her best to manage it on her own—to be strong. She'd been so proud of herself for arranging a place to live without any help. It had been her way of showing herself that she could make it out here, away from her family and everyone she knew.

And now, to find out that she had been scammed—it was just too much.

“Oh, honey,” Helen said gently. “Don’t worry, all right? We’re going to find you a place to stay. There are some great hotels that offer low rates on long-term accommodations, while you hunt for another apartment. And my cousin owns a storage facility—I can get you a discount rate on a unit to put your stuff in for now.”

“You would do that for me?”

“Of course!” Helen says. “You’ve been conned. I feel really bad for you. I’ll do what I can to help. Especially since you don’t have anyone in town that you can turn to. I remember what it was like to be your age, and just starting out.”

“I’m really lucky to have met someone so kind right away,” Chloe said. “Even though the apartment didn’t work out.”

“Listen, why don’t you relax for a little while and drink your beer,” Helen suggested. “I’ll call my cousin, and if we can get you a place, we’ll have the movers take your stuff over there. Once that’s taken care of, we can start looking for a hotel for you.”

“That’s really nice of you.”

“Oh, think nothing of it,” Helen said. “And help yourself to the cookies in the tin there, if you’re hungry. I just need to make a few phone calls. Don’t worry. We’ll get you sorted out in no time.”



Three hours later, after her things had been transferred to a storage unit for which she was only paying a token amount, after Helen had given her an armful of plastic containers full

of meals for the next few evenings and an index card with her phone number on it, Chloe lay flat on her back on her bed in a small hotel room, staring up at the ceiling and wondering how this had happened to her.

She tried to look on the bright side. This place was close to Grace Hospital, so she would have a short commute to work. In fact, when the weather was nice, she could walk if she wanted to. It was less than a mile. That was a good thing.

And it had come cheap. She was paying a fraction of the monthly rent she would have paid for the brownstone—if the rent she had been quoted had even been real. Actually, she had no idea what it would have cost to rent a place like that. She hadn't been able to bring herself to start investigating *real* rentals in St. Louis yet. She hoped they would be in her price range, but for all she knew now, everything she thought she knew about this city could be wrong.

The place she'd found was nice enough. It came with a kitchenette, which was better than nothing. But it didn't feel like a home. She had counted on having that tonight—her new home. She had planned to start unpacking, to begin setting things up so that over the next few days she would begin to feel as if she really belonged here in St. Louis.

She certainly didn't feel as if she belonged in this bare hotel room, with its impersonal beige walls and soulless paintings on the walls. This wasn't her home, and it never would be.

And she had no idea how long it would be before she would be able to find a real apartment and move in.

All things considered, her time in St. Louis was off to an abysmal start.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

She couldn't let this dampen her spirits. She was starting her new job tomorrow. She would have a fresh start there, too, and she was determined to make the most of it. To make a good first impression.

She had given up her future with Greg in order to pursue her medical career. Now she needed to make the most of it in

order to make that sacrifice worth it.

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CHAPTER 2

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SHAUN



Can I crash on your couch? Just for a couple of days.

Shaun pressed the button on the side of his phone to make the text from his brother disappear from the screen. As always, he felt a little rude about not answering Matt, but they had been through this countless times now.

It was never just a couple of days. Those days would turn into a week, and then a month, and eventually Shaun would have to kick Matt out, and Matt would rail at him, and Shaun would feel horrible about it. He had plenty of friends if he was couch-surfing at the moment. It wasn't as if he would be out on the street. He'd find a place to stay.

And besides, Shaun worked hard. He didn't have the capacity to put up with his deadbeat brother on top of everything.

He wasn't there for me when Rosemary died. He's said next to nothing about me being a widower all these years. He only calls my name when he needs something. Well, he can forget it.

He stuck his phone in his locker and slammed it shut rather more forcefully than was necessary—but better to get the aggression out of his system before he faced his residents. He didn't like to bring his personal life with him to work. Shaun prided himself on his professionalism. He wanted his residents to see him as a doctor and a role model, nothing more. They had each other if they wanted to make friends.

He went out to the place in front of the nurses' station where he usually met the residents in the mornings. As always, they

were standing there, alert and ready to go. The sight of them calmed him somewhat. At least *they* were responsible, even if Matt wasn't. At least there was some order in Shaun's life.

"Good morning," he said, looking over the group. "Two new intakes late last night. Megan, Raul, I've given them to you. Consult with me if you need to, but no trading them away. I want to see how you do." He'd made these choices specifically, based on the patient experiences Megan and Raul had already had. It was time for both of them to expand their abilities a little.

He turned to Bev, who was almost finished with her residency. "You're with me today," he said.

"You want me to shadow you?" Bev sounded surprised. He couldn't really blame her. She was so close to the end of her residency that it had been a very long time since he had asked her to be hands-off, and to just follow him around and learn by watching.

"No," he said. "I want to shadow *you* today. You're going to do my rounds, and I'm going to be there just in case the patients want to talk to me. But if they don't ask for me specifically, I'll be keeping my mouth shut and letting you handle things."

Bev frowned. "The whole wing?"

"You're ready for it," he assured her. "Remember, you'll be done here soon. It's time you gave this a try."

She smiled. "Thanks, Doctor Marlow."

Shaun nodded, but he didn't smile back. Smiling was too close to being buddies, and that wasn't something he wanted his residents to feel from him. They weren't friends.

He was about to dismiss the group when he heard the sound of someone running up the hall. He turned, expecting to see one of the nurses hurrying to answer a call.

Instead, he found himself face to face with a woman he'd never seen before in his life.

She was short—shorter than any of his other residents—with auburn hair that hung loose down her back. Her scrubs top had a dinosaur print.

He frowned at her. “Who are you?”

“Chloe Austen,” she said, coming to a stop in front of him. “I’m the new resident. Are you Doctor Marlow?”

“I am.”

“I’m supposed to report to you.”

He checked his watch. “Technically, you were supposed to report to me ten minutes ago. I’m almost done with my morning briefing.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I had some issues come up yesterday ___”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, “but as any of my residents will tell you, personal issues are to be dealt with on your own time. I can’t ask my patients to wait for care because your boyfriend broke up with you, or whatever it might be.”

She flushed. “No, that’s not...” Catching a glimpse of the expression on his face, she fell silent.

At least she learns quickly. I don’t have time to listen to excuses. “From now on, I expect you to be here on time,” Shaun said. “If that means you need to get out of bed earlier, you’ll have to do that.”

She nodded.

“And get some different scrubs,” he said. “This isn’t pediatrics. We don’t wear dinosaurs to work. I expect you to put your hair up out of your face and dress in something more appropriate for work.”

Her cheeks went even redder, which he wouldn’t have thought would be possible. He felt a little bad about the way he was talking to her—after all, he was chastising her in front of the people who were going to be her new coworkers, and this was her very first day. Of course, he knew that he could count on the others to take her aside afterward, to tell her not to take

things too seriously and that that was just the way Doctor Marlow was—incredibly strict, but a good physician. A good teacher. He knew he was those things. He didn't need to hold his residents' hands. They would be stronger if they had to stand on their own.

"I'm going to put you with Megan today," he decided. This being her very first day, he couldn't send her out on her own to handle patients. He needed to assess her skills first. "You do everything she tells you."

"I will," Chloe said quietly.

He softened a little. It was clear that she felt bad about the impression she had made today. "Good," he said. He indicated Megan. "That's Megan."

Megan waved a little.

Chloe walked over to stand beside her.

"All right," Shaun said. "Bev, you're with me and the interns. Everyone else, get to your tasks. If you need anything, talk to the nurses."

The cluster of residents broke up.

Shaun glanced one more time at Chloe as she walked away with Megan. The women were leaning close together, talking in hushed whispers, and Shaun was sure that Megan would be reassuring Chloe. He hoped it would go well. He knew he could be too hard on people.

Honestly, it didn't help matters that Chloe was *gorgeous*. He suspected he might have come down so hard on her because he would have been tempted, otherwise, to be overly kind. That auburn hair was beautiful, and the dinosaur scrubs were fitted in a way that made him think she must have special ordered, or had them tailored for her. He wanted her to wear something shapeless, like the rest of the residents, so he wouldn't catch himself thinking about her body, and he was grateful for the fact that his *plain scrubs only* rule had been in effect before today, so that he could tell himself he hadn't just said that on her account.

When the residents had dispersed, he turned to Bev. “Do you think I was too hard on her?”

Bev’s expression was measured. “I think she’ll handle it,” she said. “We all did, when we first came to work for you. She needs to know the rules about arriving on time and dressing for work. She probably won’t upset you again.”

“You don’t think the rules are too harsh?”

“You’ve never asked me that before.” She eyed him. “Is this because I’m about to finish my residency? Is this how you talk to people who don’t work for you?”

“Maybe.” *No.* Shaun had never questioned himself at work before. He had never doubted the way he treated his staff.

Was he really just letting Chloe get to him because she was cute?

No, it isn’t just that. It was Matt’s text this morning. That had gotten him off on a sour note. He knew his brother would text him again, over and over. He wouldn’t just give up on the idea of coming to stay with Shaun. He really never did take no for an answer.

“All right,” he said to Bev, anxious to get his mind off of both Matt and Chloe. “Let’s get the interns and make the rounds. And by the way, you’re in charge of them today too.”

“I’m in charge of the interns?”

“Yup. You’re doing everything. I’ll only step in if you run into trouble.”

He knew she wouldn’t. He was confident in Bev’s abilities. She was ready to move on to the next stage in her career, and these last few weeks were nothing more than a formality, as far as Shaun was concerned. He would have completed her residency today if the choice were up to him.

So he watched her as she went through the daily routine of seeing to their patients. Of course, most of the real hard work was done by the nurses—they were the one group of people in the hospital that Shaun never spoke harshly to. He knew that even they thought of him as strict and demanding, but unlike

the rest of the staff, they enjoyed his gruff demeanor. Some of them teased him about it. The head nurse had once given him a coffee mug that said *World's Meanest Boss*, which he loved but refused to use at the hospital lest the residents and interns get the idea that his strict personality was a joke.

He didn't say a word to Bev—he was determined not to chime in unless she needed him—but to the interns, he was his usual harsh self. Maybe he was even harsher than usual, he couldn't be sure. It was interesting, surveying them silently, raising one eyebrow at them when they made mistakes they should have known better than to make. After one of them scurried away after missing a vein on a routine blood draw, near tears and stammering about needing the restroom, Bev grabbed his arm and pulled him aside.

“You know that was only the third time he's ever tried that procedure, don't you?” she said. “We've all missed it at least once.”

“He needs to be able to do that in his *sleep*,” Shaun said. “I'm not going to have a bunch of interns sticking needles into patients like they're pincushions.”

“That's not what happened, and you know it. He missed the vein once.”

He looked at her. “Since when do you talk to *me* like this?”

“I accepted a job here at Grace,” Bev said. “We're going to be colleagues. I won't be working under you anymore.”

He was momentarily distracted. “Hey, good for you.”

“Right, so I'm going to have some say in how we treat our interns. And we're not going to push them around and make them feel like crap. He was doing his best.”

Shaun shook his head. “*He did his best* is something you say to high school basketball players. Doctors don't get to show up and just try their hardest. When we make mistakes, people die. It's not enough to tell ourselves that we tried.”

“Look, I agree with you in principle,” Bev said. “But we're talking about a stick for a blood draw. The patient is not going

to die from that. Everything's fine here, so there's no reason to get so hot about it."

"You're going to be a good doctor," Shaun told her. "But there's one thing you've never internalized, Bev, and that's the need for perfection. It doesn't matter what the stakes are. Everything needs to be perfect."

"Everything is never going to be perfect, Shaun. If you keep telling yourself that, then nothing is ever going to be good enough."

"That's right," he said. "That's what we should be striving for as doctors. We should always be improving. We should never settle for *good enough*. And missing a vein is *never* going to be good enough. That kid has his mother to tell him he's doing a great job. From me, he's going to hear what he's doing wrong."

"They're scared of you," Bev told him. "I used to be scared of you. That's why I've never talked to you directly before."

"They should be scared of me," he told her. "And when you have your own crop of interns, you're going to need to make them afraid of you."

"I don't think that's my style."

Shaun didn't answer. He didn't know what else he could tell her. But what they were talking about...it wasn't a *style*.

Bev was going to need to learn how to take matters around her under control, the way he had done with the interns.

And the way he had done with Chloe.

If you couldn't control your people, you would never be a great doctor.

CHAPTER 3

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CHLOE



Once they were out of earshot of Doctor Marlow, Megan turned out to be a cheerful, upbeat person who was completely pleasant to be around. Chloe immediately felt at ease in her company.

“You shouldn’t worry about him,” Megan said, leading her down the hall. “That’s just the way he is.”

“I don’t think he likes me,” Chloe said.

“Well, he doesn’t really like anybody,” Megan said. “He’s not exactly *friendly*. You’ll get used to him.”

“Are my scrubs inappropriate?” She glanced at Megan, who was wearing plain navy.

“Yeah, he wants you to just wear blue,” Megan said. “Any shade of blue is okay, though. The point is that you’re not supposed to look unprofessional or distracting.”

“But patients want to be distracted,” Chloe said. “They have nothing to do in the hospital except be bored and think about whatever illness or injury landed them here.” She gestured to her top. “I’ve bonded with patients over this. People like dinosaurs. Hospitals are miserable, but dinosaurs are fun.”

“Well, your job isn’t to bond with patients or to have fun with them,” Megan said. “You’re supposed to cure them. That’s Doctor Marlow’s philosophy. Maybe it was different at your last hospital.”

“It was,” Chloe said.

“You’ll get used to it here,” Megan said. “It isn’t bad. You just need to remember that you’re here to do a job.”

“And enhancing patient comfort—bedside manner—that’s not part of our job, according to Doctor Marlow?”

“That kind of thing is something they get from the nurses,” Megan said.

Chloe was quiet. She didn’t agree with that philosophy at all.

But she was only here to do her residency. It wasn’t as if Doctor Marlow was going to be her boss for the rest of her life. She would put in her time, and then she would find a job at another hospital.

And the most important thing in all of this was the fact that working for Doctor Marlow was getting her out of Seattle. It didn’t matter exactly what that looked like. It didn’t matter that her new job wasn’t the way she’d fantasized it might be.

It didn’t matter that this was one more thing that wasn’t going right for her here in St. Louis.

It was right *enough*. It was a job, and it would keep her going for the next few years. She could learn to play by Doctor Marlow’s rules for the time being.

“At least he’s good to look at,” she said to Megan.

Megan laughed. “You got there pretty quickly.”

“Don’t you agree?”

“Oh, I agree, all right. Everyone does. The nurses call him *Doctor Love* behind his back. But don’t get your hopes up.”

“Is he married?”

“No, I don’t think he dates at all. He’s married to his work.”

Chloe shrugged. “So am I,” she said.

“Are you?”

“For the time being. I just got out of a thing that didn’t end very well.”

“Yikes. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It’s for the best, really,” Chloe said. “It wasn’t a good relationship. It’s nice to be able to start over.”

“Is that what brings you to St. Louis?” Megan asked. “I noticed you said you were here from Seattle.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Chloe admitted. “Just looking to get some distance from all that.”

“Have you been to St. Louis before?”

“Never.”

“You should let me show you around,” Megan suggested. “How about a drink after work?”

Chloe laughed. “You sound like you’re trying to be my friend.”

“I’d like to be!”

“I’d like that too, but you don’t think Doctor Marlow will disapprove?”

“No, he likes it when we’re friends with each other,” Megan said. “It makes him feel more justified in the fact that *he* isn’t friendly to any of us.”

“You don’t expect me to believe that he actually has mixed feelings about the way he treats people?”

“He’s really not that bad, I promise. He’s a good man, and he’s a great doctor. He’s just...really strict.”

“I’ll say. We’re not even allowed to let our hair down, literally?”

“You can do a ponytail if you’d like, or a braid, but he really prefers a bun. He doesn’t want to see hair hanging down at all. Says it’s not professional.”

“That’s a little ridiculous.”

“He just likes to be in control of everything. So what do you say?” Megan asked. “Are we going for drinks?”

“Yes,” Chloe said. “Thanks for asking. It’ll be nice to have a friend here. I don’t know anybody east of Colorado.”

“I know a great place,” Megan said with a smile. “I think you’re really going to like it.”

“I’m not particular,” Chloe assured her.

They paused outside the door of one of the rooms and Megan took the clipboard that was hanging on the wall. “Okay,” she said. “This is Mr. Tamble.”

“Okay.”

“He’s recovering from heart surgery. Do you want to take a look at his chart?”

Chloe held out a hand, and Megan gave her the chart. Chloe paged through it, noting the important details. Mr. Tamble’s recovery seemed to be progressing as well as one could expect, and the notation indicated that if everything stayed as it had been, he could probably be released to go home the next day. “So we just need to check his vitals, maybe get a pain index, see how he’s feeling and how he’s been eating and all of that,” she said, glancing up at Megan for confirmation.

“Exactly,” Megan agreed. “Now, Mr. Tamble isn’t a very agreeable patient. He doesn’t like being here, and he doesn’t have much respect for any of the doctors or nurses—especially the women. He’s probably going to try to make things difficult. Just let it roll off your back.”

Chloe had encountered her share of patients like that before. “Don’t worry,” she said confidently. “I can handle whatever he can dish out.”

“Good,” said a voice. “You won’t mind an audience, then.”

Chloe and Megan turned. Chloe’s heart sank.

Doctor Marlow had appeared as if out of nowhere behind them. “Oh,” Megan said. “Hi, Doctor Marlow. Did you want to see to Mr. Tamble today?”

“Chloe seems pretty confident,” Doctor Marlow said. “Maybe we should let her do it.”

Chloe felt a twang of nervousness. It was clear that he wasn’t exactly confident in her—he probably thought she was going to fail. But she wouldn’t. She knew she could handle this. It

wasn't even a particularly difficult patient—just a standard examination of a post-op recovery. She'd done this dozens of times in Seattle.

She nodded. “All right,” she said. “Let's do it.”

“Megan, why don't you go down the hall to room 205 and see if you can help Bev out?” Doctor Marlow said.

Chloe frowned. “Megan isn't going to stay?”

“I don't think Mr. Tamble needs three doctors for a routine check,” Doctor Marlow said. “Unless you don't feel confident that you can handle this without her?”

“I can handle it,” Chloe said.

“All right, then. Let's see what you can do.”

He opened the door and ushered Chloe inside.

There was something about his presence that robbed Chloe of her confidence. She knew she could handle this situation, but having him looking over her shoulder made her feel uncertain all the same. It was as if he was just going to be waiting for her to make a mistake that he could seize upon, and just knowing that made it all the more likely that Chloe would mess up.

She steeled herself and approached the bed.

Mr. Tamble turned out to be a baby-faced man in his sixties with what looked like a permanent scowl on his face. He glowered up at her. “I don't know you,” he announced. “You're not one of my doctors.”

“I am today,” Chloe said cheerfully. She had learned not to start off by believing she had to explain herself to patients—there had been plenty over the years who had insisted she was too young, too pretty, or simply too female to possibly be a good doctor. It was always better not to entertain those conversations—they didn't lead anywhere good.

So instead of debating her right to be here with Mr. Tamble, she readied her stethoscope and stepped to his bedside. “Let me get a quick listen,” she said.

Mr. Tumble grumbled, but he sat upright and positioned himself in such a way that she would be able to access both his chest and his back.

Chloe moved forward and listened to Mr. Tumble's heart and lungs. She carefully assessed the strength and clarity of his heartbeat, making notations on the chart as she did so.

"Well, everything sounds good to me," she said.

"So I can go home?"

"If Doctor Marlow doesn't have any objections, you'll be able to go home tomorrow, as you were scheduled to."

Mr. Tumble frowned. "I don't know why you don't let me go right now. Unless you're just trying to make more money by keeping me in this bed. I can leave if I want to, you know, you can't stop me."

"Well, I can call an orderly to restrain you, if that's something you need me to do," Chloe said cheerfully. "But you're right, I can't legally force you to stay. If you're determined to leave against medical advice, you have every right. I noticed on your chart that you have your daughter listed as your contact. Would you like to call her up and explain to her that you're ready to check out against the advice of your doctors, and that she should come and pick you up?"

Mr. Tumble scowled, and Chloe knew that she had hit upon the right thing to say to him. Of course his daughter wasn't going to permit him to come home early against medical advice. No caring daughter would.

Now it was time for the softer touch. "One more night," she told Mr. Tumble. "I know this place sucks, but one night won't be that bad. I'll arrange for you to get something special for dinner."

He brightened. "Steak?"

"Now, Mr. Tumble, I know I'm not going to be the first one to tell you that you need to lay off the red meat. You just had a heart attack."

He groaned. “You’re going to give me a salad or something, aren’t you?”

Chloe already had an idea in mind. “I’m going to give you a vegetarian dish that you’ll really enjoy,” she promised. “And when I’m finished, I’ll give you the recipe, so you or your daughter can make it once you get home.”

“I’m not going to enjoy that rabbit food,” Mr. Tumble swore darkly.

“Okay. You can tell me so after you’ve tried it.”

“Don’t think I won’t.”

“Fair enough.” She had absolutely no emotional investment in whether Mr. Tumble liked her cooking or not—except, of course, that it would have been nice to show him that there was such a thing as a delicious vegetarian meal, given the dietary restrictions he was now facing. The real point of this exercise was to distract him from his desire to try to leave the hospital early.

Doctor Marlow said nothing, but Chloe felt quietly pleased with herself as she finished up the investigation. He had seen her in action, and she had given him nothing to fault.

In fact, she was so pleased with herself that she was sure, as they left the room, that he would actually pay her a compliment. He would tell her that he was happy with her work.

He said nothing, though. He just looked at her appraisingly, then turned and walked off, leaving her standing there.

What the hell? Why is he like that?

She had no idea what she was supposed to do now. He had given her no instructions. Should she just keep visiting patient rooms? Surely he couldn’t want her to do that on her own, on her very first day—but what if that *was* what he wanted? What if she just stood here in the hall, and half an hour later he found her and demanded to know why she wasn’t working?

It would hardly be the first thing he’d have expected her to know just by intuition.

She was just about to start panicking when Megan came walking briskly down the hall toward her.

Relieved, Chloe hurried to her new friend's side. "So that was weird," she said. "Wasn't that weird?"

"I don't know," Megan said. "That was Doctor Marlow. Bev didn't really have anything for me to do, so we just stood around and chatted until he came back and told me to come and find you."

"Did he mention...did he say anything about how I'd done?"

"No," Megan said. "How *did* you do?"

"Okay, I think," Chloe said. "It wasn't exactly the world's most challenging procedure, but he's kind of a difficult patient, and I thought I handled that well. But Doctor Marlow didn't say anything to me,"

"You'll have to get used to it," Megan told her. "If you're looking for some sign of approval from that man, I'm afraid you're in for a lot of disappointment."

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CHAPTER 4

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SHAUN



When Chloe showed up the next day in a sky-blue scrubs top with a bright yellow scrunchie holding her hair back from her face, Shaun knew that he couldn't complain.

She had done all that he'd asked. And if he said anything about the way she'd presented herself today, he would be explicitly changing the rules he'd set for his residents just on her account. He couldn't do *that*.

But it was a little infuriating, because he was fairly sure that she was trying to defy him. She wasn't a fool. She could see that all the other residents were dressed in dark blue. She must have known that that was the expectation around here.

She was being different on purpose.

But he had only specified *blue* when he had written the rules, so technically, her sunny outfit was permitted.

He also wished she had put her hair up *properly*—her thick ponytail swung when she moved, and she hadn't bothered to pin down the flyaways around her face. It made her look younger than anyone else in the hospital, and less professional.

And then there was the way she dealt with the patients.

He'd taken her aside yesterday evening after he'd seen her serving dinner to Mr. Tamble. "You can't just do that," he'd said. "You can't give food to the patients."

"Oh, it's all right," she said, as if it was her place to tell *him* what was all right to do in this hospital. "I conferred with the

dietician on his chart.”

He had been momentarily taken aback that she’d thought to do something like that. “You did?”

“Well, of course.” Chloe had laughed. “I wasn’t going to give food to a post-op patient without making sure it was all right! But I didn’t want to bother you. I know how busy you are.”

He had frowned, unsure of whether or not he was being criticized. Was she implying that he was too busy to consult on the needs of his patients?

Then again...if she had come to him with this idea, he had to admit that he probably would have told her to drop it and allow Mr. Tamble to eat the hospital meal. It would be perfectly serviceable, he would have told her.

“What did you give him?” he’d asked her.

“Lentil and rice soup. The seasonings were the only part I was worried about, but the dietician cleared all of them. Said that everything was fine. So I gave it to Mr. Tamble, and the recipe as well.”

“Where’d you get the recipe?”

“Oh, it’s a family recipe.”

“You mean you cooked this for him yourself?” He’d been puzzled. “When did you find the time?”

“No, I’m sorry. I see the confusion. I did cook the soup, but I had meant it to be *my* dinner,” she said. “But when I saw that Mr. Tamble needed something to look forward to, I decided to give it to him. I could get dinner at the cafe. They had a really good tuna sandwich, actually!”

Even now, Shaun wasn’t sure why this irritated him so much. There was nothing at all wrong with what she had done. In fact it had been a kind thing—giving Mr. Tamble something to cheer him up when he was sick of being in the hospital and facing a life without a lot of his favorite foods.

In a lot of ways, he admired Chloe for what she’d done.

It had followed him home yesterday evening, and he'd found himself thinking about her that night over his own dinner.

Maybe that was why he'd disliked the whole matter so much. He didn't like the idea of thinking about his residents when the workday was over. They weren't supposed to find their way into his personal life, or his personal thoughts. He was supposed to leave them behind when he left work.

Now he glanced over at the nurses' station.

Chloe was standing there with a little basket, smiling at Steph, the head nurse. The two of them were laughing about something. He felt another prick of annoyance, and decided to go over to them and break up the party.

Steph noticed his approach, and he saw the smile disappear from her face. That just ratcheted up his annoyance. It made it seem as if the two of them had been talking about him, or at the very least, about something they didn't want him to hear. That wasn't acceptable.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Steph pointed to the basket. "Chloe brought in apple cinnamon muffins."

He looked at Chloe. "You baked muffins?"

She laughed. "Oh, God, no," she said. "Cooking is one thing, but I can't bake to save my life! I picked these up at a bakery around the corner from my house. My friend Helen told me it was the best place in St. Louis."

"I thought you didn't know anyone in St. Louis."

"Oh, I didn't," she said. "But I met Helen when I moved in, and we've been getting to know each other a little."

She said this as if it was the most natural thing in the world—as if anyone would have made a new friend after forty-eight hours in a new city. *Maybe she gave Helen baked goods too. Maybe that's how she's doing it.*

Shaun knew his thoughts were rude and uncharitable. Chloe was a friendly person. Of course she was making friends quickly. Not everyone in the world found her kind of over-

friendliness as grating as he did, he knew that. Some people probably thought it was really nice.

He gestured to the basket of muffins. “You can’t just bring stuff like this in.”

