



Code Trauma

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Category: Romance, Suspense

Description: This novella is part of the Extreme Measures series and comes after Life Flight.

Flight Nurse Practitioner, Holly Cooper, has an enemy who wants her gone from the hospital one way or another. She and her fiancé, Detective Andy McKittrick are “taking a break”, and a patient has died under mysterious circumstances. Life is complicated at the moment so when she’s attacked, her friends—and “on hold” fiancé come to the rescue. Andy may have his issues, but he’s never stopped loving Holly. When he hears someone is out to get her, he races to her side. Can they find a killer before the killer succeeds in sending Holly six feet under?

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Nurse Practitioner Holly Cooper shut the door of her Honda CRV and clicked the remote to lock the car. She let her gaze roam the hospital parking lot while she turned her collar up against the biting wind.

Was he watching? She walked toward the entrance of the hospital, unable to stop herself from tossing another glance behind her. She'd been doing that a lot over the past two weeks.

Ever since the threats had started.

Notes on her windshield at work, her mailbox at home.

Even a note in her locker at work.

Leave and don't come back.

You're not wanted here.

Go away.

She shuddered and hunched her shoulders against another strong gust and the shiver that danced up her spine. She despised the fear that consumed her but couldn't seem to do anything to stop it.

She'd reported the incidents to the sheriff, who was looking into them, but he'd come

up empty so far. The same with hospital security.

Holly had closed all her social media accounts and tried to make sure she took precautions when it came to walking to her car before and after a shift.

But she was still scared.

You could call Andy, a little voice whispered.

No. She couldn't. She shut off that line of thought and breathed a relieved sigh when she stepped safely through the automatic doors and into the hospital lobby.

Why would someone threaten her? Who had she angered?

The only person she could think of was Garrett Mann, the doctor who'd repeatedly asked her out and whom she'd consistently turned down. He was flirty and cute, true, but she'd seen the fallout of his relationships and wasn't interested in being his next conquest. But more than that, while her current relationship was in a state of ... what? Limbo? Uncertainty?

Whatever the word, it didn't change the fact she was in love with someone else. She'd told Garrett that, of course, but it didn't seem to make a difference to him.

"Come on, Holly," he'd cajoled just yesterday, "all this playing hard to get is just wasting time that could be better spent having fun. You know you want to go out with me."

She'd rolled her eyes and walked on while she considered filing a harassment suit against him. Then again, if she went out with him once, he'd probably lose interest. Or she could encourage him to a DEFCON 1 level of annoyance.

Since that held absolutely no appeal, all she could do was pray that if she ignored him long enough, he'd leave her alone. If not, she'd talk to her boss and HR.

She reached the base locker room and pushed inside. Her locker was on the last row, and she scanned the room, noting part of the night shift crew, Carrie and Pam, getting ready to leave. Their presence helped calm her nerves. Slightly.

"Holly?"

She jumped and spun, her heart racing. Okay, maybe she needed more calming. She placed a hand over her thudding chest and shook her head at the woman who'd stepped up behind her. "Penny. You scared me."

"No kidding. Are you all right?" The redheaded, gray-eyed, Penny Satterfield had been a close friend from the moment Holly had met her. Funny and smart, she had an openness about her that invited friendships and fun. And her skill as a medical helicopter pilot was legendary throughout the business.

"Yes." Holly hesitated then sighed. "Actually, no."

"What's wrong?"

With a glance at the other ladies, she whispered, "Someone's threatening me."

Penny gaped then. "What do you mean? Threatening you how? Since when?"

"Shh!" Holly motioned to the far corner of the locker room. "Come back here. I've got about ten minutes before I need to clock in."

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Penny followed her, but it was busy right at shift change. “Hey, Holly, Penny. Good morning.” The greeting came from Sylvia Blackmon, one of the flight nurses who often picked up other shifts in the ER when she wasn’t working on the chopper.

“Morning, Sylvia,” Holly said while Penny waved.

Once the woman had slipped out of the room, Holly opened her locker and Penny leaned against the one next to it.

“Who’s threatening you?” her friend whispered.

“I don’t know. If I knew that, I wouldn’t be so stinkin’ jumpy.”

“Tell me more.”

Holly glanced around. No one was paying them any attention. “It started a couple of weeks ago. Someone on my social media page sent me a private message telling me to leave town or else. I didn’t recognize the name, and when I clicked on the profile the person had no friends or even a picture. I think it was a bogus account set up to specifically target me. The sheriff thinks so, too. He tried to track it, but the IP address ended up being from a local coffee shop that tons of people use every day, so there was no way to trace it.”

“You’ve been to the sheriff. That’s good, because all of that is so weird. And scary.”

“Tell me about it.” Holly quickly locked up her personal items and headed to the computer so she could clock in.

“I wondered why you hadn’t posted anything lately,” Penny said, following her. “What are you going to do?”

“I mean, what can I do?” Holly shrugged. “The sheriff knows.” She paused. “Then again, I’m not so sure how hard he’s working on it. He’s retiring in a couple of months, and right now, there’s no one stepping up to take his place.”

“Have you called Andy?”

Andy. Holly could no more stop the skip of her heart any more than she could will it to stop beating. She and Detective Andy McKittrick had reconnected from their elementary school days and had been seeing one another on the weekends. She thought he might have been close to asking her to marry him, but then two months ago, his partner had been killed in a nightclub shooting.

Their romance had come to a screeching halt, and no matter what she did, she couldn’t seem to reach that place inside him where he’d gone to deal with the trauma. “No. I can’t call him right now.”

“What? He’s practically your fiancé. I can’t believe you haven’t told him about this.”

Holly groaned. “It’s complicated.” She hadn’t told anyone Andy had basically ghosted her. When the subject came up or when someone asked where he was, Holly just said they were taking some time to make sure their relationship was what they both wanted.

“Complicated or not, he’ll want to know—and being a police detective, he’ll know what to do, too.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“He’s asked me for space, Penny. I promised to give it to him.”

Penny’s eyes went wide. “Wait a minute. He asked you for space?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“Right.” Holly swallowed the sudden tightness in her throat. How she missed him.

“I still think you should tell him.”

“No. I want to, but no. He’s dealing with the death of his partner, and I don’t want to ... infringe on that.”

But Penny was shaking her head. “I think you’re making a mistake.”

“Sometimes I think I am, too, but for now, I’m going to honor his request.”

Her friend frowned. “Just how much space does he need? Is there more to this than just him trying to work through the death of his partner?”

“Yes,” she said, working to keep the tears at bay, “there’s more.”

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“And you didn’t think that was important enough to share?”

“I didn’t want to talk about it, to be honest, so I’ve just kind of avoided the topic, but things are up in the air at the moment with Andy and me, and I’m not sure when—or even if—we will work things out.”

Penny’s eyes were wide. “Wow, I’m so sorry. I had no idea. I’m a lousy friend that I didn’t see this.”

Holly smiled. “You’re not a lousy friend. I’m the lousy friend for not telling you.” The smile faded and she drew in a deep breath. “But, now you know. And it is what it is for now.”

“I could always ask Holt to look into it.”

“Penny, this is not a case for the FBI.” And while Penny’s husband, FBI Special Agent Holton Satterfield, would come to her aid if asked, Holly just couldn’t bring herself to believe she needed that much help.

“Is he at least getting therapy?” Penny’s question jolted her out of her thoughts.

“Yes.” At least he was. She wasn’t sure if he was still going. She glanced at the time. “I’ll be over to base shortly. I promised I’d stop by the ER and check on a friend.”

“Who?”

“An older gentleman I go to church with.” She glanced at her watch. “I’ve got to go.

See you for lunch if you're around?"

"Sure."

Holly hugged her well-meaning friend and hurried off to clock in. She said a silent prayer for the man she loved and asked for wisdom.

And protection. For both of them.

* * *

You're an idiot. We all love you and think you're an amazing man, but you're definitely an idiot.

Andy pushed his half-eaten biscuit away from him and frowned when he read the text from Penny, one of Holly's best friends. He'd thought she was his friend, too. But if it came down to a choice between him and Holly, Holly would win every time. Not that Penny should be made to choose.

Why is that?

You're going to lose her. If someone doesn't kill her first.

He sat up on the sofa.

What are you talking about?!

Someone's threatening Holly so you'd better do something. Fast.

The breath left his lungs. He rose to pace the length of the kitchen before making his way into the den, where he dropped to the sofa to stare at the screen as though the

words might change into something else.

They didn't.

"What's going on?" His brother, Jacob, walked into the den to frown at him.

"Something about someone threatening Holly."

"What?"

"I'm not sure."

"Oh, right, because you refuse to talk to her or let her be with you at the worst time of your life like the woman you plan to marry should be."

Andy scowled. "Shut up."

Jacob planted his hands on his hips and shook his head. "Whatever, man."

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Andy ignored him. Like most younger brothers, Jacob could be annoying—even if his intentions were good. Andy dialed Penny’s number and grimaced when it went to voice mail.

He tried Holly’s. Also voice mail. They’d both be working and probably had their phones on Do Not Disturb. Or they were just ignoring him.

“No answer?” Jacob asked.

“No.” He shook his head. “Holly’s being threatened, and she didn’t reach out.”

Jacob huffed. “Why would she? You basically told her to stay out of your life. I’m sure she took that to mean you were staying out of hers, too.”

Andy winced. He loved her, and he’d pushed her away. But he’d pushed her away because... because he was a coward. He’d pushed her away before she could walk away. His therapist had nailed it when he’d stated that fact three sessions ago. Andy had been wrestling with it since then, trying to find the courage to face Holly and beg her forgiveness. “Jacob, I just...”

“What? You think because what’s-her-face walked out on you because you showed emotion in front of her that Holly’s going to do the same thing?”

Andy froze. Stared at Jacob and swallowed. Even his brother had figured that out? “No. Of course not,” he lied.

Jacob raised a brow, obviously seeing right through him.

Andy groaned.

“You need to go to her,” Jacob said. “Or you’re for real going to lose her. If you haven’t already.”

He let that sink in. Someone had threatened Holly. As a detective, he’d seen all kinds of things he wished he could wipe from his mind, the latest being the death of his partner. He rolled to his feet and paced to the window to look out. He wasn’t able to help his partner as the man lay dying on the asphalt outside the nightclub. What if he lost Holly, too?

He’d asked Holly for space, and she was giving it to him—and he was almost mad that she hadn’t stormed his apartment and demanded he let her be with him.

Addimmature bratto idiot and coward. But, she needed him. Maybe. Regardless, it was time to stop thinking about himself and focus on Holly. If she’d even let him at this point.

“I’m going to her.”

“Good. I’ll help you pack.”

“I got it.” He packed an overnight bag and headed for his truck.

“You want me to come?” Jacob called from the doorway.

“No. You have a shift tonight. I’ll figure out what’s going on and text you.” Jacob worked for the local fire department.

“You better.” His brother stepped back and shut the door.

Once in the driver's seat, Andy tried calling Holly again.

Still nothing. He backed out of his driveway, his adrenaline pumping.

He'd known Holly since fifth grade—and had vowed to himself that he was going to marry her the day he'd saved her from the playground bully. And then, just a few short weeks later, he and Jacob had been shipped to another foster home.

But he'd never forgotten Holly.

