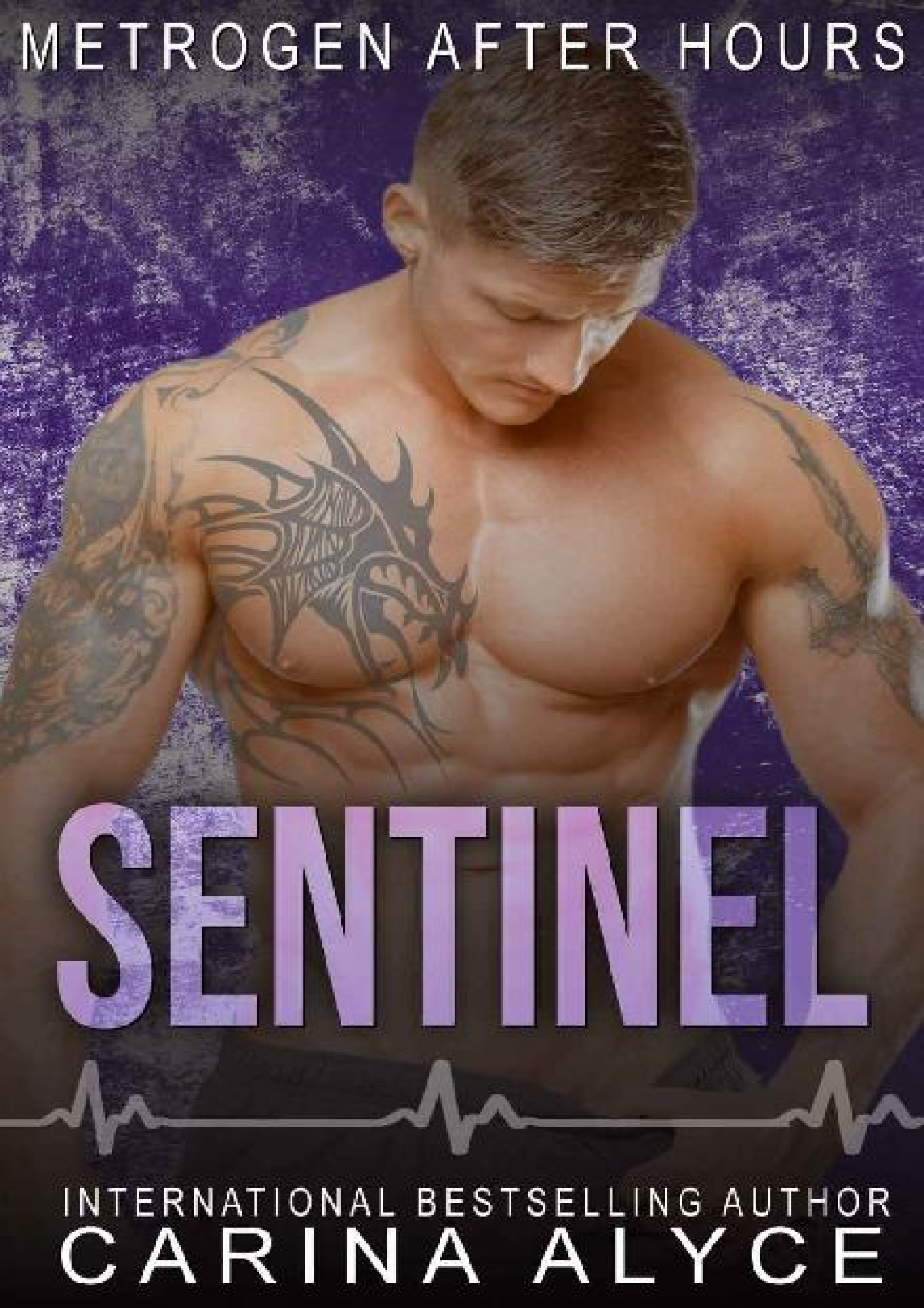


METROGEN AFTER HOURS



SENTINEL

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CARINA ALYCE

SENTINEL

A STEAMY GRUMPY SUNSHINE MEDICAL
ROMANCE

METROGEN AFTER HOURS

CARINA ALYCE



ARE YOU READY FOR SEXY FIREFIGHTERS, DIRTY DOCTORS, AND HOT COPS?

Do you wish Grey's Anatomy and Chicago Fire had more sex scenes - like a lot more? Maybe a hundred times more?

Me too! I took all your favorite TV fire/police/medical drama tropes and gave you the addictive plot twists, sexy times, and drama you are dying for. (I'm a real doctor so it's more legit!)

So if you are looking for a steamy grumpy firefighter falling for some single mom sunshine - and a shocking plot twist - with plenty of naughty sexiness, you NEED to keep reading!

PS - this is a standalone HEA in the interconnected MetroGen After Hours series. You can start reading from the beginning with [Volatile: A Steamy Grumpy Sunshine Small Town Medical Romance](#) available on KU, paperback, hard cover, and large print!



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YOUR FREE GIFT



There's a naked ER doctor in her shower promising her screaming orgasms. Should she say 'yes?' As if that's a question ...

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carinaalyce.com/hot-treat-for-you](http://carinaalyce.com/hot-treat-for-you)

SCAN BELOW TO GRAB YOUR COPY!



*To India who never loses her smile no matter what happens in
the ER*

PREVIOUSLY ON METROGEN AFTER HOURS

Carina Alyce's MetroGen Downtown books encompass the Medical, Fire, and Police heroes of Cuyahoga County and their complicated love lives with the steam and the drama of your favorite TV shows. Everyone needs a hot protective hero falling for a strong woman with goals.

MetroGen After Hours gives you all the HEA in stand alones connected in the bigger MetroGen universe. Opposites attract and grumpy sunshine galore!

Volatile starts you out when nurse/part-time arson investigator Jennifer Bayani gets exiled to small town USA where she's following up on a set of suspicious fires. Getting cuffed by Deputy Brandon Smythe, tattooed and so surly hot, is not one of her goals.

Burn Card follows grumpy Fire Captain James Haskell on what is supposed to be a weekend of firefighter business in Las Vegas. Things change when he crashes into the Vegas B4 Vows Bachelorette party and his secret crush - his next-door neighbor, Caroline Peters.

Roulette happens during Burn Card at the Vegas B4 Vows Bachelorette party when superfans ER doctor Ryan Yates and NICU nurse Kyra Washington find they have perfect chemistry and make a bet on their future - that they can live together without sex.

Sentinel introduces grumpy Firefighter Rafe Falcon to single sunshiny mom Ava Remley. She might be the antidote for his

bad mood, except she has a secret that might destroy the fire department and MetroGen.

Get ready because there's steam, secrets, lies, and betrayals ahead...

(And by the way, the MetroGen Chaplain is keeping tabs on everyone in the hospital in his journal. He tries to keep official names out of his diary, just in case.)

Don't miss the whole series!

[Volatile: A Steamy Grumpy Sunshine Small Town Medical Romance](#)

[Burn Card: A Steamy Grumpy Sunshine Firefighter Romance](#)

[Roulette: A Steamy Opposites Attract Vegas Medical Romance](#)

[Sentinel: A Steamy Grumpy Sunshine Medical Romance](#)

[Tempted: A Steamy Friends to Lovers Firefighter Romance](#)

[Sampled: A Steamy Opposites Attract Medical Romance](#)

[Wrapped Up: A Steamy Holiday Romance](#)

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[Enamored: A Steamy Valentine's Day Romance](#)

[Wildcat: A Steamy Opposites Attract Football Romance](#)

[Unwrapped: A Steamy Holiday Romance](#)

[Embers: A 9/11 Romantic Suspense](#)

[Live Wire: A Steamy Friends to Lovers Firefighter Romance](#)

CAST OF CHARACTERS



METRO GENERAL HOSPITAL

- Dr. Manika Gupta-Carver - ER
- Dr. Eliza Kendall - General Surgery
- Dr. Ryan Yates - ER
- Dr. Kayla Varma - ICU
- Dr. Joel Glazier - Ortho

FIREHOUSE 15 A-SHIFT UNDER FIRE CHIEF NOAH BAKER

- Mateo Soto - Captain
- Aiden Clarke - Lieutenant
- Luna Rodriguez – Lieutenant
- Rafe “Rafael” Falcón - Firefighter
- George Kenner - Firefighter
- Vanessa Knight - Firefighter
- Kevin Jones – Firefighter

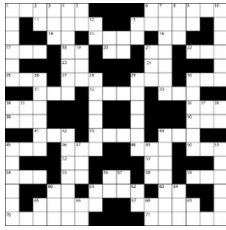
SENTINEL

ADJECTIVE

1. The first lymph node cancerous cells drain into. 2. Descriptor of an unexpected event resulting in death or serious injury of a patient. See 'swiss-cheese model' for more details

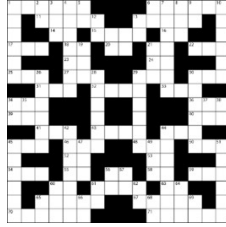
-Netter's Medical Dictionary

PART ONE



TOLKIEN BOOK 2 LEAD (12
LETTERS)

MANY MEETINGS



FROM THE DIARY OF CHAPLAIN AT METROGEN

September

I adore September. The kids are back in school, it's too early for cold and flu season, and the new interns at MetroGen have settled in enough to be almost useful.

Then the crisp cold air reminds me that the Browns were featured for the preseason on the cover of Sports Illustrated as the team they predict to win the Super Bowl. Before we've played a single game. Or our head coach has even been a head coach for a full season.

It could go really well or end in total disaster.

In the eternal words of a wise man (not my Lord and Savior JC), the Man in Black... Get used to disappointment.

CHAPTER 1



The pencil snapped on the paper, and Rafe Falcon swore loudly. “Godddamn, motherfucking piece of shit...” He took a deep breath. This wasn’t that difficult. He wasn’t in the firehouse right now. No pressure. No klaxons. No bells. No axes. No buildings on fire.

As a grown man, he should be able to handle this. He’d been a firefighter for almost twenty years. If he could climb a five-story ladder with an axe, an oxygen tank, and fifty pounds of gear, he would not quit here.

Twenty-five across, eight letters. Begin at the beginning.

The New York Times crossword puzzle was mocking him yet again.

“Start. Five letters. Why the hell are you using the same word twice?” Rafe growled at the paper. It didn’t respond as usual, and he wondered why he kept up this torturous ritual.

It was a regular post call morning for him. He’d finish his 24-hour shift at Firehouse 15, drive to his favorite quiet coffee shop, and enjoy his paper.

Or rip his paper to pieces by erasing it too hard.

“Trialed.” He wrote his guess in with a fresh pencil. “Seven letters. Crap.”

He tried to erase gently. *The New York Times* paper, getting thinner and cheaper every day, had trouble competing with the strength of his shoulders and biceps. By his tenth erasure, it'd be time to use his second copy of the paper.

The Monday crossword was easy. The Saturday one was the hardest.

He decided to put the 'ED' at the end and figure out the start.

"Don't do that. It's not a past tense clue." A hand tapped the box in the left corner. "You can't use an 'ED.'"

Rafe followed the pointer finger up an arm to a blue-eyed blonde. She was holding a cup of coffee and another copy of the Saturday paper.

"Why not?" he asked.

"If they wanted you to use past tense, it would have said, 'began at the beginning.'"

"Goddamn it. No fuck—" he started to swear and then stopped himself. This wasn't the firehouse. He wasn't supposed to swear the blue streak while interacting with the regular public. "You're right. No 'ED' on the verb."

"It's not a verb anyway," she indicated the clue. He noted her fingernails had been chewed down, and her left ring finger bore the blank old callus of a past wedding ring.

That was interesting because she couldn't have been far past thirty. Then again, he'd been divorced twice, so who was he to judge?

"Then what is it?" he hissed.

"Menachem." She smiled at him like he hadn't been giving off his best 'leave me and my paper in peace or I will end you' vibe.

"Men' what?"

"It's asking for the name of Menachem Begin, an Israeli Prime Minister. 'Begin at the beginning.'"

“Oh.” He wrote it in and looked at the clue opened up by the answer.

British righteousness. *Six letters down.*

Ah, this one he knew.

Honors, he wrote.

“Hey, umm. Not quite,” the woman said.

He looked up at her smiling face and scowled. “Why are you still here?”

Didn’t she get it? Between his hair, massive muscles, and the black dragon tattoo that started on his right wrist and climbed all the way across his shoulders, people in the coffee shop tended to give him a wide berth. Her grin and her bobbed, straight, almost white blonde hair could go elsewhere.

Undeterred by his failure to make interesting conversation, she said, “You’re close, but no cigar.”

“How the hell would you know?” He checked around to see if she was supposed to be meeting someone here. She had one cup of coffee and a pastry bag.

“It says ‘British.’ Which means h-o-n-o-u-r with a U.” Still grinning, she took his pencil away and overwrote his answer without erasing or ripping the paper. “No thanks needed.”

“You won’t get it.” What was going on here? Had he hit his head last shift and entered an alternate reality where he’d turned into suburban soccer mom coffee shop catnip?

When he glanced back up, she still hadn’t moved. The woman hadn’t stopped smiling, and even he had to admit she was cute.

“Yes? Why are you still here?”

“Well, you come in here once a week and destroy the paper, so I figured I’d help you out,” she said.

“My paper and I are fine.”

“Right. Did you have a bad night at the firehouse?” She sat down in the chair next to him, plopping her coffee and pastry bag on the table.

“You know what I do?”

“It says so on your shirt.” She’d unsettled him enough for him to forget he was still wearing his uniform top.

“Oh.” He was terrible at this. There was a reason he was divorced twice.

“Bad night?”

“Yeah, after three dead bums and no sleep for the past thirty-six hours, I’m not in the best mood. Best go about your way and bother some other shithead who isn’t fucking awful at the crossword.” Rafe knew he wasn’t being fair, but he hadn’t been in the mood for company outside of his firehouse for a while now.

“Want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Fine. I’m still helping you.” She tapped on the clues. “What do you think this one means?”

“It means take a hint and leave.”

“Nah, it’s only eight letters. ‘Take a hint and leave’ is seventeen. I’m Ava by the way.”

Despite himself, he chuckled. “Fine, Ava. Five letters. Bottled spirit.”

She winked at him. “Genie. Or vodka.”

It wasn’t his imagination. She was definitely flirting with him. A gentleman who possessed even a minimum of manners would do something at this point. “Ahh. Do you want a bagel or something?”

“Well...” She was in the midst of writing on his crossword puzzle when she paused. Her hesitation reminded him of the pastry bag she’d set on the table.

“God. I suck at this. Really. Save yourself and leave before I slit my own throat. You’ll be better off.”

“We both might be a little rusty. Why don’t you offer to help me? You are a firefighter.” She nodded encouragingly.

Feeling like a total fool, he said. “Do you need help?”

“Not really. I was grabbing a drink before I took my groceries upstairs.” Ava sipped her coffee.

“Oh.”

Ava appeared to be waiting for him to continue. Couldn’t she see his last ex-wife was right and he had no conversational skills outside of sports, Michael Judge movies, and firefighting? He was going down in flames with no hope of rescue.

“My apartment is on the third floor of this building.”

This time he understood. “Do you need help with your groceries? I could carry them.”

“It’s a trek.”

“Do your groceries weigh greater than seventy pounds?” He named the weight of his usual firefighting gear. “Is the stairway on fire?”

“I hope not.”

“It’d better not fucking be if no smoke detectors’ve gone off.” He cursed and then winced. Too much time with too many guys, though the two women on his shift could swear like sailors, especially Vanessa Knight, a former Ms. Universe. “I’m sorry.”

“My poor virgin ears,” Ava faked covering her ears. “A swear word. Need smelling salts.”

Her eyes were full of such good humor that he couldn’t prevent his snort of laughter. He downed the rest of his coffee and folded up his newspaper. “Where’s the car?”

CHAPTER 2



Rafe followed her to off-street parking and a simple sedan. She must have been shopping for one because it wasn't a very large haul. He noted two gallons of milk, bread, shredded cheese, bunches of fruits and vegetables, and a rotisserie chicken.

It was the exact type of thing he would have bought for himself on a day away from Firehouse 15, assuming he didn't eat ten times the amount she did in a week.

He gathered up her three reusable bags, and her eyes got big. "You don't want me to carry a bag?"

Stealing her pastry bag and placing it in one of the grocery bags, he used one of his better lines. "I could probably carry you on my shoulder, too."

"I should help at least a little."

"You can take the keys."

"And the paper." She stole his newspaper.

She directed him to the third floor, almost fluttering around him. They reached a sadly nondescript and equally spartan hallway. The nameplate over the door read. 'Remley.'

He hazarded a guess from the general size of the building, "One bedroom?"

"Two." She stuck her keys in the door and teased him for a second. "I'm separated. Divorce will be finalized soon. November, maybe."

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Divorces aren’t easy. I’ve done it twice. First time we were so young, didn’t know what we were getting into. Second time, hurt more.”

“Sorry for yours. You say it’s never going to happen to you, and then it does. You think someone will back down and forgive, except you don’t. And you won’t.”

“And then it’s too late,” he agreed. “So, you didn’t forgive him?”

Ava shook herself, opening the door and giving him another carefree smile. “What makes you think I’m the unforgiving one?”

“I didn’t peg you as the cheating type,” he admitted. She’d been sunshine downstairs, the light of her smiles could drive away any darkness, and God knew he’d seen darkness.

He passed her groceries through the door without asking for an invite.

“Cheating isn’t the only way to end a marriage. And I’m the unforgiven.” She balanced on her tiptoes to place her hands on his shoulders. She placed a soft kiss on his scruffy jawline and handed him his paper. “Anti-hero 1992. Twenty-four across. Keep working on the crossword, Mr. Firefighter.”

And then she was inside, her door closed and locked.

He stood frozen for several seconds before staggering down the stairs. Nothing about that kiss was a simple, friendly thank you.

It couldn’t be a booty call since she hadn’t invited him in. It was the perfect amount of first date encouragement, though. He must not have screwed it up too badly if she’d kissed him.

Except, now what was he supposed to do?

Hanging around the coffee shop and her apartment was more likely to get him arrested.

The answer came to him back at his table in the coffee shop after he opened his paper to resume his piss-poor attempts on the crossword.

‘Genie’ intersected with twenty-four across, and she’d written ‘Unforgiven,’ the clue meaning Clint Eastwood’s 1992 anti-hero movie.

Then he saw it.

The minx had filled her phone number into the last row, completely ruining “Shredded” ten letters forty across.



Ava Remley calmly counted to twenty, waiting for his footsteps to fade before exhaling.

The first couple of times she’d seen him at the coffee shop, she was sure she’d conjured him up from the depths of her imagination. He was nothing like what she’d expected.

He’d been a thundercloud of a man each time in his own bubble of frustration. The ever-present firefighter crewneck shirt displayed arms covered in scars and tattoos, telling their story without words. The tail of what she suspected was a dragon, spikes and all, rested on his right arm, near where he’d constantly destroy pencils.

Everything about him screamed, ‘Go away. I’m stone cold.’

Yet she couldn’t or didn’t want to believe it. She’d given in to the temptation to speak to him. Her intention had been to keep it light and playful, and it somehow ended with a sort of kiss.

Allowing him inside her apartment would have been unforgivably fast, and bending the rules of her separation agreement. Besides, she had moved out here to get away from the past.

Out with the old, in with the new.

A letter of recommendation from Dr. Manika Guptra-Carver from the head of the MetroGen ER got her a solid job in a tech at a Lake County Urgent Care. Her salary kept the rent paid and her lights on.

A text message popped up on her phone from an unknown number.

?ToretoBits. Rafe, by the way

Ava:?

Rafe: Shredded. TORE TO BITS. I'm working on my crossword.

Ava: See, you're getting better.

Rafe: I'm terrible. Might need a tutor.

She stifled a giggle. He'd put a ton of effort into being cranky and was dedicating the same energy at securing a date.

Still, she hadn't done this for a while, so she'd better at least attempt to play slightly hard to get.

Ava: Can you afford my rates?

Rafe: What if I buy you coffee and a muffin? I know a nearby coffee shop.

Ava: Hmm. It's really far from my place.

Rafe: Two muffins?

Ava: I'm in.

Rafe: When?

Ava: About two weeks? Saturday, same time same place?

She regretted it, but she had to name a date two weeks away. Jenna would be back next weekend, and Rafe wasn't allowed meet her daughter yet.

Rafe: See you there.

Ava was debating whether to send a winking or kissing emoji to end the convo when another less welcome text

message popped up on her screen.

E: We need to talk. Six p.m. work?

She checked the clock and calculated if she had time to make the neutral child exchange and be ready for her visitor.

It was at least an hour till she would leave to pick up Jenna, so she could put the groceries away.

She texted back the affirmative with her address.

Ava nearly tripped over a pile of mail she'd tossed on the floor this morning. It didn't take more than a glance to recognize the letter from her lawyers. Based on the previous six she'd received on the same topic, her lawyer wanted her to sign documents to designate where to send the child support payments.

As if money could fix everything. This past year had certainly proved otherwise.

She shoved the letter in a drawer next to the other six.

No amount of money was worth abandoning her pride and her ability to stand on her own. She was a good, kind person, and she wouldn't let him change that.

Not now, not ever.

CHAPTER 3



“Here comes the airplane.”

“Mama.” Jenna squealed and flipped the entire bowl of pureed organic peas off the table.

“Seriously, again, sweetie? Too bad. We have more.” Ava grabbed another one of her ex’s specially requested, gourmet prepared, organic, high nutrient pea purees from the fridge. He always sent Jenna home with a multitude of ‘acceptable’ baby food options.

Despite these special food choices, Jenna came back starving from her father’s. Ava was fairly certain their daughter subsisted primarily on formula and Bamba peanut product at his apartment. Per their separation agreement, Ava was to offer her a no added sugar organic baby puree at least twice a day. Crackers, bars, and cookies were on the unacceptable list.

Bamba made the cut because research had found three times a week consumption made the child less likely to end up with peanut allergy.

Jenna, smart little (illegal per the aforementioned rules) cookie, had long ago figured out the loophole.

Before she had time to feed Jenna more of the hated peas, Ava had to answer a knock at the door.

As expected, she opened the door to Dr. Kandal, a former friend and current general surgeon at MetroGen Hospital.

“Hi, Eliza.”

Her non-friend stood outside in the hallway. “So, this is where you went?”

“Yeah, I moved someplace smaller. Come in?” Ava said, wondering why Eliza had decided to come by today.

Ava was a persona non grata at MetroGen now, and if she'd been allowed, she'd have already moved to Lake County. The separation rules dictated she was unable to leave Cuyahoga County, or they'd have grounds to take Jenna from her.

Yet another box on the whole multitude of other prohibitions, from dating to being in contact with anyone employed at MetroGen.

“Sure.” Eliza walked through the door, and Ava gestured for her to sit at the table two seats away from Jenna and the pea splatter. “Oh my goodness, she's so cute.”

Jenna had inherited Ava's grin, which she used to excellent effect on Eliza. It made the total mess of smeared peas on her purple bib almost forgivable.

“Yep, this is my little gremlin. Say ‘hi,’ Jenna.” Ava sat down with the peas.

“Mama. No peas.”

“Yes, please. Yummy peas.” Ava tried to give her more. Her parents had similar issues when it came to the purees. They gamely took a picture every day at their Lake County house lest the ex claim they hadn't fed Jenna whatever disgusting peas, prunes, or yams he'd sent.

“No. Blah.” Jenna blew a raspberry.

“Yummy peas. Jenna can eat the peas.” Ava attempted to ‘fly’ the spoon into her daughter's mouth.

“No. Peas.” Faster than a ten-month-old should have, the adorable vandal in training snatched the bowl off the table and dumped it on her head.

“Not again.” Ava got up to get the trash can and paper towels.

“Why feed her peas if she hates them?” Eliza asked. She had two kids of her own and raised them with her sister Kayla since the death of her husband over a year ago.

“Because the lawyers say I have to try.” Ava cleaned up Jenna’s flinching face, which quickly resumed smiling because she knew what would happen next.

“You’ve tried. What does she actually eat?”

“My food.” Ava brought over a plate of three grilled cheese sandwiches, quartered grapes, and steamed carrots. “The rules are about baby food, not about adult food. She’s been eating table food since she was four months.”

Eliza watched Jenna stretch to snag the top grilled sandwich and a mushy carrot, which she then eagerly gummed to death, sans hesitation.

“Ymmm,” Jenna over enunciated. Thus far, she’d mastered mama, papa, gamma, yum, no (constantly), nose (sounded like ‘no’), please and peas—likely because the last two sets were close together.

They watched Jenna inhale the three sandwiches, the fruit, and vegetables in quick succession.

“Wow. I can’t remember my kids eating a single sandwich at this stage. She must have her mama’s brains,” Eliza said, as if they could avoid the other half of Jenna’s genetics.

“Or my nose. Watch.” Ava used another washcloth to clean Jenna off again. “Hey, sweetie. I’ve got your nose.”

“No. No. Nose.” Jenna pointed at her nose and then grabbed Ava’s nose.

“Silly Jenna.” Ava unstrapped Jenna and moved her to the fenced-off baby playpen with a bunch of brightly colored, ethically sourced, cruelty free, painted blocks and multiple artisan, handmade, stuffed animals. Ava snapped a picture of Jenna with the toys before grabbing two waters out of her fridge and pointing to the couch.

“Aren’t you coming, too?” Eliza moved to sit.

“I will in a second.”

Ava waited for Jenna to toss her expensive toys out of the playpen. Shrugging, she didn't bother to give them back. Instead, she gave her daughter a Walmart pop-up toy, a squeaky giraffe, and a beat-up, nigh indestructible, ball. All Jenna's favorites.

"Nice place you have here," Eliza said at last.

"Thanks." Ava automatically sat on her second-hand couch. "So?"

"I wanted to see how you were doing. We didn't stop caring for you after everything," Eliza said. "You could have visited me at my place. I thought I'd have been neutral ground."

Eliza was at least a decade older than Ava and had climbed the ranks of the surgery department to be the head of General Surgery. In her current position, Eliza had no claim to any neutral ground.

"I'm fine. I work at an urgent care clinic in Lake County now," Ava said, not giving more details.

Eliza looked over the room with its thrift store furniture and cheap knickknacks. It was a far cry from Ava's previous home, a near mansion in Eliza's neighborhood. "Do you need anything? Help?"

"My parents watch Jenna when I work. Family always comes through. I probably had an easier time than you did," Ava said. Her parents lived in Lake County, and her two siblings were still in-state.

"I can't believe it's been over a year," Eliza admitted. Last Memorial Day, her husband Scott had drowned in a boating accident, leaving Eliza a widow with two children. Her sister, Dr. Kayla Varma, pulmonary critical care, had dropped her job at Yale and moved to Cleveland. "Somehow, between me, Kayla, and Stella, we're surviving."