“Why can’t she?” Steph asked. She pointed to a plate of chocolate chip cookies. “I brought those in. Is that not allowed either?”

“No, but...that’s different. The nurses bring things for the nurses.” Shaun told himself he was concerned that the patients would get the muffins—most of them were on carefully controlled diets of one sort or another—but really, he knew that wasn’t it. It wasn’t as if the patients were going to raid the nurses’ station and steal treats. The nurses would never allow that. And he had never tried to forbid things like cookies and muffins here before—Steph was exactly right.

It was because Chloe was the one who had brought them. If anyone else had done it, he would have overlooked it. But it was only her second day here and already he felt she was changing too many things for his liking. Befriending the patients, befriending the nurses—

But I like it when the people who work under me are friends with each other. It lets me keep my distance from them.

Why on earth was he letting this get to him so much? It was beneath him.

“Keep them behind the counter,” he said to Steph shortly, and she put the basket of muffins down on her desk beside the cookies, where they wouldn’t be in plain sight.

He turned to walk away, thinking that at least losing himself in his work would allow him to take his mind off of—whatever this was.

But a moment later, he heard footsteps running after him.

He turned to face Chloe. “Please don’t run here.”

“Are you going to criticize everything I do?” she asked, planting her hands on her hips.

In that moment, looking at her, he was so attracted to her that he almost couldn't take it.

How was he going to get through this? Seeing her every day, working with her...already she was driving him crazy.

She was waiting for an answer, he realized. "I'm not going to criticize everything you do," he said. "But I do have a set way that I like things to be done around here, and I'm going to ask you to stick to that."

"And that involves no muffins?"

"We're here to do an important job. Making friends with the nursing staff isn't in your job description."

"Doctor Marlow, if I can speak openly, I completely disagree with that."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"Developing a close relationship with the nurses is *vital* for a physician," Chloe said. "It's something I did in Seattle, and it made the job much easier and more streamlined. It helps when the nurses know they can trust me. It helps when they understand what kind of person I am. Don't you think that's true?"

"I think you're overthinking things," Shaun said, even though on some level he did agree with her. He liked the fact that the staff of the hospital understood the work environment he was trying to establish.

That was, all of them except Chloe understood it. She was the only one who couldn't seem to get on board.

There was something about her that fascinated him. Anyone else in her position would be struggling to fit in, trying their hardest to internalize the way people behaved in a new workplace and adopting the culture as their own. Chloe didn't seem to want to do that. She seemed to like the fact that she stood out.

Shaun thought that maybe, if she wasn't working for him, he would have liked that about her too. It was definitely an interesting character attribute—but it was one he didn't really

know what to do with in a professional setting. He had never had an employee who refused to fall in line before.

Maybe I should get to know her better. Maybe she's onto something with this idea of getting close to the people you work with.

Where had *that* come from?

That wasn't something Shaun believed in at all. Trying to develop a closeness with coworkers—particularly with employees—could only cause trouble. Chloe needed to understand that when they were at the hospital, Shaun was in charge. She needed to defer to him without thinking about it so that when they were in an emergency situation and someone's life was at stake, she would do everything he said without question.

He couldn't be her friend. He had to be her boss—and *only* her boss. He couldn't allow her to ever think that their ideas were on an equal plane. Whether it was muffins or life-saving medical decisions, she needed to know that his word was law while they were here.

“Being kind to the nurses is good,” he said. “But don't distract them from their work.”

“Does that mean I can't bring them anything? No gifts?”

It was such a stupid rule that he couldn't bring himself to codify it—and besides, the nurses would have hated him for it. Chloe wasn't the first person to have brought in a gift for the nurses—there was a particular influx of them around the holidays. He couldn't ban that practice.

“You can do what you like,” he said. “I just don't want to catch you hanging around the nurses' station giggling with them like a schoolgirl.”

She frowned and folded her arms across her chest. “That's a bit of a sexist way to put that. Would you say that to one of the male doctors if he was laughing with the nurses?”

“Probably not,” he admitted. She did have a point. “All right. I'm sorry. But my point stands. This isn't the place for socializing and sharing a laugh. You're in a hospital. This is a

very serious place for the patients. They don't want to hear their doctors laughing and having a good time."

"But it doesn't have to be that serious, does it?" she asked.

He looked at her. "What does that mean?"

"I'm just saying...a lot of the patients in here are long-haulers, or else they're suffering from conditions that have them in and out of the hospital a lot."

"Exactly. They're suffering. They don't want to hear you having a good time."

"But they should have laughter and happiness in their lives," Chloe said, as if it was the most natural conclusion in the world to draw. "The fact that they're in the hospital doesn't mean they shouldn't feel *normal*. It doesn't mean they shouldn't hear sounds of laughter and happiness. Things like that can make a real difference in people's mental well-being. It's not good for patients to be surrounded by nothing but somber attitudes all the time."

Shaun was irritated. Clearly, they disagreed on their philosophies of practicing medicine—and she actually had the audacity to try to make changes of this magnitude on her second day here. She was really going to try to convince him that his approach to patient care was wrong.

I need to keep her in her place.

He turned away. "I have rounds," he said.

"What am I doing today?"

"Pick someone to shadow."

"You don't care who?"

"No, I don't." He just wanted to get away from her.

He could feel her eyes following him as he made his way down the hall toward a patient room, but he didn't look back.

CHAPTER 5

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CHLOE



After just two weeks, Chloe found herself assigned to the night shift. It honestly came as a relief to her—she was glad to be away from Doctor Marlow, out from under his thumb, and she took it as a good sign that he seemed to trust her enough to allow that to happen. He still hadn't said anything kind to her, but that was all right. That was the kind of doctor—the kind of man—he was. She could accept it, especially if she didn't need to be in his presence.

The night-shift doctor was less of a presence than Doctor Marlow, and it was easier to get through the shift without very much interaction. Chloe found, at the start of the evening, that she had been assigned a few patients to keep up with throughout the night, and that she had been given instructions to talk to the supervising doctor if any issues came up. Other than that, she was given a free hand.

It was a relief. This was much more like the way she had expected things to be here at Grace Hospital. It was the way things had been for her back in Seattle. She settled into the routine quickly. Though she knew she wouldn't be given night shifts all the time—it was policy at Grace hospital to keep the night shifts on a rotation, so that no one had to do them too often—she couldn't help feeling that this was preferable to her usual shift, and that maybe she would have liked to work overnight more often.

Maybe there was something she could do about it. Maybe she could let someone—whoever did the scheduling—know that she was happier with the night shift...

No, it was a bad idea. Her life was more than just the hospital, after all. She was starting to make friends here in St. Louis. Helen had just proposed that Chloe join her weekly book club, something Chloe was excited about, and she had signed up for a yoga class. She wouldn't be able to do those things if she was constantly working at night and sleeping all day. She needed to maintain a normal schedule—a normal life—as much as she could.

Still, when the night was over, she headed back to her hotel room in the early morning light feeling more relaxed than she had since arriving in St. Louis.

She was so eager to collapse into bed and sleep for hours that for a few minutes, she didn't even realize anything was wrong.

It wasn't until the wind gusted that it occurred to her that she shouldn't be able to feel any wind—she was indoors.

Dread settled in the pit of her stomach, and she rolled her head slowly to the side.

The curtains were blowing inward.

There was glass on the floor of the room. The window had been broken.

Chloe sat up, her heart pounding. The room had been broken into. It was immediately obvious.

Her eyes immediately went to the safe.

She hadn't used it. She had thought about it, but had decided it would be too much trouble to take her things out of a safe every time she came home, and surely they would be fine. The hotel required a key card to enter the building.

But she was on the first floor. Someone had come in through the window.

She picked up the phone and pressed the button for reception, her eyes already sweeping the room, looking for what was missing.

“Front desk,” a voice said.

“This is Chloe Austen.” Chloe heard the way her voice was shaking, but she couldn’t do anything to stop it. “Someone’s broken into my room.”

“Are you all right? Was anyone hurt?” The voice on the phone was suddenly all business, and it occurred to Chloe that maybe the woman had been trained to deal with calls like this one. That made her feel a little better. At least someone knew what to do.”

“No,” she said. “It’s only me here, and I was—I was at work when it happened.”

“I’m going to call the police,” the woman said gently. “I need to put this call on hold in order to do that. Are you going to be all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine...” She had never felt less fine in all her life, but she could get through a few minutes on hold.

“Is anything missing?” the woman asked her.

“I don’t really know. I haven’t gotten a good look around yet.”

“Okay. Stay put. I’ll call the police, and I’ll be right back with you.”

Pleasant, boring hold music came on the line. Chloe felt as if she was having an out-of-body experience. How could she be sitting here listening to this soft, easy-listening music, when her whole life seemed to be falling apart? It didn’t make any sense.

Eventually, the front desk woman came back on the line. “Ms. Austen?”

Chloe jerked herself out of her reverie. “I’m here.”

“I’ve spoken to the police, and they’re on their way over,” the woman said. “We’re going to move you into another room in the meantime. I’m sending one of the bellhops to collect your things.”

Chloe felt a little shiver of embarrassment, but she had to ask — “Can I be on a higher floor this time, please?”

“Of course.” She heard the sound of tapping on a keyboard. “We have a room available on our top floor, the sixth.”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

“That’s fine. I’ll have the bellhop take your things there,” the woman said. “And the police will be with you very soon, if you’ll just stay where you are.”

Chloe nodded, then realized she was on the phone and couldn’t be seen. “Yeah, I’ll be here.”

“Good,” the woman said. “Would you like me to stay on the line with you until they arrive?”

The honest answer was a resounding yes—Chloe didn’t want to be alone with her thoughts right now, because she knew that she would begin to regret having come to St. Louis at all. Everything seemed to be going wrong. But she had to face this. The woman at the front desk had been kind and helpful, but she wasn’t going to be the person to see Chloe through this trauma. In a few hours, when Chloe had trouble sleeping because of what had happened—as she felt sure she would—she wasn’t going to be able to call the front desk to talk about her fears.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’d better get ready for the police to arrive.”



The next several hours were a blur. Chloe answered questions for so long that by the time she was installed in her new room and ready to sleep, it was mid-afternoon. She was even more grateful for the fact that she had just come off a night shift—it meant that she could take her time falling asleep. She had all night before she had to be back at work again.

However, as predicted, she had trouble sleeping. Every time she closed her eyes, she imagined she could hear someone moving around in her room. She couldn’t bring herself to turn out the lights.

According to the police, she had been lucky. The thief hadn't gotten her purse because she had had it with her. She hadn't left any cash or credit cards in the hotel room. Her phone had been on her too, and the valuable jewelry she owned was locked away in the storage unit with all her furniture—although now that this had happened, she was itching to go and check on it, to make sure it hadn't been touched since the last time she had seen it.

The only thing she had lost was her computer. And that was definitely inconvenient, but it wasn't the end of the world. She could get another computer. She would save up for a few weeks and do that, and then it would be as if this had never happened.

At least, that was what she wanted to believe. That was what the police had said to her.

The truth was that things didn't feel that way at all. Chloe wasn't sure she would ever feel normal again.

When the morning arrived, she felt as if she hadn't slept at all. She stood under the shower for so long that she felt as if she was going to fall asleep standing up in the hot spray. Finally, she dragged herself out, dressed, and walked to work.

It wasn't until she was halfway there that she realized she had allowed herself to waste so much time in the shower that she was now going to be late.

That would have panicked her yesterday. Today, she couldn't summon the energy to care very much. So one more thing was going wrong—what difference did it make?

Doctor Marlow's eyes followed her as she came in. She was only fifteen minutes late, but she could sense the disapproval radiating from him.

Suddenly, she felt unable to face it. She swerved to the left, into the staff room. She would talk to him later, she knew, and it would probably go worse for her because she had dodged him now. But she would give herself this break first.

She put her lunch in the staff room refrigerator, then pulled out her phone and texted Helen. *Can I call you?*

Helen would be home right now. She was an artist, and she kept her studio in her house. The question was whether she would come to the phone. She tended to put it aside when she was deeply involved in her work.

Sure enough, several minutes passed with no answer.

Chloe closed her eyes and took several deep breaths, doing her best to calm herself. She knew she needed to keep it together so that she could get her work done. She couldn't afford to go to pieces at the hospital—patients would find it troubling if their doctor was too emotional. For their sake, she needed to stay calm.

And she needed to get out of the staff room and start her rounds. She was already going to be staring down the barrel of the gun for her late arrival. She needed to make up for that.

She permitted herself thirty more seconds of deep breathing, then left the staff room.

Doctor Marlow was waiting for her right outside.

He didn't say a word. He just raised one eyebrow, as if to challenge the fact that she had arrived late and hadn't gone straight to work.

She lowered her head.

He could be too strict sometimes, and sometimes he made her angry. But today he was completely correct. She had failed in her responsibilities.

There were extenuating circumstances, of course. And she knew that, if she had still been in Seattle, explaining those circumstances would have been enough to get her out of trouble. Her hospital there would have understood, would have sympathized with what had happened to her.

Doctor Marlow wouldn't feel that way. And, honestly, he was probably right not to. It wasn't as if she could tell the patients that their doctor had been through a break-in. Patients didn't care about that. They needed constant attention, not excuses.

She hurried away to the room that was first on her list.

Megan was already there, waiting for her. They were still partners, although lately Chloe had been taking over more and more of the procedures. “Are you all right?” Megan murmured. “I was a little worried about you. And then Steph told me she had seen you show up, but you still didn’t come out onto the floor.”

“I just needed a minute,” Chloe said. “Do you think Doctor Marlow is mad?”

“I do, yeah,” Megan said, sympathy filling her voice. “He doesn’t like it when people are late. He thinks it means they aren’t taking their jobs seriously.”

“But I am,” Chloe protested. “I just—something came up. It was serious. I wouldn’t have been late if it hadn’t been for that.”

“I believe you, Chloe, but you were late on your very first day.”

“I got lost.”

“I know. I just think he’s been waiting for something like this to happen again. He’s been expecting it. You’ve kind of proven him right about you today—shown him that the worst things he believed about you were true.”

Chloe’s heart sank. “Do you think I’m going to be fired?”

“He wouldn’t have let you do rounds today if he was definitely going to fire you.”

“But you think he might be considering it?”

“You should go see him after work today. Try to explain what happened. Apologize for being late.”

“Yeah.” Chloe sighed. She knew she should. “He’s going to be really mad.”

“Hey, you’ll be all right,” Megan said. “Remember, we were all new here once. In a few months, someone else will be the new kid, and Doctor Marlow will ease up on you.”

Chloe nodded. She hoped her friend was right.

CHAPTER 6

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SHAUN



S *he can't keep doing this.*

Shaun hadn't been able to get his mind off of Chloe's tardiness all day. He wished he could forget it. He wished he knew why she had gotten so under his skin. But for whatever reason, he couldn't seem to focus on anything else.

It wasn't as if she was the first person to ever be late to work. Other members of his staff had done it.

Maybe he was just upset because it seemed to be turning into something of a habit with her. If it had just been her first day that this had happened, he might have been able to overlook it, but this was twice now.

He was going to have to talk to her. He understood that things happened in people's lives, but they had a duty to their patients. She needed to understand how serious this job was.

He couldn't imagine what things had been like at her last hospital—how could she have been left believing that this was okay? He wanted her to be successful here, but that wasn't going to happen if she couldn't take the job seriously.

He put it off until the end of the day, but with an hour left to go before their shifts ended, he knew the time had come. He spotted Chloe coming out of a patient's room, heading toward the staff room, and followed.

She was looking down at her phone, obviously distracted. Was she texting? Didn't she know better than to carry her phone around at work? He hadn't explicitly told her that she needed to leave it in her locker, but surely that was obvious?

She disappeared into the staff room. Shaun waited a moment, organizing his thoughts, and then followed her.

She was sitting at a table in the corner, her back to him, the phone pressed to her ear, and Shaun realized she had come in here to take a call. He was about to back out—as irresponsible as he found her behavior, he didn't have any desire to listen in on her private conversation—when he realized that she was crying.

“I know,” she said. “I know. But I don't think I can go back there. I hardly slept. I know the sixth floor is safer, but...no, no other hotels have availability. I've been calling around all day.”

A pause. Then, “Helen, you don't have a spare bedroom. No. You don't have—I'm being silly, I know I am. You can't deal with me sleeping on your sofa indefinitely. This is such a generous offer, but I really can't take you up on it. I wish I could.”

She paused again. “No, not even this week,” she said. “You don't know me well enough to have me in your apartment while you're not there. Besides...if I'm being honest, I don't think it would help me that much, Helen. Being in your place, I mean. I'd still be on my own until you got back, and that's most of what's freaking me out right now.”

She wiped her eyes.

Shaun suddenly realized that, despite his intentions, he had been standing there eavesdropping for almost a minute. He cleared his throat.

Chloe jumped as if she'd been given an electric shock. The phone dropped from her hand, bounced off the table, and clattered to the floor.

What was going on with her? She was a doctor. Doctors couldn't be this nervous. He knew she had been successful in Seattle. How could she be falling apart like this now that she was here in St. Louis? It didn't make any sense.

Chloe scrambled after the phone and picked it up. “Helen, are you still there? I'm sorry, I dropped the phone. Listen, I have

to go. What time are you flying out?"

She paused for a moment. "Okay," she said. "I'll see you when you get back. Travel safe."

She put the phone down and rose slowly to her feet, facing Shaun.

He felt awful. He could see that she knew she was in for a telling-off. It was written all over her face—the anxiety, the nervousness. And it was made that much harder by the fact that she was still tearful. He found himself wishing he could just walk away from this.

But he knew he couldn't.

"You can sit down," he said. He went over to the table she'd been sitting at and took the chair opposite hers.

Slowly, Chloe sank back into her seat.

"We need to discuss your performance," he said.

"I know." She stared down at her lap. "I was late today."

"And you didn't get straight to work. You came here instead. And you're here again now."

"I'm not trying to get out of working." Chloe looked up at him with such an earnest expression on her face that it made Shaun feel even worse about this whole conversation.

This was terrible. He had never had such a hard time chastising a member of his team before. He was known for being dispassionate. Why was he letting her get to him like this? Whatever she was upset about, whatever had made her cry, it had nothing to do with him. He wasn't responsible.

It was important not to get too emotionally invested in the lives of the people you worked with. He shouldn't be hurting just because she was hurting. He should be able to brush it off.

Why couldn't he?

He opened his mouth to tell her that she needed to get her act together if she was going to continue working here—but the words didn't come. He couldn't do it.

“What’s wrong?” he found himself asking instead.

She wiped at her eyes. “Nothing. I’m all right.”

This was so obviously false that Shaun didn’t even bother responding to it. He just waited.

Chloe sighed. “All right,” she said. “I know I’m not supposed to let my personal life affect my work. And I’m sorry. You’ve seen nothing but the worst of me since I’ve gotten here. I really feel awful about it.”

“It’s all right,” Shaun said. He couldn’t believe he was reassuring her right now—that was a million miles from what he had come in here to do.

It was just that she looked so distraught. So vulnerable. He had the strangest urge to put his arm around her, to tell her that everything was going to be all right.

He edged his chair a little farther away from hers, knowing that it would be disastrous to give in to that impulse. “Tell me what’s going on,” he suggested. If he could keep her talking, he could turn his attention to problem-solving instead of trying to provide comfort. That would be much better.

She bit her lip. “My hotel room was broken into yesterday.”

“Your hotel room?” He frowned. “What are you doing in a hotel room?”

“The apartment I was supposed to move into sort of...fell through,” Chloe admitted.

“So you’ve been staying at a hotel? Since you got to St. Louis?”

She nodded. “It’s not a big deal,” she added quickly. “It’s close to work, and it’s a decent place.”

“A decent place that just got broken into?”

“I didn’t lose anything much.”

“I heard you on the phone,” he said, forgetting entirely that he hadn’t wanted her to know he’d been listening. “You said you weren’t sleeping.”

“That was just last night.”

“But that’s why you were late today, isn’t it?” he asked. “You didn’t get any sleep.”

“That’s why,” she said. “I’m sorry. I’m sure I’ll feel better tonight.”

“You didn’t sound on the phone as if you would. Was someone offering to let you stay with them? You should do that.”

She shook her head. “That was my friend Helen. And I couldn’t possibly impose. She and I haven’t known each other that long, and she’s out of town right now. She said I could go over to her place and stay there until she gets back, and I know she’d let me sleep on her couch after that, but I just can’t. I don’t think it would make me feel that much better, anyway—I would still be on my own. Her place could get broken into just as easily as a hotel could.”

“Where is this hotel?”

She named it. “It’s just a few blocks from here.”

“This isn’t a very safe neighborhood,” Shaun said. “I would have advised you to find a hotel a little farther away. Maybe I can help you find something.”

She shook her head. “Because of the debacle with my apartment, I’m already out a few thousand dollars,” she said. “And I’m going to have to find a way to pay a deposit on another place. I can’t afford a nicer hotel than the one I’ve got.”

“Well, you can’t stay there,” he said.

She blinked. “I have to, though,” she said. “It’s my only option.”

Oh, that was awkward of me. No wonder she was looking at him as if he was a little crazy. Who was he to tell her what she could or couldn’t do? He had no say in the matter, and he’d been talking to her like...like someone who had some sort of authority. As if he was in charge of her personal life and not just her work life.

Anxious to cover the faux pas, he quickly said, “I’m concerned about your performance at work, of course. It’s clear to me that staying at that hotel is causing enough distraction that you can’t be counted upon.”

She flushed and shook her head. “I’ll do better,” she said. “I promise.”

But I’m not really worried about that, am I? That’s not the real reason I don’t want her to stay at the hotel.

He couldn’t allow himself to dwell too long on that thought. It wasn’t his way of doing things, focusing on his employees’ emotional needs like this. He didn’t want to admit that the real reason he didn’t want her going back to the hotel was that he could see she was frightened.

That’s not what it is. I’m just trying to make sure she’s the best doctor she can be. I’m just doing my job.

“I have a spare bedroom,” he said.

Immediately, he regretted it. As soon as the words were out of his mouth he knew how foolish they had been. Was he really asking her to come and stay with him? He couldn’t be that crazy, could he?

He was trying to *distance* himself from her. Why on earth was he asking her to come and live with him?

Chloe, too, seemed hesitant about the idea. “That wouldn’t really be appropriate, would it?”

Say no. Say she’s right. Tell her it was a mistake, that you were being ridiculous. Offer to help her find a better hotel.

“It would be fine,” he said.

He couldn’t take it back. Not now that he’d made the offer. Because he had seen it—a flash of hope in her eyes, the desire to escape the situation she was in. She was *so* unhappy at that hotel that she was willing to come and stay with him, even though he knew he’d never given her anything more than the bare minimum when it came to politeness.

And besides, he couldn’t stand the idea of letting her go back to that hotel, knowing that she was staying in such a dangerous

part of town. There had already been one break-in. What if something else happened, and this time she was there when it did? If she'd discovered the break-in yesterday, that meant it had happened while she had been on the night shift. If it had been any other day, she would have been in the room, and that would have been much worse.

She shook her head. "I can't," she said. "I couldn't put you out, Doctor Marlow."

"It's really no trouble," he said, resigning himself to the fact that he was actually doing this. "As a matter of fact, you'd be doing me a favor."

"I would?"

"My brother, Matt, has been pestering me to let him come and stay with me," Shaun said.

"Oh—I wouldn't want to get in the way of that."

"No, it wouldn't be like that at all," he assured her. At least this part was completely honest. "I don't want him to come. You'd be giving me a good excuse to tell him no, if I can say that the room is occupied."

"I'd be doing you a favor?"

"You absolutely would," he said.

"You'd have to let me pay you rent or something," she said. "I can't just live in your house free of charge."

"I'm not going to charge you rent."

"Please. You have to let me do something to contribute, if we're doing this," she said. "I'd feel much too uncomfortable about it if I was just freeloading."

"Well, you can't give me any money," he said. "That would make *me* feel uncomfortable." He was trying to help her out, not to turn the situation to his advantage.

"We can talk about it tonight," she said. "But...yes. I'd appreciate this. Thank you. I'll pack up my things and come over after work."

CHAPTER 7

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CHLOE



I *must be completely out of my mind.*

Chloe stood outside the address Doctor Marlow had given her, looking at the house. It was beautiful—red brick with a cement porch under an overhang, and columns on either side of the double doors that made up the entrance. She would have loved to own a home like this, and the idea of living here was very appealing.

But to live with Doctor Marlow?

Why had he even asked her? Chloe didn't think he liked her very much, so what could his motive have been? Was this just about making sure she wasn't late for work in the future?

Well, I won't be. I'm sure we'll ride in together. At least, I hope we will. This was much too far from the hospital to walk, and it didn't make sense for them to drive separately.

Chloe had to admit that her heart fluttered a little at the idea of being alone in a car twice a day with her gorgeous boss. Was that nerves—fear that he would be critical of her? Or was it something else?

A curtain twitched.

Oh, great. He's watching me. He must think I'm crazy, standing out here like this and not coming inside.

Hoping to save some face, she hurried toward the door, dragging her suitcase along with her, and knocked.

The door opened quickly enough that Chloe's fears were confirmed—Doctor Marlow had definitely known she was out

there. *That's great. We're off to a humiliating start already.*

"Come in," he said, standing back so that she could.

She nodded. "Thank you so much for this, Doctor Marlow," she said. "I'm looking for an apartment, so hopefully this arrangement won't have to last too long."

"Well, it'll last as long as it needs to," he said. "And you might as well call me Shaun—while we're not on the clock, at least. We should keep things professional at work, of course."

"Right," she said. "Thanks...Shaun."

It was strange to see him out of his work attire. He wore a faded blue T-shirt that was fitted enough that she could make out his physique—he was more muscular than she had realized. His jeans hung low on his hips in a way that made her breath catch a little. In another scenario, if he had been a different man, she could imagine hooking her fingers through his belt loops, pulling him close, knotting her fingers in that dark, wavy hair of his, getting lost in his obsidian eyes—

He cleared his throat, snapping her out of her fantasy. "Do you want to see your room?"

"Oh—yes," she said. "Thanks."

"Need help with that?" He gestured to her suitcase.

If he'd asked differently—if he had said *can I take that for you*, for example—Chloe would have taken him up on the offer. As it was, she felt like she would be inconveniencing him if she did. "I've got it," she said.

He nodded. "Okay, we're going upstairs."

Fortunately, the suitcase really wasn't that heavy. Still, Chloe fell behind a little as she lugged it up the staircase, and by the time she reached the top, she was breathing heavily.

If Shaun noticed, he didn't say anything about it. He just turned and led her down the hall to a set of French doors.

Chloe frowned. "In here?"

"This is my spare room," he said.

She pushed the door open.

The room was massive. In any other house, it probably would have been the main bedroom, or maybe even two. If it hadn't been for the sheer size of this place, Chloe would have been forced to question whether Shaun had actually given her the main bedroom.

