



# Healing Her

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Dr. Ashley Proctor is Oakridge Hospital's youngest cardiothoracic department head—brilliant, disciplined, and impossible to rattle. But when Dr. Jennifer Colton, a bold and charismatic transplant surgeon, arrives to revamp the hospital's organ donation program, Ashley's carefully controlled world is thrown into disarray. Jen's charm and unorthodox methods make her an instant favorite, fueling Ashley's resentment. Their professional rivalry escalates when a high-profile patient—a beloved actress in need of a heart transplant—forces them to work together.

As tensions rise, so does an undeniable attraction. A late-night argument turns unexpectedly personal, and Ashley finds herself drawn to Jen in a way she can't ignore.

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# Page 1

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1

Too cold. Ashley blinked herself awake. Wrong smell. These aren't my sheets. And who's in here with me?

She sat up and looked around, pulling the sheet up over her breasts. It was a familiar bedroom, at least. Glancing to her left, she spotted a head of ginger curls she did know very well. Ashley reached over and nudged the still, lightly snoring body. "Felicity."

A snort, and Felicity shifted around but did not wake up.

Ashley prodded at her again, a bit more firmly. "City. Come on."

With a sigh, the redhead rolled over on her back, and unlike Ashley, she didn't bother to cover her breasts. Ashley admired the freckle-dusted, surgically enhanced expanse of bosom with clinical detachment. They'd been done as well as could be hoped for, and she enjoyed them every time she spent an evening with City. Not too large, just a bit more than City had been blessed with, and the scars were minimal.

The breasts were perfect. As they should be—when City had decided to go for the boob job, Ashley had recommended the best plastic surgeon she knew to take care of her friend. She'd gone to medical school with the guy; he was an ass, like many cosmetic surgeons she knew, but he was the best in his field. She didn't have to like a doctor to know they'd be good at their job.

City cracked open one of her big brown eyes and winked at Ashley from under the

tumbled cloud of her bangs. “Like what you see?”

“As always.” Ashley picked her smart watch up off the bedside table and strapped it onto her wrist. Cutting it close. Oops.

“I’ve got to get to the hospital.”

Pouting, City shifted onto her side, propping herself up on her elbow. “No time for another round?”

“Not this morning. Sorry.” Tossing the blankets aside, Ashley swung her legs out of the bed and got to her feet. As usual, the clothing she’d worn last night was neatly draped over a shabby chic chair in the corner of City’s bedroom, along with her leather tote bag. She fished a fresh pair of panties and a bra out of the Birkin’s capacious depths and headed to the bathroom in the hallway for a quick rinse and to borrow City’s deodorant.

After her shower, she wiped the steam from the mirror and inspected her face. Not bad for the morning after a night out at forty-two, she thought. Of course, she got strategic Botox every so often, ate well, and exercised when there was time. And it wasn’t like she’d stayed out until 2 AM. The minute she’d seen City Davis walk through the doors of the Indigo Lounge at quarter after 11, she’d made a beeline for her and swept her right back out the door. They’d headed directly for City’s Culver City apartment and tumbled into bed.

That was the advantage of having a long-standing friends-with-benefits arrangement. Efficiency, friendship, and good sex—who needed more than that? Ashley smiled at her reflection and rearranged her long brown hair into a tidy French twist before she slid back into her clothes. Then she frowned. Somehow, she’d forgotten that she’d bumped into a carefree dancer at the Indigo Lounge last night. The other woman had spilled some of her pink cosmopolitan down the front of Ashley’s white silk blouse.

Ashley groaned.

Ashley Proctor was the top cardiothoracic surgeon at Oakridge Hospital. People respected her. People feared her. She could not show up with a pink drink stain over her right breast. Ashley tried to button her fitted gray blazer over the stain. Immediately, she saw it was no good; the alcohol was splotted all along her lapel as well.

City poked her head into the bathroom. "Can I help?"

Ashley smiled wryly and gestured up and down the full length of her five feet, eleven inches. "I don't have time to go all the way home for new clothing. But unless you've got something from Nordstrom with a designer label on it in your closet somehow, I don't think so."

Pushing the door wide, City crossed her arms over her chest, leaned on the door frame, and laughed. She was five foot two on her best day, managed a modern art gallery, and dressed like it. "Best I can do is one of those patchwork wrap dresses you can wear a million different ways. It would look great on you but might raise a few eyebrows at the hospital." She waved towards a wall of living room windows that displayed an overcast sky. "Plus, LA has decided to acknowledge that it's actually November today."

"I see that." Ashley checked her watch again. "I can send my Saks personal shopper a message now, maybe she can meet me at the store with some options. I'll still be a little late for our morning meeting, but that's better than showing up with pink vodka all down my front."

"Smart lady. Does that buy you any extra time here?" Still naked, City pushed herself off the door and sauntered back towards her bedroom. "My invitation still stands, Ashley."

Tempting, tempting. Ashley leaned out of the bathroom door to watch City's pert freckled bottom as she sashayed away. With a sigh, she called out, "Sorry, City, see you later," and headed for the exit.

2

"Come to mama," Jen Colton cooed, wiggling her fingers as she reached for the large chai latte with both hands. The strap of her messenger bag slipped off of her shoulder. "Oops."

The guy manning the Oakridge Hospital coffee cart kept a grip on the cup with one hand and grabbed the falling bag with the other. "Got you."

"Ah, thanks." She pulled the strap of the bag up and over her head to secure it, then made a second attempt at grabbing her drink. "You see how I need this?"

"Happy I was here to help." He flashed a smile at her. "Haven't seen you here before. First day?"

"Yep, fresh out of medical school." Jen stifled a chuckle as panicked confusion flashed across the coffee fellow's face. As good as she knew she looked at fifty-five, her crow's feet and unruly silver curls were not those of a fresh-faced intern. "I'm kidding! Jen Colton. I'm a transplant surgeon. I've got some miles on my engine. But yeah, it's my first day here at Oakridge." She saluted him with her drink. "You'll be seeing me a lot..." She squinted at his name badge. "Bryce."

"All right, Doctor Colton. I'll remember you." His eyes widened again as she tucked a ten-dollar bill into his nearly-empty tip jar. "Hey, you don't have to do that."

"I used to tend a bar to get through medical school, kid. I do have to do that." Jen smiled again. "See you."

She checked her phone for the last message she'd gotten from Steve Sundstrom, Oakridge's Chief of Surgery. It directed her to a conference room on the fourth floor, in the hospital's surgical wing. Seemed easy enough. Sipping at her chai latte, which she was pleased to discover was excellent, she made her way to the elevator bank, taking in her new place of employment with interest.

## Page 2

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Oakridge was an older hospital, she knew. But it was the leading surgical hospital in Los Angeles and one of the top ones in California. She felt fortunate to be coming on board here. Heading up this hospital's organ donation and transplantation team was a real feather in her cap in what she thought might be the last decade of her storied career.

And if she was facing her last years as a surgeon, Jen was delighted to be spending them in California, after a lifetime in Boston and Philadelphia. Despite this particular day turning out to be surprisingly gloomy and wet for LA, she knew that most of the time, the weather here was fantastic. Sunny, warm... all the things the American Northeast tended not to be quite a lot of the time. It had almost been a bigger draw than the prestige and the patient work she was going to get to do at Oakridge.

Jen squeezed into a crowded elevator full of people in white coats. "What floor?" asked one of them, a broad-shouldered young man with twinkling brown eyes and a ready smile. He stood with his index finger hovering over the elevator keypad. Intern, Jen decided. Preference for Peds. He was too open-faced and optimistic to be anything else, and kids probably loved him. She'd put money on him coming from a family of pediatricians.

"Four, please, and thanks," she replied. He nodded and punched four. Next to Jen, a petite woman in her mid-thirties raised her head and inspected her with cool detachment. She was beautiful, with perfect tawny skin, but her large dark eyes were hard, and her jaw had a firm set to it. Surgeon, Jen thought. Cardio? No, Oncology. And she's seen a lot.

"You're going to the surgical wing?" the petite woman asked, lifting her delicate chin

into the air.

“Yep.” Jen smiled. She could feel the other doctor trying to figure her out. That wasn’t surprising. She hadn’t picked up her monogrammed coat for this hospital just yet, and her loose sleeveless top, flowing skirt, and flat sandals were more high school art teacher than transplant surgeon.

But to her pleasant surprise, the younger doctor gave one quick, decisive nod, and said, “I know who you are. Doctor Jennifer Colton. I did an oncological surgery fellowship at Mass Gen last year. You’re a legend in those halls.”

Jen could only duck her head. “Well...”

“Doctor Priya Majumdar.” The woman held out a slender hand. “Will you be working here?”

Jen shook the extended hand briefly. “Ah, yes. Today’s my first day.”

Life and interest sparked in Dr. Majumdar’s eyes. “You’re joining our surgical team?”

“Are you going to the meeting this morning?” Jen countered with a grin.

“Of course.”

“Then you’ll find out more there.” With a wink, Jen raised her drink to her mouth and walked off of the elevator just as the doors opened.

She found the conference room with ease and poked her head around the door to see if anyone was there. Doctor Sundstrom was alone, shuffling through paperwork. He looked up when the door hinges creaked, and a broad smile spread across his face.



“Doctor Colton. Welcome aboard.”

“Thank you, Doctor Sundstrom.” Moving to the seat next to his, she sat down and surveyed the room. “Nobody’s here yet?”

“Everyone will be as last minute as possible, I’m afraid. No one likes these meetings. Alas, they are a necessary evil.” He ruffled his sandy gray-blond hair and winked at her over his wire-rimmed glasses. “You know how it is.”

“I do. I do. I’m only here because I wanted to impress my boss on the first day.” She beamed at him and sipped at her chai.

“Well, you know I’m already impressed by your body of work. And your reputation.” He sat back in his chair and regarded her with admiration. “You have done pioneering work in the field of transplants. And I hear you were on your way to being a fantastic general surgeon before you specialized. What you’re going to do for our organ transplant and donation program here... I can’t even begin to imagine how many lives we’ll save with you at the helm.”

“That’s my goal, Doctor Sundstrom. My purpose in life is to save other lives. I’m grateful to you and Oakridge for giving me the opportunity.”

“Please. Call me Steve. We’re going to be working closely together, and I think we’ll become great friends.”

She liked him. He was affable, intelligent, and his reputation was as formidable and legendary as hers. Jen liked to think she had a good people sense, and she was only getting green flags from Dr. Stephen Sundstrom. Yes, she also thought they’d be good friends. She reached her hand out for a firm shake. “I agree, Steve. Call me Jen.”

“Fantastic.” He smiled. “How are you finding LA? The weather’s a little hinky lately, I promise it’s usually more like it was when you came out here for your interviews.”

“It’s great,” she replied honestly. “I think I’ve found an apartment, I’m going to see it later, if I can take a long lunch.”

Steve nodded. “Of course. Today will mostly be meetings and introductions for you, a more comprehensive show-around; the long lunch won’t be a problem. You need to get settled right away, build a life here. The social scene in LA is good, whenever we find time for it.”

That, Jen knew already. The minute she’d arrived last week, she’d started poking around the lesbian scene. Just yesterday, she’d happened upon a café/nightclub called Indigo Lounge. She couldn’t resist dropping in to have a couple of drinks and to work off some of her nervous energy about her new job on a pounding dance floor.

She might be AARP-eligible, but she was not the type of fifty-five-year-old who couldn’t appreciate good music and a lively dance beat. She wasn’t about to spend every night at home curled up in a chair with a cup of tea and a stack of medical journals. She’d done that during med school, her residency, and her fellowship. And she’d promised Nina that she’d live, once it became clear that Nina wouldn’t...

Jen shook her head, sending the memories back to the cobwebs. “I don’t think socializing will be a problem. I’ve been prowling the city for a few days now; I’m finding all sorts of interesting places to go.”

“Great! That’s great. Let me know if you need any recommendations. Do you like reading? My wife runs a book club—” Steve looked up as the door creaked, interrupting him. A slow stream of doctors and nurses was beginning to flow into the conference room. “Oh, it looks like it’s time for our meeting to begin.”

Sitting back with her chai, Jen watched the surgical wing staff filing in and beginning to jockey for seats and standing positions. It was enjoyable to watch Priya Majumdar's eyes widen when she spotted Jen in the chair next to Dr. Sundstrom. She already liked Priya. But then, she had a soft spot for oncologists.

## Page 3

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It didn't take long for Jen to realize she was a subject of heavy interest, not that she found that surprising. One pair of eyes after another met hers and bounced away, and the whisper level in the room hissed louder and louder. Jen hid behind her drink and smiled. She did love to be the cause of a sensation.

Steve got to his feet and raised a hand for silence, smiling at his surgical team. "All right, everyone, simmer down. Everyone here? Let's get this show on the road." He began to rub his hands together. "I'm excited about today, and I hope you will be too."

"What's this about?" a very good-looking guy probably in his early forties asked. He wastoogood looking, Jen thought, but in the self-assured academic way, not in the cocky over-polished way. Glasses, great hair, a look of perpetual curiosity in his eyes. Neuro, she decided.

"You all know it's been a goal of mine to totally revamp our organ donation and transplant program here at Oakridge since I was named Chief of Surgery three years ago," Steve began. He started to pace. "We're LA's top choice for surgical procedures, for everything from appendectomies and lap choles to complex brain aneurysm repairs. And that's because of all of you." He paused and smiled. "We've got a great team here, some of the best surgeons in the country. And now we've got a real feather in our caps to round the team off." Gesturing to Jen, Steve's smile got even bigger. "Jen, will you please stand and introduce yourself?"

"Absolutely." Setting her drink aside, she got to her feet and hoped all five feet, four inches of her radiated good cheer and competence. "Hi, everyone. My name is Doctor Jennifer Colton. I'm a transplant surgeon and a lifelong East Coaster—in fact, I'm a

Townie, and I feel like some of you will know what that means.” Her grin got wider as some of the folks in the room cheered. “Yep. Hiya, fellow Bostonians.”

“Harvard?” the probable neuro guy asked with interest.

“Nope. Undergrad at Boston College, and then I’m afraid I committed the cardinal sin of going to UPenn for med school.” At a couple of boos, she chuckled. “I’m not sorry. Perelman treated me well and my education there was amazing. I did take all their teachings and knowledge back with me to Boston, though. I’ve spent the vast majority of my surgical career at Massachusetts General Hospital.”

Priya Majumdar squirmed her way to the conference room table and leaned forward on it. “Why did you come to Oakridge?”

Jen glanced at Steve, who nodded for her to go ahead. She took a deep breath. “I’m going to be the director of the new and improved organ donation and transplant team here. I’ll be working with all of you in one capacity or another as we do the good work of saving lives.”

Excited murmurs filled the room, but they didn’t cover the sound of the door opening one last time, hinges creaking. A striking brunette slipped through the door, her face flushing red as the room fell silent and everyone turned to look at her. “Oh.”

Jen tilted her head and looked the new arrival over. Expensive dress. Immaculately groomed hair. A pinched look on her face, mouth tightening further into a straight line by the second. Now, this one is cardio. For sure.

“Doctor Proctor,” Steve said with surprise, his eyes wide. “You missed the start of the meeting. This isn’t like you.”

“I’m sorry, I—” Dr. Proctor’s dark eyes went round as dinner saucers as her gaze

landed on Jen. “You!”

Jen recoiled back for a moment in confusion. What? I—oh.

The remembered taste of a cosmo martini filled her mouth, and her internal jukebox loaded up the song that had been playing when she’d shimmied backwards on the Indigo Lounge dancefloor, spun around, and collided with a tall, attractive brunette.

This tall, attractive brunette.

She’d lost half her drink to the encounter and waved it off with an apology. But judging by the look on this woman’s face, that apology had not exactly landed.

And now they were going to have to work together.

Oh, boy.

3

Ashley could not believe her eyes. The hippie-looking dancer who was the whole reason she’d had to drop six hundred dollars on a brand-new Diane von Furstenberg dress less than an hour ago, the woman who was why she was late for this staff meeting—what was she doing here?

“It’s nice to see you again,” the woman said with a friendly smile on her face. Her pretty face, Ashley noticed, much to her annoyance. She was older, light crow’s feet radiating from her blue eyes, and her hair was a long tumbling cloud of silver curls. But her face was open and cheerful, her cheeks dimpling as she smiled, a pert little nose a plastic surgeon would kill to replicate. Ashley had noticed none of these things in the shifting violet light of the Indigo Lounge, but in the warm lights of the conference room, she couldn’t miss them.

None of that dampened her irritation, which in fact only increased when she realized everyone in the room was looking between the two of them, naked curiosity on their faces. Chief Sundstrom was the first to speak up. “You two know each other?”

“We’ve met socially,” the woman replied, keeping things simple. At least she could be discreet. Ashley wasn’t in the closet, but she wasn’t in the habit of giving any of her colleagues gossip fodder. Her life was hers; she wanted to keep it that way. So she did grudgingly appreciate the modicum of discretion.

Chief Sundstrom looked puzzled but let it go. “Doctor Proctor, this is Doctor Jennifer Colton. She’s going to be the director of our organ donation and transplant program here at Oakridge.”

What! Disaster. “Are you serious?” she blurted out without thinking, and immediately wished she could take it back. Whispers and murmurs began to go around the room, and Chief Sundstrom’s left eyebrow nearly took flight, it arched so high.

“In fact, I am serious, Doctor Proctor. Do you have any objections to this appointment?”

Plenty, as it happened. Ashley wasn’t unfamiliar with Dr. Colton’s reputation as a pioneering maverick. It seemed like she popped up in *Transplantation*, the most prominent journal in the world of organ transplants, every other month. She’d been among the first to embrace the concept of animal to human transplants, of 3D printing organs based on patient cells. She frequently wrote papers proposing new ways to increase organ viability, and worked with pharmaceutical companies to try and develop new immunosuppressant drugs.

New, new, new seemed to be the mantra of Dr. Jennifer Colton. Always pushing ahead, never sticking to tried and true methods. It seemed the next new shiny thing always had to be sought. Ashley hated everything about this approach to medicine.

So much had been invested in the safe methods they had now, so much careful policy was in place to protect doctors... Jennifer Colton was a threat, plain and simple. Ashley's stomach churned at everything the woman stood for.

"Doctor Proctor?" Chief Sundstrom's voice was loaded with concern.



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She snapped out of her anxious, furious reverie. “No objections.”

“Good.” Jennifer Colton was still smiling. “That’s very good. Because we’re all going to have to work together very closely. I expect a high degree of collaboration and cooperation with my surgical teams. Lives are at stake with everything we do as surgeons, but most especially in the transplant field. Organ donation is a precious gift, and every second counts in a transplant procedure, from the time a donor organ is extracted to when it’s stitched into its new home.” Her smile grew wider and her eyes locked in on Ashley’s. “It’s like dancing. One little misstep and you never know what can go wrong.”

Bile set Ashley’s stomach on fire. Was the transplant surgeon picking on her? That sort of behavior would be beneath any surgeon in her opinion, but certainly it had to be beneath a world-renowned transplant surgeon of Jennifer Colton’s level.

“We’re looking forward to working with you, Doctor Colton,” came from Ashley’s left, and oh, of course that suck-up Majumdar was on board with this preposterous plan. Oncological surgeons were almost worse than transplant surgeons when it came to pushing the boundaries of modern medicine into the stratosphere. But Ashley could understand that when it came to cancer. To a point.

Her blood boiled and she barely heard the rest of the meeting. She only snapped back to attention when she realized people were squeezing past her to get out the door of the conference room. Turning, she tried to squeeze out with them.

“Doctor Proctor?” The calm, friendly voice of Jennifer Colton came from behind her, and Ashley reluctantly turned to face her. Up close, she was even more attractive,

Ashley noted with extreme irritation. She clearly invested in excellent skin care, for one thing. But it was her eyes, those sparkling blue eyes, deep as oceans, full of wisdom and mirth—they were what made her face transcend prettiness. Ashley liked older women because of their eyes, the knowledge they held.

If only this older woman wasn't... who she was...

She shook her head. "Yes, Doctor Colton?"

Gently, Jennifer guided Ashley out of the way of the departmental exodus. "I feel like we got off on the wrong foot, Doctor Proctor. I'm sorry about last night. I'm sure my drink stained your outfit, so please send me the dry-cleaning bill."

Ashley raised an eyebrow. "That is the least you can do, so thank you, I suppose."

"My, you're a prickly one." Doctor Colton chuckled. "Is there something else I've done to warrant this level of hostility?"

Ashley stopped to think. It was the kind of approach she always took, to actually stop and think before she spoke, and to choose her words with care. "It's not hostility. I am, of course, upset about my clothing. I also don't like how you decided to tease me in the middle of your speech about unity and cooperation."

"It was just a joke," Doctor Colton began, eyes widening in surprise.

"A joke I don't appreciate coming from anyone, let alone a surgeon of your stature who is new to this hospital. If anything, I feel the hostilities began on your end first."

Blinking, the transplant surgeon took a step back. "I don't feel hostile towards you. And this is escalating far beyond a spilled drink and a silly joke. Why?"

Ashley fought back the rising irritation that just looking at Jennifer Colton caused her. She still managed to speak carefully. “You and I have vastly differing approaches to medicine. I don’t feel like we’re going to work well together at all. I would like to simply request that you stay out of my way from here on out.”

With an effort, she turned on her heel and left the conference room, Dr. Colton stunned in her wake.

4

“Tell me about Doctor Proctor,” Jen said to the chief as he showed her around the cafeteria.

“Whew...” He let out a long, low whistle. “You first, what’s going on there?”

“Nothing big, from my end. We went to the same bar last night. I got a little too into dancing, turned around too fast and bumped into her, spilled my drink all over her.”

“Oh, yeah, she wouldhatethat.” He chuckled. “Listen. She’s a great cardiothoracic surgeon?—”

“Iknewit,” Jen chortled. “I knew she was cardio.”

“She is. One of the best in the state.” Reaching for a coffee cup, Steve offered it to her. She shook her head. With a shrug, he filled it from the machine and tilted his head for her to follow him. “As a surgeon, she’s unmatched in her field. As a person, she’s...”

“Capable of pressing diamonds out of coal with her backside?” Jen asked sweetly.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that, Doctor Colton.” He winked. “But yes, I will

admit that Doctor Proctor can be a little... oh, how can I put it? Standoffish. Rigid. Set in her ways.”

“Noted.” Spotting a fridge with an array of cold drinks in it, Jen grabbed a bottle of fizzy lemon water. “What’s her first name, anyway? You just call her Doctor Proctor and she wasn’t exactly forthcoming with a formal introduction when I tried to apologize to her.”

He laughed and picked up an absolutely enormous, very sticky-looking cinnamon bun. “Well, I’m afraid that tracks. She doesn’t easily forgive, that one. Anyway, she’s Doctor Ashley Proctor. Ashley, not Ash. Never, ever Ash. A resident tried that once.”

Now it was Jen’s turn to whistle. “Ballsy.”

“Indeed. You will be unsurprised to find out that he transferred out of our residency program and went all the way to Beth Israel.” He raised an inquiring eyebrow at her.

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“Plastics?” she guessed.

“Plastics.” He led her to the checkout, where she picked up a container of melon and pineapple from the big ice bin. Taking everything from her hands, he scanned, paid, and handed her items back to her. “You’re a lot more conscientious about your diet than I am.”

“I’m not Chief of Surgery, you are, I think you’ve earned coffee and a cinnamon roll.” She smiled as she followed him to a table. “And I’m not that conscientious; I do still eat red meat more than occasionally, I drink, and I’m probably going to grab street tacos on the way back here after my apartment viewing.”

“Smoking?” he asked.

“Never, but especially not...” She pulled out a chair and sat, turning her container of fruit over in her hands. “You know I’m a widow?”

“You mentioned it during your interviews. I didn’t want to pry.”

“Thank you.” Jen swallowed hard. Talking about Nina’s death hadn’t gotten any easier in five years. “My wife, Nina, was a pulmonologist. She became one because her entire family is full of heavy smokers. She lost so many of them to emphysema and lung cancer.”

“Oh. That’s rough.”

“Yeah. Nina never smoked in her life. Not once. She hated the smell, their coughing,

the phlegmy tissues they all left in their wake... It got to a point where even the smell of mint mouthwash made her sick; they'd gargle so much of it to try and hide the smoke on their breath. Not to mention the strong colognes they all liked."