Reconnecting with her a year ago via social media had been an amazing thing, and he only wished he'd done it sooner. They'd dated and made the distance between them a minor inconvenience.

And then his partner, Chris, had died. Killed by a drunk with a gun. They'd responded to the scene of a bar fight because they'd been one street over. When they'd arrived, Chris had rushed through the door and taken a bullet to the head.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why hadn't he waited?

But he hadn't. His partner of six years had led the way into the building with Andy pulling up the rear.

Now, Andy sped down the highway toward Asheville, located about an hour away from his home in Spruce Pine. He was thankful for the flashing light on his dash, which made it possible for him to cross the Asheville city limit in just under forty-five minutes.

Now to find Holly.

Holly found the emergency department short-staffed, so no one minded that she wanted to care for her friend.

In room six, she checked the IV bag hanging on the pole. “Almost empty, Mr. Carson,” she told the man in the bed. “I’ll have to get another one.” That normally wasn’t part of her job, but she didn’t mind. The walk would allow her a few moments to think about the threats she’d received and what else she needed to do about them.

He nodded. “It’s really good of you to come see me. I know you’re busy.”

“Aw, what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t check in on my favorite drummer?”

He chuckled, but it was a weak sound. She squeezed his hand. “Get some rest. We need to get you well and back up on the stage at church.”

“Indeed we do. Thank you, my dear.”

“Of course.”

He closed his eyes, and she said a heartfelt prayer for God to touch him and heal him.

“Holly, I didn’t realize you’d be down here today.”

Holly whirled to see the doctor she always did her best to avoid. Garrett Mann. Unfortunately, avoiding people in the emergency room was basically impossible, and

he'd caught up with her. "Yep. The place is super short-staffed, and I told Nick I didn't mind helping out." Nick, the head doctor of the ER.

"Well, it's good to see you." He winked at her like they shared a secret. They didn't. "How's your patient?" he asked. "I think I've treated him before. Seizures, right?"

"Right. He's doing fine right now. He was a bit dehydrated in addition to the laceration on his forehead. We're waiting on a room to open up to monitor him for any more seizures. If that'll be all, Dr. Mann, I've got to head to base." She patted Mr. Carson's hand and turned to make her escape.

Garrett stepped in front of her, blocking her way. "It's Garrett, not Dr. Mann. It's good of you to help out. Things can get a little overwhelming. The extra pair of hands is always welcome."

"Not a problem."

She started to head to the next room, but he stopped her once more with a hand on her arm. "What's the rush?"

Holly shot him a tight smile and shrugged him off. "He's not the only patient, Doctor. I need to replace this IV bag then head to base." The base for the medical flight team was located in one of the wings of the hospital.

"That's what nurses are for."

She barely refrained from rolling her eyes. "Iama nurse, remember? Anyway, I'm here to help, so that's what I plan to do."

"What about lunch later?"

“I already have lunch plans.” At least it was true.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

The tone in his voice sent shivers up her spine. Was he the one who’d sent the threatening notes telling her she needed to leave? But why pursue her if he wanted her gone? Or did he think she’d come running to him for help?

Ha. Not likely.

She stepped past him, and this time he didn’t stop her.

Once out of the room, she let out the breath she’d been holding and aimed herself toward the supply closet.

Another nurse greeted her with a smile. “Hi, Holly, no emergency flights today?”

“Hi Rachel.” Rachel Vickers, a respiratory therapist who was often in the ER. She didn’t seem to have a problem with Dr. Mann’s attentions—even went out of her way to flirt with the man. Rumor had it that they’d dated for a while. So why didn’t he leave Holly alone and focus on someone who’d welcome his advances? She realized that Rachel was staring at her, waiting for a response. “Oh, sorry. I’m a little scattered today, but no flights yet. Headed to base shortly.” Holly shook off the creepy sensation the doctor always left her with and smiled at the pretty woman.

Rachel frowned. “Tough patient?”

“Tough doctor,” Holly muttered.

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“Sorry?”

Holly forced a smile. “Nothing. You look like you’ve been running. Are you okay?”

“Just late and trying to catch up.”

“Are you here to work with Mr. Lyles?”

“I am.”

“He was sleeping when I checked in on him earlier, so poke gently.”

Rachel laughed. “He can resemble a bear, can’t he?” Mr. Lyles was a “frequent flyer.” He had chronic asthma and didn’t always take his meds like he was supposed to. He also didn’t like breathing treatments. Rachel nodded to the room. “Is that Dr. Mann?”

“Yes, it sure is.”

“Oh good, I have a question for him.” Rachel stepped around her. “See you later, Holly. Hello, Dr. Mann ...” Rachel’s voice faded as the door shut behind her.

Holly sighed and headed for the supply room, only to be stopped by Raina Price, the paramedic who was often on the chopper with her and Penny. “Raina, what’s up?”

“I was looking for you.”

“Well, you found me. I’m headed to get an IV bag. Walk with me?”

“Sure.” She started down the hall once more. Raina fell into step beside her. “Isn’t that something nurses do?”

Holly cut her friend a sideways glance, and Raina grinned at her. “Sorry, I heard some of the exchange between you and Dr. Mann.”

“He’s a piece of work.”

“I avoid him.”

“You’re not the only one. And besides, I am a nurse.”

Raina stuck her hands in her jacket pockets. “Penny said something was going on with you. You okay?”

“I’m fine.” And she was fine with Penny sharing with Raina. They were closer than sisters. When one hurt or was in trouble, the others came to the rescue. Or at least tried to. “Just some weird notes. Threatening notes, actually.”

“What do they say?”

“Stuff like I don’t belong here and if I know what’s good for me, I’ll leave. Nothing like someone wants to kill me, but someone definitely doesn’t want me around.”

“When did all that start?”

“A couple of weeks ago.”

“But you’ve been here for ages. Why start wanting you to leave now?”

“Who knows? I’ve reported it to the sheriff and hospital security, so I’m not sure what else I can do.”

“Tell Holt? Andy?”

“Like I told Penny. Not yet.”

They arrived at the supply closet door, and Raina checked her watch. “I’ve got to go clock in. Are you going to be all right?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Okay, I’ll see you when you come down to base.”

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“I’m just helping Mr. Carson. I’ll be there as soon as I hang his bag and turn him over to Dr. Mann.” He might not be her favorite person, but even she’d admit—grudgingly—he was a good doctor and always gave his patients excellent care.

“Okay.”

Raina gave her a quick hug. “See you later.”

Her friend darted down the hallway toward Life Flight’s base. The medical flight team was close, and she loved them like family.

Sometimes more. And her family was amazing. With a mother and father still together and a younger sister in her last year of law school, Holly was blessed, and she knew it.

She held her badge over the security pad and waited for the green indicator to flash, then opened the door. The light came on at her entrance, and in the laptop to her right, she logged in and tapped the appropriate key sequence to indicate what she would be removing from the room.

The IV equipment was in the back, so she followed the shelving unit to the area and grabbed one of the plastic bags.

And the lights went out.

Holly stood still. “Hello? Hey, there’s someone in here. Can you turn the light back

on?"

But the light shouldn't have gone off. It was motion activated. If it went off, someone had turned it off.

Silence thickened the darkness.

Nothing.

Just the sound of her heart beating in her ears.

And the footsteps walking toward her.

Holly's breath caught.

She backed up, trying to stay as quiet as possible. In her mind, she pictured the layout of the supply room. Sharps to her right. IV bags behind her. Bandages and tape to her left.

Why would someone turn off the light to enter the room?

The threats jumped to the forefront of her mind. God, help me, please.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and hesitated, her thumb hovering above the home button. Did she want to take a chance on making the light come on? But she couldn't just stand there.

A noise sounded behind her. She spun, listening. Holly heard the person breathing, and a cold chill shivered up her spine. Who was doing this to her?

She moved away from the breathing but was confused. Which way was the door?

She shoved a fist against her mouth to keep from crying out.

She had to get out, get away.

Holly pressed her thumb against the home button. Her screen lit up and provided an eerie glow in the dark room. She swiped a finger across the bottom and saw the missed calls and texts from Andy.

Guided by the light of her phone, Holly moved toward the door.

The hard crash against the back of her head sent her to her knees. She cried out. Her phone tumbled from her hand and her ears rang from the pain. Nausea swirled through her, and she eased backward until her shoulders rested against a supply cabinet.

“Stay out of this hospital,” the voice whispered. “Or die. This is your last warning.”

* * *

Andy stepped inside the hospital and made his way to the base where Holly usually was. When he found it empty, he hurried to Dr. Fitzgerald’s office, only to find the man out. His administrative assistant directed him to the ER. With each step, the knot in his gut grew. Ever since his partner’s death, he’d developed a distinct distaste for stepping foot inside any medical facility. But for Holly, he’d do it. He closed his mind to the memories and focused on finding Holly. He made his way through the triage area by flashing his badge, turned a corner, and found several people clogging the hallway.

“Make way, coming through.” A nurse shoved past him. “Here Holly, put this on your head.”

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“Holly?” Andy pushed his way to the center to find Holly on a gurney with a hand to her head. He stopped beside her. “What happened?”

Her eyes widened when she saw him. “Andy? What are you doing here?”

“We can talk about that later. Now, what happened?”

“Someone attacked me,” she said. Tears formed in her eyes and coated her lashes.

He reached for her and pulled her into his arms. “I’m here now.” He looked up at the others. “You all can go back to work. I’ll take it from here.”

“’Bout time you showed up,” Penny hissed at him.

“Penny?” Holly frowned at her friend. “How did you...?”

“Know to come out here? I didn’t. I was coming to find you because you weren’t answering your texts.”

“Oh.”

Andy took a look at the back of her head. “The skin isn’t broken.”

“I know, thanks.”

“Well, where’s a doctor? Someone needs to examine that.”

“Take a deep breath and relax,” she said, her eyes dark with pain and something else, but he wasn’t exactly sure what. “Someone went to get a doctor. I’m just going to wait here and try not to throw up, okay?”

Andy took the deep breath she suggested.

“Holly, are you all right?”

He turned at the question. Rachel, a nurse he’d met several times during his visits to see Holly, walked up and placed a hand on Holly’s shoulder.

“Yes. I’m fine.” She started to touch the back of her head, but stopped short, dropped her hand, and grimaced. “Or I will be.”

“We’re getting her examined by a doctor, and then I’m taking her home.” Andy looked at Rachel. “And if a doctor doesn’t show up soon, I’m going looking for one.”

Rachel raised a brow. “If she said someone is on the way, then someone is on the way.”

“I need to make a report and get my stuff,” Holly said. “And let my boss know what’s happened. Has anyone talked to Dr. Kirkpatrick?”

“I covered that,” Penny said. “He said he would find someone to cover your shift for as long as you needed.”

“He’s a good boss,” she whispered.

Rachel shifted. “I can help get your stuff if you want.”

“Thank you, but I’ll get it.”

“Okay, well, if I can do anything, let me know.”

Andy stayed at her side while one of the doctors checked her out. “No concussion, and the person didn’t break the skin so no stitches. You’ll be fine, but you’re probably going to have a nice headache.”

“I don’t know that I’d call the headachenice,” Holly said, “but I agree that I’ll be fine.”

“Take it easy for a couple days, and call if you have any nausea or vomiting or changes in your vision. You know the routine.”