But a few details did make it clear to her that this room was intended for guests. The furnishings were spare, for one thing. The bed looked as if it hadn't been slept in recently, and the only other piece of furniture was a tall old wardrobe that looked like the kind of thing Chloe's mother would have picked out. There was no sign of a closet, so she supposed it had been put in as a substitute.

"The wardrobe has towels," Shaun said. "And—I don't know what you need in the way of toiletries."

"I've got everything." She actually had her own towels, too—she had been using them at the hotel.

"Right," Shaun said. "Okay. What else?"

"Laundry?" She was going to have to do a load pretty soon, and it occurred to her that she was grateful not to have to use the coin-operated machines she'd scoped out on her first night in the hotel.

He nodded. "I'll show you where. Do you want to go now?"

"Actually, a tour of the place might be nice," she said.

"Oh," he said. "Yeah, I guess we could do that."

Chloe frowned. She had hoped that his standoffish attitude might be just a work thing—that maybe when he was at home, he relaxed and was more pleasant to be around. But judging by the way he was acting toward her right now, that didn't seem to be the case. It seemed to Chloe as if he was eager to park her in her bedroom and be rid of her.

Well, too bad for him. I do need to know my way around this place if I'm going to be living here. And if he doesn't show me I'll have no choice but to go poking around on my own. I'm sure he doesn't want that!

“Why don’t we start in the kitchen?” she prompted when Shaun made no move to begin the tour.

“Right. Come this way, then,” he said.

He led her back down the stairs and into a large kitchen filled with chrome appliances. It was modern and completely immaculate, but it looked like an industrial kitchen to Chloe. There were none of the homey touches she would have anticipated—no little knickknacks, no mugs with pithy sayings on them, no art on the walls.

She turned toward the refrigerator. “I’ll get my own food, of course,” she said. “But will you mind if I keep a few things in here?”

Even now, she half expected him to tell her not to be silly, that she was welcome to anything in the house. But of course, that wasn’t the kind of man he was.

“Why don’t you put your name on anything that’s yours,” he suggested, opening a drawer and handing her a sheet of blank labels and a marker. “That way we’ll be able to tell our things apart.”

“Sure,” Chloe said. “That sounds like a good idea to me. I’ll go shopping tomorrow after work.”

“What will you do for food until then?”

He really wasn’t going to offer to share anything. “I’ll order delivery,” she said. “Is that okay? If I have something delivered here?”

“Sure. Of course that’s fine.”

“Would you want to get in on it?” Might as well try to make an overture of friendship, even if he wasn’t going to.

But he shook his head. “I’ve got my dinner prepared,” he said. “I make sandwiches every night.”

“Sandwiches *every* night? Not much variety in that.”

He shrugged. “I know what I like.”

“Okay, fair enough. What about the rest of the house?”

“You wanted to see the laundry room.” He led her out of the kitchen, not the way they had come, but through a different door that led into a narrow hall. “You can also get to this hallway from the den. You’re welcome to watch TV in there. I don’t usually use it, because I like to watch in my bedroom.”

“Okay,” she said. “Thank you.” She hesitated, then decided to try one more time. “What kinds of shows do you watch?”

“The news, mostly. Sports sometimes.”

“Do you like reality TV at all?”

“No.”

She gritted her teeth. He really wasn’t making this easy.

But she wasn’t going to give up. He could be distant and cold to her at work, if that was the way he liked to operate, but this was different. If they were going to be around each other all the time at home, they were going to have to figure out a way to make it bearable. To make it *pleasant*.

“Well, my favorite show is on tonight,” she said. “Maybe you’d like to watch it with me.”

He frowned. “Do you want me to?”

“I think it would be nice,” she said. “We have to get used to being around each other, right? I’ll even let you explain to me why I’m wrong to like reality TV, if you want.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said. “That’s just rude.”

Because you’re never rude.

He shrugged. “I guess I can hang out in the den while I have my sandwich. What time is your show on?”

“You have streaming services, right? I think it came out at midnight last night. I just haven’t had the chance to watch it yet.”

“Oh, yeah, I have all the streaming services,” he said. “We’ll find it.”

He didn’t sound overwhelmingly excited at the prospect, but at least he had agreed to watch with her. Maybe there was hope

for the two of them to form a friendship after all.



“Why are they yelling at each other?” Shaun asked.

“They’re rivals,” Chloe explained. “Those two have a really long-standing rivalry.”

“I thought you said this was only episode three. How long a rivalry could it be?”

“They played together last season,” Chloe said. “The redheaded one voted the short-haired girl out of the game, so now they hate each other. It’s a whole thing.”

“So this time the short-haired one is going to vote out the redhead?” He was leaning forward, staring avidly at the screen, and Chloe knew a moment of satisfaction. The same thing had happened with Greg—he had insisted that reality TV was stupid, but every time she’d turned on a show, he had let himself get caught up in the drama, forgetting all about the fact that he supposedly didn’t like it.

She supposed Shaun would probably do the same thing Greg always did—when the show was over, he would pretend that he hadn’t been interested in it at all. But for now, she was going to enjoy the fact that the two of them seemed to be bonding over something, even if it was likely to be temporary.

“Actually, I don’t think either of them is getting voted out,” she said.

“What? But the whole episode has been about the two of them yelling. How could it end any other way?”

“You saw the bald guy in the challenge, right? He was dragging the whole team down. I don’t think they’re going to keep him around.” She shot him a look. “You know how one weak element can hold a team back. Who would you want to vote out, if you were playing the game?”

“I would vote out one of the shouters,” he said firmly.

“You’d be happy to keep someone around if they weren’t performing up to your standards?”

He didn’t look at her, but she felt something pointed in his reply. “Sometimes people who start out not performing up to your standards improve, if you give them a chance.”

“Sometimes,” she murmured.

They watched until the end of the show. Sure enough, the bald man was voted out. Shaun shook his head. “They made a mistake,” he said. “They’re going to have to keep dealing with all that drama now.”

“You don’t like drama very much,” Chloe observed.

“Nobody likes drama.”

“I don’t know. It can make life interesting sometimes.”

“You should try a regular sport,” Shaun said, picking up the remote and handing it to her. “Basketball. There’s a game. Do you watch?”

“Never have.”

“Maybe tomorrow night you’ll join me for that. There’s a pretty big game happening.”

She was stunned. She hadn’t expected this to work as well as it had—but it seemed he was actually opening up to her.

To her chagrin, she found herself suddenly questioning the choice to try to get closer to him. She wanted their time as roommates to be comfortable—but was she really ready to be *friends* with this irascible, difficult man?

Could she even be friends with him? She wasn’t at all sure that she liked him, but she knew for certain that she was attracted to him. There was nothing at all relaxing about being in his presence. Most of the time, she couldn’t decide whether she wanted to shout at him, run away from him—or grab him and kiss him.

The frustrating thing was, this was her *boss*. She couldn’t do any of those things.

Maybe it would have been better to keep a professional distance.

But it was too late for that now. She was living in the man's house. They were going to be *something* to each other. Friends—or at least, friendly roommates—was the safest choice on the table.

“All right,” she said. “You’re on. Basketball tomorrow.”

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CHAPTER 8

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SHAUN



More quickly than Shaun would have imagined possible, he and Chloe fell into a routine.

It was just so *easy*, living with her. He had expected that it would feel complicated—that it would be awkward to spend his days with her. But it wasn't. There was nothing strange or unpleasant about finding her in the kitchen in the morning, dressed in insensible scrubs and frying an egg or pouring a bowl of cereal. In spite of the way they had butted heads at the hospital, he found that she was everything he would have asked for in a roommate—she always washed her dishes right after using them, always put things away, and didn't try to start conversations in the mornings. She seemed to sense that he didn't like to talk first thing.

In the car on the way in to work, it was a different story. Shaun was taken aback that first day by the way she behaved as they drove in. First, she turned on the radio, something he almost never did. She hummed along with the pop song that was playing, gazing absently out the window.

“Do you really like this one?” he asked after a moment.

“Oh—not especially. You can change it if you want, I'm not attached.”

“I don't usually listen to music in the mornings.”

“You don't?” She sounded taken aback, as if he had told her that he didn't really like breathing oxygen very much. “Why not?”

“It's a distraction.”

“A distraction from what?”

He hesitated. He had never really thought about the answer to that question, and though he would have said he knew what he meant calling music a distraction, now that he was being questioned he found he wasn't quite sure.

“I suppose I like to take this time to think through my tasks for the day,” he said.

“But you don't really know what your tasks are going to be, do you?” she said. “I mean, you can't know what patients are going to need until you get there and actually see them. Ours isn't the kind of job where you can plan ahead very far.”

“Some things are predictable,” he said.

Chloe shrugged. “Maybe. I always feel like things go better for me when I don't go into the day with any expectations. But that's me. Maybe it's different for you.”

He didn't know what to say to that, so he didn't answer.

They didn't talk any more that morning, but what she'd said stayed with him. The day was a particularly draining one, full of unexpected challenges, and by the time they got back in the car to head home, he felt as if nothing could have prepared him for it. He wanted nothing more than to get home and settle into his evening routine, to leave the stress of the day behind.

Chloe got into the car and immediately turned on the radio.

Shaun snapped it off. “Can we not?”

“You *really* don't like music, do you?”

“Not right after work.”

“And not right before work either?”

He sighed. “I like to focus,” he said. “I like to pay attention to what I need to be doing. Music is a distraction.”

She didn't say anything else for the rest of the ride home.

The next day, when they got into the car, Chloe didn't even try to put the radio on. They rode to work in silence. And on the

way home, she pulled a book out of her purse and spent the whole time reading.

Shaun was glad. He depended on the quiet car rides. He needed that time to help him prepare for the day ahead, and to decompress once it was over.

But at home...things were different.

They took to watching TV together every night, alternating between a show he chose and one of hers. When it was Chloe's turn to pick, they usually ended up watching a reality program, and Shaun grew familiar with the characters and the rules of their competitions. Soon, he was able to root for his favorites, and he and Chloe groaned together when someone they had especially liked was voted out.

On other nights, Shaun would put on a basketball game. Chloe knew only the most basic rules—he had to explain everything from traveling violations to the way zone defense worked—but she could be so exuberant when the team she was supporting did well that it was impossible not to enjoy watching with her.

One night—it was a basketball night, a game Shaun had been looking forward to for weeks—Chloe turned to him as soon as they got into the house.

“What time does the game start?” she asked.

“Eight,” he said.

“Perfect!”

“Perfect for what?” He followed her into the kitchen.

She was already opening cabinets. “I thought I would make chili,” she said.

“Make *chili*?” This was a surprise. “Do you have the ingredients for that?”

“Didn't you notice that I put a bunch of ground beef in the freezer the other day?”

The truth was that Shaun never used the freezer. He wasn't much of a cook, and he tended to stick to the same basic meals

all the time. He went over to it and opened it. “There’s no beef in here.”

“No,” she said patiently. “I put it in the fridge this morning to thaw. You can’t make chili with frozen beef.”

He opened the fridge. Sure enough, there it was—a package of raw ground chuck. He pulled it out.

“Hand me that?” Chloe asked.

Bemused, he gave it to her. “I didn’t know you knew how to make chili.”

“Sure I do,” she said. “I’m a pretty decent cook, actually. It’s just that I haven’t had a chance to do much of it lately.”

“I see.”

“And you’ve really been looking forward to this game, so I thought it would be the perfect time to make something special.” She glanced at him. “You like chili, don’t you?”

“Sure, I like chili,” he said, though he couldn’t actually remember the last time he’d had any. The hospital cafeteria served chili sometimes, but it was watery and had no kick, so everyone avoided it. He wondered whether Chloe’s would be any good.

“Why don’t you go rest up,” she suggested. “I’ll get going in here”

“Can’t I help?”

She looked at him. “You want to help me cook?”

“You shouldn’t have to do it by yourself.”

“But you like to rest after work,” she said. “You need at least an hour before you start feeling like yourself again.”

He frowned. “I never told you that.”

“I *noticed*,” she said. “I’ve been living with you for a while now, I do notice things. You always go hide out in your bedroom or your office after work, and I usually don’t see you until seven or eight at night. I can tell you’re decompressing.”

“I guess you think that’s silly.”

“Why would I think that?”

“Well, you never do it. You’re ready to shift into listening to pop music the moment we walk out of the hospital.”

“Yeah, but that’s me,” Chloe said. “We’re different.”

“Because I need this time to decompress and you don’t?”

“Of course I do,” she said. “Do you think that what happens at the hospital doesn’t affect me at all?”

He paused.

He had made that assumption.

It was just that she always seemed so lighthearted. So carefree. It was easy to assume that everything just rolled off her back, that nothing ever troubled her. It was easy to let himself believe that she walked away from everything unscathed.

But now he was thinking—really thinking—about the things that had happened today.

Her thoughts were apparently in line with his. “We lost Mrs. Shepherd today,” she said quietly. “I was there when you told her family. I know I wasn’t the one who had to actually say the words. But of course that stays with me. I don’t just walk out of the hospital and forget it ever happened. It matters.”

“You don’t seem like it does.”

“Listening to pop music—doing things to separate myself from the person I am at work—that’s how I cope,” she said. “It helps me to draw a line between work-Chloe and life-Chloe. If I can leave the hospital and put on a favorite song, it reminds me...well, it reminds me that I’m still alive, and that there’s more to my life than the worst moments in the hospital.”

“That’s what I’m doing, too,” Shaun said, surprised. He had never spoken to anyone about these feelings, so it was a shock to hear her articulate them. “When I go up to my office after work, it’s because I’m trying to let go of the day and get back to feeling like my normal self. I guess I just can’t do it as quickly as you can.”

“Everyone’s different,” Chloe murmured.

“But I’ve taken that away from you,” Shaun realized. “By stopping you from listening to music when we’re in the car.”

“I’m all right. That’s why I started bringing a book to read after work.”

“We can turn the radio on tomorrow.” He felt guilty.

She smiled at him. “Please don’t worry,” she said. “I can always listen to music on my headphones—there are a lot of solutions to this. I don’t need to make you uncomfortable on your drive home. It’s okay that I want to listen to music and you don’t. It’s okay that we have different ways of dealing with the stress of being at the hospital all day.”

Shaun nodded. “I would never have guessed you felt that at all,” he said. “You always seem so lighthearted.”

“I try to be,” she said. “I don’t want to turn into someone who’s so brought down by the worst parts of our job that I dread going in every day. You know as well as I do that it’s only bad *sometimes*. A lot of times, it’s really great. Like three days ago, with David Murray.”

Shaun nodded. David Murray was a seventeen-year-old born with a chronic heart condition. He hadn’t been expected to live to see twenty—but just the other day, he had received a successful transplant, and now his prognosis was much better. The whole hospital had celebrated David’s surgery, and the nurses had brought him a cake. It had been one of the best days they’d had in a long time.

“They can’t all be David Murrays,” Chloe said philosophically. “But as long as some of them are, our job is worth doing. And as long as that’s true, I consider it my duty to keep a good attitude and be the best doctor I possibly can.”

“That’s admirable,” Shaun admitted. He had to admit, he was suddenly seeing her in a completely different light.

“So go ahead,” she said. “Go relax. I’ll get the chili ready. You should do whatever you need to do to recover from the day and keep yourself fresh for tomorrow.”

“Actually,” Shaun said, surprised to find that it was the truth, “I think I’d really like to stay and help with the cooking.”

“Are you sure? I promise you don’t have to. I’ve done this thousands of times.”

“Really, *thousands*?”

“Well, maybe hundreds.” She laughed.

“Then I want to hang around and learn from the expert,” he told her. “Teach me to make chili, doctor.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “First we need a saucepan. I couldn’t find them. Where do you keep them?”

Shaun pulled a pan down from a hook over the kitchen island. “These aren’t just decorative.”

“But that’s a cast-iron skillet,” she said, laughing.

“It is?” He looked at it. “I just use it to make grilled cheese in.”

“Yeah, you don’t want to make chili in something like this. You’d ruin it.”

“So then what’s a saucepan?”

“We’re looking for something like a pot.” She held up her hands, indicating the shape of what she wanted.

“I don’t have anything like that,” he said.

“You don’t have any cooking pots?”

“What would I do with them?”

“Don’t you ever make *pasta*?”

“If I want pasta, I order it from the local Italian place.”

She rolled her eyes. “I really need to teach you how to cook while I’m here,” she said. “What happens if you ever want to make dinner for somebody?”

“It’s never happened before.”

“Well, we can’t make chili without a saucepan,” she said. “So I guess we’re ordering from the local Italian place.”

“Will the beef go bad?”

“It’ll be fine for a day. I’ll pick up a saucepan tomorrow during my lunch break.”

“You don’t have to use your break for that,” he said. “We can go together after work.”

Chloe grinned. “You’re on,” she said. “And then you can keep it, so next time you want to cook something, you’ll actually be able to do it.”

He laughed at the idea of ever wanting to cook something. “All right,” he agreed. “Here, why don’t you look at the takeout menu, and I’ll go open up a bottle of wine.”



Forty-five minutes later, the pair of them sat on the sofa in front of the ball game with plates on their laps. Chloe’s attention was fixed on the screen in front of her.

“That was goaltending!” she cried. “Wasn’t that goaltending? Are they going to let him get away with that?”

“I don’t think it was,” Shaun said. “I think it was already off the rim by the time he grabbed it.” He was impressed that she understood what goaltending was already. They’d only seen one instance of it in a game—it wasn’t a violation that occurred very often.

Chloe sighed. “I think these refs are on the take.”

Shaun burst out laughing. “You do?”

“Well, not *really*, but they aren’t calling anything. It’s like they’re asleep out there.”

“I think you’re seeing fouls where there aren’t any. That charge you pointed out in the last play wasn’t anything at all.”

“Well, it should have been! The guy fell down.”

“Yeah, he was faking it.”

“They can fake it?”

“They’re not supposed to. If he does that too much, he risks a technical foul. But yeah, he was hamming it up, hoping to get the foul called.”

“Ridiculous.”

“I know. They should just play the game, if you ask me.”

“How long have you been interested in basketball?”

Shaun hesitated. It was a perfectly innocuous question, but for the first time since he’d met Chloe, she had gotten close to something he really didn’t want to answer.

“Since about five years ago,” he said, and left it at that.

She wasn’t content to let that be the end of the discussion. “Oh,” she said. “I would’ve thought you played in high school or college. You know a lot about it.”

“No, I’m just a sports fan,” he said.

I wasn’t always.

Thankfully, she didn’t have any more follow-up questions. She turned her attention back to the screen.

They watched without incident until halftime. When the commercials came on, Chloe muted the TV. “We’re losing,” she grumbled.

Shaun was touched by the way she had come to refer to the teams he supported as “we” and “us.” It was a habit she had picked up from him, and sometimes he wondered whether she even knew she was doing it.

“Hey, Chloe?” he said.

“Hmm?”

“Why did you move to St. Louis?”

She laughed. “To work at Grace. What do you mean?”

“I just mean...it’s not like you needed a job,” he said. “You applied at Grace while you were still working in Seattle. And it’s obvious you don’t know anyone here, so it’s not like you moved to be with family or a boyfriend. What made you come to St. Louis?”

He had expected a lighthearted answer—maybe she would say that she was interested in the Midwest—but to his surprise, her expression grew serious.

“You don’t have to answer,” he said quickly. Maybe the question had been too personal.

But she shook her head. “It’s all right,” she said. “It’s not like it’s a secret. I just don’t like to talk about it. But you might as well know. The truth is, I was in a relationship that ended badly, and I wanted to get out of Seattle. I would have taken a job anywhere that was *away*. Grace was the first place that offered.”

Shaun nodded. It made sense. Her presence here did have a sort of unpreparedness about it, especially given the fact that she hadn’t managed to find herself a reliable place to stay. It fit with the story of someone who was running away from something.

The part that didn’t make sense to him was the idea that someone could have treated her badly.

“I would have thought any guy who was lucky enough to get with you would have the sense not to blow it,” he said.

Immediately, he felt like an idiot. What a thing to say. That made it sound as if *he* was trying to get with her.

Which he definitely wasn’t.

He wasn’t blind, though—he could see the appeal she would have to other men, men who weren’t as averse to the whole idea of dating as he was. Chloe was stunning to look at—and that was just when she was standing still. Living with her, he had gotten to see that there was more to it, things a still image could never capture. There was a sexiness to the way she moved, almost as if she was dancing. There was a sway of her hips that always seemed to draw his eye, and he had to consciously remind himself sometimes that he couldn’t stare at her.

“I don’t think he thought he was blowing it,” Chloe said. “He thought I was going to do what he was asking me to do, and that we’d just move on with our lives together.”

“What was he asking you to do?”

“He wanted me to give up my career.”

“What?” This was unfathomable to Shaun. “Why would he ask you to do that?”

“He said that in a few years’ time we’d be having children, and that I should focus on staying at home and getting ready to raise our family,” she said. “He said he earned more than enough money to provide for us—in his defense, that was true—and that since he was earning more than I was anyway, it only made sense for me to be the one to stay at home.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t want to.”

“Being a doctor means everything in the world to me,” she said. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted. I wouldn’t give that up. Not for Greg or anybody else.”

Shaun nodded. “I respect that,” he said. “If it meant that much to you then of course you should do it. What did he say when you told him?”

She rolled her eyes. “That if I really loved him, I would do what he wanted.”

“That’s crazy,” Shaun objected. “That’s not how loving someone works at all.”

“So you don’t think I should have done it?”

“No, of course not. I don’t think he should have asked you to.”

“It feels good to hear someone say that.”

“I’m glad I could help.”

“Anyway, he ended things with me after that,” she said. “He said he was wasting his time with me, and that I didn’t have my priorities in order. It was pretty heartbreaking, because we’d been together for a long time. I kind of thought he was... well, the *one*.”

She glanced at him, as if she thought he might laugh.

Shaun wouldn’t have dreamed of it. “I’m really sorry you went through that,” he said. “It sounds awful.”

“I’m glad I found out what he was really like before I ended up married to him or something,” she said. “It would have been really terrible to get into a commitment and *then* realize he expected me to give up on my dreams. But still, it feels like I’m starting my life over. I’m a little at sea these days, because I thought I had everything sorted out, and then it went away.”

Shaun looked down at his hands.

“I can relate to that feeling,” he said quietly.

“Can you?”

He hesitated.

Was he really going to talk about this? It had been years since he had even made reference to it aloud. It was such a painful thing. He hated to speak about it.

But she had opened up to him—and he found himself wanting to do the same.

He drew a deep breath.

“Six years ago,” he said, “I got married to my college sweetheart.”

She waited.

He’d been afraid she’d make some remark about how nice that sounded—too many people still did that—but he could see right away that she had put the pieces together, that she knew this wasn’t going to be a happy story.

“Her name was Rosemary,” he said. “We were just kids when we met, and we fell in love by the time we were twenty. We agreed that we wouldn’t get married until after med school. We wanted time to get our careers where we wanted them, to make sure we were ready, and then we were going to settle down and start our family and our life together.”

“That sounds like a smart choice.” She said it softly, almost as if she was trying to reassure him.

“That’s what we thought,” he agreed. “And on the day we finally got married, I couldn’t have been any happier. It was the best day of my life.”

Chloe didn't press him. She didn't ask him what happened next.

She just waited for him to be ready to tell the next part of the story.

He drew a deep breath. "We'd only been married for three months when she was diagnosed with cancer," he said. "Stage four. Neither of us saw it coming. It was such a shock."

"Oh, God," Chloe breathed.

He knew she could understand. He had seen her deliver this kind of news to people. He had seen how seriously she treated those moments. And he knew now that she wasn't the woman he'd initially thought her to be—someone who could shake it off and dance to pop music on her way home from work. She was affected by diagnoses like that. She knew how painful they were to hear.

"We had hope—but everything fell apart so fast," he said. "She died just six months after her diagnosis."

"Five years ago," Chloe murmured. "Around the time you got into sports, then?"

He let out a huff that wasn't really a laugh. "Yeah, that's right," he said. "After she died, I couldn't bring myself to watch anything fictional on TV anymore. People were always falling in love, and I was so angry at the world, about what I'd lost. I couldn't bring myself to watch other people be happy. At least when sports teams were happy, love and romance didn't enter into it, so I didn't have to feel anything too deeply."

"I understand that," Chloe murmured. "God...Shaun, that's terrible. I'm so sorry."

They were quiet for a long moment.

"I haven't talked to anyone about that," Shaun said.

"Not even a therapist?"

"No one."

He expected her to tell him that he should find someone to talk to, to help him cope with his feelings.

Instead, she said, “I’m glad you felt like you could talk to me about it.”

“Well, it seemed like you might be able to understand.”

“I think I do,” she said. “I mean...it’s obviously much worse than what happened to me. But I understand feeling like you could count on your future, and then suddenly having that ripped away.”

He nodded. “That’s exactly what it is,” he said. “I miss Rosemary all the time, of course. I’ll always be sad about losing her. But I think I’m starting to heal from that. The part I can’t get past is that I feel like I’m living a shadow of the life I wanted. Everything I do feels wrong, because I feel like she should be here, and she’s not.”

“Have you ever thought about leaving St. Louis?” she asked. “Getting out of Seattle really helped me. The place felt haunted.”

“Haunted,” he said. “That’s exactly how it feels. But I could never leave. I’m too tied to this place now. You were just starting out in your career—that’s a good time to start again in a new place. But I’m years into mine. I’ve built something at Grace Hospital that I can’t walk away from, no matter how hard it might be to still be in this city. I did sell our house, though.”

“This wasn’t where you lived with your wife?”

“No, we had a little cottage in the suburbs,” he said. “I couldn’t stay there, not after what happened. I felt the fact that she was missing in every room. I couldn’t even sleep, because I kept feeling like she might come in in the middle of the night. Or, if I did fall asleep, I would wake up and feel like she was on the other side of the bed, and if I just reached out—”

“You would be able to bring her back,” Chloe said softly.

He nodded. “Yes. That’s exactly how it felt.”

“I understand,” she said gently.

“My family asks me why I don’t start dating again,” he said. “I think they think it’s time. But I’m not ready for that. I’m not anywhere near ready. I don’t know if I ever will be.”

“Well, I can definitely relate to that,” Chloe said. “I think I’ll probably start dating again someday, but right now I need to get to a point where I’m not just trying to fill the hole in my life that Greg left behind.”

In that moment, the air between them seemed to crackle with tension.

Somehow, they had gone from opening up about the trauma of their pasts to discussing the present—and the future.

And suddenly Shaun was aware that Chloe was much closer than he had previously realized.

What am I doing? he thought helplessly.

But he was already kissing her.

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CHAPTER 9

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CHLOE



The moment their lips met, Chloe felt herself melt into him. She couldn't believe it had taken as long as it had to reach this point. Five minutes ago, she would have denied it—she would have said they weren't headed for this—but now that they'd gotten here, it felt inevitable. It felt as if she had been thinking about kissing him since the moment they had first seen each other in the hospital.

She'd been imagining her hands in his dark, curly hair, and now there was nothing to stop her. She let one hand wander up the back of his neck, her fingertips lingering for a moment on the exposed skin there, marveling at the fact that she was allowed to touch him like this. Then she threaded her fingers in his hair. It felt exactly the way she had imagined it would—soft and thick—and she thought she could happily go on doing just this for the rest of the evening.