"Jesus." Steve's eyes were round.

"But my lovely, wonderful wife, who only wanted to give the world the gift of how to keep their beautiful lungs healthy... cancer came for her. Because she'd grown up around so many smokers." She looked at him soberly. "You know that secondhand smoke kills. Well, it killed Nina. She loved her family, she tried so hard to educate them, but they still smoked. And they smoked around her whenever she visited."

"Were new lungs an option?"

"Surprisingly, they were, she was the rare prime candidate at first. But you know how that works, Steve. There are somanyprime candidates. And just not enough lungs. So we pursued aggressive treatment while we waited." Blinking back tears, Jen could barely see the cafeteria, the bowl of fruit in front of her, anything. "Unfortunately, the cancer was more aggressive. Transplantation had to be taken off the table. Chemo, radiation, it stopped helping. So, one day, Nina sat me down by her hospital bed and told me she was stopping the treatment. Stopping everything. She signed a DNR and went on hospice." Despite her best efforts, a tear fell on the table. She was grateful when Steve tucked a paper napkin into her hand. "Within a month, my beautiful Nina was gone."

He placed a hand on her arm. "I'm so sorry."

Jen dabbed away her tears and sniffed. "Thank you. It's still hard. Because it was such a senseless death, it took so much away from the world, and it waspreventable. But her family, the people who were supposed to love and protect her, set her up for a death sentence from childhood." She sighed and looked up to the ceiling, trying to

slow her beating heart. “Sorry. Sorry. I still get so angry. They were my in-laws for over two decades, and they haven’t reached out to me since the funeral. That was five years ago. I was civil to them the whole time she was dying, but they seemed to know innately that I blame them.”

“I think it’s understandable.” He picked at his cinnamon roll. “So is Nina why you’ve gotten to be so ferocious about the world of transplants and organ donation?”

“In a roundabout way, yes. My goal is to save lives. I couldn’t save hers. I couldn’t prevent it. But it was preventable. And other deaths are preventable if we can get enough people to sign up for organ donation, if we keep pushing the boundaries of transplant research.” Twisting the cap off of her water bottle, she carefully sipped at the bubbly elixir. “I want my department to be on the cutting edge of research. Transplant methods, pharmaceuticals, the whole hog, Steve. I’m going to teach my surgical methods to the staff here. We’re going to save so many lives.”

“I’m on board, Jen. I have been since you gave me the rundown during your interviews.” Steve leaned forward and met her eyes with his earnest blue ones. “You know you’re going to have an uphill battle with some of our surgeons, though, right? You know that?”

“Ah, and we’re back to Doctor Ashley Proctor, Never Ash.” Jen cracked open her plastic bowl of cut fruit and popped a triangle of pineapple into her mouth. “You remember what else I told you during my interviews, Steve?”

He stared at her for a moment with a frown of concentration on his face. It was quickly replaced by one of apprehension. “Oh, no.”

“I do love a challenge.” She grinned sunnily. “She’s a challenge.”

Steve rubbed his head. “Please don’t make me regret this.”

Jen twirled her fork in her fingers. “I promise nothing.”

With a sigh, Steve rolled his eyes to heaven. “Oh, my ulcer. My gastroenterologist is going to have a field day.”

5

Ashley sat in the very back of the hospital auditorium, eating roasted pumpkin seeds and seething.

“...that’s the first stage, the most basic stage, of my plan to make our organ donation and transplant program here at Oakridge Hospital a big, beautiful success,” Doctor Colton said, a big, optimistic smile on her face. “We’re going to actively discuss organ donation with patients at all stages of their care with us. Even if they’re just here for a septoplasty to correct a deviated septum, we’re going to at least mention organ donation as something important to consider, and we’ll include a new pamphlet in their paperwork. We want to get them thinking about it.”

Ugh. It made Ashley think about the times sales associates had pitched her credit cards when she went shopping. It never failed to drive her away from the offending store for months at a time. This is what we’re reduced to? Shilling for organs? She shuddered.

“We all know that a new entry is made to the transplant waiting list every eight minutes,” Dr. Colton continued. “We also know that 90% of Americans support organ donation, but only 60% ever sign up. Here at Oakridge Hospital, we want to get them to do it. But I don’t like being pushy any more than you all do. And I don’t love that many hospitals don’t talk seriously about organ donation until they’re trying to get a grieving family to let us cut up their recently deceased loved one for parts, as they see it.” Her smile faded. “It’s a hard enough time for them. If we improve the educational process ahead of time, so that the donation is seen as the gift it is, rather



than as a horrible added trauma, my hope is that these initial small steps, imbued with information and generosity, will be as fruitful in their own way as our later larger steps should prove to be.”

Three rows down from Ashley, a general surgeon whose name she never could remember raised his hand. “Do those larger steps include any kind of campaigning for presumed consent? Countries like Singapore and Brazil have made organ donation more of an opt-out thing, what do you think of that?”

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“I see why it works for some countries, but I don’t necessarily support it,” Dr. Colton replied firmly, to Ashley’s surprise. “I don’t think it would ever even fly in America, anyway. Imagine what kind of field day some politicians would have if we tried to establish mandatory organ donation at a federal level. No, it’s not a great idea here, and I don’t have it on my road map. We have enough trouble with the government sticking their noses in healthcare already anyway.”

Grudgingly, Ashley was impressed by this mindset, which she shared. She didn’t like that she and this overly progressive, sales-shilling maverick of a surgeon agreed on anything, but if they had to, well, this was a good thing to agree upon.

“Eventually, I want to take our education efforts and expand them hospital wide, then into an active outreach program at universities and high schools. We’ll partner with other hospitals in the state to help them expand their education and outreach programs as well.” Her smile was back. “But that’s in the future. Right now, that future starts with us. With all of you. But I know that none of us went into the teaching field for a reason. Me included!” Doctor Colton’s eyes twinkled with a good humor that Ashley found alluring and aggravating by turns. “We’ll have weekly briefings where I give you the tips and tricks I’ve picked up over the years, or I’ll bring in people I consider to be specialists in the field of organ donation education. And of course, I’d like to take it in turn to sit in with patient sessions with each of you so I can help out.”

Ashley recoiled and dropped her bag of pepitas. Little green seeds scattered all over the auditorium floor in her row, and people turned, curiosity in their gazes, to see what was happening. She blushed as she ducked down and tried to pick up as many seeds as she could.

Absolutely not, she raged internally. That woman is not coming anywhere near my patients!

She sat back up and quietly tried to use her feet to sweep up any seeds she'd missed and kick them under her seat. There was no way she could pay attention as Dr. Colton wrapped up her preposterous lecture. If she didn't distract herself, she might well explode.

Sit in on her patient sessions? To push them about organ donation like she wanted them to sign up for a credit card? Heart and lung patients were already anxious about their procedures, from simple stent insertions all the way to the delicate yet brutal task of a lung resection. It took a lot to get them to come to terms with the fact that Ashley would be cutting them open and handling their most vital organs. To talk about organ donation to a plastics patient was one thing; cardiothoracic patients already feared they were on the precipice of death. They didn't need one more reminder of their delicate dance with mortality.

Around her, people began shuffling papers and getting to their feet. She joined them, stuffing her now half-empty bag of pepitas into her lab coat pocket. They all seemed excited, whispering and murmuring to each other about the donation program. Apparently only she was entirely opposed to Dr. Colton's snake-oil saleswoman meddling.

"Penny for your thoughts," a light voice said to her left. Startled, Ashley glanced at the doctor who had slipped up to join her as the flow of people exited the auditorium.

"Elaine," she said, with a quick smile. Oakridge's Chief of Cardiothoracic Surgery had been the entire reason she came to this hospital. A giant in her field, Elaine Martin had taken an uncertain but determined young Ashley under her wing in the third year of her residency. It was through her guidance that Ashley had come to find her calling, and she'd been instrumental in leading Oakridge to hire Ashley once her

programs and fellowships were complete. Though unspoken, Ashley felt it was understood that Elaine would be championing her to take over as cardio Chief in the next few years.

Quite apart from all of this, however, she considered Elaine to be one of her only friends apart from City, a very dear one, and a wholly valuable mentor. Her opinion meant everything to Ashley. And the topic of Jennifer Colton was one Ashley desperately wanted Elaine's opinion on.

She considered her words carefully, wondering how to even begin to broach the subject in a civil, yet detached sort of way. Certainly, she didn't want her absolute fury to spill out all over like her pepitas had done in the auditorium. And she didn't want to come off as some idiot who hated the idea of organ transplants—obviously she supported them. Any cardio surgeon worth the salt they largely eliminated from their diets supported transplant surgeries. She just also supported not being pushy with patients, and she supported established, safe methods.

Rules, methods, policies, procedures—they all existed for a reason.

Feeling Elaine's curious eyes on her, she took a deep breath and decided to start simply. "What do you think of this new donations and transplants director?"

Elaine's eyes went from curious to shrewd, and she answered equally simply, but with candor. "Doctor Colton is a brilliant surgeon. She's also a rule-breaker. I expect you don't care for her much."

A little cough escaped Ashley's throat. "Well."

"You're not required to like everyone, Ashley." Elaine chuckled. "It would surprise me more if you did. I've known Jen for decades. Well, known is a strong way to put it. We've attended a number of conferences at the same time, and I do like her. She's

wickedly intelligent, and she's got fire in her belly." Her mouth tilted into a sly smile. "In many ways, she does remind me of you. Or rather, you remind me of her, I suppose."

The very thought made Ashley slightly nauseous. "I would prefer that not be the case."

"I bet you would." Elaine took her arm and led her to the elevators. "Tough cookies, my friend. Women like the two of you are rare in the world of surgery. Bright, determined, but with real heart behind the work you do. As much as you try to convince the world that you don't have a heart, I know the truth; I know how much you care about each and every patient that walks through your door." She pressed the button for the basement level, where the cafeteria was. "You want to fix every broken heart and punctured lung you see. So does Jen, but she wants to do it by finding new ways to expand donation and transplant possibilities. In your own different ways, you're both idealists."

Unwillingly, Ashley saw her point. Even more unwillingly, this also made Dr. Colton more attractive to her. That made her shiver with distaste, and she shook her head. "No, Elaine. I'm an idealist. She's a mad scientist. I worry about how her crazy visions and ideas are going to change this hospital."

"We're due for a shakeup, I think," Elaine said lightly. "And so are you, perhaps."

"Me!" Ashley stared at her mentor. "No, thank you."

The elevator doors slid open with a ding and Elaine stepped out, beckoning for Ashley to follow her. "Whatever comes next, I don't think you'll find that it's something you can decline. The universe is funny like that."

Jen watched as Dr. Proctor walked off with Elaine Martin after her presentation. They were an interesting mentor-mentee pairing, in her opinion. Not that she knew Elaine terribly well at all, but her experience with her was that Oakridge's head cardio surgeon was a warm, generous physician with a mild penchant for boundary pushing. Not at all like a certain pedant for procedure with a stick so far up her backside, she should be producing some kind of fruit...

But after two weeks of covert observation, she did rather understand why Elaine had taken the younger surgeon under her wing. Doctor Proctor had a reputation for being no-nonsense, a real stickler for rules, and frankly rather unpleasant to deal with, according to several doctors. But of those doctors, the ones who had consulted on cases with her, or had worked on difficult surgeries with her, grudgingly agreed that her patients liked her. Were grateful to her, even. They appreciated her care and it made them feel safe that she was so rigid about her surgical methods. People did come from all over the state specifically for Ashley Proctor.

Clearly there was something there that Elaine saw worth nurturing and training despite their differences. It made Jen even more interested in working with her. She felt, however, that it was going to be an uphill battle to get in on any of the woman's consults. There were a number of lobectomies, coronary angioplasties, and even a balloon valvuloplasty on her docket over the next couple of weeks. All prime opportunities for Jen to sit in and gently discuss organ donation education. But judging by the look she'd seen on Ashley's face in the presentation, she wasn't going to get a chance to talk to any of the patients involved.

Jen sighed as she entered her little office and closed the door behind her. Yes, she had been paying attention to the prickly cardio surgeon while making her presentation. In the past two weeks since she'd been at Oakridge, she'd been paying very close attention to Dr. Ashley Proctor.

She sat in her desk chair and spun to stare out over the suburb of Oakridge. It was

time to admit that her close interest in Dr. Proctor went beyond the professional, and beyond the challenge of conquering an uptight rules fetishist. The woman was attractive. And, given where their first meeting had taken place, Jen guessed she was some flavor of queer. The woman was too rigid and uptight to be a straight woman hanging out at a sapphic bar for fun. She'd gone for some specific objective, Jen was sure. Which meant she was probably single, or at least in a flexible situation.

She was intelligent, well-spoken, good-looking, highly regarded in her field, probably single, and Jen just knew she was on the spicy, combative side if she ever let go the reins on her tight control. Everything that had always been absolute catnip for Jen in a woman. Nina had been all of these things.

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But Nina had also been open, generous, wore her heart on her sleeve, whereas Ashley was... well, Jen didn't like to use the phrase uptight bitch generally speaking, but she really couldn't think of a more accurate descriptor in this particular case. And that was everything Nina had never been.

And yet here she was, staring blankly out over a Los Angeles suburb, wondering how she could get Dr. Ashley Proctor to like her.

"All right. All right, enough," she said aloud, spinning back around to face her desk. She had a full schedule ahead of her for the rest of the day, starting with a pre-surgical consult with Priya Majumdar on a laparoscopic ovarian tumor excision. It would be a delicate talk, she knew. This was a patient who'd been through some pretty intense chemotherapy, and now she'd had a reoccurrence of her cancer. Bringing up organ donation could make her think that the hospital thought her prognosis was terminal, when in reality her odds were excellent. It would be a slender needle for her to thread.

Jen checked her watch. Oops, she had to get a move on. Today's surgical roster was a tight one. There was a nurse shortage due to some kind of over-allocation of vacation hours, some illnesses, and a lack of travel nurses able to come in so last minute. She didn't have a second to spare between chats, and absolutely none of them could go sideways if they were to stay on schedule.

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"What do you mean my OR staff isn't available yet?" Ashley stared at the OR charge nurse, Sandra Ramsey, in disbelief. "This valve replacement is supposed to be



happening right now. I have a patient who hasn't eaten in over nine hours. Why do we even have a schedule if this is what happens?"

"Doctor Proctor, I apologize," Sandra said, shaking her head. "Truly, I do. But you know that the best-laid schedules can go awry even on a perfectly staffed day. Which this is not." Her face was sympathetic, but her body language was resolute, arms crossed over her chest, chin in the air. "We've rescheduled as many surgeries as we could. Surgeons are completing their surgeries in as reasonable a time as is safe, which I know you of all people appreciate."

Ashley rolled her eyes. "Yes, of course."

"I'm sorry Dr. Majumdar got started late, but if you can give us thirty more minutes, her patient should be in recovery, the room will be sterilized, and we'll have nurses for you." She tossed her long dark ponytail. "That's going to have to be good enough for you, because it's as good as I can get."

"Fine." Spinning on her heel, Ashley stalked off towards the room where Magnus Svensson and his wife Vita were waiting for her to update them on the status of his procedure. He was such a good and compliant patient, she hated to make him wait any longer.

Anger surged with every step she took down the hallway, with every squeak of her sneakers. Of course delays happened, but 98% of the time, they didn't. Not here, not with Sandra Ramsey in charge. Sandra was constantly being headhunted by other hospitals; she was that good at her job. Oakridge's surgical department was a smoothly running machine because of her. And this wasn't the first time they'd had people out sick or on vacation, but it was the first time it had ever been a problem to this degree.

That meant there was some kind of new variable causing today's problems. Ashley

stopped outside of Magnus' room, her eyes narrowing as she thought about what that could be. Realization hit right at the same time that she heard footsteps behind her.

“Doctor Proctor, I’m so glad I’ve caught you. Is everything all right?” Doctor Jen Colton’s pleasant voice piping up from behind her was the last thing Ashley wanted to hear. Slowly, she turned to face the source of her irritation.

“No, Doctor Colton. Everything is not in fact all right.” She tried to take slow, deep breaths, willing herself to remain calm. “Would I be correct in thinking you’re the reason that Dr. Majumdar’s surgery began late today?”

The surgeon stepped back, eyebrows raising. “I see we’re off to a grand start today. Do you always get up on the wrong side of the bed?”

The breezy audacity of the joking inquiry made her see red. “Answer the question.”

Doctor Colton blinked and spread her hands wide. “Her patient had a lot of questions about corneal and tissue transplants. Our educational consultation did run a little long, but that’ll be an outlier, I’m sure. I got a little excited that she wanted to know so much about?—”

“My patient is starving. He is waiting for a procedure I should have started twenty minutes ago!” Ashley pointed towards the room where the Svenssons waited. “For you to hold up anyone’s surgery while you recite the contents of a pamphlet at them is inexcusable.”

“Now, hang on,” Dr. Colton began, drawing herself up taller. “I’m very sorry?—”

“You’re always sorry! Yet you never stop being inconsiderate!” The words burst out of Ashley, and she immediately regretted them. What was it about this woman that just riled up the worst in her? She’d known her for two weeks, but it felt like she’d

loathed her for years.

Doctor Colton's mouth compressed into a nearly straight line, and Ashley could hear the sharp breath she drew in through her nose. "I am sorry for your patient. I will order him whatever he likes for his post-surgery meal and apologize to him myself. But I need you to grant me a little bit of grace here. Today is an unusual day. This will not happen again."

"It never should have happened in the first place," Ashley hissed, still horrified by herself but also still unable to stop. Two weeks of bottled-up irritation and unwanted attraction were just boiling out of her. "You knew today was an atypical staffing day. You're an experienced surgeon. I don't care how excited you were about your little education initiative, you put patient care first, always."

"Education is patient care," Dr. Colton snapped back. "Organ donation education is care for this patient and for other, future patients. It's a bigger picture."

"On a day like today, you set the bigger picture aside." Her voice was rising. "Immediate needs take precedence when we're understaffed! It's unconscionable for you to have delayed even one procedure, let alone two. Or more, really, since there's inevitably going to be a ripple effect down the schedule. Your inconsideration didn't only cause problems for me."

"Well, you're certainly acting like it did." Dr. Colton's eyes were flashing with anger. "Again, I apologize to you, I will apologize to your patient, I will provide him a meal, and this will not happen again. Now, are you done berating me in front of our colleagues and patients?"

To Ashley's horror, when she looked around, she saw nurses, doctors, and even the Svenssons watching the goings-on with concern and curiosity on their faces. Her face flushed hot at how unprofessional she was acting, and she wished the tile floor would

open up and swallow her whole. “I,” she began, and had to pause to gulp down her humiliation. “I am sorry, everyone.”

She didn’t know what else to say. What could make up for the scene she’d just caused? At least the Chief hadn’t witnessed it. But Elaine had, and that was more than Ashley could bear. With a whispered further apology to the Svenssons, she shoved past startled hospital personnel and walked briskly to the stairs.

Steps echoed behind her as she took the cement stairway down towards the basement. “Go away,” she hissed, not bothering to look behind her. She knew it was Elaine. “I’m fine.”

“Oh, no you’re not.” Her mentor caught up to her and grabbed her arm, forcing her to stop on a landing. “Absolutely you’re not. I’ve never seen you like this, Ashley. What’s going on?”

“There’s nothing going on, Elaine, I had a momentary lapse in sanity.”

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“Yes, in front of half our department and the patient you’re supposed to be cutting open today.” Elaine’s blonde eyebrows nearly disappeared into her hairline. “What do you think that little display did to his confidence in you?”

Ashley winced. “I’m going to apologize to him personally.”

“I feel like it’s going to take a little more than that to calm him down before you get to slicing into him, but sure, good start.” Elaine’s eyes were full of worry. “When I said I didn’t expect you cared for Dr. Colton much, I didn’t know just how little you liked or respected her. That was a very unprofessional display on your part.”

“Well, I mean, she’s wrecked the surgical schedule for the rest of the day, that’s not very professional either,” Ashley countered.

“Yeah, I think you win the lack of professionalism sweepstakes for the day,” Elaine replied dryly. “You went a little far, and for the life of me, I can’t imagine why. In all the time we’ve known each other and worked together, I have never once seen anything like this from you.” She looked searchingly at Ashley, who squirmed under the scrutiny. “You’re lucky as hell the Chief didn’t see it, although I am certain he’s going to hear about it before the day is out.”

Oh no. Ashley cringed. “God.”

“So.” Elaine took her hands and guided her to sit on the stairs. “Tell me. What the hell caused all of that?”

“I don’t know, exactly.” Ashley sighed. “She does just rub me entirely the wrong

way, Elaine. No, I don't care for her." Picking at her cuticles, she thought about how much, exactly, she should reveal. "We actually met before she was announced as the donations director here. Well, not met."

"Do tell." Elaine lifted an inquisitive eyebrow.

"I went to the Indigo Lounge to meet up with City. I was looking for her on the dance floor, Dr. Colton was out there dancing, we collided."

Elaine frowned. "Okay. That happens."

"She had a drink in her hand, it got all over me." She blew out a breath. "The next day we had that meeting where she was introduced. Which was the first time we met formally. She did apologize to me and offered to pay for my dry cleaning. But she also teased me during the meeting."

"She did?" Elaine's frown deepened. "How? Oh, wait, the dancing remark?"

"I can't believe you remember that," Ashley groaned. "Yes. That. Look, she's just so... cavalier about everything. I feel like she doesn't fully comprehend the damage she causes, doesn't understand the effect it has on people. You don't think that's dangerous in someone who says she wants to save lives? How far will she go? It's like she thinks 'better to ask forgiveness than permission' has any validity in the surgical world."

"She wouldn't be the first or the last surgeon to believe that," Elaine said, lightly. "Some would argue it's how some of the greatest innovations in our field were discovered."

"And that makes it okay? To risk people's lives?" Ashley shook her head. "Never mind. I'm just going to get wound up again, and it's past time for me to go up and

talk to the Svenssons.”

Elaine got to her feet, brushing off her backside before reaching out to help haul Ashley up. “Ashley, can I make an observation? Without you biting my head off?”

“Um...” She didn’t like the way this was going, but she was dead curious. “Sure, okay.”

“You say that Doctor Colton rubs you the wrong way, that she just gets your back up.” Elaine tilted her head, a tiny smile playing on her lips. “But I’ve seen a lot of people get your back up over the years. Not like this, though. This is different.”

“I don’t follow.” Ashley rubbed at her temples.

Elaine stepped close and peered up into her eyes. “I just wonder if there’s something else buried deep under that anger of yours.”

Yep. She definitely didn’t like where this was going. “Still not following,” she hedged.

She didn’t expect the left turn and the pinpoint accuracy that came next. “When’s the last time you were seriously interested in someone?”

Heat washed through Ashley, and she hoped to God she wasn’t blushing. “What does that have to do with anything at all?”

“Oh, maybe nothing. Or maybe something. Only you can say.” That was definitely a twinkle in Elaine’s eyes. “Do you have anything you want to say about that?”

“Nope. Nope, nope, nope.” Ashley shook her head and began to ascend the stairs back up to the surgical floor. “Lovely chat, Elaine. I’ll be getting back to my patient

now.”

Her mentor didn't say anything else, but her amused chuckle followed Ashley all the way back upstairs.

8

“An investment in hyperthermic perfusion technology is an investment in our future as a leader in organ transplantation,” Jen recited, pacing around her office. She paused and glanced at her laptop to review her speech. “Perfusion pumps have been used to keep donor kidneys viable far longer than the typical 24-hour time frame, adding precious time to the transportation segment of the transplant process. These extra hours might not be needed... or they could be critical in the event of unexpected delays.”

She placed her hands at the base of her spine and arched backwards, sighing in satisfaction at the sound of her lower back popping. It felt like she'd been walking for miles and miles in her tiny little office. Well, she probably had been. She'd been rehearsing and rewriting this presentation for Oakridge investors for hours.



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The investment panel was due to convene in two days. She desperately wanted to get Oakridge the money to buy a perfusion pump. It would be invaluable to the program, a far better option than the special coolers and ice pack system the hospital currently used. Jen couldn't believe they didn't already have one. Or two. Two would be great.

Somewhere deep within her highly-educated brain, there were better words she could use that would loosen the purse strings she needed. But she'd already been running on empty all day, and now, at nearly 9 PM, she had nothing more to give. She knew she should go home, but she just wanted to get a little more done.