Eliza's situation was in some ways worse than Ava's. Kayla was the division chief of the ICU, and Stella, a distant cousin of Scott's, a busy ENT surgeon. They completed the high-powered job woman trifecta. It took the three of them

working together to care for the two fatherless children. Especially since MetroGen was more than happy to put the new blood to work.

“I’m glad you have them,” Ava said simply. “You lost more than I did.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Eliza said. “Do you ever wonder if you could have changed something? ‘Don’t get on the boat!’ Or ‘don’t get in the car.’”

Ava shrugged. “Dwelling on what could have been won’t change anything. It’s no one’s fault. We’re stuck making the best of it.”

“Are you making the best of it?” Eliza asked.

“I am. I’m fine. We’re fine. Everything’s fine,” Ava assured her.

“Aren’t you lonely?”

“I’ve got my family, I’ve got Jenna, and I had coffee with a guy,” Ava added the last part because Elizabeth seemed to believe she’d become a hermit.

“Coffee? Sounds promising? How did you meet him?”

Ava laughed, “At the coffee shop on the first floor. It’s not a date. I agreed to give him crossword puzzle lessons.”

“‘Crossword puzzle lessons.’ Is that what you kids call it these days?”

“It’s a newspaper and a coffee. Which is allowed even when separated. Nothing to write home about. Even if he’s cute,” Ava admitted, propping her feet on the much-abused coffee table.

“Wow, that’s great. I haven’t even thought about testing the waters,” Eliza said, her eyes slightly misty.

“I’m getting a divorce. He didn’t die.”

“Part of him did. Which is why I’m here,” Eliza said. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“Is he trying to sue the ER again? I’ve already been clear I won’t testify.”

“He’s not. The Fire Department and MetroGen placated him on that. Especially now that Jacob Carver got fired.”

“He’s fired? Manika fired him?” Ava straight up in surprise.

“Don’t ask me for details, please.” Elizabeth raised her hand. “By the time the news reaches me in the OR, the truth has gone full crazy rumor. Always dramatic, except you can’t tell fact from fiction.”

“None of this was his fault,” Ava said. Dr. Jacob Carver was married to the ER Chief Manika Gupta-Carver. Manika had promised she wouldn’t fire him. He’d been suspended with the expectation that he would return to work after serving his time.

“I can’t say I agree,” Elizabeth said.

“He did nothing wrong. It was a bad situation.”

“How can you be okay with it? You’re the only innocent one in this. It’s not fair. You lost everything, and you’re still paying.”

“Eliza, I’m fine. I chose this of my own free will. It’s everyone else who seems like they can’t move on.” Ava tried not to be annoyed. She didn’t work at MetroGen anymore and never would again. There was no reason to involve her in the politics. “Is that why you came here? To tell me about Jacob?”

“No, though you can probably call Manika if you want the whole story,” Eliza said.

“Then why are you here?”

It took one sentence to confirm Eliza’s visit was no social call.

“He’s seeing someone.”

CHAPTER 4



Eliza's pronouncement managed to fill the tiny apartment despite the simplicity of the statement.

Ava crossed her arms. The separation agreement had a very specific clause about intimate relationships. Any such would constitute breach of the agreement and would be treated as adultery before the divorce was finalized. His legal team had made it very clear when forcing her to sign a gag order and various NDAs that the celibacy clause would be enforced on Ava.

Clearly, the rules didn't apply to him.

Her former friend was pale, gaze fixed on the glass of water she'd set on the coffee table.

Eliza probably had no idea of the ins-and-outs of their separation, though it wasn't brain surgery to comprehend a woman dating a man who'd discarded Ava so abruptly after five years of marriage was nothing to celebrate.

But also not Eliza's fault. No point in shooting the messenger.

"Good for him, and don't use his name. We can't say things in front of her." Ava reminded her about Jenna, who was blissfully attempting to tear shreds out of the ball with her four teeth.

"The someone he's dating is my sister Kayla." Eliza held up her hands. "I want you to know I do not support this in any way. It's too much too soon, and he is the last person she should be involved with, especially after what he did to you."

The expression on her face made Ava rewind what Eliza had said about being neutral ground. Everything Eliza'd said had been in the past tense.

“You could have visited me at my place. I thought I'd have been neutral ground.”

She should have followed the same crossword advice she'd given Rafe about exact tense.

This would not rattle her.

“I said I'm fine.” Ava did have another question. “How long?”

“Officially, I don't know. Unofficially, it might have happened at the resident and fellow mixer in June,” Eliza said. Her face was clear that the unofficial version was God's truth.

“Three months ago. Good for him.”

“How can you say that? He's dictating your every move—even what you feed your own daughter. Then he's isolating you from your support network. The old him wouldn't have done any of this. Kayla doesn't know what a kind and caring person he used to be.”

“Which is why he'll be truly single soon enough,” Ava said.

“Come on. Yell at me. Be pissed. He discarded you like a piece of trash. After what you'd been through...”

“Stop. Living through it once was bad enough,” Ava cut her off.

“These aren't the actions of a good person,” Eliza said.

“This isn't my problem. It's your sister's problem. And I hope the two of them have only happiness and bliss ahead of them,” Ava said.

“Are you serious?”

“Why did you come here? To assuage your conscience? To get my blessing for your sister? You got it.” Ava picked up the water from the coffee table. The beat-up table had come with its own set of rings, no need to add more.

“That’s it?”

“He’s my past. I can’t keep looking back. There is only one thing that is important to me, and it isn’t him. I will do whatever it takes to keep Jenna. She’s the one I care about. And he will still be her father, so I have to keep an even keel.” Ava swung Jenna out of the playpen and gave her a hug.

“But...” Eliza said

“Mama!” Jenna called and turned her face toward them. Ava heard Eliza take a sharp breath, knowing what Eliza saw. Jenna had her bright blue eyes, a carbon copy of her father’s. Her skin was like Ava’s, and had level four tight red curls, like neither of them.

Genetics certainly had its quirks.

“Yes, sweetie. Ready for bath time?” Ava kissed her hair, ideally reminding Eliza who was the center of the universe in this now.

Eliza sighed. “I understand. I’m glad I got to meet her, and I felt you had to know about Kayla. I’ll see myself out.”

Ava waited until Eliza was gone to wipe the tears falling down her cheeks.

CHAPTER 5



The corner of her computer read three-fifty-nine.

Ava rubbed her eyes and checked the clock again.

Yep, it was almost four pm on a Friday two weeks later.

In less than a minute, they'd close the doors and would accept no new patients into the urgent care.

Completely different from the MetroGen ER, where it never closed, and the patients never stopped coming.

Such was medicine.

The big fish ate the little fish and became places like MetroGen. The little fish banded together, streamlining the design and expenses like urgent care centers. Or they got eaten up.

“Wow, someone jumped through the door right before the four p.m. deadline,” Rowan Shaw, the nurse practitioner, said.

“At least they could read the four signs warning them,” Ava said, waiting for the new patient's information to come through the electronic medical record.

“If you want your medicine served up like fast food, you shouldn't be shocked it's exactly what you get. No one bangs on the door of a restaurant demanding it reopen because its hours don't match your work schedule. There's another urgent care that sees patients till midnight,” Rowan observed.

“I'm surprised they don't turn off the lights and the heat at closing time,” Ava said. “It's different from working in the

MetroGen ER.”

“The ER was probably more exciting. Do you ever feel like your brain is turning to mush?”

“I’m probably not the best to ask—my daughter has a ten-word vocabulary.” Ava documented the supplies she’d used on the last patient.

“My brain is turning to nothing but *Encanto* and *Frozen* songs with my three-year-old. She says a lot, mostly in song.” From what Ava understood, Rowan was an OR nurse and came up a few times a month from Geauga Regional for extra cash as a newly minted nurse practitioner.

“Still, you can’t beat the hours,” Ava said.

“No kidding. I’ll drive up from Geauga any day for what they pay me,” Rowan agreed.

“How long is the drive?” Ava asked, moving a photo of the palm wound she’d finished suturing into the electronic medical record.

“Forty-five minutes. Those are very neat stitches,” Rowan commented on Ava’s work on the patient.

“Thank you.” The man had cut his hand open with a pocketknife trying to open a bag of chips.

“I definitely couldn’t do them so neatly,” Rowan said. “Nice horizontal mattress stitches.”

“It’s like they say—practice makes perfect.”

“Must have been a lot of practice MetroGen, right? Do the techs get to suture a lot over there?”

“Depends on how busy it is and how tired the residents are,” Ava answered.

“Still, those stitches are superb. Sure you weren’t part of the plastic surgery department?”

“No, the ER,” Ava said.

“They trained you quite well. You caught that heart attack this morning before I had a chance to see him. Good thinking

on the EKG.”

“Thanks,” Ava said, closing the patient chart.

“I’ve never seen a tech show quite as much initiative or enthusiasm as you,” Shaw commented.

“I’m new. It might pass.”

“Ever think of going back to school and getting a degree?” Rowan asked, then raised her hands as she assured her, “It’s not my business.”

Ava picked up the newly printed paperwork of the next patient, whose chief complaint was heartburn and vomiting. “No, I think I’m done with school.”

The nurse practitioner understood Ava wasn’t interested in discussing this further. Instead, she had a different question. “I’ve been meaning to ask you since you worked at MetroGen. Do you know anyone in the plastic surgery department?”

“What are you hoping to have done?”

Rowan brushed her hair with her right hand, her nursing jacket revealing an old, healed burn.

Ava didn’t say anything. Among medical circles, asking prying questions was frowned upon unless it was a compliment or the other person gave a deliberate opening.

Rowan noticed Ava’s deliberately neutral face. “Ugly, isn’t it?”

“I’ve seen worse,” Ava admitted.

“It’s a souvenir from high school,” Rowan explained and pulled her sleeve back all the way. “I actually got treated at MetroGen.”

The scars had old skin grafts patched together in cut out fashion. “They did solid work.”

“That’s what my regular doctor said. It’s vain to wonder if there’s more that could be done. The TV commercials claim Dr. Steadman and the plastic surgery department can work wonders. Ever met him?”

“On occasion,” Ava kept her answer neutral and focused on the skin before her. “Plastics usually doesn’t do scar revisions, particularly ones this old. The MetroGen Derm clinic might be more helpful. They can try some different steroids and smoothing to make the edges less noticeable.”

“Damn. TV loves to promise miracles. I should know better.”

“Hope springs eternal. You’ve got good function and full use of the hand, so I suspect they’ll tell you that you’ve got the best outcome anyone would hope for now.”

“Except going sleeveless in the summer. Ridiculous, right? I could have died in this fire and I’m complaining about not getting to wear a tank top.”

“It’s not ridiculous. You feel how you feel. The question is if any doctor on the planet can give you the perfect scar-free arm.” Ava stopped talking before she revealed too much.

“Which I know no one can,” Rowan said. “You suggest dermatology then?”

“I think so. Hmm.” Ava glanced down at the vitals of the new patient. “Want me to get an EKG on this one?”

Rowan skimmed the chart, noting the age and elevated heart rate of the woman. They’d already caught a heart attack once today, and women tended to have uncommon presentations. “Start there. If it’s abnormal, you have my permission to call 911 immediately.”

The urgent care wasn’t the place to get your heart attack treated. You needed to be in the hospital in the cath lab STAT, ideally within ninety minutes to save the heart muscle. The fastest way to do that was via the Mentor FD ambulance.

“Yes, ma’am.” Ava rolled the EKG machine toward the door.

“See, you should think about more school,” Rowan said, following her into the room.

“Thanks. I’m good as I am.”

With Jenna away this weekend, she only had to wait till tomorrow morning to see Rafe after his shift ended.

Hopefully he liked her for who she was now.

CHAPTER 6



“**W**hat are you doing?” Lieutenant Aiden Clark of Firehouse 15 stared at Rafe in the men’s locker room on Saturday morning.

“What do you mean ‘what am I doing’?” Rafe tilted his neck and added more shaving cream.

“Kevin, get your butt over here. You’ve got to see this!” Aiden called his best friend, Kevin Jones, over to the bathroom mirrors.

“Fuck off, assholes.” Rafe had given himself a haircut and was now using a real metal razor on his face.

“Oh my God!” Kevin’s dark brown eyes twinkled and ran back to the door. “Put it on the intercom. Falcon has a date.”

They might as well have put it on a freaking banner because the rest of the Firehouse 15 A-shift crowded through the door, including the two women.

Lieutenant Luna Rodriguez pushed her way to the front. A fellow Cleveland Puerto Rican, she teased him in Spanish. “*¡No jibaro aquí. Mira ese gato que viene ahí!*”

Rafe ignored her saying the equivalent of ‘Ain’t no hillbilly! See the hot cat on the prowl’.”

The only other woman in the firehouse, the blonde ex beauty queen Vanessa Knight, said, “I hope you’re telling him he looks bangable. Who’s the lucky lady?”

“Hopefully, someone one who’ll punch his V-card,” Kevin catcalled. Rafe debated shoving him through the mirror.

Best not. Kevin was the only guy at Firehouse 15 who rivaled Rafe for sheer muscle but accompanied it with the attention span of a hummingbird.

“Come on, he ain’t no virgin,” George Kenner commented from the back. “Or not, according to his ex-wives.”

“Break it up, children.” Captain Mateo Soto marched through the same door. “Is this how we treat our senior leadership?”

“Of course not, sir,” Aiden immediately deferred to the captain. The entire room knew the captain’s fake gruff act was precisely that, and Aiden’s deferral would only egg them on.

“We absolutely don’t tease our *broki*.” Luna used the slang term for brother with a straight face. As the captain’s niece, she had a bigger license to sass her uncle, provided it didn’t occur during a scene. Strangling the captain’s niece or cleaning the clock of Aiden, the heir apparent to taking over the firehouse in the next few years, wasn’t an option.

Over forty now, Rafe was feeling ancient compared to these youngsters. There was a clear divide between the new class of almost-thirties and the old guard. George and two of the other guys were pushing fifty, and boy did it show some days.

“It’s not a date. I’m having a morning coffee and working on my crossword puzzle skills.”

Aiden held up a nearby bottle. “The crossword puzzle is into aftershave?”

“And polo shirts?” Luna pointed at Rafe’s best jeans folded up with his second-best polo shirt.

“Or, even better, if you need to score, the klaxon rings, and we go to a fire. You show up dirty and ashy. ‘Sorry, I’m late. Saving lives.’” Vanessa waved her arms. “Trust me, the ladies fall for it every time.”

“Don’t listen to her,” George said from the back.

“Definitely not. Remember, though, when you seal the deal, don’t forget her name,” Kevin imparted equally

questionable advice.

“Too late. The shift’s over. Scram. Leave the man in peace,” Soto barked. “Even a *perro viejo* can learn new tricks. He’ll be fine without your help.”

The crowd melted away except for Aiden Clarke.

Rafe addressed him. “Something else you need to say?”

“Not about your dating. Luna and I were talking. You doing okay?”

“‘Luna’ is it?” Rafe carefully applied the aftershave, examining his face in the mirror.

“Don’t change the subject. I wanted to check up on you,” Clarke said. “You and George.”

Rafe scowled. “Of course we are.”

“Well, I noticed you stopped going to therapy.”

“I went the required amount.” As of last December, he’d attended the mandatory six sentinel event debrief sessions.

“I don’t know what happened that day. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

Rafe made sure his tone brokered no argument.

Clarke wasn’t willing to let him off easily. “Soto mentioned you traded off of Medic six times this month.”

It was interesting Soto had tried to sic Clarke on him rather than Rodriguez. Soto should have been aware Rafe and Clarke could talk a good long time without actually mentioning the elephant in the room.

“Yeah. Ladder has way less calls than Medic. And no subs.”

Firehouse 15 was the busiest house in the city, and Medic 15 went to three times as many calls as Ladder or Engine 15. When they were struggling to fill staffing, Cleveland FD typically stuck the substitutes on Medic, where being less familiar with the regular team was a smaller issue.

“The extra two dollars an hour isn’t tempting enough for you?” Clarke asked.

“*¡De ninguna manera!* The Chief can keep his extra two dollars an hour,” Rafe said in reference to the hourly increase he got for every Medic shift as an official Spanish translator. Since Chief Baker was elevated to Fire Chief, he’d offered an oral and written test to qualify as bilingual and get that pay raise.

Rafe’s days of volunteering to switch to other firehouses or onto Medic died in November last year.

“Am I supposed to put Vanessa with the sub for the fourth time this month?”

Rafe shrugged. “I don’t want to be with the sub. At least it’s Vanessa. The last time Rodriguez was with the sub, she sang with the radio. He swore he’d cut his wrists before going through that again.”

“Luna’s singing is terrible.”

“‘Luna’ again? What the hell do you think you’re doing, Lieutenant Clarke?” Rafe asked. Calling each other by first names was fine and good while teasing each other. However, if Clarke was going to play the Lieutenant card, it wasn’t the time to slip up.

Clarke blushed. “I’m not doing anything, and you’re changing the subject, Firefighter Falcon.”

“You and Rodriguez think I’m in trouble because I won’t work Medic anymore for two measly dollars. Or maybe you should keep your hands off our new lieutenant.”

“Shit, man. We aren’t anything.”

“As it should be, *hermano*. Captain sent her away to that fancy college, and she came back home the second she graduated to join the department,” Rafe reminded Clarke. Rodriguez’s parents had died around Rafe’s rookie year, and Captain Soto had raised her practically in the firehouse. With her college education and language skills, she got her extra two dollars an hour and a promotion to lieutenant back in

June. “Her uncle expects her to go far. She’s not for blue-collar slobs like us.”

“I know. I know.” Clarke raised his hands. It had taken him multiple attempts to pass the lieutenant exam, which Rodriguez had breezed through on her first try.

“Do you? The captain has a shotgun and shiv. He’d gut a *gringo* like you, and I’d be honor-bound to help him.”

“Would you cut the crap already? I’m not dumb enough to date in the firehouse. And we, your officers, both of us, are concerned about you.”

“Only me? What happened to George?” Rafe had a good idea where this was going.

“He says he’s still talking to the counselor. You aren’t.”

“I went to the required amount of sessions,” Rafe repeated his earlier statement. As commanded, he had followed to the letter his Fire Chief-mandated therapy almost nine months ago. Hell, he’d don’t everything he’d been told by the legal department and his union rep.

Never talk about the incident. Don’t ask questions about the incident. Avoid thinking about the incident even if you wake up with nightmares.

“As your boss and your friend, I’m concerned you might be burning out. You’ve been divorced about two years, and she took your kid.”

Rafe stepped away from Clarke, his eyes narrowing. Of course Clarke went there. “Wasn’t my kid.”

He had to give Clarke credit; the lieutenant didn’t back down. “It changed you. And then... what happened this winter?”

No. They weren’t doing this.

Rafe wasn’t supposed to discuss the incident outside of those forced therapy sessions. How his attitude had worsened wasn’t Clarke’s business. Rafe was still doing his job.

“Nothing happened I couldn’t handle,” Rafe said. “Thank you for inquiring, sir.”

While Clarke wasn’t happy, there wasn’t much he could do. “I’ll drop it... for now.”

“Good choice,” Rafe agreed in a clipped voice.

“Be glad it was me and not Lun... Rodriguez. She was planning on cornering you and singing at point blank range until you broke.”

“*¡Los Santos nos protegen!*” The saints had better protect him. It was no exaggeration that her voice could have been used in Guantanamo Bay interrogations.

“And she’s more relentless than I am. You’ll have to watch your back to make sure she doesn’t ambush you with a song.”

“Then I’ll carry ear protection.”

“Let me know if you need anything. Though for dating advice, I’ll send Kevin. He dates enough for two people.”

“Three!” Kevin reappeared from where he had probably been eavesdropping. “Might be four. Oh, if you’re ever late, show up covered in ash and explain you saved a kitten from a tree. Or a baby. And the tree was on fire.”

“If the baby was in a tree...” Clarke rolled his eyes at his friend.

“Trust me, they never ask the how it happened. They only care about you being big and strong. And Vanessa was wrong about showing up covered in ash. It’s an ash-rodesiac.”

“Worse wordplay ever,” Rafe said. He bet Kevin, who was quite intelligent, though flighty, was excellent at crossword puzzles.

CHAPTER 7



Ava came down from her apartment to the coffee shop and was surprised to see Rafe already there. They'd agreed to meet at ten thirty before the lunchtime Saturday rush but not so soon it would pressure him for time to finish his shift at the firehouse.

Freshly shaved, he had two cups of coffee and six muffins stacked on the table. At least one newspaper had also been used for his crossword work.

She'd worn an orange yellow dress with a black sweater wrap over top to protect her from the October air. He stared at her like she was a yummy muffin he wanted to eat.

His reaction made her blush, and she tried to return a tiny amount of his intensity. This was the first time she'd seen him without a Firehouse 15 crew shirt. He'd opted for jeans and a red polo, the short sleeves stretched out over his biceps. She desperately wanted to run her fingers across the scar on his wrist and up to the black tattoo.

"Umm," he stood abruptly and pulled out a chair for her. She sat down on it, and he didn't move.

Glancing up at him, she realized her dress draped in front enough to show off the curves of her chest and the freckles she'd hated her whole life. "Rafe?"

"Sorry," he mumbled something about cinnamon and found his own seat.

"I like your shirt." She picked up a mug of coffee. "Is one of these mine?"

“Either one. Might be cold,” he added quickly. “Not because you’re late. I came early.”

“Oh. There are free refills.” She sipped one of the lukewarm cups. “Thank you.”

“I can get more. And sugar. Or cream.” His voice got louder on each word.

She took his hand to refocus him, recognizing part of what made him tick. He lived in a rough world of doing things, acting, not waiting for events to happen. Rafe had been sitting still too long and growing more frustrated with the inability to ‘do’ anything. The waitress was circling them without coming closer to Rafe, unsure if it was safe to give them coffee.

“How about I get us more hot coffee from the waitress, and you bring the sugar and creamer?”

“Shit, I should have thought of that,” he grumbled.

“Don’t worry. I do like your shirt. Nice to see you don’t live at the fire department.” His brows drew together, and she plowed onward. “When we get back, we’ll start the crossword lesson.”

Finally having instructions, Rafe shot off and rejoined her for coffee. She took one sugar, no cream, he took two sugars and a lot of cream.

When she hid her smile, he said, “If my firehouse asked, I only like it black.”

“Our secret.” She let her knee drift into his, hoping he would relax. “So, today, it’s the harder crossword, but lots of the rules stay the same.”

“I’m ready.” He gave her his full attention, and now she blushed. He might be grumpy, but despite his rough edges, he was obviously attracted to her, and her to him.

“The easiest clues are fill in the blank. If you see four letters a blank and the word ‘bunny’ capitalized, what’s it going to be?”

“Bugs Bunny.”

“Exactly. They’ll also use hyphen words. The other really easy ones are the two and three letter ones because there are only so many combinations. TV companies, too - ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX.”

“Every sports channel is ESPN, right?” he guessed, giving her a tiny smile.

Ava almost bit her tongue. He probably had no idea that when he relaxed, his hard features were completely kissable. There was a scar on his chin, and she could smell the piney scent of his aftershave.

“Learning the crossword favorites like ‘aloe’ helps, too. Then notice if the clue ends with an ‘ing’ or ‘ed.’ The tenses have to match. So stitched means ‘sewed,’ and stitching means sewing.”

“Huh, should I go through and fill in ED’s and ING’s?” He put the pencil to the paper.

“Not yet. The Saturday crossword tends to be tricky. Wear becomes worn, not weared.”

“Which is why I’m awful at it,” Rafe said, breaking his pencil point again.

“Let me see how you’ve done so far.” Ava reached for his paper, but he drew it back.

“We can use my extra blank one.” He averted his gaze.

“Why? I want to see how you’re doing. It’s just a crossword puzzle.”

“I have a blank one.”

“Don’t be silly. How can we understand the mistakes if we can’t see them?” While he could easily out strength her, she poked his ribs, startling him and giving over to her desire to touch him.

Her tactic worked great because he let go of the paper and she ended up sprawled on top of him.

A wave of heat slammed into her. He dwarfed her in every way, holding her like she weighed nothing, which was

certainly not true.

Ava wiggled out of his embrace in possession of his paper. “Wait till I teach you about the abbreviation and double meaning words.”

Then she glanced down and realized why he hadn’t wanted her to take his paper.

Twenty-five percent of the crossword puzzle clues had been filled in, though there were a few holes in the paper from multiple erasures.

The part he was freaking out about was written in the margins...

Convo topics

How are you?

What’s your favorite movie?

What is your occupation?

What’s your favorite food?

How old are you?

Do you have food allergies?

Are you taking any medications?

Stop taking her history and physical.

Tell her

Nice dress.

Nice shoes.

Nice hair.

Stop saying nice.

She's pretty.

She smells good.

You're thinking about her a lot.

Endlessly.

Naked.

The poor man had broken out in a sweat and his face showed he was ready to face a fire—or a firing squad—at this moment in time.

A new waiter came by with a pot of coffee. “Refill, anyone?”

“No!” Rafe barked, simultaneously crushing the pencil in his hand again.

“It’s no problem. No coffee. We have more.” She waved the waiter away and placed her left hand on Rafe’s right, carefully opening his palm to remove the shattered wood.

“Fuck. Sorry. I’m an ass. I should leave.”

“Stop.” Taking refuge in audacity, she leaned forward and ran her tongue across the seam of his lips. “Me too. A lot. Endlessly. Naked.”

A very inappropriate vision waltzed through her mind, imagining her hands on his shoulders as she sank onto his hard...

Take it down a notch. She was on her first (or second date) in almost a decade. Back off the lonely, desperate for affection, almost-divorced lady vibe.

“What if we go hang out upstairs at my place? You, me, and those muffins. Low key,” she suggested.

“If you’re sure.” Rafe scrunched up his face, making his scar more prominent.

“Trust me. I’m sure I can’t eat six muffins by myself.”

CHAPTER 8



This ray of sunshine who was clearly far more than he deserved had transferred their coffees into to-go cups and brought the muffins with them to her apartment.

To prove he hadn't been raised by wolves, Rafe had left an absurdly large tip for the wait staff.

As she unlocked the door, Ava said, "It's not much."

"It's fine. Trust me, an expensive beautiful house can hide plenty of ugliness—secret hoarding, overloaded extension cords. It's not the house, it's the people who live in it."

She blushed and let him in. "Thanks. Make yourself at home while I get plates."

Behind the door was an immaculate, though rather well-used, apartment. The appliances had seen their youth back in the 70s, though Ava had coaxed more shine than he would've thought possible from them.

He hung his coat on a hook behind the door and waited by her kitchen table. Based on the Dewey Decimal numbers carved into its surface, it had started its life in a library and was lucky to spend its retirement in her kitchen.

Once she set the table, he pulled out her chair. "For the hostess."

"You're being very sweet." She beamed at him.