“Right. Thanks.”

After the security officer took her report, Andy said, “I’d like to see the footage leading into that supply closet. It’s only accessible to someone with a badge. Let’s see who swiped a badge right after Holly.”

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The officer nodded and walked to the nursing station. With a few taps on the keyboard, he logged into the software and soon had the footage playing. “There’s Holly,” he said. “And there. The person caught the door just before it closed.”

Andy sighed. “No badge necessary. Thanks.”

“Yep.”

Andy looked up to meet her gaze. “You ready?”

She nodded. Then winced. “Remind me not to do that.”

He led her out of the hospital and to his truck. “Let me drive you home. We’ll get your car later.”

She hesitated, then shrugged. “Sure.”

“Who would do this to you, Holly?”

“I don’t know. At least, I’m not sure.”

“Penny told me about the threats. I’m going to call the sheriff and find out all I can, and we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“I’ve already reported it to Sheriff Lewis as well as Dr. Kirkpatrick, but you’re welcome to talk to him.”

Andy shot her a look as he climbed into the driver's seat. There was something in her tone that held a chill. A distance. He swallowed. Not that he blamed her. They rode in silence for the next ten minutes until he pulled into the parking space in front of her home. She lived in a three-bedroom townhome not too far from the hospital.

Andy slid out of the truck and walked around to the passenger side. After he helped her from the vehicle, Holly pulled her keys from her pocket. "Let's get you settled," he said, "then I'll call the sheriff. In the meantime, I'm going to stay with you. You shouldn't be alone."

"Andy..."

He started to open the door, and she placed a hand on his. "Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Pretending nothing is wrong. We've barely said two words to each other for two months, and now you want to come riding to the rescue? Why are you here?"

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He raised a brow. "Are you kidding me? Penny texted and called me out on being an idiot and said someone was threatening you."

"She did?"

"Yeah."

That sounded like Penny. "So, you're here because she told you to come."

He frowned. "No, I'm here because she told me what was going on and I can't bear

the thought of you in danger.”

Okay, that was better. And she could understand that, but still...

Andy took her face in his and gave her a sweet kiss. “I’ve missed you.”

She placed a hand on his chest and backed up. “Hold up with the kisses, Andy. You don’t get to do that anymore.” As much as she wanted to melt into his arms, there was too much wrong between them for that. “I’m not the one who went anywhere.”

He closed his eyes. “I know. I know. You’re right.” He glanced around. “Let’s get you inside.” He pushed the door open and allowed her to go first.

Holly stepped over the threshold and gave a low cry. Andy’s hands came up to grip her shoulders. She simply stared at the red words spray-painted across her living room wall.

Leave town or die.

He moved her so her back was against the wall, then closed the door. “Call 911 and don’t move from this spot.”

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While she fumbled for her phone, he pulled his gun and held it in front of him as he walked through her townhome.

“911. What’s your emergency?”

“Someone broke into my home.” She gave the address and clutched the phone to her ear. A surge of anger rose up hard and fast enough to nearly strangle her.

“Is the person still there?”

“I don’t know. I have a friend who’s a detective. He’s checking the rooms now.”

“Then stay still and wait for him to come back.”

Holly had no trouble following that order. She wasn’t sure her legs would work anyway. The ugly red words seemed to sear themselves onto her soul. Where was Andy? The townhome was small and wouldn’t take but a few seconds to clear. Just as she was ready to go looking for him, he returned from her bedroom, his weapon holstered, but his face white. “It’s clear.”

Holly let out a slow breath. “The police are on the way.”

He nodded.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “You found something else, didn’t you?”

“In your bedroom, someone hung one of your dolls from the shelf and painted your

name across the dress.”

Holly darted from her spot by the door and headed to see for herself.

Andy caught her by the upper arm. “Don’t go look. There’s no reason to, and you’ll never be able to wipe the image from your brain once you see it.”

She hesitated. “Which doll?”

“Not the one your dad brought back from Israel.”

She almost wilted against him but pulled away at the last second and pressed a hand to her aching head. All the dolls in her collection were gifts from her father, but the one he’d brought her from Israel was special. “I’m scared,” she whispered.

“I know. You can’t stay here.”

“I can stay at base.” She’d never been so grateful for that home away from home. Her family when she needed them. And boy, did she need them now. “I can’t believe this. What have I done to deserve this?”

“Hey, there’s nothing you could have done to deserve this, so don’t even think along those lines. But something sure has triggered someone.”

“Yeah.”

“And we’re going to find out what.”

She studied him. His eyes were narrowed and fierce, his jaw tight.

Officers arrived and processed her townhome, asking her questions until her head

spun. Even the eight hundred milligrams of Motrin didn't completely stop the pain. Despite the nasty warning on the wall, she sat on the couch and simply just closed her eyes.

Andy finally escorted the last officer out of her home and shut the door. She opened her eyes as he turned to her. "You want me to pack a bag for you?" he asked.

"No, I'll do it in a bit." While he was here, she might as well see if he could answer all the questions she'd had bouncing around her head for the last two months. "Can you cover that up with a blanket then sit beside me?"

"Yeah, sure." It didn't take him long to hang a blanket over the spray-painted threat. "I'll get rid of the doll, too, for now. Until you decide if you want to have someone try to clean her up."

"Thanks."

Once those two items were done, Holly was able to finally pull in a deep breath.

She patted the cushion next to her. "Sit." He sank onto it and she took his hand. "Talk to me, Andy, please."

He sighed. "I've really been messed up, Holly. After Chris was killed, it sent me into a very dark place, and I haven't been able to come out of it." He looked at her. "Until now. When I heard you were in danger, it knocked me off my feet—and some sense into my head, I think."

“And so you came running.”

“I did.”

“Thank you for that. It means a lot.” It didn’t solve their problems, but it did let her know that he thought of her as a priority. At least when she needed him. But what about when he needed her?

“Yeah.” He grabbed a blanket from the end of the couch and covered her up. She snuggled next to him. “See if you can sleep for a little bit, get the headache to ease. Then we’ll pack your bag, get something to eat, and I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“We’re finished talking?”

“For now.” He squeezed her hand. “We’ll talk more when you’re feeling better.”

“But—” At his tight features, she let it go. “Where will you stay tonight? You’re not going home, are you?”

“No. I have enough vacation time built up that I don’t have to be back for another two weeks. I’m not leaving until we find out who’s responsible for this. As for where I’ll stay, I’ll get a room at the motel across the street from base.”

“Okay.” Relieved and feeling safe for the first time since the threats started, she let the fatigue settle over her and closed her eyes.

* * *

Andy watched Holly sleep for about an hour before he decided to be productive. He gently settled her against a pillow and pulled his phone from the clip on his side as he walked into the kitchen. From here, he could keep an eye on her and the front door but talk without waking her. He knew the evidence the officers had collected would be sent to the lab in Asheville. Thankfully, he knew Yasmine Forsythe, a lab tech, who worked there.

She answered on the second ring. "Hello, Andy."

"Hey Yasmine, thanks for picking up. I need a favor."

"Of course, what can I do for you?"

"Have you received the evidence from the break-in over here in Asheville? The victim is Holly Cooper."

"Um ... not yet. Why?"

"When you get it, can you speed-process it?"

"Andy..."

"Come on, please?"

"She's special to you?"

"I've got the ring in my pocket."

She went silent, then sighed. "Oh. Well. I guess she is special. No promises other than to do my best to get it done ASAP."

“Thank you.”

“Sure thing.”

He hung up as Holly stirred and sat up. She rubbed her eyes, and he walked over to sit beside her once again. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. Hungry.” She touched the area on her head and grimaced.

“How is it?” he asked.

“It’s sore, but I think it was more of a glancing blow than a direct hit. At least the headache is basically gone.”

“That’s definitely a good sign. Want to head over to the hospital and grab something on the way? We can see if Penny and Raina need us to bring them anything.”

She glanced at the clock. Just after lunchtime and she was starving. What a morning it had been. “Yes, sure.” She packed a bag while he watched. The whole time she worked, he wanted to explain himself, beg her forgiveness, but this wasn’t about him. He needed to be here for her, and when she was ready, maybe they could have a talk. A long-overdue, honest conversation.

Maybe...

Or should he try to set things straight while they were alone? But her body language shouted that she might not be super receptive to anything he had to say. So, he stayed quiet and determined just to be there for her for as long as she'd let him.

She followed him to his truck, and he helped her into the passenger seat. "You're sure you're okay?"

"I'm sure. For the moment."

"Let me know if that changes."

She placed a hand on his arm. "I'm okay, really."

He drew in a deep breath. "That shook me today. Not because I'm scared of the person doing this, but I'm terrified I won't be able to stop him from hurting you again."

Some of her stiffness relaxed and she dropped her hand into her lap. "Well, nothing to do but trust God and stay alert."

"Right." He paused, and his fingers spasmed where they rested on her arm. "I ... I'm having a hard time with trusting him right now."

"I know." For a moment, her eyes were soft and kind, and he wanted to wrap her up and hold her close, protect her from every bad thing—and person—in the world.

Then her gaze chilled once more and she shifted away from him.

He cleared his throat. “How about you trust him, and I help him out if presented with the opportunity?”

She gave a forced laugh, and his heart squeezed. What had he been thinking when he’d pushed this woman away? He should have leaned on her. And God. But Chris?—

Andy shut off the “should haves.”

He closed her door and walked around the truck to slide into the driver’s seat. Seconds later, he pulled out of the townhome parking lot and headed for the highway that would lead them back to the hospital about ten minutes away. “One thing struck me about your break-in,” he said.

“What?”

“There wasn’t any forced entry. Did you leave the door unlocked?”

She frowned. “Of course not.”

“Okay, then could Penny or Raina have given the key to someone?”

“Neither would do that. Not without clearing it with me first.”

“Can you call Penny and ask her?”

She studied him for a moment, her frown deepening, then pulled out her phone and dialed Penny’s number. She put the phone on speaker so he could listen in.

“Holly? I’m so glad you called. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m with Andy. We were heading back to the hospital. I’m going to stay at base tonight.”

“Okay, why?”

“Someone broke into my house.”

Her gasp echoed over the line. “Broke into your home! Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine, but did you by any chance loan my key to anyone without telling me?”

“No way!”

“I didn’t think so, but Andy insisted I ask.”

“Holly, what’s going on? First the attack in the supply closet and now this?”

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“I don’t know, Penny. I really don’t, but I’m working on figuring it out.”

“Hold on a second. I’m going to check my purse.”

Andy caught sight of the car behind him. It had been there awhile. He kept his eyes on the mirrors while he waited for Penny to return to the phone.

“Holly?” Penny’s hushed voice finally came over the line. “The key is gone.”

Andy’s jaw tightened, and he spared a glance at Holly, who thanked her friend and hung up. She swallowed. “So, what does that mean?”

“We look for someone at the hospital who has a grudge against you.”

“Dr. Mann is the first person who comes to mind.”

“Dr. Mann.”

He slowed to cross the bridge that would take them to the hospital exit and looked in the rearview mirror in time to see the sedan behind him slam into the back of his truck. The wheel spun beneath his fingers, Holly screamed, and he rammed into the side of the guardrail.

Holly clutched the door handle and tried not to scream again while Andy yanked the wheel and got the tires back onto the road. In the side mirror, she could see the car

coming back for another hit.