Coffee. Coffee was what she needed. Both Bryce's little coffee cart and the cafeteria were closed, but she remembered there was a decent enough coffee machine in the surgeons' lounge. She'd get herself a cup of coffee, then DoorDash herself some kind of dinner. That would get her back on track. Tucking her phone into her pocket, she left her tiny office and wandered through the largely silent hallways of the surgical floor.

Sure enough, in the dimly lit lounge, there was a very large and fancy Keurig with a gratifyingly wide variety of pods, including, she noticed with delight, a few peppermint mocha flavored ones that must have been bought for Christmas. Quickly, she located a clean mug and got the coffee started. The festive odor of chocolatey peppermint filled the lounge as she scrolled through the DoorDash app, looking for something, anything, that sounded good. She was at that point of being hungry that she couldn't make a choice, but she knew she needed to.

As the Keurig finished dispensing its Christmas-flavored elixir and shut off, the door to the lounge creaked open, catching Jen's attention. Curious to see who else was

night-owling it this evening, she looked up. “Oh,” she blurted out. “It’s you. Hello.”

Doctor Ashley-Never-Ash Proctor slipped through the lounge door, a sour expression on her face. Jen had made absolutely sure to steer clear of her since their confrontation three days ago, and she wasn’t exactly thrilled to see the woman now. While the patients and staff Ashley had lost her cool in front of had all received direct, personal apologies, Jen was acutely aware that she herself had received no such thing—and as the target of the ire, even if it had been partially deserved—well, she did feel she was also due at least a small apology.

And to her surprise, it looked like she was finally going to get one. “I saw you coming down here, and I wanted to get you alone,” Ashley began, her slightly curled lip and furrowed brow indicating the exact opposite sentiment.

With effort, Jen stifled the cheerful, mildly inappropriate quip she felt rising in her throat. Instinct told her it would not go over well.

“I wanted to apologize,” Ashley went on, and boy, did she make it look like those words were coated in acid in her mouth. “My behavior the other day was completely unprofessional. I shouldn’t have confronted you in front of everyone like that.”

“I accept your apology,” Jen replied with a nod. “Thank you.”

Silence stretched between them as she returned to her quest to locate a late dinner. Ah. Italian sounded very good right now. Baked spinach and ricotta tortellini. Don’t mind if I do, she thought happily as she punched her order in. Judiciously, she added tiramisu. Calories were good for her brain.

And caffeine. She remembered her coffee and turned to get her mug from the Keurig. Ashley was still standing by the door. “Can I make you a cup of coffee?” Jen offered, wondering why she was still there. “Or I’m ordering dinner, can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you,” Ashley replied stiffly. “I’m not hungry, and I can make my own coffee.” She walked over and began poking through the coffee pods.

Jen shrugged and moved to sit at one of the empty lounge tables. “Suit yourself.” She sipped her coffee as she finished off her order and sent it in. Covertly, she was also watching Ashley as she moved around the coffee station. She looked tired, Jen observed. And very pretty. The green silk blouse she was wearing was very flattering in cut and color and paired well with the tight camel-colored pencil skirt that hugged her sleek curves. Wisps of her brown hair had escaped her tight French twist, softening her face despite the pinched look hovering around her mouth.

What would it take to get her to relax? Did she even know the meaning of the word? But as soon as she thought that, Jen dismissed it. The Good Doctor Proctor did at least have some notion of relaxation, or at least a sense of how people had fun. She hadn’t gone to the Indigo Lounge for a book club meeting, after all. Yet most of the time, she seemed absolutely uptight as hell. She must have a permanent migraine, surely.

Ashley looked back over her shoulder, face fixed into the same mild scowl she seemed unaware that she put on whenever she saw Jen. “What? Do you need something?”

“No,” Jen replied, and then, before she could stop herself, she corrected. “Yes, actually. Do you ever pull the stick out of your ass?”

“Excuse me?” The way Ashley’s jaw dropped almost to the floor would have made Jen howl with laughter if she didn’t know full well how that would escalate the situation. “How dare you?”

“It’s a genuine question. Crassly worded, I admit,” Jen said, pushing herself to her feet. She walked over and took the empty coffee mug from where it was hanging

limply in the other surgeon's hand and stuck it under the machine spout. "Isn't it exhausting being such an uptight control freak? I know you must know how to let go, but do you ever?"

"This is preposterous," Ashley sputtered.

"Yeah. But think of it as lancing a wound. I would like us to work together, we've got to get this bad energy out from between us in order for that to happen."

"Uh, it's not happening, because I'm not working with you. My patients will remain far, far away from your rogue door-to-door salesman pressure tactics." A snort, an actual snort of contempt shot out of that perfect, prissy nose. And that got Jen's back up in a whole new way.

She could take bad attitudes, misfired tantrums, and even a frankly wild overreaction to having a drink spilled on oneself, but actual, palpable ignorant contempt for innovation and education in the so-important field of organ donation? That was too far. That hit too close to Jen's tender widow's heart, and she stepped right up to poke a finger into the woman's chest. "It astounds me that a surgeon with your intellect, skills, and education can be so blindly, willfully ignorant. Why do you hate the idea of educating patients so much?"

"It is unnecessary to bring up the specter of organ donation to people who are already stressed about going into surgery." The statement was delivered with such pomposity, Jen couldn't help but roll her eyes.

But she was on a mission. "Well, for starters, it would help if you quit referring to it as a specter, for God's sake. Organ donation is a gift. I think even you know that."

"Of course it is," Ashley spat, with an eyeroll of her own. "And our patients know it is too. But they do get upset when it's brought up unnecessarily."

“It’s not unnecessary if we—oh, forget it.” Annoyance was bubbling much too close to the surface, and the one thing Jen felt she had over this rigid nitwit was that she hadn’t yet lost her cool. She was too hungry for this argument to go well.

But to her surprise, as she turned to retrieve her coffee, she felt a restraining hand on her left arm. “Stop right there,” came the impatient, irritated command. “You don’t get to walk away from me after you insult me, Doctor Colton.”

Jen yanked her arm away, disturbed that an electric thrill had shot through her at the touch and at the commanding voice Ashley had used. She shook her arm, trying to make the tingling stop. “And you don’t get to order me around.”

Ashley stared down at her, mouth tight, eyes opaque. An odd energy stretched between them, making the hairs on Jen’s arms rise up, her stomach twisting with a strangely eager tension. She didn’t know what to say, but she opened her mouth and inhaled?—

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Surprise rushed through her as Ashley's hands cupped her face and pulled her up into a kiss so instantly incendiary that she felt her core grow warm and heavy at the first taste of the other woman's tongue.

It had been so long since she'd felt something like this, the rush of electricity, the heat bubbling between her legs. Since she'd tasted another woman's mouth, let her tongue flicker along the soft warmth there. And she'd never experienced the kind of commanding, take-charge intensity that was thrilling her now. She and Nina had shared a sensual, deep connection and their dynamic had always been balanced.

Not like this, nothing like this. Jen reached up and twined her arms around Ashley's neck as the kiss deepened. The hands holding her face firmly in place as her mouth was invaded and explored were somehow delicate yet strong all at once, definitely a surgeon's hands. She'd never been with another surgeon before, she realized. She'd been missing out.

More thrills shot through her as Ashley's hands moved to her thighs and she was hoisted up onto the countertop next to the coffee machine. Eagerly, Jen spread her legs wide and tangled her fingers into the lapels of Ashley's lab coat, pulling her in close. Her black linen skirt rode up, leaving the damp gusset of her pink cotton panties exposed and pressing up against Ashley's waist.

When Ashley's hand slid along the bare skin of her thigh, Jen thanked God that she'd decided against wearing pantyhose that morning. Her nipples peaked hard, brushing against the lining of her bra and sending little electric jolts directly to the pulsing heat between her legs. Even the way the edge of the countertop was biting into the soft backs of her thighs was somehow erotic, increasing the pleasure of the encounter

tenfold.

And Ashley's mouth was so supple and hot, her tongue plunging into Jen's mouth in a way that made her nearly slide off the counter when she thought about how that tongue would feel on her clit, what it could do.

Those nimble surgeon's fingers were plucking now at the leg of her panties, then the waistband, slowly working their way in under the elastic. Jen held her breath in anticipation, her mind swirling as she imagined Ashley's slender fingers sliding along the slick heat of her labia, the precision with which one wet fingertip would graze over her clit?—

The lounge door creaked, and Ashley jumped away, almost pulling Jen off the counter as she did. Still dazed with lust, Jen was only barely able to snap her knees together and smooth her skirt back over them. She glanced at the door to see who'd interrupted.

It was a little blonde nurse who often worked the late surgical shifts. Aubrey, Jen remembered. Relatively fresh out of nursing school. Jen swallowed back her disappointment and smiled as she slid down off the counter. "Hi, Aubrey. Everything okay?"

Aubrey glanced between the two surgeons, uncertainty written all over her open, freckled face. "Sorry to bother you," she said softly, her fingers curled around the edge of the door. "DoorDash dropped off your food with me at the desk. They said they'd been trying to call you?"

Patting her pockets, Jen looked around, wondering where her phone had gotten off to. Then it appeared under her nose. She looked up to see Ashley holding it stiffly out in front of her. "You dropped this," the younger surgeon said, her voice as pinched and cold as if they hadn't just shared a scorching gusset-burner of a kiss.

Jen blinked and took her phone. Sure enough, there were a number of missed calls. She was grateful the delivery driver had taken things into their own hands while she'd been so thoroughly distracted! "Thanks, Aubrey. I'll come get it in a minute. I appreciate you coming to let me know."

"Welcome." The nurse vanished out the door, pulling it closed behind her and leaving Ashley and Jen to regard each other soberly. Jen tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "Doctor Proctor..."

Ashley smoothed the flyaway hairs around her face back and tugged at her blouse, whose silk placket looked irretrievably rumpled after their encounter. She frowned down at it before glancing up at Jen, her face utterly smooth, devoid of any hint of her feelings. "My apologies, Doctor Colton. That got out of hand. It won't happen again."

"Oh, no, I don't—" Jen began, but she went quiet at a wave of Ashley's hand.

"Very unprofessional of me. I..." Ashley swallowed. "I'm sorry." Briskly, she walked over to the lounge door, her heels clicking on the tile. When she arrived at the door, hand on the knob, she glanced back over her shoulder at Jen, her face still unreadable. Without any further word, she twisted the doorknob and slipped away.

Jen rubbed the back of her neck. There was no way she was going to be able to concentrate on her presentation at this point. And she had no idea how she was going to work with Ashley now.

9

City fell back against the bed pillows, a satisfied sigh bursting out of her on impact. "Hotdamn, Ashley."



“You’re welcome.” Ashley winked as she came up from her position between City’s thighs and sprawled out next to her on the bed. It was their fourth encounter in a week, rather a marked increase from their usual occasional hook-up. Her jaw was starting to ache from the unaccustomed overuse.

But if she was preoccupied with City, then she didn’t have to think about what had happened—almost happened—with Jen Colton last week...

A twinge of guilt pinged at the back of Ashley’s mind; she was using City and she knew it. She also knew City wouldn’t mind if she knew, since their relationship had always been strictly casual and non-monogamous, less a relationship than a pleasurable arrangement, really. But it wasn’t right, not by her own ethical code. It was selfish, too. And it was escapism at its very worst.

Normal people read books. Knit scarves. Took up competitive coffee making. They didn’t trip and fall face-first into the lap of the nearest beautiful and willing woman in order to avoid thinking about a different beautiful and possibly willing woman. No, that was something only Ashley Proctor could find herself doing.

“Penny for your thoughts,” City prompted, rolling onto her side and propping her head on her hand.

“In this economy? Better make it a dollar,” Ashley quipped in return. A joke, but she knew City was serious about wanting to know what was going on in her head. The woman had a deep-seated belief in talking through her emotions. And it wasn’t that Ashley didn’t see the value in that, it was just... not for her. Ever, but especially not now. There was too much to unpack.

What had possessed her to kiss Jen Colton? To hoist her up onto a countertop and run her hands over her smooth thighs, to slide a hand up under that rucked-up skirt and pluck at the waistband of her panties? Beyond the unprofessionalism of doing it in the

hospital—Ashley had prided herself on never hooking up at work, as so many of her colleagues had—there was the simple fact that she hated Jen Colton. They were on diametrically opposing sides of medicine, and Ashley detested everything the woman stood for.

And yet, when Jen had snapped back that bratty, snippy, “And you don’t get to order me around,” ugh. Ashley squirmed now just remembering it, the way it had made her instantly wet, desire coiling and twisting in the pit of her stomach. She’d had her tongue in Jen’s mouth, tasting the chocolatey peppermint coffee, exploring the soft warmth, long before she understood what she was doing.

She couldn’t remember the last time blind lust had driven her like that. If it ever had.

When she’d left Jen in the surgeon’s lounge with whatever pathetic mumbles she could come up with, she’d sent one perfunctory text message and driven straight to City’s place. Where she’d found herself every other night since. City was enjoying it, but Ashley knew she was ravenously curious. Which meant she was going to have to cool it with City, and if she did that, she was going to have to either find another friend with benefits very quickly, or...

...Well, she didn’t want to think about that or any of it all.

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Ashley was jolted out of her circling thoughts at the touch of a gentle hand between her legs. “Oh!”

“You think too much,” City advised, smiling. “I can fix that.”

But City hadn’t, in fact, fixed it.

Oh, she’d given her all in the pursuit of Ashley’s pleasure. Pulled out a whole bag of tricks all night. But then Ashley had gone into work. And of course, the first person she saw was Jen Colton, smiling and chatting with the kid at the coffee cart in the Oakridge lobby.

To her absolute fury and mortification, she wondered what color panties Jen was wearing today. They’d been pink, that evening in the lounge. She’d caught a glimpse when she’d leapt back at the sound of the door opening, before Jen could pull her skirt down.

Cheeks burning, Ashley put her head down and made a beeline for the elevator bank. She was desperate for caffeine, but there was no way she could approach the coffee cart now. The cafeteria was out simply because the coffee there was terrible, and she’d been avoiding the surgeon’s lounge for a week. Her only remaining choice was a Diet Coke from the vending machine on the surgery ward floor. It was a poor substitute, but it was her only choice. Ashley squirmed her way onto the first available elevator and rubbed at her pounding temples.

“Rough night?” The cheery, mocking voice of Priya Majumdar was grating on already abraded nerves. Ashley lifted her head and shot a glare at the oncology

surgeon. To her annoyance, Dr. Majumdar not only didn't recoil from the glare, her grin seemed to get wider, as if she were rejoicing in Ashley's clear misery. Great.

She ignored everyone during the elevator ride, ducking her head again and keeping it down as she exited onto the surgery floor. Much to her dismay, she felt a firm hand on her elbow and almost stumbled as she was pulled into a conference room. "Hey?—"

"Doctor Proctor, I'm sorry for the sudden ambush." Chief Sundstrom looked harassed, his gray-blond hair sticking out in all directions and his forehead more rumpled than usual. "A situation has come up. I've been waiting for you to come in."

Guilt flooded Ashley, even though she knew she wasn't late. She didn't have a surgery on the board until later in the afternoon. Yet she still felt like a teenager sneaking in ten minutes late for English class. "I'm sorry, Chief. How can I help you?"

He waved a hand dismissively. "Nothing to be sorry for, there's no trouble, exactly. But we have a patient who came in early this morning, a very delicate heart case. Elaine and I discussed it and we want you to take the lead on it."

"Oh, certainly, of course." Ashley frowned. Why wouldn't Elaine want to take the lead?

Chief Sundstrom seemed to understand her concern. "It's not only a delicate case in terms of what needs to be done; it's a case that will require absolute discretion. Doctor Martin and I both trust you implicitly in this regard. You'll handle it privately and you'll do your finest job with the actual surgery."

Her interest was thoroughly piqued at this point. "Well, Chief, you've certainly got my attention. Can I know more?"

“Absolutely. Come with me.” Opening the door to the conference room, he poked his head out and peered around. Seeing that the coast was clear, he beckoned for her to follow him.

They moved in silence through the surgery floor towards the back bank of service elevators typically used for patient transport. In the elevator, Ashley was surprised to see Chief Sundstrom punch the button and swipe his ID badge for the hospital’s tenth floor. This was the private VIP floor of the hospital, where only very private and usually very wealthy or famous—or both—patients were cared for. She’d only been on the floor twice in her entire career at Oakridge Hospital, once assisting Elaine on a quadruple bypass for a California congressman and once taking point on a stent insertion for a popular actor in action films. And both of those had been years ago.

“Your badge will be updated in the system to grant you access to this floor,” the Chief advised as the floors ticked by. “And you’ll have full leeway to choose ninety-eight percent of your surgical team. Scrub nurses, assisting physicians, anesthesiologists, all of it. Well, most of it,” he amended at the end.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “ninety-eight percent?”

“I’ll explain more after this meeting, if it doesn’t become clear.” The elevator doors slid open, and he set off down the hallway at a brisk trot.

Ashley followed along, taking in her surroundings. The VIP floor didn’t look like any other floor in the hospital. No traces of white paint or beige plastic here, no sir. This floor looked like an upscale hotel, with walnut paneling and brass uplighters with pleated linen shades. Where normally there would be tall, beige-painted rolling cabinets with drawers holding masks, gowns, and other protective gear, on this floor there were only small, polished walnut bureaus stationed outside of the door of each room.

Even the cleaning and nursing staff on the floor were clad differently. Instead of the hospital's regular pale blue and drab green scrubs, they were all in getups that hardly resembled scrubs at all, but looked more like sleek, high-end workout gear. The nurses wore a burgundy color as deep as a fine Bordeaux wine, their orderlies were dressed in navy blue, and the cleaning staff wore a pleasant mint green that struck Ashley as impractical given their line of work, but nobody had consulted her.

This floor obviously cost a lot of money to run, but then, it did bring in a significant amount of it as well. She supposed this was a clear case of spending money to make money.

Chief Sundstrom paused by a closed door. "This patient prefers a very calm, quiet environment—another reason Elaine and I wanted you on board. You are... well, typically you are our most unshakable surgeon."

The unspoken rebuke was clear in his awkward pause, and Ashley's face burned once again. The Chief hadn't called her into his office to talk about her explosion at Dr. Colton in the week and a half since it had happened, but obviously he knew about it. How embarrassing. "I appreciate your trust in me," she said, drawing her shoulders back to stand up straight. Somehow, she even managed to look him directly in the eyes. "There won't be any problems."

"Hmm," was all he said, but before she could wonder what it meant, he had the door pushed open and was striding into the room with a wide, beaming smile on his face. "Ms. Rivera, how are you today?"

The answer, delivered by a throaty, sexy, whiskey-and-cigarettes voice that was shockingly familiar, was amused. "Well, Steve, you promised to send me some strapping young men to help me with my sponge bath, but all I've gotten is a pinch-faced nurse named Gertrude." A deep, rich chuckle. "She was very thorough, though, I'll say that for her."

“Well, we’ll see if we can’t adjust the situation to be more to your liking.” The Chief, too, chuckled, and then turned to beckon Ashley into the room. “Ms. Rivera, I wanted you to meet the surgeon that’ll be managing your care from here on out. This is Doctor Ashley Proctor. She’s our best cardiothoracic surgeon. Doctor Proctor, this is Maria Rivera.”

Ashley stepped forward, unable to believe what she was seeing. Propped up in a plush, state-of-the-art hospital bed, surrounded by fluffy pillows, was one of Hollywood’s greatest actresses and her very first crush.

Maria Rivera’s huge, dark eyes, liquid with promise and able to speak as eloquently as she did on the big screen, danced with good humor. Her arresting smile was still a magical spell that sent sparkly thrills down Ashley’s spine. And not for Maria Rivera was the plain white cotton Oakridge hospital gown with blue polka dots, no; the two-time Oscar winner was wrapped in a stunning green silk velvet lounging robe that Ashley just knew felt like wearing a lapful of Persian kittens.

But once the initial thrill wore off, Ashley could see that the woman was in seriously advanced heart failure. It wasn’t only the nasal cannula that gave it away, of course. Maria’s skin, usually a healthy sun-kissed tan on screen, had taken on a pasty pallor. Her nailbeds were faintly blue, as were her lips, despite the constant oxygen flow. And while she was still an extremely beautiful woman at the age of 57, she looked drawn and tired, and her captivating sparkle was dulled.

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Not in any way the picture of a healthy woman. Ashley's own heart constricted to see someone she'd adored for so long in a state of clear suffering. "Ms. Rivera. It's such an honor to meet you."

"If you're the doctor who can fix my heart and get me those sexy bathing attendants, then I am also honored to meet you," Maria replied, with another of those smiles that made the whole world go weak in the knees. She brushed her long, dark hair back over her shoulder before folding her hands into her lap. "So. Is it surgery, then?"

"I'll need to review your records thoroughly, but I would say there's a reasonable probability of it, yes," Ashley advised gently. "What surgery it will be, I can't say just yet."

Maria let out a dramatic sigh and winked before falling back against her deep stack of pillows. "Dios mío. Well, then, you're definitely going to have to do something about those bathing attendants."

"I'll do my best." Ashley caught Chief Sundstrom nodding towards the door. "Perhaps I'll come back to you later this afternoon, Ms. Rivera."

"I'll look forward to that." Maria nodded graciously, then picked up a book that had been lying face down on her lap, as they exited the hospital room.

The Chief clicked the door shut and ushered Ashley away in silence, waiting until they were in the elevator, alone, to speak. "It's inherited dilated cardiomyopathy," he began, his eyes fixed on hers. "Just about end-stage, as you can see."



Ashley felt her eyes widen with shock. “An enlarged heart? Didn’t she notice earlier? How could she let it go this long?”

“You’ve met enough actors in your time here, you know how work-driven they can be. And frankly, according to her records, Maria Rivera has been a model cardiac patient for years.” He spread his hands wide and shrugged. “She has almost religiously followed a low-salt, lean protein, vegetable heavy diet for a long time. Light, but consistent exercise. She says she’s particularly fond of tai chi and long walks.”

“And medication?” Ashley couldn’t shake off her distress. She felt the actress should have taken much more aggressive action, much earlier. There were added complexities in heart surgeries over fifty, and heart surgery was already complicated. A transplant or even device implantation should have been done long ago, in her opinion.

“The typical regime of beta blockers and diuretics to start. About three years ago she was put on an ARB, last year on Digoxin. And some blood thinners.” Chief Sundstrom looked at her closely. “You know nobody can force a patient to get surgery if they don’t want it. Ms. Rivera has been very dedicated to her career. I think you know a little something about that.”

It wasn’t like the Chief to get personal with her. She wasn’t sure how she felt about it. “Maybe.” Then she remembered a tidbit from their conversation before entering the hospital room. “Wait, what was that about my surgical team you said before? I could pick most but not all?”

At that, the Chief’s face grew stern, and a pit opened up in Ashley’s stomach. She felt like a nine-year-old being called on the carpet for making a ruckus in class. Not that she ever had. She held her breath as he spoke. “Doctor Proctor, we still have to decide on what kind of surgery is going to happen here, but you will be keeping

Doctor Colton involved and updated.”

Oh, no. “Sir?—”

“That’s not a point that’s up for discussion,” he said, his voice as set as his face. “Any surgery can go wrong, so whether we implant a device or have to do a transplant, Doctor Colton must be involved in an educational aspect. And besides that, she’s a world-renowned general surgeon with a great amount of experience in the cardiothoracic realm.” The elevator doors slid open on the surgery floor, and he stepped out. “Last of all, she was specifically requested by the patient. Seems they know each other. So there’s that.” With a brisk nod, he turned and walked off, leaving Ashley standing open-mouthed in the elevator door.

She spotted Jen Colton peering out of her office, face wary. As soon as they made eye contact, she whisked back in and the door slammed shut. Swallowing, Ashley hustled off the elevator and made a beeline for the office she shared with a pediatric surgeon, who was thankfully not in this week. She tossed her Hermès bag down with an uncharacteristic carelessness and slumped into her chair, cradling her face in her hands.

There was no way, clearly, that she was going to be allowed to get out of working with Jen Colton. The very thought filled her with fury, lust, and despair. This was such an important case, and the Chief clearly knew the two of them didn’t get along. How was this going to ever, ever work?

10

“Darling, you haven’t changed a bit.” Maria’s throaty laugh was still robust, despite her obviously declining health. It gave Jen hope. “I hate how gracefully you’ve taken to aging. You look years younger than me even with that shining silver hair.”