The force of her unadulterated joy at this basic courtesy was practically a blow to his chest. What the hell was she doing within ten feet of him?

Though he hadn't felt like dating lately, he rarely attracted women like her. After a few beers, he was better at picking up women. He just became less aware of his shortcomings, and the women who responded weren't interested in much more otherwise.

Case in point, Ava unfolded their crossword puzzles and gave him his newspaper back—with a pen.

“What's this?” He held the offending writing utensil away from him.

“Three letters. Contains ink.” She took a cinnamon muffin off the newly plated half dozen for a bite.

“Ava.”

“Or sty. Also, three letters.”

“I know it's a pen. Why is it a pen?”

“‘Why is a raven like a writing desk?’ Also, a common clue. Poe.” She ate more of the muffin.

“A pen. Really?”

“Another one they always use is Paris. Not the city. Sometimes the Hilton. More often in a clue about unwinnable choices. Paris of Troy.”

“Yes. Using a pen on a crossword puzzle is an unwinnable choice.”

“Why? It's not an unwinnable choice. It's a crossword puzzle. Simple as that.” Ava shrugged.

“I destroy newspapers when I erase my mistakes. Obviously, the best solution is a pen.”

Not the least bit put out by his attitude, Ava smiled again and took a sip of coffee. “My bad. I should have started your crossword lessons by telling you everyone makes mistakes. You don't have to erase them. No one else cares.”

“I care. My paper gets messy.”

“And trying to obliterate your mistakes by erasing through the paper isn't messy?”

Ava set down her muffin and snatched his paper back. She flipped it over and smeared her hand down the opposite side of the paper.

No big surprise. Her hand ended up smudged with black newsprint. “Don’t stress. The paper was never clean or perfect, no matter if you use a pencil or a pen. Think about that for a second.”

Rafe stared at her as she got up to wash her hands. She was beyond out of his league. Sensitive, empathetic, she effortlessly guessed how flawed he’d felt for almost a year.

She was the very opposite of Kevin Jones’s ‘hit it and forget it’ strategy. This woman was meant to be a partner for someone, using her sunshine to make that lucky guy’s life a thousand times better.

The right thing to do was explain to her he wasn’t that lucky guy, and he needed to leave ASAP.

He promptly forgot his intentions when she brightly plopped back down on her chair, saying, “Want to eat my muffin?”

Fuck. That explained everything.

Sex. She brought him here for sex.

He was relieved... and oddly hurt.

“Are you a badge bunny?”

“A what?” She tilted her head quizzically.

“I’m asking if I’m here for sex.”

“Why would you think that?”

“You asked me to eat your muffin.” He shifted his hips because the blood was leaving his brain and rushing straight to below his belt.

“Oh... well. I meant this muffin. It’s enormous.” She pointed to her partially eaten cinnamon sugar muffin.

Rafe rubbed his temples. “I’m a shithead. Don’t let me talk anymore. I’m sorry.”

“At least you haven’t tried to run away yet. So, what is it?”

“What is what?” Rafe stumbled, getting overwhelmed by her unflinching refusal to judge him.

“A badge bunny.”

Several answers popped into his mind. He struggled to use the most tasteful one. “A woman who... prefers police officers or firefighters.”

“She prefers them for their crossword skills?”

“No. She wants them for their techniques and skills.” He willed his dick to stop straining against his zipper.

“Ambulance chaser was already taken by lawyers? Are firefighters and police officers particularly better at sex?” She looked highly amused at the idea.

“We work out a lot. Got testosterone, muscles, carrying stuff. Obviously not super smart, but dynamite in the sack.” God, stop him now. Had he actually explained this to her?

“Are you dynamite in the sack?” She laid her much smaller paler hand on his.

He almost choked. “I can’t speak for all firefighters. Might have heard a lewd joke or two.”

“Lewd? How lewd?” The woman had to be teasing him, but her hand climbing its way from his wrist to his elbow mesmerized him.

“The usual. Find you hot, leaves you wet. Put the hose in the hole. Grease my pole. Make you scream louder than a siren.”

“Louder than a siren?”

“Sirens are really loud.” He cleared his throat. “We’re supposed to be commanding, decisive, and powerful, which is what badge bunnies want when they bring a firefighter home.”

“Never thought I would be a badge bunny, and I’m not doing a good job of convincing the one firefighter I did bring home to kiss me.”

“Kiss you?” The hand was tracing the whirls of his tattoo up to the edge of his polo shirt.

“Since I’ve never kissed a firefighter, I can’t count as a badge bunny. I admit, I do stare at your muscles when you mangle your newspaper, and I got you to carry my groceries so I could watch them more.”

“They’re good for more than your groceries.”

“Hmm.” She stood and untied the black wrap she’d worn to protect against the cold. Rafe’s jaw almost fell on the floor when she said, “Want to show me?”

CHAPTER 9



Rafe almost knocked over the table in his haste to reach Ava. He got a brief glimpse of an orange sheathe dress and the edge of her bra with a smattering of freckles because his body moved without conscious thought.

His mouth was already on hers, his hands on her ass, pulling her against him. She tasted exactly like the coffee and the cinnamon sugar of the muffins. Her open mouth welcomed him, and he intended to devour each taste and sip of her sweet softness. Ava draped her body around him and unbuttoned the top buttons of his polo.

The groan he couldn't control encouraged her to hike her skirt up until her legs could straddle his thighs.

He'd been thinking he'd gone out of bounds in his questions about her being a badge bunny. Instead, he'd failed to consider the most logical answer—basic physical attraction.

This good girl had needs, because she matched his enthusiasm in her kiss.

“Couch?” she murmured for the brief second she wasn't sucking on his tongue.

“Yes.” Rafe didn't bother to separate their bodies by even a few inches. He picked her up with ease into a bridal carry, never breaking the kiss. They stumbled to the couch, and he lay back to keep her on top of him.

She ended up straddling his chest, her mouth a deeper shade of pink than it had been minutes ago.

“You’re going to kill me,” he said.

“Like this?” Ava slid down over his hips, rocking slightly against his dick, which had grown to full readiness.

That made him sit up to watch her experimentally adjust her position.

“Ava,” he murmured, pleasure-pain shooting through him. “We shouldn’t...”

“You’re right.” Her agreement didn’t stop her from pushing the edge of his polo shirt upward. “Can I at least see how big the dragon is?”

“It’s huge and roaring to go.”

She laughed without reaching for his aching cock because her hands stayed under his shirt. “Not that dragon, though I’m sure it’s fabulous. I mean this dragon.”

His tattoo. She wanted to explore his tattoo.

“Anything you want.” He had to sit up to remove his shirt. Fortunately for her, and unfortunately for him, it moved her off his lap, which kept him from being reduced to full slobbering caveman.

He stretched his arms out, displaying the finished product, which had taken over a year to complete. The head started on his right pec, its body covered both his arms and wings on his shoulder blades.

Ava echoed his thoughts. “This must have taken a ton of work.”

Her smooth hands petted the wings, meeting in the center of his back. Without asking for permission, she feathered kisses across his shoulders and down the mismatch of burns and scars mixed between the ink.

“It was,” he admitted, leaning into her touch, almost like an animal willing to take any amount of affection.

“What does it mean?” She twisted her arm around his chest from behind and kissed the back of his neck. Seeing

white hands encircle his waist from behind, he took calming breaths.

She wasn't an easy lay, and he had to be careful with her. Though she never said anything specifically, he sensed something almost delicate and fragile about her.

Rafe used his much longer wingspan to lead her back to his front. She perched on his hips, allowing him to sense the silkiness hidden beneath her dress. He kissed her lips gently, trying to contain the part of his mind screaming to get her naked beneath him.

It took a few long, drugging kisses to convince him to answer her question. "Freedom and fire. The dragon owns the sky, and he controls the fire."

She laid her head on his chest, practically listening to his racing heart. "Ahh, fill in the blank. Thrones author. Abbreviated. Four letters."

Rafe cradled her there, forcing the brakes on his hormones. Too much too fast. They were on their second sort of date, and she wasn't divorced yet. "Umm. GRRM."

"They kind of count for freedom and fire. Minus the incest babies."

"Always good to not include." He exhaled, near calm. "Slowing down here."

"Yeah," she agreed. "I do want to kiss the dragon—a lot—but I should get to know him better."

"Rushing in is how you get burned." She wasn't helping him stay calm if she talked that way.

"In the spirit of slowing down, want to talk more crossword puzzle rules? How are you in other languages? They love Latin."

He pointed to a tattoo on his left wrist reading *Nunca olvides*. "Puerto Rican. Spanish is my playground."

"They use *Nunca* all the time for never clues. What does your tattoo mean?"

“Never forget.” He didn’t expand on it.

“You’re not doing a good job of keeping it light. But I’ll make it happen.”

“*Muchas suerte*, lots of luck on that. I’m a regular *oso gruñón*—a grumpy bear.”

“More of a grumpy dragon. How do you say that?” She seemed fascinated by every word out of his mouth.

“Pretty close to the same. *Dragón gruñón*.”

“We’ll see how long you stay a *dragón gruñón*. What if we want to answer the questions on your list?”

“Nope, I have to go.” He pretended to get up, and she climbed on top of him again, play pinning his wrists. Her bright blue eyes stared into his brown ones, practically drunk with lust.

“Stay. I’ve got you where I want you.” She ducked down to kiss the head of the dragon, making him groan again.

“You do?” His attempts to scowl were easily defeated by her mischievous grin.

“Yep.” She hopped off him and headed to the table, returning with their coffees, muffins, and newspapers. “Let’s run this list. I also like my shoes and dress.”

“God, you’re going to kill me.”

“I think your shirt looks great. On my floor.” She settled into the crook of his arm as he sat up. “How am I doing? Is that what a badge bunny would say? Do I mention I’m hot and bothered? You?”

“Cranky and not kissed enough.” Rafe play bit her almost bare shoulder.

“Oh, I like that answer.” She continued to read the list. “My favorite movie? *The Princess Bride*. Yours?”

“*Office Space*.” Rafe did his best to surreptitiously adjust his hard-on.

“I Love Kung Fu,” she quoted the line.

“Do you?” he asked.

“Not really, though I hope you can tolerate sword fights between the Man in Black and Inigo.”

“I’ll survive somehow,” Rafe said, realizing he’d almost certainly do anything this glorious beaming angel suggested—without protest. Her absolute refusal to let him be grumpy over their smartly aborted tryst was almost a sprinkling of freaking fairy dust.

Even if it meant they’d be doing every single ridiculous item on his list.

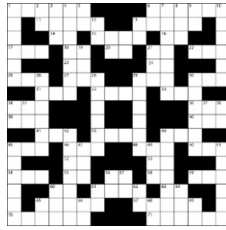
Whoever her ex was must have been the dumbest man on the planet.

“My occupation? I’m a medical tech at an urgent care in Lake County.”

“I’m a firefighter.”

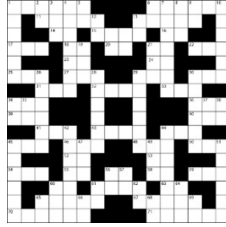
“Good. Next question. Favorite food?”

PART TWO



ISAAC OF GENESIS 22 (9 LETTERS)

SACRIFICE



FROM THE DIARY OF CHAPLAIN AT METROGEN

October

You may believe MetroGen is made of cement and rebar. Physically, that is true.

Spiritually, I like to think it's held up by prayer.

Metaphorically, it's made of gossip. It runs the hospital.

This particular rumor came from the ER when the firefighters brought in a patient. The charge nurse told me... I'd say it's been almost a year since I've heard a pregnant mother's case go this badly.

Gonna send an email to the charge nurse to invite her outgoing shift to my office for 'Spiritual Music for the Soul with Wine and Cupcakes.' We'll need plenty of wine.

CHAPTER 10



This had been one of those God-awful twenty-four-hour shifts.

It started with a morning house fire. No fatalities was a plus. However, then they got to stay and work overhaul, which was essentially fire suppression cleanup. The water has to go somewhere.

Overhaul meant several hours of hard manual labor with saws and Halligan bars, ripping up burned sections of the house to confirm no smoldering fire had been left behind.

Worse, they had to wear most their gear and oxygen because there were fumes everywhere and only God fucking knew what hazardous materials had caught on fire.

Midnight had led to a second house fire. This one was a three alarm, requiring multiple firehouses. Firehouse 15 had been first on the scene, and Rafe had been on Ladder, whose job was search and rescue. They'd found three people, only two with pulses. The other victim was a grandpa who had gone to sleep and never woken up.

And the shift wasn't over yet, because they had a call to a high-speed car accident in at seven am on the freeway. A small green car had plowed directly into the center barrier, and it was clear neither the driver nor the front seat passenger had been wearing a seatbelt. The windshield was gone, and the passengers had been ejected.

The police beat Firehouse 15 there, so their lights were on, blocking the Saturday morning traffic trying to zip by. The

Ladder, Engine, and Medic added their bulk and lights because there was always an asshole trying to speed past the accident at a hundred miles an hour.

With the scene safely marked, Rafe and George went with Medic team to evaluate the two ejected passengers while Lieutenant Clark and Knight assessed the car.

Rodriguez was on Medic with the swing shifter who had survived her singing, going on twenty-four hours.

It only took a few seconds to recognize the driver was a lost cause. His head... it was not... good.

“Check the other one.” Rodrigueuz sent George and Mr. Swing-shift away.

Switching his leather glove for a disposable one, Rafe felt for a carotid pulse. The head was twisted at an unnatural angle, and he was only confirming what was obvious.

Rodrigueuz took out her stethoscope for good measure and listened before shaking her head. “Nothing. Time of death 8:35.”

They covered the body with one of the exposure blankets rather than leave it sitting out mangled. The morgue would come get it later, since their duty right now was to the living.

“Help!” Swing shift waved them over.

George had started CPR on the other victim.

Even as Rafe and Lieutenant Rodrigueuz raced over, they could see the problem.

George and Swing Shift had cut apart the victim’s shirt, revealing a pregnant belly. Her motionless face shook with every compression, her brown eyes open and sightless.

Bile fought its way up Rafe’s throat.

This could not be happening again.

Rodrigueuz yelled, “Hold compressions. Stop.”

Rafe placed his hand on the woman’s rapidly cooling neck. What he didn’t find was a foregone conclusion. “No pulse.”

“Then stop. She’s a black tag.” Rodriguez used the triage term for patients who had no hope of survival.

George argued, “We just got here. We can still—”

“The call came in fifteen minutes ago. She was out of time the second they hit the barrier.”

“No,” George hissed, throwing off his turnouts and preparing to do more compressions. “It hasn’t been too long.”

“Firefighter Kenner. I told you to stop. They hit a stationary object going seventy miles per hour. She’s forty feet from the car. There was never anything to save.”

George wrestled the jumpbag containing more medical supplies from Swing Shift’s shoulder. “No... we can save the baby.”

“The baby’s gone, too,” Rodriguez said, reaching to grip the jump bag.

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem if we get a scalpel and—”

“Absolutely not.” She released the bag, letting George stagger back, and felt for a pulse on her own. “She’s gone. Time of death 8:42.”

The radio on the shoulder of Rafe’s turnout jacket reminded him they had other duties. “Falcon, Kenner, report to the car. We’ve got a kid in the back.”

“Yes, Lieutenant Clarke,” Rafe said, whipping out another exposure blanket, unwilling to spend another second looking at the motionless form.

Rodriguez gently pushed him back. “Solari and I have this. We’ll meet you for the extraction.”

Rafe turned to leave and noticed George hadn’t followed him. His fellow firefighter had a blank expression, staring into the morning traffic.

“Come on, man. We’ve got an extraction.” Rafe passed the discarded turnouts back to George.

“I could try. Give me a scalpel,” George mumbled, stepping closer to the traffic.

Not today. Rafe seized George's shoulder and dragged him back to the smashed car. "You stay here."

"About time you joined us," Clarke said. He and Knight had already chocked the vehicle to keep it from rolling for the extraction. The hydraulic press—aka the Jaws of Life—was ready to crack open the door.

The rest of the team had already cut the battery, and Engine 15 was standing nearby with their handline in case of ignition.

A child around a year old or so, was in a rear facing car seat behind the passenger seat.

Judging by the pink Mini Mouse blankets, it was a she. A very confused, crying she, unhappy at the unfamiliar faces trying to break into the car.

"Thank God for freaking car seats," Vanessa exclaimed as the hydraulic press chewed its way through the door.

Rafe squeezed through the newly opened space, mindful of the rough metal edges remaining of the door. He cut the tethers on the car seat to slide it across the back bench, trying to keep the same angle.

"It's all right, honey," he crooned to the little girl from behind his safety glasses. The girl stared at his face, and he puffed his cheeks out, successfully distracting her.

"Car clear?" Vanessa asked, meaning Rafe had to confirm there were no other occupants in the car, including animals.

"No one else. Purse in the front seat, diaper bag on the floor." Rafe passed the car seat to Clarke, and Vanessa scooted into the spot he had vacated. Being smaller, she fit more easily between the seats to snag the bags.

Clarke and Rafe transferred the car seat onto the waiting gurney while Rodriguez and Swing Shift Solari did a quick survey.

In general, it was best not to remove a rescue from their car seat when there were no visible injuries. The seat provided

adequate support and restraint since it was damn near impossible to get a C-collar on a child of this size.

A police officer rifled through the purse, quickly hunting for ID's. Vanessa pointed to the tag on the diaper bag. "This might help."

"Says here, Angel Lawson, has an address. Same address as the driver's license, different name." Rodriguez snapped a photo of both on her phone and said, "We'll head to MetroGen then. Coroner should be on his way."

"Roger that. We'll wait here for the tow truck and stay with the vics," the police officer said.

It took another twenty minutes to pack up their gear and get back to Firehouse 15. George remained completely silent and non-participatory other than climbing into Ladder 15.

"Are you okay, Kenner?" Clarke asked for the fourth time as they approached the firehouse.

"Fine," George mumbled.

Like hell they were fine. Neither of them had been fine for a year.

Nothing was fine and never would be again.

They parked inside the barn of Firehouse 15. Rafe stayed with George in the back cab, listening for the rest of the team to unload from the Engine and Ladder.

It was well after ten a.m., and the B shift was more than ready to take over. They'd even cleaned up the trucks and equipment.

He and George could be free.

Assuming they could take the first step... getting out of the ladder truck.

George kept his face hidden, rubbing his forehead over and over.

Rafe suspected he was hiding tears. Except it was a violation of the Firefighter Manliness code to ask another dude

if he was crying. Beaten up, having a heart attack, hallucinating, crazy-drunk questions were fair game.

Not crying.

The side door opened, and Captain Soto said, “Kenner, Falcon, out.”

The captain hadn’t been on the overnight scene, yet the look in his eyes spoke volumes. There was no way Rodriguez hadn’t told him about George’s scalpel plan. Rafe couldn’t muster the energy to be angry at her for narc’ing on them.

George stumbled out the door after Rafe. Soto said, “My office. Now.”

Rafe moved toward the hallways, and Soto blocked him. “Not you. Kenner only.”

The remains of A-shift and the whole incoming B-shift watched Soto guide George past the gym to his glass-walled captain’s office. Soto made George sit down across from the desk and shut the door.

“We need our turnout gear stowed,” Clarke called them to action. “Come on, everyone. B-shift, check the trucks.”

Doing his best to stay calm, Rafe walked into the turnout room where they had individual cages to keep their gear. At his cage, he slammed his helmet into the metal wall.

Shouting with rage, he threw his dirty turnouts at the industrial-size laundry hamper. He missed, so he flipped the hamper and kicked the hell out of the pile of jackets and pants. Dust and smoke rose from the pile, but it didn’t slow him down.

Clarke and Kevin entered and promptly handed him their helmets. Rafe smashed them on the wall and stomped on their offered turnouts, too.

He wasn’t wearing air; he wasn’t in a fire, and he still couldn’t breathe. There wasn’t enough oxygen in the room.

Or the world.

Fortunately, Kevlar doesn't break, and his legs got tired before he injured himself.

"Need more to break? There's plenty of ugly dishes upstairs I've never liked," Clarke said.

"No. I'm fine." Rafe tried to smooth out his dirty, sweaty, navy, Firehouse 15 uniform T-shirt.

"Yes, I can tell," Kevin agreed. "Never been finer. More fine. The finest of the fine."

"Exactly," Rafe said.

"All right. You're correct. Definitely. We recommend you go blow off some steam. We're going to Gold's Gym to pick up a few ladies and then to the grocery store to pick up more ladies," Kevin explained.

"That's only Kevin," Clarke said. "I will actually work out and go grocery shopping."

"I work out. And stuff. I have needs and not just for food."

While Kevin might have been a man-ho, he did make a valid point. They weren't hit as hard as George and Rafe had been, but they weren't made of stone. They needed an outlet, something to take the edge off, even a temporary, warm, welcoming body.

"Aww, fuck." Rafe realized he was more than an hour late to his not-date/crossword puzzle lesson with Ava. "I'm late for my girl."

"Excellent. You focus on getting some, not this crappy shift," Kevin helpfully suggested.

Rafe rushed out the door with his keys, wishing it were that simple. A quick glance up the hallway showed Soto still talking to George, who was crumpled over, head in his hands.

Leaving the firehouse didn't mean the weight ever left his shoulders.

CHAPTER 11



Ava drank her fourth cup of decaf coffee, having already reached her limit of two regular cups.

It was nearly lunchtime, and she hadn't had a single message from Rafe.

He was supposed to be finishing a 24-hour shift. He was probably late because a scene had gone long or something. No reason to worry. If he hadn't ditched her for not being able to commit to a relationship before, he probably wouldn't do it today.

The front door of the coffee shop opened, allowing cold October air into the coffee shop. Rafe had arrived, not in his date-ware polo and neat jeans but a wrinkled Cleveland fire uniform.

Equally out of character, he brought with him the acrid scent of sweat, smoke, and diesel. His face was an angry grimace, similar to the first time she'd approached him.

The hostess moved to greet him and backpedaled at his scowl. He scanned the room until his gaze fell on Ava.

Stepping around the hostess, he stopped directly in front of Ava. From there, he stood without speaking, his chest heaving. Ava tentatively pointed to the seat next to her with its waiting paper and cooling coffee.

"Want coffee? I ordered you a grande, two packets of sugar, lots of cream."

He moved to sit, but accidentally swiped the coffee with his elbow, pouring it across the table. Faster than she expected, he jumped up and pulled her away from the rapidly growing river of brown.

The brief contact revealed he was one ball of tension before he abruptly released her like he'd been burned.

"I don't. I.., Today... I don't think I can do anything. No lesson. I'm not going to be good company."

The beleaguered hostess ran up with towels, taking a wide berth around Rafe.

"Relax. It's fine. It's coffee. It's okay," Ava took a step toward him.

"It's not okay." His voice raised in volume, and other customer's heads were turning. "No. I can't Just. No. Bye."

He pivoted and headed out the way he'd come.

Ava dropped two twenties on the table and chased after him. Like heck he was going to isolate himself.

"Stop! Rafe." She ignored the chilly air, having left her coat inside, and blocked his path.

The guy was a mess.

"I'm all fucked up right now." He shouted at her. "I'm not good to be around anyone. You shouldn't want to be near me right now. I'm unpredictable. You don't know what I might do. I'm angry to my damn bones, ready to lash out against everyone in my path. I wanna bash some heads, screw someone, or get so damn drunk I can't remember my own name."

"I'm not scared."

"You should be. I'm twice your size and four times stronger than you."

She inched forward, raising her hands to gently place them on his. "Size matters not. Four letters."

"Yoda." Rafe took a slow deep breath. "This isn't how I want to be. This isn't how I want you to see me. You're too

good for this.”

“I see a good man who must have had a no good very bad horrible day.”

“I shouldn’t feel this out of control. This isn’t okay,” Rafe said, his volume quieter.

“You’re allowed to feel. You aren’t made of stone. It wouldn’t be okay if you believe this was fine.”

“Are you sure?” His next question was almost a whisper.

“Yes, I’m sure.” She tugged him back to the building. “Come upstairs. I’ll take bad grumpy dragon company to no company.”

After grabbing her coat, she led her man mountain up the stairs to her empty apartment. Rafe followed her inside, setting his keys on the counter without speaking. His face remained a storm cloud, his arms crossed on his chest, drumming his fingers.

Ava gave him a soft smile. Rafe might have believed he was moody, but she could see what he was underneath his bluster.

She knew. She knew him.

Before he could object or start overthinking, she gave him the biggest hug she could, ignoring the grime, dirt, and scent of smoke.

His muscles bunched underneath her fingers, practically etched in stone.

“Breathe. Breathe,” she repeated. “Tell me or don’t tell me. Keep breathing.”

He freed a hand and used it to clasp her head to his chest. “Believe me. It was bad.”

“Tell me what you need. Whatever it is. You’re going to be okay.” She kissed the side of his arm, then his shoulder, the highest point she could reach.

“I can’t. I don’t know.” He stammered at the kisses. “Stop.”

“Why?” she asked, watching the sinews in his arms vibrating.

“I’m disgusting. I stink. And what I want might break you.”

“I’m tougher than you think.” She pulled his head down to hers and kissed him on the lips.

Which was basically setting off a firework. Or a hundred fireworks, because he dragged her body onto his and kissed her back, hard. ‘You are more necessary than air, I don’t know how I live without you’ hard. Seven letters like a rock—granite—hard.

Certainly hard enough to need more, because he carried her across the kitchen and set her on the table to make it easier to plunder her very willing mouth.

Rafe blotted out every other part of her vision and her very existence. His strength, his size, his body holding hers, his hands fisting up her skirt to slide it upward.

Ava wouldn’t have it any other way. Her body was answering the call of this delicious, potent male demanding her, shaping her, needing her.

Whether it was the primordial lizard brain or the attraction of the caveman claiming what was his, she was programmed to yield to him. He could strip her naked, suck on her breasts, and pound her until he came all over her body.

“Shoot.” Her hands got tangled halfway through rolling up his shirt when the logical part of her brain reasserted itself to remind her she might have been overpromising. “Rafe.”

He came to his senses, noticing her gently disengaging. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Too much.”

“No, it’s not you,” she tried to reassure him the rejection had a cause unrelated to the two of them. “I didn’t think we’d get here this soon. You see, I can’t sleep with anyone until the divorce is final.”

That made his features relax a tiny amount. “Right. It’s okay. I’m being calm now. Better if I stop touching you.”

Ava held his hands right where they rested on her waist. “I liked it. I don’t want you to stop touching me. I should have told you about it. And I can’t risk it because I have a daughter.”

He rested his forehead on hers, “I noticed.”

“You did?” She’d tried on their previous date to move the baby stuff out of sight.

“You had a car seat in the back of your car, and you store pink princess diapers next to the toilet paper under the sink.”