“Andy—”

“I see him.” He waited until the last possible minute, and Holly braced herself for another crash.

Andy jerked the wheel to the right and pressed the gas to race up the exit ramp, escaping the second hit. The sedan’s engine roared, but Andy whipped the wheel one more time, then slammed on his brakes to spin out of the oncoming sedan’s path. The dark car roared past them and disappeared around the bend just ahead.

Andy muttered something under his breath as he shoved the truck into park.

“What?”

“The license plate number. I got it.”

He grabbed a pen from his console and wrote on his palm. He tossed the pen down and grabbed his phone. After identifying himself, he started barking orders. “I need a plate run. Yes, now, please. The person nearly ran me off the road.”

Breathe, Holly. Deep breath in ... slow exhale. They were alive and the danger was over. As long as the person didn’t come back. Andy hung up his phone. “Garrett Mann.”

“What?”

“The car belonged to the doctor.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” She pressed a hand to her head, thankful the

incident hadn't triggered any more pain. "But, honestly, Andy, while Garrett is a flirt and a player who skates right up to the edge of sexual harassment, I'd never picture him doing something like this."

"Guess we're going to find out. Cops are looking for him as we speak." He hesitated. "As soon as they pick him up, they'll bring him in for questioning. Do you feel like going to the police station?"

Did she? "Yes, sure. Why not?"

He checked the damage to his truck and announced it minimal, then got them back on the road heading toward the police station. "You think they'll find Garrett today?" she asked.

"I would think so."

She bit her lip. "No, I've changed my mind. For now, I guess just take me to the motel across the street from the hospital. Assuming you can find him and pick him up, you can question him and tell me what happens. I don't need to see him—which means staying away from the hospital for the moment. Because if that was him in the car, he'll have to get back to work so he has an alibi. And if I'm at base ..." She pressed a hand to her right temple. While her head wasn't hurting too much, she simply wanted to lie down.

"That's probably a good idea."

"Sorry I'm being such a wimp."

Andy reached over to snag her fingers in his. "You're not a wimp, Holly, you're hurt and need to rest. I'm an idiot for forcing you to do too much too soon."

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“You’re not an idiot.” She paused. “Well, not in this case anyway.”

He barked a short laugh. “I’m working on it.”

“Good.”

Within minutes, he had her checked into the motel and inside her room. With a gentle finger, he stroked her cheek, looking like he wanted to kiss her, then backed off with a sigh. “Get some sleep. We’ll talk when this is all over.”

“You mean really talk?”

“Yeah. Really talk.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

He handed her the overnight bag, which she set on the floor beside her while she watched him leave. Once he was out of sight, Holly shut and bolted the door, went to the nearest bed, and sat on it with a groan. Her head ached, and she grabbed the Motrin from her purse and took another pill.

But finally, she was safe.

She would stay here tonight and make arrangements for the townhome to be painted and cleaned up as soon as possible. With that in mind, she called the pastor at her church and asked for a recommendation for someone to take care of the chores. Once she explained what happened, he told her he’d take care of it.

“But I don’t expect?—”

“I know you don’t, Holly, but you’ve been a blessing and a help to more than one person in this church, myself included. Let us help you now.”

So, she’d agreed with a grateful heart, checked in with her family—without telling them what happened, and turned on the television.

With the news playing in the background, she pulled her iPad from her bag. She planned to read while she waited to hear back from Andy, but soon, her lids grew heavy. She set the iPad aside and stretched out on the bed. Okay, so she’d sleep a little.

She’d just drifted off when her phone buzzed.

She grabbed it from the end table. Dr. Kirkpatrick. “Hello?”

“Holly, I just wanted to call and check on you.”

“I’m doing okay. Headache has eased and, to be honest, I could have probably finished my shift.”

“I’m so glad to hear you say that. Do you think you could come back in?”

She sat up. “Probably. Why?”

“We’re short a nurse practitioner. Janine just got a call that her son has the flu, so she has to leave, and Hank is still on vacation.”

“Um ... yeah. Give me about thirty minutes to get there.”

“Of course. Hopefully, we won’t have a call before then.”

“I’ll shoot for twenty minutes.”

“You’re the best, Holly.”

She hung up and texted Andy.

Going in to work. I’ll just have to avoid the ER and anywhere I might run into Garrett.

I should have texted you. Mann is in custody. You should be safe for now.

Relief kept her rooted to the bed for a few seconds before she stood and headed for the shower. She probably still had blood in her hair and needed to freshen up. She glanced at the clock. She could do this—she just had to walk across the street to base. And she’d make sure she was walking with someone in the same direction, just to be safe.

* * *

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“I’m telling you, you’ve got the wrong guy.” Dr. Garrett Mann crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair.

Andy watched through the two-way mirror while the sheriff tried to wring a confession from the doctor. Only he wasn’t budging. “Someone stole my car. And I was at the hospital during the time you say I was running that guy off the road.”

“We’re checking your alibi. Until we get some answers, you want to tell us about your relationship with Holly Cooper?”

“Relationship?” He snorted. “It’s strictly professional.”

“So, you’ve never asked her out?”

The doctor sighed. “Yes, I’ve asked her out. She said no, that she was in love with someone else. End of story.”

Andy’s heart flipped at the thought of Holly saying she loved him. She hadn’t given up on him just because he’d acted like a jerk.

One of the deputies slipped into the conference room being used as the interrogation room and passed a note to the sheriff.

Sheriff Lewis read it and frowned. He looked up at the mirror. “Alibi is solid. And the stolen car report is there just like he said.”

Dr. Mann stood. “Now, may I please leave and get back to work?”

“Yes. Thank you for your time.”

He left, and Andy’s heart chilled. “I need to get back to Holly. If Mann’s not the one we’re after, the person threatening Holly is still out there.”

The sheriff nodded. “You’d better give her a heads-up.”

Andy headed for the exit, snagging his phone from his pocket. Still walking, he called Holly. When it went to voice mail, he texted her.

Mann isn’t the guy who’s threatening you. Stay on guard. I’m heading to the hospital. You’ve got a bodyguard until all of this is resolved.

Her response was almost immediate.

I’m headed for the chopper. We got a call. Will text when I’m back.

His adrenaline surge abated a fraction. As long as she was in the air, she was safe.

At least from someone who intentionally wanted to hurt her.

5

Reports of a multicar pileup on the interstate always sent dread through Holly. She sent up a silent prayer for those involved and buckled herself in. Penny sent them whirling into the air while Holly stayed in contact with the paramedic on the scene in order to be prepared for whatever emergency they were walking into.

“Three victims,” Holly said, repeating the information. “The head trauma is ours.”

Raina nodded, and five minutes later, Penny hovered over the area where she’d been

cleared to land. Following the motions of the officer directing her, she touched down with barely a bump in the middle of the highway just a short distance from the collision. While Penny powered down the chopper, Raina and Holly beelined toward the scene.

“Over here!”

Holly followed the voice to find paramedics, Carl and Nadine, strapping the neck brace to the woman on the ground. Carl looked up. “Trauma dressing in place, you have two large bore IVs in the ACs, and 1000 ml of Normal Saline has been administered. She’s lost a lot of blood, and it’s possible she has a skull fracture, but she’s stable for the moment. Let’s get her on board.”

They worked together to get the woman into the belly of the chopper and were soon back in the air heading toward the hospital. “I’ve got the doctor on the line,” Raina said.

Holly commenced to give her report of the woman’s condition. “Patient is a fifty-two-year-old female?—”

“Holly, the bleeding isn’t stopping.”

“Administer LR, TXA, and two units of blood.” TXA, a hemostatic agent commonly used to stop bleeding in severe trauma.

“On it.”

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They pushed fluids, and several seconds later, the woman's eyes blinked open. Panic flared. "What's going on?"

Holly took her hand. "You've been in a car accident, but you're going to be just fine." She took another look at the vital. Strong heartbeat, good breath sounds. Blood dripping into her veins to replenish what she'd lost. She was going to be fine. She reported the status to Dr. Mann.

"What's your name?" Holly asked her.

"Liza Hollister."

"Nice to meet you, Liza. Sorry it's under these circumstances."

Liza smiled then closed her eyes. "My head hurts," she whispered.

Because her brain was probably swelling. "We've got you covered. Raina, Decadron?" Decadron should reduce the brain swelling. She passed the woman the vial.

"On it." Raina pulled the meds and inserted them into the IV port.

Two minutes before they were to land, the woman went into cardiac arrest.

Holly reacted. "Grab the paddles!"

Raina was already moving. She placed the paddles on the woman's chest. "Clear!"

Holly lifted her hands and watched the monitor. “Come on, come on, you can do this.” Sinus rhythm appeared for a moment then went back into V-Fib. “Push one milligram of Epi. Follow with twenty of saline.”

Raina inserted the needle into the IV port and administered the dose.

Two minutes after the first shock, Penny was landing on the tarmac. “Shock her again,” Holly said.

Raina settled the paddles on the woman once more. “Clear.”

The machine popped, and the woman bowed off the table before dropping back on it. A team met them at the chopper, ready to take over—Dr. Mann and Sylvia included. Thankfully, they were all business. Raina called out all the information, including the drugs and dosage amounts, while Holly did CPR until they could shock her again. “Get her in the trauma bay now,” Dr. Mann said. Holly climbed on the gurney and continued the compressions all the way into the bay where the trauma team took over. They worked on her for the next thirty minutes before Garrett shook his head. All activity ceased, and the heart monitor squealed its tragic tone.

“Time of death, 6:04.”

Raina closed her eyes and drew in a ragged breath. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Sylvia drew the sheet over the woman’s face, and Holly pressed her fingers to quivering lips.

Her phone buzzed. The team was needed once more.

For the next three hours, Holly and the others worked nonstop. Once the last victim was rushed through the sliding glass doors, Holly, Raina, and Penny made their way to base. Holly fought exhaustion even while her mind was flipping through the events of the day.

When they stepped into the kitchen of the base, Holly shook her head. “I don’t understand why she died.”

Raina and Penny stopped and looked at her. “What?” Raina asked, a frown on her face.

“The woman with the head injury. We gave her blood, TXA, and fluids. Her vitals were starting to stabilize. I just don’t understand what went wrong.” She shook her head. “There was no reason for her to have arrested.”

Raina bit her lip. “Well, there was something wrong, obviously. Maybe the paramedics on the ground missed it.”

“No. Her heart rate was fine, and then all of a sudden she was in V-Fib.”

“Come on, Holly,” Penny said, “these things happen sometimes.”

“Her husband was there. She had no history of heart issues. No allergies to drugs, nothing. She had a head injury and went into V-Fib. How does that make sense?”

Penny walked over and wrapped Holly in a hug. “You’re upset because we lost her. It’s understandable.”

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Holly sighed. It was more than that, but she wouldn't think about it for now. She checked her phone and found a message from Andy.

Can we have dinner?

Yes. What time?

Whenever you can get away.

I'm on duty, so has to be here.

As he well knew.

Of course. Don't leave base without me. I want to meet you at the door and walk down with you.

He was worried she'd be attacked again. In the hospital where she'd always felt safe.

That's fine. I'll be here.

See you soon.

But what would she say to the man who'd ghosted her during one of the most painful events of his life?