The heat building low in her body quickly set her straight, though. She was going to need more than just kissing and a few light touches.

Shaun broke the kiss. Chloe heard herself let out a little whine of displeasure, and was startled. Had that sound really come from her?

He held her back at arm's length, but she was pleased that he didn't take his hands off her completely. She didn't want him to ever let her go.

“What are we doing?” he murmured.

Her heart beat a little faster. “Do you not want to?”

“I want to way more than I should.”

“Me too.”

“We shouldn’t. We work together. It’s not a good idea.”

Maybe that’s what’s making it so hot.

“What happens here doesn’t have to affect what happens at work,” she told him. “We’ve already separated the two. I call you by your first name here. We watch reality TV here. It doesn’t affect what happens at work.” She wrapped her hand around the back of his neck. “It wouldn’t change anything.”

“Why is that so easy to believe?”

“Because it’s true.” The urgency of the moment was starting to fade just a bit, but she could feel the spark—she knew that as soon as he pulled her close again, she would want him just as badly. “We can do this and still be professional in the morning.”

“But Chloe...you know this doesn’t...this can’t mean anything.” He closed his eyes. “You know I’m not ready for anything.”

Chloe breathed in slowly and forced herself to relax. As badly as she wanted to throw caution to the wind here, *this* was a conversation really worth having.

She sat back a little, putting some distance between the two of them. He opened his eyes and regarded her with clear anxiety.

“It’s all right,” she told him quietly. “I’m not ready for anything either. My breakup was too recent. I’m not looking for a relationship right now. That’s not what this is.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m very sure.” It was true. She didn’t think she was still hung up on Greg, exactly—at the very least, she was starting to get over him—but the idea of tying herself to anybody at all right now was off-putting when she had just extricated herself from a situation that had threatened her career. It was better to be single, at least for a little while. It was better to feel that she could focus on the things that were really important to her,

without having to worry about what anybody else thought or wanted her to do.

“I just don’t want this to turn into something negative,” he said. “I don’t want you to have regrets.”

She shook her head. “I won’t,” she said. “I’m not looking for that any more than you are. I promise. But there’s no reason we can’t enjoy ourselves, right? We’re both single. It’s safe to say we both find each other attractive.” She touched the back of his neck again and felt the heat rise within her. She ached to move closer to him, to let her hands start exploring more of his body, but she forced herself to hold back. She would wait until he indicated that that was what he wanted.

Shaun nodded.

“Yes?” she said.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t think I can resist you anymore,” he murmured. “I’ve wanted you since the moment I first saw you.”

She chuckled. “That why you always give me such a hard time?”

“God, I don’t know, maybe it is. I can’t pretend I didn’t want to keep you at arm’s length.” He slipped his hand beneath the hem of her shirt, trailing his fingers up and down her spine, and Chloe shivered. “So much for that.”

“My bedroom or yours?” she asked.

He groaned. “I guess we have to move...”

“We don’t have to. We can do this right here.”

“I don’t have anything.”

“It’s okay. I’m on birth control.”

“Are you sure it’s all right?”

In response, she climbed onto his lap and straddled him, feeling the heat of him pressing against her. She groaned and rocked against him.

His head fell back on the couch. “Okay,” he moaned. “Okay, we’re doing this.”

Things got a bit hazy after that. Chloe wasn’t exactly sure of the sequence of events that led to the two of them getting naked—had she taken off her pants, or had he? She was sure that he was the one who had unclasped her bra, because she noticed how deftly his fingers opened the clasp. Greg had always struggled, and half the time they’d had to stop what they were doing so she could turn around and let him look at the clasp.

The moment Shaun released her bra, though, she knew she was in for something special. He was obviously a skilled lover.

He took her hips between his hands and lifted her up so she was on her knees, positioned above him. He slid a hand between her legs and touched her, cautiously at first, almost as if he wasn’t sure this was the right thing to do. His eyes locked with hers.

She rocked against his hand, his touch sending sparks of pleasure through her. “Shaun—”

He seemed to sense what she couldn’t articulate. Slowly, he guided her down onto him.

Chloe let out a gasp at the feeling of fullness.

His eyes rolled back in his head and he groaned. She could feel him throbbing inside her. It was exquisite.

And then she started to move.

Chloe had forgotten how good it could be to just *enjoy* sex. In the last few months with Greg, every encounter had been fraught. She had always felt as if they were trying to salvage their relationship. With Shaun, she didn’t need to worry about that, because there was no relationship. There was just their bodies moving in tandem, the heat and the friction between them, the pleasure of surrendering to pure physicality and forgetting about everything else.

They fell into a rhythm that felt perfect. As the pleasure built, Chloe leaned in and kissed him again, reveling in all the ways they were connected.

Without warning, she realized she was nearing orgasm. This was rare—how long had it been since she'd been able to come without some form of self-stimulation? But Shaun was doing it for her.

I'm not going to be able to give this up, she thought helplessly as the first waves of pleasure overtook her. *I'm not going to be able to give him up*.

It wasn't a relationship. It couldn't be a relationship. But maybe it could be something else.

She shuddered and went limp against him, burying her face in the crook of his neck. A moment later, his hips thrust up into her, and she knew that he had finished too.

She lingered for a moment, breathing in the scent of him. Then she rolled off of him, rested a hand on his shoulder for a moment to signal—she hoped—that things were good between them—grabbed her T-shirt and panties, leaving her pants behind, and went to the bathroom.

After she had cleaned up a bit, she stopped and looked in the mirror.

She hardly recognized herself.

Who was this woman? Her lips were swollen from the force of Shaun's kisses. Her hair was ruffled, the scrunchy that had been holding her ponytail so loose that it was in danger of falling out. She took it down and let her hair spill loose around her shoulders.

She wasn't the person she had been in Seattle, that was for sure. Already, this new life had changed her.

She liked it. She liked being someone new. And she thought she liked the person she was becoming, too—someone who wouldn't shy away from an adventure.

She walked back out to the den.

Shaun had pulled himself together in her absence—a little bit, at least. He was wearing his boxer briefs now, but nothing else.

Chloe grinned. "You should always dress like that."

“*You* should always dress like that,” he countered.

“I thought you liked it when I dressed professionally,” she teased him.

“If you’re not going to wear pants, you’re welcome to wear that dinosaur scrub top any time you want.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her down beside him on the couch.

She looked over at him. “So that was okay?” she asked.

“That was *great*,” he assured her.

“Yeah?”

“Exactly what I needed, actually.”

She grinned. “Glad I could help. Is the game back on?”

He burst out laughing. “The game’s *over*, Chloe. You missed it.”

“Oh no! But you were so excited about that game!”

“It’s all right. There’ll be another one on Thursday.”

“Yeah, but this was the one you’d been talking about. Oh crap, did I ruin it?”

“*Chloe*.”

She turned and looked at him. He was smiling.

“This was better than basketball,” he told her firmly. “Okay? I’m glad we did this. I’m glad we missed the game.”

“It really must have been good, if you’re glad we missed the ball game.”

He sighed. “Do you want to know the truth?”

She felt a flutter of anxiety. That sounded ominous. “Of course I do.”

“The truth is that I haven’t been with anyone since Rosemary.”

“Oh.” She swallowed, glad she hadn’t known that before. That would have been a lot of pressure.

He reached over and laid a hand on top of hers. “Don’t worry,” he said. “You don’t need to take that too seriously. It doesn’t

mean anything. It's not like I swore an oath of celibacy after she died and now I've broken it."

"Well, I didn't think that." But she did feel relieved to know that it hadn't meant quite that much to him. If he had told her he felt as if he'd betrayed Rosemary, she wouldn't have known how to handle it.

"She would have wanted me to be happy," Shaun said. "I know that. We even talked about it a little before she died. She wanted me to go on enjoying life. It's not like I've been avoiding women because of her. It's just that I haven't quite known what to do. The idea of trying to date someone is more than I can stand right now, and casual hookups just make me feel sad and even more lonely than I already feel."

"But you don't feel that way now? With me?"

"No, it's different with you."

"Why? What makes it different?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest with you," Shaun said. "But if I had to guess, I'd say it's the fact that you and I aren't just strangers who met in a bar, who hardly know each other's names. We're something more than that."

"Friends?" Chloe suggested.

"Yeah," Shaun said. "I guess that's what we are. Friends."

"You don't have to sound so shocked about it." She grinned.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But to be completely honest with you, I am a little shocked. I can't remember the last time I made a new friend. Even my old friends have gotten kind of distant since Rosemary died. They tried to stay close to me, but I haven't been very open to people."

"That's understandable," Chloe said gently. "But it's also sad. You've been on your own since then?"

"More or less. I have no idea how you wore me down."

"With my good looks and charm."

"You're joking, but yeah, I think that was most of it," he agreed. "The charm more than the looks. Not that you're not

stunning, of course, but it's the way you act that really won me over. You're too easy to talk to."

"I won't apologize for that."

"No, I don't want you to." He grinned wryly. "I guess after all this time, I actually made a friend."

"It was bound to happen sooner or later," she said. "You may not realize it, Shaun, but you're pretty good company yourself."

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CHAPTER 10

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SHAUN



Shaun was determined to keep things professional at work. He wasn't willing to let their new arrangement affect the quality of his job performance, or the care the patients received.

Unfortunately, the only reliable way to stick to that plan was to avoid Chloe at work entirely. Every time they were together, he found himself caught up in daydreams and fantasies. It was impossible to focus on what the patients needed when she stood too near him, when he could smell the scent of her coconut shampoo and see the way her scrubs clung to her hips.

He kept her at arm's length by giving her assignments that took her far away from where he was going to be. He had her shadow and assist other members of the staff for a while. Then, when he could no longer justify making her stick to someone else all the time, he assigned her to patient rooms at the opposite end of the hall from the ones he was putting his primary focus on. But as the attending physician, of course, he couldn't really *avoid* any patient rooms, and no matter how hard he tried to keep his distance, he eventually found himself crossing paths with her.

And then there was the morning meeting, when he stood with all the residents and gave them information about the day.

He had to give Chloe credit. It was clear to him that she was trying, too—at least, at the beginning. She stood at the back of the group and kept her eyes studiously on her clipboard.

But during each meeting, when he called her name—and that was unavoidable, he *had* to say her name—she would look up, and the whole thing would be lost.

The moment their eyes met, he would be transported back to the times they spent together away from work. If he was lucky, his thoughts would go to something fairly innocuous, like the way she laughed when something funny happened on one of her reality shows, or the look of pride in her eyes when they'd finally made that chili and he had pronounced it the best he'd ever tasted. But more often, he thought of things he could never say aloud—things like the way chills ran down his spine when he made her moan.

It was *so* distracting.

One afternoon, about a week after their arrangement had begun, he walked into the staff room to find her standing in front of the vending machine. Her back was to him, and it suddenly occurred to him that the room was empty apart from the two of them—that if he approached her right now, no one would see them.

It was too much to resist. He walked up behind her, getting so close that his body hugged hers.

She jumped a little at the feel of him, but she didn't turn around. "What's up?" she asked. "Need something out of the vending machine?"

"Hmmm. Maybe." He reached around her and placed his hand on the glass front of the machine, leaning more of his body weight into her. He gritted his teeth, hesitating for a moment, but the room was empty... He rolled his hips forward slowly, grinding against her.

She gasped and pushed back into him.

Shaun stood there for a moment, unwilling to break the contact, but knowing that there was nothing they could do to ease the building tension. If he'd thought he could get away with it, he would have dragged her into a closet right now, and he was pretty sure she would have let him.

But no, they couldn't. They *couldn't*. He was the attending physician here, for God's sake. He had to be the responsible one.

He stepped back quickly, before his desire could overwhelm him, and made a show of rummaging in his pockets for change.

"Here." Chloe pushed a dollar bill into his hand. Before he could tell her no, she hurried away from him and out of the room.



The rest of the day was absolute torture.

Shaun continued to try to keep his distance from Chloe. In fact, he was probably trying harder than ever after what had happened in the staff room. He was terrified of what might happen if he allowed himself to be alone with her. He had lost control so quickly. What would happen if they were together where a member of his staff could see them—or worse, one of the patients? Surely he would be able to keep his hands off her in a situation like that.

But what if he couldn't?

All too soon, he was put to the test. He was consulting on an X-ray when Bev led a few of the other residents into the room. He heard her voice over his shoulder.

"This is something all of you should probably take a look at, because a spiral fracture like this one is so uncommon," she explained. "I've only seen one other one in my time here, and this is a good opportunity to study up."

Shaun hadn't even turned around yet, but already he knew that Chloe was in the room. He wasn't even sure *how* he knew it. Maybe it was her smell—but it felt like something more primal than that. He was simply *aware* of her. He was so aware of her that he didn't even need to see her in order to feel her presence.

And to his shock and dismay, he could feel himself getting hard.

How could this be happening? He hadn't even laid eyes on her. He was looking at an X-ray of a spiral fracture, for God's sake. There was nothing arousing about *that*.

He knew that he needed to step back so that the residents could come forward and get a better look at the X-ray. Bev would already be starting to wonder why he hadn't done that, though he didn't think she would ever guess the true reason. But he was afraid to move. He was afraid that when he saw Chloe, he would lose control of himself.

You have to be a professional.

He forced himself to take a step backward, doing his best not to look at any of the people around him—but of course, he couldn't resist checking whether or not he had been right.

He had been.

There she was.

She was wide-eyed, looking as alarmed as he felt, and she wasn't looking at the X-ray at all. As he watched, her eyes raked slowly over his body, making him feel as if she'd stripped him naked.

It felt indecent, the way she was looking at him. It stunned him that she was willing to look at him like that with so many other people in the room.

Then it occurred to him that he was still looking at her.

He turned away quickly, hoping no one had noticed that moment of lingering eye contact but feeling as if that might be too much to hope for. It felt as if they'd practically been shouting at each other.

Bev was now talking about the image on the X-ray projector. He was glad she'd taken over responsibility for that, because he didn't think he could have strung two words together.

And then, just as he was thinking that things were as out of control as they could possibly get, Chloe reached out and brushed her hand against his arm.

It was such a casual touch that he knew there was no way anyone could have seen it and read anything into it. It probably didn't even look deliberate. But Shaun felt as if his body temperature had skyrocketed. He couldn't seem to draw breath.

He hurried out of the room, away from the dim lighting and the press of bodies. As soon as he stepped out into the fluorescent lights of the hallway, he began to feel better. The distance really did help.

He hurried down the hall. He had managed to keep things under control, but he was going to have to watch himself.



By the end of the day, it was clear that Chloe had taken the exact opposite lesson away from their two close encounters.

For the rest of the afternoon, she seemed to crop up everywhere he went. It didn't take long to come to the realization that she was doing it on purpose.

When he stopped at the nurses' station to pick up a chart, she came up alongside him. "Hi, Steph," she said, acting as if she didn't see Shaun there at all.

"Chloe." Steph smiled. "I took that banana bread you brought in home to my husband and son. They loved it."

"Oh, I'm so glad," Chloe said. "I've been trying to work on my baking skills, and it's always nice to have someone to cook for."

As she said it, she bumped her foot against Shaun's, just briefly.

"I know what you mean," Steph said, completely unaware of the little flirtation that was taking place right before her eyes. "Sometimes cooking for my family does feel like work, but other times it's the perfect way to unwind after a day at the hospital. It just feels so easy to make everything go the way you want it to in the kitchen. Do you have that experience?"

“Oh, absolutely,” Chloe said. “I usually find when I’m cooking that things work out the way I want them to.”

Shaun stared at the chart in front of him, the words swimming on the page. It was impossible to pretend he didn’t know that she was talking about the night they’d made chili together, and what had happened afterward on the kitchen floor.

But Chloe kept right on talking, as if he wasn’t there, as if she wasn’t blatantly hinting at their private life. “Do you find that cooking is a good way to set a mood for you?”

“A mood?” Steph asked. “What do you mean?”

“I can just imagine you making dinner for your family and creating an atmosphere,” Chloe said. “Making everyone feel comforted and at home.”

“Oh, I see,” Steph said. “Yes, that’s exactly how it is. What about you?”

“I love to use my skill in the kitchen to set the mood.”

Shaun felt like he was going to melt into a puddle right there on the hospital floor. It was maddening. The things she was saying were technically harmless, so he couldn’t exactly tell her to stop, and yet she was practically being pornographic with her intent. He understood exactly what she was trying to do, and it frustrated him that it was working so well.

And at the same time, he didn’t want her to stop.

It was intoxicating that the sexiest woman he knew was talking about him like this, even if no one knew that he was the one she was talking about.

Steph knew what she meant, even if she didn’t know the details. She laughed. “I’m guessing the moods you set with your food are usually pretty different from the ones I set with mine,” she said. By now, everyone in the hospital knew that Chloe was single, even if most of them didn’t know much else.

“Well, you’d be right about that,” Chloe said.

“You might have to give me some of your recipes sometime,” Steph said. “Maybe I can impress Dan with them.”

Chloe laughed. “I’d be happy to,” she said. “I’ve got a chili recipe that never misses, if he likes that.”

She grabbed a chart from the rack and turned to Shaun. “Hi there, Doctor Marlow,” she said cheerily, as if there was nothing at all about the conversation she’d just been having that might be of any special interest to him.

“Chloe,” he managed.

She practically skipped away.

Steph laughed, watching her go. “That one’s a treat,” she said.

“You think so?”

“Oh, everyone just loves her,” Steph said. “She’s brought such a light into this place. So much positive energy. We could do with a few more like her, if you want my opinion.”

There’s definitely nobody else like Chloe. “Maybe we could,” he said. “Maybe that’s something I should keep in mind the next time I make a hire.”

“You like her too, don’t you?” Steph said. “I thought at first that maybe you didn’t, but now I can see the way you are around her.”

Shaun almost choked. “What way am I around her?”

“You’re just...happier,” Steph said. “And I get it. She’s kind of infectious, isn’t she? Just being around her makes you feel a little better about everything. It’s easy to get down in this place, but she makes everyone feel a little more positive, even the patients.”

Shaun nodded. “That’s certainly one way of putting it.”

I sure hope she’s not making the patients feel the way she makes me feel, though. Some of their hearts couldn’t take it.

If he was completely honest with himself, Shaun was beginning to question whether his own heart could take it.

One thing was for sure—he’d bitten off more than he could chew.

CHAPTER 11

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CHLOE



Shaun didn't speak to Chloe for the entirety of the drive home.

Chloe didn't dare to break the silence. She was aware of how she'd behaved that day at the hospital. She had expected him to be upset about it, and she wasn't at all surprised by the way he was reacting. It was just that she hadn't been able to resist flirting with him, especially after what *he* had done in front of the vending machine in the early afternoon.

He's the one who started it, she reminded herself. He really can't be angry that I rose to the occasion when he gave me every indication that he wanted a flirtatious day.

They reached his house, and Shaun got out of the car without a word and went inside.

Now Chloe was really worried. Was he actually angry with her? She had thought that it was all in good fun. *She* had certainly been having fun. But maybe she had been wrong. He had told her, when they'd started this thing, that he was worried it would interfere with their work relationship, and she'd assured him that that wouldn't happen. Maybe he was upset because it had interfered after all.

She was a bit wary of what would happen when she went into the house. Would there be a confrontation? Living with Shaun had been a good thing for her so far, but if they were going to be angry with each other, she could imagine it turning sour pretty quickly, and she didn't want that.

But there was no point in lingering outside. She was going to have to go in and face the music. She got out of the car and approached the door. Feeling a bit hesitant, she let herself in.

She found Shaun in the kitchen, standing with his back to her, looking at the contents of the refrigerator.

She cleared her throat to let him know that she was in the room, but he said nothing.

“Shaun?” she tried.

He slammed the refrigerator door shut and spun around.

Chloe couldn't help it—she let out a gasp.

His eyes were dark with some emotion she didn't quite recognize—but it didn't look like anger. And when he strode across the room toward her, she didn't back away. She stood her ground.

He grabbed her by the upper arms. His grip was firm, but it wasn't painful. Instead of struggling to break free of him, as she might have expected she would do in this situation, she found herself watching him, eager to see what he meant to do.

His voice was authoritative, when he finally spoke. But there was no anger. “You can't act like that while we're at work.”

“I can't act like that?” she repeated. “What about you?”

His eyes widened.

“Don't look surprised,” she said. “You came up on me when all I was doing was trying to buy a snack. That was—that was *indecent*. What would anyone have said if they'd seen you rubbing up on me like that in the middle of the staff room?”

She saw his jaw clench and knew that her words were having the desired effect.

Good. He's not going to stand here and act like I was the only one who was inappropriate. That's not the way it was, and I'm not going to let him get away with it.

“You wanted me,” she said. “You wanted me so bad, didn't you?”

He hooked his thumb in the waistband of her pants. “These pants are too small for you,” he said. “Anybody would have wanted you, wearing these things. I’m sure I wasn’t the only one. And this shirt—I could rip this right off you.” His hands moved to her breasts, cupped them, and then traced her nipples through the fabric.

She moaned and leaned into his touch. “It’s all right,” she breathed. “I wanted you too.”

“Yeah, I could tell. Talking about me like that. You might as well have been giving Steph the play by play on everything you and I have ever done together.”

“Mmm, no, she didn’t know what I was talking about.”

“You don’t think so? She definitely knows you’re sleeping with *someone*. All that talk about using cooking to set the mood...”

“Cooking isn’t the only way I set the mood.” She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. “And it worked, didn’t it?”

“You can’t keep doing that at work.”

“So punish me.”

His eyes darkened. “That’s what you want?”

“Show me what happens when I’m bad.”

A little growl escaped him. He grabbed her wrist, spun her around, and slapped her palms against the kitchen counter.

Oh, fuck. Now I’m in for it.

Chloe couldn’t bring herself to have any regrets, though. She was glad she’d provoked him at work. She was glad he had come home so aggressively turned on that he couldn’t resist her. She wanted to see what he would do.

He wrapped his body around hers, pressing up against her just as he had in front of the vending machine, and Chloe felt a thrill pass through her at the knowledge that this time they didn’t have to stop. They didn’t have to pull away from each

other. They could keep going, could follow this urgency between them until they reached satisfaction.

She lowered her body so that her cheek was resting on the kitchen counter, knowing that by doing so she was lining them up perfectly, giving him the best possible angle.

Shaun shoved her pants down. She felt them pool around her ankles, felt the air on her bare skin—and then the heat of his body against hers.

He groaned, grinding against her, prolonging the moment.

“Just do it,” she urged. She’d been aching for him all day, and now—*finally*, there was nothing to stop them. She wanted him so badly that she felt as if she was going to burst into flames.

With a low moan, he thrust into her.

Chloe closed her eyes and rocked back into him, reveling in the sensation of surrendering her body to him. It was the best feeling in the world. “We should always do this after work,” she murmured. “Best way to shake off the day.”

“Yeah.” His hands tightened on her hips. “Well, that’s definitely going to happen if you keep flirting with me at work. Do you know how close I came to dragging you into the on-call room today?”

“Only interns have sex in the on-call room.”

“Yeah, *I know*. It would have been really embarrassing and I don’t even care because you’re so hot. I don’t know how I’m supposed to keep my hands off you all day, Chloe, I really don’t.”

“So take me into the on-call room next time. I don’t care if it’s embarrassing.”

The idea of doing this at work, while people walked by right outside the door, was ridiculously tantalizing. She imagined it now—the threat that someone could walk in and discover the fact that they were breaking all the rules of common sense and workplace decency in such a fundamental way... It appealed to her, even though of course it wasn’t a good idea to allow it to happen.

He groaned. “You tempt me too much.”

“You can just give in.”

He pulled away from her, and for a moment she felt bereft. But then he spun her around and lifted her up to sit on the counter. He looped his arms under her knees, yanked her to the edge of the counter and thrust into her again.

She leaned back, bracing herself on her palms, and wrapped her legs around his waist. He’d set an intense new rhythm, hammering forcefully into her, and she could feel the tension building low in her body. She wasn’t going to be able to stave off her orgasm much longer.

Shaun, apparently, was right there with her. He was gasping with every thrust, his movements becoming erratic.

“Chloe,” he gasped. “I—”

“Do it,” she moaned, feeling her grip on control loosen and fail.

The next few moments were a blissful blur.

As the waves of pleasure subsided, Chloe became aware of the fact that she had slipped off the counter and was now lying on the floor. Shaun was next to her, his arms wrapped tightly around her.

She struggled to free herself from his embrace and sat up.

“No, don’t,” Shaun caught her shoulder and pulled her back down into his arms. “Stay a minute.”

“What?”

“Just, stay here with me for a minute.”

“Do we cuddle now?” They never had before.

“We’re not cuddling. We’re just staying here. I’m not ready to get up yet.” He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

Chloe laughed. “This is absolutely cuddling, Shaun. This is what people in relationships do.”

But in spite of that, she didn't pull away from him. The fact of the matter was that it felt good to be held like this. It had been a long time since it had happened. Greg had been pulling away from her for a long time without her really even realizing it. It was only now that she found herself in the arms of a man again that she really felt everything that she'd been missing. It was only now that she was able to fully realize how much she'd been longing for physical closeness.

She sighed and snuggled into him. "I guess we can cuddle a little bit," she said.

He laughed. "Don't worry. We're not staying long. This floor isn't very comfortable."

"We could take this up to bed."

"We do that and I'll probably fall asleep." By unspoken agreement, the two of them did not share a bed. That felt to Chloe like it would be crossing a line. Cuddling after sex might be questionable, but sleeping together, in each other's arms...that was *definitely* a marker of a relationship. And this wasn't a relationship. So even when they did have sex in one of the bedrooms, they always got up afterwards and returned to their own beds when they were ready to sleep. She understood what Shaun was saying now, even though it was something the two of them had never articulated. He was telling her that they were approaching a line they shouldn't cross.

I can't let this cuddling thing continue. As good as it felt, it was dangerous, and she knew better than to indulge herself. This wasn't a relationship. It was never going to be a relationship. She needed to remain practical.

She sat up again, and this time, he didn't pull her back down.

"We should think about dinner," she said.

"We should think about putting our clothes back on." But he didn't get up. He propped his head up on one hand and watched her.

She grinned. "Is that what you want? For me to put my clothes back on?"

“No, of course not. I want you to walk around naked for the rest of the night. But it might be in your best interests to get dressed, if you want to get anything done tonight.”

She laughed. “Who says I want to get anything done?”

“Well, if *that’s* the way you feel about it.” He got to his feet and pulled her up alongside him. “Maybe you should...I don’t know, make me some dinner.”

“Did you seriously just tell me to *make you dinner?*”

“Hey, you can cook and I can’t, and we both know it. Besides, I thought you liked making dinner. I thought it helped you set the mood.” He leered.

“I’m not sure I need any help setting a mood with you,” she pointed out. “Seems to me I’ve done a pretty good job of that already.

He laughed. “Touché.”

She grabbed her scrubs top and tugged it on. “*We* can make dinner,” she said. “What do you want?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You’re the one who does all the shopping. What’ve you got in the refrigerator?”