“Yeah. She’s ten months old. My ex is difficult. Don’t ask for details.” She shook her head. “The separation has rules on rules, and I’m not even allowed to even think about introducing her to an ‘intimate partner’ unless we’ve been together for at least six months. Ergo, no sex until after the divorce.”

“So, it would be a total asshole move to ruin your custody chances because I’m fucking horny.” He grimaced and gritted his teeth.

She couldn’t help herself and pressed her hips into his, sliding down what had to be a monster erection. “Me too.”

The damn man deliberately shifted his hips to help put more pressure on her extremely needy and under-loved clit, asking playfully. “How horny?”

“Desperate to ride the dragon horny,” she hooked her arms over his shoulders, letting him suspend her off the ground. “Or let the dragon ride me.”

“I think you’re this ray of sunshine, a cherub, and then you say those dirty thoughts of yours.” He traced the edge of her dress, making her nipples tighten, before he set her down a good three feet away from him. “I’ll be fine. I can meditate or stare into fucking space to make this go away. Could you put on something really ugly and be less cute? Also, stop smiling at me.”

“Or you could take a shower here and release your tension,” she suggested, shocked by her own boldness.

“Stick with smiling, because you are being a very bad girl.”

“And I could watch.”

“*Madre de Dios, brillo de sol.*” He staggered and grasped one of her kitchen chairs, its wood creaking in his hands. “You want to watch?”

Her cheeks flaming, Ava ventured onward. “You said you were dirty. You don’t have any other clothes, so if I came in to take them to the laundry, and I happened to...”

“Mistakenly catch me jerking my cum gun till it fires while I think about you?”

She squeezed her legs together. “What if I happen to be naked too? Since you got my dress a little bit dirty. Cleanliness is next to godliness.”

“Son of a bitch. This is so fucking unfair. I should be losing myself inside your hot wet cunt right now, forgetting everything else.”

“I wish I could, too. And you are being the unbelievably most amazing boyfriend for being willing to be inventive.”

He startled at her last sentence. “Boyfriend?”

“Too soon?”

“It’s nice. Boyfriend. I like it.

“So, I can be naked?”

“No. There are limits to my control, and it’s shaky now before both of us are naked together.”

“I trust you,” Ava said, wishing she could give him everything he deserved.

“I don’t trust me. I’d like to think I could hold together, but, sweetheart, let’s not tempt the devil.”

CHAPTER 12



Rafe was absolutely certain this was a horrible idea.

He'd stripped naked in the bathroom, and Ava had whisked his clothes away. Now he waited for her to come back, his cock throbbing more painfully with each passing second.

Every time he saw her or thought of her, he lost any semblance of control. First, she'd offered him comfort despite him being a total jerk, and now she was going to watch him do a completely different type of jerking around.

The door to the bathroom opened and closed. He pulled back the shower curtain to give his special performance for an audience of one.

"Rafe, I'm ready. W-oo-w," she stammered, dropping her eyes to his waist.

His cock appreciated the attention, as it was standing fully erect. Each vein bulging.

"Fuck, I could come from your eyes alone. Good thing the rest of you is off limits. I wouldn't last even a second. What are you thinking?"

She ran her tongue across her lips, making Rafe's cock twitch in response. "Six letters. Apollo's enemy."

"Damn, I don't have enough blood going to my brain. You better clue me in." He fisted his dick, fucking his hand with slow strokes. "Dragon?"

"Python."

“Ah, fuck, you’re killing me. That idea of me putting it inside of you... Tell me you’re wet.”

“I am.”

Her eyes lingering on his tattooed chest down to his cock was almost as powerful as touch.

He jerked his staff even more roughly, punishing himself with pain and pleasure, words spilling out of him. “I have these fantasies about you. Dying to slide in your tight cunt that needs me. I’d do anything to be there.”

“Anything?”

“God, as much as I want to be inside of you, I’d lick up those freckles on your chest, first. Bet they taste like cinnamon and sugar. Like your pussy. To spread those pink lips and rub it till it’s good and swollen.”

Glancing up at her was a mistake because she was staring at him, panting.

He lost it all over the wall right there in her shower.

Ava staggered over and closed the shower curtain. He took a very fast shower and then accepted the faded pink towel she offered him.

Wrapping the towel around his hips, he pushed the curtain back.

He might have felt better, but one look at her told him her needs still needed to be met.

Like a zombie rising from the dead, his dick had great off-limits ideas to make her feel better.

“How long do you think it’ll take for my clothes to get clean?” he asked her.

“Probably an hour. Sorry, I don’t have anything that will fit you.” She averted her eyes.

“I’m glad you don’t.”

She tilted her head in adorable confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t want to wear anything that used to belong to him. Or anyone else for that matter.”

“No problem there. He kept everything and changed the locks.”

“What a rat bastard move. You okay?”

Her eyes flickered up and down his body. “I’m fine. It’s just been a while.”

He crossed the distance between them and kissed her mouth. She trembled for a second before responding extremely enthusiastically. She practically threw herself on top of him, her smaller hands trying to touch everywhere at once.

Boy he wanted to let her touch everything. He could throw down the towel and take her on the sink. She was warm, definitely wet, and willing. She could ride his cock like a pogo stick.

No, they still had to do the right thing. He reluctantly held her back.

Her pupils were dilated, aroused, and it was all he could do not to act on his instincts. A worthy compromise though he was willing to make.

“Okay. Stopping.” She opened the door to leave.

“Or we’re starting.” He picked her up and carried her into the living room.

“We’re what? We can’t.” She struggled briefly and stopped when she saw his wide grin. “Or we can?”

“Don’t worry, sunshine. Your boyfriend can be inventive.” He plopped down on the couch with her above him.

She was sitting astride him, hands on his bare chest. “How inventive?”

“The clothes won’t come off, and I swear those panties will stay right where they are. I won’t even move the towel.” He rearranged her hips to position her heat right over his lengthening cock. Then, lifting slightly, he bounced her on what he assumed was her clit.

His guess was right, because she arched up against him, hissing. Time to push her a little further.

“What kind of panties are you wearing?”

“Umm, nude.” She ducked her head back down to kiss him.

He held her back, forcing her to wait. “You took off your panties?”

“No. They’re peach, flesh tone. Nude.” She thrashed against his grip.

“You don’t sound so certain. I’m going to have to check really closely.”

Moving her forward and placing her center over his face, he inhaled the scent of her arousal. “God, this is perfect.

“Perfect? What are you—”

Rafe laved her lacy peach panties, outlining her clit with his tongue.

“Oh my God.”

“Not Him. I’m closer to the devil,” Rafe said between licks, rubbing that swollen bud through the soaked fabric.

Ava only moaned and pressed her hips into his face.

“That’s right, good girl. Spread it wide for me. Follow the rules and keep those panties on. You go ahead and come all over my face,” he urged her.

Though his fingers itched to slide beneath and tease her core, he’d have to make do with what he had. They could play this little game for as long as it took for her to be available again.

He stabbed his tongue upward, pressing where her slit must been and then flicking up toward her clit. The fabric was soaked to the point it was plastered against her, and he tightened his hands on her ass, pulling it even more taut.

“Rafe,” she called out, signaling him to apply maximum pressure. Which he gave more than willingly, sucking hard on

her clit, her warmth flooding his mouth regardless of the flimsy barrier.

That did it, because she tightened and came with the scream. Torn between feeling her spasms against his mouth and seeing her pleasure, he eased her back so he could watch her body shudder.

It was glorious. Her nipple shadows were visible through that lacy nude bra and her sky-blue dress.

When she came down off of her high, he laid her back down his body so they were spooned together and waited for her breathing to slow.

He thought she was going to tense up but she didn't. Instead, she lay languid against him.

"I take it you're feeling better."

"No kidding. My thighs didn't suffocate you, did they?" She was adorably confused.

"Don't you worry. Trust me, *mi brillo de sol*. I had the best seat in the house."

"You called me that again."

"It means brilliance of the sun. Sunshine. Because you are. And thank you."

"Shouldn't I be thanking you? You gave me an amazing orgasm, and I didn't do anything except lend you my shower."

"Best shower of the year. And I'm talking about before that when I got off shift."

"I didn't do anything special. I just told you I'd be there and you were allowed to feel how you felt. You can be how you were. If you want to tell me, it's okay. If you don't, that's fine, too."

"I've had a bad year. A really bad year. You have a daughter. I had a son."

"Did he die?" Ava asked quietly.

“No, his mom took him. DeShawn is almost seven now. She’d told me I was his dad. I believed her.”

“And you weren’t?”

“I wasn’t. I’d married her, gave him my name, and then a guy showed up with a DNA test. She’d been cheating on me the whole time.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. You were still his father. Blood doesn’t make family,” Ava said.

“I stayed away. Not because I don’t love him. It’s better for him this way. Less confusing.”

She hugged him. “You’re a good man.”

“Am I? I’ve made mistakes. Last winter...” He trailed off, reliving those terrifying moments in Medic 5. The moments he was supposed to take to the grave. The scene so horrible he and George were legally forbidden to speak of it.

“It’s okay.”

He swung his head to look at her, seeing nothing but support in her face. “There was a call. She died because of me. I screwed it up. I wasn’t ready. I wasn’t trained.”

“If you weren’t trained for it, how is it your fault?”

“I had other choices. I made the wrong one,” Rafe said. “I should have been better.”

From the moment, he saw the pregnant woman on the highway today. He knew why George had snapped.

“Rafe, you’re an EMT, right? It’s unfair to ask you to do more,” Ava reassured him, likely drawing from her experience as a tech.

“You don’t understand. She was dying. I tried... we tried... a procedure we had no business trying. Ever. And not in the back of an ambulance. She bled out with my hands trying to hold her together.” He held up his hands as if the blood was still caked under his nails. “She died because I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I killed her.”

Ava twined her fingers through his. “You were trying to save her. Hospitals call these ‘sentinel events.’ They defy all probability, where everything, every safeguard, fails at the same time and someone gets hurt - bad.”

“That’s what FD’s therapist said. Yet why do I feel so shitty?”

“Because you’re a good person. The people they happen to, they can’t understand they were screwed because the system dealt them the shittiest hand possible. Not even the best poker player can win a game when the deck is stacked against them.”

Rafe’s throat felt thick, the tightness of tears he’d never shed over this. Still, telling her and hearing her say he was a good man ... “Can I hold you for a while? Please.”

“As long as you want.”

God. He hoped it would be forever.

CHAPTER 13



“Now it’s time to check on the piggies,” Ava said while changing Jenna’s diaper on the table. She counted to ten on Jenna’s toes.

“Mama. No, no.” Jenna tapped on her nose.

“You’re right, baby. Nose. Nose.” Ava beeped her own nose and then Jenna’s nose. “Mommy’s nose, and there’s Grandma’s nose.”

Her mother Mona tapped her nose and then her father Richard’s nose. “Noses noses everywhere.”

“No, no.” Jenna grabbed Ava’s nose and missed, sliding one slimy hand down the front lapel of Ava’s suit.

“Oh no. Exactly what we needed,” Mona said and grabbed a diaper wipe.

“It’s okay. It’s not important. Just you, Jenna. Is your hand so yummy?” Ava waved off her mom and kept her eyes on Jenna. The outcome of this final divorce mediation would not in any way be dependent on whether or not Ava had baby slobber on her clothes.

Her lawyer was meeting with the other team one last time before they went in front of the judge to end their marriage.

It should have been a short hearing because everything was supposed to be done beforehand. Of course, nothing could be simple.

Did they expect Ava to have an eleventh-hour request when she’d already waited a year?

Things were getting serious with Rafe. What had started out very physical had an emotional breakthrough after his awful shift. There would be a lot for her to explain to him as soon as the divorce was official, but the way she felt toward him...

Even though he wasn't allowed to meet Jenna yet, they'd talked about her. And when they were done talking, they towed the line on not going all the way. Though there was tons of heavy petting (and touching and sucking) on her couch with her clothes staying on.

Rafe insisted he didn't mind, keeping it slow. He 'mistakenly' lost his clothes regularly without letting Ava touch him naked.

The idea of her naked body laying on top of Rafe's dragon woke her up at night, sweaty and wet. Her body knew exactly what it had been missing out on.

Delayed gratification was a skill she'd mastered over time. With the end of the tunnel in sight, she could survive a few more days.

Or possibly hours.

Her lawyer brought in a set of papers for her to recheck one final time.

"I believe everything is here. Are you sure this is what you want? You're leaving quite a bit on the table."

She would be receiving a hefty settlement of a cool thirty million. With that amount of money, she never needed to work again, Jenna could live in the lap of luxury. Except that was the opposite of what Ava wanted. Money corrupted and made it simple to believe you could buy happiness and loyalty.

Worse, it would make her dependent on his handouts. That had been his strategy from the beginning, controlling her with money.

He had not expected her to give up their house without a fight and rent a cheap apartment. Nor had he expected to her to find a job as a tech and refuse his unneeded and unwanted support.

“He can keep the table if I get what’s under it,” Ava said.

“Umm, carpet?”

“Jenna.” Ava ducked under the table and made a face at Jenna as she chewed on the giraffe and attempted to shred her favorite ball.

“The custody arrangement gives you primary custody and your ex every other weekend, alternating major holidays, and a full month in the summer. I’ve never seen a medical custody arrangement like this one, either.”

“It’ll be fine,” Ava said.

“Ohio is a distributive property state, so you have rights to his company, and you’re refusing to accept his eight thousand a month in child support.”

“It’s not refusal. It’s going into a trust for Jenna, and he gets zero say on how it’s spent. I don’t need his money.”

“You’re making 40k as a medical technician since he blocked your...”

“I know.”

“You should have a team of lawyers, not just me. He has them, and they aren’t pulling any punches.”

“Yes,” Mona echoed. “Tell her to take him to the cleaners.”

“Why? You think it will make him sorry? That it’ll teach him a lesson? Or more money’ll make me happier?”

“Well, it couldn’t hurt,” her father grumbled.

“We don’t have the same goal here, which is why you’re my lawyer and not his. Do you have the other papers completed?” Ava returned them to the issue at hand.

“The supplemental papers, yes, but—”

“Then let’s sign and go home.”

“Fine. As long as you’re sure,” her lawyer asked one last time.

“I’m sure.”

Ava left her parents and Jenna in the hall while she went into the courtroom to meet the judge.

And there he was, surrounded by his team.

Not once did he look directly at Ava.

She was a non-person to him.

Fine.

She hadn't broken before, and she wouldn't break today.

The judge, full of raised eyebrows when she saw who was divorcing, followed protocol and confirmed the agreement to divorce.

With minimal fanfare, a signature and a stamped contract with the lawyers, it was done.

Ava beat it out of the courtroom ahead of her lawyer.

Her mom now had Jenna in a stroller and asked, "Done?"

"You're certain we don't have to sell our house because it's not appropriate for her?" Richard's question was right on the heels of her mom's.

"No," Ava said again, since that had been one of the early issues they'd settled, yet it kept coming up.

"Good, because that Goddamn bastard can't tell me what to do, not after what he did to my little girl."

"Quiet," Mona said. "I'm sure his little gag order is still in place."

"Some of it," her lawyer said. "The custody arrangement about negative speech remains in place, but family members and intimate contacts may discuss the relationship when not in contact with the minor child. There is a statement you'll have to memorize whenever discussing the father and his relationship with the minor child."

"She's only a year, so we can hold off on discussing it," Ava said.

"Mama. Mama. My mama," squealed Jenna raising her arms to Ava.

“Hey, baby. Who’s my big girl?” Ava plucked Jenna out of her stroller and gave her kisses, relaxing into the perfect baby smell. This was why she’d take any punishment, any abuse.

Even if it was time to hand Jenna over.

The party only got better from there.

His legal team exited the courtroom, flanking their master like he was their king.

Angry, coldly charming in his ten-thousand dollar bespoke suit, her ex-husband, billionaire *Dr. Daniel Steadman*, finally deigned to look in her direction.

Or through her, more likely, because the approaching footsteps warned her of more visitors.

People she recognized quite well. The first was Daniel’s mother, Christine, and a second—

Dr. Kayla Varma.

The new girlfriend.

So much for thinking Daniel would back off now that it was official. He had a smirk on his face when he said, “Six months.”

That asshole. With the papers signed, he was going to act like he and Kayla had been together six months. Pretend he hadn’t slept around against the separation agreement, and Kayla Varma qualified for an exclusive intimate contact.

Maybe she should have called him out on it during the negotiations rather than deal with his smugness.

But that would be stooping to his level, and in the past year, he’d gone lower than she could have dreamed.

“I’ll take my girl now,” Daniel said. “You can be present for this introduction, if you must.”

Ava touched her internal calm and picked up Jenna, stiffly handing her baby away. “Here’s your daddy.”

Daniel took their daughter and cooed. “Jenna, I want you to meet someone. Not Grandma. This is Daddy’s special

friend, Kayla.”

It was rather satisfying when Jenna took a single glance at Kayla and burst into tears. She began screaming at the top of her lungs. “Mama! Mama! Mama! Mama! No! No!”

At least Kayla had the grace to be uncomfortable and wisely made no movement toward the screaming thrashing baby.

“Have a good weekend,” Ava said brightly and walked away with the stroller to say goodbye to her parents.

Yes, as she watched her parents leave, she was taking near vicious pleasure in Jenna’s response to this forced meeting with Kayla.

German desserts 13 letters.

Schadenfreude.

Daniel would be getting exactly what he deserved if Jenna cried the whole time. Stranger anxiety at this age could be a nightmare, and Jenna hadn’t been involved in the negotiation of the polite treatment of new intimate contacts and associated significant others.

She’d gotten halfway down the hallway and almost crashed into Elizabeth Kandal.

Elizabeth craned her neck at the group Ava had left behind and her face fell. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“Oh, it wasn’t?” Ava throttled down her desire to scream.

This wasn’t Eliza’s fault.

This wasn’t Kayla’s fault.

Everything was Daniel’s fault.

“No, it wasn’t.” Eliza said in a low voice, “His lawyers asked she be present in case there were questions about their relationship.”

“Was she going to lie and claim they hadn’t slept together?”

“If asked, she was going to explain the nature of her committed, exclusive relationship with Steadman.”

“And act like he’d waited to screw her?” The unfairness stung.

“I told you, I don’t support this, but...”

“Sister. Family. Loyalty. Traits which should be valued, even if they’re undeserved by certain people.” Ava kept walking.

“I’m sorry,” Eliza tried one more time.

“Save it. You, her, him. At least we’re clear on where everyone stands.”

Ava bundled on her winter coat over her suit, folded the stroller up, and got into her car.

She turned on the radio and listened to the first song that came on.

1980 Pink Floyd. 15 letters.

COMFORTABLY NUMB.

It was over.

She was free.

Unlike Daniel, she could let go of the past. There was no point in waging war for a battle they’d lost a year ago. He would die on his hill someday.

But he would not drag her down, too.

She texted Rafe.

They had a lot of ground to cover now that she was released from the restrictions.

Ava: Dinner tonight? I have VERY good news.

Rafe: Working at 15.

Ava: Sorry. I forgot.

Rafe: Want to come have dinner here? Meet my team?

Okay, she wasn't completely free. Firehouse 15 was four blocks from MetroGen, solidly in Daniel's territory. Besides, she didn't want an audience for the next part.

Ava: Thinking more alone. Brunch at our usual place?

Rafe: Hmm.

Ava: After brunch. Lunch. And dinner. Alone at my place.

Rafe: Alone?

Now she felt daring.

Ava: 5 letters. Undisguised.

There was a long pause between messages.

Rafe: NAKED

Ava: Cu soon.

CHAPTER 14



The last shift had been blessedly quiet. Rafe had gotten a good night's sleep and had ignored his team making jokes at his expense about shaving.

If her news was this good, he had a great plan. He put on his fancier button-down uniform for the first time rather than his T-shirt. He could imagine her hands undoing each button, the same way he'd kiss each of her freckles.

She didn't disappoint.

In fact, she was practically glowing in a delicate, pink, lace dress. He swore the fabric was slightly sheer, begging to have him touch it... and then strip it off her.

For once, she seemed nervous when she stood up from her table.

"It's done. It's official. I'm single. The divorce went through. I was wondering if you wanted to... umm." His golden girl blushed bright pink to the tips of her ears.

"Skip brunch?" he suggested, taking her hand. "Get 'undisguised' with my other dragon at last?"

Now she was flaming red. "Now that I'm officially divorced, I'm allowed to discuss my ex-husband with intimate contacts."

"Intimate contacts?" He took her hand, running his thumb on the inside of her wrist. This woman needed someone to make love to her with all speed. Sure, they had to get to know each other better, but what felt good, felt good.

“Yes.” Her gaze followed his finger, her voice breathless. “There’s so much I have to tell you. I want you, but to be fair, I have to let you know about him.”

“I don’t give a fuck about him. It’s you I want to take upstairs.” He put his hand on her knee. Despite the winter weather, she wasn’t wearing nylons. Her thighs were nothing except gloriously smooth skin like spun silk. She needed a man. She needed him to kiss and lick his way up those thighs.

The shithead ex-husband could screw someone else.

Ava sucked on her lip, and Rafe leaned forward to claim his spot as her intimate contact.

There was a loud crash behind them.

Screams filled the air. “He’s choking! He’s choking!”

Rafe jumped to his feet, scanning the crowd for a likely patient. A man was turning red in one of the back booths. A scone, partially eaten, was on the table in front of him.

Ominously, the man wasn’t even making choking noises while he grabbed at his own neck.

Total airway obstruction, Rafe recognized they didn’t have time to waste. “Someone call 911.”

He sprinted to the man, bowling over the chairs and tables in his way. The man turned blue. Rafe locked his fists around the man’s waist from behind and pulled upward and inward in the Heimlich. With each attempt, he didn’t hear more coughing or the sound of the food dislodging.

Fuck. The man went limp.

“Who called 911?!” Rafe shouted and lay the man on the floor. This was bad news. The next step was to begin CPR. Sometimes the chest thrust from CPR could force the object out.

The man was purple now from lack of oxygen. The clock was ticking, without oxygen, he’d have no heartbeat soon.

Rafe tried two rescue breaths. No air moved. The food must have been lodged in there, unreachable, without some

serious equipment in the hospital.

He switched to give chest compressions. Another rescuer would be fucking helpful right now. “Tell me about 911!”

“Step back,” a voice commanded.

He snapped his head up and saw Ava standing in front of him. She had a bottle of hand sanitizer, a pen, and a paring knife from the kitchen.

There was something different in her face. Something he had never witnessed from her—the grim flat eyes of a professional.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“A cric.”

She twisted the pen open, dumping out the contents, giving her a rigid straw from the outer plastic shell. Then she poured some hand sanitizer over the pen, knife, and the man’s neck.

“You’re going to do a cricothyrotomy?” he said, dumbly. A cricothyrotomy established an emergency airway. Contrary to TV, it was rarely done, and while Rafe knew how to do it in theory, he’d have never tried it in the field.

No one would.

Except surgeons and ER docs.

What the hell?

Ava was an urgent care technician...

“Yes, I am. Prepare to breathe for him.”

Ava took his place by the neck, felt below the Adam’s apple, and made a swift vertical incision through the neck.

Blood spurted onto her dress, but she ignored it. She shoved the tube, which had been a pen, into the opening, packing around it with napkins. The tube made an odd sucking sound.

Rafe knew what the sound meant. The man’s lungs would take air from any place it could. He leaned forward and blew hard into the pen, listening for the expansion of air.

The man's color rapidly improved with Rafe's rescue breaths. Ava called out. "I need a plastic bag, masking tape, whatever you've got."

Coffee shop employees brought them a few plastic bags and scotch tape. Ava punctured the bag and threaded the pen through it, then used the tape to secure the airway as best she could.

Sirens sounded like they were parking, and a few minutes later, two women in Cleveland FD paramedic uniforms came through the door.

This surprised Rafe because he wasn't aware Cleveland Fire had any paramedics, or women, for that matter, outside of his own firehouse.

One of those women, whose name tag read 'Yates,' said, "I didn't expect to see you here."

He thought she was talking to him, though he'd never seen her before.

Then he understood.

She was talking to Ava.

"I work in Lake County as an urgent care tech," Ava addressed Paramedic Yates. "Don't know much about this guy. He was choking, and Falcon from Firehouse 15 tried the Heimlich until he lost consciousness. Chest thrusts didn't work, so I cric'ed him with a pen. He's breathing better, so we should have circulation."

Rafe automatically took a pulse, mind still reeling.

Ava had said she was an ER tech. The paramedic should have been pissed about how far outside of her scope of practice Ava was acting.

"Pulse in the seventies," the other paramedic reported, mirroring his actions.

The two paramedics were exchanging glances. Yates said, "Where to now? We don't have a protocol in place for this yet."

“Secure it and head to a hospital with Level 1 trauma center with ENT and plastics,” Ava said. “I did it, so I’d better come with you.”

“If it stays stable, our destination is MetroGen,” Yates said, a warning under her words.

Ava nodded once. “Then so is mine. He’s my patient.”

“I’m coming, too,” Rafe volunteered. “I can drive, and you three can protect his airway.”

They loaded the man into the ambulance. Rafe took the wheel and related the situation to Dispatch. They took the info calmly, far different from the day he’d faced worse odds and had been desperately calling for help.

Technically, it was significantly unlike that day because there weren’t any hysterical doctors cutting willy-nilly, and no one was dying.

Dispatch confirmed they would have ENT and plastics available on their arrival at the MetroGen ER.

He checked in with the ladies in the back, and they assured him they were fine. In fact, they were discussing the various techniques required in a cric.

Good for them, he thought as he parked in the ambulance bay. He was way out of his league as an EMT Basic.

If he’d been a paramedic, he’d probably still have hesitated. It would have taken experienced hands, lots of staff, and a centralized medical command to talk him through it.

Which had never existed in the past twenty years of Cleveland Fire.

When they rolled the patient through the doors to Trauma 2, Ava’s face reflected an emotion he could only describe as stony determination.

Why was she worried?

She’d performed far above and beyond what was expected of her as a tech, saving the guy’s life.

Then he found out different.

“According to his ID, this guy is Timothy Brown, forty-five, choked on a scone at a coffee shop. I cric’ed him with a pen in the field,” Ava said, her eyes darting in across the many faces greeting them.

One of the receiving ER nurses gaped, “Jessica? Dr. Steadman?”

“Dr. Steadman?” Rafe repeated, almost tripping on his own feet.

This wasn’t possible. Ava wasn’t a doctor, and she wasn’t Dr. Steadman.

Dr. Daniel Steadman was a world-famous plastic surgeon at MetroGen and owned a massive medical equipment company worth billions.

Rafe’s last brush with the Steadman family had been the frantic, desperate call a year ago. The day he’d helped cut open Mrs. Jessica Steadman in the back of his ambulance with Dr. Jacob Carver. The day that changed him and George forever. A call so damning they could never speak of it.