While he appeared to regret that, could she ever trust him not to do it again?

And if Dr. Mann wasn't the person threatening her, who was?

* * *

Andy waited for Holly to step through the door and join him in the hallway. She looked rough. Lovely, but ... "Hard flight?"

"I can't even explain how hard."

He took her hand and led her to the hospital cafeteria, where they walked through the line then headed to their table in the corner. He slid onto the padded seat and over next to the wall, then waited for her to join him on the same side.

Only she put her tray on the table and took the opposite booth.

He raised a brow, his heart constricting, praying he didn't fumble his words. He cleared his throat. "So, I owe you an apology. An ... explanation."

"No, you don't owe me anything. If you're going to explain, then do it because you want to, not because you believe you owe me something."

He paused and nodded. "Okay, fair enough." He drew in a steadying breath. "I ... don't even know where to start. After Chris was killed, I just ... reacted. I couldn't think. I didn't want to be around anyone." His eyes met hers. "Except you," he whispered.

She frowned. "Then why push me away?"

"Because I was afraid." He lifted a shoulder in a hesitant half-shrug.

"Afraid of what?"

“Of you seeing that side of me.”

“Whatside? Please, Andy, don’t make me drag this out of you.”

He ran a hand down his face. “I’m not trying to make you do that.” Clearing his throat, he took her hand. “You know that from the age of six, Jacob and I were in and out of the foster system.”

“Yes.”

“Well, when we got older, we ended up going back to live with our parents for a while. Shortly after Jacob and I were returned to our parents after the latest foster stay, my dad left. Just packed up his stuff and walked out the door without a backward glance.”

“Oh, Andy, I’m so sorry.”

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“It was bad. So, then it was just my brother and Mom and me. Mom had to pick up another job, and I had to quit football and start working. It was a horrible, horrible season of life, and I spiraled real fast into a very dark hole. I suffered a debilitating bout of depression for about a year.”

Her eyes were narrow, studying him. But not judging. They held sorrow and compassion and a love that nearly took his breath away. A love that he certainly didn't deserve.

“Why didn't you ever tell me this before?”

“Because it's ugly. It's not who I am. Not who I wanted to be. And I didn't want you to think it was.”

A tear hovered on her lashes, and when she blinked, it rolled down her cheek. Andy lifted a thumb to brush it away.

“And you were afraid I'd judge you?” she asked. “Think bad of you? Break up with you?”

He nodded. A slow dip of his head. “I don't know that I ever consciously thought that, but yes. I think, deep down, I was afraid if you saw me in the depths of grief—and yes, depression—you would walk away.”

“But ... why?”

He ran a hand over his face. “Probably because of Sharon, the girl I was dating when

my dad left. She couldn't handle it. Didn't even want to. So, she left, too."

She blinked and her face stilled into a neutral expression he couldn't read. "And you thought I would be like this Sharon girl? Like a teenager who couldn't deal with your pain?" She pulled her hand from his and pinched the bridge of her nose, then swiped the tears from under her eyes.

"It sounds stupid when you say it like that." And it did.

"Like what, Andy? You compared our love, our commitment to one another, to some teenage puppy-love thing?" She shook her head. "I'm not saying that wasn't a traumatic experience, and I'm not belittling the pain I know that caused you, but I thought we had something that went deeper than?"

"We do, Holly, we do!" He kept his voice low but hoped she could feel the intensity behind the words. "I love you."

"And I love you, too, Andy." Tears welled in her eyes, and she looked away to breathe deeply. When she met his gaze once more, the tears were gone. "I honestly don't know what to think, but I've got to get back to work." She slid out of the booth and looked down at him. "I'm not walking away from you, from us. But I do need to process, to think."

"Holly—"

"Please, Andy, give me this time."

He'd blown it. He curled his fingers into fists on the table, but nodded. "All right."

She turned and walked away. He could only pray it wasn't forever.

Holly returned to base, her thoughts whirling, emotions sucker-punched once more. How many more hits could her heart take?

She opened the refrigerator and found a bottle of water.

Penny walked out of the bedroom, phone pressed to her ear. "I love you, too. Bye."

The words cut like shards of glass through Holly, and she had to work to keep the pain off her face even while she silently berated her reaction. She couldn't flinch every time she was around a happy couple.

"Can you toss me one of those waters?" Penny asked.

"Sure." Holly handed her the one she'd just retrieved and got herself another one while Penny took a seat on the couch in the living area.

"Any luck on figuring out who's out to get you?" Penny asked.

"No. I thought it was that creepy Dr. Mann, but they questioned him and it turns out it wasn't."

"Wow."

"I know."

"And now, feel free to spill the details on the status of you and Andy."

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Raina swept through the doors and flopped onto the couch next to Penny. “Looks like I arrived just in time. I caught ‘status of you and Andy.’ I’m assuming there’s an update?”

Holly bit back the sigh that wanted to escape. “I mean, he’s apologized for ghosting me, and told me why he did, but I’m having a hard time wrapping my mind around it.”

“You want to share that?” Raina asked. “And if you don’t, that’s okay.”

“I know.” Holly walked over to the recliner and sat, curling her legs beneath her. “It’s fear.”

Raina raised a brow. “Fear? Andy? I never got the impression that he’s afraid of much of anything.”

“Hm.” Holly swigged her water. “Well, apparently, he allowed a bad experience from his past to influence him, and that’s why he shut me out.”

Penny wrinkled her nose. “Well, that stinks.”

“No kidding. I mean, it’s not that I don’t understand. I can, on some level, if I look at it like some PTSD reaction to the situation. And, I mean, we all make mistakes.”

“Then why do I get the feeling there’s more going on here?” Raina leaned forward, eyes narrowed, hands clasped.

Holly studied her friends—women she was closer to than her own sister. “You know, I’ve had it pretty easy, all things considered. Life hasn’t been a huge struggle for me like it has been for you guys.”

“Don’t sound like you feel guilty about that,” Penny said. “That’s a blessing.”

“Oh, I know. I don’t feel guilty, I just ... I don’t know what the word is ... like, maybe I shouldn’t vent or whine or complain when something rotten happens because it was bound to happen eventually, and I’ve been fortunate to avoid it up to this point?” She dropped her head in her hands. “I sound ridiculous, don’t I?” They were silent, and Holly peered up through her fingers.

Raina shook her head. “Yes, completely crazy. And I mean that in the nicest way possible. Life hurts sometimes. Sometimes it hurts certain people more than others, but that doesn’t mean you should trivialize your pain. Now, is there anything Penny or I can do?”

“No, I don’t think so, but thank you for being my friends and letting me be sad and whine.”

“It’s not whining,” Penny said. She and Raina enveloped Holly in a tight group hug before Penny stepped back. “Now, we need to figure out who attacked you in the supply closet, tried to run you off the road, and broke into your home. I’m assuming it’s the same person.”

“Yeah. I think it is, and so does Andy. I think it’s the person who’s done all this other stuff, and they’re escalating.”

“Well,” Raina said, “if it’s not Dr. Mann, who else could it be?”

Holly leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “I have absolutely no idea.”

* * *

Andy chugged the first two cups of coffee, then slowly sipped the third. Thanks to a restless night in his motel room, he'd managed to watch hours of security footage that Sheriff Lewis had kindly shared with him.

He'd focused mostly on the hospital attack. Cameras had picked up Holly walking into the supply closet, but it was a busy area, and others had come and gone. No one looked suspicious—like they'd just attacked someone and were in a hurry to get away. Andy had also requested the footage from the ER because he knew Holly had spent some time there before going out on the call.

He saw Dr. Mann approach her in the ER and noted Holly's body language. Stiff shoulders, tight smile, cool eyes. She didn't like the guy. Which meant Andy wanted to punch him for continuing to push his attentions on her. Or, at the very least, make it so she never had to see the man again.

Although after the interrogation at the police department, Andy had a feeling the doctor might be giving Holly a wide berth from now on.

At least something good had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

When the hospital footage hadn't enlightened him, he'd switched to her townhome complex and studied footage from different cameras with multiple angles. There, he'd found something he thought might be interesting. A car had pulled into the parking lot and sat there for an hour and fifteen minutes with the driver staying put. It was also in a good spot to see Holly's townhome door. Andy straightened when the driver finally got out of the car. Of course he had a hoodie on. He shoved his hands into the front pocket of the sweatshirt and hurried toward the residential building. Then bypassed Holly's door and disappeared around the corner of the building.

Andy sighed and kept going. Watching.

Until the same person reappeared, walked to Holly's door and opened it.

He had a key. Well, at least they knew what happened to Penny's key.

Five minutes later, the door opened, and the person reappeared, head down, face hidden. He shoved a can—which Andy figured was the red spray paint used to deface Holly's wall—into the front pocket of the hoodie, hurried to his vehicle, climbed in, and drove away.

Andy saved the clip of footage on his laptop, then went back to the shot of the vehicle and tried to get a plate. He was able to make it out and ran it.

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Only to find it belonged to a black Mercedes, not the green Honda in the video. The guy had switched the plates. With a sigh, Andy shoved the laptop away and rose to pace. Then grabbed his jacket and headed out the door and across the street to the hospital.

7

Sitting at the kitchen table at the base, Holly studied the summary she'd written for her report while Raina worked in the kitchen. Penny's shift had ended, and she'd gone home to her husband. Maxine, one of the other pilots, had arrived and was going through the chopper checklist in hopes of finishing it before their next call.

Reading back through the report she'd written just reinforced her confusion about Liza Hollister's death. There was no medical reason for it—at least not that she could see. An autopsy would reveal the truth, but while motor vehicle accident deaths were ruled “unusual deaths,” an autopsy wasn't done unless they needed to rule for cause of death.

She rubbed her eyes.

When she lowered her hand, her gaze fell on Andy, who'd just stepped through the glass doors. He had his hands in his pockets, and he looked so sad she wanted to run to him and throw her arms around him. Instead, she forced herself to stay put. “Hi.”

“Hi.” He cleared his throat. “I know you asked for space, but do you mind if I have a seat? I have some security footage from your townhome I think you should see.”

“Oh. Okay. No, I don’t mind.”

He sat next to her and slid an iPad in front of her. “Tap the screen and watch.”

She did so. The footage rolled, and she watched the person in the hoodie enter the townhome and leave again. Sickness curled in her belly, and she sucked in a deep breath. “Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“He definitely had Penny’s key.”

“Yeah.”

“But ... how? It has to be someone who has access to base lockers—which means it has to be someone I work with.” She didn’t want to believe that was possible, but with the evidence staring her in the face, what else was she supposed to think?

A knock sounded on the door, and she looked up to see Garrett Mann standing outside, eyes narrowed, jaw tight. “Great,” she whispered.

“Want me to get rid of him?”

“No, I can handle him. If he thinks I need someone to run interference, he’ll just keep pushing.” She stood and went to open the door. “Dr. Mann.”

“Holly.” His eyes slid past her. “Detective.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Andy rise. “Did you find your car?”

“Yes. It was parked in the motel parking lot across the street.”

“Interesting.”

“And your keys?”

A flicker of uncertainty crossed his face and he frowned. “They showed back up in my desk.”

“How convenient.”

The doctor scowled and looked like he might be ready to lay into Andy, so Holly asked, “Can I help you?”

“There seems to be some concern about the way you handled one of the patients yesterday.”