“I am years younger than you,” Jen replied puckishly, laughing as her old high school friend swatted at her leg.

“Two years are hardly a blip on the clock! You look under fifty.” Maria tossed her hair—the gleaming chestnut of which Jen knew was expertly maintained by Los Angeles’ best private hairdresser. But even Philippe Casals had been unable to fully hold back the ravages of Maria’s advancing cardiac condition. Jen could see the hair was thinning, and brittle at the ends.

“I don’t, Maria, but it’s lovely for you to say so. And we’ll take years off your own clock once we get your heart condition sorted out.” Jen scooted closer to her friend on the hospital bed so that she could take her hand, carefully avoiding the IV butterfly stuck into the soft, smooth skin. “You’ll feel better than you have in years.”

“I’d like that.” Maria smiled and settled back into her pillows. “They still haven’t come up to tell me what surgery it will be.” She sighed. “I don’t like the idea of either option. Either some foreign plastic and metal thing stuck to my heart, or I get someone else’s heart entirely.” Pulling her hand free from Jen’s, she patted her heart, face pensive. “All of my best work came from my heart. Will my work be the same if someone else’s heart beats in my chest?”

“Of course it will.” Jen recaptured her friend’s hand and gave it a soft little kiss before letting go. “The heart is a machine, a wonderful and glorious organic machine, but a machine, nonetheless. The work came from your beautiful soul, my friend.”

Maria’s chuckle was fond. “Thank you, Jen. You always did have a knack for making me feel better.” Her eyes darkened with sympathy. “Now, can I make you feel better? You seem tired, querida. And I bet you aren’t seeing anyone.”

Jen pushed back a flash of memory, the taste of peppermint coffee and the feel of Ashley’s nimble fingers at the waistband of her panties. “I just got here, Maria. I

haven't had time to do anything but work. I'm overhauling the entire transplant program here. Presentations, fundraising, getting to know my colleagues..."

"You could get to know a special colleague, no?" Maria's eyes gleamed. "You like doctors, are there no doctors here that have caught your eye?" She laughed as Jen blushed. "Oh, tell me, tell me everything."

"There's nothing to tell," Jen said firmly, drawing herself to sit up straight. "But since you're the biggest nosy-pants I know, I did find a bar here that I like to go to."

"You must take me once I'm all fixed up." Maria clapped her hands. "You know I love to watch you work."

"Are you sure you only like men?" Jen joked, tilting her head. "You love going to lesbian bars more than I do!"

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“I’m an artist, a master of my craft,” Maria replied, spreading a hand over her chest and opening her eyes wide. “I study the human condition, amiga, and your human condition is fascinating.” She clicked her tongue and sighed. “I wish I did love women. I’ve never found any love with a man that came close to what you and Nina had.”

Jen swallowed back the lump of grief that formed in her throat. “Oh, Maria. I miss her so much.”

“I know, querida.” This time, it was Maria who reached out to take Jen’s hand. They sat together quietly, remembering Nina. Maria had been at their wedding, had flown to visit as often as she could when Nina was diagnosed.

She had sent the most beautiful arrangement of flowers to the funeral.

The door cracked open, and Jen turned to see who was interrupting. At the sight of Ashley Proctor slipping into the room, chaos twisted her stomach and lust made her cheeks flush hot. From the corner of her eyes, she saw Maria’s eyebrows lift with interest. Jen got to her feet as smoothly as she could. “Doctor Proctor.”

“Doctor Colton.” Ashley’s eyes darted between the two women. “Is this a professional consultation or a chat between friends?”

So Sundstrom had let Ashley know that Maria and Jen knew each other. That probably meant the cardiac surgeon also knew that Jen was going to be an immovable part of Maria’s team. Won’t this be fun?

“Maria and I do go back a ways, that’s true.”

“We met in high school.” When Jen dared to glance at her friend, Maria’s eyes were alight with mischief and curiosity. “And we’ve been friends ever since, haven’t we, Jen?”

“We have.” Jen turned so that only Maria could see her and made a face that she hoped said don’t you dare. “It’s been a great privilege of my life to watch Maria grow into one of the greatest actors of our generation.”

“And one of mine to see my great friend become a greater surgeon.” Maria looked at Ashley and smiled broadly. “I’m so glad she will be part of your team.”

Jen turned around back in time to see Ashley’s face pinch into a tight but polite smile. “Indeed. Doctor Colton, if I could see you out here for a moment?” Without giving Jen a chance to reply, Ashley turned on her heel and strode out the door, closing it firmly behind her.

“Oh, ho ho,” Maria chortled immediately, glee in her voice. “I was going to ask you to tell me what you thought of this uptight little thing, but I don’t think I need to, now!”

“No, it’s not like that,” Jen began, exasperated.

“Well, why the hell not? She’s pretty, even if she is wound tight.” Maria asked.

“We are colleagues, and she doesn’t like me.” Except that Jen had it on good personal authority that Ashley did, and the memories bubbled up again and made her blush harder while Maria laughed and laughed.

“Get out there before she comes back and pinches her face even more. But come back after!” Maria commanded. “You’re going to have to spill, hermosa.”

“There’s nothing to spill,” Jen hissed, and hurried to open the door.

Ashley was standing there, predictably pinched of face as she looked at her watch. She glanced up as Jen closed the door behind her. “About time.”

“I feel sorry for your friends if your idea of a good farewell is a hasty one,” Jen shot back. “Can I help you, Doctor Proctor?”

“I wanted to talk to you about your input for Ms. Rivera’s treatment,” Ashley replied, her face somehow pinching even further. “I don’t think it’s appropriate. You clearly have a very personal connection.”

“Yes. We do. Which would be why she asked for my inclusion on her surgical team.” Jen worked to keep her voice steady. If this prissy cardio doc thought she was going to allow herself to be thrown off Maria’s treatment team, she was going to get a very nasty surprise. “I believe Chief Sundstrom has already advised you that my inclusion on this team is non-negotiable.”

“It was mentioned.” The words emerged as if they were being pushed out against Ashley’s will. “I came to appeal to you directly to remove yourself. You’re too close to this case. I don’t believe that’s helpful.”

“Unless Maria herself asks me to step down, I won’t, Doctor Proctor.” Jen tucked her hands into the pockets of her lab coat so that she could clench them unseen. Her nails dug into her palms. “So. I believe that settles that. Have you had a chance to look at her records? Do you have a course of action planned?”

Ashley hesitated, eyes narrowed. “I do. I’ve discussed it with the Chief and with Dr. Martin.”

“You should probably discuss it with me, too,” Jen prompted, feeling like she’d

somehow gone into dentistry. Why did this woman make everything feel like pulling teeth?

And why was the tension of it all such a catalyst for desire? Jen shifted from foot to foot.

At least Ashley also looked uneasy the longer this conversation went on. “I intend to discuss it with the team at a meeting tomorrow. You’ll find it on your calendar and in your email. There’s no point in me handing out information piecemeal, one doctor at a time.”

“I’d like to have some idea,” Jen began, but stopped when Ashley waved an impatient hand in her face.

She was tempted to grab that hand and bite it. Then to push up the sleeve of the lab coat and kiss her way up Ashley’s arm, tasting the soft skin leading into the crook of her elbow...



Jesus!

“I also don’t want to give you any details that you might let slip to our patient and unnecessarily alarm her,” Ashley was saying when Jen tuned back in. “I’d like to have our meeting tomorrow and then come directly to the room and present the plan to her myself. You don’t need a chance to interfere.”

“Interfere? Oh, wow.” Jen stepped back, blinking. “And calling my actual professionalism and ability to distance myself appropriately into question? You’ve got some nerve, Proctor.”

“I’ve got an important patient with critical needs who must be handled with care. Having you involved at all is already a risk, but as you say, it seems to be a non-negotiable point and you don’t have the sense to recuse yourself.” Ashley’s cheeks were red, and tendrils of her glossy brown hair were starting to slip from her tight French twist. “I’m doing what I need to do, saying what I need to say, to keep this entire delicate operation from going entirely off the rails. You’re a wild card as far as I’m concerned, Doctor Colton.”

“You’re an audacious bitch with a lousy ability to read people or accept that you might be wrong,” Jen snarled, furious at herself as much as she was at Ashley, but it was past time she gave back as good as she was getting. “That’s a more dangerous approach and attitude than anything I could ever dish out. Ease up, Doctor Proctor, or the fuck-up you’re trying to prevent is going to be entirely your fault when it does happen.”

She had turned and stomped her way noisily back into Maria’s room before she

realized it, mortified as she saw the amused look on her friend's face. "Maria, I am so sorry to come in hot like that. I didn't mean to make that much commotion."

"Please, it's the most excitement I've had in months, everyone tiptoes around me." Maria's dark eyes were practically glittering with delight. "I didn't hear everything, but I heard enough to know there's a very delicious tension between you and the pretty prissy one." She clasped her hands under her chin and batted her eyelashes. "Tell me everything. Have you fucked her? Are you going to?"

"Maria! My God!"

"He doesn't have to be involved,querida." Maria patted the space at the edge of her hospital bed, face alight with anticipation. "Now, come, this is better than any of the books I brought with me, and I wantallthe details."

With a sigh, Jen obediently took her seat. "There aren't many," she began.

"Yet," Maria said sweetly, knowingly.

"Yet," Jen conceded with a groan.

11

Jen squirmed on the countertop as a nimble tongue traced patterns delicate as lace on her clit, teasing little flicks on the tender flesh sending sharp shocks all through her body. Restlessly, her legs flexed in their position over smooth shoulders, her toes pointing as the relentless mouth between her thighs licked and tasted her.

Three fingers filled her pussy, sliding in and out of the wet heat. Sometimes, the long middle finger pressed up, massaging her G-spot and making her gasp. Jen's arms reached up and she grabbed the handles of the cabinets she leaned against, her nipples

were peaked hard, and she was so close, so close...

Her phone shrilled across the room with her morning alarm, ripping her out of her dreamworld and away from where Ashley Proctor had been on her knees in the surgical lounge, eating her out with the fervor Jen just knew lurked under that uptight demeanor. "Ugh," Jen groaned, sitting up and swinging her legs out from under the down comforter on her bed. Clad only in a thin white tank top and black panties, she marched barefoot and grumpy to her bathroom, twisting the various handles in her shower to get the hot water going.

Between her legs, her panties were still warm and damp with arousal, and in the mirror, she saw her nipples still hard against her tank top as she brushed her teeth. When steam clouds filled the bathroom, she stripped off and stepped into the shower.

Hot water, just on the edge of being too hot, streamed down over Jen's body and pinked up her fair skin. She picked up a bottle of rose-scented shower gel and poured a generous palmful into her hand, then rubbed them together to distribute it.

The cool gel made gooseflesh of her skin as she massaged her body. It slipped and lathered up, heady clouds of the rosy scent mingling with the steamy water, and Jen's head fell back as the sensations began to overwhelm her. Her hand slipped between her legs and began to play with her clit.

She'd chosen this apartment mainly for the shower, which had an overhead rainfall and multiple nozzles jutting from the walls. There was also a powerful handheld nozzle that she pulled free from its hook now and took with her as she sat down on the ledge built into the back of the shower stall.

Legs spread wide, Jen twisted the lever on the handheld nozzle to adjust the spray and slowly, tantalizingly lowered it to her pussy. The hot stream drilled into her clit, yanking a gasp out of her throat. She adjusted her grip to ease up the pressure,

shifting on the bench until she had the perfect, perfect angle and water pressure on her clit.

Jen's moans filled the bathroom as waves of pleasure washed through her body. With her free hand, she alternated between her breasts, lifting and squeezing the soft warmth of one at a time, peaking a nipple with slippery fingers.

Water crashed around her as she came, back arching away from the shower wall. Her fingers spasmed around her right breast, holding it tight while her orgasm racked her body.

Slowly, she came back into herself, coming down from the sensual high on a cloud of satisfaction. She released her breast with care and dropped the shower nozzle onto the floor. Her chest heaved, her breaths deep.

Jen opened her eyes and blinked slowly, finally coming back to the whole of her senses. Her legs would remain weak for a bit, she knew, so she didn't stand up right away.

In the week or so since she and Ashley had had that insanely hot and unexpected kiss in the surgical lounge, this is how she'd woken up in the morning. Although today's dream had been even more intense and graphic than its predecessors. She wondered if yesterday's confrontation outside of Maria's room had contributed to that.

Maria. Jen grabbed the brass rail embedded in the shower wall and shot to her feet. There was a meeting today, the one Ashley had referred to yesterday. That was why her alarm had gone off a little earlier than usual. All sexual desire gone, Jen rushed through the rest of her shower and hurried back to her room to check her phone. "Damn it!" she yelped, racing to her closet. She was definitely going to be late, and it was entirely her fault.

Well, and Ashley's, but she doubted that explaining how would go over well as an excuse for her tardiness.

Jen skidded to a stop outside of the conference room, making sure to catch her breath before she eased the door open. There was no hope for her to make a professional entrance when she was ten minutes late, but she could at least look less like she was escaping some kind of catastrophe.

A dozen pairs of eyes focused on her as she slipped into the room, and she did wish she didn't have quite so sensitive a blush reflex.

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Standing by the projector screen, dressed in a sleek black pantsuit that Jen thought was probably designer, her hair tidied back into its usual sleek French twist, was Dr. Ashley Proctor. One bold dark eyebrow lifted into a perfectly plucked arch, and her damn prissy mouth pinched for a brief moment before she addressed Jen's entrance. "So very, very kind of you to join us for the meeting, Doctor Colton."

Jen slumped into a chair, wishing she'd dared to waste more precious minutes in the pursuit of a cup of tea. "I'm sorry, Doctor Proctor."

"I'm sure." Lifting her hand, Ashley clicked on the remote she held. A presentation filled the screen. "I'll try to cover the entirety of my plan in the time we have left."

Jen winced and slumped further into her chair.

Only to sit up straight as an arrow, her spine galvanized steel as her mouth dropped open. Ashley was proceeding through her minimalist PowerPoint slides briskly, with a plan she clearly thought was the most sensible approach to managing Maria's heart condition.

They'd all read the same records, Jen was sure. They'd all seen the state of Maria's heart from the scans, that the management she had insisted on thus far had helped some but had gone on too long. She should have been on a transplant list long, long ago, in Jen's opinion. And Jen had spent the last two days gently talking to Maria about it in between Maria's efforts to squeeze more sexy gossip out of her.

Maria, predictably, had been resistant, but Jen knew it was just because she didn't have the info she needed. Jen did, and she'd shared it. Told Maria that most surgeons

would have had a pacemaker or implantable defibrillator in her years ago but for her resistance. Now, Jen felt, they were well past the time when those would be effective for long. It was time for the radical approach, she'd explained. Maria's big heart had to go. Yes, it meant waiting for a while, and then medication for the rest of her life, but there'd be a rest of her life. A fresh new heart beating in her chest and giving her a new lease on living. She'd regain strength, her blood flow would improve, and she could get back to work.

A device would help for a while, but, Jen had pointed out, if Maria was going to have surgery anyway, why not get the big one and hopefully be done, rather than prolong things?

It had taken some doing, but Jen had eventually gotten Maria to understand. And now Maria was ready to hear that she was going on the transplant list.

But Ashley was breezily presenting a procedure to install an implantable cardioverter defibrillator. "The recovery time is four to six weeks, but the patient will be able to go home and resume her life, slowly and under frequent observation, the day after we complete the implantation."

"And in a year or less, she'll be back on your operating table under your scalpel," Jen blurted out before she could stop herself.

Once again, all eyes were on her, with varying degrees of astonishment in them. Except for Ashley's. Ashley's brown eyes went dark with anger at the interruption, and Jen saw her grip on the presentation remote get white-knuckled. "Excuse me, Doctor Colton?"

In for a penny... "Well, I think you heard me. We've seen the records." Jen gestured to the fat pink folder on the table in front of Ashley. "At this point, any kind of device is merely a Band-Aid. Ms. Rivera's heart has deteriorated rapidly over the last

months. She's had minor heart attacks already, the next one could be fatal. She should have been on the transplant list a long time ago, we need to put her on there now."

"As you well know in your position of transplant director, Doctor Colton," Ashley began through gritted teeth, "donor hearts are rare. So hard to obtain."

"Yes, which is why time is of the essence." Jen was amazed that she was having to fight for what, to her, seemed like the only sensible solution. "Get an LVAD on Ms. Rivera, get her on the list, and let's get that bad heart out of her as soon as we can. I don't see why this is even in question."

"Why should we put her life on hold more than it already has been?" Ashley shook her head. "The ICD will let her get back to work in a couple of months. A transplant will put her in a holding pattern while we hope to get a heart, and who knows how long that will take? Then the recovery time, assuming she's lucky enough not to reject the donor organ, is significant."

The other doctors, nurses, and surgeons in the room glanced between the two surgeons as the clash went on. Nobody volunteered an opinion. Jen could not believe what she was hearing. Or not hearing, rather. She turned her astonished gaze back to Ashley. "I don't understand why you'd rather prolong her suffering with a quick-patch procedure that will just land her back here sooner rather than later."

"Perhaps," Ashley began, her voice silky, "you're too close to the patient to see the rationality of my decision to help her get her life back as soon as possible."

Jen was left speechless. Ashley was so intent on being right and in charge that she had actually decided to call Jen emotionally overinvolved in front of their colleagues. Was the presentation a decoy, another tactic to get Jen either thrown off the team or given no choice but to recuse herself?



No. No, Jen couldn't believe the cardio surgeon was quite so conniving. She genuinely believed this conservatism was the best solution for Maria and that Jen was being too radical in wanting to go for a transplant. She just wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to undermine Jen.

Fortunately, Steve Sundstrom finally spoke up. Clearing his throat, he got to his feet. "Let's table the best course of conversation for now. Doctor Proctor has the floor. Please, Doctor, complete your presentation."

Ashley smiled tightly and turned back to the projector screen, clicking to advance to the next slide. "Now, here's the team I want with me in the OR, plus Doctor Colton..."

The little jab didn't get past Jen, but she did ignore it in favor of trying to control her temper for the rest of the meeting. When it finally ended, she didn't wait for Steve to waylay her. She was first out the door and making a beeline for a distant supply room at the far end of the surgical wing.

Closing the door behind her, Jen crossed over to a plastic-sheathed stack of thermal surgical blankets and face planted into it. The pile neatly muffled the primal scream of rage she howled into it, a scream she found so entirely satisfying that she let out another one. And then another.

The door squealed open behind her and she stood up, whirling to see who was disturbing her. Ugh. You.

"I thought I'd give you a moment to collect your thoughts," Ashley said, inspecting her fingernails with a studied casualness. "And to ask you again if you could please remove yourself from my surgical team. You're welcome to visit the patient as much as you like, of course, but you're too close to actually be involved."

“She has a name!” The words exploded out of Jen with a force that made Ashley step back in surprise. Jen strode forward and poked her finger right into Ashley’s puffed-up chest. “Her name is Maria! She’s a human being, not a surgical practice dummy. That’s flesh and blood you want to cut into. Stop calling her ‘the patient,’ damn it!”

Ashley brushed Jen’s hand away, eyes narrowing. “I’m aware that Ms. Rivera is a human being. The problem is that you are too aware, and I am trying to remind you that she may be your friend, but she is also a cardiac patient, and her care comes before your emotions.”

“My emotions are because you’re proposing a course of action that’s going to see her under the knife again and again when it’s unnecessary at this late stage.” Jen spun around and paced the room. “Yes, Maria is my friend. But I would advocate this hard for transplantation for any patient at her stage of heart failure. I see no need to waste the hospital’s resources or her precious time by subjecting her to surgery after surgery.”

“And I am not wasting her time,” Ashley snapped impatiently. “I’m allowing her to get back to doing what she loves sooner. That is giving her time now. I implant the ICD, and she’s sitting at home reading scripts by next week. She’ll be ready to go back to work, with some limitations, in two or three months.”

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“Limitations—argh! Why don’t you hearyourself? Why are you such a workaholic that getting back to work is more important than dramatically improving quality of life?” Jen tangled her hands into her hair and pulled, frustrated. “What is with your need to be right at any cost?”

“Why am I wrong?” Ashley threw her hands into the air. “Why are you so intent on pushing radical surgeries before they’re needed? God, if you’re this much of a pain in my ass now, I definitely want you off my team before you can so much as critique the suture method I intend to use.”

“Oh, I’m not going anywhere, Doctor Proctor,” Jen scoffed. “You can’t make me.”

And then, just like the night in the surgical lounge, Jen’s declaration of defiance seemed to entirely change the energy in the supply room. Ashley’s eyes grew even darker and she strode forward to back Jen up against the table with the stacks of surgical blankets. She stared down at Jen for a moment, face unreadable, before her mouth once again claimed Jen’s in a fiery, wet kiss.

Jen, still wound up from her morning dream and shower session, was immediately primed, her pussy going soft and warm as Ashley’s hands slid into her hair and gripped tight. She arched her hips forward, trying to press herself against Ashley’s thigh.

“No,” Ashley snarled into her mouth. “You have to wait.”

Jen hadn’t known that she could be so susceptible to a domineering presence. No one had ever been like this with her before. A thrill went through her at the idea of

contradicting her usual egalitarian sexual nature and allowing herself to be directed. Ordered. Commanded.

Without a word, Ashley pulled back and turned Jen around to face the table, stretching Jen's arms out over the blanket stack. She leaned forward, over Jen's back, reaching with one hand to pin Jen's wrists down. Her other hand moved Jen's lab coat back and slid under the waistband of her skirt, then her panties. Jen gasped when long, cool fingers touched the hot, soft folds of her pussy, the unexpected temperature play nearly taking her legs out from beneath her. "Oh, fuck."

"Shh." Ashley's fingers surrounded her clit, sliding up and down on either side. Jen squirmed and pressed her ass back against Ashley, biting her lip. Ashley pressed her fingers together and rubbed the root of Jen's clit between them, a firm, deft massage that did nothing to quell the rising heat and everything to stoke the flames higher.

Pressed against the blankets, Jen's nipples hardened. Pleasure rippled in the pit of her stomach, undulating waves all through her insides. She felt warm, liquid, boneless, melting with desire.

"I'm so mad, I'm going to make you come so fucking hard," Ashley whispered, nipping briefly at the shell of Jen's ear. "Do you want to?"

Jen had never wanted anything more. She nodded, her cheek rubbing against the plastic wrap over the blankets. "Yes," she whispered.

"You want me to make you come?"

"Please," Jen groaned, as Ashley's fingers slipped through the wet heat.

One slight adjustment, and Ashley's slender middle finger was pressed directly over Jen's clit. "Come," she said, and the rasped demand went straight to Jen's core.

Everything she knew was focused on that working fingertip. Ashley's hand on her wrist gripped more tightly, pressed her hands down more into the blanket stack. Behind her, Ashley was curved snugly over Jen, holding her completely still. Jen was utterly pinned down, a complete prisoner to her own lust and Ashley's dominance.

Nothing had ever excited her so much in her entire sexual experience. She hadn't known anything could.

Jen bit down on her lip to keep her moans and sighs firmly held back. Rhythmic waves of pleasure were overtaking her completely, making her legs shake the closer she inched to climax. Ashley's fingers were the center of her entire world, rubbing, pressing, sliding, hot, wet, unrelenting?—

Jen pressed her face down into the blankets as the most earthshaking orgasm of her life ripped through her, pulling a long and filthy groan out of her. "Good girl," Ashley was crooning into her ear, her hand still working between Jen's thighs, but more slowly, carefully as Jen began to come down. Gently, her hand eventually stilled, simply cupping Jen's pussy as the last tumultuous aftershocks sent little shudders through her body. "Good girl," she repeated, and Jen all but melted.

They stood, still joined together, still bent over the table, for a moment longer. Then the noise outside the supply room door began to intrude, the sounds of people bustling around and talking, discussing the day's surgical rota. Ashley's hand pulled slowly out of Jen's panties and she released her wrists.

Jen turned around as the cardio surgeon backed off, standing up straight on still-weak legs as she rubbed her wrists, which clearly showed some red handprints. She was absolutely going to have to wait until they subsided before she went to see Maria.

Ashley's face was unreadable again as she observed Jen. "I have to make rounds," she said, a bit flatly, as if she hadn't just wrenched a powerful orgasm out of Jen.