He and George had been cross-covering Thanksgiving weekend on Medic for Firehouse 5. They’d been called to an MVA. Mrs. Jessica Steadman and ER Dr. Carver had been hit by a drunk driver.



“I’m so sorry, Jess...” Dr. Carver said to the unconscious form of the pregnant woman. “Scalpel.”

“Sir, I can’t...” Rafe hesitated.

*“Jessica Steadman will die if we don’t act! Hand me the **damn** scalpel. Her babies are dying. I promised. Seconds count!”*

Rafe had given him the scalpel as Dr. Carver poured bottle of iodine on her still moving abdomen.

“God forgive me. Daniel won’t.”

And then they'd lost her pulse as the blood poured over the floor of the ambulance.

There had been so much blood as George broke every traffic rule.

No amount of speed had saved the patient or her babies. No amount of therapy could absolve he or George of the guilt they'd carried since that day.

To have killed a mother and both of her children.

FROM THE DIARY OF CHAPLAIN AT METROGEN

November after Thanksgiving

Let's sum up what happened.

*When you hide a powder keg in the OR,
you get one thing.*

Fireworks.

An unbelievable amount of fireworks.

*Especially if you roll the powder keg into
the ER and have a drag out fight between Dr.
DS and...best to stop here...*

CHAPTER 15



Rafe came back to reality and spun around to stare at Ava. “You died.”

“What?” She stepped away from the patient’s bed as a horde of ER nurses and doctors descended on the patient.

“I killed you. All three of you.”

“No. You SAVED me.”

She’d changed so much since the day of the C-section. Her hair had been darker and long, her face much fuller. No wonder he hadn’t recognized her. She was practically a different person.

Except her eyes. The same frightened eyes had fluttered open as he’d used his hands to widen her incision.

“Like hell I did.” His mind was reeling. “What the fuck?”

“Not here. Can we talk in private? Not here?” She waved her arm to encompass the entire room.

A short, skinny, dark-haired woman in green surgical scrubs jauntily skipped into the room. “Have no fear. ENT has arrived... Wow. Kudos on the pen.”

“He choked on a scone. Cric’ed at the coffee shop with a paring knife. We didn’t try to retrieve it, Dr. Magi,” Paramedic Yates said from the side.

“Scone of death. Cool. Here’s the plan. We’ll put a trach tube to secure it for more airflow, and then head up to the OR

for his scope and repair. Dr. Steadman'll confirm with me when he gets down here."

Ava's face drained of its color. "What do you mean Steadman? He's not on call."

One of the nurses explained, "The on-call plastic surgeon got sick. Dr. Daniel Steadman is in the covering. He's been hospital."

Paramedic Yates tugged on Ava's arm. "We need to get out of here, Dr. Steadman."

"Remley," Ava corrected her, disentangled her arm, and pushed the three FD members out of Trauma 2. "I'm not leaving. You need to leave right now."

"But—" Rafe's world was still spinning.

"*Leave now.* I have to stay. I'm responsible for the procedure. If I don't stay, Lord only knows what he'll do." She sounded as if she'd hyperventilate any second.

The desk clerk burst into the room and whisper-shouted. "Plastics team just landed. He's *COMING.*"

The ER doctor, also named Yates, whom Rafe remembered well from the fateful C-section, sprang into action. "Move it, you three. Trauma 4. Stay there. And no matter what you do, don't be seen and don't say anything."

The two lady paramedics hustled Rafe into the other room across the hall and pressed themselves against the wall. He had a last glimpse of the nursing staff and techs forming a protective circle around Ava, partially blocking her from view.

Footsteps, the odd muffled sound of dress shoes in surgical shoe covers, came down the hall.

"Who the hell performed a cric with a pen?" an angry cultured voice demanded.

"Dr. Steadman, good to see you," Dr. Yates answered calmly.

Paramedic Yates, her wedding ring visible, shook her head at Rafe. Her message was simple.

Stay the fuck silent.

“This is Timothy Brown, cric’ed with a paring knife and pen in a coffee shop after Heimlich maneuver failed. I’ve secured his airway, and as soon as you confirm, we can lock and load for the OR.” Magi said, on board with the ‘get-the-hell-out-of-the-ER’ plan.

“How could this have fucking happened. Chief Baker said this shit wouldn’t happen anymore,” Steadman hissed.

“A scone did it. Hazards of the a coffee shop,” Magi tried.

“The scone didn’t grow hands. I want the name of the cowboy who did this butchery.”

“That would be me.” Ava’s voice was unmistakable.

Rafe didn’t know if he was supposed to cry or scream or cheer. Liar or not, going toe to toe with Dr. Daniel Steadman was no easy task.

The trauma room held its breath, silence broken only by the beeping of machines.

“You cric’ed him in the field?” the plastic surgeon said, accusation in the words.

“He’d lost his airway,” Ava said in a tone Rafe recognized as the one ubiquitously used by doctors who had trained to be calm in the wildest of circumstances.

“So you cric’ed him in the field by yourself without backup? Without contacting medical command? You’re a fucking tech.”

“I *was* the medical command here less than a year ago. In my capacity as a board-certified ER attending privileged at MetroGen hospital, I determined an emergency surgical procedure was required, and I performed it. Are you questioning me?”

“I question your judgment, again.”

Her voice was cold, devoid of her sunshine for the first time, Rafe recalled. “And I’d do it again in a second. Without a single regret.”

“Because you’re selfish. You should have never been working that day.”

This wasn’t about the patient.

“Are you expecting an apology? You won’t get one, ever. I had no idea until then that I was nothing more than an incubator.”

“You killed our son. You, Jacob, and those butchers at the fire department.”

Rafe couldn’t help his growl and forward momentum toward Trauma 2. The two paramedics grabbed him as he pulled back the curtain to see the standoff in Trauma 2.

The bright pink of Ava’s dress stood out in the sea of navy-blue nurses and turquoise green doctors. Dr. Steadman, in his light blue scrubs, had his back to Rafe.

Ava’s view of Rafe was unimpeded, and a faint expression of fear crossed her face. “God killed our son. You just keep thinking that you can adjudicate it in some other way. Find justice by punishing everyone else.”

“I don’t have time for your bullshit.” Steadman started to turn, and Ava’s face contorted in increasing terror.

“I was on a date.” She blurted out, stopping him mid-step.

“You couldn’t even wait for the ink to dry on the divorce?”

“Coming from the man who showed up at the divorce hearing with his girlfriend? It hasn’t even been six months since the resident and fellow mixer.”

Ava’s words were brave, but her eyes were still on Rafe. The two female paramedics kept trying to push him out of sight, which was like trying to move a tank.

“Is he the reason you didn’t contest any of the clauses? What’s so special about him?”

“He’s just a regular guy. A normal human. A nobody who likes crosswords.”

Her words had a chilling effect on Rafe. Had he been a pawn between these two?

“He must be fucking dynamite in bed for you to sign away half a billion dollars.”

“The reason I didn’t contest any of the clauses was because of you.” Ava shook her head.

“I didn’t force you to sign anything.”

“I was done a year ago. You know what you did.” Ava’s hands were fists.

“You got what you deserved. *Murderer.*”

“Every word proves my point. I don’t have to listen to you anymore. I can’t. And I won’t.” She signed off some paperwork and shoved it toward her ex-husband’s chest. “I’ve done my part. I saved his life. Harass someone else.”

“You...”

“Save it. I don’t need your approval or permission. Take one step toward me, and my next signature will be on your restraining order.” Ava flounced off in the direction of the rest of the ER.

“Okay, now that those fireworks are over, can we get to the OR?” Dr. Magi asked, unconcerned with the steam coming out of Steadman’s ears.

“Fine.”

“All yours. Nursing staff, huddle over here.” Dr. Yates led his team into Trauma 4, effectively pushing the paramedics back by sheer weight of numbers, positioning himself and one computer in front of Rafe and the paramedics. The group engaged in idle superficial discussion about cleaning the Trauma 2 after it was vacated.

The gurney rolled by, or so Rafe guessed by the sound of things.

The atmosphere visibly relaxed to some degree, and Dr. Yates waited until the rest of the staff had departed to address the paramedics and Rafe. “Kyra, how could you bring him here?”

“I didn’t think...” She-Yates was at a loss for words.

“He brought her in with Jacob Carver last year. The C-section.” Dr. Yates and his glasses confirmed every one of Rafe’s fears.

Everyone had known, except him...

CHAPTER 16



Ava had a scrub top placed over her bloody dress in time to see Rafe walk out the trauma bay doors without speaking to her. She ran after him into the snowy space next to the ambulances.

“Rafe. Stop!”

He didn’t.

Abandoning any of her remaining pride, she broke into a sprint for two blocks. By the time she could plant herself directly in his path, they’d reached the end of MetroGen’s property.

His face was set in stone, and those usually warm brown eyes were colder than the snow surrounding them. “Whatever you’re selling, I ain’t buying.”

He tried to step around her, and she caught his elbow, heedless of the tense muscles beneath her grip. “You don’t understand.”

Rafe whipped back around, breaking her hold. “I don’t? Unless you joined a one-person witness protection program that excluded only me, you are nothing but a liar.”

“This isn’t what you think. Please let me explain,” Ava begged. Somehow, in the last hour, the past, present, and future had unraveled into a tangled mess.

“Did you know who I was the first time you talked to me in the coffee shop?”

“Sort of,” Ava hedged.

“Did you KNOW?!” he snapped.

“Yes. I knew.”

“There I was, thinking my luck was changing with a girl who had a lovely smile. Who didn’t seem discouraged no matter what a jerk I was. Except it was a ploy. A sick, weird, creepy twisted game.”

“It was nothing like that!” Ava tried to protest.

“You gave me a fake name. You lied about everything.” He turned away from her.

She wouldn’t let him, using her weight to swing her own body in front of him again. “My maiden name is Jessica Ava Remley. I couldn’t use my married name because it was owned by Steadman Medical.”

“Bullshit. I’ve been divorced twice. Don’t insult my intelligence by making crap up.”

“I’m not. The rules are different when there’s a billion dollars on the line. There’s no hell like getting out of the hospital to find the locks on your house changed, and you can’t get a job because Steadman Medical took control of your name and your medical license.”

Rafe shut his mouth, and Ava took this to be her opportunity to say her piece.

“Dr. Daniel Steadman, the plastic surgeon and owner of Steadman Medical, was my husband. When he demanded a divorce, his team of lawyers slapped me with restrictions. ER doctor Jessica Steadman couldn’t work, but medical technician Ava Remley could,” Ava told him.

The medical technician certification she’d gotten in college and used to make ends meet through medical school had been in her maiden name. The urgent care hadn’t cared if she went by Ava since they already had three Jessicas on staff. Nor had they asked many questions about her work history in light of Manika Gupta-Carver’s letter of recommendation.

“He’s worth a billion dollars. You didn’t have to work,” Rafe said.

“And depend on his generosity? Take it from someone who learned the golden rule up close. *He who has the gold makes the rules.*”

“Instead, you lied to me. Over and over. You and the Fire Chief let George and I believe we’d KILLED you and the babies. Worse, I trusted you. I opened up to you about how it haunted me.”

“I wasn’t sure. I was an ER doctor at a Level 1 trauma center. We see a thousand sad and horrible deaths a year. And I couldn’t tell you the truth about Daniel.”

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t?”

She waved her hand back at the hospital where Daniel was undoubtedly taking the patient to surgery. “He’s Dr. Daniel Steadman, loving father and pillar of the community. I had to sign gag orders and NDAs. If I broke them before the divorce, he’d be able to take Jenna. And once he had her, he’d... he’d take revenge on everyone else.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Don’t you understand? He doesn’t know who you are! Daniel wants to destroy everyone who had a hand in the delivery. As long as his attention stayed focused on me, you were safe.”

“That’s your excuse. You lied to me for three straight months for my own protection?” His laughter was full of bitterness. “Were you ever going to tell me?”

“I was. Today.”

“Your text messages suggest otherwise. Was the plan to break the news after we’d fucked?”

His words stung enough to make her eyes water. “I... I was falling for you. I thought if I eased into it...”

“Yes, you were betting on the pussy distracting me enough that I wouldn’t notice your colossal lying?”

She refused to rise to the bait. He obviously hadn’t noticed all the subtle ways she’d tried to broach the subject. “We talked about moving past mistakes and living with the bad

parts. You'd lost your son. I thought you'd understand why I couldn't risk losing Jenna."

He shook his head. "Well, congratulations. You didn't lose Jenna. You lost me."

"Please give me a chance. It's a big ask, but please. I love you." She tried one final time. Losing her heart to him hadn't been part of the plan. It made them both vulnerable, as evidenced by what happened today.

"But not enough to have been honest."

"I did what I had to for Jenna. For you. For George. For the hospital. For the fire department."

For a second, it seemed like he'd back down. She reached out a hand, and his fingers inched forward.

Then he stopped.

"No. You were right the day I helped you with your groceries. Some things are unforgivable, Jessica."

This time, when he trudged away, she didn't follow.

He was right.

While she might have been facing an unwinnable situation, no one forced her to carry on this charade. She'd made her choices, and she'd have to live with the consequences of her decisions.

It came up regularly on crossword puzzles.

Six letters. Destroyer of Troy.

The average reader would assume the answer was Greeks.

They'd be wrong. It was singular.

One person was responsible for everything.

I, Paris.

I, Jessica.

I, Ava.

CHAPTER 17



“I don’t fucking believe this.” Rafe dropped the bench press bar back into position at Firehouse 15 two weeks later.

“Me neither, man. I thought the bar was going to bend.” Lieutenant Fabian Santos steadied the bar now that he was done spotting Rafe in the Firehouse 15 gym.

“I didn’t mean the weight. It’s my warmup,” Rafe snapped. “Sorry, lieutenant, or are you going by ‘captain’ today?”

“Lieutenant’s fine,” Fabian responded, unfazed. “It has to be rough when everyone got sick at the same time.

An outbreak of a stomach virus had brought the whole firehouse down. Technically, Soto had been hospitalized for the flu, first. Clarke had been acting captain for a week, but then he and Rodriguez visited Soto in the hospital and caught the fever, vomiting, and diarrhea. Which they gave to their roommates and the rest of the firehouse, including George, who was only working part-time these days.

Then the subs got sick and the other shifts.

To keep the lights on, the battalion chief had pulled an entire swing shift with a lieutenant from Firehouse 5 and two more subs from another house. Their combined might was able to man exactly one firetruck.

“No kidding.”

“How is it only you didn’t get sick?” Santos asked. “It’s cool the last man standing is an *hombre*, though.”

“Social distancing,” Rafe grunted and moved to the barbells. He grabbed two seventy pounders and started curling. The barbells were likely circa 1970, back when Arnold was young.

Circa

Five letters.

Damn it, Ava was still in his head.

Fabian switched to Spanish with a trace of a Brazilian accent and called Rafe out. “*No creo. El verdad, por favor.*”

They both knew social distancing in a firehouse was almost impossible. Twenty-four-hour shifts in close quarters and shared communal cooking was the perfect breeding ground.

Rafe stuck with English. “I’m too mean and grumpy to get sick. Viruses run the other way.”

“*Y tu equipo también,*” Fabian continued in Spanish, commenting on how Rafe’s team was avoiding him enough to prevent him from catching the illness, too. “What got you so pissed off? Girl problem?”

“No girl. Not anymore.” Rafe pushed through a set of twenty curls.

“What happened? She cheated on you?”

“She was a liar.” He switched to triceps overhead press.

“Catfished you? Fake name? Secretly crazy? Huge gambling problem?” Fabian asked, easily lifting much lighter weight for a few shoulder extensions.

“She was going by her middle name. Then she let me believe we’d never met before and that she was a technician at an urgent care.”

“When she was secretly a con artist stripper out to steal your cash?”

“She worked at an urgent care as a tech, but there was a lot she didn’t tell me. Then I found out just as I thought we were going to—” Rafe stopped before he revealed too much. This Dr. Steadman—or Steadmens—issue was a toxic waste dump, ready to contaminate anyone who touched it. “We weren’t allowed to do stuff because she was getting divorced, and there’s a kid.”

Fabian raised a hand. “Hang on. You were dating a woman with a kid who wasn’t divorced yet. You weren’t sleeping together, and you’re mad she didn’t give you her whole life story with the giant pile of dirty laundry?”

“Sort of. Her ex is a doc at MetroGen. Fucking loaded.” Rafe had to be careful about the next part. If Ava and the Fire Chief had gone to such lengths to make him and George believe she was dead, then the last thing he should do was pull Fabian into this. “She said she was worried she’d lose custody of her kid if she told me the full truth. Claimed she was under a gag order.”

The other man started laughing. “My momma would whack you over the head with a broom for even thinking a woman could pick you over her kid.”

Rafe ground his teeth. “You have a point. Her ex sounds like a real piece of work. She worried a lot about following the rules, and turns out he already found himself a new slampiece, at the hospital no less.”

“Why aren’t you mad at him, not her?”

“I’m mad at everyone. This isn’t fucking fair.”

“Whoever said life is fair? Where is that written?”

“Did you quote *The Princess Bride* at me?” Rafe snorted, another relic from time spent with Ava.

“I have sisters. You would not believe what movies I was forced to watch. Besides, don’t tell me you didn’t like it. Fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, true love, miracles...”

“I did not,” Rafe lied.

“Liar. Pardon me for pointing this out, but you look like crap.”

Rafe reviewed his reflection in the gym mirror. His eyes were sunken in, and it was obvious he'd been shaving only the bare minimum to keep his SCBA mask sealed.

He should have felt better. The weight of responsibility for the C-section had been removed from his shoulders. Jessica - Ava - hadn't died, and he had saved her and Jenna. His suffering, guilt, and struggles ought to have been over.

Yet her eyes haunted him. The panic and horror the moment she'd seen her ex husband ...

“Come to the heavy bag.” Rafe abruptly left the weight benches and moved to the boxing area.

“I wasn't done with this set,” Fabian said, mid-biceps curl.

“Drop the damn weights.” Rafe shoved a set of gloves on his hands. “Get your officer butt over here to hold for me... sir.”

Fabian took it with grace, not one of the types who were full of their rank, even from a relative stranger like Rafe. “Okay. Because you need it.”

“I don't fucking know what I need.” Rafe didn't box much anymore. He'd been into it early in his career, right up until he'd done a live bout with a friend that landed him in the ER. Considering the number of other injuries he'd picked up since then, boxing wasn't worth it

Except right now he needed to hit something.

He got into his right handed stance as Fabian braced the bag from the opposite side. “Boxing therapy. Go for it.”

“I'm pissed.”

Thunk. Left jab.

“She lied.”

Whack. Right cross.

His own fire chief betrayed him. Ava betrayed him.

“Why couldn’t she trust me?”

Jab again. She’d hidden the truth, on purpose.

“Every day she lied when I’d have protected her.”

Right cross followed by a left hook.

“I loved her. I’d have fucking died for her.”

Rafe sped up his punches, raining more and more powerful blows against the bag. The bag practically groaned at the force of each impact. Fabian was hard pressed to keep it in place.

Physical pain felt good, but it wasn’t enough. There was an enemy he couldn’t defeat. Forces beyond his control that had twisted and bent him for the last year.

He’d lost his sense of self. He’d lost what made him a proud man, a firefighter who believed in his skills.

Everything was gone.

Lost.

No. He hadn’t lost everything.

Ava had.

He missed the bag and almost punched Fabian in the face.

The lieutenant danced out of the way at the nick of time. “Aim for the bag this time.”

“No. I could have taken your head off. I couldn’t see I was losing control.” Rafe lowered his hands. “Oh, God. Ava. I couldn’t see it.”

Fabian nodded in encouragement. “Go on. Figure this shit out.”

“She was terrified. She was terrified of HIM. He was the bogeyman, her shadow, forcing her to live in fear. Even being near me was a huge risk. And I did NOTHING.” Rafe sat down at his admission, the pressure building to a near intolerable level. He’d left her completely vulnerable.

“Nothing?” Fabian sat next to him, not touching, still near enough to be supportive.

“No. I was worse. I abandoned her. I told her I couldn’t forgive her. I love her, and I abandoned her at her most vulnerable. Just like everyone else.” Rafe tore off the gloves and threw them across the room, hitting the free weights.

This whole year, she’d been fighting on her own. He’d at least had his job, his A-shift who’d been kept unaware and untouched by the tragedy. Over and over again, Aiden Clark, Kevin Jones, and the rest of his team shown they cared, while he pushed them away. Even the department had made an attempt to help him and George with the counseling.

Hell, even this very minute, he had Santos listening to him bitch about his problems because that is what firefighters did for each other.

Who had Ava’s back? Who was watching out for her?

“God, I fucked this up.” Rafe buried his face in his hands. He hadn’t been able to put a name on the burning acid in his chest that hadn’t moved since he’d left her in the snow. It was a thousand times worse than the guilt he’d felt over the C-section last year.

“I met you today so take this with a grain of salt. You might have fucked this up, which means you’re gonna have to make it right. To win her back, you need go big. Really, really big. Give her something so important she’ll forgive anything,” Fabian said with confidence.

“Do you have a girl? Because your advice is way better than I’d expect from anyone on my team,” Rafe said, particularly since Lothario Kevin Jones would have told him to find a new chick.

“No, but my old captain, James Haskell, taught me a lot. I’m kind of envious of what he has.”

“Haskell?” Rafe was surprised. Haskell had been the captain of 5 who’d been removed from duty after the Steadman C-section.

“Yeah, he burned his life down after a bad call around Thanksgiving last year. His pregnant wife left him. It was bad.”

“Whoa.” Rafe hadn’t been aware of the details.

“Don’t worry. He’s better now, and he and the wife are going strong.”

“What did he do to get her back?”

“Nothing much. Stole a firetruck, drove to where she was staying, and went full Magic Mike in front of her and her friends. He also promised to quit the fire department for her if she wanted.”

“He stole a firetruck?”

“Wasn’t so much ‘stole’ as I helped him borrow it from my firehouse without permission, and we were his backup dancers.”

“I don’t think stripping will help me.”

Fabian dropped his voice. “James has scars. The bad kind, he almost died in a fire.”

“Fuck,” Rafe breathed. This Steadman thing was more like an atomic bomb than toxic waste if it took a man who’d almost given his life for the department away from his command.

“Bravest thing I’ve seen a man do. It was his only way to show she was more important than anything—his career, his pride, his pain... And trust me, his dancing was not great,” Fabian added, trying to lighten the mood, passing Rafe a towel.

Rafe wiped off his face. “How are you single? Or do you get laid a ton?”

“There was this one girl from the Vegas conference... well... nevermind.”

“No. Tell me.”

“The girl, she’s great. But this life we have, the things we see, I didn’t want to cause her more pain. And I’d just gotten promoted to lieutenant... Not being together is better for both of us.” Fabian’s expression was shadowed.

“I take back believing you give good advice.” Rafe hit Fabian on the shoulder with the towel.

“My advice is still solid. Besides, who cares what I did? What are you going to do?”

Rafe thought about it and had a worthwhile idea. Ava needed to be free from any fear her ex-husband would take her daughter.

“I’ve got a phone call to make.” He headed out of the gym.

“What are you going to do?”

“Nothing illegal,” Rafe assured him and turned back. “And, Santos, the Vegas conference was a year and a half ago. If you’re still hung up on that girl, take your own fucking advice.”

CHAPTER 18



In a perfect world, after the debacle over the trach at MetroGen, Dr. Ava Remley would have marched straight back to her lawyer demanding a new court date. Her lawyer would have gleefully crucified her ex-husband for being a total tool and got his parental rights severed. Heck, while they were at it, she'd have secured the half a billion-dollar-payout she deserved for being married to that asshole for five years and him demanding a divorce while she was still half sedated in ICU.

None of those things occurred.

Daniel had behaved badly and would likely continue to do so in the future. It was equally unlikely Daniel would lose access to Jenna without becoming a massive drug dealer or going to jail.

She'd saved a life and survived Daniel's constant attempts to shake her resolve.

Instead, in her efforts to protect everyone, she'd broken Rafe.

He was right to have dumped her. She hadn't been honest with him and had deliberately obfuscated at every opportunity.

"We aren't strangers. You did my C-section in the back of an ambulance last November. I'm going through a bitter divorce and my ex-husband has become a sociopath. He might come gunning for you. Want to date?"

One way or another, it would have ended the same way, and she'd been selfish to want to steal moments with him because he made her feel good.

Made her feel loved.

But it wasn't fair. It wasn't honest, because the past was there, casting a shadow.

She found herself on the west side driving through the snow-covered December streets until she came upon a familiar neighborhood.

The biggest house on the block, newly painted a garish yellow and decorated with an obscene amount of Christmas lights, had been hers and Daniel's.

He'd changed locks before she was discharged from the ICU. To rub salt in the wound, his lawyers had also served her with a court order barring her from entry because the house and her name were the property of Steadman Medical.

They had sold it quite early on to new money, and Daniel moved into his downtown building.

This wasn't why she was here. The house she wanted was another half a block down the street.

The Gupta-Carver house. The place where it had begun.

She looped her messenger bag over her shoulder and parked in the empty driveway behind the closed garage.

On the steps, she noted no one had put up Christmas lights here.

Last year they had...



"No mocking me, kiddo." Jacob Carver said in pretend seriousness.

"Me? No. I don't mock." Jessica strapped into the passenger side of Jacob Carver's SUV. Her seat had to be pulled back pretty far to accommodate her belly.

“Manika did for me putting up the Christmas lights yesterday. Some people do it after Halloween.” He backed out of the driveway, away from his house covered with enough Christmas lights to outdo the National Lampoon’s Christmas vacation.

“Enthusiasm isn’t bad for the holidays. Name the actor. Ten letters.”

“Umm. Will Ferrell?” Jacob tried, not a crossword aficionado, yet always tolerating her.

“Good guess because of Elf. Too many letters. Chevy Chase.”

They were driving from the more expensive neighborhoods on the West Side to MetroGen on the East Side. Sticking with the city streets, it was usually a thirty-minute drive.

“I’m not Chevy Chase over the holidays, but this is why me and the Chaplain love Thanksgiving weekend. You make your own rules. Eat that turkey. Sleep it off to eat more. Drown your dysfunctional family sorrows with a fifth of vodka. Wake up at three a.m. to go to the doorbusters Best Buy for those same relatives. Get into a fistfight over the latest toy at Walmart. Rinse and repeat until school restarts on Tuesday.”

“The Chaplain isn’t all about the injuries. You’re such an ER doc to the bone, though. You’d bleed your own epi for a trauma code.”

“Born with epi in my veins.” Jacob pretended to flex, keeping his hands on the steering wheel.

“We’re all born with epi in our veins,” Jessica reminded him of the medical fact.

“I got double. Can’t wait to see what comes through the door today. It’s amazing how many shoppers are ready to beat each other up to save five bucks,” Jacob stopped at an intersection’s red stop sign.