“A bunch of things with my name labels on them.” She smirked at him. “You wanted to keep our stuff separate.”

“I’ll let you use any of the seasonings in the cupboard,” he bargained. “And you can choose any bottle of wine to open.”

It was a game the two of them played now, using the rules they’d established when she had first moved in to tease each other. There was no doubt that they would share everything. Not anymore.

“All right,” she said. “I think I’m going to make a stir fry. Can you get out the chicken that’s thawing in the fridge?”

Shaun went to the fridge and opened it.

Before he could come back with the chicken, though, the two of them heard the rattling sound of a key in a lock.

Startled, Chloe spun around.

The doorknob of the front door was jiggling.

Someone was outside. Someone who had a key. And they were about to come in.

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CHAPTER 12

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SHAUN



Shaun grabbed the pile of Chloe’s clothes from the kitchen floor and thrust them at her. “Pantry,” he snapped.

Her eyes widened and she disappeared into the pantry. Shaun hoped she understood that he wasn’t angry with her—he had only been trying to protect her from being seen by whoever was about to come through the door.

No one was supposed to have a key to this place—but he had a sneaking suspicion he knew who this was going to be, all the same.

He barely had time to tug his own pants on before the door was thrown open. There stood his younger brother, Matt.

“Shaun!” Matt strode in without waiting for an invitation. “What’s going on? Why don’t you have a shirt on?”

“Why are you in my house?” Shaun countered.

“A guy can’t come to visit his big brother?”

“A guy can’t just *show up*, no.”

“Well, I did try to text you,” Matt said. “I’ve been texting you for weeks, and you haven’t answered. Can you blame me for worrying?”

This was entirely disingenuous, Shaun felt. “You weren’t worried about me,” he said. “And you should know why I wasn’t texting you back, Matt. You never contact me unless you want something.”

Matt didn't even bother to deny that. "I just need a place to crash for a few weeks," he said.

"You get evicted again?"

"You make it sound so dramatic."

"Well, did you?"

"I mean, I guess it depends on what you mean by evicted."

"Come on, Matt. You know what *evicted* means. Were you kicked out of your apartment?"

"I mean—it wasn't my fault."

Of course it wasn't. "What happened?"

"The landlord said I'd been smoking inside."

"And had you been?"

"Maybe," Matt said. "Honestly, though, there was no reason to make such a big deal out of it. But he said I was in violation of my lease, and he kicked me out. Not even a warning!"

Shaun sighed. "Where have you been staying since then?"

"At Sebastian's. You remember my buddy Sebastian, right?"

"Oh, I remember Sebastian." Matt had been friends with Sebastian since high school, and the two of them had simply never outgrown each other. They'd never really outgrown anything else either. Shaun had spent the last fifteen years waiting for his brother to grow up, and it just never seemed to happen. "So why can't you keep staying with him?"

"I can't impose on him," Matt said.

"Really?" Shaun asked dubiously. Matt wasn't the sort to care about being an imposition.

"Well, his girlfriend said I couldn't hang around," Matt said.

"Ah." There it was.

"I know, right?" Matt said, as if no one could possibly help but be on his side after having heard that. "She said that if I was living there, I had to help pay the rent. I mean, it's Sebastian's place! It's not up to her. And she crashes there all the time and

I know she doesn't pay. But he's whipped. He just knuckled under and told me I had to go."

"You didn't consider getting a job and helping out with the rent?"

"I *have* a job," Matt said irritably. "You know that. I'm an influencer."

Shaun closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It wasn't even that he was judgmental of his brother's choice of career—he knew there were plenty of people who made their living as social media influencers. But Matt wasn't one of them. Half of his followers were just people he knew in real life, and Shaun doubted he'd ever influenced anybody to do much of anything. If Matt had been able to pay rent as an influencer, Shaun would have had no quarrel with it, but he obviously couldn't.

"Look," he said. "You can't stay here."

"Why not?"

Shaun was spared having to answer by Chloe's emergence from the pantry.

She had obviously taken the trouble to put herself back together. She'd put her hair in a tidy bun, and she'd come out holding a bag of white rice, making it look as if she had only ever gone in there to search for it.

She held it up. "Can we use this for the stir fry?"

Shaun knew her well enough that he was able to make out the uneasiness on her face. She knew she was stepping into the middle of something awkward, and she was trying to smooth it over as best she could.

"Yeah we can use that," Shaun said. "Chloe, this is my brother, Matt. Matt, this is my roommate."

"Oh," Matt said. "So you're the reason I can't have the spare bedroom."

"I guess?" Chloe looked at Shaun. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have anything to apologize for, Chloe," Shaun said firmly. "It's not a spare room at the moment, it's your room."

You live here.”

“You never told me you were getting a roommate,” Matt said. His tone was almost accusatory.

“Well, you never asked me,” Shaun pointed out. “You never really talk to me, Matt.”

“What are you talking about? I talk to you. I’m talking to you right now.”

“Yeah, and speaking of which, how did you get a key to my house? I didn’t give you that.”

Matt made a sheepish face, but he didn’t actually look ashamed in the slightest. “You can’t be angry with me,” he said.

“We’ll see,” Shaun said. “What did you do?”

“Well, the last time I was here, I made a copy.”

“You copied my house key,” Shaun repeated wearily. “Without even asking me whether you could.”

“You would have said no.”

“That’s right, I would have. You didn’t think that was something you needed to respect?”

“I needed a way to get in here,” Matt said unapologetically. “If I hadn’t let myself in, I would probably still be out there knocking. You wouldn’t have bothered to let me in. You’d have left me out on your porch until I froze to death.”

“Until you froze to death? It’s seventy degrees out there.”

“Metaphorically.”

“God, Matt. Give me the key.”

Matt handed it over. Shaun was aware of the futility of the request—it was more than likely his brother had a duplicate somewhere—but he had to at least make the attempt.

Matt pulled out a chair and sat down at the kitchen table. “So, stir fry, huh?”

“You’re not staying for dinner.”

“Oh, come on. Chloe wants me to stay, don’t you, Chloe?”

“I mean...it doesn’t matter to me,” Chloe said awkwardly.

“Don’t put her in the middle of this,” Shaun said.

“How do you know my brother anyway, Chloe?” Matt asked, ignoring Shaun completely. “He’s never mentioned you to me before.”

“We haven’t known each other that long.”

“And he already asked you to move in with him? That’s big.”

“Stop it, Matt,” Shaun said. “She works at the hospital. She just moved down from Seattle and her living arrangements fell through. She needed a place to stay and I had a room, so I offered.”

“That’s my big brother,” Matt said. “Always so generous when someone needs a place to stay.”

“Damn it,” Shaun said. “Chloe, would you mind giving us a moment alone to talk?”

“That’s no problem,” Chloe said. She put the bag of rice down on the counter and left the kitchen.

Matt watched her go. “She’s pretty hot.”

“Stop it. We work together.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t work with her.”

“She just got out of a bad relationship, Matt. Leave her alone.”

“Okay, okay,” Matt said. “If I promise to leave her alone, can I stay?”

“I told you, the guest room is taken.”

“Yeah, but that’s okay,” Matt said earnestly. “I could crash on the couch. That would be good enough for me. You know I’m not fancy.”

Shaun hesitated.

Matt was annoying, and he didn’t want him to stay. It wasn’t just the fact that he was a freeloader, either—Shaun had never gotten over the fact that Matt hadn’t been there for him after

Rosemary had died. That had been the darkest period of his life, and he could really have used the comfort of a family member. Matt had given him almost nothing beyond showing up for the funeral.

I don't owe him anything after the way he treated me while that was going on.

But he couldn't quite make himself believe that. Because in spite of what had happened, Matt was still his younger brother. Shaun could never forget that fact. And he also knew that he was nothing like his brother. Matt might have ignored Shaun when he was the one in need, but Shaun just couldn't do that—even though Matt's crises were always of his own making.

"All right," he said. "You can sleep on the couch in the den."

"Oh, you're the best," Matt said. "I knew I could count on you."

Shaun held up his hand. "There are going to be rules this time, Matt."

"Ooh, rules. Lay them on me, doctor."

Shaun sighed. "You can't be respectful for five minutes? I'm giving you a place to stay."

"Tell me what I need to do! I'll respect your rules."

"All right. No smoking in the house. You can take it out into the yard."

"Fair enough. Can I vape in the house?"

"If it's all right with Chloe."

"Now we need Chloe's permission?"

"She's living here, Matt. You're the guest. And that's rule number two—you leave Chloe alone."

"Am I allowed to speak to her?"

"Of course you can speak to her. You can't hit on her. You can't bother her when she's trying to go about her day. In fact, don't speak to her unless she speaks to you first."

"You know you're being crazy, don't you?"

“No stealing my alcohol,” Shaun went on.

“Oh, for—I’ve never stolen your alcohol.”

“Drinking it when I haven’t offered it to you is stealing it. If I open a bottle of wine at dinner or something, you get a pour, but you don’t get to raid my collection.”

“Okay, okay, damn.”

“And I don’t want you sitting around the house while Chloe and I are at work,” Shaun said.

“What, I have to go to the park or something?”

“*Look for a job.*”

“I have a job.”

“A job that will actually let you pay rent on a place to live. This isn’t going to be an indefinite arrangement, you staying here. I don’t care what you do—get a side hustle at a coffee shop, drive for a rideshare company—*something*. Doesn’t matter. If you’re staying here, I want to see how you’re earning money so you’ll eventually be able to live self-sufficiently.”

“You never could just do a guy a favor without needing to get all controlling about it.”

“Someone has to give you a push,” Shaun said. “Those are my terms, if you’re staying here. Oh, and I want you to make up your sofa bed every day. I don’t want to feel like I can’t use my den just because you’re crashing in there.”

“What’s the big deal?” Matt asked. He sounded genuinely mystified this time. “You never use the den anyway. You always watch TV in your bedroom.”

Shaun didn’t want to explain what had changed—why having access to the den had suddenly become important. “That’s the deal,” he said instead of answering the question. “Take it or leave it.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll take it. Are you really going to kick me out if I forget to make up the bed one day?”

Shaun knew he wouldn't, but he also knew that he wanted Matt to take this seriously. "Don't try it, and then you won't have to find out."

"I have no idea when you got like this," Matt said. "You weren't always this way."

"What way?"

"Such a total downer. You used to be fun."

Really, you can't think of any event that might have happened in the last five years or so that would have made me less fun? Just the fact that Matt wasn't making the obvious connection pissed Shaun off. He had a reputation for being over the top when it came to strictness and control, and he didn't expect most people to understand why that was. But Matt should have known.

If there was anyone in the world who should have understood Shaun's fear of losing control of a situation, of being taken by surprise, it should have been Matt.

But he didn't understand. He didn't even try to understand. He just acted as if Shaun was vaguely disappointing to him for being less *entertaining*, less free-spirited, than he had been when he was younger.

It wasn't even a fair assessment. Shaun had always been the responsible one of the two of them.

"I'm going to go tell Chloe she can come back down," he said. "Go put your duffel bag in the den. I don't want your stuff littered all over the house while you're here."

"You might want to put a shirt on while you're at it." Matt scooped up the shirt Shaun had left on the counter and tossed it to him, and Shaun couldn't help wondering whether his brother suspected what had been going on just before he had walked in.

CHAPTER 13

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CHLOE



“So, Chloe,” Matt said, attacking his serving of stir fry. “You’re a nurse at the hospital?”

“She’s a doctor,” Shaun said wearily.

Chloe smiled. She wasn’t offended. “People make that mistake all the time,” she told Matt. “I like to think it’s because of my sunny personality.”

“See, she didn’t take it personally,” Matt said to Shaun.

“Of course I didn’t. Nurses are the most important people at the hospital,” Chloe said. “There’s nothing insulting to me about the idea of working as a nurse.”

“How come you didn’t do it?”

He seemed genuinely interested, so Chloe gave her answer serious thought.

“I think I wanted to be a doctor because I wanted to save lives,” she said. “It sounds a little trite, but it’s the truth. The work the nurses do is so important, and nothing could happen without them—and I know they make our patients’ lives better. But when I come home from the hospital and know that someone is going to go home to their family because of a diagnostic call I was able to make, or a treatment I was able to prescribe—there’s no better feeling than that in the world.”

“Yeah, it sounds pretty good,” Matt agreed. “This stir fry is pretty good too, by the way.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Best meal I’ve had in weeks. My buddy Sebastian doesn’t really cook, and neither does his girlfriend.”

“I could teach you how to make a few things, if you wanted,” Chloe offered.

“You don’t have to do that,” Shaun interjected. “He isn’t going to be here that long.”

“It’s no trouble,” Chloe said. She was slightly mystified by the drama between the two brothers. All right, so Matt wasn’t as ambitious or successful as Shaun was, and it was a little strange the way he had just shown up out of nowhere, but he seemed like a pleasant enough guy. Maybe all he needed was for someone to give him a chance. “Do you want to make dinner with me tomorrow, Matt?”

“Oh, now that would be fun,” Matt said. “You’re on. I’ll be there.”

“Great,” Chloe said happily.

But she couldn’t help noticing that Shaun didn’t look happy about it at all. He looked annoyed, as if he would have preferred that she just didn’t talk to Matt.

She wanted to ask him about it—to try to find out what was bothering him—but she couldn’t very well pose the question with Matt sitting right there. It would have been much too awkward.

As a consequence, they finished their dinner in relative silence, and when the plates had been cleared, it was Shaun who stood up and started to carry the dishes to the sink.

“Matt and I will help with that,” Chloe said.

Immediately she regretted the phrasing. It was hard to say exactly what the problem was, but she sensed she shouldn’t have paired herself with Matt like that. It was obvious that, for whatever reason, Shaun was unhappy with his brother, and if there were sides to be taken, Chloe wanted to be on Shaun’s side, not on Matt’s.

She quickly stood up and started clearing the table.

Matt stretched. “Actually,” he said, “I’ve had a day. I think I’m going to hit the hay. That will be all right with you, Shaun?”

“Do whatever you want,” Shaun said, not turning around. “You know where everything is, right?”

“Sure thing.” Matt wandered down the hall.

The moment he was out of earshot, Shaun let out an exasperated sigh and leaned against the counter. “I’m sorry about him,” he said.

“Why are you sorry? He’s not doing anything that bad.”

“He knows exactly what he’s doing. Trying to push your buttons about being a nurse instead of a doctor—”

“Shaun, that didn’t bother me at all. Why would it? There’s nothing wrong with being a nurse.”

“Of course there isn’t, but this is what he does. He’s self-conscious about how unsuccessful he is, so he tries to diminish everyone around him to make himself feel better. He can’t *stand* the idea that he’s having dinner with two doctors.”

“I think you might be reading into things. He was really nice about the dinner.”

“He wasn’t being nice. He was trying to make you feel weird about the fact that you cooked for us. And didn’t you notice the way he refused to stay and help clean up?”

“He was tired.”

“Don’t make excuses for him. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to clear the table before he went to lie down.” Shaun sighed. “He does this every time, Chloe. You have to take my word for it. I’ve been putting up with it for years. He just thinks the whole world revolves around him. He doesn’t even acknowledge the fact that other people exist, with their own lives and problems. He hangs around here now because he’s been evicted and he has nowhere else to go. But where was he when Rosemary died and I needed someone to support me? Nowhere to be found.”

Chloe was quiet for a moment. “I see,” she murmured.

“He’s happy to turn to family when he needs help. But when I needed help, he couldn’t make the time. So I don’t feel particularly inclined to bend over backward for the guy these days, especially given the way he acts whenever we see each other. He’s annoyed that I’m letting you use the spare room, you know. He thinks I should have just kept it open for him instead of taking on a roommate.”

Chloe bit her lip. “If you want me to go—”

“No, of course I don’t want you to go,” Shaun said with a sigh. “What, back to that rat trap of a hotel, where you could have been killed?”

“I don’t think I could have been *killed*,” Chloe objected.

“You don’t know what would have happened if you’d been in the room when that break-in had happened,” Shaun countered. “You’re not going back there. It’s out of the question. Besides...I don’t *want* you to leave. I’ve enjoyed having you here. That doesn’t end just because Matt’s decided he wants my spare room all of a sudden.”

“It isn’t really that sudden. Wasn’t he asking after it before I moved in?”

“That doesn’t mean he gets it. It’s up to me.”

“Yeah,” Chloe agreed. “I know. I just don’t want to outstay my welcome.”

“You’re not. Trust me. I want you here. I want you to stay.”

“Then I will,” Chloe said. She was forcibly reminded of the moment earlier that afternoon when he had pulled her back down onto the kitchen floor to lie naked with him—he had asked her to stay then, too. She had the same feeling now of being in over her head, of being closer to a romantic relationship than either of them had ever intended.

That isn’t what this is. He’s not asking me to stay because he has feelings for me. He just wants me to be safe.



Regardless of what either of the two of them might have wanted, it was indisputable that Matt's arrival changed things.

He was sleeping in the den, and though Shaun told him to clear away his blankets and turn the couch back into a daytime seating area every day, Matt rarely actually did it. The den had become a hangout spot for Chloe and Shaun since she had moved in, but now they could hardly go inside without feeling like they were trespassing in somebody's bedroom. The nights of watching TV together began to fall by the wayside. Sometimes they still ate together at the kitchen table, but whenever they did, Matt was with them. He'd completely fallen through on his agreement to cook with Chloe—she wasn't sure whether he had ever intended to do it, but she decided not to ask him about it again. If it wasn't what he wanted, there was no reason to push it.

She was more concerned about the fact that she and Shaun were having trouble finding time to be together.

It wasn't the kind of thing she could go to him and complain about. She wasn't his girlfriend. Theirs had always been an arrangement of convenience, and now the convenience was gone.

It didn't stop her from feeling hopelessly attracted to him. It didn't stop her from wanting him all the time. But there didn't seem to be much either one of them could do about it.

Matt was just always there.

They stopped speaking to each other on the way home from work. It seemed to happen by mutual agreement. The tension in the car was so high that Chloe thought it was possible that just the sound of his voice would be enough to provoke some kind of visceral, sexual reaction—that she would force him to pull the car off the road and climb into his lap right there on the shoulder.

Maybe it wouldn't be the worst thing if she did. It wasn't as if they were getting any action at home.

They arrived back from work one day and came in to the sound of the TV playing in the den. Chloe recognized what

she could hear as the same animated program that Matt watched semi-regularly. It was packed with crude humor and was the kind of thing the guys in her undergraduate program had watched while drinking in the dorms. It wasn't the kind of thing she expected to find an adult man watching, but she'd gotten used to the idea that this was what Matt did.

She looked over at Shaun. "Does he know we're home?" she asked quietly. There was no sign that he had heard them come in.

Shaun's eyes blazed in response. He didn't answer, but he grabbed her hand and pulled her into the pantry.

There was a time when they would have taken their time with each other. When they would have enjoyed the buildup. It wasn't like that anymore.

Shaun didn't even take her pants all the way off. He pushed them down to her ankles and thrust into her without preamble. Chloe was ready for him, of course—she walked around in a state of constant unsatisfied arousal these days, and having him inside her was a relief. She closed her eyes as he took her, giving in to the pleasure, her orgasm building fast.

It didn't take very long, after all the delay of pleasure they had both been through, for both of them to reach climax.

Shaun clapped a hand over Chloe's mouth as he felt her start to come, and she was glad for it. She didn't think she could have kept herself quiet. She'd been needing this so badly that she'd been dreaming about it, but her dreams couldn't hold a candle to the real thing. For a blissful moment, she forgot all about how frustrated she had been lately and just allowed herself to revel in the sensations she was feeling.

But all too soon, it was over.

A cold sort of sadness filled her as they separated. There was no way they could take a few minutes in each other's arms, the way they had once done. There was no lock on the pantry door. There was nothing to stop Matt from walking in at any moment, looking for a bag of corn chips. They'd already taken a big risk by doing this at all—but if they had gone up to one

of their bedrooms together, Matt would have seen them and would have known what was happening.

Sneaking around had been kind of exciting when all this had started. Chloe had enjoyed the feeling of walking around the hospital and knowing that the two of them were caught up in something nobody else could see.

But it wasn't fun anymore. Matt's presence in the house was keeping them from enjoying each other in the way they had when this had all started out. And even though Chloe had assured Shaun that she didn't mind his being here when he'd first arrived, she now found herself wishing that he would leave.

But what could she possibly say?

Matt was Shaun's brother. When push came to shove, he had much more right to be here than she did. Who was she, after all? Nobody. Just someone he worked with.

As if summoned by her thoughts, Matt came wandering into the kitchen. Chloe was briefly thankful that they'd already pulled their clothes back on and come out of the pantry.

"When did you two get home?" he asked. He looked as though he'd only just gotten out of bed.

"You didn't look for any jobs today, did you," Shaun said wearily.

"Don't be like that. I made a bunch of content for my social media platform." Matt wandered over to the pantry and grabbed a box of cereal. "My big break will be here any day now. Hey, let me know when dinner's ready, okay?"

CHAPTER 14

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SHAUN



“Are you okay, Doctor Marlow?” Bev asked Shaun the next day at work. “You don’t seem like yourself.”

“What do you mean?” Shaun asked. He couldn’t see any differences in his own behavior, any ways he was deviating from the norm. In fact, he was deliberately keeping quiet today because he didn’t fully trust himself not to act unusual.

Which should be just fine, because I’m always quiet. How many times have people told me that? If there’s one thing that shouldn’t arouse any suspicion, it’s me keeping quiet, for God’s sake.

And yet, here was Bev, asking him the very questions he didn’t want to answer.

“I don’t know,” she said. “You seem as if you’re in a bad mood today.”

“I’m not in a bad mood,” he lied.

Bev shrugged. “Okay,” she said. “If you say so.”

It was clear that she didn’t believe him, and it was equally clear that she was willing to let it go if that was what he wanted.

Shaun appreciated this about Bev. She was the sort who knew her limits, and she could always be counted upon to keep her focus on work, even if she sensed something going on with him.

Not like Chloe.

Chloe would have dragged it out of him, whatever it was. She would have bothered him and bothered him until eventually he admitted the truth about what was on his mind.

That was what she would have done a few weeks ago, anyway.

Things were different between them now. She no longer flirted with him at work, and while Shaun would have thought that would be a relief, he actually found himself missing it. He understood why she didn't do it, though. The tension that built up when she did could no longer go anywhere. They had no outlet for their feelings toward each other. Not with Matt around all the time. It had come to the point where he could hardly stand to look at her. He just wanted her too badly.

And here was Bev, noticing that he was going through something. Offering to talk to him about it.

You can't open up to people at work. There's no world in which that ends well.

But something had cracked when he'd let Chloe into his life. He just wasn't the same closed-off person he had once been, and he couldn't go back.

"The truth is," he said to Bev, "I've sort of been seeing somebody."

Her eyes widened. He wasn't sure if she knew about Rosemary's death, but she certainly knew he hadn't been involved with anyone in the time they'd known each other. "Are you really?" she asked. "That's great, doc."

"Well, I don't know," he said. "It's complicated."

"It's always complicated," Bev said wisely. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I shouldn't do that.

But he really did want to. Having someone to discuss things with suddenly felt like the most amazing thing he could possibly have asked for. And it would be such a relief to finally say the things he was feeling out loud, even if he did need to be vague about them.

I just can't let her know it's Chloe. That's what really matters.

“Can you have lunch with me today?” he asked.

“Sure,” Bev said. “Cafeteria at twelve thirty?”

“Sounds perfect.”



As it happened, Shaun was about five minutes late for the meetup in the cafeteria thanks to a patient having some detailed questions about a medication she was starting. He hurried down the stairs to the first floor, glad to be getting away from the part of the hospital where he was likely to run into Chloe around every corner. He was already breathing more easily.

He spotted Bev at a table, a salad and a bottle of water in front of her. He made his way through the line quickly, buying soup and a sandwich, and then joined her at the table.

She glanced at his tray. “Do you really like that hospital chili?”

His stomach clenched. “I didn’t actually realize it was chili.” He took the lid off of the soup cup—sure enough, chili it was. “I wouldn’t have gotten it.”

“It’s a lot better if you put cheese and croutons in it,” Bev said.

But the taste of the chili wasn’t what worried Shaun. It was watery and weak, but it wouldn’t kill him. What might kill him was sitting here reminiscing about the chili he and Chloe had made together—about every time they had cooked together. About the times it had gone wrong, and the times it had gone right. About the way they’d touched each other casually in the kitchen as they had worked and the way the touches had always grown less and less casual as the evening wore on.

He pushed the chili aside, knowing that he couldn’t possibly eat it without aching for Chloe. “The sandwich will be enough for me,” he said.

“So tell me about this woman you’re seeing,” Bev said, pouring dressing over her salad. “You don’t seem especially

happy about it.”

“I don’t know,” Shaun said. “Things are hard at the moment.”

“Why? You like her, don’t you?”

“A lot,” he admitted. “More than I expected to.” *More than I wanted to, I think.*

“Does she like you?”

“I’m pretty sure she does.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“We agreed that we were just going to have a casual relationship,” he said. “We both said we weren’t ready for anything serious.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Bev said. “Casual dating is fun.”

“Right, but...”

She eyed him shrewdly. “But now you do want something serious.”

Shaun opened his mouth automatically to protest...but then he hesitated.

Do I?

He hadn’t thought about it in those terms. But how much easier would life be if he could call Chloe his girlfriend? If they didn’t have to pretend at work that they hardly spoke to each other? If he could be close with her in front of his brother?

Maybe I’m just thinking that I want that because it would be more convenient. And that isn’t a good reason.

But it wouldn’t be more convenient. It wouldn’t be convenient to have to go back to Chloe and explain that even though they’d told each other differently, he actually did want a relationship now. It wouldn’t be convenient to have to disclose the true nature of their relationship at the office. It certainly wouldn’t be convenient to be in a brand-new relationship with the woman he was living with—what if something went wrong?

“I haven’t done this in a long time,” he admitted. “I guess I don’t really know what I want.”

“You should talk to her about it,” Bev suggested.

“No, I shouldn’t,” Shaun said. “We agreed that it wouldn’t be anything serious. If I tell her I’m thinking like this, it’ll probably just upset her.”

“She might be where you are,” Bev said. “She might be thinking the same things you are, and be too nervous to bring it up, just like you.”

“Not a chance,” Shaun said.

“How can you possibly know that?”

“For one thing, she just got out of a serious relationship,” Shaun said. “She warned me when we got into this thing that it wasn’t going to be anything serious. And I agreed. That was what I wanted too, at the time. It wouldn’t be fair for me to change the terms of our arrangement now.”

“But you’ve changed your mind,” Bev said. “Maybe she has too.”

“I don’t think so. She’s been avoiding me lately,” Shaun said. “If anything, it makes me wonder whether she’s picked up on how I feel and is trying to distance herself.”

Bev sighed and picked at her salad. “Relationships are hard,” she said.

“You’re not kidding,” Shaun agreed.



The talk with Bev had been nice, but it hadn’t solved anything. And the day didn’t get any easier from there.