“Will you be all right?”

“Yes,” Jen replied slowly, confusion over what had just happened beginning to set in. What was it between them? Arguing one minute, complete polar opposites, then... this. This thing that had come out of nowhere and was, alarmingly, escalating at a record-breaking pace.

She had questions, but before she could ask even one, Ashley had opened the supply room door and vanished into the corridor. Presumably she would be heading to the nearest bathroom to wash her hands and put herself back together.

It wouldn't be a bad idea for her to get the hell out of Dodge as well, before anyone came in and caught her in a room that was filled with the scents of good sex. She had enough questions; she didn't need anyone else to come in with any of their own.

12

Ashley had specifically chosen her Santa Monica apartment for its breathtaking view of the Pacific Ocean, something she hadn't grown up with in Cleveland, Ohio. But as she stood, fully dressed for work, by the floor-to-ceiling expanse of windows in her living room, eyes fixed on the horizon, she didn't see so much as a seagull flapping by.

All she saw was Jen Colton, bent over a table and a stack of surgical blankets, biting her lip and rolling one blue eye to look at Ashley through a cloud of her silver curls.

Ashley was holding a hot, fresh cup of coffee she'd just made. But she didn't feel the warmth seeping into her hands, nor the smooth ceramic surface under her fingers.

The soft, slippery heat of Jen Colton's clit had been on her fingertips for three days now.

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Over by her couch, her phone went off, buzzing loudly against the birch top of her end table. City, she thought absently, for a brief second before the thought fluttered away and was replaced by the sound of Jen's groan as Ashley had stroked her orgasm out of her.

She'd never been with anyone like Jen Colton. And she could not for the life of her stop thinking about it. It had been a mind-altering, life-changing fuck in a hospital storage room. Absolutely incomprehensible on every level.

Ashley was self-aware enough to know that she was, in fact, the control freak Jen had accused her of being that night in the surgeons' lounge. It was how she'd gotten as far as she had in her career. Being told now was not an acceptable answer for her and never had been.

She wandered over to her oversized gray velvet sofa and curled up in the corner. As near as she could figure out, she'd never before been told you can't by anyone to whom she was attracted to, however unwillingly she was attracted to them.

Well, Jen Colton was actually the first person she'd felt such a strong pull towards despite the intense dislike she held for the woman. That wasn't the point... she thought. Maybe. Or was it? Lots of people had told her she couldn't do something at various points in her life, and she'd gone on to defy them every time, whether she liked them or not. This, however, was the first time sex was involved.

Ashley's head was spinning. Yes, Jen Colton was an attractive woman. No, Ashley did not like her. But oh, God, when Jen squared up and got in Ashley's face, when she said Ashley couldn't make her do something... there had been so many women in

Ashley's life, and she'd never wanted to make them... she squirmed in her seat. She'd never wanted to make them behave. To submit. To bend to her will. That was new.

It was why she'd been ghosting City for three days now, she admitted to herself with guilt. They were good friends, and their sexual relationship was great, and it had fulfilled a number of needs for them both, but Ashley knew something was very different for her now after the supply room encounter. Sex with City wouldn't be the same. It wasn't about just having a mutually pleasurable sexual encounter for the sake of an orgasm now, not for her.

No, she wanted more of whatever that had been with Jen. The bratty cracks, the defiance, the way her nails bit into the palms of her hands when Jen's spirited repartee made Ashley clench her fists. She wanted to be told you can't and then to show Jen that oh, actually, she absolutely could.

And that frightened her more than anything. Because to have that kind of control meant letting go in other ways. Despite this being new for her, Ashley was no dummy. She knew there was a different kind of intimacy in that kind of sexual interaction. And since she was not one for intimacy in general, because intimacy involved feelings and emotions and she did not have space for that in her life... feeling pulled towards any kind of intimacy was a great big red flag.

"We are strong women, Ashley Elizabeth," she heard her mother's voice saying briskly. A vivid memory flashed into her mind, of Rebecca Proctor sitting at the kitchen table of their tiny Cleveland house, busily making tea sandwich after tea sandwich. They would be burying Ashley's father later in the afternoon. A car accident on a rainy day. She could still feel the tears drying on her cheeks. She was nine.

"We will get through this." Rebecca's eyes were dry. Two black dresses hung neatly



on the back of the kitchen door, both impeccably ironed. Rebecca kept spreading cream cheese on bread, laying thin slices of cucumber on top, then another slice of bread. With the same precision she used for stitching up wounds on her clinic patients, she cut the sandwich into two triangles and placed both on top of a growing stack on the plate by her elbow. Ashley remembered listening hard as her mother went on. “It’s just you and me now. You’re going to have to do a lot for yourself from now on, Ashley, do you understand?”

She hadn’t.

Rebecca had sighed and gotten to her feet, setting a glass dome over the sandwiches she’d made. “We have to get ready. People will be coming back here after the funeral. Did you vacuum?”

She’d cried the entire time. But she’d vacuumed. “Yes, Mother.”

Rebecca squared her shoulders and stood up straight. “Then let’s go show them all how strong we can be. They think we will need their help. But we haven’t needed anything so far, and we’ll be fine, won’t we?”

To this day, Ashley didn’t understand at all why her mother had not wanted any help or input from their neighbors. Why she’d kept them closed out, not even accepting so much as a casserole from any of them. But she knew she’d internalized the message Rebecca sent. You’re on your own, kid. You don’t ever need anyone else. Emotions are weakness.

The day after the funeral, Rebecca had returned to work at the medical practice she shared with two other doctors. Ashley had been sent back to school with strict instructions not to bawl like a baby and to get all of her schoolwork done. There was no time to mourn Kenneth Proctor, not then, not ever.

Had that been a healthy upbringing? Ashley didn't have to be a psychiatrist to know it wasn't. But she had the career she wanted, she'd graduated at the top of her class at every level of her education, she was an incredible surgeon. She had surpassed her mother in every way, thanks to Rebecca's cool, pragmatic detachment and harsh lessons.

This thing with Jen Colton threatened to upend all of that. So obviously it couldn't go any further, it had already gone much, much too far. Ashley bit down on her lower lip and peeled away dry skin with her teeth. She truly had no idea what to do.

Another message buzzed through on her phone, and this time she actually looked at it. To her surprise, it was from Chief Sundstrom. She picked up the phone and was horrified to see five missed calls from him. Call me immediately, the message said, tersely.

She fumbled her way through calling him back, and he didn't wait for a word from her when he picked up. "Maria Rivera's had a heart attack," he said, the words short and his tone curt. "Get herenow."

Ashley was positive she was going to get some serious speeding tickets from at least five different Los Angeles suburbs, the way she'd raced to get to Oakridge after the Chief's call. And all eyes were on her as she all but sprinted through the hospital to make her way up to the VIP floor.

She got herself under control as the elevator doors slid open, patting her hair to make sure there were no flyaways. A hallway mirror let her know her cheeks were still flushed a hectic pink, but there was nothing she could do about that now. As she slowly approached Maria Rivera's room, Ashley took in five long, deep breaths. Then she pushed open the door.

Maria's room was buzzing with activity. The Chief was there, of course, his face taut

with concern. A trio of nurses were hard at work around Maria's bed, adjusting her IVs, checking her sitting position, tucking warm blankets around her shoulders. The woman's eyes were open, but her face had taken on an ashier gray tone and her lips were even more blue. They'd taken out her nasal cannula and replaced it with a full mask. The situation was clearly very, very dire.

To Ashley's chagrin, Jen Colton was also there. The transplant director glanced toward her as she walked in, but their eyes met only briefly before Jen's gaze went right back to being fixed on Maria. Her expression was troubled, and Ashley felt an unaccustomed desire to comfort her.

She shook it off. "Status?"

"Stabilized at the moment, but officially critical, Doctor Proctor." Chief Sundstrom's expression was grim. "I believe we're past the point of an implanted device."

"We were past that point five days ago when she came in," Dr. Colton remarked, her voice grim.

Ashley ignored her and moved past the nurses to get to Maria's bedside. Gently, she took the woman's frail wrist in her hand to feel her pulse. It was a soft, feathery beat under the thin skin. "Hello, Ms. Rivera," she said, keeping her tone low. "How are you?"

Maria's free hand crept up and pulled the oxygen mask away slightly. "I could get up and salsa right now if these nurses would let me," came the faint reply, with a bare ghost of a smile.

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“I’ll make sure of that,” Ashley promised, swallowing hard.

On the other side of the bed, there was what might have been a tiny, derisive scoff as Jen moved forward to pull Maria’s hand back from the mask. “Keep that on, Maria. You need every breath,” Jen said, clasping Maria’s slender hand in both of her own. “So cold. I’ll bring you some warm mittens, too. No fingers, so you can use your phone to listen to books.”

There was a book open face-down on Maria’s bedside table, she’d clearly been reading when her heart gave out. She reached for it. “I have books,querida.” But as she tried to pick it back up, she frowned, and her struggle was obvious. “Oh, don’t tell me I can’t evenreadnow.”

“I’ll give you my Audible login, there’s lots of books on there,” Jen told her. She looked closely at the book on the table. “I have this one in my library! Of course I do. You recommended it to me. How many times have you read it?”

“As many as I like,” Maria whispered, her mouth turning up in a faint smile. Her eyes weren’t as sparkling as they usually did, but there was still a special affection in them as she looked up at Jen. Ashley’s gut twisted with jealousy. No one had ever looked at her like that, and that it was her teenage crush looking at the object of her current obsession just made it ten times worse.

There was a sigh from the bed. “I’m so tired,” Maria whispered, her eyelids drooping shut. Jen shot an alarmed glance at the Chief, who shook his head.

“I’m not surprised you’re tired, Ms. Rivera. It’s been a hell of a morning.” He

beckoned to Ashley and Jen as he backed towards the door. “We’ll let you sleep while we discuss our next steps. Then one of us will be back with you to update you when you’re feeling a little better.” Indicating that the women should precede him out of the room, Chief Sundstrom followed them and shut the door firmly behind them.

Before he or Ashley could get a word out, Jen pointed a finger up at Ashley. “I am going to contact UNOS and put Maria on the transplant list today.”

The vehemence in the statement made Ashley step back, but the tone of it also got her back right up. “You’ll do no such thing. I’m the doctor in charge of her care, I’ll be the one making that call.”

“I have no confidence in your care, your judgment has been too conservative?—”

“You’re too close to Ms. Rivera, your judgment is clouded. My judgment has been in cooperation with my patient and her wishes for her healthcare?—”

“She is not a doctor! You are! You’re supposed to give her the best course of action for her whole life, and your reluctance to act radically has cost her more of the time you keep saying you want to save for her?—”

“Doctor Proctor! Doctor Colton!” Chief Sundstrom’s voice cut through their escalating quarrel, and they both fell silent. Ashley glanced around the VIP floor and was mortified to see nurses, orderlies, and cleaning staff all hastily looking away from her.

There were so many people. How on God’s green earth did this keep happening?

Chief Sundstrom took both of them gently by an elbow and steered them towards a conference room. The motion-activated lights flickered on overhead as he closed the door and pulled down all the blinds. Only then did he turn to the two of them, mouth

tight and blue eyes alight with controlled fury. “First off, I am more than tired of hearing two of my most esteemed surgeons at each other’s throats. This is not how medical professionals, especially ones at your levels, should be acting.”

Jen looked as abashed as Ashley felt. “I’m so sorry, Chief,” she said, twisting her fingers together. She looked like she was going to say more, but he held up a hand to stop her and turned his gaze onto Ashley.

“I’m also sorry, Chief Sundstrom,” she said, her face still warm with embarrassment.

“Apologies accepted. And please work out whatever this thing between you two is.” He waved a hand between them, and Ashley blushed hot for a split second before she realized he could have no way of knowing of their sexual tryst. He was only referring to the professional tension between them. “I am not removing either of you from Ms. Rivera’s care, so you’ve got to make it work.”

Ashley cleared her throat, and carefully avoided looking at Jen. “With respect, I do think Doctor Colton’s personal closeness to Ms. Rivera is hampering her ability to provide objective care and solutions.”

“She’s our director of transplants and organ procuring,” Sundstrom replied, clearly exasperated. “What would you have me do? She is, in fact, the physician who should be contacting UNOS. Which she’s going to have to do when we’re done here.” He pulled out a chair at the end of the conference table and sat down, gesturing for the two of them to do the same. “Time is really of the essence now. We’re going to hammer out an urgent, top priority treatment plan before we leave this room.”

Ashley sat down in the chair nearest to the door, watching as Jen sat down opposite her. She took in a breath. “I need to work with Sandra Ramsey to schedule an LVAD installation as soon as possible. And under normal circumstances I’d suggest then that we send Ms. Rivera home, but I really would prefer to keep her here so that we can

monitor her very closely while we wait for a heart.”

“I’m going to press for her to be put at the top of the recipient list,” Jen advised. “I truly don’t believe she has much time, otherwise. Her heart is failing more rapidly than even I expected. She was reading a book when the infarct happened, for Christ’s sake. Just sitting in bed, it’s not even some kind of smutty romance or insanely violent action novel. She’s reading a biography of Ruth Bader Ginsburg.”

“I agree,” Chief Sundstrom nodded. “We have no more time to waste in arguing courses of action. At this point, Ms. Rivera needs her heart to be supported, and a new one on the way as soon as possible. Can the two of you agree on that?”

Ashley loathed not being able to be the one to call UNOS. It felt wrong that she wouldn’t be shepherding this new heart into Maria’s chest every step of the way. But there was nothing she could do. Policy-wise, she knew this was how it had to be. And she was nothing if not a stickler for policy, regardless of how she felt about Jennifer Colton. “I can agree on that. Can I go meet with Sandra now?”

“Absolutely. Get that LVAD procedure on the wall. Doctor Colton, you get on the horn to UNOS and make your case.” The Chief glanced between the two of them. “We’re not going to have any further problems. Right?”

“No, Chief,” they replied in unison, getting to their feet.

He left first, leaving the two of them in the room together. Jen gripped the back of her chair with both her hands and looked directly at Ashley. “Doctor Proctor,” she began, eyes steady, and Ashley’s heart dropped into her stomach like a lead weight as the woman went on, “Do you think we need to talk about what?—”

“I’ve got to go schedule that surgery with Sandra,” Ashley blurted, and fled the room, cheeks absolutely burning.

“I don’t love these kinds of events,” Jen announced, swirling her champagne flute in her hand. She ran a hand down the close-fitting skirt of her pale blue dress. “I feel like I’m not getting anything valuable done here.”



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“You look very decorative and everyone wants to meet you,” Steve replied blithely, letting his wife, Elyse, straighten the bowtie at his neck. “That’s very valuable in the eyes of the hospital board.”

The three of them were all grouped together in a corner of the Claiburne Hotel’s large, elegant ballroom, watching as other small groups of people ate canapes and guzzled down gallons of bubbly. The hospital threw two upscale fundraising events each year, and much to Jen’s dismay, she’d been told when she was hired that as a department head, she was expected to attend them. She’d missed the early summer gala since she hadn’t been working for Oakridge at the time, but there was no getting out of this sparkling just post-Thanksgiving, pre-Christmas event.

Elyse Sundstrom, a veteran of many an Oakridge fundraiser, stepped around her husband to stand before Jen and look her over with appraising green eyes. “This is a lovely dress,” she said, reaching out to pinch a fold of the icy blue velvet. “The way it sets off your hair and eyes is perfect. Oh, but—” Reaching into her curly blonde updo, she extracted a hairpin and advanced on Jen with it. “There’s a little lock of hair that needs some extra security. I always have my hairdresser stick some extra pins in me so I can help with things like that.”

“You’re amazing,” Jen breathed, bowing her head so that Elyse could work her magic. “I hadn’t noticed. I don’t usually care about my hair.”

“It’s beautiful hair. I’d love to be able to go silver like you. My hair just grows out the color of dirty dishwater if I don’t keep up with my bleaching schedule.” Elyse stepped back, the iridescent black bugle beads on her own gown glittering in the ballroom light. “There. Absolutely beautiful. You look like an ice princess, Jen.”

“Thank you, Elyse. I appreciate you recommending me to your personal shopper. I wouldn’t have known where to begin. Not just with the formalwear at all, but...” Jen gestured to her height, or lack thereof. “The whole being short thing.”

“We can’t all be willowy brunettes,” Elyse replied lightly, tilting her head to indicate Ashley Proctor standing on the other side of the ballroom. Jen followed her gaze.

Ashley was with a petite redhead in a bias-cut copper silk gown. Unlike everyone else in the room, the redhead had chosen to leave her incredible crown of spiraling curls loose and free, tumbling down the delicate curve of her spine. She looked like an autumn sprite, one with a deliciously sexy air about her. Jen was intrigued by prim, closed-off Ashley’s choice to bring someone so clearly free spirited and her polar opposite as a date.

“I’m going to say hello,” Jen murmured, absently setting her champagne flute on the tray of a passing waiter.

“Behave yourself,” Steve warned. Jen waved a careless hand at him as she began to make her way through the crowd.

Ashley looked up as she approached, wariness in her brown eyes. Jen noticed how especially pretty Ashley looked this evening, even though her burgundy silk jersey gown was high-necked and, apart from a surprisingly high leg slit, cut much too severely in Jen’s opinion. Her hair wasn’t in its usual tight French twist, however. Someone—Jen suspected the livewire redhead—had convinced her to wear it in a sleek, low ponytail that flowed down her back. It amazed Jen to see how much hair had been contained in the tightly pinned up style Ashley wore every day.

“Doctor Proctor.” Jen smiled politely. Now that she was here, she wondered what she’d been thinking. They hadn’t really spoken since putting Maria’s LVAD in together the week before, a procedure that had gone smoothly and with little

conversation. And not once had they spoken about what had happened in the supply room. Jen was actually fairly certain the cardiac surgeon was avoiding her.

Now, Ashley smiled back at her, a tight, nervous smile. She looked like she would cheerfully volunteer to be stuck full of thumbtacks if it meant she would be taken away from this moment. “Doctor Colton.”

“Doctor Jennifer Colton? Hi.” The redhead stuck out a delicately freckled hand. “I’m Felicity Davis. You can call me City. I’m so pleased to meet you.”

That made Jen’s eyebrow lift up. Someone who knew Ashley Proctor, pleased to see her? Interesting. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. I’ve heard a lot about you from Ashley.” City had big brown eyes that twinkled with merriment. “You certainly do drive her up a wall. I’ve been dying to meet you for that alone.”

“City!” Ashley gasped, her eyes widening in horror. Jen bit her lip to keep from giggling. She hadn’t expected to like the troublemaking ginger, but she did, instantly.

“I think I’ve seen you at the Indigo Lounge, actually, Doctor Colton,” City remarked. “Do you know the owners, the Hartley-Blooms? They’re here tonight.”

“You have, and I’m sorry I missed you there,” Jen replied lightly. She was intrigued by the situation before her. The way City was gently tweaking Ashley’s nose, so to speak, was absolutely fascinating. Jen would have put good money on nobody in the world being allowed to do that. “I’ve met Esme, we’ve had some great conversations. But not Nora.”

“Nora buys art at the gallery I manage.” City twisted her arm through Jen’s and led her over to an attractive pair of women admiring a graceful bronze sculpture that

suggested a nude woman, dancing. “I’m hoping Esme can talk her into buying this piece for the Lounge. We’ve loaned it to the hotel for the month. But wouldn’t it look perfect in the decompression room at the Lounge?”

That caught the attention of one of the women by the statue, who looked over at them with a lovely smile on her face. “Oh, City, it really would be ideal there.” She tucked a lock of her long salt and pepper hair behind her ear and looked at her partner, a striking blonde with a mercenary air about her. “Nora, don’t you think it would?”

“I do. But I also have to consider how much we’re going to be giving to the hospital, Esme, since that’s what we’re actually here for.” The blonde, Nora, shook her head at her wife. “City, you troublemaker.”

“It’s my best talent,” City replied lightly, tossing her head of tumbling curls. “Right, Ashley?”

Jen hadn’t noticed that Ashley had trailed along behind them as they approached the Hartley-Blooms. She looked increasingly uncomfortable as City’s arm remained twined with Jen’s. Perhaps even slightly annoyed, Jen thought. Experimentally, she tugged City in closer and watched as Ashley’s eyes narrowed. How very, very interesting.

There was not much, Jen thought, that she wouldn’t give to know what the hell was going on in Ashley Proctor’s head right now.

As she and City watched, Ashley swallowed hard, her cheeks flushed, and she snatched a champagne flute off a nearby tray. “I need some air,” she announced, a split second before she turned on her heel and began to push her way through the crowd.

“Hm,” City said, tapping one perfectly manicured finger on her own glass of

champagne as she tugged Jen into a little wall niche with a small bench. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear that my dear friend Ashley was having a little bit of a jealous moment. How fascinating.”

Jen slid a sidelong glance towards her. “Do tell.”

“That woman has all but ghosted me lately,” City replied, just before taking a large swig out of her glass. “Then she texts me today to ask me if I’ll come to this with her. I was already coming as the gallery’s representative, but I say sure. Because she’s talked about you a lot.”

“So you said.” Jen picked at her bottom lip, heedless of the lipstick she knew she was getting all over her fingers. “What did you mean by that? She doesn’t like me...”

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“Oh, that’s bullshit and you know it.” City chortled with glee. “I mean, no, she doesn’t, but also yes, she does, and I get the distinct feeling that you two have fucked. Yes?”

Blunt language aside, Jen wasn’t sure what the right answer was, not without getting onto some kind of firmer ground about the relationship between Ashley and City. “Well...”

City waved a hand in the air. “Ashley and I are just friends,” she said, shaking her head. “With benefits, yes, but friends. You wouldn’t be stepping on anything between us. Though I was extremely put out by the ghosting thing.”

“I’m sorry,” Jen said quietly.

“Why? It’s definitely all on her. I appreciate the sentiment, though.” City twisted on the bench to look Jen squarely in the eye. “I don’t like it when Ashley does that, but I’m used to it. She shuts herself off from people a lot when she doesn’t know how to cope with something. She would be amazed if she knew I knew that about her.”

“I’m amazed you know that about her.” Jen was learning more and more about Ashley than she’d ever expected. “You must be very good friends, benefits or not.”

“I think I’m her only friend, if you can even call me that,” City mused. “We met at the Lounge years ago. I’ve never known her to really talk about any other person, except her boss there—” She pointed at Steve Sundstrom. “And recently, you.”

Jen wasn’t sure she actually wanted to know what Ashley said about her, but she did

feel she had to know. “What did she say?”

“Nothing flattering, sorry. You definitely get under her skin. Don’t worry, she doesn’t tell me about patient details.” City sipped her champagne. “But she has talked about how you’re pushy about organ donation, you’re like a carnival huckster, you’re too friendly with everyone at the hospital. Once she read me some kind of article about you in a magazine and raged about your ‘reckless ways’ for a solid hour until I got my hands on her and calmed her down.”

“That doesn’t sound as bad as I was thinking it would be,” Jen admitted.

City tilted her head from side to side, lips pursed and her eyes thoughtful. “You should see her when she goes off. Something about you really pushes some buttons with her. I’d love to know what. Past trauma, I’m sure my therapist would say.”

“What kind of past trauma?” Jen asked, curious.

But City only shrugged, an eloquent, almost liquid movement of her freckle-dusted shoulders. “That would require me to know more about Ashley than she allows. Our relationship is not that deep, though I do adore her.” Lifting her champagne flute, she took a large swig of her drink. “But as mad as you seem to make her, she also seems to like it that way. She wouldn’t talk about you so much if she didn’t. I’d be interested to see if whatever this is between you goes further.” She cocked her head and regarded Jen with interest. “I wonder if you could get her to open up. Crack her like the stubborn walnut she is and figure her out. I’d love to know what’s in her head.”

“I am sure you’re not alone,” Jen chuckled.

City smiled faintly. “I’m sure.” Getting to her feet, she grabbed Jen’s hand and pulled her up after her. “There’s a little rooftop mini-garden at this hotel. Ashley and I have

been up there a few times. Hardly anyone knows about it, and I'd bet good money that she's up there. You should go find her."

"Should I?" Uncertainty twisted in Jen's stomach. As angry as Ashley often made her, she genuinely couldn't deny the pull between them. Ashley must feel it, too. But where Jen wanted to figure it out, Ashley seemed to want to just run away from it. Would it be fair to corner her and force her to talk about it?