“Hope it won’t be a steak knife sale.”

“Which would be cool. Not for them, but for us.”

“No kidding. I’ll only stitch under 5cm lacs, or the babies will make me pass out.” Jessica rubbed her 35-week belly under her coat.

“You could have stayed home. I’m your double cover,” Jacob reminded her of the agreement they’d worked out. Since she could go into labor at any time, having another doctor drive her was the only safety precaution Daniel found remotely acceptable.

Thank God Jacob had also pointed out the second doc could take over her patients immediately, giving her no excuse to delay presenting to the ER for any suspected labor.

Jacob ended up being her main chauffeur because of their proximity and working more hours than his wife Manika, who had a large administrative burden.

“And miss the steak knife sale? What would I do? Hang out and do crossword puzzles while the ER fights off the extended Black Friday Barbarians at the gate?”

“Glad I could get you into the holiday spirit. It’ll be awesome. Remember the equally awesome hoverboard massacre?” Jacob asked.

“The year it was seventy on Christmas and fifteen kids presented in the same hour with forearm fractures?” Jessica guessed because a lot had happened during the eight years they’d worked together in the ER. He had been her attending through residency and a mentor the whole time.

“That was a fun day. I actually meant the day those six kids tried to drag race on the hoverboards, and they caught fire.” Jacob chuckled and waited at a red light. “I expect we might have a few e-bike explosions of people overloading them today.”

“A great reason for two-day Atlantis shopping. Online is the way to go.” Despite having multiple baby showers and a husband willing to purchase a hospital wing, Jessica couldn’t help buying ‘one more thing because the price is amazing’ items for the twins online.

The light turned green, and Jacob drove into the intersection.

“Manika feels the same way. She’s on a deal hunt for—”

Jacob never finished his sentence because there was no warning beyond a quick flicker of movement outside of Jessica’s window.

A drunk driver in a canary yellow sports car ran the red light and plowed right into the passenger side of Jacob’s SUV.

CHAPTER 19



Ava shook her head to dispel the memory.

The police report said the guy had been traveling over ninety and was four times the legal limit.

Or so it had been determined on autopsy.

Of the people who were truly at fault for what happened, the DOA driver was out of Daniel's jurisdiction.

She rang the doorbell and waited.

The lights were on, so one of the Carver doctors had to be home.

Manika Gupta-Carver opened the door in a terrycloth bathrobe and froze. "Jessica?"

"Actually, it's Ava now."

"Right. What's going on?"

"Hey, do you have a minute? I was nearby." Jessica corrected herself. Bending the truth hadn't helped her lately. "Actually, there's stuff we need to talk about."

Weariness washed over Manika's face. "Come in. Let's go to the office."

They sat down at her desk, behind the endless piles of paperwork, which was the lot in life for any department chief.

"Did you fire Jacob?" Ava skipped easing into the topic.

"You believe I would fire my own husband?" Manika responded.

“You didn’t hesitate to suspend him for doing precisely what I asked for. He was saving my life.”

“It was foolish. We’re ER doctors, not OBs.”

“It was desperate,” Ava countered. “I had a traumatic abruption. I was bleeding to death.”

“Doesn’t make it better. Crap like that only happens on TV. Heck, I think it happened on the first episode of Code Black,” Manika dismissed her.

“Five minutes,” Ava countered.

“What?”

“Five minutes. When a mom’s heart stops beating, you have five minutes to get the babies out, or they’re dead.”

Manika didn’t say anything for a few long seconds.

“Once they’re out, you have fifteen minutes to get the mom back. Jacob gave the twins those five minutes and me the next fifteen. He didn’t deserve to be fired.”

Manika shook her head. “Your skills are wasted in that urgent care. Why don’t you come back? I’ve heard the divorce is final, and I obviously have an opening for a full-time ER attending position. It’s unlikely your credentials have even officially lapsed. I can get you a temporary license under your new legal name. You could start by the new year.”

Ava let out a slightly hysterical laugh. “Thumb your nose at Daniel by having me take Jacob’s place after you fired him?”

“As much as I’d love to tell Daniel Steadman to take a long walk off a short pier, I held up my part of the bargain. I did not fire Jacob. He quit.”

“Why? He was supposed to get counseling and start back slowly.”

Manika gritted her teeth. “No counseling on the planet will save him from his hero complex or his guilt. He led a prolonged resuscitation on a drowning patient.”

“Well, they’re not dead until they’re warm and dead,” Ava said.

“It was June! Jacob was prepped to crack a chest for internal cardiac massage on his own in Trauma 3—where we had actual cardiothoracic surgery. Ryan Yates almost had to pry the bone saw out of his fingers.”

“Oh.” Ava was taken aback. “Might have been a bit far.”

“A bit? We tell the medical students medicine is supposed to be precision, devoid of emotional involvement. But we’re lying. Nothing is closer to visceral than working the ER, and Jacob’s more visceral than most.”

“Which is why I can’t come back,” Ava said. “Don’t offer me money. I don’t need it.”

“What do you need? Why are you here?” Manika’s voice echoed the questions Ava had been asking herself for months.

“Freedom. I’ve made choices recently that could have been better... and I brought a patient to MetroGen. Saw the looks on people’s faces. ‘She’s the one with the C-section. The one Daniel Steadman hates.’ The one who people will never stop talking about. If I stay, it’s the only person I’ll ever be.”

“It will pass. They’ll find a fresh scandal. New staff will come, and the gossip will change the C-section to yet another urban legend of MetroGen.”

“No, it won’t. Daniel isn’t going anywhere. The whispers will follow me everywhere. Even if they didn’t, you or the fire department will ask me to pick a side. I don’t want that.”

“You’re the one who insisted...”

“I didn’t do it for me! I did it for everyone else. Power, influence, money, it was never what I wanted. All I want is to go to work, do my job, and go home to the most beautiful girl in the world.”

“To the most beautiful girl in the world,” Manika repeated with an odd sort of significance.

“My one and only,” Ava said, “Chief Feldsher in OB is not sure I can have any more.”

“I’m sorry, but at least you have her. I don’t even have that.”

It occurred to Ava that she hadn’t considered Manika’s feelings. “Oh. Manika. I didn’t mean... you and Jacob...”

“Strangely, when you suspend your husband for six months, it doesn’t increase your chances of getting pregnant. Every hour I creep closer to the day when forty stares me in the face.”

Ava glanced around, realizing if Jacob had quit his job of his own volition, he should have been home. “Where is he?”

“Taking an EMT exam.” Manika sounded resigned.

“Did he forget he has an MD behind his name after he quit?”

“After you took a job as a tech, it got him to thinking. This is the first step in his quest to become a doctor-paramedic-firefighter. Because that’s more important than everything else.” Manika’s eyes were bright with unshed tears.

Ava got up to give her friend a hug. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I thought he’d get over this obsession. That we’d all move past it and go back to running the ER together. It haunts him, and I guess this is his way of coping.”

“Which is why I can’t come back. This past year has been purgatory, part in the old and unable to move to the new. This is my last gift to you.” Ava gave her a huge file of papers from her bag.

“What is this?”

“It’s from me and my lawyer. He thought I was crazy to give up most of what Daniel owed me and hired a contract lawyer instead of divorce attorney.”

Manika lifted the first page of the document. “A contract?”

“These are my stipulations and expectations related to the establishment and continuation of certain programs between MetroGen, the ED, and Cleveland FD. An ironclad legal

document in the event any angry billionaire plastic surgeons are tempted to push back. I love you guys, and I won't leave you unprotected."

"How many pages are there?" Manika weighed it in her hand.

"Too many. According to my lawyer, this covers everything in this universe, all known universes, in every language, other dimensions, and alternate timelines." Ava shrugged. "You and Chief Baker each get a copy."

Manika wiped her tears away. "Then go. Be free. Take my blessing to be happy, Ava."

"I hope I can. Tell Jacob... tell him I'll be fine. Everything will be fine." Ava gave Manika's hand a squeeze across her table. They'd worked together for eight years, had seen so much and lost so much.

It was another piece she'd be shedding. Necessary pain, necessary sacrifice. Letting go of what had been.

And these weren't even her biggest parts she'd given up.

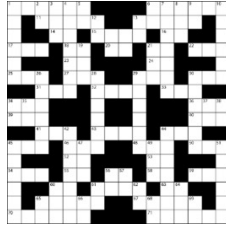
"Stay safe. You'll bring sunshine wherever you are."

Ava gave her a wide smile. "Don't hold onto the storm clouds—even if Jacob's doctor-firefighter-paramedic plan sounds like an awful TV show."

"Don't get me started."

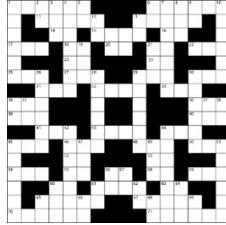
With that, Ava let herself out of the Gupta-Carver house, hoping this closed door opened a window somewhere else.

PART THREE



DAMN IT FEELS GOOD TO BE A
— (7 LETTERS)

GANGSTA



FROM THE DIARY OF THE CHAPLAIN AT METROGEN

Early January

It's always a good day when a doc stops by my office for a chat.

Sometimes they need to unburden their souls. Bad shift, dead patient, questioning themselves, getting a divorce.

Other times, though, they've done something, and they aren't sorry. Not the least little bit. Dr. AJG showed up, smirking, put his feet on my desk, and we had a scotch.

It was extremely watered-down Scotch. Ninety percent water. Still, it's the principle of the thing.

Wonder what he did.

CHAPTER 20



Their phone call was brief and to the point.

Three hours later, they met at the Siren Bar for lunch. Rafe had already ordered a pitcher of beer, wings, onion rings, and fries.

The bald man who entered stood about six foot five, putting him toe to toe with Rafe. He was not as muscular as Rafe, more of a swimmer or runner. Still, there was no mistaking the intelligence in his eyes or his sardonic grin.

“I’ve never been here before.” He craned his neck in a few different directions, trying to take in the decor.

Fitting its location across from the training academy, the Siren Bar and Grille was an explosion of Cleveland Fire logos and equipment. Throckies near MetroGen Hospital was filled to the gills with medical themes.

Not that Dr. Joel Glazier of MetroGen orthopedic surgery had any question of whose turf he’d ventured into for lunch.

“Been a while, Falcon.” Glazier took a chair.

“It has. How you been?”

“Same as fucking usual. Training my pissant residents how to sew bones back together. The manliest of specialties with drills and saws. You break anything lately?” Glazier picked up a wing that Rafe had stacked on his plate.

“Doc, it was that one time.”

“Or six. You have enough hardware to be the bionic man. How’s your wrist doing?”

Glazier had pinned Rafe’s wrist back together around two years ago. “Let’s me know when it’s gonna rain.”

“Your entire body is a giant barometer.”

“Only my legs. And my arms. And my ribs. And my chin.”

“Yes, your little toe must be the only one not getting the weather report. What do you want?”

Rafe pushed fries toward Glazier. “You didn’t think I called you about my surgeries?”

“If you had an injury problem, you’d have scheduled an appointment at my office, not invited me to lunch post-call. Though I am in no way opposed to a free lunch.” Glazier ate a handful of the fries.

“And good beer.”

“And supposedly good beer. Glad I took an Uber here.”

“You can have Scotch, too, if you need it,” Rafe volunteered.

“Are you going to put out next? What do you want?” Glazier asked between bites of fries.

“There’s a MetroGen rumor I wanted confirmed.”

Glazier picked up a wing and took a big drink of his beer. “Interesting.”

Rafe held onto his patience. Glazier could be a first-class asshole when he felt like it. This was his version of friendly. “Interesting how?”

“You’re right. Their beer is pretty good.” Glazier finished the glass. “I might have to put out after all.”

Pouring him another one, Rafe said, “You’re an easy lay.”

“Hope you have big tits under there because I prefer my ladies less tattooed.” Glazier drank the second beer more slowly.

“You were saying ‘interesting’?”

“Yeah. Figured an ambulance driver like you would have an easier time chatting it up with the docs down in the ER. Heard Marcus Doyle is pretty easy, though he is married for the moment, possibly temporarily. Or aim for a threesome with Dr. Carver and her husband.” Glazier paused mid sip. “Actually, I heard he got fired suddenly.”

Rafe pushed the onion rings at him. Glazier would tell him what he needed in good time. “Try the rings.”

“I will.” Glazier grabbed a fistful and shoved it into his mouth. “Delicious trans fat.”

“Wings, fries, rings, and beer. Hope you’ve got good cholesterol.”

“Ahh, I’ll bang a cardiologist and let her tell me what to do. Actually, I’d have to work hard to find one at MetroGen since their division chases them off pretty damn fast. It’s a bad sign if someone makes me look nice.” Glazier wiped off his mouth with a napkin. “You’ve wined and dined me. I’m willing to put out. Shoot.”

The next words were chosen carefully and neutrally. “Tell me about the ‘resident and fellow mixer?’”

“That shitty thing?” Glazier snorted. “Yes, as the chief of orthopedic surgery, I’m forced to attend every year.”

“Every year?”

“It’s always a weekend near the end of June after the new residents and fellows arrive. Open bar equals meat market.” Glazier tried a wing.

“Meat market?”

“Yes, MetroGen and Steadman Medical co-sponsor it. Trust me, it’s practically the first week of college.”

“Humor me, I never went to college,” Rafe said.

“The first weekend of college is a rite of passage where the freshmen get drunk for the first time and hook up like horny rabbits. Same thing happens at the mixer. I think this year one of my residents banged the only dude in the OB-GYN residency class.”

“How charming,” Rafe observed.

“Your group can’t throw stones. I’ve seen your crew scoring with the nurses at Throckies. ‘I saved a baby from a burning building. Wanna see my big hose?’” Glazier must have seen Kevin Jones at work.

“Back on topic.” Rafe refilled the glass of beer.

“Fine. I luck out because my residents are mostly guys and don’t hook up with each other. When these fledgling couples break up in less than a month, nobody bitches to me about their hurt feelings. Internal medicine, which is bigger with a pretty even split... it’s gotta suck to be them.”

“So, the purpose of the resident and fellow mixer is drunken hookups?”

“Depending on who you ask, it’s also scoping out your competition for the year. But getting shitfaced is relatively universal.”

“Were you shitfaced at the last one?” Rafe asked.

“Nah, I don’t need booze to score tail. If I’m not your flavor, ain’t no amount of liquor gonna make it better. And my sometimes girl doesn’t drink.”

“You got a ‘sometimes girl’? New for you?” Rafe remembered Glazier was divorced, same as him. “Not a resident?”

“Hell no. She’s a firebrand ENT attending in and out of the OR. Banging a resident or fellow isn’t worth the paperwork, which most attendings should know. If you plan on fucking one, the mixer is too obvious of a place to do it, or you get accused of favoritism and shit. Attending on attending action is a victimless crime.”

“So, you hooked up with your sort of girl. When you weren’t doing that, did you see anything out of the ordinary?” Rafe tried to be casual.

Glazier’s eyes were cautious. “Such as?”

“I dunno. Did Daniel Steadman have a good time?”

Taking a long pull from his beer, Glazier said, “What did you hear about that?”

“Mostly how he couldn’t keep it in his pants? Who did he trip and fall on top of?”

“Dr. Kayla Varma, attending. New head of the ICU.” Glazier chewed on another onion ring. “It was interesting to watch. I was at the front desk getting a room when they staggered out the front doors drunk as skunks.”

Rafe was doing fast calculations in his head. The summation was an absolute violation of the many separation clauses which had been enforced on Ava.

“I’m sure it’s fine. They were a couple beforehand if they were going to be so public about it.”

“Not exactly.” Glazier downed the whole beer. “Quite a bit of interest in Daniel Steadman? Whatever you’re doing, it may not be wise. We can stop here.”

“You don’t want to stop.” Rafe passed his full glass to Glazier.

“True. I’ve never been a particular fan of Daniel Steadman. Too much money, and he knows it. Then that ugly business with his ex-wife in the ER. They’re not even allowed to talk shit about him after what he did. And now...”

“Now?”

“Can I have all this to go?”

“Yes. Doggie bag. No problem.” Rafe flagged down a waitress. “You were saying?”

“I’m an asshole. I’ve always been an asshole. It’s just how I was built. Daniel Stedman, he’s only rage now. An endless black hole of rage that cannot be contained. And everyone who was a target of his rage needs to hide. Staff run before him.”

“Yet here you are, giving it up for cheap.”

“Steadman has extremely low tolerance of anyone who isn’t perfectly well behaved, hypocrite that he is. And the girl I

see... I wouldn't be seeing her if she were well-behaved."

This was interesting. Glazer had someone who he cared enough about to stick his neck out over. Or maybe he shared Rafe's feelings about men treating women badly. "I can't imagine you with the well-behaved girl."

"Me neither. Either way, he doesn't like her, and she's Kayla Varma's next-door neighbor. No matter what anyone says, Steadman had not been at Varma's house until after the resident mixer."

"You sure?"

"Not only has my girl mentioned it, I've seen it with my own eyes. When she let me spend the night, never saw him till after the mixer. Now his Rolls Royce is there occasionally."

"It's possible they were together and she went to his place."

Glazier scoffed. "Daniel Steadman lives in the penthouse of Steadman Medical in downtown Cleveland. Can't be too far from *his* hospital. I've never made it past the lobby, but you essentially need a retinal scan, a blood test, and a special card to get above the fifth floor."

"Yet you aren't worried."

"Steadman can't touch me."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm the best."

"And humblest."

"Most humble," Glazier corrected him. "When you're on the short list of doctors who the NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL come to for surgery, not even murder will get you fired."

Rafe ate a fry, closing the new doggie bag. "Same goes for handsome billionaire plastic surgeons."

"Precisely. Don't tell me what's going on. I don't want to know." Glazier stood up. "My Uber's coming, and you think this through. If you tangle with Steadman, better watch your back."

Once Glazier left, Rafe walked across the street to the Cleveland Fire training center.

Staffing was sparse because it was still another month until the new class of trainees started in January. However, any Cleveland firefighter was allowed to use the facilities at their discretion, no questions asked.

Therefore, no one said anything when he took over a computer station and called up Firehouse 15's upcoming building inspections. To his delight, several of the downtown skyscrapers were on the schedule for his shifts next week.

Since he already knew downtown like the back of his hand after twenty years, he dialed the number listed for the Key Bank Building's Security and Fire Center.

"This is Cleveland Fire, confirming your inspection this week."

"Absolutely. We have you on the schedule."

"Great, got a few things you should do beforehand. Is this the main control center for fire and security, or will we need a second center?"

"Nope, we're the only one. The servers are backed up on-site and remotely, but this is the only spot with twenty-four-seven staffing."

"Good. Good. You have video feed backed up? How long?" Rafe opened a calendar app on the computer and did a quick web search for the dates of MetroGen resident orientation.

"At least two years. Police like having it available upon request. Even has audio at some entrances."

Five letters. Winner.

Bingo.

"Couldn't be happier to hear it. We're gonna want to check the stairways and visibility from all the cameras. Can you have

the security feed available from the last week of June this year?”

“No problem. Looking forward to seeing you guys.”

“Me too. Till next week.”

Rafe hung up the phone and set his lips in a grim line.

Steadman wouldn't know what hit him.

CHAPTER 21



A week into the New Year, Rafe waited patiently through plastic surgery triage and had plenty of time to get ready in the exam room. For good measure, he busted out a set of fifty push-ups before taking off his shirt for his exam.

It took a little effort, but he was able to arrange his features into something that was not murderous rage.

After what felt like an eternity, the doctor arrived. He was wearing a suit and tie with his perfect tanned skin and cool blue eyes.

And equally frozen demeanor.

Dante's third circle of hell. Three letters.

ICE.

“Hello, Mr. Falcon. I’m Dr. Steadman. I understand we’re here to discuss your scars.”

“That’s what it says on the chart.” Raf felt that cold assessing gaze sweep over his skin, most likely noting the many burns, surgical scars, and tattoos. He extended his arms and waited for the doctor to come closer. “Which one do you think we should start with?”

“None of these are particularly awful. Some of them could improve with simple steroid injections from dermatology and

regular vitamin E. You don't seem to have any keloids. Dr. Glazier did a good job when he closed your other incisions."

"I'll be honest, doc," Raf flexed, making his already large biceps bulge and let Steadman palpate one of the scars. "I'm here cuz of my woman."

"She doesn't like them?" Steadman said absently, unaware of how much danger he was in.

"No, doc. A good woman appreciates touching while she puts footprints on my ceiling. Jessica loves it." Rafe deliberately used Ava's real name, even though he still didn't think about her as anyone except 'Ava.'

That got a reaction. Steadman paused. "Do I know you?"

"Not yet, but you will. Jessica has the cutest daughter—named Jenna."

The doctor backpedaled half a step as Rafe stayed where he was. "Well, I can't help you."

"I think you can. You see, I'm here to have a word with you. Because, unlike you, I know how to protect my woman."

Steadman's jaw tensed. "Shall I call security?"

"I don't think that's necessary, do you? Unless you're a pussy and can't take his own lumps like a man. But then again, you probably don't have balls. If you did, you wouldn't pick on your ex-wife and the mother of your child. A real man doesn't terrorize a woman."

"We're done here." Steadman moved to get away.

"I know what you did."

Steadman turned back around. "What?"

"Jessica's too nice. She's terrified you're going to take Jenna away from her. You had that long list of rules for who she could talk to, where she could go, who she could date. But you just couldn't keep it in your pants, could you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“You and Dr. Varma. Guess the enforced celibacy policy till divorce doesn’t apply to you.”

“She and I are in a committed relationship. We’re getting married.”

“I’m sure you are. Because you hunted down every single person who saw you get shitfaced drunk at the residency and fellow mixer?”

“A little affection at the bar on the woman with whom I’m in a committed relationship is meaningless.”

“You’d think so, and I get you’re used to getting your way with your money. Did you realize there’s a twenty-four-hour security camera at Key Bank across from your Steadman Medical?” Rafe smiled. “Wanna guess what it captured?”

Steadman went ominously quiet.

“You gonna tell the judge you and Dr. Varma were in a long-term committed relationship? I enjoyed the part of the video when you had to ask her name several times. Right before you unzipped your fly and pushed her to her knees...”

“Stop.”

“In a public street, no less.”

“What do you want from me here? Kayla and I are in a relationship now. We’re getting engaged, and marriage is on the table.”

“I’ll believe it when I see the ring.”

“Jessica already agreed to custody terms,” Steadman said. “Just because I broke the celibacy clause, she won’t contest it.”

“Courts change their minds all the time, and I bet she can afford a team of lawyers with the bags of money you’ve thrown at her. She didn’t fight you, but I have no problems going toe to toe with you and we’ll see which one of us has a bigger cock.”

“You think I’m scared? You don’t know what I’ve been through.”

“Wrong, you fucked up twice. Once by divorcing her and then by fucking Dr. Varma off schedule.” Rafe stood, towering over Steadman by four inches. “And when a judge watches the video, I don’t think he’s gonna give you a father of the year award... Your ex-wife already calls me ‘daddy.’ You want Baby Jenna to do the same? Because I’ll make sure you never see her again.”

As expected, Steadman threw a punch, connecting with Rafe’s jaw.

Rafe didn’t even flinch and gave his best grin. “You gonna try that again, Mayweather? You punch like a chick. And not a strong one.”

At the second swing, Raf caught the fist and pushed back slightly. Steadman shouted, “You asshole!”

“I’m not the asshole here. You are. Hope you don’t break one of your delicate surgeon hands.” Rafe spat on the floor, narrowly missing Steadman’s expensive leather shoes.

Steadman rocked back on his heels. “I will bury you.”

Rafe sighed, “Shoulda been more aware of your surroundings. In a fire, you’d be a cinder.” Completely unconcerned, he pushed a Kleenex box to the side, revealing his phone, which had been video recording the entire confrontation. He hit send, right to his email. “Situational awareness, motherfucker.”

“You set me up!” Steadman was livid. “I’ll make you regret this. I will come after everything you own. Your job. Your house.”

“Do I look worried? You want my job. Go for it. I bet you gave Ava enough money to buy a mansion and never work again. Thanks for giving me enough goods to deep six your custody rights. Don’t try to destroy my phone. It’s already sent, and the Wi-Fi is surprisingly good in this section of the building.”

“You think this settles anything?” Steadman hissed.

“I think I’ve got you by the balls, and you’re gonna back the hell off. Before you call the police or the mayor,

remember, after twenty years on FD, I know every cop in the city. I doubt you can say the same.”

“What do you want?”

“Jessica, or Ava as she goes by now, is released henceforth from her NDA, and the limits on her movements, speech, medical license, and relationships are null and void. In exchange, we won’t press the custody issue... unless you fucking step a toe out of line, I own your ass and your daughter.”

“And what about Jessica? You own her too?”

“Nah, I’ll let her own me. Excuse me, I’ve decided against getting my scars corrected. Pleasure to see you, doc. Have a nice day.” Rafe put his shirt on and sauntered out the door, whistling.

CHAPTER 22



The fallout came from an unanticipated source.

Rafe unlocked his door after a twenty-four-hour shift a few days later and found someone sitting in his kitchen.

“How the fuck did you get in here?” he asked the person.

“Your building super. I can be very convincing.” The man smiled, which considerably softened his piercing blue eyes. “My friend Rafe needed me to check his oven. He’s on an overnight shift, and I don’t want him to burn the building down.”

“You always were a sneaky bastard.” Rafe walked past him and opened his fridge. “Want a beer?”

“I can probably handle one. I drove.”

“Always Mr. Responsibility.” Rafe set two open beers on the table.

“I have to be in my position,” Fire Chief Noah Baker said, now almost a year since his promotion to Rafe’s boss’s boss’s boss’s boss. “How are you, Rafe?”

“Never better. To what do I owe this pleasure? Let me guess. You’re here to check on my oven and my health.” Rafe didn’t hide any of his sarcasm. Long before Noah had ascended to fire chief, they’d been in academy together.

“A doctor’s appointment did bring me. I hear you threatened Dr. Daniel Steadman—the head of plastic surgery sits on the MetroGen board. Head of Steadman Medical.” Baker wasn’t going to beat around the bush.

“That? Yes, I did. Watcha gonna do about it, *güero*?” Raf took a swig of his beer and watched those eyes ratchet up from lazy to petrifying. The Chief could have taught a thing or two to Steadman about intimidation. “Don’t give me Chief face. If the Fire Chief was making this official, you’d be at HQ and I’d be in the hot seat.”

“Steadman wants you fired. Says you entered his office under false pretenses and ‘verbally assaulted him.’”

“Did he mention he punched me?”

Noah sipped his beer. “Learned the hard way you have a plate in your chin?”

“Says the man who put it there.” Rafe and Noah had once gone a little too far boxing back in the day, earning Rafe his first piece of hardware. “What do you want?”

“I want a public apology, and you’re to stay away from him.”