“What?” She blinked at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Liza Hollister.”

“What about her?”

“It’s been reported that you gave her the wrong medication, and that’s why she died.”

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A cold chill swept over her. “That’s not true. I did everything exactly the way it was supposed to be done. I followed your orders.”

“But I wasn’t there, so I don’t know that, do I?”

“What is this?” Andy asked, stepping next to her. “Payback for giving you the brush-off? For the sheriff pulling you in yesterday?”

“Of course not.” Garrett crossed his arms. “I’m just passing on information.”

“That you got from where?” Andy asked.

“It’s from an anonymous source.”

“Well, that shouldn’t come from you,” Holly said. “That should come from Dr. Kirkpatrick. So unless you have anything else?—”

Mann held up a hand. “I was just giving you a heads-up.” He backed up and headed down the hallway.

Holly ran her hands down her face, then drew in a deep breath. She looked back at Andy. “I’m going to see Dr. Kirkpatrick.”

“I’m right behind you.”

* * *

“Do you want me to wait out here?” Andy asked her.

“No, you might as well hear everything firsthand. It will save me having to repeat it.”

Holly knocked on her boss’s office and entered when he said, “Come in.”

The man was seated behind his desk. He looked up, and his eyes narrowed. “Holly. I was just about to ask you to come to my office. How’d you know I wanted to see you?”

“I didn’t, but I figured it was coming. Garrett Mann said Morbidity and Mortality are looking into Liza Hollister’s death.”

Dr. Kirkpatrick huffed and leaned back in his chair. “How on earth did he know?”

“I guess the rumor mill is operating at warp speed.” She raked a hand over her ponytail. “But this time, I’m stumped. I have no idea how anyone would know anything about what went on in the chopper. I only voiced my concerns to Penny and Raina. How did you come to hear about it?”

“I got a phone call from someone who said you had ‘messed up’”—he used air quotes—“and that the patient shouldn’t have died. And that the incident needed to be investigated.”

“Well, shouldn’t there be an autopsy first? To determine cause of death?”

“I’ve already asked the ME to make it a priority, but until we hear back from her, you just keep doing your job.”

She studied him. “Are you sure?”

He sighed. “Look, this was an anonymous tip thing. I’m not a fan of those. If someone has information, proof, that you made a mistake, then they can bring it to my attention, tell me to my face. This is all hearsay, and I don’t bench my players based on that.”

Holly nodded, her relief evident, yet she was still concerned. “Will you face backlash because of this?”

“Did you do anything wrong?”

“No.”

“Then I’m not worried about it.”

She sighed. “At least not on purpose. I mean, I’m not perfect, of course, but”—she twisted her fingers together, then straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin—“no. I did everything exactly how it should have been done, and I’d do everything the same if I had to do it all over again.”

“Then, we won’t worry about it until we have something to worry about.”

She stood. “Thank you, Dr. Kirkpatrick.”

“Sure.”

She hesitated and glanced at Andy, then back to the doctor. “I didn’t put this in my report because it’s an opinion, not fact, but I think I’d like to run it by you.”

The man raised a brow. “Okay.”

Holly sat back down and walked him through the scenario on the helicopter. “I agree with your anonymous caller. I don’t know what happened, but I don’t think Liza Hollister should be dead, either.”

Dr. Kirkpatrick frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been thinking about this, and I believe, before the chopper is used again, it needs a thorough inventory with everything checked. Including the meds. And—in light of the current accusations—it can’t be me who goes through it.”

He hesitated. “If we ground that chopper and someone needs it...”

“I know. I’ve thought of that, trust me, but I just keep going over and over everything that happened with Ms. Hollister and I can’t help it. I don’t understand why she died. Something’s ... not right. I don’t know what, but ... something.”

He studied her a moment, and Andy thought he was going to refuse, then he gave a slow nod. “All right. I’ve never known you to overreact to anything. If you say something’s off, I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt.” His phone pinged and he glanced at the screen. “Autopsy’s in progress. We should know something shortly.

I'll have someone start going over the chopper, but if we get a call, you'll have to go."

She nodded. "Okay. Thank you. I'm just going to head back to base."

"I'll be in touch as soon as I hear something."

Holly stood, and Andy led her out of the office. "That went well," he said."

"Better than I expected." She bit her lip. "Someone's out to get me, Andy. Someone wants me out of this hospital, and I don't know why."

8

Holly returned to base, her heart heavy with the current status of their relationship, while Andy said he was going to talk to the sheriff and see if the man had made any progress in the case.

What was she going to do?

Pray he'd learned something from the situation and that she could trust him again?

Or keep her heart under lock and key and possibly miss finding joy again in being with Andy?

"Ugh. Lord, tell me what to do, please," she whispered. "And if Andy and I are supposed to build a life together, give me the strength to overcome my doubts and hurt."

When she got no clear answer to her plea, she sighed. She'd just have to keep praying about it and listening. God would let her know. For now, though, she turned her focus

back to the other thing that wouldn't stop bugging her.

Knowing a call could come in at any moment, Holly kept herself busy going back over every medical detail of what she'd done in flight. She even called the paramedics who'd worked on Liza Hollister and got their feedback and impressions of the woman's physical state. They were both shocked to learn she'd died.

"So, it's not just me," she muttered, hanging up.

"What's not just you?" Raina asked from her spot behind the stove.

So deep in her own musings, Holly hadn't noticed her enter. "I talked to Carl and Nadine. They both thought Liza Hollister would make it."

Raina stirred the spaghetti sauce then set the spoon aside. "Ever since you brought it up, I've been thinking about it. You're right. We gave her the meds. We got the bleeding stopped. She woke up and was lucid. You ordered the Decadron. Seconds later, she went into cardiac arrest. Could it be as simple as she was allergic?"

"Her husband said she didn't have any allergies."

"So, it was a new one."

"Yes. It's possible." Holly pursed her lips and shook her head. "It could have been anything, I guess. Maybe you and Penny are right and I just don't want to accept the loss."

"We've lost patients before," Raina said. "And it's hard, and we're always sad about it, but you're taking this harder than usual."

"Yeah. I am." She paused. "Well, going over and over it isn't helping, so I guess I

just need to wait until we get the results of the autopsy.”

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“I noticed Andy was here earlier.”

“He was.”

“Are you going to forgive him?”

Holly paused. “Yes. I just don’t know if I can trust him again. Just because I forgive him doesn’t mean that I want to put myself back into the same situation.”

Raina nodded. “I understand that.”

“But I’m praying about it and working on finding peace no matter what the outcome is.”

“And I’ll join you in that prayer.”

“Thank you, Raina.” She had the best friends.

A knock on the door pulled her to her feet, and Dr. Kirkpatrick stepped inside. The frown on his face didn’t bode well. “What is it?” she asked.

He waved a folder at her. “Got the autopsy report.”

“And?”

“Cause of death is an overdose of epinephrine. Said no way was that an accident. I’m afraid I’m going to have to suspend you pending an investigation.”

* * *

Andy was sitting across from the sheriff when his phone pinged with a message from Holly.

Autopsy report came back. I'm suspended pending an investigation.

A groan slipped from him, and the sheriff looked up from the computer where he was watching the security footage from Holly's townhome. "What is it?"

"Holly was just suspended."

"For what?"

He read the next text. "The autopsy of Liza Hollister said she died from an overdose of epinephrine."

The sheriff frowned. "They think Holly did it on purpose?"

"I don't know what they think. I think someone's framing her. Trying to prove her incompetent."

"But ... if that's the case," the sheriff said, his words slow and thoughtful, "whether the intention was for someone to die or not, someone did. And that's murder. Or at the very least manslaughter, depending on the circumstances."

"Yeah."

The sheriff eyed him. "If I were you, I wouldn't leave her alone right now. Someone wants her out of that hospital bad—and it doesn't look like they care if it's in a car or a coffin."

Holly dropped her packed bag on the floor of the locker room and turned to find Raina and Penny staring at her with sober faces and angry eyes. Angry on her behalf. “Stop,” she said. “It’ll be okay. The truth will come out.” She frowned. “What are you doing here anyway? You’re off shift.”

“We’re here for you, my friend,” Penny said. “Just like you’d be for us.”

Holly refused to cry over the love of her friends. Simply because if she started, she wouldn’t stop. And that wouldn’t help anyone. “Oh. Thank you.”

“Where are you going?” Raina asked.

“Back to the motel. The sheriff called and said he doesn’t want me going home until this has been resolved. I told him I would do that for the next couple of days, but after that, I wouldn’t have a choice.”

“And Andy? Where’s he?”

“He was with the sheriff when he called, but he’s on his way here. Said he wants to escort me to the motel.”

“And then?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll just take it one day at a time.”

“Well, you’re not staying there by yourself,” Raina said. “As soon as I’m off shift, I’m coming over.”

“Yeah,” Penny nodded. “Me too.”

Holly stepped forward for a group hug. “Thanks, guys,” she whispered.

After a tight squeeze, she let go and picked up her bag. She followed Raina and Penny back into the large living area only to see a dark-haired woman standing just inside the door.

“Hi,” Penny said, “can we help you?”

“Yes, please. I’m looking for someone named Holly Cooper. I was told I could find her here.”

Penny stepped in front of Holly from the right side while Raina did the same from the left. Closing in and protecting her.

“And who are you?” Penny asked.

“Victoria Mann.”

Mann? As in Garrett Mann? A sister or cousin perhaps?

Holly wasn't about to let her friends put themselves in danger for her—should this woman be dangerous. She stepped around her self-appointed guardians. “I'm Holly.” She set her bag on the floor but didn't move forward like she normally would. “What do you need?”

“I need you to stay away from my husband.”

Penny gaped and Raina clasped Holly's bicep, obviously ready to yank her out of harm's way.

“And who is your husband?” Holly asked, knowing the answer without hearing it, but needing it confirmed.

“Garrett Mann.”

She knew it, but she still gasped. When she snapped her lips shut, she couldn't help but stare. “I'm sorry, what? Garrett Mann is married?”

The woman scoffed and crossed her arms. “Are you saying you didn't know?”

“Of course I didn't know. Not that it would matter, because I'm not interested in the man.”

“Then why is your picture all over his phone?”

Holly blinked. “Again, I’m completely at a loss. I have no idea why he’d have my picture.”

The woman pulled her phone from her purse, tapped the screen and then held the device out to Holly. “This is my phone. When he was in the shower yesterday morning, I AirDropped the pictures from his phone to mine. Look. Nothing but you.”

Raina snatched the phone before Holly could move and passed it over to her. Holly raised a brow at her friend. “Thanks.” Then she glanced at the screen and sucked in a breath. Swipe after swipe revealed pictures she had no idea had been taken. A tremor swept through her. “No.” She shook her head. “I don’t know why he has these, but if you look closely, you can see they were taken when I wasn’t looking at the camera.”

A flicker of uncertainty flashed in Mrs. Mann’s eyes. “Even so, it’s obvious he’s obsessed with you.”

Holly passed the phone back to the woman. “But I’m not with him. In fact, it looks like he’s stalking me.”

Her quiet words hovered in the air between them, then with a huff, Mrs. Mann spun and darted out the door.

“You need to tell the sheriff about this,” Raina said. “I know that they cleared Dr. Mann as being the one after you, but what if they’re wrong? What if someone is working with him and he just reported his car stolen so he had that out?”