Shaun was called to consult on a patient who had been in and out of the hospital several times without seeing any improvement in his condition. He didn’t realize until he got to the man’s room that the patient was one of Chloe’s. She was already there when he arrived, standing awkwardly in the

corner and staring at her clipboard as though afraid to make eye contact with him.

Shaun took the chart from the foot of the bed. “What seems to be the problem?” he asked, making sure to keep a respectable distance between Chloe and himself.

“I’m not sure,” Chloe said. “The same symptoms are presenting repeatedly. Antibiotics help, but then as soon as he finishes them, the symptoms return.”

“I’ll order some tests,” Shaun said. They were probably looking for an immune disorder, and if they could find it, they’d be able to drastically improve the patient’s quality of life. It was good to find himself faced with a problem he knew how to solve.

He made a few notes on the chart and hung it back up, then went out to the nurse’s station to put in the order for the tests he would need.

He was only a few steps out of the room, though, when he heard the sound of footsteps chasing after him. He turned to see Chloe pulling the door closed behind her.

“Can we talk?” she asked, her voice low.

Could they *talk*? What was there to say?”

He thought back to his conversation with Bev. Bev had encouraged him to talk to her—but Shaun had been sure Chloe wouldn’t want *that* conversation. She had been perfectly clear with him about not wanting a relationship.

Shaun couldn’t believe *he* even wanted a relationship.

What am I thinking? I don’t want one.

He was lonely. That was all. It had been so long since Rosemary, so long since he had felt like a part of anything. Of course he was having trouble turning away from this thing with Chloe. Of course he felt like he couldn’t say no to her.

“This isn’t really the best time to talk,” he said.

She stared at him. “About *Mr. Collins*.”

“Who?”

“The patient, Doctor Marlow.” She stressed his title.

Shaun was immediately abashed. How could he have assumed that she wanted to talk about the possibility of a relationship? They were at work. Of course work was what she wanted to talk about.

He had let his feelings for her go much too far if they were affecting the way he did his job.

It doesn't matter if I'm interested in her romantically or not. I have to pull away from this, for both of our sakes! He had to be able to carry on a professional conversation, and if he was losing the ability to do that, they had a serious problem.

He walked over to one of the racks mounted on the wall that held patient test results, hoping that Chloe would follow him. She did. Shaun took down one of the clipboards and pretended to examine it.

When he had composed himself, he looked up at her. “What about Mr. Collins?”

“I think you should test him for Sjögren syndrome,” she said.

“You know that’s more common in women, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I know,” she said. “That’s why I think it’s been overlooked. But he does have some of the indicators.”

“Like what?”

“Dry eyes,” she said. “He mentioned it in passing—I wouldn’t have thought to ask on my own. But once he said it, I decided to see if it might be related to the rest of his symptoms.”

Shaun nodded. “I’ll test for it,” he said. He wouldn’t have thought of Sjögren syndrome on his own, and he was impressed that she had.

For a moment, their eyes met, and he thought about asking her to come out for coffee after their shift ended. Maybe it would make sense to talk about everything that was going on between them after all.

But in the end, he just couldn’t take the risk. He couldn’t put himself out there like that and risk getting turned down—not

when something like that would completely destroy the working relationship they were still trying so hard to build. Not when he was finally beginning to see the potential she had, the great doctor she could be.

It wasn't worth giving this up to pursue a romantic relationship that probably wasn't going to go anywhere.

Maybe it was for the best that Matt had arrived in town when he had.

I never thought I would be grateful to my freeloading brother for taking advantage of my hospitality!

But maybe Matt's being here was serving a purpose. Shaun had allowed himself to get far too caught up in things with Chloe. He had forgotten all about the serious, steady person he took pride in being. Now here he was, walking around the hospital obsessing about one of his residents. He had almost missed a key diagnostic detail because his head was so in the clouds. That was unforgivable.

It was time to distance himself from Chloe. As much as he hated the idea, he was going to have to cool things down—at least until Matt left his house.

The break would do them good. And when Matt left—he hoped—they could pick things up again, and his head would be on a little straighter.

CHAPTER 15

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CHLOE



Things were definitely starting to get uncomfortable between Chloe and Shaun. It was becoming impossible for her to ignore the way he acted toward her.

She'd gotten used to having dinner with him every night, but now he had started taking his meals in his bedroom. She'd hear the sound of the TV through his closed door when she walked by, letting her know that he was watching basketball games without her. Although there had been a time not long ago when Chloe hadn't cared at all about basketball, she found herself missing the games now. She went to her own bedroom and turned them on the TV in there, keeping the sound on mute, afraid to let him know what she was doing for reasons she couldn't explain.

After a few days, she realized she wasn't even watching the games. It was just a way to feel as if they were doing something together, even though they never did anymore.

She hadn't been able to bring herself to stop making dinner every night.

"You don't have to cook," Shaun said. "We can fend for ourselves."

But the idea of letting go of the cooking routine she'd developed felt too sad. "I don't mind," she said. And then, in case he was thinking of pushing back, she added, "I have to eat anyway."

"Let her cook," Matt said. He'd wandered into the kitchen while they were talking. "She makes good food. We appreciate

you, Chloe.”

“You should get your own food and stop eating hers,” Shaun said. “Or at least start paying for groceries around here.”

“No, it’s fine,” Chloe said hurriedly. She and Shaun had started combining their weekly grocery budget—she added items to his list, and when he ordered online he gave her the receipt so that she could put in for the things she’d requested. It was a good system, one that made her happy. But more to the point, they had lost so much lately that she didn’t want Shaun to start looking too closely at one of the few things that still tied them together. She lived in fear that the connection they’d been building would unravel completely. “I like cooking. I don’t mind doing our dinners.”

“Are you sure?” Shaun asked. “You really don’t have to.”

“Hey, she said she wants to,” Matt said. “Don’t wreck a good thing, bro.”

But if Chloe was honest with herself, the reason she wanted to keep cooking was that she hoped she could somehow resurrect those early days, when her food had pulled Shaun closer to her. When they had bonded every night over dinner.

That wasn’t happening anymore—and she was no longer sure that Matt’s presence was the only reason.

How hard would it have really been for the two of them to find some time to be together? They worked together. They were together all day. They couldn’t let themselves get physical at the hospital, of course, but they could have had lunch together sometimes. More than once, Chloe saw Shaun eating with one of the other residents. It wouldn’t have drawn any suspicion if he’d shared a meal with her. But he never did, and she was too nervous to be the one to ask him. She could feel the way he was pulling back from her.

We said all along that this wasn’t going to be a relationship. He’s not doing anything beyond what we agreed on. Of course he isn’t going to start taking me on dates, now that Matt is getting in the way of our casual hookups.

But she hadn't realized how much she was growing attached to the rest of their bond. It wasn't just the physical side of things she was missing. It was the time they had spent together. He was the closest friend she had in St. Louis.

The realization made her feel very lonely.

She started to put away the dinner she'd been preparing. "Actually," she said, "I'm not sure I do feel like cooking tonight. Are you guys fine ordering in?"

Matt groaned. "You ruined it, Shaun."

Shaun was looking at her closely. "That's fine," he said. "Italian?"

"Yeah, if that's good with you."

"Why don't you write down what you want, and I'll put the order in?"

Chloe grabbed the notepad they used to write down their grocery list, ripped off the second page, and scrawled a couple of items she remembered from the Italian food menu. The truth was that she didn't much care what she got. She just wanted the chance to spend the night out of this kitchen. If she was being honest, she wanted the chance to feel sorry for herself a little bit.

Shaun took the paper. "I'll place the order."

"Can you text me or something when it gets here?" she asked. "I'm going to go watch TV for a while."

"Sure," Shaun said. "That's fine, I'll send you a text and you can come down for it."

She nodded. "Thanks, Shaun."

"No problem."

There was definitely something in the way he was looking at her, and she wasn't sure exactly what it was. She was fairly certain that he could tell she was upset.

But if he could, he didn't say anything. He didn't try to follow her or find out what was wrong. He just let her walk away.



“All right, back up,” Helen said. “You didn’t tell me about *any* of this.”

“I didn’t tell anybody about it,” Chloe said. She didn’t think she was in danger of Shaun or Matt overhearing the phone call, but she kept her voice down all the same. “Nobody knows.”

“I mean, I knew you were staying with someone from work, but you didn’t tell me it was your attending physician!”

“Would you have told me not to do it?”

“I don’t know,” Helen admitted. “I might have. I mean, you told me you and he didn’t really hit it off.”

“We didn’t. At first. I don’t know. Things changed.”

“I’ll say they did. You’ve been sleeping with him? How long has that been going on?”

“Only a few weeks. It’s really not that big a deal.”

“It’s a pretty big deal,” Helen countered. “Not least because you didn’t feel like you could tell me about it.”

“Well, it was just a casual thing, so we agreed we would keep it a secret.”

“That doesn’t make sense, though,” Helen said. “If it’s casual, why should you keep it a secret? What are you protecting by doing that? Keeping secrets is for when you’re serious about someone.”

“No, we had to keep it to ourselves,” Chloe said. “It would have looked bad for both of us if people at the hospital found out what was going on.”

“Right, so that’s why you don’t tell them at the hospital. It doesn’t explain why you wouldn’t have told *me*. I don’t even know anyone at your hospital.” Helen paused for a moment. “Are you embarrassed of him? Is that what it is?”

“No! Not at all!”

“He’s not, you know, goofy-looking or something?”

“Helen.” Chloe laughed. It was a relief to laugh about this. “He’s very sexy. He’s tall, and he’s got movie-star hair, and these *hands*—”

“Okay, okay.” Helen chuckled. “You can send me a picture sometime. But if it’s not about looks, what is it? What made you keep him a secret?”

“I don’t know,” Chloe admitted. “Maybe it’s just that I don’t think I would have known how to explain it all. What he meant to me.”

Helen’s voice softened. “You’re telling me that he does mean something to you. That it isn’t just casual.”

Chloe groaned. “I don’t know. I really didn’t set out to get into a relationship. I would have said it was the last thing I wanted.”

“You can’t always see these things coming, though,” Helen said. “Maybe you didn’t start out wanting a relationship, but now that you’ve gotten to know him better, you’re changing your mind.”

“I shouldn’t change my mind. We still work together. It’s still a bad idea for all the same reasons. And I just got out of a terrible relationship.”

“I know you did, but this isn’t the same guy. You never intended to stay single forever, right? So you found the next one more quickly than you thought you would. I don’t think you should hold back from him because you’re afraid.”

“He doesn’t want a relationship either, Helen. Besides, you heard what I just told you, right? He’s been keeping his distance lately.”

“Well, I think you should talk to him about that. Find out why he’s been doing it. You did say his brother was in town. Maybe that’s the only reason he’s acting differently now.”

“Yeah, maybe...but maybe it’s just that he’s tired of things between us. What if I try to talk to him about this and it just

makes things horrible and awkward? I do still have to work with the guy.”

“Honestly, Chloe,” Helen said, “it sounds to me like things are pretty awkward already.”

Chloe laughed humorlessly. “That’s true,” she admitted. “It’s definitely gotten uncomfortable.”

“So talk to him. At least then you’ll know. And if he really isn’t interested in continuing this little dalliance, if this is his way of backing away from you—I mean, at least you’ll know. Wouldn’t you rather know than to be stuck wondering about it?”

“I have no idea,” Chloe admitted.

“You would,” Helen assured her. “Trust me. You’ll feel much better once you’ve got this resolved. Promise me you’ll talk to him. I know it’s hard, but it’s got to be done.”

“I don’t know what I would do without you,” Chloe said.

“Oh, you’d be fine,” Helen said with a laugh. “You’re a lot tougher than you give yourself credit for, Chloe. But you need a push right now, and that’s what I’m here for.”

Chloe heard the sound of the doorbell. “I think our dinner is here,” she said.

“You’re having dinner together? That’s a start.”

“I wish,” Chloe said. “No, we’re just having takeout from the same place.”

“Well, take it as an opportunity. Sit down with him.”

“All right.” Chloe took a deep breath. “It’s a scary idea, but I think you’re right. It’s got to be done, or I’m going to keep driving myself crazy about it.”

“And let me know how it goes,” Helen said. “Call me. You’ve been much too distant lately.”

Chloe laughed. “I’ll call you,” she said. “Or we’ll get drinks sometime soon, if you’re up for it?”

“Yeah, that sounds great,” Helen said warmly. “I’ll look forward to it.”

They hung up. Chloe lingered on the edge of her bed for a moment, putting off the inevitable, but then she got to her feet and went down the stairs toward the kitchen.

Sure enough, the food had arrived. She could hear the sound of plastic bags and styrofoam cartons being unpacked from the hallway outside. She was about to go into the kitchen, claim her meal and maybe ask Shaun if they could sit outside and talk, when she heard Matt’s voice.

“So have you two always been that deeply weird with each other?” he asked.

“We’re not weird,” Shaun said.

“Come on. You act like you can hardly stand being in the same room together. I’m not as stupid as you think I am, you know.”

“We work together all day,” Shaun said. “Maybe we’re just a little tired of each other by the time we get home.”

“Well, you’d think you would have thought of that before you asked her to move in.”

“Yes,” Shaun said rather wearily. “I guess you’d think I would have.”

“So you don’t have a thing for her?”

“What on earth would make you think that?”

“I don’t know, man. I’ve known you for a long time. Whenever you were awkward around a girl when we were younger, it usually meant you had the hots for her.”

“Right, well, I was also a teenager back then,” Shaun said. “Times change.”

“And there’s the fact that you told me not to go for her.”

“Yes, but that was just because I don’t need one of my residents having an emotional breakdown after being played by my brother. I know how you treat women.”

“I don’t know,” Matt said. “You look to me like you’re into her.”

“Well, I’m not. You couldn’t be more wrong. Come on, Matt. You know she’s not my usual type.”

Chloe felt her heart begin to race. She wasn’t his usual type? What did that mean? What was wrong with her? What *was* his usual type?

“That’s true,” Matt said. “I mean, she did seem like a weird choice for you. I definitely had some questions.”

“Consider them answered,” Shaun said dryly. “I’m not involved with Chloe. Trust me. There’s no way. She’s not for me.”

Chloe wanted to evaporate on the spot. To think she had been on the verge of walking in there and asking him to talk about their relationship! She couldn’t possibly face him now.

She turned and ran back up to her bedroom, moving as quietly as she could. On the second-floor landing, she felt her phone buzz—it was the text from Shaun telling her that the food had arrived. But she had lost her appetite and no longer had any interest in the meal.

CHAPTER 16

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CHLOE



“So you’re saying you found a new place,” Shaun said slowly. “And you’re moving out—tomorrow?”

“That’s right.” Chloe had decided to have this conversation with him in the car on the way home from the hospital so that they could talk without having to worry about being interrupted by Matt. She hadn’t accounted for the fact that Shaun would pull over to the side of the road to give her his full attention. Now she wanted nothing more than to get back to his house, get out of the car, and start packing, but of course, that wasn’t an option. She was stuck here until he decided to get them moving again.

“Well, that’s sudden,” Shaun said.

“We always knew our situation was temporary,” she said. “We always knew it was only until I was able to find a place of my own. I didn’t expect it to happen this quickly either, but this is good news, right?”

“Where is this apartment?”

“Does that matter?”

“You don’t know the city as well as I do. That hotel you were in was shady, and I don’t want you putting yourself in another bad situation because you feel pressured to get out of my house.”

“I’m not feeling pressured,” Chloe lied. The truth was that of course she felt pressured. After what she had heard Shaun and Matt saying about her last night, there was no way she could stay in that house, especially since she had really been

growing to care for Shaun. She realized now that she had been careless with her own heart. She should never have allowed herself to get attached, and she needed to get out of that situation as soon as she could.

The time had come, for better or worse, to swallow her pride and go sleep on Helen's couch.

Helen had been very understanding about it. She hadn't even forced Chloe to talk about what had happened to make her want to move out so quickly. Chloe thought her friend could probably guess what it had been. Helen was old enough to have seen this sort of thing play out a few times.

At least she's not trying to tell me it's for the best that I know the truth.

It probably *was* for the best. Better that Chloe know now than try to go on sneaking around with a man who didn't actually give a damn about her and letting her feelings grow.

"Just tell me you're moving somewhere safe," Shaun said.

"It's perfectly safe," Chloe insisted, knowing that it was true. She had looked into the safety of Helen's neighborhood back when she had believed that she would actually be living there. And besides, she would be living with a roommate now. What could be safer?

"I don't know," Shaun said. "This just all seems so rushed. Wouldn't you rather stay for a few more nights? You could move out next weekend."

"No, I should do it now," Chloe said. "Tomorrow's my day off, so it's really the perfect time."

"But I don't have tomorrow off," Shaun protested. "I won't be able to help you."

"That's okay," Chloe told him. "I really don't need any help."

"So I'll just go to work and you'll be gone by the time I get home?"

"Don't worry. I'll clean up the guest room on my way out."

"That wasn't—I'm not worried about *that*, Chloe."

“This will be a good thing,” she told him. “Now Matt can move into the guest bedroom like he wanted to. I know that wasn’t your first choice, having him in that room, but you’re not enjoying having him living out of the den either.”

“Is that what this is about?” Shaun asked. “Are you leaving because of Matt? Because you were there first, and I never meant for him to stay this long. If he’s causing problems, he ought to be the one to go, not you.”

“It’s not because of Matt,” Chloe said. *It’s because of you, Shaun. It’s because you mean more to me than I ever meant to you, and now that I know that, there’s no way I can ride to work with you every day and eat dinner at your table every night.*

Honestly, seeing him at work was going to be hard enough after what she had overheard.

Shaun bit his lip. “Chloe,” he said. “I know we never meant to live together long-term. There...there are a lot of things we never meant to happen.”

He was going to tell her he regretted the fact that they’d ever slept together.

No.

She couldn’t stand to hear it. After the conversation she had heard last night, it would be more than she could stand. She had to be the one to say it first.

“I was thinking about that too,” she said. “We haven’t been very careful, you and I. And I know you agree. We’re colleagues, after all, and we should have remembered that our professional relationship comes before anything else.”

“Do you think so?”

It was relief she saw on his face. She was sure of it. “Oh, yes,” she said. “We’ve let ourselves get much too close on a personal level, and it’s a mistake. I think we need to reestablish appropriate boundaries.”

“Meaning what?” He was watching her closely.

“Meaning we go back to being colleagues and nothing more,” she said. “No more sneaking off and fooling around. No more touching when we think nobody is watching. No more sex. None of it. I don’t think it’s too late to salvage our professional relationship, but we need to be more responsible than we have been.”

“You know how you sound, don’t you?” Shaun asked.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You sound like me,” he said.

“Do I?”

“That’s exactly the kind of thing I would have said to you when you first came to St. Louis.”

“Well, I should have listened,” Chloe said. “I should have kept things more professional than I did.”

He glanced at her. “You regret what happened?”

I know you do. “I’m just saying it’ll be for the best if we keep things professional from now on. Don’t you think so?”

He nodded slowly. “That makes sense to me, I suppose,” he said. “You’re right. We work together, and that’s what’s most important.”

Chloe’s heart sank. She realized that a part of her had genuinely hoped Shaun would put up a fight here. She had hoped he would tell her that this wasn’t what he wanted, and that he would rather have her stay. That he would tell her, if it was between going back to having just a professional relationship or taking what they had to the next level, he would rather see what there was to be explored.

But he had meant what he’d said to Matt. It was obvious now. He *wasn’t* interested in her like that. He never had been, and he never would be.

“We should go home,” she said, anxious to get out of the car. “I need to start packing so I can get out tomorrow morning.”

“Bright and early, huh?”

“Well, why put it off?” she asked. “You’ll be going to work first thing.”

“That’s true. I guess you’re not going to want to hang around and spend the day with Matt.” He started the car and pulled away from the shoulder. “All right,” he said. “You’re right. We’d better just...get home.”



The rest of the day was tense.

Chloe kept to her room as much as she could, grateful for the fact that she hadn’t allowed her possessions to end up strewn around the house. It took a surprisingly short time to pack. In the end, she sat staring at the suitcase on her bed, feeling as if it didn’t make sense for everything that had happened since she’d arrived at Shaun’s house to now be so neatly packed away. Surely they must have left more of an impact on each other than this?

But no. That was why she was leaving, really, wasn’t it? She had realized, now, that they hadn’t impacted each other that much at all. That there was nothing he was going to hold on to once she was out of his home and his life. She would be extracted cleanly, surgically, and it would be as if they had never gotten close.

It’s for the best. We’ll be able to move on. That’s what both of us need.

Eventually, there was a knock on her bedroom door. Was it Shaun, coming to talk about things? To say goodbye?

No. When she opened the door, she found Matt standing there. “We’re ordering Chinese food,” he said. “Do you want anything?”

She nodded. “Do you have a menu?”

He handed her his phone, which had the order open already. “Add whatever you want to the cart,” he said. “Shaun is buying tonight.”

Chloe was inclined to say no, that she didn't want Shaun to buy her dinner and that she could buy it for herself. But there was no point in making a fuss about it. Let him pay if he wanted to. It wasn't as if she hadn't already accepted far too much of his generosity for her own good.

I should never have come to live here.

She put fried rice and kung pao chicken on the order and handed the phone back to Matt. "Thanks for bringing this up," she said.

"No trouble." He looked at her appraisingly. "Did you and Shaun have a fight or something?"

"What makes you think that?"

"I don't know," Matt said. "You're moving out so suddenly. It's obvious to me that my brother wasn't expecting that."

"He was expecting me to move out," Chloe countered. "We just didn't know when I'd find a place to live. But now I've found one."

"Well, that's convenient," Matt said.

"That's right," Chloe said. "I guess you'll be moving into this room tomorrow. Don't worry, I'll make sure it's nice and clean for you. You'll never know I was here."

Matt frowned. "Are you sure you didn't have a fight?"

"I told you we hadn't."

"I know, but he's definitely acting weird. It's hard to believe nothing at all happened to make him behave that way."

"You'll have to take that up with him," Chloe said. "Listen, can you have him text me when the food arrives? I'm still packing, and I think I'm going to eat up here so I don't need to stop."

"It looks like you're done packing," Matt observed.

"I have things left to do," Chloe said, although Matt was right—she *was* finished, and she didn't need to do anything else. The truth was that she just didn't want to go downstairs and spend an awkward meal at the table with the two of them.

Matt shrugged. “If that’s what you want,” he said. “I’ll let Shaun know.”

“Thanks, Matt.”

“No problem.”

“Listen,” she said. “It was nice meeting you.” To her surprise, she found that she meant it. Matt was difficult, and she imagined that having him as a sibling was a headache, especially for someone of Shaun’s serious nature—but she had grown to enjoy him in spite of herself. Getting to know him was something she *wouldn’t* regret from this whole experience.

“Can I be honest with you?” Matt asked.

“Please.”

“I don’t know what’s going on with you and Shaun,” Matt said.

Yes you do. I heard you two talking about it. “Nothing is going on.”

“Maybe. But I do know that he’s been more relaxed lately than I’ve ever seen him. Having you here has been a good influence on him. And now that you’re leaving—well, I just hope I don’t see him turn back into the rigid, uptight person he used to be.”

“Maybe he has a good reason for being that way,” Chloe said.

“Meaning what?”

“He told me about what happened to his wife,” Chloe said. “Something like that would have a lasting effect on a man. I’m not surprised it’s changed him.”

“He told you about Rosemary?”

“He had to talk to *someone*.”

“Someone, yes. You?”

“Who was he supposed to talk to?” Chloe asked. “He told me you were hardly around when it happened.”

Matt raised his eyebrows, clearly surprised by her boldness.

Chloe was surprised herself. She regretted what she’d said. “Listen, I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s not any of my business what

happened between you and your brother.”

“But that’s what he told you? That I wasn’t there for him when Rosemary died?”

Chloe was now heartily wishing she had left the subject alone. “I don’t know,” she said. “It’s between you and him. And I really have to pack.”

Matt said nothing.

Chloe eased the door closed and leaned against it, her heart hammering as if she had just run a marathon. She had known it would be difficult to move out the way she was and leave Shaun behind, but she hadn’t expected a confrontation with Matt.

At least this will all be over soon.

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CHAPTER 17

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SHAUN



The following work day seemed to go by in a blur. All too soon, it was time for Shaun to go home—and he knew what he would find when he got there.

It seemed fitting in a way that today had been Chloe’s day off and that she hadn’t been at the hospital either. It felt as if she had carved herself out of his life completely. Of course, he knew it wasn’t so—she still worked at the hospital, and he would see her there tomorrow. It would be as if nothing had happened.

Except...of course it wouldn’t be like that. Too much had happened.

He felt a strange, foolish sense of hope as he opened the front door of his house. Perhaps she would have changed her mind and decided to stay.

But no. As soon as he stepped into the kitchen, he could feel the difference. The house was quieter. Emptier. Colder, somehow. He could hear the sound of the TV coming from the den—Matt was still here—but it felt as though the life had gone out of the place.

He wasn’t in the mood to spend time with his brother, but as he walked past the den, Matt called out to him. “Shaun, come in here!”

Thinking it would be quicker to go in and see what Matt wanted than to have an argument about it, Shaun went into the den.

“Sit down,” Matt said, pointing to a chair.

“I don’t want to watch the game, Matt,” Shaun said, glancing at the basketball game on TV. It was strange. He’d never been one to pass up a good ball game. But he knew that watching now would only make him long for Chloe. Already, he missed watching with her. He missed how excited she got at big plays and how she yelled at the officials through the screen. Sitting quietly and watching a game now wouldn’t be half as much fun, and it would just make him miss her all the more.

Matt grabbed the remote and muted the TV. “Okay,” he said. “We won’t watch. But sit down and have a conversation with me, at least.”

Shaun raised his eyebrows. “You want to talk to me?”

“Is that really so hard to believe?”

“Honestly, yes, it is. I can’t remember the last time you tried to talk to me, Matt.”

“That’s a bit much. I talk to you all the time.”

“When you want something, maybe.”

Matt closed his eyes and took a breath. “Okay,” he said. “Maybe that’s fair.”

Shaun hadn’t expected that. He’d thought Matt would protest, or even laugh at the accusation. “You don’t disagree?”

“I don’t know,” Matt said. “That’s why I want to talk to you, to be honest. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about this.”

“Have you? Since when?”

“Will you please sit down so that we can have a real conversation?”

Shaun didn’t really want to. He wanted to be alone. But how often did his brother ask for a serious conversation, which seemed to be what he was after here? Shaun went into the den and took a seat.

“I was talking to Chloe last night,” Matt said.

Oh, please don’t let this be him trying to hook up with Chloe. Shaun knew he had no right to tell his brother not to do that—

particularly if Chloe had expressed any interest. But he thought it might kill him to have to watch.

But that didn't seem to be the direction Matt was going with this. "She brought up Rosemary," he said. "I didn't realize you had told her about that."

"What about it?" Shaun *definitely* wasn't in the mood to talk about Rosemary, and especially not to his brother.

"She kind of called me out, to be honest with you," Matt said. "She told me I hadn't been there for you when Rosemary died."