“No. Gotta be sorry first. I’m not.” Rafe cracked his knuckles.

“You do understand that we’re trying to work with MetroGen, build something out of the mess Chief Pegg left behind. We need Steadman’s support for the Department.”

“You need his support. He can go fuck himself.” Rafe finished Noah’s beer and set his phone on the table, hitting play. The Fire Chief controlled his expression for the length of the video.

“No wonder he was pissed. He gonna sue you for the recording?”

“Only one party needs to consent to the recording, which was me. I checked the Ohio laws first. Besides, you can’t throw a damn stone about ethics. You let George and me believe she was dead.”

“You drew your own conclusions on that.”

“And you did nothing to correct it. Supposedly, you have eyes everywhere. Gonna tell me you hadn’t heard how messed up it made me?”

“Many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view. Jessica Steadman died, ceasing to exist when Daniel Steadman demanded a divorce and she became Ava Remley. She knew, as I did, it was best for you to remain safely anonymous.”

“Your Jedi mind tricks won’t work on me, Chief. I’m familiar with the plot of *Star Wars*, thanks,” Rafe would not be dissuaded by Baker’s show of faux humility by invoking *Star Wars*. Back in the day when they’d been equals, Baker had been a total sci-fi geek, though he’d certainly learned to channel Darth Vader since then. “Give me a good reason why you hid the truth from me.”

“I didn’t hide the truth from you, specifically. I buried the incident – every report, every scrap of paper. No records, no questions, no matter what the rumors of MetroGen brought out from the woodwork. Anyone who knew the details had been thoroughly warned to never divulge their information. It worked better than I anticipated, keeping you safe and the focus of Daniel Steadman elsewhere.”

“Right until Ava met me and burned your plan to the ground.”

“I admit, I didn’t see that coming. No one expected you to fall in love with her, show up to MetroGen with a guy she’d trach’ed, and then pick a fight with her ex-husband on MetroGen property.”

Raf twirled his bottle on the table. “Why do you want to get in bed with Steadman and the rest of the assholes at MetroGen? He might be their leader, but they didn’t hesitate to toss her in the trash at his request.”

“Because we need them. I can do this. I can keep the disaster of a C-section from happening again. But not without them.”

Five letters. Name of betrayal.

Judas.

“What did you trade for your thirty pieces of silver?”

Noah had sterner nerves than Steadman, for sure. He raised his eyebrows. “I’m surprised you don’t know. I didn’t broker the deal—Ava Remley did.”

“She didn’t,” Rafe denied.

“Daniel Steadman wanted to burn the world down—the hospital, the fire department, the ER. You name it, he’d have destroyed it. The only one who stood in his way was her. She stuck to her guns—damned horrible luck, and a desperate attempt to save her—exactly like she’d asked. To shield everyone else, she took his ire and kept most of it aimed at her these past months.”

“He seems to have plenty of ire oozing out of his every perfect pore.”

“It was worse before. I played ball and protected as many people as I could, including you. He wanted the heads of everyone involved.”

“I never asked for your protection, Noah. Besides, don’t pretend you protected me out of the goodness of your heart. We both know that ain’t true, *jefe*.”

“If I’m a heartless bastard, I’d have let your head roll. You aren’t worth spending my political capital on,” Baker said.

“Oh, so it was more political than what you did to Captain Haskell? You demoted him and tied him to a damn desk. The man DIED for this department, and you still fucked him over.”

Chief Baker’s face didn’t flinch, and it was hard for Rafe to remember him as the little Blondie who’d been his fellow rookie two decades ago at Firehouse 15.

“Everyone has something to lose, and he was your commander. Who should I have allowed to be punished? George? Dispatch? You?”

“Haskell wasn’t even present at the scene. Guess you can’t be demoted when you’re unranked.” Rafe smirked.

“Your decision to never apply for promotion in twenty years has nothing to do with me. Soto has approached you

many times.”

“Not everyone wants to live and die climbing the metaphorical ladder when we should be climbing the real thing,” Rafe growled.

The Chief remained unruffled. “Should we settle this by arm wrestling? Bench press contest? Fire axes at dawn?”

Rafe had to admit the Chief kept himself firefighting trim, unlike many of the other chiefs who’d gone soft around the middle. “I could take you.”

“Only if you want a second plate to go with your chin,” Baker said, which wasn’t a bluff. He’d been one of the best boxers in the Department.

“I’m game any place, any time.”

Chief Baker regarded him steadily. “This is not something I can ignore. Daniel Steadman knows your name. He wants you gone, and someday, he’ll realize you were in the C-section.”

“I assume you’re here to offer me a chance to resign.”

“Should you choose to go quietly, you’ll get your pension and a glowing letter of recommendation. You have enough experience to join any fire department you want anywhere in the state. Lake County, perhaps?” Baker offered, implying he had been aware of Ava’s location the entire time.

“You must really want what Steadman’s giving you.”

“Rafe, forget about him. These aren’t his wishes; these are Ava’s. It’s her steadfast devotion and commitment that will create Rescue Alpha and heal what you lost that day. And yes, I knew it haunted you.” Baker said the last part in an undertone.

“Because I thought I KILLED HER AND THE BABIES!” Rafe punched the table. “Don’t pretend you can understand even an ounce of what I experienced!”

“I carry those deaths with me—every single one. And it’s my responsibility to prevent future deaths. This is where Rescue Alpha comes in.” The Chief’s voice was quiet.

“What is Rescue Alpha?” Rafe asked.

“It’s Cleveland FD and MetroGen’s combined advanced paramedic program. State-of-the-art training, shared by both institutions. Training paramedics in emergency surgeries, like C-sections. So, if this ever happens again, you’d be ready.”

Rafe sat back. The Chief wasn’t lying about this. He’d wondered where Paramedic Yates had come from.

Except...

“Cleveland FD only, right?”

“I’m afraid so. You have to pick one—her or absolution. I can’t give you both.”

“Her.” Rafe said without a shred of hesitation.

The Chief closed his eyes for a second and then nodded. “You don’t need more time to think about it?”

“Nope. You thought there was a question in this?” Rafe almost felt amused. It was hard to tell if the Chief was being deliberately dense or he believed Rafe would trade Ava for his career.

Then again, the Chief was divorced for a reason.

“Well, if you truly wanted to go out with a bang, you’d have beat the crap out of Steadman. There was a chance you’d reconsider.”

“Or I didn’t want to spend a weekend in jail. Besides, a restraining order would make the custody hand-off even more awkward. Especially since I finally got the upper hand on him.”

“Then I expect your resignation paperwork by early next week. In exchange, I personally—and on paper—guarantee you will be left out of all future CCFD and MetroGen business. You’ll both be free and clear of us forever if you never try to interfere. I don’t need more political opponents from this.”

“I guess I’d better take the money and run. Thank you, sir,” Rafe said, realizing it was unlikely he’d ever see Noah

Baker again. Their roads had parted twenty years ago, and now the rift would be permanent.

Rafe was choosing Ava and exile from the city he'd loved.

"One more thing," the Fire Chief said.

"What?" Rafe asked.

"I see Firehouse 15 recently worked on the pre-plans for a few buildings downtown. Then you would know Key Bank doesn't have cameras facing the entrance to the Steadman Medical building."

Rafe glowered at the Chief. "You are a sneaky bastard."

"Allow me to give you a word of advice," Baker said, standing up and heading toward the door. "You and I have both been divorced. Make your next marriage count. And soon."

"Oh, I will, Noah."

FROM THE DIARY OF THE CHAPLAIN AT METROGEN

Late February

*There was an odd announcement today.
All of Dr DS's cases were canceled for the
whole week. No explanation given.*

Hope he's okay.

*He probably is because over in the ICU,
his girlfriend Dr KV is still working full time.*

CHAPTER 23



Ava had the weekend off, and she spent it baking cookies in her new house.

There was no good reason to bake cookies. On the other hand, there was no good reason NOT to bake cookies. She could freeze them now and have them ready at a moment's notice for coffee hour at her new church. Now with her new legal name and medical license in the clear, she was working at the same urgent care as a doctor, not a tech. The urgent care being closed on the weekends had definite benefits.

Jenna was upstairs napping, not due at Daniel's till next weekend.

In an odd turn of events, her lawyer had received a letter from Daniel's lawyer stating that he would be driving to and from Lake County for the exchange at Ava's house instead of Ava having to venture to Cleveland. It even had a list of four acceptable neutral parties who could make the transfer, and Kayla Varma was not one of them.

Her doorbell rang.

It was a little odd to happen late February in the snowbelt. Her parents were coming over tomorrow, not today.

Ava went to the door and peeked out the side windows. The edge of a man in blackish pants with a yellowish jacket was the only easily visible part.

"Mentor building inspection," a man's voice said, muffled by a scarf.

She opened the door and craned her head up, up, and up. The man had a very familiar set of brown eyes, and the yellow jacket was a Mentor Fire Department turnout jacket.

“Dr. Remley. I’m here to conduct your building’s annual fire inspection.”

“Rafe?” she asked.

He held out a large clipboard and opened a wallet with a city of Mentor ID. “It’s routine, especially after the purchase of a new home. May I come in?”

“Of course.” Ava’s mind eased. It was unlikely Rafe had stolen Mentor firefighter gear or official building inspection forms.

“Thank you, ma’am. According to the blueprints, this is a four-bedroom, three and a half bath? Occupancy?” He entered to her landing, carefully wiping off his boots on the mat.

“Yes, correct. It’s for me and my daughter.” Ava untied her apron, glad she was wearing a bright turquoise happy dress today.

“I’ve already checked outside. As we go from room to room, I’ll have questions.” He walked purely business toward her dining room and kitchen, pointing out the smoke detector. “One in the kitchen?”

“Yes, there are three more in the house.”

His eyes swept through her kitchen, the scent of cookies permeated the room. “Do you have a fire extinguisher?”

“Under the sink.”

“Do you mind if I take this off to look?” He indicated his turnout jacket.

“Be my guest.” She draped her apron on one of the eat-in kitchen chairs, and he did the same with his turnout jacket. The two were next to each other, almost like they belonged together.

No. He was here for a job. Maybe he started a second gig in Mentor.

Though, judging by the muscles bulging through his Mentor Fire T-shirt with his turnout pants suspenders, he was finding plenty of time to work out. He was even more cut than she remembered, and it took self-control to keep her hands from tracing up the his tattoos.

It only got worse when he bent down from the waist to check under her sink for the fire extinguisher.

He straightened up and said, “We’d recommend this be closer to the stove. This is a B-C extinguisher. You should have an A-B-C to put out ordinary, grease, and electrical fires.”

“Oh,” Ava said, and he marked something else on the clipboard.

“Gas heat?” he asked in the living room, not commenting on the portrait of Jenna over the fireplace.

“No, electrical comes from the Perry Power plant. I have a carbon monoxide detector, though. The chimney and the fireplace are for show.”

“It’s not for show. It’s just not part of the central heating of the house. Flue works?”

“I think so. I hadn’t really planned on using the fireplace. Jenna’s learning to walk. Baby plus fire equals bad.”

“Well, even if you’re not using it, you should get it inspected by a professional yearly. Should have been covered in your home inspection.”

“Right. I’m sure I have that somewhere.” It was odd how the man, a guest on her turf, seemed to be taking over her space.

He checked her laundry room, mudroom, empty two car garage, and half-bath before asking if they could move upstairs.

They went to her office (don’t over-use extension cords), the guest bedroom (don’t plug space heaters into extension cords), the two guest bathrooms (change out old iridescent

bulbs for cooler LEDs), and her hallways (more smoke detectors equals better)

“Mama.” They could hear Jenna say from behind the door.

“I guess she’s not napping. You can come in.” Ava opened the door in the darkened room and turned on a few of the lights.

The room was relatively spacious with a play mat, changing table, and a wide plethora of doctor and firefighting toys. Jenna, in firefighting pajamas, peered over the side of her pack-and-play.

“Pack and plays are as safe as cribs and lighter.” Ava said to defend her decision.

“It’s fine.” Rafe hugged the wall, avoiding going near Jenna and remained focused on other parts of the room. “Good, no space heaters, changing table secured to wall. No curtain strings. Avoid homemade pajamas. Commercial baby clothes are typically fire resistant, not fireproof unless they’re made of Kevlar.”

“No Kevlar. Wanted to give her more than doctor stuff.” Ava said.

“Hey.” Jenna, now fifteen months, had started talking up a storm. “Mans. Mans. Mama. Mans here.”

Ava picked her up and said, “It’s okay. This man is nice. He’s a firefighter doing a job.”

“Not Daddy. Not grumpa.” Jenna squirmed, reaching toward Rafe.

“No. This is Rafe.”

Jenna redoubled her efforts. “Big. Rafe. Now.”

“I can leave,” Rafe volunteered.

“No.” Jenna tried to launch herself toward him. Rather than engage in a battle of wills with a toddler, Ava quickly traded Jenna for Rafe’s clipboard.

Rafe held Jenna away from him, his hands several shades darker than her skin. Jenna stared at his face like he was the

most fascinating thing she'd ever seen.

"Hi," Rafe said.

"Hi." Jenna beeped her nose. "Nose. Nose. Nose."

"She wants to get your nose," Ava translated the behavior.

"Oh." He brought the baby closer and let her feel her way past the scar on his chin to tap his nose. Then he grinned at her and tapped her nose back. "Nose."

"Nose," Jenna agreed, satisfied with her new friend. "Nose. Jenna Nose. Big man's nose. Good."

To Ava's surprise, Jenna laid her head on his chest, yawning and snuggling in. "Tired."

There weren't enough words to describe the awe on Rafe's face, though Ava was willing to try a crossword puzzle's worth.

Adoring.

Tender.

Protective.

Charmed.

Her heart thumped in all sorts of ways that didn't need an EKG or a cardiac consult.

Jenna must have been pretending to nap earlier because, within seconds, she went limp in sleep.

"Sorry about that. I can put her back."

"No worries. I've got it." He gently set Jenna in the pack-and-play as if she were a fragile piece of glass.

Ava's mind remembered the way he'd spoken of the son he'd raised and had been taken by his mom. This man was meant to be a father.

"Rafe." Ava stretched out a hand to him.

He reached toward her... and took his clipboard back.

Without comment, he carried his trusty clipboard to the remaining room, her bedroom. Rafe paused briefly at the door,

likely noticing the very different bed she'd splurged on.

While her old bed had been a queen, this one was a custom-built king, constructed for someone significantly larger than she.

He didn't comment, instead walking into the master bath and let out a low whistle.

Ava swore he glanced back at her with heated eyes. Another new house feature was double sinks, a shower for two, and a jetted tub.

Except he said, "Be careful about this outlet by the tub. Do you remember where your breaker box is?"

"Garage, right?"

"Correct. You can't be too careful about electricity. You never know when it'll start a fire. Sometimes it can't be controlled."

This time, she was certain he was watching her because he set the clipboard on the sink counter and ran a hand down her cheek.

She wet her lips, mouth suddenly dry, unable to speak. Cradling his wrist against her cheek, she rubbed the dragon tattoo twining up his arm.

"Are you sure you understand, Dr. Remley? Electricity can be very dangerous."

"Dangerous," she managed to repeat.

The electricity in this room was about to explode. Three months apart without a word from him. She'd told herself in those months of radio silence she should move on and that he had, too.

Yet here he was, not letting that happen.

"It's uncontrollable even." His body was only inches from hers. "It can destroy everything it encounters."

She set her hand on his wrist, leaning into his strength. "Let me do it right. Fix the part I broke."

His eyes, almost ebony, held hers. “You broke nothing.”

“I did.”

Rafe shook his head at her admission. “No, and you didn’t let the world break you.”

His lips were closing the distance to hers, lightning about to burn the building down.

And then a buzzer went off somewhere downstairs, making Ava step back. “My cookies. The oven.”

He dropped his hands; the intensity fading. “Go get them. It’ll be bad if your kitchen catches fire during my inspection. You’ll have to wake the baby.”

“Rafe,” she tried.

“I can finish alone here.”

Ava flounced downstairs, turned off her oven, and pulled out the cookie sheet.

They smelled amazing, and she wondered if she could entice him to stay a few more minutes.

It would take more than that. She could hide his turnout jacket. Or tackle him.

Which would almost certainly fail based on his mountain of muscle.

She heard his footstep coming down the stairs, then he entered the kitchen, clipboard and pen in hand.

He handed her the whole thing. “I’m going to need your signature, and you’ll receive your copy of our recommendations in the mail within five business days.”

His face was unreadable, and Ava wished again the oven alarm hadn’t interrupted them.

“I sign here?”

“And initial. And a date.”

He stood next to her to point out the highlighted sections. This was yet another type of torture because he was a few

close inches away. She could feel the air displacement around him, unable to touch him.

“Done?”

“One more page.” He flipped through the stack of papers, and the text in front of her made her freeze.

The last page was a completed crossword, save for one single blank highlighted clue.

Wrds 2 say

Four letters

The abbreviation of ‘words’ to wrds and two to 2 meant no traditional spellings would be used and the answer would be two words.

Their eyes met again, and she realized he was holding his breath, his gaze unwavering on hers.

The pen trembled in her hand before she wrote down the only answer that ever mattered.

Rafe’s response was immediate.

He plucked the clipboard from her nerveless fingers and tossed it on the table, pulling her in for a very long-delayed, big, damn kiss.

Three months of separation and even longer without sex made it one hell of a kiss. She ended up sitting on the dining room table, boosted up to place her face level with his, her skirt scrunched up to her thighs.

LUVU.

CHAPTER 24



When the kiss finally ended, Rafe didn't release her. "Ava, *mi brillo de sol*, upstairs. You and that bed are made for me."

Her aqua dress had somehow lost structural integrity because it was trying to slip off her shoulders. "Hang on, Rafe."

"You're about to make me the happiest man on earth. We love each other. We can be together now."

"We've got to talk about this."

"Later." He gave her a drugging kiss, robbing her of speech. "I'm going to eat your sugary sweetness for real. Swallow you whole."

Her man was making this deliciously difficult. She had to lurch away, scampering to put the table between them or she'd climb the dragon this very second. "No. I want this. I want us. It needs to be honest and right. Believe me, I didn't do right by you."

"Sunshine, I've had two months to think about this. There is nothing you can say that will change my mind. I love you."

His words tore at her heart, and tears almost threatened. "I love you, too. And because I love you, you NEED to hear the whole story. No more secrets. No more lies. No gag orders. No NDAs. Please."

Rafe sighed and sat down at the table. "Okay. I'm listening."

“Right.” She twisted her hands together and gave him one of the cookies. “Try this.”

Those brown eyes of his seared her skin. “Not the sugar I want. Sit down.”

Ava took the chair next to him, making sure not to touch him. “The first time I saw you at the coffee shop, I didn’t think you were real. I had flashes of you from the C-section. Your eyes. Your face. And there you were, this silent dragon in my coffee shop.”

“An angry, grumpy dragon with a huge chip on his shoulder.”

“Which I was part of. You were one of the few things I remember about the C-section, your voice. Telling me to fight. Telling me you were going to save me... I knew you were more than anger.”

He took a slow breath. “I wondered why you hadn’t walked away when I was a jerk to you over the crossword puzzle.”

“Compared to what I’d been through with Daniel, you were a lightweight.” Ava chewed on her lip.

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“The lip thing. You shouldn’t be nervous around me, and I should be the one biting that lip.” He kissed her hand.

“Please understand why I held back telling you about the C-section and Daniel. It was to protect you.”

“So I’ve heard about your quest to protect everyone, except yourself. It wasn’t fair.”

“Who said life was fair?” Ava said.

“Eight letters. Goldman. William, author of *The Princess Bride*.” Rafe smirked. “I watched your favorite a few dozen times.”

“He didn’t say it was fair. He said ‘Life is pain, Highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something,’” Ava

retorted, pulling her hand back.

“Then sell it to me, sunshine. Make me understand. I’m listening this time.” He took her wrist back for another kiss.

“It started with Scott Kandal, the cardiac surgeon. He was Daniel’s best friend. Scott drowned over Memorial Day last year. The old Fire Chief refused to help the Coast Guard search. Daniel led the charge to get rid of him, and he wanted Noah Baker for Fire Chief.”

“He got his way.”

“Daniel believed Baker was the ruthless fixer type, a trait Daniel had shown occasionally at Steadman Medical. I thought replacing the fire chief would be enough for Daniel, but then he started acting strangely protective toward me.” Ava had excused Daniel’s behavior back then, believing it would be temporary.

“Which you accepted because you were pregnant.”

“He wanted to move us from our house to the Steadman Medical Building. It’s more sterile than an OR, and I wasn’t going to raise our children in a concrete jungle. Next, he told me to quit working.” Ava shook her head at the memory. “How much closer to the hospital could I be than the ER with every doctor in the hospital guarding my back?”

Rafe reached over to put his arm around her and answered her unasked question. “For support. Because I know where this is going.”

“Jacob Carver talked him down. He promised to shadow me everywhere, drive me to work, deliver the baby if necessary, whatever it took.”

“Ballsy of him,” Rafe commented.

“We’re ER doctors. We believe we can do anything—trach a choking patient with a pen and a paring knife.” Ava almost laughed at the way Rafe wrinkled his nose. “Really, Jacob and I talked through these crazy situations—delivering during a zombie invasion, a blackout in the OR. I was always clear though, he had permission to C-section me. It gave the best chance to save me and the babies in almost ANY situation.”

“Still fucking ballsy.”

“He’d done mission trips in Africa. If there was an ER doc who could do it, Jacob was the guy. And he did it. He saved me. He saved Jenna.”

“But not your son.”

Ava shook her head violently, almost removing his arm from her shoulders. “It was a miracle two of us survived. If you and he had waited, I’d died.”

Rafe went still. “You sound sure.”

“*Gruñón*, I’ve had over a year to think about this. There is nothing anyone can say that will change my mind,” she echoed his previous words. “I am steadfast. I am unwavering. You, Jacob, and George saved us, and I don’t have a shred of regret—even if Daniel deemed me unforgivable.”

Now the tears slid down her cheeks.

“Stop, Ava. Please. You don’t have to go on.” He kissed those tears away, able to sense the unbearable pain she’d been carrying.

“I named our son Jacob.”

There. She’d said it out loud.

The words were unbelievably simple and yet so complex. This act of defiance snapped her marriage in half and started the war. Her lot has been irrevocably cast against the might of Daniel Steadman, and he’d brought the hellfire down on her.

Jessica Steadman had died, and Ava Remley was what remained.

Rafe embraced her completely, moving her onto his lap and doing nothing beyond holding her in his huge, strong arms. She was shaking, a mess of fear, nerves, relief, and a thousand emotions in between.

Ava sat back slightly to make sure he heard the next part. “He asked for a divorce right there in the ICU. He refused to publish an obituary or have a funeral because of our son’s name.”

“What a bastard.”

“Daniel Steadman isn’t solely a person, he’s a brand. If he was willing to risk his image to punish me, I knew what he’d do to everyone else involved. And he hadn’t noticed until it was too late that the Fire Chief had been waiting in the hall and witnessed the whole ugly conversation.”

“Well, he’s a bastard, too. Damn vulture hanging outside your hospital bed.”

“No, Rafe. He was a mess. He’d been waiting to apologize. Baker had promised to fix the problems in the fire department, yet there I was.”

“Do you know what he did? What he did to me? Or to the captain who’d commanded me, who wasn’t even involved,” Rafe grumbled.

“Can’t you see the method to the madness?” Ava twisted her face to be even with Rafe’s. “It was our plan. I colluded with the Fire Chief against my own husband to protect as many people as we could. My side of the bargain was protecting the hospital and Jacob. Baker protected the fire department. He buried the report of who was in the ambulance and took Haskell off active duty because... James Haskell will be battalion chief someday.”

“No fucking way.” Rafe broke out in near hysterical laughter. “I had no clue my sunshine was this devious.”

“Less devious than not telling you who I was. I convinced myself was only checking to see you were okay. I didn’t expect to feel so... connected to you. And I was terrified Daniel would come after you if he figured out your identity. Once he did, then he’d come for me and... Jenna.”

“He’s an asshole of the highest order. And don’t you worry about me. Daniel and I had a little chat.”

“What! When!” Ava was glad Rafe’s arms kept her from tumbling over.

“Almost two months ago. A man who tortures his ex-wife is no man, and he never expected a dumb lug like me to play

dirty. You were too nice. I have him by the balls, and if he fucks with me, I'll twist them off."

This was news to Ava. Daniel's team of lawyers had been much more flexible than usual since the divorce. "What did you do?"

"Nothing illegal." He took out his phone, found a file, and played it for her.

It made her crack up. Rafe hadn't been exaggerating; Daniel had been caught. "You did this."

"For you. He'd never try to stop controlling you otherwise. This is my gift, my grand gesture, for you. Freedom. Say the word, and we'll send it to your lawyer... and TMZ. Family court and the court of public opinion will NOT judge the good Dr. Steadman kindly."

Ava lifted the phone, staring at her ex-husband's face, frozen and contorted with rage where the video stopped.

Right here, under her fingertips, was the ammunition she needed to deliver the knockout punch to Daniel. It would be unbelievably simple to annihilate him, the way he tried to destroy her.

"Seven letters. A dish best served cold." Ava mumbled.

Revenge.

Rafe kissed her lips. "Wrong seven letters. 'She's blind.'"

Justice.

Her hand trembled for a good fifteen seconds, the time it took to make an incision through the abdomen in a crash C-section.

She deleted the video. "No. I am better than this. We are better than this."

He kissed the crown of her head. “You are. Don’t worry. I made copies.”

“Rafe!”

“It’s insurance. A man protects his woman. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you.” He stared her in the eye. “Chief Baker offered me a spot on your new advanced paramedic team, Rescue Alpha. Only if I apologized to your ex and stayed away from you forever.”

“Oh, no.” Ava bit her lip again. Rafe had been haunted by the C-section, and joining Rescue Alpha could have exorcised his ghosts.

“It was never a contest. Meet Mentor’s newest firefighter. Got a pay raise, and I’m enrolling in a different paramedic training program.”

“But—”

“Stop. I’ve lost nothing and gained everything. No more talking.”

She opened her arms to him and let him carry her up the stairs.

CHAPTER 25



When they reached the bedroom, Rafe was practically out of his mind with need, and Ava wasn't much better. She'd plastered her body to his, kissing him like he was the air she breathed.

He tried to be gentle by setting her on the bed and quietly closing the door, lest they wake up a sleeping baby.

It was harder to not shred his shirt when he felt the heat and eagerness of her gaze on him as he stripped it off.

He was in the middle of dropping his turnout pants and their suspenders, only to stop. "Ava, I want you, but I don't want to hurt you."

She slid off the bed to kiss him, melting those curves onto his chest. Those little pale of hands of hers urged his underwear down, freeing his engorged cock. "You won't hurt me... wow."