"Well, yes. You don't get answers if you don't ask questions. As a doctor, you know that." City drained her champagne glass and traded it to a waiter for a full one that she passed on to Jen. After a second of thought, she grabbed another and handed it over too. "I think you'll both need one of these."

"That seems right," Jen agreed, accepting the flutes. "Where's this rooftop garden, again?"

City grabbed her own glass and took Jen by the elbow. "I'll show you."

14

There were a few chips in the black enamel paint that covered the iron railing around the Claiburne's rooftop garden. Ashley felt their rough edges biting into her fingers as she gripped it. She welcomed the sensation. It felt like it was keeping her tethered to the world.

Her thoughts whirled. Jen, looking like a Disney princess in a velvety blue gown. City, an absolute demon wreaking havoc in ways that Ashley hadn't expected. And the two of them arm in arm! She couldn't decide if it was a dream or a nightmare.

So she'd grabbed her wide pashmina shawl from the coat check and fled up here to the little garden on the roof. A tactical error, actually, since it brought back memories



of the several times she and City had sneaked up here during other galas and gotten up to no good while they looked out over Los Angeles. Ashley pressed the heels of her hands to her forehead, where a dull throb had set up shop about thirty minutes ago.

Behind her, the heavy roof access door creaked noisily open, and she whirled around, heart pounding. To her shock, Jen slipped through the doorway and onto the roof, glasses of champagne in each of her hands. She kicked the door shut with her foot, wobbling slightly. “Oof, I shouldn’t have tried that in heels.” There was a bright smile on her face when she glanced around and found Ashley. “Hi.”

Ashley fumbled behind her to grip the railing again. “Doctor Colton.”

Jen’s blue eyes rolled skyward. “Jesus. Do you not think we are way beyond formal titles when we’re not at the hospital? You’ve had your hand in my panties.”

Jesus indeed. Ashley didn’t know where to look. And if she blushed any harder, she might pass out. “What a thing to say.”

“Well, it seems silly to keep tiptoeing around the subject.” Jen stepped forward and held out one of the champagne flutes. “Drink that. Good Lord.” She looked around the small garden area. “They don’t really keep up with appearances up here, do they? I hope you’ve had your tetanus booster.”

Reluctantly, Ashley released the railing and took the proffered glass. “What do you want, Doctor Col... Jennifer?”

A sigh, and another eyeroll. “Fine. Jennifer will work for now. Close enough. Ashley, we can’t go on without discussing...well, everything.”

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“How much of everything?” Ashley asked, suspicious.

“All of it.” Jen crossed her arms over her chest. “Why you hate me so much, for starters.”

“Hate is a strong word for it.” Ashley gulped down half of her champagne, wincing as it burned a mildly acidic trail down her esophagus. It always astounded her how Oakridge and the Claiburne cheaped out on the alcohol for these events.

“Given the literal screaming matches we’ve had on multiple occasions... are you sure?” Jen cocked her head, her eyes full of questions. “But okay, I’ll dial it back. You definitely don’t like me, your little friend down there confirmed that much. But then you also seem to struggle with keeping your hands off of me.” She lifted her glass to her mouth, her gaze locked onto Ashley’s.

Ashley could only swallow hard, her nerves having formed a huge lump in her throat. And her mouth was dry. “I...”

“I don’t mind the hands thing,” Jen volunteered. “I really, really do not. But the rollercoaster of rage-lust-rage-lust-snit fit, that’s taking its toll on me. Apart from anything else between us, we are adults. Adults who work together doing very important work that literally changes peoples’ lives. We’ve got to get on the same page in every conceivable way. So, we talk.”

Inhaling sharply, Ashley set her glass down on a nearby planter and gazed up at the sky. By all rights, she should be alight with fury right now, ready to shout and fight. Instead, she wanted nothing more than to flee this trap. Talk? That would presumably

involve some kind of feelings? No, thank you.

Unfortunately, Ashley was fairly certain that City was lurking in the stairwell, so even if she felt comfortable bowling Jen over to get to the door, she'd then have to deal with someone who actually knew where she lived. It seemed there would be no getting out of this feelings fest.

"I'll go first, so you can have a second to think about what you want to say." Jen drew herself up to stand taller, which Ashley found absolutely adorable, quite against her will. "Since the day we met, I've found you incredibly attractive and also insanely hard to deal with. I know you're a world-class cardiac surgeon and you're going to be a fantastic Chief of Cardio when the time comes, but only if you pull the stick out of your very shapely behind."

Ashley's jaw dropped. She had no idea how to respond to this, let alone think of a way to discuss her own feelings without starting a fight.

Jen continued, relentlessly. "My late wife, Nina, God rest her soul, was absolutely nothing like you. She was a wonderful person with a beautifully open, generous soul. Maybe you, too, are a wonderful person. I have no idea because you've been so combative with me from day one. But I still find you irresistible in a way my Nina would be laughing about if she were here." She paused, her blue eyes so frank and clear that Ashley knew she meant every word. "Your turn."

Her heart clenched in her chest in a way that would give her cause for alarm if she weren't a cardiothoracic surgeon. This was not her area of expertise. Still, after the scolding they'd gotten from Sundstrom the other day, she knew Jen was right, and they had to come to some kind of mutual understanding. "You drive me crazy," she admitted. "You are daring. Unafraid. You have a lot of passion. It's frightening, the way you let it lead you in your work. I think you let it go too far sometimes. You want to change too much, too fast, and you lack respect for tried-and-true methods."

“Tried is the key word there,” Jen replied, her gaze steady. “Those methods you champion so much were just as new once as anything I push for today. Innovation is a necessity in the field of saving lives.”

“But slowly, carefully, minimizing the risk of harm—we took the same oaths, Jennifer.” It was a struggle to keep a lid on her temper, on the part of her that wanted to steamroll over Jen with facts and logic and her own deep-seated need to be right all the time. “Also? You get too close to everyone, to patients, to the staff, to the damn kid that runs the coffee cart in the hospital lobby. I believe this clouds your judgment to an almost dangerous degree.”

“And I believe that your extreme level of detachment prevents you from providing the highest quality of care that I know you’ve got in you. As I said, you are a superb surgeon. I have seen you work.” Jen’s chin was up and her jaw set. “But you hold yourself so far back that people find it difficult to trust you. If I am too close, you are too far. Which leads me nicely into my next point.” She gestured between the two of them with her nearly-empty champagne glass. “Us. This thing we have. You haven’t addressed that, and it’s as important as our work differences.”

“It shouldn’t happen again,” Ashley reached behind herself and gripped the railing again, panic rising in her throat. “It never should have happened.”

“But it did.” Jen set down her glass and stepped forward, forcing Ashley against the railing. “And what would you say if I told you I wanted it to happen again?”

“I...”

“What if I told you I wanted to reach under your skirt right now and take off what you’re wearing? That I want to taste you?” With her next step, Jen’s body was pressed against Ashley’s, and Ashley could feel that, like herself, Jen wasn’t wearing a bra under the soft blue velvet. “It seems unfair. You made me come, but I wasn’t

allowed to return the favor.”

As Ashley gripped the railing, desire and fear swirling in her stomach, Jen’s deft surgeon’s fingers traced along the slit in her skirt. Ashley bit her bottom lip and mentally blessed and cursed City for pushing her to wear the Ralph Lauren gown.

Slowly, Jen slid down to her knees. Her fingers nudged the slit of Ashley’s dress wide open and crept under the waistband of Ashley’s black lace panties. Her eyes remained fixed on Ashley’s and she waited, her hands curled around a handful of panty. Anticipation crackled between them. Ashley closed her eyes.

“Please,” she breathed out, in her thinnest possible whisper.

Her soaked, hot, folds had been warm and full even before Jen went for her panties. As the black lace was peeled down her thighs and off her feet, the feel of the cool November air on it sent a shiver rocketing up her spine, and she shuddered out a sigh.

A sigh that quickly became a gasp when Jen’s lips closed around her clit and ever-so-gently sucked at it. The very tip of her nimble tongue teased the sensitive bit of skin, almost toying with it. It was pleasurable intense, making Ashley flex up and stand on her toes. A groan wanted to spiral up from her stomach, but she only bit her lip harder.

The Los Angeles breeze flirted and toyed with the fringe on her pashmina, with her bangs and her ponytail. Ashley’s head fell back and her fingers tightened around the iron railing as Jen’s lips and tongue made her knees weak.

Hands, small but strong, slid under her dress and around to grip her ass and pull her closer, giving Jen’s mouth full access to every inch of Ashley’s pussy. Ashley freed one hand from its death grip on the railing and reached down to bury it in the soft cloud of Jen’s curls. Her fingers curved to cradle Jen’s head, and her hips rocked

forward into the hot, wet eagerness of the mouth that licked, sucked, and softly nipped at the very core of herself.

She'd never been bold or daring enough to have sex outdoors, where anyone could see or hear her. A titillating urge came over her, to unclip the hook holding her halter top up and let it fall to expose her breasts to the evening air. She didn't, but her nipples tightened at the thought.

Ashley hadn't known she could learn so many surprising new things about herself in such a short time.

Pleasure, electric and insistent, was beginning to wash through her as Jen ate her out. All of her focus was narrowed down to the little button of flesh between her legs, the firm hands squeezing her ass, the buzzy little hums of satisfaction as Jen licked and tasted and nibbled.

She'd kept her groans pushed down in her belly for as long as she could. Her fingers gripped at a handful of Jen's hair as her climax all but exploded from her, forcing out a shuddering gasp that rang sharply out into the night air. Her back pressed into the railing as her whole body tensed and then relaxed, and then she could only bend forward over Jen, letting her hand slide off the kneeling woman's head and down to her shoulder. She was gratified that Jen held her as she came down, arms wrapped around Ashley's thighs and her head pressed against Ashley's stomach.

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They stayed this way, in a surprisingly comfortable silence, for a while. The sounds of the city honked and rushed up towards them from Sunset Boulevard. Slowly, Ashley felt her breathing return to normal. It was with extreme reluctance that she finally straightened up and sighed.

Jen seemed just as reluctant to let go of Ashley and get to her feet. But she did, stepping back with a wary expression on her face that actually caused a pang of guilt to pierce Ashley's heart. She knew she deserved that kind of kid-glove caution. As confused about her feelings as she remained, however, she was determined at least to not get back on her personal emotional rollercoaster about it. This time, she was not going to allow herself to bite Jen Colton's head off, or to let her feelings affect their work.

She was going to try. With effort, Ashley pulled herself up to stand straight and even managed to offer a shy smile that seemed to make Jen drop a little of her distrusting expression. The pang of guilt was replaced with a tiny bit of a relief.

"We have more to talk about, you know," Jen said at last, bending down and grabbing something Ashley couldn't quite see from the ground.

Ashley nodded. "I know."

Jen cocked her head. "It's a Friday evening. I don't have anything on my agenda tomorrow except to visit Maria. I think you've got something on the wall, a stent thing but not until tomorrow afternoon. Right?"

"Right," Ashley echoed, puzzled about where this was going.

“Good. Good.” Jen nodded, a tiny little satisfied smile on her face.

The silence stretched out between them until Ashley couldn’t take it anymore. “Okay, so, what, then?”

“Oh. Right.” With a wide grin that Ashley could only callshit-eating, as City would put it, Jen held up Ashley’s black lace panties up in the air like a little Victoria’s Secret flag, “So if you want these back, you’re going to have to follow me home.”

15

The deep, satisfied moan that unfurled from Ashley’s mouth as Jen slowly pushed the thick vibrator into her pussy was music to Jen’s ears. She could only smile as she watched Ashley bite her plump, pink bottom lip and arch her head back against Jen’s fluffy down pillows. There was still a restraint about the heart surgeon as she allowed herself to be fucked within an inch of her life, but at the same time she was more free now, letting out tiny whimpers of pleasure as Jen pressed the curved vibrator up against her G-spot.

Jen pressed a kiss to Ashley’s knee as she worked the vibrator, pushing it in deeper to let the special little buzzy nub work its magic against Ashley’s clit, pulling it back out to let the deeper vibration at the head send rumbles through her G-spot. Ashley was clutching fistfuls of cotton sheet in her hands, pushing her hips up in frustration as Jen pulled the vibrator back from her clit yet again. “Stop that,” she growled, opening her eyes. One hand came up to grab Jen’s wrist. Jen pulled the vibrator further back.

“Ah, ah, ah,” she said, shaking her head and laughing as Ashley snarled. As Jen pushed the vibrator firmly home again, Ashley’s head fell back on the pillows once more and her hand dropped away from Jen’s wrist.

Holding the vibrator pressed close to Ashley’s clit, Jen straddled Ashley’s thigh and



began to grind her pussy against the smooth skin. Their soft gasps and whimpers mingled in the air as their orgasms built and rose and finally crested. Jen's back arched, and she barely held on to keep the vibrator in place against Ashley's clit as she also arched up from the bed.

With one last sigh, Jen slumped down next to Ashley and carefully began to pull the vibrator free, tossing it aside once she'd eased it out completely. Beside her, Ashley was limp, her sleek ponytail thoroughly rumped and mussed, long legs splayed out, eyelids drooping over glassy brown eyes. Jen marveled at the sight. After all these weeks of tight, restrained Ashley, it was incredible to see her sprawled out and thoroughly fucked in Jen's own bed.

Jen propped her head on her hand. "Want a drink?" she asked, admiring the view next to her. "I've got lemon sparkling water, Diet Coke, I can make you a cup of tea if you like."

"Mm. Lemon water is nice," Ashley murmured, flinging an arm over her forehead. Her eyelids drooped more and more shut.

Chuckling to herself, Jen slipped out of bed and headed for her kitchen, not even bothering to put on a bathrobe. She put together a little tray with highball glasses of ice, a can of cold sparkling lemon water for them to split, and, after some thought, a small plate of grapes, cheese cubes, pita bread, and hummus. She was always ravenous after sex, and she hadn't eaten much at the gala. Probably Ashley hadn't either.

By the time she'd returned to her bedroom, Ashley looked somewhat recovered and was sitting up against the padded headboard of Jen's bed, the down comforter pulled over her lap. Her hair was still an absolute mess, to Jen's amazement and delight. She really would have expected the priss to re-emerge and tidy it up while she had a moment alone, but apparently not.

Ashley was holding a framed photo in her hands that Jen usually kept on her bedside table. It was one she'd taken herself. Nina, a smile like sunshine on her face, holding her hair back with one hand as it flew around her head in the wind. They'd been on a boat off the coast of Maine, hoping to see whales. And after hours and hours, the boat was about to turn around, and then they saw it: a majestically huge humpback whale, heaving itself out of the Atlantic Ocean, a white spray of water surrounding it as it crested and then splashed back down.

Jen had managed to catch the magical moment that Nina turned back to her to ask, "Did you see that?"

Now, Ashley looked up at Jen, with the photo of Jen's dead wife in her hands. "Is this Nina? Your wife?"

"Yes." Jen took a deep breath and carefully set the tray of goodies down on the bed before sitting down and wrapping one of the throw blankets she kept at the end of the bed around herself. "When she was healthy."

She expected Ashley to ask how Nina had died, like so many did. Instead, to her surprise, Ashley set the photo back down and poured them each a glass of the sparkling water. "How did you two meet?"

"Intern year. We both matched to Mass Gen, she for internal med, me for general surgery." Jen picked up a cheese cube and a grape and popped them into her mouth. Chewing thoroughly gave her time to think about how she wanted to tell the story. She finally swallowed. "We met in a bar near the hospital one night when we'd both gone out with our intern groups. Hit it off right away. Typical 90s lesbians, we did in fact move in with each other immediately." She smiled wryly.

Ashley turned her highball glass around in her hands, taking a few sips of water. "And you stayed together?"

“We got split up when she decided she wanted to do a pulmonology fellowship at the Mayo Clinic. But we were prepared for that—she’d told me from the night we met that that was her dream. She was from Minnesota; she’d grown up wanting to do pulmonology there. We both knew it was coming, and we made it work. The internet was a new thing then, but we got ourselves a pair of AOL accounts and learned how to email. Took full advantage of AT&T free nights and weekends long distance calling, too.” Jen nibbled at another cheese cube. “It wasn’t easy, but we loved each other. So we handled it.”

Setting aside the glass, Ashley picked up the photo again. “I can’t imagine what it would be like to love someone that much. Toneedsomeone that much.”

“Have you never had a relationship like that?” Jen asked. In the next instant she was shocked when Ashley shook her head. “Never?”

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“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I don’t really get close to people,” Ashley said dryly, her mouth quirking up in a half-smile that made Jen chuckle. “No. City’s as close as I’ve ever come, but... I don’t love her. Not like that. And honestly, she’s...” She swallowed and picked her water glass up again to take a few more sips before inhaling deeply and looking Jen squarely in the eyes. “City is really my only friend. I mean, that I’ve ever had.”

Jen’s heart skipped a beat at how lonely that sounded. At Ashley’s age, she’d been at a similarly demanding stage of her surgical career, but she’d had Nina, she’d had friends like Maria. “Even as a kid?”

Ashley set aside the photo and her glass and picked at her cuticles. Jen saw her swallow and suck in a breath. “Not really. I... my father died when I was nine. My mom was a family practice doctor who hadn’t expected to become a single parent. And she wasn’t...” She looked visibly uncomfortable, and Jen knew this had to be hard on her. “I love my mother. But she was not an easy woman to have as a mother, especially after my father died. She’d always been fairly detached and preached self-sufficiency, but it got a lot worse once it was just the two of us.”

Jen reached over to take Ashley’s hand. “I’m sorry.”

“I survived it.” But the smile on Ashley’s face as she said it struck Jen as being nailed on, a bit forced, and practiced, like she’d had to do it for too much of her life. Jen’s heart broke as Ashley went on. “I think that’s why I had such a problem with you. You’re everything I never got to be. I never had the room to be so passionate about my work, because I had no support, because I kept people at arm’s length. I don’t get close to my colleagues or patients because my mother engrained it in me to be

incredibly independent.”

Pulling her blanket more closely around herself, Jen scooted closer to Ashley. “You know, it doesn’t have to be like that anymore. We can start fresh, right here and now. I’d love for you to feel like you can rely on me. And I’d like to be your friend.”

Ashley shot her a sidelong glance. “You’re awfully naked for a friend.”

“I have it on good authority I’m not even your first naked friend,” Jen quipped. “Anyway, I didn’t want to jump the gun, I only just got you to admit you had parents and didn’t just spawn in some kind of uptight priss laboratory in Topeka.”

She was shocked when Ashley snatched a pillow out from behind herself and whacked her right in the face with it. Screeching with laughter, Jen launched herself across the bed in a tackle to start a tickle fight that lasted until they started kissing, and then the kissing led to more interesting things...

16

Mmm. So warm. Ashley yawned and stretched. Do I smell pancakes? This isn’t my bed. Eh?

She blinked and sat up to look around. The bedroom she was in was a bit bare, but sunny and well-lit. It was done up in a palette of pale blues, white, and seafoam green. Lots of soft downy bedding and pillows, sheer curtains, and fluffy white rugs made it feel cozy and comfortable, which she thought might be why she felt well-rested despite the champagne she’d consumed last night.

Her glance fell on the bedside table, where her phone sat next to a photo of a pretty brunette in sunglasses, with the most gorgeous smile she’d ever seen. Nina. She finally collected all of her scattered wits and remembered. This was Jen Colton’s

place. They'd come back here and... Ashley blushed as she looked over at the other bedside table and saw a sizeable purple vibrator sitting there.

They'd had sex. Lots of sex. And they'd talked. More and more came back to her, and Ashley put a hand to her head as she clutched the comforter to her chest. She'd opened up last night, like she never had before. Things she'd never even told City she'd talked to Jen Colton about. And somehow, instead of being overloaded with panic, there was an unfamiliar sensation of... contentment, she thought it might be. Of a burden shared, and therefore halved. She felt lighter than she could ever recall.

And she'd unbent to allow something no one, not even City, was permitted...

As she was trying to figure out how to process it, Jen bustled into the room, carrying a big tray of breakfast goods. Her smile was radiant, her curly mane tied back from her face with a deep purple ribbon that matched the amethyst shift dress she was wearing. "Hi, Ash." Jen put the tray down on the bed and climbed in next to her, leaning over to give her a kiss on the cheek. "I made pancakes. Gooood pancakes."

She had smelled pancakes. Ashley looked at the tray in awe. Pancakes, two kinds of jam, real maple syrup, a dish of creamy butter studded with big salt crystals, and a bowl of sliced strawberries filled most of it. There was also a carafe of orange juice and a pair of glasses. She recalled last night that Jen had brought a tray of post-coital snacks to the bed as well. "Who are you?" she asked, shaking her head in wonder. "Martha Freakin' Stewart?"

"I just enjoy a certain standard of living," Jen said primly, filling a small plate with two pancakes, butter, maple syrup, and strawberries. "I bet you don't even eat breakfast half the time."

Ashley had to admit she wasn't great about it. "I usually eat a bowl of Raisin Bran and a protein bar," she admitted. "It's... sort of balanced."

“Jesus. And here I felt guilty for not making eggs or sausage or some other source of protein. At least I’m feeding you something better than cardboard flakes and a Styrofoam bar. Eat, eat.” Jen handed over the plate she’d filled and picked up another one.

The pancakes were perfectly fluffy, the salted butter a perfect contrast with the rich maple syrup. The strawberries were juicy and ripe, surprisingly red for December even in California. Ashley wasn’t sure she could go back to cereal and protein bars after this.

Jen was chewing on a bite of pancake and looking thoughtful. “I think I actually have something you can wear to the hospital, if you want to just leave from here. Something that’s not an evening gown. As fetching as you looked in it, I don’t think it’s really the thing for a stent procedure.”

Ashley felt her eyebrows go up. “How can you have something for me to wear? We don’t have the same style, and anyway, any skirt you have will probably look like a belt on me.”

Jen rolled her eyes heavenward. “Grant me strength. I had no idea you were such a snarky one. I’ve got half a mind to throw you back out into the water.” Setting her plate aside, she stood up and walked over to a closet. “I bought a very nice navy suit a couple months ago. It needs tailoring to fit me, it’s much too long, which means it should be perfect on you. I won’t have a blouse that fits, but here’s a black silk camisole. A little edgier than your usual look, but maybe no one will notice.”

“I have a spare blouse in my office, anyway.” Ashley spotted her black silk sandals on the floor next to a chair draped with throw blankets. “And spare shoes, thank God.”

“Those will coordinate neatly enough with the camisole, at least.” Jen carefully set

the suit down on the chair. “The whole shebang will get you to the hospital.” Sitting back down on the bed, she picked her plate back up and stuffed another bite of pancake into her mouth, chewing and swallowing quickly. “We took my car here. Shall I drive you to the hotel to get yours, or would you prefer to Uber?”

Each word out of Jen’s mouth felt dangerously close to popping the bubble of happiness they existed in at the moment. The sultry yet fairy-like Jen of last night had been replaced by Dr. Jen Colton, M.D. and F.A.C.S., an entity far more pragmatic than Ashley had ever given her credit for being before today. “I haven’t decided yet,” she hedged, nibbling on the edge of her own bite of pancake. “I’ll figure it out. We’ve got time.”

“We do have time.” The look on Jen’s face as she licked a dab of rich, dark cherry jam off of her index finger was what Ashley could only describe as naughty. “Eat, please. I’d like to show you something.”

“Show me something?” Ashley raised an eyebrow, but obediently began shoveling her stack of pancakes into her mouth.

Jen dipped her finger into the cup of cherry jam again, taking a bigger dab of the deep garnet jam onto the tip. Slowly, in a devilish way that made heat arrow directly to Ashley’s core, she stuck her finger between her lips and millimeter by millimeter, pulled it out again, sucked pristinely clean. “Show you,” she agreed, with a wink.



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Within what seemed like seconds, Ashley had cleaned her plate and was standing, open-mouthed, in the bathing heaven that was Jen's bathroom. Jen had handed her a plush, neatly rolled turquoise bath towel, but Ashley's fingers loosened and dropped it to the floor as she tried to take in what she was seeing. "This is your bathroom?"

"Mmhmm." Jen walked over to the shower and began twisting the various handles. Steamy water began to stream out of what seemed to Ashley like dozens of nozzles. "Like it?"