Shaun was stunned. "She said that?"

"Is it true?" Matt asked.

"Well..."

"Tell me straight, Shaun. I'm asking."

"It wasn't just you," Shaun said uncomfortably. "No one was really around after that happened. I don't think people knew how to handle it."

"But I'm your brother," Matt said. "I should have been there for you. More than anyone else, I owed you that."

He wasn't wrong. Shaun had often felt that way, and it had been hard for him to stop being angry about his brother's selfishness back then. In fact, he wasn't sure he had gotten over that anger.

"You never would have said anything," Matt said. "You never would have called me out about it or brought it to my attention. So she did it for you."

"I didn't mean for her to say that to you," Shaun said.

"But it's true, isn't it? I wasn't there for you." Matt didn't wait for an answer. "I'm really sorry, Shaun. You know I liked Rosemary. I was so cut up about it when she died, and I really didn't know what to say. And then I saw what you were going through—it wasn't as if I didn't notice—but I had no idea how to help you. I think I pulled away because I thought there was

nothing I could do to make it any better. Not that that's any excuse for leaving you in pain."

"There wasn't anything you could have done," Shaun said, feeling a little surprised by this explanation. The fact that Matt had known what he was going through, that he had *wanted* to help but had felt overwhelmed by the task—that didn't make it all okay, but it was a lot more understandable than what Shaun had assumed. "I thought you just didn't care very much."

"Of course I cared," Matt said earnestly. "Shaun, if I had known what you needed, I would have done it. I should have tried harder. I should have done something, even though I didn't know what the right thing was."

Shaun nodded. "The fact is that nothing you could have done would have changed the fact that I had just lost my wife," he said. "Nothing was really going to make that any better. And I know how hard that is to face. I have to give people bad news at the hospital all the time. I used to worry about finding the right way to say it to make it easiest for them to hear, but of course there's no right way to tell someone their loved one has died. It doesn't matter how you say that. It's going to crush them."

Matt nodded. "I see what you mean."

"So no, you couldn't have made things any less horrible for me," Shaun said. "But having you around...it would have helped. Just to know that you were there. That you gave a damn. That I wasn't quite so alone. That was what I needed. I needed to have my brother with me."

"I let you down," Matt said. "I'm really sorry, Shaun. Honestly. I hope you can forgive me."

Shaun nodded. "I understand," he said. "It was a hard time. You didn't know what to do."

"I could have done better." Matt looked down at his hands, then looked back up at Shaun. "That's not the only thing I wanted to talk to you about, though."

"What else?"

"You told Chloe about Rosemary."

“I know I did.” What was Matt getting at?

“You never talk about her,” Matt said. “Not to anyone.”

“It’s a hard thing to talk about,” Shaun said.

“But you talked to Chloe about it.”

“Well, we’re friends.”

“Yeah. That’s another thing. You don’t really *have* friends.”

“Hey.”

“I’m not criticizing you,” Matt said. “But you’re not the most social guy in the world. You’re obsessed with your work. I’ve stayed with you more than once, and I never see you going out with people from work or having anyone over to watch the ball games. I was kind of shocked to find you with a roommate, honestly. It’s completely out of character for you.”

“Well, we bonded,” Shaun said. “She told me some things about her life too.”

“I get that,” Matt said. “You don’t need to defend yourself here. I think it’s a good thing. I just think it’s interesting, that’s all.”

“Interesting?”

“You confided in her,” Matt said. “That’s not really something you do. Until now, I mean. And then she used what you had told her to try to help you by talking to me—that’s big too, Shaun.”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at,” Shaun said.

“I’m saying you care about her,” Matt said. “I think you might be in love with her.”

Shaun frowned. “Did you miss the fact that she just moved out?”

“No,” Matt said. “Did you ask her to stay?”

“I told her there was no rush.”

Matt shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “I think she cares about you too. The way she talked to me about

Rosemary—I can't imagine anyone making that effort for someone they didn't love."

"She doesn't love me," Shaun said.

He didn't want to give his brother all the details. But it was obvious to him that Matt's analysis wasn't right. Chloe had just finished telling him that she didn't want their relationship to continue on as it had been. She wanted less from him, not more.

"I told you it wasn't like that between the two of us," Shaun told his brother. "We talked about this the other day, remember?"

"I remember. But you were lying," Matt said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Honestly, I think you're even lying to yourself about this," Matt said. "It's obvious to me that there's something between the two of you. I don't know why you don't want to admit it. But you should look at it more closely, because it's been years since I've seen you form a real human connection with anyone, and I hate to see you throw that away."

"I'm not throwing anything away."

Matt sighed. "You don't have to listen to me," he said. "But I'm your brother, Shaun. I know you and I haven't been close lately, but I know you better than anybody. You've been lonely since you lost Rosemary, and I think you're afraid to let yourself love someone new, but you shouldn't let her get away."

Shaun got to his feet. He didn't want to discuss this anymore. What was the point? Even if Matt was right, it didn't matter now. Chloe didn't want to be with him. She'd moved out. She'd made her decision clear.

"I'm going to take my dinner upstairs," he said.

"Shaun, don't," Matt said. "I knew you would do this."

"You knew I would do what?"

“Pull away if I tried to talk to you. You always do. You shut down when things get too heavy.”

“You don’t think I can handle heavy things? I handle heavy things at work every day.”

“I know you do,” Matt said. “In your career, that’s all you do. Maybe that’s why it’s so hard for you to do it in your personal life.”

“Is that really what you think?”

Matt shrugged. “All I know is that you shut down when serious things come up,” he said. “You know...I know I wasn’t there for you when Rosemary died. I acknowledge that. And I know you don’t like that I keep turning to you when my life starts to fall apart, and maybe I shouldn’t. But you’ve never asked me *why* I have so much trouble holding down a job. You’ve never tried to help me with that.”

Shaun felt a surge of shame. “I didn’t realize that was something you wanted me to do,” he said. “You never asked.”

“I know,” Matt said. “It would have been too difficult, trying to explain to you the way sometimes my mental health gets the better of me...”

“I’m a doctor, Matt. I would have understood that.” Shaun sighed. “You and I need to do a better job of supporting each other, don’t we?”

“Call Chloe,” Matt said firmly.

“No. You’re wrong about that one.”

“I’m not,” Matt said. “I don’t know why you can’t see it, but you two are perfect for each other.”

“It’s not what she wants, Matt.”

“But it is what you want, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Shaun admitted. “But I don’t think it does me any good to dwell on it, knowing that it’s something I can never have.”

“I still think you should talk to her,” Matt said. “Have you told her how you feel?”

“I can’t afford to do that,” Shaun said. “Even if you were right, even if I felt everything you’re saying—we work together. I can’t let anything get in the way of our ability to do our jobs.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Matt said reluctantly. “But I don’t like to see you missing such a good opportunity, Shaun. You deserve to have something good happen to you.”

Shaun, who had never realized his brother felt that way, was lost for words. He left the den, his mind full of everything Matt had said, half wishing he could throw caution to the wind and confess his feelings to Chloe.

But she had told him she didn’t want to be with him. He couldn’t push it.

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CHAPTER 18

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CHLOE



Don't be a coward. Just walk in there and deal with it. You know that's what has to be done.

Chloe took a deep breath and pushed through the doors of the hospital. She had arrived in plenty of time—the last thing she wanted was to give Shaun an excuse to call her out for being late today. She knew how he could be. He was unhappy with her about the way she'd left, and he'd probably relish the opportunity to show her that her absence didn't matter to him.

She wanted to show him the same thing. She wanted him to see that it didn't matter to her what he thought of her, that the things he had said to Matt about her didn't hurt her at all. Of course, he didn't know she had overheard that conversation, but she couldn't stand the idea of him walking around thinking she was in any way sad about him.

I'm not sad about him. I don't care about him.

One day, she would manage to believe that was true. But for now, convincing him would be enough.

So she went straight to the nurses' station for the morning meeting, not bothering to stop in the staff room for a cup of coffee. She had told him they were to be coworkers and nothing else so now that was all he was going to see from her. Absolute professionalism.

When she reached the group, though, she found an unfamiliar woman in a white lab coat standing at the head.

She found her way to Megan. "Who's this?" she murmured.

“New attending,” Megan said.

“New attending? What happened to Doctor Marlow?”

“No idea,” Megan said. “Some people are saying he was transferred to another hospital. Some people think he’s still here, but in another ward.”

“Did anyone know he was leaving?” Chloe felt nauseous. “No one told me.”

“Well, they wouldn’t go out of their way to tell his newest resident, would they?” Megan asked. “But I don’t think anybody knew. The nurses don’t even seem to know what’s going on, and they know *everything*.”

Chloe took a deep breath. She was shocked. “Do we know—is he coming back?”

“I mean, if he transferred, he probably isn’t.” Megan looked at her. “Are you all right, Chloe? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“No, I’m fine,” Chloe said quickly. “I’m surprised, that’s all.”

“Well, understandably,” Megan said. “I don’t think anybody saw this coming. It’s strange. The man’s practically an institution around here. No one thought he’d ever leave. And then we show up today and he’s just...gone.”

Chloe nodded.

Could he have left because of me?

That seemed ridiculous. She knew she hadn’t affected him that deeply. She couldn’t have made him want to change his career substantially. Not Shaun, to whom career was everything in the world.

But then what could have happened? What could have pulled him away?

“May I have your attention?” the new attending said, putting down the clipboard she was holding. She faced the residents directly. “My name is Doctor Amanda Haverty and I’ll be serving as your attending physician. I’ve worked very closely with Doctor Marlow in the past and I’m familiar with the way

he ran things on this ward. I don't feel the need to make a lot of changes. I'm sure you all have ways you're accustomed to doing things. So I'd like to take a lot of my lead from all of you as we get used to working together. You can show me the ropes and I'll learn how things are done around here. How does that sound?"

There was a murmur of agreement from the assembled group.

"All right, then," Doctor Haverty said. "I'll be popping in on each of you throughout the day so I can learn a little more about you, so be expecting that. Otherwise, why don't you go about your business as normal."

But there was nothing normal about this day. It was impossible for Chloe to pretend that she wasn't acutely aware of the thing that was different at every turn.

Shaun's presence was a gaping hole in the workplace environment.

It has to be because of me, she thought miserably as she approached her first patient's room and picked up the chart on the door. Nothing else is different. And he was happy here. It's not as if he was looking for something else and an opportunity opened up. He wasn't moving on to a job he really wanted. He was leaving this one. And I'm the only reason he could possibly have wanted to leave.

She felt massively guilty. He had told her from the start how important it was to him to keep things professional. She hadn't listened. If only she had! Maybe none of this would ever have happened.

But is that really what I want? For none of it to have happened? Would that really be better?

If she was really honest with herself, she didn't think so. She was *glad* she'd had the opportunity to get close with Shaun... even though it had ended badly.

And maybe it was for the best that he was no longer in this wing of the hospital. She was sorry he'd felt the need to leave because of her, but the two of them had tried to work here together and it definitely hadn't been anything she would

consider a success. They couldn't afford the temptation of seeing each other in close quarters and dark rooms. Having this distance between them—it was definitely what was best.

Resolved to stop worrying about it, she went into the room.

It was occupied by a patient she had never dealt with before, an elderly woman who squinted up at her in confusion. "You're not Doctor Marlow."

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Martinez," Chloe said, consulting the chart quickly to get the woman's name. "My name is Doctor Austen."

"Well, Doctor Marlow is my doctor," Mrs. Martinez said rather huffily. "You can just go away and tell him to come in."

"I'm awfully sorry, Mrs. Martinez," Chloe said. "I'd get him for you if I could, but unfortunately, Doctor Marlow isn't working here anymore."

It felt strange saying it out loud. It felt as if she was making it real by speaking the words. For a moment, she wanted to take it back. But of course she couldn't do that. It was true whether she said it or not.

Mrs. Martinez narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean, he doesn't work here?" she demanded. "I just saw him yesterday, and he told me he was going to be my doctor. Why would he say such a thing if he wasn't going to be working here?"

"As I understand it, it was a last-minute decision," Chloe explained.

"Well, that doesn't make *any* sense," Mrs. Martinez snapped.

Though Chloe didn't much like being snapped at, she could empathize with what Mrs. Martinez must be feeling right now. She had thought she knew who would be taking care of her, and now she was having to cope with a change in what she had expected. Chloe thought it must be very similar to what she herself was feeling about Shaun's unexpected departure.

"I'm sorry," Chloe said. "I know this is frustrating, and I promise I'm more than qualified to give you the care you deserve. I've just been going over your chart here, and it looks

like you've been dealing with some headaches and chest pain?"

"That's right," Mrs. Martinez said, with a tone that seemed to ask, *what are you going to do about it?*

"I'm really sorry to hear that," Chloe said. "I'd like to run a few tests, if that's all right with you, and see if we can pin down the cause."

"Doctor Marlow *already* ran tests."

"I see that, and I have the results right here," Chloe said. "But the tests he started with aren't showing anything out of the ordinary, so I think the best thing to do is to try a few more tests."

"Will my insurance cover this?"

"I can definitely check on that before we start, if you'd like me to," Chloe said.

"Yes, you'd better," Mrs. Martinez said. "I know how you doctors are. I won't have you running up huge bills that I can't afford to pay by doing a bunch of unnecessary tests!"

"I assure you, Mrs. Martinez, that's not my intention," Chloe said. "But I'm happy to find out what your insurance will cover before we get started. Will that be all right?"

"Well, I suppose so," Mrs. Martinez said, sounding slightly mollified. "Just don't charge me for anything. That's all I ask."

Chloe nodded. "I'll go and see what I can find out for you."

She walked out of the room, shaking her head, filled with the frustrating urge to find Shaun and talk to him about the conversation she had just had. She knew Shaun would agree with her—they both thought it was awful to see patients put in a position of having to choose between good healthcare and saving money. It was probably the reason Shaun hadn't been exhaustive with the first tests he'd run. He would have hoped something would show up on those tests so that he wouldn't have to look any further.

It stunned her to realize that she knew exactly what he would have thought, what he would have said, without actually

needing to have the conversation with him. She hadn't realized that she knew him that well, but apparently she did.

He's the closest friend I have in St. Louis, she realized with a pang. And I've driven him away. I've ended that friendship because I couldn't stop myself from falling in love with him. I was careless—reckless—irresponsible—

She was so caught up in her own thoughts that she almost walked right into Megan.

“Hey,” Megan said, catching her by the shoulder. “You look like you're barely here today. Are you sick or something?”

“No,” Chloe said. “Just distracted.”

“Are you sure? You really do look pale, you know. And if you're sick, you should probably go home.”

Chloe shook her head. “I'm not sick,” she said. “I'm just thinking.”

“About Doctor Marlow?”

“Yeah. I know there's no point in it, but I keep trying to figure out what could have made him leave.”

Chloe was hoping that Megan would have some theory about it, something that she herself could latch on to. She wanted to believe that it hadn't been their relationship that had driven him away, and if Megan could think of something else that might have caused it, that would have made her feel infinitely better.

But Megan looked just as perplexed as Chloe felt. “I have no idea,” she said. “I really thought he liked this ward. I would never have expected him to leave. And I'm sure he wasn't fired. Someone would know if that had happened. The nurses *always* know when there's a scandal. Besides, Doctor Marlow was too good. Too well-liked. I can't imagine anyone letting him go voluntarily.”

Chloe nodded. “It doesn't make sense to me either.”

“But you two carpooled to work together, didn't you?”

Chloe and Shaun hadn't told anyone at the hospital that they were cohabitating, but it had been impossible to hide the fact that they arrived and left together every day, so they had allowed everyone to believe that they lived near each other and carpoled to work. No one had questioned it.

"We used to," Chloe said. "We stopped."

"You stopped? How come? Did he give you any reason?"

"No," Chloe said. "I was the one who told him I didn't want to, so it must be a coincidence."

"Because I was just thinking...if he was still working at the hospital, there'd be no reason he wouldn't be able to drive you. I thought that might be proof that he had gone somewhere else. But if you were the one who decided...you're right. That's probably just a coincidence. He could still be here. Actually, I'd say that means he probably is. He would have told you, right? If he couldn't drive you anymore?"

"I don't know," Chloe said. "It sounds like everything was decided really quickly. Maybe he didn't know he was leaving until after I told him I didn't want to ride together anymore."

"Why *did* you decide that, anyway?" Megan asked.

Chloe's heart pounded. She was getting dangerously close to letting Megan find out the truth about her relationship with Shaun.

What does it matter? He's gone. There's nothing left to protect. She might as well know.

But even though it would have felt good to open up to her friend, Chloe kept quiet. Shaun might have decided he didn't want her, but she couldn't help feeling a sense of loyalty to him.

Even now, she couldn't bring herself to betray his trust.

CHAPTER 19

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CHLOE



The next week had Chloe feeling as if she was walking through fog. Every day she arrived at the hospital half expecting to find that it had all been some sort of dream, that Shaun had never left. Maybe he would be angry with her, but if only he would be *there*...

But he never was. And as the days went by, it began to feel less and less likely—both to Chloe and to the other residents—that they would ever get an answer to the question of where he had gone.

Meanwhile, Chloe was beginning to wonder if she really might be sick. She was having trouble getting out of bed in the morning, waking up feeling exhausted each day. At first she wondered if it might not be some degree of depression—but could she really be depressed about Shaun’s absence? Disappointed and upset, certainly, but could it be affecting her that strongly?

“You really don’t look right,” Megan said one day over lunch.

“I don’t feel right,” Chloe agreed.

“You shouldn’t be coming in to work if you’re sick,” Megan said. “We have immunocompromised patients on the ward.”

“I know that,” Chloe said. “But...I don’t think I am sick. I don’t have a fever. I don’t have any real symptoms. I just feel...*off*.”

“Maybe it’s the stress of moving to a new city.”

“But that was months ago,” Chloe protested.

“These things can sometimes take a while to settle in,” Megan said wisely. “When I started working here after med school, it took me a *year* to start feeling normal.”

“A year?” Chloe asked anxiously. She couldn’t afford to go on feeling like this for a whole year.

“Oh, I’m sure it won’t be that bad for you,” Megan said. “I was a lot younger than you are now.”

“Not that much younger.”

“Well, it was my first job. This isn’t your first job. You’re going to have an easier time of it than I did. Look, maybe you’re just anemic or something. Are you eating enough protein?”

“I think so.” Chloe thought back over the past few days, but the truth was that she’d been so distracted lately that she couldn’t even say for certain what she’d had to eat for dinner each night.

Megan looked dubious. “I’m getting you some chicken,” she announced, getting up from the table.

“Aw, no, Megan, I already ate a salad. I’m really not hungry.”

“It didn’t have any protein on it. You have to listen to me about this because I’m a doctor,” Megan said firmly.

Chloe laughed. If nothing else, it did feel good to have someone looking out for her. “Okay,” she said. “You’re the boss.” She handed Megan her hospital meal card so that the chicken would at least be charged to her own account. “Get us each a slice of that cheesecake too, okay? On me.”

“Well, if you insist, I’m not going to argue,” Megan said with a grin, and disappeared up to the counter.



Chloe had a new patient that afternoon, a woman in her late twenties who had passed out at work.

“Kimberly Johanson?” she read off the chart.

The woman nodded, looking a little fearful. Chloe could empathize. It wasn't uncommon for people to feel edgy when they weren't used to being in the hospital, and she knew it would be part of her job to help put Kimberly at ease.

"How are you feeling now?" she asked.

"Still a little light-headed," Kimberly said. "I feel like I haven't had enough to eat—but I know I have."

"What did you have for dinner last night?"

"Pasta."

"Meat sauce?"

"Alfredo."

"And for breakfast this morning?"

"I had a bowl of cereal."

"You might just be low on iron," Chloe said, remembering what Megan had just said to her over lunch. "It doesn't sound like you've been getting a lot of that in your diet."

"Maybe," Kimberly said. "My boyfriend always says I need to eat more red meat, but I always kind of took that as a joke."

"If you're not getting enough iron, you might want to take him a little more seriously." Chloe smiled so that Kimberly would see that it was nothing to worry about. "It's a mistake we all make from time to time. I'll do some bloodwork, if that's all right, and that should give us our answer."

"You really think it's nothing to worry about?"

"Have you had any other symptoms?"

"Not really. I've been tired lately," Kimberly said. "But that seems like the same thing, doesn't it?"

"Yes, that would also point me towards low iron," Chloe said. "I'm willing to bet that's what the test will show. I'll have a nurse come in and do the blood draw in a few minutes, okay? And once I've got the results, I'll come back and we can talk about what you can do to help alleviate these symptoms."

Kimberly nodded, already looking more relaxed. “Thank you,” she said.

Chloe left the room and went down to the nurses’ station, scribbling the test order on her clipboard as she walked. How interesting that a patient should come in with the very same symptoms she herself had been having... But perhaps this was fate’s way of intervening, telling her that she needed to take better care of herself. Maybe this was a reminder that she needed to be more conscientious about getting her own vitamins. She hadn’t passed out at work yet, at least, but she certainly didn’t want anything like that to happen. She was glad she’d eaten that extra chicken over lunch—she *was* feeling a little better since then.

She flagged down one of the nurses and passed over Kimberly’s chart. “Standard blood panel,” she said, “but put a rush on it if you can. She’s antsy about being in the hospital, and I’d like to get her an answer as quickly as possible and hopefully get her on her way.”



Two hours later, the results of the bloodwork were back. Chloe found them in the paperwork slot outside Kimberly’s door and plucked them out, thinking she’d take them down to the staff room to review. It was always best not to look at test results for the first time right in front of the patient, just in case they showed something surprising.

But as Chloe walked toward the staff room, flipping through the chart and looking for the result she had expected, something surprising caught her eye.

I can’t believe I didn’t even think to ask her about this!

She turned and hurried back toward Kimberly’s room. Kimberly was waiting inside, flipping through a magazine, but she looked up when Chloe came into the room.

“Are the results back?” she asked, obviously trying to sound unconcerned.

“They are,” Chloe said. “Kimberly—are you aware that you’re pregnant?”

Kimberly’s jaw dropped. “I’m what?”

“You’re pregnant.” Chloe watched her closely. You never could tell whether something like this would be taken as good or bad news.

But a smile was spreading across Kimberly’s face. “Am I really? Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” Chloe said. “I take it you’re happy about this?”

“My boyfriend and I have always talked about having a family!” Kimberly said. “It’s a little sooner than we anticipated, but he’s going to be so excited. I can’t wait to tell him!” She pulled out her phone. “I don’t have service in here!”

“Not to worry,” Chloe said. “We just need to go over a few things, and I want to make sure you’re setting a follow-up appointment, either with your own doctor or someone here in this hospital—and then you can go.”

“So there’s nothing wrong with me?”

“Nothing that nine months won’t fix,” Chloe said, smiling. It was always such a pleasure to be able to give good news, and it was one of her favorite parts of being a doctor. “You have a good day, Kimberly. Congratulations.”

The joy on Kimberly’s face kept Chloe in high spirits for the rest of the day. It wasn’t until she was on her way home that evening that she made the very obvious connection.

Kimberly had had all the same symptoms that Chloe herself was having...and she hadn’t been anemic.

She was pregnant.

But there was no way Chloe could be pregnant herself...

Except...well, of course she could. She had been taking the same birth control for years, but she had been so carried away recently that she hadn’t always remembered to take it on time.

There was a drugstore on the corner near where Helen lived. Chloe pulled into the parking lot and dashed inside to buy a

test, her feeling that everything happening was completely surreal now starting to grow.

She paid for her test at the self-checkout, not wanting to have to deal with facing a clerk, even though she was sure that no one at the drugstore cared about her purchase of a pregnancy test. Clutching the bag tightly, her heart pounding, she hurried out of the store and drove home in a daze.

She was relieved to find that Helen wasn't yet home when she arrived. She hurried to the bathroom and locked herself in to take the test.

The two minutes of waiting for results were interminable. Chloe felt as if she was going out of her mind. She didn't even know what result she was hoping for—only that she needed an answer.

And then the time was up and she was picking up the test and staring at the little plus sign in the window—*positive*.

She was pregnant.

It explained everything—why she had been feeling so strange, so not herself, in recent weeks. Why she never felt like she was getting enough sleep or enough to eat. She should have recognized the symptoms sooner—but everything had just been so stressful and overwhelming lately, what with the state of things between herself and Shaun.

Shaun.

Chloe groaned quietly. How was she going to tell him about this?

There was no doubt in her mind that it wasn't news he would want to hear. He'd made it clear enough that he had no interest in a long-term relationship with her—and even if they weren't romantically involved, having a child together would tie them together permanently. It would also make it impossible to conceal from anyone that they'd been involved.

He probably won't want anything to do with the baby.

Chloe knew she had to tell him anyway. It was the right thing to do, both for Shaun and for the baby. Both of them deserved

a chance to know each other, and she wouldn't be the one to take that away.

She was surprised by how affectionate she already felt toward her unborn child, just knowing that it existed. She might have wondered, once, whether she would go ahead with having an unplanned pregnancy, but now that it was here, she knew beyond question that she would be keeping her baby.

I love it already, she thought wonderingly.

The idea of telling Shaun what had happened was overwhelming—but, Chloe had to admit to herself, there was something exciting about it too. It had been so long since the two of them had seen one another or interacted at all. She had wondered if she ever *would* see him again.

She had missed him.

Now they were going to have to have a conversation.

But how was she going to find him? She had no idea where he had gone.

Somebody must know. She would ask the chief of medicine at the hospital if she had to. And, failing that, she knew where he lived.

CHAPTER 20

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CHLOE



Chloe made an appointment with the ob-gyn at the hospital for the very next day, relieved that she wouldn't have to take time off work to go get her first scan. She would be able to do it over her lunch break.

She made her way down to the first floor of the hospital, her heart pounding with nerves and excitement, wondering if she would be able to get a picture of the baby. She intended to go over to Shaun's house after she got off work today. Hopefully, she'd catch him there, and she'd be able to tell him what was going on—but if he wasn't there, she was going to sit outside and wait for him to get home.

Or maybe Matt would let me wait inside. She was willing to bet that Matt was still there.

The idea of the conversation she was going to need to have made her uncomfortable, but maybe it would be easier if she had pictures in hand. If she could show Shaun the baby, at least he wouldn't be able to doubt that she was telling the truth about her pregnancy.

She checked in for her appointment at the little obstetrics office and took a seat in the waiting room. The place was full of pregnancy and parenting magazines. Feeling a little out of place, Chloe reached over and picked one up at random.

I'd better get used to this. This is my life now.

She flipped it open. Beatific mothers and charming babies smiled up at her from every page, and Chloe felt a twinge of

warmth and happiness. Soon enough, she would have a baby of her own. She would be one of those happy mothers.

“Chloe?”

The voice was familiar—she would have known it anywhere—and yet Chloe couldn’t bring herself to look up, sure she must be mistaken. *How could he be here?*

“Chloe, what are you doing here?”

Chloe forced herself to raise her head. Sure enough, there was Shaun, dressed in his white lab coat and holding a clipboard.

Words failed her for a moment.