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Holly bit her lip and nodded. "I'll call the sheriff."

"And Andy," Penny said.

"Yes. And Andy."

* * *

Andy had his finger over the button that would send the call to Holly's phone when her call came in. He answered. "Hey. I was just getting ready to call you."

"Well, I've finished packing up my stuff and am ready to head to the motel whenever you can take me. But, first, I wanted to tell you about an interesting encounter I had with Mrs. Garrett Mann."

"Mrs.? The man's married?"

"Very."

"Oh boy. Does he know she knows that he's been ... um...?"

"Unfaithful? I have no idea. She went searching on his phone and found a bunch of pictures of me. He's been stalking me, Andy, but I don't know what to think about setting me up to be suspended. Or fired. What would he have to gain from that?"

"Revenge?"

She sighed. “Maybe. I don’t know. I just know I’m tired and want to go home.”

“No, don’t go home. Not yet.”

“I’m not, I promise.”

“Perfect. And honestly, this suspension might be a blessing in disguise. I don’t know that you’re safe at the hospital base.”

“Or maybe someone just wants me to get away from the base so they have easier access to me?”

He blinked. “Or that. We’ll just have to be super careful. I’ll come get you and take you to the motel, so just hang tight and I’ll be there shortly. The sheriff plans to pick up Mann and dig a little deeper into his previous story. He’s still our number one pick for the one causing all of your problems.”

“Fine. I’m going down to the lobby. I’ll wait for you there?”

“No, go to the ER entrance. I’ll park in the police spot and come in and get you.”

“Fine. See you in a little bit.”

10

Holly sighed. Her head was aching, and she wanted to have a good cry. But that would just aggravate her headache. She walked to the elevator with Raina and Penny on either side of her. The three rode the elevator down to the ER floor and walked the hallway toward the ER. “I feel like I have my own personal protection unit.”

“You do,” Penny said. “For now.”

“Until this guy is caught,” Raina said with a nod.

“... really think I wouldn’t find out?” The screech came from the direction of the ER and Holly paused, then hurried toward the commotion.

Dr. Mann stood in the hallway, hand outstretched toward his wife. “Come on, Vicki, you know you’re the one I love. I just flirt. It’s harmless.”

“Pictures, Garrett. Many, many pictures.”

“I didn’t take those!”

“Then how did they get on your phone? Hidden away in a little album labeled Holly Cooper? Huh? You think I’m too stupid to figure out technology?”

“No, of course not, but I’m telling you, I didn’t put those there.”

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“Well, someone knew they were there, because someone left me a note under my windshield wiper telling me to go take a look.”

Holly’s gaze bounced between the husband and wife while everyone else stood staring in shock.

“What’s going on here?” Dr. Nick Israel appeared and walked toward the dueling couple. “Garrett?”

“A personal issue, Nick. I’m sorry. We were just getting ready to leave and take this to a more private area.”

“Good idea. Why don’t you do that?” He clapped his hands, then waved them in a shooing motion. “All right, children, the show is over. Back to work.”

“No need to take this somewhere more private,” Victoria said, her voice icy enough to send a cold front through the Mojave Desert in the dead of summer. “We’re done.” She tugged at the collar of her coat. “And I do meandonein every way imaginable.”

Rachel stepped up beside Holly. “What in the world?”

Holly shook her head, her heart aching for the shattered wife and the apparent end to a marriage. “So sad,” she whispered. She placed a hand on Rachel’s bicep. “Stay away from Dr. Mann. He’s nothing but heartbreak waiting to happen.”

Rachel shot her a dark look but nodded her head. “Unbelievable,” she muttered.

Victoria Mann swept out of the ER area with a toss of her head and a glare at them all. Garrett Mann looked up, saw everyone watching, and scowled. His gaze landed on Holly and his expression morphed into a smirk. “Well, my marriage is over. Guess you could go out with me now?”

Rachel gasped. “Seriously?”

Holly could see the deep pain in his eyes in spite of his poor attempt at a joke. “I’m sorry, Garrett,” she said, “very, very sorry for you and Victoria.”

“Yeah.” The man sighed, lifted his iPad and headed for the nearest patient room.

Rachel followed him, and Holly checked the time. Andy and the sheriff would be there soon. Andy, to take her to the motel, and the sheriff to take Garrett back into custody.

The doctor didn’t know it, but his day was getting ready to go from bad to worse.

* * *

Andy pulled to a stop in one of the reserved law enforcement spaces in front of the ER entrance. The sheriff parked behind him and climbed out to join him on the sidewalk. “I’ll go after Mann. You get Holly to the motel.”

“You really think he’s our guy?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to press a little harder this time to find out. I think he’s connected in some way, for sure, since it was his car that was supposedly stolen.”

“Right.”

Andy rushed inside to find Holly in a huddle with Raina and Penny just outside the double doors of the emergency room entrance. She looked up, and his gaze collided with hers while his heart thudded with regret at the choices he made and prayers that she would offer him another chance.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“It’s been an exciting couple of hours,” Holly said. “I’ll explain on the way to the motel.”

He frowned and nodded.

“Holly?”

Holly turned, and Andy thought he recognized the woman approaching. Rachel?

“Are you leaving?” Rachel asked.

“I am.”

“But ... why? Aren’t you still on shift?”

“I’ve been suspended,” Holly said, her eyes flashing. “But I’ll be back once the investigation is over.”

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“Oh no! What happened?”

“It’s a long story. Ask Garrett if you’re still speaking to him.”

Surprise flickered across Rachel’s face and Holly sighed. “I’m sorry. That was petty.” She paused. “Did you know he was married?”

“No.” Rachel’s features tightened, and a fist curled at her side. “I can’t believe I was such an idiot.”

“Oh, honey, you weren’t an idiot. Just deceived by a very good deceiver.”

Rachel shook her head. “I’ve got to get back to work.”

She hurried away, and Holly nodded to Andy. “I’m ready, I guess.”

Andy escorted her to his car while the sheriff went in search of Dr. Mann.

The trip to the motel took all of three minutes, and soon he was standing inside her door while she set her bag on the bed. The fact that she insisted on getting it herself, refusing to let him carry it for her, spoke volumes. “Holly, can we please talk?”

“I’m still processing, Andy.”

He sighed and dropped his chin to his chest. “All right.” He turned to go.

When his hand landed on the knob, she covered it with hers. “Wait.”

“What?”

“I’m not being fair to you. If you want to talk, then we should talk.”

His burden shifted. “I would really appreciate it.”

She gestured to the small table in the corner. “Have a seat.”

He did, and she lowered herself into the chair opposite him. “Andy, I love you. If I didn’t, I would have just walked away from you. But I don’t do that with people I love.”

“Like I did?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

He nodded. “I know. But thank you for sticking with me.”

“I’m going to be honest. I’m having trust issues.”

“I know. And all I can do is promise to never do that to you again.” He cleared his throat. “My therapist is helping me understand that my childhood has had a big impact on who I am as an adult. And ... I have trust issues of my own.”

“Of course you do. Who wouldn’t?”

“But that’s just it. I thought I’d gotten past all that. I met you—as an adult—and it was everything I’d dreamed of for years. Being with you, loving you, ... it changed me. In a good way.”

She bit her lip, and tears flooded her eyes. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“And then Chris was killed, and it nearly killed me. All my life, I’ve handled my problems on my own because I had to. My counselor pointed out that I simply don’t know how to lean on someone else for emotional support.” He frowned. “And I guess I have to admit that’s true. But,” he took her hands, “I want to learn. And I want that person to be you.”

She sniffed and nodded. “I do too, Andy.”

“Then we can try again? Will you give me a second chance?”

She smiled. “I want to.”

“I want you to.”

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“We just have to be able to talk through the bad times. And the good, of course, but most especially, the bad. And ... this is a really good start.”

Thank you, Lord.

He stood and pulled her up with him. “Can I kiss you?”

She laughed. “Yes.”

Just as his lips settled over hers, his phone buzzed. He ignored it and let it go to voice mail while he relished the feel of Holly in his arms once more.

When it buzzed again, he groaned and lifted his head. “I guess I should see who it is.”

“Probably.”

He pulled the phone from his pocket. “It’s the sheriff.” He swiped the screen. “Hello?”

“Hey, are you with Holly?”

“I am.”

“Is she safe?”

“She’s in a motel room. Why?”

“I really think we got our guy. You should see the stuff on his computer. Obsessed doesn’t even come close to describing his interest in her. And the pictures on his phone are only a few of the thousands he has of her. I don’t know where his wife thought he was when he wasn’t at the hospital because he sure wasn’t at home. He was too busy stalking Holly.”

“You have him in custody?”

“We do. His wife—soon to be ‘ex’ according to her—came by and gave us more incriminating evidence against him. Said she found more pictures in his desk at his house.”

“Is she still there?”

“Yes, I think so. Why?”

Something didn’t sit right with Andy. “Do you mind if I come by and have a chat with her? And maybe Garrett as well?”

The sheriff paused. “Why? You think I’m wrong?”

“No, not at all. I just think there’s more going on here than we’re seeing, and I’ve got a few questions I’d like to run by them both.”

“Then come on over. I’ll have her waiting for you.” The sheriff gave him a description of the woman and Andy hung up. He turned back to Holly. “You heard my side and put two and two together?”

“Yes.”

“Will you be all right while I go talk to the Manns again?”

“What do you think we missed?”

He rubbed a hand over his chin and shook his head. “I don’t know, but I have questions, so don’t go home just yet, okay?”

“Yeah. Okay, sure. I guess while you do that, I’m going to take a nap and then start preparing my statement for the board.”

Still, he hesitated. “I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“Raina and Penny are coming by in a couple of hours. I’ll be fine. Go.”

He kissed her again, then stroked a hand over her cheek, marveling at the softness. And at the love in her eyes. “Okay, I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll be here.”

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Andy shut the door and heard the deadbolt engage. He took a deep breath then reassured himself that he was only going to be three minutes away. The police station was just around the corner from the hospital. He could be back fast if he had to be. But if he thought he would need to do that, should he leave her?

The door opened. “Go, Andy, I’ll be fine. Mann is in custody, and I’m going to sleep a bit, then work.”

He sighed and nodded. “Okay, see you in a little while.”

He hurried to the sheriff’s office and walked inside to find a woman matching the sheriff’s description sitting in the lobby. It could only be Victoria Mann. “Mrs. Mann?”

She stood. “You’re the man the sheriff said wanted to talk to me?”

“If you don’t mind. I just had a few questions that were nagging at me—about Garrett.”

“Okay, if it helps me make sure I get my fair share in the divorce, then I’m happy to answer.”

“Right.” He cleared his throat. “So, the pictures that you found on Garrett’s phone. You said you got a tip that they were there.”

“Yes, someone left a note under my windshield wiper and said they hated to be the bearer of bad news, but that I needed to find a time to check his phone, that he had a

girlfriend.” She spread her hands, then clasped them at her waist. “And the person was right. Obviously.”

“And the pictures in his desk?”

“Some of the same.” She swallowed hard. “I’m very angry with Garrett because of this whole stalking thing, but I honestly don’t see him as someone who’d do the other stuff that they’re accusing him of.”

“What other stuff?”