His erection was unabashed with its desire, precum on the tip, butting into the fabric of her dress. "Good wow? You've seen it before."

"It's been a few months since we've played, and I've never been allowed to touch it before." She wrapped her fingers around his shaft, making him groan. "It's different to know the python is going to... be there."

He licked her earlobe, praying he wouldn't pounce on her. "Feeling shy that I'm going to fuck you till your body sings?" She tensed and he amended. "Sorry, too rough? Make sweet, sweet love to *mi brillo de sol*."

“No, it’s not that.” Ava released him and took a step back, her hands at the hem of her skirt. “I’m a little nervous. I haven’t been with anyone for almost two years.”

“Two years?” The math didn’t work out.

“Didn’t want to bring him here, but once I was pregnant, he stopped touching me.” She was staring at the floor.

That would not do.

“Total idiot. If it had been me, you’d have been worshiped, touched all over. I’m going to make it up to you.” Rafe helped her raise the hem to her thighs.

Yet she hesitated. “No one has seen me naked, either. My scar.”

Rafe shook his legs out of his pants, fully bare, and backed her against the bed. He didn’t follow her, instead he ran his hands up his legs and chest to his face, pointing out the patchwork of burns, scars, and tattoos adorning practically every surface.

“You are beautiful. I’m amazed you’re even willing to touch a goddamn motherfucker like me.” He came closer, guiding her hand on the same path, her skin burning his.

“Those are beautiful. You’re a warrior. You earned those saving lives. Mine is ugly. And a reminder of how I hurt you.”

This time he took the hem and pulled it up to her waist before she could stop him.

She averted her face while he deliberately lay her back into the bed and examined the scar below her belly button and above her simple cotton panties.

“This scar?” He traced the jagged line, the skin puckered from the desperate procedure that had almost cost him this woman. “It’s not your scar. It’s our scar. We made it together.”

To prove his point, he placed a kiss on it and helped the dress over her head.

He rolled to the side and took a moment to take in the beauty of his sunshine in nothing except the nude bra and

panties he'd imagined for months.

"And?" She watched him through half-lidded eyes, her voice a mix of eagerness and trepidation.

"So damn beautiful. You are everything I ever dreamed of. Don't ever doubt it, *amor de mi vida*."

"I like that. Love of my life?" she correctly guessed.

"Exactly."

His woman needed him to make love to her STAT until she passed out.

He reached toward her bra and paused.

"What's wrong?"

"Umm, I'm not sure I'll be able to hold back once I touch you, and I didn't bring condoms."

"I don't have any. And you won't need them."

"Won't need them?" Rafe was torn between jumping on her for trusting him this much and asking why she sounded so certain.

"I had every test on the planet in the hospital, and there's been no one... are you saying you..."

He shook his head violently. "I get a yearly department physical, all clean. And it's been over a year without any company."

Ava slapped her hand over her mouth. "A year? On purpose when you're so very, very..."

"Down, dirty, and fuckable?" He toyed with the straps on her bra. "I was taking grumpy me time, and then I got obsessed with crossword puzzles and a sunshine girl I met at a coffee shop."

His sunshine girl kissed his mouth, tongue between his lips, and he lost his ability to speak.

It took lots of effort, but he stopped. "As much as I want to do you the way God intended, I want a ring on you before I put a baby in there."

“Oh. The doctors in the ICU said with all my blood loss and the surgery... it might not happen. Ever. I’m okay with it. Others were not.” She tried to slide away.

“No, you don’t.”

Rafe rolled them over so she was straddling his chest, cursing Daniel Steadman a thousand times over for his utter selfishness. This woman lost a child and the possibility of more, yet the bastard made it about him?

“Listen to me. I want you. I want you, me, and Jenna together. If we have more of our own, adopt, foster, or whatever, it will be the family we make. Together. Us.”

“And you think you’re a grumpy dragon?”

“I am the original grumpy dragon. Now take off those panties so I can give that pussy the kiss it needs before I give it what it’s been missing.”

Her sunshine restored, she wiggled out of her panties and bra. Rafe held his hand around her waist, taking his time to look his fill.

Ava blushed bright red, the delicious flush on her pale skin almost more than he could handle without pouncing on her.

Instead, he urged her upward and made good on his promise to kiss those freckles.

Then, he sat up enough to suckle each of her pink nipples, listening for her squeaks of pleasure. Between licks, he molded her hips and thighs with his hands, her slit getting wetter with every touch.

“Stop playing, Rafe!” she whisper-screamed, likely trying not to wake Jenna a few doors away.

When she rubbed her hips over his poor neglected cock, he couldn’t deny them both any longer.

Urging her into position, he helped guide her over the tip of his shaft. Rafe forced himself to go slow. They were making love, and there would never be a first time again.

Or, his sunshine simply spread her legs and impaled her sheath on him before he could stop her.

Ava's eyes rolled back, and she let out a high keening as Rafe tried not to surge into her. The way her pussy squeezed him and spasmed around his shaft was nearly more than he could handle.

Ignoring his cock's demands to give it to her hard and fast, he mumbled. "You okay? Please. Ava."

She bent forward to kiss him, her hot flesh pulsating around his. "It's good. Full. More."

"Ride me, sunshine. Don't you worry a fucking second about me. Do what feels right to you."

She obeyed him, lifting her hips till he was halfway out and dropping back down. Each time, she made a sound between a hum and moan, driving him wild. He opted to hold her hands, keeping them on his chest for her balance. She could do whatever the hell she wanted from here on out since he was already in paradise.

After a few minutes, she opened her blue eyes and said words he was not ready for. "More. Rough. Give me the dragon."

"Fuck." His hips snapped upward before the expletive finished.

She arched back, driving her body to meet his. "Yes. Exactly. Rougher. Faster. Dirtier."

She was going to kill him. So much for slow and gentle. No way in hell was he going to turn her down.

Rafe flipped them over, placing him on top. "You want it like this? I'll fuck you good and deep. Your hot sweet cunt'll be mine. Fucking brand you with my cum while you scream my name and call me 'Daddy.'"

That broke her because she tightened everything, spasms chasing spasms.

By then, he was driving into her, chasing her orgasm with the feral primal need to possess.

And she freaking loved it. She met his thrusts with soft moans and coos, grasping his shoulders with cries of “More. More. Rafe.”

He was at the end of his control, but he wanted her to come again. “Yes. Sunshine. You want this. You like this. Your man pounding you makes you feel damn good. Tell me.”

“Yes. Rafe. Want it.” She thrashed beneath him, her nails skating over his back.

“Mark me. You want to. You scratch me up, make me yours, because I’m gonna fuck you from every angle tonight. Every edge of this bed, every hole you’ll let me use. You’ll come so many times today you won’t remember your name.”

She dug her fingernails into his back this time, drawing blood over the unfurled wings of his dragon tattoo as he pounded her in total frenzy. He caught her final scream with his mouth, emptying into her through the throes of her last orgasm.

There were stars, and the end of the world and the beginning or some other celestial shit happening in his brain.

Without conscious thought, he instinctively rolled them to lay side by side, lest he crush her smaller body. She purred into his chest, his dick still buried inside her and one of her legs wrapped around his hip. “Hey there, dragon. I got my ride.”

Damn, that woman freaking kissed the dragon head on his right pec.

“He says you can ride him anytime you want. I’ll fucking drop whatever I’m doing take you back to the sky,” he caressed her hair.

“Sounds fun.”

“Those three letters don’t cover it, *brillo de sol*. If I’m not in a burning building, I will be right here whenever you call. For whatever you need. Anything,” he vowed, meaning every word.

In fact...

CHAPTER 26



Ava was floating between her body and the ceiling in an insane post-sex haze. No wonder the mythical badge bunnies Rafe had told her about flocked to firefighters.

Though it was wrong to make that comparison. She and Rafe had plenty of chemistry; it was the love beneath it making it beyond what she'd believed possible.

He asked, "What are you doing next Thursday morning?"

"Going to work." She didn't want to move away from this sated post-sex cloud.

"Wanna call in sick?" Rafe kissed the nape of her neck, nuzzling his way down her back.

"Doctors don't call in sick unless we're dead."

"You aren't doing that again. Fine, Jenna's gonna be sick." He bit her on the upper slope of her butt with a mock growl.

"What am I doing on this one Jenna sick day?" She squirmed away in order to face him. His expression was closed off, the way he did when he was thinking hard.

"We should take Jenna on a field trip to the courthouse," he said finally.

"The courthouse?"

Rafe rolled out of bed and found his pants. Then he got down on one knee right next to the bed, black box in hand. "Will you marry me?"

Ava sat up, clutching the sheet to her chest. The box contained a simple silver wedding band with its surface carved with flames. “Rafe. We’ve been back together for an hour.”

“It’s been a very nice hour. Please, Ava. Marry me.” The poor man wasn’t closed off now, he was genuinely terrified.

“I’ve been divorced for less than three months. I shouldn’t jump in without thinking.” Ava could only stare at the box.

“Those months gave me plenty of time to think. I can’t imagine my life without you, and I don’t want to. We love each other. You are worth it, and I’m not above playing dirty to keep you forever.”

A great moment for her to break the tension. “How dirty?”

He dropped the box on the bed and pulled her, still naked, against his equally bare, inked skin. “As dirty as I need to.”

“Shouldn’t we wait?” Ava asked, her resolve crumbling when faced with the overwhelming love in his eyes and the way her body was screaming ‘yes.’

“Screw waiting.” He twisted his lips in a part smile. “If marrying me for love and passion isn’t enough, how about this? I will protect you and Jenna till the day I die. And as a bonus, after we’re married, there ain’t no lawyer on the planet who’ll forbid Jenna to see your new husband. Nothing he can do, especially after what he did with Dr. Varma.”

She snorted in laughter, understanding his logic. “Good point, except this is about us, not him. Are you sure? It might be only the three of us.”

Her admission only made him hold her closer. “All the more reason to protect our family. This is more than I thought I’d ever have. Please. Three letters. Affirmative.”

Ava fumbled on the bed to find the box and handed it to him. “Ask me again.”

“Will you marry me, Ava Remley?” This time, he was grinning.

“Yes. Of course, I’ll marry you.”

Her formerly grumpy dragon pounced on her, bouncing her onto the bed and covering her face with kisses. Somewhere in the mess of lips and skin, they got the ring on her finger.

She ended up on top, resting her left hand right over his heart. Behind her, she could feel his shaft at full readiness, and he had a different type of fire in his eyes.

“Too bad about Jenna being sick on Thursday. We should let her sleep for now.” His huge hands nudged her down his hips.

“Great idea.” Ava gave herself over to the man she loved without reservation.

CHAPTER 27



Late in the evening on the Thursday in question, Rafe woke up on the couch in a pile of tulle.

He was still in his firefighter dress uniform, while his two ladies were a rumpled pile of white gauzy lace wedding dresses.

Their courthouse wedding had turned out better than he'd ever imagined. Witnessed only by Ava's parents, they had stood in front of the judge with Ava and Jenna in matching white dresses, courtesy of Atlantis's two-day shipping.

Though it was probably a far cry from whatever insane wedding Bonanza Ava must had for her previous wedding, she was radiant, and Jenna made it even better by insisting on climbing on her 'Big Mans.' With Jenna held between them, chewing on the hem of her fluffy dress, they were married.

They celebrated their union over lunch at TGI Fridays, a baby bounce house, and an indoor petting zoo. Jenna was ecstatic from her ride on a very, very docile pony.

Or 'hausey (horsie).

Now a true family, they ate takeout for dinner and fell asleep together on the couch.

Rafe wasn't ashamed to admit he'd barely slept the night before, hoping Ava wouldn't come to her senses and drop a slob like him.

Ava was asleep curled on his shoulder, her straight hair tickling his nose.

He carefully extricated his body from his tumble of girls.

Ava's eyelids fluttered. "Rafe?"

"It's late, Sunshine. And our baby girl needs a change."

"I can do it," Ava mumbled before dropping off to sleep again.

"I got it." He picked up Jenna, who snuggled him without shifting. She barely stretched when he got her out of her dress, changed her diaper, and slid her into a fresh set of baby pajamas.

Her drowsy expression was nearly identical to Ava's. "Big Manz."

"Good night, Jenna."

"Night, Big Manz." Her little face waited expectantly.

He wrinkled his brow before he understood. The next step in the bedtime sequence was a goodnight kiss.

"Love you, baby girl." He kissed the top of her head, and she gave him a sloppy one back on his cheek.

Fuck, he was in heaven.

Time to prep for his wedding night.

Moving far more quietly than he regularly would navigate a flight of stairs in his turnout gear, he slipped off his shoes and made his way to the kitchen. In the back of the fridge, he had a bottle of champagne and a box of nice chocolates.

Which was when he noticed a St. Patrick's Day envelope on the table.

He was a hundred percent certain neither he or Ava had gotten the mail. Furthermore, the mail typically went to the study, and this letter lacked a stamp or postmark.

It was addressed to him from Captain Soto, which relaxed Rafe significantly. Not every firefighter gained access to a building by breaking down the door, and Soto had plenty of experience to overcome a basic lock.

Rafe opened the envelope and a card with a stack of photos fell out.

The pictures were of Dr. Daniel Steadman and Kayla Varma, time stamped on the night of the notorious resident and fellow mixer.

Even more, he recognized these pictures were not from the security feed of the Key Bank building. It was from the Tower City's on the opposite side.

The beloved Dr. Steadman and his might-be-fiancée were engaged in an act that could easily have gotten them arrested for public indecency.

Congratulations. Heard these might interest you. Never know when you can use more insurance. And use the card if you have anything worth safekeeping.

-Your captain

“Interesting,” Rafe mumbled. The Chief had told Captain Soto, and Captain Soto had searched out the security tapes on his own?

No, no matter how sneaky and underhanded the Chief could be, blackmail wasn't his style. Chief Baker wouldn't resort to tactics such as this because he presumed they wouldn't be necessary. He could have requested a copy of Rafe's damning recording and used it against Steadman, yet he didn't.

Rafe flipped one picture over and found a simple St Patrick's Day business card attached to the back.

The card was written in Spanish, and had a PO box listed.

Reparamos el mundo un día a la vez.

We repair the world one day at a time.

It didn't sound sinister, and whomever it was, Soto trusted them.

He thought of Ava and Jenna both sleeping innocently upstairs. They were his now, and he would sacrifice anything to keep them safe.

He let go of his career. He'd dirtied his hands to get to Steadman's level. If necessary, to keep them that way, he would lie, he would cheat, he would steal.

Hell, he would kill if he had to.

MetroGen and Cleveland FD had promised not to interfere if they stayed in their new lives.

But it never hurt to have a backup plan.

So, he could certainly spare one of the backups he'd made on a jump drive of his conversation with Daniel Steadman.

Having made his decision, Rafe memorized the PO box number and took the entire package outside. With a lighter from the garage, he burned the pile in the yet unused backyard fire circle.

Safety first.

Satisfied with a job well done, he washed his hands and woke his bride with the chocolate and champagne.



Thank you for reading **SENTINEL**.

I hope you loved Rafe and Ava as much as I do, and the next scorching book in the series catches up with Lieutenant Fabian Santos who, after giving Rafe such great advice in the gym, makes his move on the one that got away - ER clerk Cassie Odon - in [**Tempted**](#).



One-Click TEMPTED right now!

If you need more Rafe and Ava you can get their exclusive *naughty* bonus scene , **Word Porn**, by signing up for my VIP list at <https://carinaalyce.com/sentinel-signup!>

As a bonus, turn the page to see what happens Cassie meets Fabian in a compromising position learns his secret in your sneak peek of [Tempted: A Steamy Friends to Lovers Firefighter Romance.](#)

THE DIARY OF THE CHAPLAIN

JULY

Oh, glorious July. They say spring is the time for babies.

WRONG. July brings us the miracle of new life in little baby medical students, interns, and rookie firefighters. It's going to be a contest to see who is the most lost.

The unit clerks had better be ready to give lots of directions.

EPILOGUE



“**Y**ou are a professional,’ Cassie reminded herself, wheeling her computer through the MetroGen ER. The wee morning hours of Thursday night shifts in the minor care pod were supposed to be slow.

The bars didn’t have extended hours. No major concerts. The light drizzle should have kept people in on a late July night.

Unless it was a full moon.

In which case—definitely the best time to google hangnails, calluses, splinters, toothaches, and ‘funny rashes you’ve had for three years.’

Lest anyone think she was joking, the minor care census included a hangnail, a cut lip, a rash, and a stubbed toe.

For the two ladies waiting for urine pregnancy tests, Cassie totally recommended the one-dollar pregnancy tests at Dollar Tree. Skip the three-hundred-dollar ER co-pay. It would take Cassie far longer to process their insurance in her job as the ER clerk than wait for the store to reopen in five hours.

The triage nurse at the front door was having a ball because her triage reasons became more outlandish as the night wore on. They’d already discharged ‘bitten by a person, werewolf, or vampire.’

Seriously, why were Fabio and Glen sharing a room? And what did ‘get checked out’ mean? They couldn’t be too sick if they were in the minor care pod and not one of the two

standard care pods. At nineteen and twenty-eight years old, they shouldn't have been taking a ton of meds.

Group STD testing, perhaps?

No, the triage nurse'd have written 'personal concern w/testing' on that.

Object in the butt? While everyone said 'they fell on it,' it usually appeared as 'OITB.'

Sex accident? Ideally, they weren't drunk. Drunk guys, gay, straight, or in between, were obnoxious when she had to file their insurance.

It made her long for the trauma pod. There, she worked with the charge nurse, fielding phone calls, test results, locating consults, specialists, and directing human traffic. Her main company here was an attending, a PA, and two custodians cleaning the floor for the fifth time after another visit from the Vomit Comet of Minor Care.

She opened the door to Room 78 and understood the triage nurse's note.

There sat two shirtless firefighters 'getting checked out.' Even better, she recognized one of them, who had been similarly naked during their last conversation.



Rookies were the most dangerous and unpredictable part of firefighting. Not fires, not bombs, not axes, but rookies. Despite six months of fire academy, one whiff of smoke and they went rogue, forgetting everything they'd learned.

Which was how Fabian had ended up here.

Rookie Glen had gotten confused in the smoke and failed to find the evac when the ceiling started to come down. Fabian had found him and dragged him out just in time to get hit by some of the rafters.

And now they were in the ER, shirtless, waiting to get assessed.

“I’m sorry,” Glen said for the twentieth time since they’d arrived.

“I know,” Fabian answered. “These things happen.”

“Really, lieutenant, I’m sorry.”

“Yes, you told me several times. It’s fine.”

The door opened, and the desk clerk entered with her computer to start their registration.

Fabian’s breath caught, seeing her up close for the first time in years.

Gorgeous, giddy Cassie Odon.

He’d have known her in his sleep because she had the particular ability to convince you with a smile that her teasing troublemaking plan was a great idea.

She was his one very particular weakness.

And she should have been his...

When recognition crossed her face, it was like not a moment had gone by. She smiled at him, unmarred by the conflict he felt.

He found himself grinning back, basking in her delicious brand of teasing sunshine, blotting out any regrets he might have had.

Then she glanced down at her forms and then back at his face. “This can’t be right.”

“It’s right,” Fabian assured her, hiding his reaction to her presence.

“Not possible. Prove it. Insurance card and ID.” She held out her hand, but her eyes were on his shoulders.

At least that part of him impressed her today. “I promise, it’s legit.”

Glen asked, “What are you talking about?”

Fabian rolled his eyes, grateful Glen was here to be a buffer. Besides, this wasn’t the first or the fiftieth time a problem with his name had come up. “My name.”

“Yeah, you’re Lieutenant Fabian Santos.”

Cassie, the troublemaker retaining the sense of humor she had when he’d meet her three years ago, stifled a giggle. “I’m sure there’s a very exciting story behind it.”

“I don’t understand what’s going on. Is this another rookie hazing thing? Fake names after getting drenched?” Glen guessed.

“Tell him.” Cassie tapped his information into the computer and gave his cards back.

“In the nineties, my mom loved romance novels and models... I’m not clear exactly on what it was he did...” Fabian hoped to stave off the explanation.

“His mom named him Fabio,” Cassie said. “After the shirtless model on many romance novel covers. Best story ever. ID please.”

Glen went from crestfallen to stunned to cackling. “No way. Lieutenant. New Old Spice guy versus old Old Spice guy? I remember that commercial from elementary school.”

Cassie took his driver’s license. “And not yet old enough to drink, Glen Lindsay Smith.”

“It’s a family name,” Glen said.

“I’m sure.” Cassie kept her face straight, which was difficult for her if Fabian’s memory served. She had been at the height of the Vegas antics with his friend Jared, another trickster. Her energy, then and now, was infectious, and addictive.

“I’ve never had the ER clerk do this to me before.” Glen was confused.

“Because your mom brought you last time?” Cassie winked when she leaned forward to return Glen’s cards.

Poor Glen’s jaw dropped.

Fabian got it. Cassie had that effect on anyone around her. She was a bright ball of energy with her smooth skin several shades darker than Fabian’s tawny tone. He tried not to stare at

the generous curve of her chest and focused instead on the long red extensions braided through her hair.

Now she caught him looking, and her deep brown eyes were laughing at him. Cassie Odon was damn fine, and she didn't look the least bit sorry about it.

He'd had his chance, and he'd blown it. He knew it. She knew it.

Yet ... her eyes flicked back to Fabian's bare skin. He was suddenly glad they'd been too busy with the fire to eat dinner. Never hurt to be shirtless without the after-meal pouch. She was checking out his mat of coal-black chest hair. Unlike Glen who hadn't even grown any yet.

"Is this normal?" Glen asked Fabian.

"Only when you've met before and gotten acquainted." Fabian didn't bother to avert his eyes.

"Yeah, me and Fabio are really close friends. In fact, he wore this the last time I saw him." Cassie said.

"Says the woman who wore a tube-top made of scraps when we danced at Coyote Ugly," Fabian reminisced about one of the tamer events during that notorious Vegas weekend. He'd been attending a firefighters conference. She'd been with her girls for a bachelorette party.

"All for a good cause."

"Mine too." Fabian felt the room's temperature rising. Glen was forgotten because the forecast called for a dead heat with a heavy shower of flirtation, the past eclipsed by the present.

"You did fulfill every woman's fantasy. It's universal."

Fabian was drawn to the way the words rolled off her lips. This woman radiated loud, friendly temptation, just as she had in Vegas. Being near her reminded him he was alive and getting more tempted by the moment.

Glen cleared his throat. "Universal fantasy?"

“Yep.” Cassie crept closer to Glen, fake leering. Fabian was amused and annoyed. “You know what every girl wants with the strong arm muscles of our neighborhood firefighters?”

“To be rescued,” Glen stammered.

Cassie’s hair fell over Glen’s pale arm, but Fabian’s awareness climbed as her leg brushed his knee. Other parts of his body took notice as memories of Vegas rushed over him. That night at Coyote Ugly, he’d held her against him, the music throbbing around them.

Her voice purred, “No, that’s not what he did. That’s not what he gave *all* of us.”

“*All of you?*”

“Me and my five best girlfriends. All six of us. Just the way we wanted it.”

Fabian resolved to have Cassie stop by the firehouse and mess with his rookie regularly. Then again, Fabian didn’t need her around his firehouse if he responded like the to her.

His poor rookie wasn’t coping well. “All six of you, and the lieutenant? My lieutenant got gang banged? By chicks? Did you pay for him?”

“Oh, no.” Cassie kept applying the pressure to Glen and, incidentally, Fabian’s knee. “Pay? He came over so well, and he did it for free. We would have paid if that’s what it took to get his clothes off. You interested in my next friendly get-together? I already have your phone number.”

”...you do?” Glen was entranced, a feeling Fabian was too familiar with around Cassie.

“Of course, I do. You gave me your ID.” She pulled back. “Now that you’re registered, a doctor will see you soon.”

She grabbed her computer and rolled out the door, leaving them stunned in her wake.





Grab your copy of [Tempted](#) today!

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AFTERWORD



Thank you a thousand times over for reading *Sentinel*. I hope you've forgiven me and loved the roller coaster ride of plot twists and dramatic reveals.

You might have noticed a few breadcrumbs along the way hinting Ava was not whom she seemed. Since love does win out in the end, it was good to see her end up happily ever after with Rafe.

One of the things she mentioned was a 'sentinel event.' It is a real medical term and is very similar to the way Ava described it. Usually there is a major system failure that has a terrible outcome. The contributing factors are typically ignoring safety protocols or overtaxing the safeties with an unanticipated clinical situation. Most of the time you hear about wrong site surgeries, ie, taking the healthy left kidney out instead of the diseased right one.

Or possibly an ER doctor in an ambulance performing a C-section on another ER doctor pregnant with twins while unable to contact the ER's medical command.

The other part of Sentinel I wanted to bring in was that sometimes, your favorite characters ride off into the sunset away from your regular view. The MetroGen adventures continue on, but Rafe and Ava have decided MetroGen is not the key to their happiness. Perhaps someday they'll stop by and make a guest appearance or two as the plot demands, but all in all, it's okay to leave for your happily ever after.

Don't worry though, there's plenty of other couples up ahead - like Fabian and Cassie in [Tempted](#) up next!

-Carina Alyce

And if you loved Sentinel, don't forget to stop by [Goodreads](#) or [BookBub](#) and share the (spoiler-free) love!

ABOUT CARINA ALYCE



Carina Alyce is the pen name of the Amazon best-selling author and full-time triple board-certified physician who started writing dramatic medical romances after twenty years in the trenches of health care. She promises she never had sex in a call room - the mattresses are not comfortable - or had a fistfight with a patient - though she did work as a fight doc at the Octagon. Her stories are sexy, snarky, and real with all the romance and drama of the lives of our first responders.

She writes the MetroGeneral Downtown series that tackles the personal and professional challenges facing our front-line providers. You'll find her stories have the drama of Grey's Anatomy, the comedy of Scrubs, the sexiness of Outlander, and the medical details of Forensic Files. They feature fast, witty dialogue, strong women with goals, and quirky ensemble casts.

When not working or writing, she is a brown belt in judo, an avid reader, and an attending surgeon in stuffed animal veterinary medicine for her six kids. (No one trusts her husband's medical skills because he's just a lawyer.) You can follow her at carinaalyce.com/newsletter



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First edition

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NEED MORE METROGEN STAT?

He let her walk away once, but tonight, this firefighter is playing for keeps...



Firefighter Fabian Santos has always had it bad for Cassie Odon. Circumstances always kept him from stripping her naked and making her scream his name. Until they end up sharing a shower in [Tempted: A Steamy Friends to Lovers Firefighter Romance](#) the next book in the MetroGen After Hours series.



And if you loved Sentinel, don't forget to stop by [Goodreads](#) or [BookBub](#) and share the (spoiler-free) love!





There's a naked ER doctor in her shower promising her screaming orgasms. Should she say 'yes?' As if that's a question ...

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