He was staring at her too, as if he didn’t know what to say.

“What...what are *you* doing here?” Chloe managed.

“I work here.”

“You work in obstetrics?”

“It’s temporary...” He was still staring at her as if he had never seen her before. “I’m just filling in here for a few weeks until...until I start a new job.”

She wanted to know more about that—what was the new job? Would he still be in the hospital? And why—why had he left the ward? Was it because of her?

Before she could ask any of those questions, a woman in green scrubs appeared. “Chloe Austen?”

“I—that’s me.” She got to her feet and made her way across the waiting room.

As she passed Shaun, he caught her by the arm. “Well-woman exams are across the hall,” he said, his voice tight. “This office is for pregnancy scans.”

She looked up at him.

“You—are you pregnant, Chloe?”

It wasn’t how she had imagined this moment—not remotely—but what could she do? Chloe nodded.

“And it’s—”

“Yours,” she confirmed.

Shaun released her arm, clearly shocked.

“Ms. Austen?” the nurse repeated, looking from Chloe to Shaun. “I’m sorry. Do you need a minute?”

“No, I’m ready,” Chloe said, recovering herself. She started toward the nurse. Then something occurred to her and she turned to Shaun.

“Did you want to come?” she asked him.

Shaun gaped.

“You—you don’t have to,” she assured him quickly. “If you’d rather not, it’s fine. I only thought you might like to be there. But if you don’t want to come—”

“No,” Shaun said quickly, dropping the clipboard he was carrying on the nurses’ desk and hurrying over to her. “No, I want to. I want to come.”

They were led through the hall and into an examination room. The nurse handed Chloe a paper gown. “I’ll give you a few minutes,” she said, looking from Chloe to Shaun and back again. Chloe wondered what she made of the conversation the two of them had just had—but then, she was probably used to strange circumstances surrounding pregnancies. Chloe was willing to bet that hers wasn’t even the strangest situation that had come through this office today.

The nurse left them alone.

For a moment, Chloe and Shaun stood staring at each other.

Acutely aware of the paper gown in her hands, Chloe said, “Could you, um…”

“Oh.” Shaun turned away from her.

It felt weird asking him to do that. They’d been naked together before, on many occasions. There was no logical reason to hide herself from him. But of course, everything was different between them now.

“Okay, I’m decent,” Chloe said when she’d gotten the gown on.

Shaun turned back around as she climbed up to sit on the exam table. “How long have you known about this?” he asked her.

“I only found out yesterday,” she said. “This is my first appointment. I was going to tell you about it, but I hadn’t had the chance yet.

“Oh,” Shaun said faintly.

“Where have you been, anyway?” Chloe asked. “I just got to work one day and you were gone. I didn’t know if I was ever going to see you again.”

“I didn’t think it was a good idea for the two of us to keep working together,” Shaun said.

“So you did leave because of me.” She hadn’t really had any doubt about that, but at the same time, it was hard to hear.

“Because I thought it would be best,” Shaun said. “For both of us.”

“But you didn’t ask me,” Chloe said. “You decided that without even talking to me. I don’t think it was best for me. Maybe if I had known you were leaving—I don’t know. Showing up one day and just seeing that you were gone with no warning was really hard.”

“I’m sorry.” Shaun sounded uncomfortable. “I thought it would be easier on you.”

Chloe sighed. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “Maybe it was easier. I can’t know that. But it wasn’t *easy*. It’s been awful since you left, not knowing why. Not knowing if you were angry at me, if you just never wanted to see me again.”

Shaun didn’t answer.

His silence made Chloe feel even more awkward than she already had, something she wouldn’t have thought possible. How could she interpret that to mean anything except that Shaun was agreeing with her, that he hadn’t wanted to see her again and that was the reason he had left their wing of the hospital.

To find him here, in obstetrics—that wasn’t his specialty. And she knew he had said he was only working here temporarily—

but why would he come here for temporary work when he had already had a perfectly good job? It smacked of a desire to leave as quickly as possible, which made Chloe certain that his top priority had been avoiding her.

She searched for something else to say, something that would make the moment less awkward—but nothing came to her. The only real topic of conversation that would have been appropriate at the moment was her pregnancy, and she wasn't sure how to even begin to discuss that. To judge by the look on Shaun's face, he didn't know where to start either—he was looking everywhere but at Chloe, his lips pressed together so hard that they were white.

Was he angry?

It made no sense if he was. Chloe hadn't gotten pregnant deliberately, obviously, and he held just as much responsibility for it as she did. If he was angry with anyone, let him be angry with himself. She knew the situation was awkward, but she wasn't willing to take the blame.

Before she could say this to him, the door opened again and a woman came in. She wore a white lab coat like Shaun's. She was probably in her sixties, with steely gray hair, a lined face, and a smile that made Chloe feel suddenly as if she was in the presence of her grandmother.

"Doctor Marlow," the woman said, her surprise evident. "And...is this your wife?"

"We're not married," Chloe said quickly.

"Ah," the doctor said. "Okay."

Shaun looked uncomfortable. He shifted from one foot to the other awkwardly. "Can I count on your discretion, Doctor Hart?"

"Of course," she said. "You know I would never reveal a patient's confidential information, Doctor Marlow. Not even to anyone at the office, if you ask me not to. This can stay between us if that's what you'd prefer."

Relief loosened the tension in Shaun's face. "Thank you," he said. "I wouldn't want anyone else at the hospital knowing

about this.”

Chloe felt herself flush. She didn't want to be embarrassed—he was just making the smart choice for himself professionally, and she knew that, she didn't begrudge him that—but it still felt as if he was saying he didn't want anyone at the hospital to know about *her*. After what she had heard him say to Matt, she couldn't help feeling that it was personal. He didn't want people to know that he had gotten *her* pregnant. If it had been someone else, she wondered if he would have minded. Maybe he would have been excited. Eager for people to know. Maybe she was the problem.

It wasn't just embarrassing—it also made her feel guilty. Her child deserved a father who would be proud that he or she belonged to him. What if she had robbed her child of that chance by having slept with Shaun?

But on the other hand, if she hadn't been with Shaun, there wouldn't have been a child at all.

“Lie back,” Doctor Hart said, and Chloe did her best to focus on the proceedings instead of on Shaun, who was still looking as if he wasn't quite sure what he was doing there. “Do you know how far along you are?”

Chloe tried to do the math quickly in her head, but she couldn't seem to focus on the numbers. “I'm not sure,” she admitted. “Not very far, I know that. I just took the home pregnancy test yesterday.”

“All right,” Doctor Hart said. “We can try to pin down the specifics later. This will be cold—”

And sure enough, Chloe felt something cold and damp on her stomach. She shivered a little as Doctor Hart flipped on a monitor beside her and began the scan.

“If you're that early on, of course, we won't be able to see much,” Doctor Hart warned her. “But if we're lucky, we should be able to get a bit of a look—ah! There we are, look at that!”

Chloe squinted at where the doctor was pointing—it didn't look anything like a baby to her. She could see that there was

something, some sort of unusual shape, but out of context she would never have been able to explain what it was.

Shaun drew a little closer, peering at the screen, lured in by the sight. “That’s our baby?”

Our baby. She was surprised by how good it felt to hear him say those words, and by how little she had expected to hear it so soon. She hadn’t realized that he had already started thinking of this baby as his.

“*Babies*, actually,” Doctor Hart said, smiling at them both.

“Babies,” Chloe repeated.

“You’re having twins,” Doctor Hart explained.

For a moment, Chloe felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her. *Twins?* How could it be twins? She hadn’t even gotten used to the idea of one baby yet! And now there were going to be two of them!

She felt dizzy with shock. She had no idea what to say.

Then she felt Shaun’s hand slide into hers.

She looked up at him. He was staring at the monitor, and he gripped her hand tightly. “Twins,” he repeated, his voice hoarse and full of obvious emotion.

A soft rushing sound filled the room. Chloe could make out two separate rhythms.

“Those are their heartbeats,” Doctor Hart said.

She fell silent for a moment, allowing Chloe and Shaun to listen.

Our babies, Chloe thought, and she squeezed Shaun’s hand, leaning into him. He put an arm around her and pulled her head against his torso, and in spite of everything, Chloe couldn’t help feeling that the two of them were really in this together.

CHAPTER 21

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SHAUN



Shaun waited outside of the exam room while Chloe got dressed. He had the printout of the photo from the ultrasound—Doctor Hart had made an extra copy so that he and Chloe could each have one to keep—and now he stared down at it, feeling beyond shocked.

An hour ago, this had just been a normal day. And now, suddenly Shaun was going to be a father—a father of *twins*. It didn't seem possible. Surely he was going to find out any minute now that he was dreaming.

He looked at the picture. He was familiar enough with ultrasound photos to know what he was looking at, and there was no doubt that this was a picture of twins.

My children, he thought incredulously, trying to make it feel real.

It hadn't felt real at all—but hearing their heartbeats had changed something for him. *They*, at least, felt real to him now. They were real babies.

My babies.

That was the part he still struggled with. He believed Chloe, of course, but it was hard to actually feel it. Everything had happened so fast.

The door to the exam room opened and she came out, fully dressed and tucking her paperwork into her purse—all except her own copy of the ultrasound photos, which she kept in her hand, as if she didn't want to let go of them. It was an impulse

Shaun could understand. He didn't want to let his copy out of his sight either.

"Come have lunch with me," he said.

"I have to go back to work," she told him.

"I can get you excused," he said. "I've got enough authority around here for that."

"But my patients," she said.

"Someone can cover for you. It'll be all right, Chloe. Everybody takes a day off sometimes, you know."

"I can't believe *you're* saying that to me," she said. "Aren't you the same guy who lost his mind when I was five minutes late on my first day?"

"I think it was more like fifteen minutes," Shaun murmured, feeling half amused and half embarrassed at the memory. "I really was too hard on you about that."

"No, you weren't. You were doing what you had to do to run a competent staff. To make me a good doctor. I don't question your decisions."

"Maybe you should," he said. "It's obvious I have no idea what I'm doing." The decisions he had made had led to him finding out that he was about to be a father through sheer chance. If he hadn't been working in obstetrics while he waited for Doctor Geraghty to retire, over in geriatric medicine, was there a chance he would never have known the truth?

She would have told me. She said she was going to.

But he had so many questions for her, and he needed answers. "Please come have lunch with me," he said. "We really need to talk."

"Oh—well...I suppose it'll be all right," she said. "Let me go upstairs and speak to my new attending physician."

"I'll meet you in the lobby," Shaun said, and they parted ways.



Five minutes later, Chloe appeared in the lobby. “It’s all right,” she said. “I told Doctor Haverty I wasn’t feeling well and she gave me the rest of the day off. I feel a little guilty about it.”

“Don’t,” Shaun said. “Even I would have given you the day off, if I’d known you just found out you were pregnant. Anybody with any decency would.”

“I’m just not used to this yet,” Chloe said. “It doesn’t feel real, somehow.”

Shaun could relate to that. “What do you feel like for lunch?”

“Pizza,” she said. “I’m starving.”

He nodded. “I know a place nearby. It’s only a few blocks, if you feel like walking—or I could drive us over, if you’d rather not.”

“A walk sounds good to me,” Chloe said. “That is—if you’re all right with us being seen together.”

“I think we’re past the point of worrying about *that*,” he said. “People are going to find out about us now.” He led the way out of the hospital lobby and pointed up the street in the direction they needed to go.

“I’m not going to tell anybody,” Chloe said.

“Well, you won’t be able to hide the fact that you’re pregnant for long,” he said. “Eventually, people are going to notice that. And then you’ll have a couple of babies, and you *definitely* won’t be able to hide that.” He smiled a little at the idea of it.

“I know,” Chloe said. “That wasn’t what I meant. I meant, I’m not going to tell anyone who the father is.”

Shaun’s smile faded. He had assumed, when she had invited him to the ultrasound, that it was her way of telling him that she wanted him to be involved with the baby. But maybe he had misconstrued her meaning. Maybe she didn’t want anything to do with him.

But then why would she come to lunch with me? It was all so confusing.

“You don’t want anyone to know?” he asked her.

She glanced at him. “I assumed *you* wouldn’t,” she said.

“What makes you think that?”

“You’ve always been so serious about keeping...whatever was going on between us outside of work,” she said. “You never wanted anybody to know anything personal about us.”

“Well...no, but this is different,” he said. “We can’t have children together without people knowing about it, Chloe.”

“But...well, you don’t have to have children at all,” she said. Then she blushed. “What I mean is...if you don’t want people to know about this, if you don’t want to be involved...”

“Chloe, wait.” Shaun stopped on the sidewalk and turned to face her directly. “What are you talking about? You don’t think I want to be part of our children’s lives?”

“I know you don’t,” she whispered.

He felt as if he’d swallowed a block of ice. She sounded so *certain*. He supposed it made sense that she would question his willingness to be a part of her family—they’d never been serious with each other, and things had definitely ended badly. But how could she claim to *know* he didn’t want to be involved with raising their children—especially when it wasn’t at all true?

“Why would you say that?” he asked her.

“Because you said it,” she said.

“I never said I didn’t want to help raise our babies.”

“Not that. You said...you said that I wasn’t your type.”

He opened his mouth to object to that—but then he froze, the words coming back to him.

He *had* said that. It was what he had told Matt when Matt had asked him whether anything was going on between Chloe and himself.

And that had been the night before Chloe had told him she would be moving out...

“That’s why you left,” he whispered. “That’s why you moved out so suddenly, isn’t it? You heard me and Matt talking.”

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,” Chloe murmured. “I know I shouldn’t have. But I heard my name, and then you were telling him that—that you didn’t like me, that I wasn’t *your type*—of course you wouldn’t want to start a family with me. You didn’t even want to admit to your brother that anything was going on between the two of us.”

“I—I thought we’d decided that together,” Shaun said. “We weren’t going to tell anybody about what was going on.”

“I know we weren’t,” Chloe said, and to Shaun’s horror, he saw tears welling up in her eyes. “But I thought that was because we didn’t want to let it interfere with doing our jobs. I didn’t realize it was because you were—”

“Because I was what?”

“Embarrassed of me. Ashamed to be associated with me. I didn’t know that was how you felt. If I’d known that...” She shook her head. “I wouldn’t have let myself fall in love with you.”

“Fall in love with me?” The words hit Shaun like a ton of bricks.

Chloe sighed. “I didn’t mean to do it,” she said. “But I’ve been falling for you for a while now, Shaun. I thought I could keep my distance, but...that night, when I heard you talking to Matt—that was the night I was going to tell you the truth about the way I felt.”

“But you didn’t...because of what you heard me say to him.”

“How could I tell you after that? I had to get out of your house. I couldn’t stand it.”

“God, Chloe—”

“I’m sorry. I know you didn’t want this. You didn’t want any of this.”

“Chloe.” He went to her and took her in his arms. “Don’t do this to yourself. Come here.”

She stiffened when he tried to pull her into an embrace, but after a moment she relaxed and leaned into him. He tightened his arms around her.

“It wasn’t like that,” he said softly. “What I said to Matt...that wasn’t the truth. At all.”

“It wasn’t?”

“Of course not. I can’t believe you thought so. You know me better than *that*, don’t you? You couldn’t really have thought that these past few months meant nothing at all to me?”

“I don’t know,” Chloe said. “I thought I knew my ex pretty well. But he turned out not to be the man I thought he was at all. If I could be wrong about him—”

“God. I’ve been an idiot. Of course it would be hard for you to trust anyone again after that. I’m sorry, Chloe. I should have just talked to you about it.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Chloe said. “And we told each other it was only going to be a casual thing! If my feelings changed—*when* my feelings changed—that was on me. I couldn’t have expected you to change too.”

“But I did,” Shaun said softly, holding her at arm’s length and looking into her eyes. “I’ve been falling for you too, Chloe. I only said what I did to Matt because...because it’s so hard for me to open up about my feelings. Because I didn’t want to admit that I was feeling anything. Not out loud. Not to him. It’s been so long since I had true feelings for anyone. But I was. I *am*. Of course I am.”

“What does that mean?” Chloe whispered.

“It means I’m in this with you,” Shaun said. “If you still want me.”

Chloe’s tears were flowing freely now. “Of course I want you,” she said. “I fell in love with you, Shaun. I’ve been in love with you for what feels like a long time now. I don’t want to do this without you.”

“You won’t have to,” Shaun pledged. “We’re in this together. Oh, Chloe, don’t cry...”

“It’s okay,” she wept. “It’s happy crying. And maybe hormones.”

He chuckled. “Do you still want pizza, or should we get you home?”

“Home?”

“You’ve got to move back in with me,” he said. “You’ve got to let me take care of you and the babies.”

“I feel like I’ve been back and forth like a ping pong ball,” she said.

“You’ll come, won’t you?”

“Of course I will,” she said.

He put his arm around her shoulders and they started back toward the hospital to pick up the car.

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CHAPTER 22

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SHAUN

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SEVEN MONTHS LATER



“I can’t believe you’re actually taking three weeks off of work,” Megan marveled.

Shaun grinned, shoving papers into his briefcase with both hands. “You all are just going to have to do your best to manage things around here until I get back,” he said. “Do you think you can do it?”

“Oh, we can handle it,” Megan said. “We’re all just glad you came back to work here at all. Though probably not as glad as Chloe is. She was heartbroken when you left!”

It wasn’t the first time Shaun had heard that story. To hear them tell it, all the residents on the ward had been fully aware of the fact that something was going on between Shaun and Chloe—they all claimed they had been able to tell by the change in her behavior after Shaun had transferred out. The nurses had reassured him that it wasn’t so, that even people who had noticed something wrong with Chloe hadn’t known what the problem was. But the best thing of all was that Shaun had discovered he didn’t care who had known what and when. He didn’t need to keep it a secret anymore.

“I’ve got to get down to maternity,” he said. “She’s probably already checked in. He had wanted to go on working until the last minute to maximize the amount of time he could be home with Chloe and the babies, so he’d been relying on Matt to care for her since she’d started her maternity leave last week, and his brother had done a wonderful job. He’d gotten the text from Matt fifteen minutes ago letting him know that Chloe had

gone into labor and that the two of them were on their way to the hospital, and now he was rushing to meet them.

“Don’t worry about anything,” Megan assured him. “We’ll take care of everything here. Bev’s great.”

Shaun nodded. He would have felt more anxious about it all if he didn’t have Bev to leave in charge, but fortunately she had decided to stay on the ward and continue working with him after finishing her residency.

“Good luck!” Megan said as Shaun slammed his briefcase shut and hurried off. “Let us know when we can come down and visit!”

The maternity ward was on the second floor. Shaun was too keyed up to wait for the elevator, so he took the stairs, running down them two at a time. He skidded into the ward, causing all the nurses to look up in surprise.

“Chloe Austen?” he said.

“We’re over here,” Matt’s voice called, and Shaun whirled around to see his brother helping Chloe through the doors.

“You’re just getting here?” Shaun turned to the nurses. “She’s in labor, she needs a room—”

“Calm down, Dad.” One of the nurses was already bringing a wheelchair out from behind the desk. “How far apart are the contractions?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t—”

“They’re about four minutes apart,” Matt interjected gently. “About forty seconds.”

“Matt’s been timing,” Chloe said, easing herself into the wheelchair. “Oh, no—”

She reached out for Shaun’s hand, and he squatted beside her as she huffed through her practiced breathing. “You’re all right,” he reminded her. “You know how good our hospital is. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“She knows that,” Matt said, chuckling lightly. “You’re reassuring yourself, not her, aren’t you?”

“We’ve got a room ready.” The nurse pushed Chloe along.
“Are you two both coming?”

“I’ll wait in the waiting room,” Matt said. He grabbed Shaun in a quick hug. “Good luck,” he said. “You’ve got this.”

More reassured than he would have imagined possible just by his brother’s presence nearby, Shaun nodded and went into the hospital room after Chloe.

The nurse was getting her settled into bed. “Your doctor will be in in a moment to check how things are coming along,” she said. “But judging by the pacing of your contractions, I’d say this looks to be a fairly quick labor. You might see your babies pretty soon.”

“Really?” Chloe looked equal parts anxious and excited.

“It happens that way with multiples sometimes,” the nurse explained. “Nothing to worry about. Get comfortable, and the doctor will be with you in a minute.”

Chloe leaned back on the pillows and closed her eyes.

“Are you all right?” Shaun asked anxiously, pulling up a chair.
“How bad is the pain?”

“I can handle it.” She grimaced and cursed as another contraction took hold of her. “I hope that nurse is right about this being a short labor.”

“I’m sure she is,” Shaun said. “You know as well as I do that multiples tend to be born quickly.”

“Not always.”

“No, but often enough that I’d say we can expect it. Hey. Think about what it’s going to be like when we get them home.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Think about putting them in the nursery, dressing them in all those cute onesies we bought, getting up at three a.m. to do feedings...”

She laughed. “That’s the part you’re excited about? The three a.m. feedings?”

“I’m excited about all of it,” Shaun said. “I’m excited about raising our babies together. Even the hard stuff is going to be

amazing.”



The nurse and Shaun had predicted things correctly—Chloe’s labor was very short. Two hours after coming into the maternity ward, the doctor informed them that she was ready to deliver.

The delivery was quick too, and it was fairly straightforward, but even so, Shaun marveled at Chloe’s strength. He had climbed up onto the bed behind her and was propping her up, gripping her hands in his while she pushed. “You’re so awesome,” he breathed into her ear as she let out a cry of pain. “You’re doing amazing, Chloe. I’m so fucking proud of you. I love you so much.”

A second cry joined Chloe’s, and a moment later, the doctor held up a tiny, bright red baby. “It’s a boy,” he announced.

“Is he all right?” Chloe asked, gasping for breath.

“Ten fingers and ten toes.” The doctor passed their son off to a nurse, and Shaun felt a wrench of sadness.

Apparently, so did Chloe. “Where’s he going? Bring him back!”

“You’re not done here,” the doctor told her with a smile. “Don’t worry, Chloe. He’s just getting cleaned up. He’ll be back before you know it.”

Chloe bore down again with a groan of effort, and in a matter of moments, a new cry joined the first.

“A girl,” the doctor announced, holding her up for them to see.

Moments later, both babies were cleaned up and wrapped in blankets, with neat caps perched on their heads—blue for their son and pink for their daughter. Shaun accepted the baby girl and settled into his seat to admire her, one arm resting on Chloe’s shoulder as she cradled their son.

“Should I feed them?” Chloe asked, looking up at the doctor.

“It looks like they’re pretty relaxed right now, actually,” the doctor said with a smile. “Don’t worry, they’ll let you know when they’re hungry. For now, why don’t I leave you four alone for some bonding time.”

Shaun felt a stab of anxiety. “Are we ready for that? To be on our own with them, I mean?”

“You’ll do fine,” the doctor assured him. “You’re both doctors, you know what to do. And you can always page a nurse if you run into trouble.”

He was right, of course, Shaun thought. They did know what to do. It was just a little unnerving to be responsible for two such vulnerable babies—especially given the fact that he already loved them both so much. He hadn’t been prepared for the way it would feel to fall head over heels in love with his children.

“Look at them,” Chloe breathed. “They look so *alike*.”

“They look like you.” He’d heard it said a thousand times that a newborn baby resembled its father or mother, but he had never actually been able to see it before. Now, though, it was the most obvious thing in the world. Chloe was all over their features—the shape of their noses, the point of their chins. They even had matching tufts of her auburn hair.

“We never decided on names,” Chloe said. “I can’t believe we never finalized that.”

“We didn’t know what we were having.” They had decided to wait to find out whether the babies were boys or girls on the day of their birth, and while Chloe stood by that decision—it had made today that much more exciting—it had limited the planning they’d been able to do.

“We have plenty of time to figure it out,” Shaun said. “There’s no hurry.”

But somehow, Chloe couldn’t bear to leave her children nameless. And besides, she had been thinking about *possible* names for a long time, even though the two of them had never made a decision.

“Do you like Fred?” she asked. “For the boy?”

“Fred...” Shaun mused. “Little Freddy.” A smile crossed his face. “I do like that. How long have you been sitting on that one?”

“A few months,” she admitted.

“I love it.” He reached over and tapped his son’s chin gently. “Fred.”

Fred responded with a big yawn, and Shaun laughed. “Guess he likes that too.”

“God, he’s beautiful.”

“What about the girl? Got anything up your sleeve for her?”

“Amelia?”

“That’s pretty.”

“That was my grandmother’s name.”

“Amelia it is, then,” he said, rocking her gently.

Chloe sighed and closed her eyes. “I’m so tired,” she murmured.

“You can go to sleep, honey.”

“I feel like I shouldn’t.”

“I’ll look after these two. Or I can have them taken down to the nursery, if I get tired too. You should take advantage of the fact that we’re still at the hospital to get some rest.”

Chloe opened her eyes and shook her head. “Not yet,” she said. “I will, I promise, but I’m not ready to be away from them yet. It already feels like they’re too far away, just being outside my body.” She reached out and touched Amelia’s cheek. “This is the farthest I’ve ever been from her, and she’s just an arm’s length away.”

Shaun chuckled. There was space beside her on the bed, so he got out of his chair and scooted in next to her, holding Amelia closer to her. Chloe leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“As long as you’re staying awake,” Shaun said, “there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

She glanced at him. “What’s that?”

“I know the last nine months have been great for us,” Shaun said. “We’ve gotten so close. We’ve been getting ready for this parenting journey together, working together, living together—and you know I’ve promised to stay with you through thick and thin, no matter what comes.”

“I know,” Chloe said. “I don’t think I would have been able to get through this pregnancy without having your support, Shaun. It’s made all the difference in the world. I hope you know how grateful I am.”

“I hope *you* know how grateful *I* am,” he countered. “We wouldn’t have these beautiful babies if it wasn’t for you. You made me a father. That’s not something I ever knew I wanted, but now that it’s happened…” he trailed off, finding it difficult to speak for a moment. There was no way he could possibly explain to her how much she had changed his life for the better.

“Hey,” she murmured, looking up at him. “We’ve got each other. We’re in this thing together. That’s what matters, right?”

“Yeah, it is,” he said. “And that’s why I want to make sure that that will never change.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the little square box he had been carrying around for days, waiting for the right moment. He hadn’t imagined he’d be doing this here and now, but actually, he couldn’t think of a better place and time.

Chloe gasped as she registered what he was holding.

He opened the box, revealing the solitaire diamond he had chosen a few weeks ago. “Chloe Austen,” he said, “in so many ways, you have brought me back to life. You have helped me remember how to be happy, how to trust and open up to people—how to love.”

Tears welled up in her eyes.

“My life changed the day I met you, and I still shudder to think where I would be right now—how unhappy I would still be—if you hadn’t walked onto my ward,” he said. “The thing that keeps me going, that gets me out of bed each morning and

carries me through my hardest days, is knowing that I have you. And I want to know that you and I will always have each other, for the rest of our lives.

She nodded, tears tracking down her cheeks now.

“Will you marry me?”

“Of course I will,” she breathed.

He pulled the ring from the box, slid it onto her finger, and wrapped his arms around his family, holding them close.

The End

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