"I think I'd give up my ocean view for it," Ashley whispered, her eyes fixed on a handheld shower head that was giving her some very distinct ideas. Tugging at the end of the purple ribbon in Jen's hair, she pulled it until it unfurled and fell to the floor, releasing the silver tumble of curls. "Strip and get in," she ordered.

She stood, greedily taking in the sight of Jen's lithe, compact body as it emerged from the shift dress. With a grin, Jen tossed the dress aside and stepped into the shower.

"You are going to join me, right?" she asked, dissolving into throaty chuckles as Ashley all but sprinted in and grabbed her up into a hot, melting kiss under the torrential spray.

17

Ascant handful of weeks later, things were distinctly less fun.

Two blocks from Oakridge, Jen pulled into the parking garage at the Beverly Center

with a sigh. Her mood, buoyant when they'd left her apartment, had plummeted into cave-like depths, as it always did when it came to the end of her time with Ashley.

It was absurd to her that they, two grown career women, were skulking around like this. Yes, skulking. She couldn't see it any other way. They hardly spoke at the hospital. They certainly didn't eat meals together there. Or anywhere, for that matter. In the three weeks since their encounter at the Claiburne, every torrid, split-second kiss in a quiet hospital storage room, each bed-burning evening in one of their homes... it had all been clandestine, planned on the down low, in surreptitious whispers and text conversations. Never once had there been a dinner out, not even a sandwich in the hospital cafeteria.

Last week, Jen had walked through the hospital lobby after dropping Ashley off. She'd intended to get a chai latte from Bryce's cart, but to her surprise, Ashley had managed to be there. Jen began to walk up and join her, but the alarmed widening of Ashley's eyes coupled with a panicked sidelong glance at Elaine Martin by her side made Jen back away and flee upstairs for the surgeon's lounge and the machine there.

It felt... a bit dirty, if she was being honest.

"Earth to Jen." Ashley's voice was light, even affectionate. Her words were followed by her leaning over the gearshift and planting a soft kiss on Jen's cheek. "This is my stop. See you in a bit?"

"Sure thing," Jen replied, her mind continuing to wander as Ashley got out of Jen's car and headed for her own, parked a few slots away. They would indeed see each other in a bit, and she would be kept firmly at arm's length. At night, they had incredible, intimate talks and electric sex. In the daytime, she was held apart. At home she was Jen. At work, she was Dr. Colton.

This is not how she had pictured this going when she'd approached Ashley in that rooftop garden. Well, to be fair, she hadn't at all been sure about what would happen that night, but in the end, she had not imagined that it would lead to whatever this was now. They were so close at night, yet so hurtfully far apart in the harsh light of day.

It was a week until Christmas. She'd been thinking of asking Ashley to accompany her to the Indigo Lounge holiday party in a couple of days, there was going to be a concert with Mia Cortes and other local talent, but... no. Not when things were so underground, unsettled, and weirdly shameful feeling.

Jen shook herself out of her funk and pulled her car out of the parking garage. Today she really did want a chai latte, so she had to beat Ashley to the hospital, or stand in line with an icky feeling in the pit of her stomach as Ashley thoroughly ignored her.

But she didn't even make it to the coffee cart today. As she walked through the double doors of the hospital entrance, her cellphone buzzed in her pocket. "Hi, Steve," she greeted the Chief as she answered, butterflies fluttering in her stomach. There could be only one reason why he'd call her instead of texting her if he had a question.

"There's a heart," he replied curtly, not bothering with a greeting. "Get here as soon as you can."

"I just walked in the door; I'll see you shortly." She clicked off and glanced over to the coffee cart line, where sure enough, there was Ashley with Elaine Martin. Their gazes locked as Ashley, a curious expression on her face, pulled her phone out of her bag. Her brown eyes went wide with shock.

"I'll come right up," she informed Steve loud enough for Jen to hear. Then she leaned over to Elaine and whispered in her ear quickly before patting her on the shoulder and making a beeline for the elevator bank.

Jen hustled over to meet her there just as she was punching the button for the surgical wing. She ignored the frustrated glance Ashley shot her as they entered the elevator car together, choosing instead to wave away a pair of oncology doctors she vaguely knew as she hit the Close Doors button. “We’ve got to make a plan here,” she began, working to keep her voice steady. She was so excited for Maria, it was difficult. “We only have a mere matter of hours.”

Ashley was distant, her eyes fixed on the elevator doors. “I have a plan. I’ve been prepared for this.”

Jen pushed down a surge of annoyance. “Care to let me in on it? Remember, I have to be on the surgical team. Maria expects it, and Steve did say I’m to be involved.”

“I haven’t forgotten, and I still don’t agree with it.” Ashley glanced down at her and the flash of irritation in her eyes was a knife to Jen’s heart. “I maintain that you’re just too close to the patient for this to be a good idea.”

Blinking back tears at the detached coolness in Ashley’s voice, such a contrast from the affectionate tones of just fifteen minutes ago, Jen focused on her shiny black Blundstone boots. “I was there for the LVAD installation, and it went just fine, Doctor Proctor.” She swallowed back the lump in her throat and looked up at Ashley, trying to will her to meet her eyes. Cautiously, she reached out and placed her hand on Ashley’s arm. “Ash...”

That got Ashley’s attention, and Jen knew immediately the diminutive nickname had been a grave mistake. Ashley gazed down at her with incredulity in her eyes. “Doctor Colton, I’ll overlook that inappropriate intimacy for now, but please make sure it never happens again.”

Before Jen could gather up the remnants of her shattered heart, the elevator arrived on the surgical wing, and Ashley slipped out as soon as there was a wide enough

opening in the doors, hurrying to the Chief's office. Jen trailed behind, surreptitiously wiping a tear away as she let herself into the floor's gender-neutral bathroom and locked the door behind her.

Then, and only then, did she give way to her hurt feelings and burst into sobs that she muffled into a crumpled handful of rough paper towel.

Jen sat quietly by Maria's bedside in the post-anesthesia surgical care unit on the VIP floor. The clicks and beeps of monitoring equipment surrounded them, but it was otherwise quiet in the recovery area. Maria's hand in hers was still, but soft and warm. Jen squeezed it gently.

It was late at night now. She never had gotten her chai, or even a coffee from the surgeon's lounge. Once she'd recovered from her crying fit in the bathroom, she'd joined the emergency coordination meeting in Steve's office with Ashley and the rest of the transplant team. They'd worked out a comprehensive plan quickly, thanks to Ashley's diligent preparation efforts.

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Ashley had avoided eye contact the entire time. Hadn't directly addressed Jen unless she had to. Had certainly not involved Jen in the prep discussion except to give her terse commands and instructions on what her role would be.

But it had all gone smoothly. Jen did have to admit that Ashley's rigid compartmentalizing and thorough planning had resulted in a very orderly and virtually complication-free surgery. The whole thing had taken seven hours on the dot, and then Maria had been wheeled up to recovery. Jen tried to talk to Ashley afterward, but was, to her deep hurt, brushed off. Ashley had gone off with Elaine Martin and the Chief, and Jen had scrubbed out and trudged to her office to gather herself together before heading up to sit at Maria's bedside. Where she'd now been for several more hours as other doctors and nurses bustled in and out of the room.

Ashley hadn't, yet. By all rights she should have, but it didn't take long for Jen to realize the bulk of the post-surgical checks and balances were being left in her hands. Partly, she thought, out of kindness as Ashley was well aware of Jen and Maria's closeness. And partly out of efficiency, since Ashley wasn't stupid and knew she would never be able to pry Jen away from Maria's side.

But it was also, she thought, probably a way for Ashley to keep her busy and at arm's length, and that was a fresh stab of hurt in her own heart any time she thought too hard about it.

Maria's eyes fluttered open ever so slightly, and Jen leaned forward, her grip on Maria's hand tightening. "Maria. Hi."

"Jen. Querida." Her free hand drifted up weakly to touch her chest, where the fresh

and tidy incision was under her nightgown. “Ouch.”

“We can take care of that.” Jen pressed the call button for a nurse, who arrived quickly. “Let’s get her some morphine, she’s awake and in pain.”

With a nod, the nurse set to her task, checking Maria’s pulse, her temperature, and getting the medicine injected into her IV. She disappeared out the door with a, “I’ll let Doctor Proctor know she’s awake,” casually tossed over her shoulder.

Maria sank into her pillows and watched Jen blearily. “It went well?”

“It went beautifully.” Jen smiled at her friend. “I held your old heart in my own two hands. I thanked it for all it had done for you.”

“As I would have. You know me so well.” Maria’s smile was faint. “And the new heart?”

“It’s good. Strong. We didn’t even need to shock it to get it going once we had it connected in your chest.” She brushed a stray wisp of hair back out of Maria’s face. “You’ll go on for years, I’m sure of it.”

“Who’s the donor? Can I know?” Her eyes were bright with curiosity. “Can I thank their family?”

“I can’t tell you anything right now. HIPAA laws.” Jen squeezed Maria’s hand again. The family of the young male cyclist who had been struck by a careless speeding driver while he trained for a triathlon had said they wanted to talk to the recipient of his heart eventually, but not today. “They have my info, though. They’ll let me know when they’re ready, and I’ll check in with you. Okay?”

“Okay.” The medication seemed to be kicking in, Maria looked drowsy. But even on

morphine, she could be so sharp. Her dark eyes narrowed as she looked at Jen. “Hey. Hermosa. What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“I’m just tired, it’s been a very long day,” Jen hedged. Fruitlessly, she knew. Maria could be like a dog with a bone, damn it all.

“Bullshit,” came the immediate, expected response. “You’re not just tired, you’re sad. Who hurt you?”

“I think you know the answer to that.” No one had been more delighted than Maria when Jen had confessed that she was seeing Ashley. Or more cautious. That one’s going to be a tough nut even for you to crack, she’d said, and of course she’d been right.

“Mmm. My good doctor, my surgeon. Yes?” Maria shook her head. “Let me at her.”

“Right, when you can’t even sit up in bed, sure,” Jen mocked, sticking her tongue out. “Look, it’s fine. I’ve been on edge lately, and I take things out of nothing and make them into somethings that are much too big. Now that your surgery is over, I can relax a bit.”

“I don’t believe you at all,” Maria shot back bluntly, and Jen knew she would have gone on had the door to the recovery room not opened at just that moment.

Ashley slipped in, eyes fixed firmly on the tablet in her hand. “Hi, Ms. Rivera. I’m so glad you’re awake. The surgery went absolutely perfectly.” She glanced up, her eyes flickering to Jen and then instantly away. “How do you feel?”

“Tired. A little pain.”

Ashley met Jen’s challenging gaze with reluctance. “Have you requested additional



pain medication, Doctor Colton?”

“Yes, I have, Doctor Proctor.” The title, though accurate and justified, was sour in Jen’s mouth. “Everything is in order, she’s been administered a bit more morphine and that’s doing its job.”

“Perfect. Thank you.” Ashley’s fingers flew over the tablet, then she looked up and flashed a quick smile at Maria. “Then I’ll let you rest. Please let the nursing staff know if you need anything.” Without another word, she turned on her heel and left the room, both Maria and Jen gawking after her.

Maria managed to recover first. “Oh, what the fuck was that?”

“No, Maria, no, come on.” Jen shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

“No, that is my last straw.” Maria raised a finger and shook it weakly. “Every time I’ve seen you in the same room together lately, she ignores you like she gets paid for it. I see it hurts you! Why is this happening? I thought things were going well.”

“They are! They are. Just... she keeps things separate here at the hospital, that’s all.” Flustered heat spread through Jen’s chest and up her throat. “We’re professional.”

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“There’s professional, and then there’s being a stone-cold bitch,” Maria replied with a snort. “I’d almost rather get back to the days when she clearly had a problem with you.” She waved a hand at the door. “Go after her, will you? I can’t bear to see you moping.”

“I don’t,” Jen began, but she shut up when Maria started to struggle to sit up and looked like she was going to try to swing her legs out of the bed. “Okay, okay.”

She darted out of the room, glancing left and right to see which way Ashley had gone. Fortunately, she hadn’t gone far; she was standing at the nurses’ station tapping away on the tablet. Swallowing hard, Jen stepped up next to her. “Doctor Proctor, can we speak for a moment?”

Ashley looked up, eyes wide as if she were being hunted. As if she wanted to be anywhere but here. Ouch. “Um... certainly, Doctor Colton.”

There was a conference room on the VIP floor. At this hour, it should be empty. Jen took Ashley by the elbow and led her there now, closing the door behind the two of them. “Ash...ley,” she began, tripping over the nickname she’d been chastised for using just this morning. “We need to talk about what happened earlier.”

Ashley leaned back on the conference table and frowned. “What happened, exactly?”

“This morning? When you shut me down for calling you Ash when we were in an elevator together, alone?” Jen drew herself up taller. “I felt that was a little uncalled for.”

The look on Ashley's face was what could only be described as uncomfortable, as it always was when they discussed anything to do with their situation anywhere but in one of their bedrooms. "If I was a bit sharp, I'm sorry. I had to get immediately into planning mode, I didn't need any distractions."

"It wasn't just sharp, and..." Jen shook her head. "Honestly, it's not even just about that. Ashley, you've been treating me like garbage at work for weeks, ever since we started this thing between us."

"No, wait," Ashley protested, standing up straight. "That's not fair. We agreed that work and our personal lives were to be kept very, very separately."

"We did, but you are drawing that line extremely sharply. I feel like we can keep things separate with a bit more humanity to it than you've been demonstrating." Thinking the words made her tremble, saying them aloud was threatening to close her throat up. "You barely treat me as a colleague. At least when you detested me, I knew you respected me. Now, you make me feel like a dirty secret." She picked at her cuticles. "It hurts my feelings. I think we can do better."

"Wow. Wow, okay." Ashley pushed herself off the table and began to pace the room. "I am sorry to have hurt your feelings. But I hope you can see my perspective here. This..." She waved a hand between the two of them. "This, anything like this, is very new to me in general, without even getting into the fact I've never dated a colleague before. I'm still learning to navigate all of it. And I am terrified of making missteps at work that I can't come back from." It seemed to take her some considerable effort, but she walked over to Jen and took her by the shoulders. "I have to be careful."

"There's careful and then there's chastising me for using a private name in a private situation, there's ignoring me and treating me like an intern during a major surgery or in front of patients, there's refusing to make so much as a plan for a meal together unless we can do it by text while we're here..." Jen pulled herself away and it was

her turn to pace the conference room. “I can’t even start on how we get to work in the mornings. The subterfuge, it’s so...” She shook her head. “This is not how I thought this was going to be.”

“I just,” Ashley began, then she stopped and took a deep breath before going on. “I’m sorry. I need to be careful, and I need that boundary respected. It’s going to take me time. I truly don’t like to hear that I’m hurting you, but I am asking for some understanding while I find my footing with this situation.”

“Can you at least acknowledge me at work? Stop treating me like some kind of pariah, don’t freeze me out like this?” Jen pleaded. “I won’t call you Ash, I’ll keep my distance like I have been, but please, I need something from you. God, you could go back to sneering at me if that would help. At least then you wouldn’t be ignoring me entirely.”

This seemed to shock Ashley, and she looked stricken. “Well, no, I can’t do that. I can’t just be mean to you.”

“But you have been. I don’t know how to make you understand that this way you have of icing me out at the hospital is so much worse.” Jen’s hands opened and closed at her sides, aching with the strain that was tensing up her entire body.

For a moment, she thought she might have gotten through. Ashley stepped forward, reaching to take Jen’s hands. Her eyes were still wary, but they seemed soft, maybe even understanding.

In the next moment, all of Jen’s nascent hopes were dashed. “I just need more time,” Ashley whispered, lifting one of Jen’s hands to her lips for a butterfly-light kiss. “Please? But let me try to make it up to you tonight. We can have dinner...”

Jen looked down and swallowed down the lump of disappointment. “Do you want to

go out to a restaurant with me?”

Ashley’s hesitation, the way she froze in place, was the final straw. “We can order dinner at home. Yours or mine, you choose.”

She knew without asking that once again, they’d be driving separately, uniting in the darkness of the Beverly Center parking garage. They’d drive to one of their homes, they’d have an amazing sex-filled evening and a gorgeous long talk deep into the night... and tomorrow it would all begin again the same way.

Jen understood that Ashley needed time to figure out how to handle things. But that was something they should do together, discuss together, yet Ashley wasn’t entertaining that or indeed any idea that wasn’t her way of doing things. Jen felt unheard... even dismissed.

“Not tonight,” she heard herself saying softly, and Ashley’s eyes widened in surprise and, she thought, a bit of hurt. “It has been a long, long day and I think I would like to be alone for a bit.”

“I...” Ashley didn’t seem to know how to respond to that. Jen decided to continue with her strategy of being kind, yet direct.

“We are both tired. I think we are talking past each other, and maybe things have gone very quickly and intensely in the last few weeks.” She inhaled and willed herself to settle, and to hold firm. “Today was a longer day than we had expected. Things are being felt more deeply than maybe they normally would. So I would like to have a night to myself, please.”

“I... okay. Yes.” Ashley released Jen’s hands and stepped back. “Tomorrow?”

“Maybe,” Jen replied. She smiled, but she knew it was weak and uncertain. Moving

past Ashley, she made her way out of the conference room and out of the hospital to her car. The drive back to her apartment passed in silence; she didn't even want to turn on the radio.

Once home, Jen discarded her clothing in favor of a soft, ancient t-shirt that had once belonged to Nina. It no longer smelled like her, no more of that essence of citrus shampoo, vanilla perfume, constant hand sanitizer and green tea hand lotion. But Jen still felt her wife's presence around her as she crawled into bed and faced the photo on the bedside table.

"Oh, Nina," she whispered as her eyes began to well up with tears. "I think you've spoiled me. Was I asking too much of her? Too soon?" Her breath began to shudder as she couldn't hold back the sobs any longer.

City plunked their drinks down on the table and shoved the dirty martini over to Ashley. “How many of these is it going to take for you to fill me in on what’s actually wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Ashley muttered, sipping at the edge of her cocktail. She set the glass down, pushed it away, then pulled it back to pick up the toothpick and bite one of the olives off of it. It must have been a harsher bite than she’d intended, more of a vicious chomp, judging by City’s recoil and judgmental face. Ashley sat up straight. “Nothing,” she repeated, “is wrong.”

City took a long pull on the cocktail straw in her Paulson’s Paloma, one perfect copper eyebrow arched with skepticism. “Shall I count the ways in which you are just dead wrong?” she asked, lifting a hand to tick off on her fingers. “One, I do not see you for three weeks, I just get texts. Two, we are now at a Christmas party, and you’ve got the sourest, non-festive aura in the room. And this,” she gestured around the Indigo Lounge, “is a very large bar with a lot of people in it.”

Ashley rolled her eyes and sucked the second olive off of her toothpick. “Nothing?—”

“Three,” City continued like a runaway steamroller, “last time I did see you, you were sneaking off with that charming little silver-haired surgeon that drove you mad. I support that dalliance, by the by, but where is she? And why did your face turn into an absolute thundercloud when I just now mentioned her?”

“I came here to get into the Christmas spirit,” Ashley protested, throwing her hands in the air.

“You’re doing a terrible job at it,” City shot back. “You are the Grinch, Ashley. So tell me, what is wrong? And how come I totally know it’s to do with the tiny surgeon?”

Ashley sipped her drink and thought. How could she explain what was wrong when she didn’t entirely understand it? Jen had been out of office for three days since their discussion in the hospital conference room. She had sent brief reassuring responses to texts Ashley sent but didn’t otherwise engage.

It hurt. But clearly not as much as she had apparently hurt Jen.

“We had a bad day a few days ago,” she began, squirming a little in her seat at the idea of being so emotionally open with City. It wasn’t their usual dynamic, and she still wasn’t entirely used to how much she’d let Jen in. But City was emotionally intelligent, usually had good and fairly blunt advice, and anyway, Ashley thought this might be an emergency and she needed all the help she could get.

City’s brow furrowed. “Define bad?”

“She hasn’t really spoken to me in three days or let me visit her after three weeks of being together virtually all the time.” It tumbled out in a rush, and Ashley slumped against the back of her chair. “I’ve messed up, but I don’t?—”

“You don’t see how what you did was a problem,” City pointed out, eyes shrewd.

“I mean, I see that it definitely has caused a problem, but I don’t see why she can’t meet me halfway here with some understanding.” Ashley sat up straight. “I’m new to this kind of... vulnerability. Openness.”



“I just know I am going to cringe hard at whatever you tell me is happening but please,” City swept her hand across the table, “Go on.”

“Jen has... a problem. With the way I keep my work life and my personal life very separate.” She picked her drink back up and took a mouth-puckeringly large gulp of it. The blue-haired bartender had made it very dirty this evening. “Which is to say entirely. Nobody knows we’re hooking up. I treat her very professionally at work.”

City’s eyes narrowed and she sat back, staring and thinking until Ashley began to shift around in her seat again. Then, shoving her drink aside, she leaned on the table and pointed sharply. “You’re freezing her out at work and you think that’s ‘being professional,’ don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say freezing her out,” Ashley said, but Jen had also called it that, she remembered. “I just... I can’t let on that something is going on with us. I don’t want to be undermined at work by anyone who might use my personal life against me.”

“And who might do that, exactly?” City threw her hands up. “Your Chief likes you. Your immediate superior has told you that you’re definitely getting her job when she retires. There’s nobody on your level there besides you, so what the hell do you have to protect from being undermined?”

“I have a right to keep my personal life to myself!” Why did no one understand?

“Yes, but not if you’re trampling someone else’s emotions in the process, and I have a distinct feeling that you have been doing the flamenco on Jen’s,” City said. “Tell me what your idea of professional separation means. Step by step.”

Ashley hesitated. Being forced to think about how to explain what she had thought were perfectly reasonable requests was suddenly giving her an inkling why Jen was upset about it. “We... leave, and, um, arrive at the hospital separately. And I try to

avoid talking to her if I can..."

City's jaw dropped. "Say what?"

"I mean, if I talk to her, it'll be so clear that I'm into her and something is going on. I'm not being a total ass to her anymore! I'm just trying to keep my distance." It had all made sense in her head when they'd started this thing. And it still made a little sense to her now but seeing the horrified expression on City's face made Ashley better understand that she really had hurt Jen with this. "I didn't mean to fuck up."

"Well, no, you never do, but wow." City ran a hand through her hair and sighed. "I feel like there's more."

"Just, you know..." Ashley sought for words. "We've had to work together on some surgeries, and I just kept things very professional; I didn't give her too much attention or a huge role..."

City closed her eyes for a moment. "Feeling like you went way too extreme on this too."

"City, stop! Outside of work, I give her everything. It's been amazing. I just wanted to keep work separate," Ashley snapped defensively. "Our personal lives outside of work should be what matters most."

"And outside of work, do you go on dates? You sure didn't bring her here. I would have seen you." City's eyes were bright with challenge.

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“I...” She cleared her throat. “Someone might have seen us, City, come on.”

City’s eyes went wide. “I have half a mind to throw what’s left of my drink on you.”

Ashley scooted her chair back. “Talk about extremes!”

“You never even treated me like this, and I was under no illusions about our relationship,” City snapped. “Jesus Christ! I didn’t know your walls could be so high. I thought when there was actual emotion involved that you’d be better at handling it than whatever the fuck this is.”

“I’m figuring things out,” Ashley pleaded.

“Figure it out faster, because I can’t even talk to you anymore until you do,” City said, getting to her feet and grabbing her purse off of the back of her chair. “This... Ashley, this is messed up. That woman is so sweet, and so into you, and you can’t treat her like a princess at home and a dirty secret at work and expect that to go over well.”

“She’s not a dirty secret!” Again, City had used the same words Jen had, and it hit hard. “How am I supposed to maintain professionalism at work with someone I’m involved with?”

“Better than fucking this, I’ll tell you that much,” City shot back. Without another word, she pushed her way through the tables and people crowding the Lounge and vanished before Ashley could so much as stand up.

Okay. Well. Ashley was certainly starting to see that she'd been managing things very badly indeed. The question now was, how could she possibly fix it?

19

"How are you feeling?" Jen pulled up a chair at Maria's bedside.

Maria pulled her earbuds out and glared. "And just where the hell have you been?"

"Merry Christmas to you, too. I come bearing gifts. And chocolate." Jen raised an eyebrow and held up a Christmas stocking stuffed full to the brim. Maria shook her head and crossed her arms.