“They’re saying he switched the drugs in the chopper. Drugs that killed a woman. The sheriff asked me if I’d noticed anything at home—drug vials and whatnot. So before you ask, the answer is no. Why would he bring that stuff home when he was at the hospital?”

“So, drugs were switched?”

“Yes, while I was talking to Garrett, the sheriff came in and said the report had come back that epinephrine was found in a Decadron bottle. They suspect that someone switched them out, and as a result, the nurse, Holly, had inadvertently given the patient a lethal dose of the epinephrine.” She frowned. “I think I remembered all that correctly.”

“Oh no.”

“That’s not all. There were other medications that had been tampered with as well. According to the sheriff, someone was going to die in that chopper—and soon. If it hadn’t been the Decadron and epinephrine tragedy, it would have been something else.”

Then this was a premeditated murder, not just a crime of opportunity.

“But,” she went on, “like I said, I just can’t see Garrett having any part of that. He loves being a doctor.” She clicked her tongue. “Much more than he loves being a husband, obviously. As much as I don’t want to defend the two-timing jerk, I have to admit he’d never do anything to jeopardize his career.”

Andy processed the words. “When did you find out about Holly? That he was obsessed with her?”

She frowned. “This morning when I found the note.”

“Do you still have the note?”

“No, I threw it away.”

“Okay, then?—”

The sheriff stepped out of the interrogation room. “Andy, a word?”

“Of course.”

Andy stepped over to the sheriff, out of earshot of Mrs. Mann. “Dr. Mann decided to talk a little more,” the sheriff said. “I’ll fill you in on that in just a minute, but I also just got word that one of the forensics guys said while the photos were real, they were all uploaded at the same time to the cloud from the hospital coffee shop. Of course, I wanted to know who did the uploading, and hospital security checked the date and time and sent me three pictures of the people in there using a laptop. And two using their phones.” He turned his iPad around and showed Andy the pictures.

Andy lifted his gaze. “You’re kidding me. Her?”

“I called and she clocked out about two minutes ago.”

“She’s going after Holly. She was in the ER lobby when we left. What if she followed us to the motel?”

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Together, they raced for Sheriff Lewis's cruiser, and Andy slung himself into the passenger seat even while he dialed Holly's cell phone number.

When it went to voice mail, his heart thundered in his ears. "Hurry."

The sheriff turned on the lights and siren, and they screamed down the road toward the motel where he'd left Holly.

Alone.

Unprotected.

He tried her number again. Voice mail.

Please God, take care of her.

"She could be in the shower," the sheriff said. "Or sleeping."

"True." But he didn't believe it.

11

A knock on the door woke her. A quick glance at the clock said an hour and a half had passed since Andy had dropped her at the motel. Was he back already?

She glanced through the peephole and opened the door. "Hi. What are you doing here?"

The figure raised her right arm, and Holly found herself staring down the barrel of a wicked-looking gun. “Come with me.”

Holly stumbled back, and the woman shoved her way in. “What are you doing?”

“Now. Or I shoot you and go back and find that man who seems to care so much for you.”

Heart thudding, Holly straightened with her hands held so the woman could see them. “I thought we were friends, Rachel.”

“Not in this lifetime.”

“It was you? You set me up?”

“With pleasure. Although, if you remember, at first, I did try to simply get you to leave. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“But you hurt Liza Hollister.”

“No, you did.”

“What?”

A cruel smile curved Rachel’s lips. “Just because there’s a label on the bottle, doesn’t mean that’s what’s inside it.”

It didn’t take a genius to figure out what she meant. “You switched the drugs? Then reported my mistake anonymously.” It made sense now.

“It was the only thing I could think of to get you to leave!”

“But I’ve been suspended. Your plan worked. Why all this?”

“But for how long? Eventually, it’ll be proven that it wasn’t your fault. Even I know that. It’s only a matter of time. But right now, it all looks hopeless, doesn’t it?”

“Hopeless? What are you—” It hit her. Suicide. Rachel planned to make Holly’s death look like a suicide. Cold fear curled in her midsection.

“Yes,” the woman spat. “Hopeless. Poor little Holly caved when the pressure hit. Now come on, or I’m going to take my chances and just shoot you right here.”

Holly decided she’d have a better chance of escape outside the motel room than in it. She stepped out and let the door shut behind her, then, with the gun pressed in her lower back, she walked toward the car her kidnapper indicated. “Get in.”

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“Why are you doing this? I don’t understand. What did I do to make you hate me so much?”

“You made him fall in love with you! And he’ll never see me again until you and that stupid wife of his are gone. Victoria saw the pictures I uploaded and is talking divorce, so that’s one problem taken care of. Now you. Garrett Mann is mine—or he will be soon.”

“But I don’t want him,” Holly cried. “I told him I wasn’t interested and refused to go out with him. You know all this. You were there for a lot of it. And then today? With that awful confrontation in the ER? You really still want him?”

Rachel didn’t move the gun. All Holly could do was just pray the woman didn’t accidentally pull the trigger.

“I’m done talking. Just get in the car. Climb in the passenger side and slide over.”

“Where are you taking me?” Holly’s hand shook when she opened the car door. Fear pounded through her, and she was afraid she’d stop thinking clearly.

“It doesn’t matter,” Rachel said. “I just need you gone.”

“So I’ll leave.”

“I already tried to warn you away, but you just wouldn’t go!”

“I will!” Where was everyone? Holly looked around for help, but the place was

empty, deserted. Most of the people who stayed at the extended-stay motel worked at the hospital. Those who weren't at work were probably sleeping.

But she didn't dare call for someone to help her in fear that Rachel would shoot them.

Sirens in the distance caused the woman to jerk. "You're driving. If you stall a minute longer, I'll shoot you and deal with the consequences."

Holly lowered herself into the car and slid across to the driver's side. Rachel didn't take her eyes from Holly as she slipped into the passenger seat. She shut the door. As Holly had hoped, Rachel reached for the seatbelt, and for just a moment, her attention fell away from Holly when she automatically looked down to clip her seatbelt into place. Holly struck out with her right hand against the inside of Rachel's wrist and the gun tumbled to the floorboard.

With Rachel's scream of fury echoing in her ears while the woman scrambled for the gun, Holly threw open the driver's door and shot out of the vehicle. She fell to the ground and rolled. A gunshot sounded, and the bullet whizzed over her head.

Police vehicles pulled into the parking lot, lights flashing, sirens wailing. Holly rolled to her feet and heard someone call her name. Thinking it was Rachel, she raced away from the vehicle.

A hard hand clamped onto her upper left bicep, and she spun with a cry, ready to fight once more.

And saw that it was Andy.

She fell into his arms, and he pulled her to the ground as another crack split the air.

"Police! Put the weapon down! Drop the gun! Hands in the air!"

The officers' commands came one after the other. Holly turned to see Rachel freeze. She held the gun as though unsure what to do with it.

"Drop it," Holly whispered. "Drop it." Even with all the grief Rachel had caused her, she didn't want the woman to die.

With a sob, Rachel let the gun drop from her fingers. It clattered to the ground. Officers rushed in, and then it was over.

Andy pulled her into a lung-crushing hug. "I love you, Holly. I love you."

Holly dissolved into sobs as his precious words washed over her. She pulled back and then kissed him. "I love you, too, Andy. I have for a long time." She looked back at Rachel as the officers led her away and shuddered. "How did you know I was in trouble?"

"Dr. Mann finally confessed that Rachel had been acting strange. She'd been harassing him about getting back together."

"I knew she had a crush on him and was hurt when he called things off, but from what I understand, that's usually the way things worked with him."

"The sheriff told him about the message on your wall, and he said Rachel had come to work late with red paint on her hands. But the clincher was the footage of the café where she uploaded all those pictures to his cloud account. She'd gotten his password from when they'd been together, and he never changed it. When we finally put it all together ..."

"... you rushed over here."

"Absolutely." Andy pulled her away to his vehicle. "And I don't want to wait another

minute. Will you marry me?”

Tears leaked again. This time happy tears. She sniffed and nodded. “I’ll marry you.”

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“I didn’t plan on asking you this way.”

“I don’t care how you ask, just that you asked.”

He kissed her again then leaned back and cupped her face. “I didn’t realize.”

“What?”

“How hard it must have been for you to let me pull away and wallow in my misery.”

“I didn’t want to. You gave me no choice.”

“And I regret that with every fiber of my being. I won’t do it again, I promise. If you had pushed me away—more so than you did—while all this was going on with you, I would have been a crazy person.”

“I know. I’m glad you were here.”

“And I will be from now on.”

She nodded. “From now on, we’re a team.”

“A winning team.” He pulled her back into his arms, and she knew there was no other place she’d rather be.

EPILOGUE

Holly let the door shut behind her and carried the bag of groceries into the kitchen. Her spotless, newly painted kitchen. When the pastor said he had volunteers who wanted to paint and would she please pick out her favorite color for the project, she hadn't realized he meant they intended to paint her entire place.

But she loved it.

It had been two weeks since Rachel had been caught, and Holly was working hard to put it behind her. Which meant having her home filled with love and laughter. Right now Raina, Andy, Penny, and Holt, were on their way to hang out with her.

Knuckles rapped on the door. "Come in!"

It felt weird to leave her door unlocked, but she was trying not to believe every person on the other side of it had ill intentions.

Andy stepped inside. "I'm early."

"No, you have perfect timing. Wanna fire up the grill?"

He grinned. "I thought you might need me for something."

She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. He dipped his head and pressed a kiss to her lips. "Mm, now that's worth being early for."

"The grill, my sweet man, the grill." She stepped back and he caught her hand.

"Have I told you that I love you today?"

"A few times."

“I do, Holly.”

“I know.” She hugged him. “I have good news.”

“I already know it.”

She stepped back with a frown. “You do?”

“Yes. You said you’d marry me.”

“No, silly. Dr. Kirkpatrick called. I’ve been cleared in every way and am free to resume my duties on the chopper.”

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He turned serious. “Aw, that’s great, Holly. I’m happy for you.”

Emotion wanted to choke her, but she swallowed it. “Thanks. I’m thrilled. I’m still so sad about Mrs. Hollister, but so relieved it wasn’t anything I did that caused her death. No mistake or?—”

He pressed a finger to her lips. “It’s a tragedy that we’ll think about forever, but we can pray for her family.”

“Absolutely. I’m so glad you and God are back on good terms.”

He laughed. “Yeah. It feels good. One more kiss, then I’m going to play with fire.”

“I’d say you do that on a regular basis,” Holt drawled from the open door.

Holly giggled, and her friends crowded into her living area and kitchen. “Time to light the grill.”

“Not without my kiss,” Andy said. “They don’t get to take that from me.”

She kissed him. A long, lingering cling to his lips that left her wanting to call the pastor and have him perform the ceremony immediately. Instead, she stepped away and gave him a light shove toward the small patio that held the grill. “Go.”

“I’m going, but I’ll be back.”

A gagging noise behind her spun her around. Holt was clutching his throat, but the

grin on his face said he wasn't in trouble. Medical trouble anyway. "Keep it up, Satterfield, and your steak might get more crispy than you'd like."

The threat worked, and he immediately put on an innocent face. "Y'all are just the cutest couple ever."

"That's better. Now, you can go join Andy. My girls and I have a wedding to plan."