"Don't give me that festive elf shit, hermosa. You disappeared without a word right after you help give me a new damn heart, what was that about?" Her glare somehow got steelier. "Explain, or you can take your damn chocolate and never come back."

"God, I've never known you to refuse chocolate." Jen wanted to keep things light, but when Maria's eyes narrowed further and her finger began to hover over the call button, she relented. "Maria, okay, don't get mad?—"

"I am already mad," Maria asserted, crossing her arms more tightly.

"Fair," Jen admitted. She laid the stocking in Maria's lap and took a deep breath. "I've been in Minnesota talking to the Mayo Clinic."

Maria had loosened up and been about to pick up the stocking, but her hands froze mid-air. "This better not be going where I think it's going."

"There were some interviews... there's been a provisional offer." Jen cringed back slightly as Maria's eyes grew dark. "I haven't decided, exactly."

“What the fuck, Jen!” Maria exploded and looked as if she was going to go through the roof. But just then, a nurse chose to come in and bustle around doing her checks on Maria’s incision, medication, and pain levels. Jen sat, hands folded in her lap, and avoided Maria’s steady death glare.

Eventually, the nurse left, and Jen slid her gaze to meet Maria’s. It was as piercing as it had been before the nurse showed up. “Okay,” Maria said, her voice flinty. “Explain. Quickly.”

Deep breath in. “Again, I want to start by saying I haven’t made any decision yet.”

“Quicker,” Maria snapped.

“I... feel I need to separate myself from this hospital entirely,” Jen said, trying to figure out how to speak quickly but still make sense. “I’ve fumbled things up so badly in my time here. New job, new life, I shouldn’t have gotten involved with a colleague on top of all of that.”

“If it’s such a problem, just get uninvolved,” Maria said, waspishly.

“I mean, I guess I’m going to,” Jen admitted, trying to ignore how saying the words aloud made her heart contract painfully. “I just... can’t stay with someone who gives me emotional whiplash. And who doesn’t hear me when I try to talk to her about it.”

“You can break up with someone and not leave your job.” Maria’s eyes were softening, and her hand crept up to cover her new heart. “Please, hermosa. We’re finally living in the same city, don’t leave as soon as you’ve arrived.”

Jen shook her head. “It’s impossible. I can’t just move to a different department here.”

“So another hospital, LA is a big city, any of them would be lucky to have you.” Now Maria’s eyes were beseeching. “Cedars-Sinai! They were my second choice, surely they’d love to have you.”

“They have an excellent transplant director there in Marcie Philpott,” Jen replied, gently. “She’s doing amazing work for them. All of the hospitals in this city have fantastic transplant programs going on. I was actually really fortunate to get in here.”

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Maria's face fell. "Okay, can you at least stay in California? So you're only a quick plane ride away? San Diego's not so far."

"I've applied to a few more, and yes, some in California, but I can't exactly just turn the Mayo Clinic down flat." She reached over and took Maria's hand. "I'm going to go visit them at least one more time."

Maria sighed. "I hate this. You were only seeing her for a few weeks! How can it be so bad so fast?"

"I guess... Maria, I just deserve better than being treated like a dirty mistress. Maybe the love Nina and I had spoiled me. Or honestly, maybe it educated me. If I'm not being heard by my partner three weeks in, at my age, do I really have the time to wait for another grown woman to figure out how to regulate her emotions and handle her work-life balance?" But saying it like that made her wince. "That was harsh."

"You were saying how you felt. It must have been really weighing on you."

"To say the least," Jen admitted. "Oh, but it really stinks! I like her so much..." She sighed and began to pick at her cuticles. "But I mean, that's part of the problem. I definitely felt it getting serious fast. And if I break it off with her but stay here, I'll be so tempted to fall back into it and keep getting my feelings hurt because I can't stay away at this point."

Maria's eyes opened wide. "That serious in such a short amount of time?"

"Apparently."

They sat in companionable silence for a bit. Maria plucked a Lindt truffle out of her stocking and nibbled at it. “This does feel a bit like you’re running away, querida.”

“Well, that would be because I am.” Standing up, Jen began to pace the room. “I am well aware.”

“I’ve never known you to back down from a challenge,” Maria went on, and when Jen whirled to glare at her, her face was smooth and bland, as innocent as a baby bunny as she popped the rest of her truffle into her mouth.

“I am protecting my peace,” Jen gritted out between clenched teeth.

“Coward,” Maria shot back, succinctly. “Nina would hate to see it.”

“I like to think that Nina would hate to see me in emotional distress, Maria.” She inhaled deeply and pulled herself to stand up straight. “I’ve got to go clear out my office. Even if I don’t accept Mayo’s offer, I’m leaving here, I might as well make it easy on myself.”

“Jen...”

“I’m flying out day after tomorrow for the last round of introductions. Don’t worry. I’ll visit you when I come back and I’ll keep you updated.” She summoned a weak smile for her friend and headed for the door of the room. As she approached, she heard the clatter of heeled shoes, and realized that the nurse had left the door slightly ajar.

Someone had been listening. Ashley?

Cautiously, she opened the door and peered up and down the hallway. She could hear footsteps disappearing down a corridor towards the elevators. There was no way she



could run fast enough to see who it might have been before they got on the elevator.

Well. Ashley was going to have to find out about this eventually anyway. Though it didn't exactly leave Jen with a good feeling that it might have been like this.

20

Tears blurred Ashley's eyes as she speedwalked to Elaine's office. How had she fucked things up so badly that Jen wanted to leave? She'd barely gotten to California. They'd hardly started their relationship, if that's what it was. And yet things were so bad that Jen was running off to Minnesota?

Elaine looked up in surprise as Ashley burst through the door of her office. "Ashley? Good heavens, what's wrong?"

She hadn't even sat down in one of the chairs in front of Elaine's desk before the impending tears began to flood their way down her face. "Elaine, I..."

"I've never seen you so upset." Grabbing a box of tissues, Elaine came around the desk and sat in the neighboring chair. She dabbed at Ashley's face with one of the tissues. "What's going on?"

"I messed up," Ashley wept, feeling like she was really, truly crying for the first time in her life. "With Jen. Elaine, I'm such a mess."

"Jen? Doctor Colton? You mean..." Elaine sat up straight in her surprise. "When did this start? I had no idea."

"A few weeks ago." She took the tissue from Elaine, who was sitting very still and blinking and had stopped dabbing at Ashley's tears. She folded the damp tissue in half and held it up to her eyes to catch the tears, hoping to stop her makeup from

being entirely ruined. “I didn’t tell anyone. Which is a problem.”

Elaine shook herself and sat back with a frown. “You’re allowed to keep your personal life personal. It’s rather encouraged here, actually, you know that. And I’m sure Jen knows that, she’s a professional.”

“There’s keeping things personal and then there’s making your more or less girlfriend drive you to your car every morning so you can drive separately to the hospital and ignore her all day.” The look of horror on Elaine’s face at that was a twin to the one that City had sported just a few days ago. “See! See, that’s messed up. I understand that now.”

It took a moment for Elaine to blink and recover herself. “Well, it’s good you understand. But can’t you go apologize to her? Talk to her? I’m sure you can work it out, a pair of intelligent women like yourselves.”

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Ashley had to grab a fresh tissue as more tears spilled over. “She’s leaving,” she gasped out, new hurt piercing her heart. “She’s leaving, and I don’t know if she was going to tell me.”

“Oh.” Poor Elaine really did look like she was being hit by a barrage of bricks. It was a lot of information to take in, Ashley knew. Still, she was holding up admirably. “That’s sad to hear. I thought in her time here she’d been doing quite well and that she liked it.”

“She loved it here. I ruined it,” Ashley spat bitterly. “I let myself get involved, but I had no idea what I was doing. I treated her like trash, and now the hospital’s losing her and so...” She had to wrap her arms around her middle to hold herself together, it felt so much like she was coming apart at the seams. “And so am I. It’s all my fault.”

Now she was bent double in her chair, almost hyperventilating as Elaine helplessly patted her back. She’d never felt anything in her life like she had the last several weeks. To go from detesting Jen, to realizing she was attracted to her, then the electric thrill of sleeping with her and the unaccustomed, addictive intimacy of talking to someone late into every night, of being known for what felt like the first time...

There had been no time to process any of it, not with how fast it had gone, not with how urgent Maria’s heart situation had been and how much time and attention that had taken in and of itself. She’d thought there would be time for that, eventually, somehow. But she had compartmentalized it all too much, too far, pushed eventually too far down the road too fast.

She did think that Jen could have granted her a touch more grace, but she was coming to understand, however slowly, why it hadn't happened. Her mind flashed back to the last time she'd seen Jen, in that conference room. Jen had asked her for one thing. Dinner out, together, in a restaurant. After explaining as clear as day how hurt she was at being held at arm's length in public. And Ashley hadn't even been able to give her even that much. How dehumanizing.

Slowly, Ashley sat up and felt able to meet Elaine's anxious gaze. "Are you alright?" her mentor asked, eyes apprehensive.

"I mean, no. But I think I am capable of a rational conversation now." Some tendrils of her hair had come loose from her updo in the tumult of her tears. Ashley smoothed them back and tucked them in as best she could. Taking one more tissue, she gently blotted and wiped under her eyes; if there were mascara trails, she'd deal with them later. She faced Elaine fully. "I don't usually ask you for any personal advice. Our relationship was never built on that. But I have no one else to talk to about this. Do you have anything that might help?"

"Talk to her," Elaine said simply. "Do you think you can tell her how you feel? If you haven't..."

"I haven't, exactly..." Ashley ducked her head. "We've had some amazing long conversations into the night but... not about feelings."

"Well, no wonder she's upset with you." Elaine's words were a touch harsh, but her tone was light to take the sting out. "You don't talk about feelings, and you treat her like a pariah at the hospital? She must feel like a... a... I don't know. A sex puppet."

"Elaine!" Ashley felt her eyes go wide. She couldn't exactly dispute it, to her shame, but she also couldn't believe Elaine had said it.

“It felt necessary to be bold about it. I wanted to be sure it got through.” Again, the words stung, but her eyes were a-twinkle. “You’ve always been quite sealed off. If Doctor Colton has managed to crack open the closed book of you even a little, that’s amazing, and it deserves a significant amount of respect.” She patted Ashley’s knee. “Now. What do you know about her leaving?”

“I didn’t hear all of it. I walked up around the end of the conversation, I think. She’s flying out to the Mayo Clinic the day after tomorrow.”

“On Christmas? They must really be interested in her.” Elaine looked impressed.

“I can’t compete with the Mayo Clinic,” Ashley groaned, rubbing her temples. “Nobody could. I tried to get in there twice, they turned me down flat. Of course they want Jen.”

“But I would think you want her more,” Elaine pointed out, her voice steely. “You are going to fight for this, aren’t you?”

“I don’t see how I can. It sounded like she definitely wanted to leave here no matter what.” The thought made Ashley slump back in her seat once more.

“I’ve never known you to be a defeatist, Ashley.” There was no cheery lilt in Elaine’s voice to ease the blow this time, and that made Ashley look at her closely and pay attention. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way. You know where you messed things up. You know there must be a way to fix that.”

“Yes, I... I think so,” Ashley replied slowly, her brain beginning to tick over.

Dr. Martin got to her feet, slapping her thighs on the way up. “Well, then. Let’s go get us a nice Christmas dinner somewhere and brainstorm. You won’t be letting that woman go without a fight, I’ll see to it.”

For the first time in days, Ashley felt something that might be... hope?

21

“Thank you for the nice ride.” Jen shook the hand of her Uber driver and made herself summon up a smile from somewhere. “I’ll give you a great rating, everything was wonderful.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” the nice young man replied, ducking his head with a bashful grin. He’d been a delight to talk to during the ride, a handsome young aspiring actor from Tennessee who was Ubering to make ends meet. His stories about his single mama back home in Memphis had kept Jen either smiling or on the verge of tears the whole time. “Hope I’ll get you again when you come back, I’d be happy to drive you again anytime.”

“I’ll hope for that too.” She accepted her tiny red suitcase as he lifted it out of the trunk of his little Hyundai and with a wave, headed off into the airport to find the security lines. It was a good thing she was traveling carry-on only and had splurged on TSA Pre-Check a couple of years ago. She’d be able to get to her gate in a flash.

Jen had checked in on her phone last night as soon as the notification had come up, ready to get on her way to Minneapolis. But now as she walked towards security, she found her feet dragging. And she checked her phone over and over to see if there was anything from Ashley.

It didn’t surprise her that there wasn’t. She had, to her shame, been ghosting the woman. She knew it wasn’t like her and that it was probably hurting Ashley’s feelings. No, she corrected herself with guilt. Not probably. Definitely. She’d been avoiding Ashley at the hospital, too. And sometimes when their eyes met, just before Jen ducked her head and scurried off, she had seen a flash of pain in those hopeful brown eyes.

The thing was, after the first couple of days of Jen gently rebuffing Ashley's efforts to connect, there had been only radio silence and those hurt glances. It was as if Ashley had simply... given up. There had been no urgent cornerings in a deserted hospital corridor, no furtive encounters at her apartment door, not even a single late night phone call.

Surely, if Ashley wanted to try and fix things, she would have done something, wouldn't she? But Jen had heard nothing, she had left the contact ball in Ashley's court and there it sat, abandoned. If Ashley did want to repair their relationship, Jen would have liked a public acknowledgment at the hospital. Not a big announcement, just... it might have been enough, she thought, if Ashley had approached her and asked her to talk, while some of their colleagues were around.

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But nothing of the sort had happened. Only passing, beseeching glances. Jen could only give so much from her end. Ashley would have had to have tried, and she just hadn't. That hurt, so as guilty as she felt about the ghosting and avoidance, it did feel a little... deserved.

That made her feel mean. And that was why she really did have to put herself first, and in a hurry. She didn't like the way this was all making her feel and act. Something had to change.

Security went smoothly—an absolute miracle at LAX on Christmas Day, even with Pre-Check—and she checked her phone to find her gate. “Of course it's at the other end of the terminal,” she groaned. And the airport was packed, throngs of people swarming around her in a tidal wave of humanity. Gritting her teeth, Jen put her head down and trudged forth, speeding up a little when she realized her gate was going to close in twenty minutes.

As she approached what felt like the farthest reaches of Outer Mongolia, Jen looked up and saw a crowd at her gate, all lined up and filing into the jetway. She had undoubtedly missed her business class boarding window, it was going to be an aggravation now to wait, and then to push past whoever was in the aisle seat next to her, who had not cut their boarding so irresponsibly close.

She sighed and began to make her way towards the gate. But as she got close to the end of the line of economy passengers, there was a commotion behind her.

“Jen!”



Slowly, unable to believe her ears, Jen turned around. Her mouth immediately fell open.

Ashley, in leggings, sneakers, and a long sweatshirt. Sure, they were probably Lululemon or hell, even Saint Laurent or Chanel or someone much too fancy to be making yoga pants, but Ashley. Incasualwear. Jogging towards her with a roller suitcase in tow and a coat over her arm. With her hair in a ponytail.

Jen had to process all of this before she could even get to, what the hell was Ashley doing here at the airport?

Ashley skidded—Ashley? Skidding??—to a stop before her, breath coming in gasps as she bent double. “I’ve... been... all over...”

“Oh, my God.” Jen knelt down to press a hand to Ashley’s forehead, all hurt and bewilderment burned away by the shock of everything that was happening. “What the hell are you doing? What is this? How did you even find me?”

It took a moment for Ashley to finally catch her breath. “I got lucky. Knew you wouldn’t be on an early morning flight.” She kept taking long, slow breaths. “Been here two hours. Checking every gate with a flight to Minneapolis.”

“How did you even?—”

“Accidentally eavesdropped on you talking to Maria.”

“I knew it.” Jen stood up, pulling Ashley up after her, and snapped her fingers in triumph. “I knew someone was listening.”

“Can’t believe... you were almost late.” Ashley clasped her hands over her forehead and exhaled. Then she locked eyes with Jen. “Don’t go. Please.”

It was all too much. Jen grabbed her suitcase handle in one hand and Ashley's elbow with the other. She marched over to a bank of chairs at her gate and sat Ashley down, then took the seat across from her, leaning across to take Ashley's hands in hers. "Explain. Now. Quickly."

"Jen, I'm so sorry," Ashley said immediately. "Before anything else, you have to know that I am so sorry for being soshitty to you. I am..." She swallowed hard. "I know I'm kind of an emotionally stunted headcase."

"Well, I don't know if I'd say that exactly like that," Jen said, but shut up when Ashley waved an impatient hand.

"I would, so I am. But the point is that I should have figured out how to handle things in a better way, a little quicker. I got caught up in how incredible everything was on my side, in how much someone was giving me for the first time in my life... and I gave nothing back." She looked down and shook her head. "I'm sorry for that."

"Okay." Jen sat still and thought for a moment. "Apology accepted. Now what are you going to do?"

"Um..."

"Because I love the apology; it's great you're apologizing. But I need to know you understand all of what you're apologizing for, and I really, really need to know what you plan to do about it." She let go of Ashley's hands and sat back, legs crossed, arms crossed over her chest. Her entire nature screamed out to give the woman a hint, but she stifled it.

If this was going to go anywhere, she couldn't help Ashley at all.

Ashley breathed in deeply, closed her eyes, and let it out slowly. When she opened

her eyes again, they were warm, loving, and the smile that spread across her face gave Jen a leap of hope. “I’m going to love you,” Ashley said, boldly and without hesitation, her eyes never wavering. “And I’m telling you right now that I sound brave, but I am scared shitless about saying this.”

“Being scared is good,” Jen replied, working to keep her voice steady. “Being brave in spite of being scared is great.”

Ashley nodded and looked down at her hands. “If you stay here—and I want you to, so much. I didn’t know what a great gift I’d gotten from the universe in you until you walked away—Jen, if you stay here, I want to give things a real chance. Wide open, known, seen, no subterfuge. I want to live, finally, and I want you to be with me while I do it.”

Jen uncrossed her arms and her legs and leaned forward again, putting a hand under Ashley’s chin so their eyes met once more. “You’re too hard to resist, and I hate and love that all at the same time. I accept. Let’s do it.”

Joy flared in Ashley’s eyes, a wildfire of happiness, and she jumped to her feet, hauling Jen up after her. She leaned down to cup Jen’s face in both hands and planted a kiss on her that nearly stole all of her breath away. Waves of overwhelming happiness, relief, completion, they all washed over and through Jen like a warm golden light.

When they finally parted, Jen was overjoyed to see how unafraid Ashley was. How soft, happy, and frankly wholly human she seemed. It must have been the first time in her life she ever felt like this. Jen felt honored to have been any part of such a glorious becoming.

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Overhead, there was a crackle, and a loud, impatient voice. “Will Delta passenger Jennifer Colton please report to the gate for their flight?”

“Oh.” Jen’s hands flew to her mouth. “Oh, no.”

“Don’t go.” Ashley reached out and gently pulled her hands back down. “Don’t.”

“But...” Jen looked over her shoulder, then back at Ashley, then her gaze fell on the suitcase next to Ashley. “Wait, were you going to come with me?”

“Not to Minnesota.” Ashley pulled out her phone and held it up to show a pair of boarding passes, one with each of their names on it. “Come with me. We’ll have Christmas in New York. Together. A fresh beginning, then we come home and start building our real life.”

“Together,” Jen breathed. “Yes, oh, Lord have mercy, yes.”

A joyous little whoop burst out of Ashley’s mouth, and before Jen knew what was happening, she found herself snatched up and spun around in a bone-cracking embrace. “Thank you, thank you,” Ashley whispered into her ear in a voice positively alight with joy. “Oh, Merry Christmas, Jen. I have a lot of making up to do.”

Jen rested her head in the smooth curve of Ashley’s neck and felt like she was home. “Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

## EPILOGUE

## FIVE YEARS LATER

City lifted a glass of champagne off of the tray of a passing waiter. “Have I told you lately that I just love it when you invite me to one of these hospital shindigs?”

“Only every time.” Ashley rolled her eyes and planted an affectionate kiss on the top of her friend’s head. “Thank you for coming.”

“Well, I also just love celebrating my friends.” City reached over to give Ashley’s hand a squeeze. “I’m so proud of you. Happy for you.”

“Thank you, City.” Glancing around the ballroom of the Claiborne felt, always, like déjà vu. She flashed back to the gala five years ago, where she’d been standing with City, dressed to the nines, watching Jen across the room.

It was once again a few weeks before Christmas. She was again in deep red silk, though this time it was a smartly tailored Dior suit rather than a gown. It had been a real splurge to celebrate the occasion, and she had never felt so sexy and powerful all at once.

Jen was talking to Maria, who had brought a very handsome silver fox with her as her escort to this gala. Jen, too, was clad in an echo of that very first gala, but this time in a rich, deep navy sheath dress that fit her like a glove and that Ashley couldn’t wait to get off of her at home.

With a last fond kiss to City’s cheek, Ashley began to move through the crowd to get to Jen. She managed to slip up behind her and wrap an arm around her waist, leaning down to kiss the perfect, slender column of Jen’s neck. “You just look so sexy tonight.”

Jen tilted her head up and back to get in a full, proper kiss. “Don’t get me started. We

can't sneak off this time. You've got a speech to give."

Ashley sighed. "I know."

Maria was smirking. "So the two of you have sneaked off from one of these parties before? To do what?"

"Never mind," Jen replied firmly, sticking her tongue out and blowing a raspberry.

Behind them, there was a tap on the microphone. "Hello?" Chief Sundstrom said, sounding as nervous as Ashley felt in this moment. Neither of them were great public speakers in front of crowds this size. She looked around the room at all the curious faces and felt her face flush hot.

Jen twisted in her arms and reached up to hold Ashley's face steady in her strong surgeon's hands. "Hey. This is going to be great. You're going to be great. This is your night."

"Right. Right." She fidgeted, rubbing a pinch of the velvety material of Jen's dress between nervous fingers. "My night."

The Chief began to speak. "I'd like to welcome all of you to Oakridge Hospital's Annual Surgical Autumn Gala," he said, with a quick little harrumph to clear his throat. "We've been hosting these galas for twenty years, and I'm always grateful for those of you who attend and show your support for the valuable, lifesaving work that we do."

A polite smattering of applause went around the room, and the Chief let out another little harrumph. "Tonight isn't only about celebrating the work our surgical teams have accomplished, though, nor about thanking you all for the help you provide to make that work happen." He looked around the room. "Tonight, we're also

celebrating a special member of our team, one of our bright and brilliant minds who has herself saved countless lives with her careful, thorough work. This surgeon has been with us since her residency days, before I became Chief of Surgery, and I have had the profound pleasure and privilege of watching her grow throughout her career.”

Ashley’s cheeks grew ever hotter at the praise.

“I have worked alongside her in an operating room and know firsthand just how much she cares about her work and her patients. How much work she puts into planning her procedures. In recent years, I have seen her take on extra work to learn new, groundbreaking techniques and grow even further as an incredible surgeon.” He smiled into the crowd. “Tonight, we are celebrating Doctor Ashley Proctor, our brand-new Chief of Cardiothoracic Surgery at Oakridge Hospital!”

The room erupted into applause, and Ashley knew that was her cue to head for the stage, however little she wanted to. Forcing herself to smile and look pleasant, she released Jen and stood up straight, pulling her shoulders back.

“Wait.” Jen grabbed her and reached up to pull her down into a sweet little kiss. “I love you. Knock ‘em dead.”

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“I love you, too.” She kissed Jen back and began to walk towards the stage.

The Chief was beaming as she mounted the dais. He strode forward to take both her hands in his and guide her towards the podium. They stood there as the applause died down and then, with an encouraging grin, he nudged her forward.

Hundreds of pairs of eyes, most of which she didn’t know, stared at her like a curious sea. She wanted to flee.

But in that crowd was one pair of important, shining blue eyes. Jen had pushed through the crowd to stand in the front, nodding reassurance. Ashley smiled down at her and cleared her throat.

“Thank you, everyone, for your generosity and this wonderful warm welcome.” She wished she’d written something down but hadn’t wanted to come across as too rehearsed. Still, she had planned some things. What had she wanted to say? Oh, yes. “I want to thank Chief Sundstrom and Oakridge Hospital for the support they have given me throughout my career. I feel so immensely privileged to have been here from the beginning, to have this prestigious institution behind me every step of the way.”

Elaine had moved to stand next to Jen, and she, too was smiling up at Ashley. Ashley took renewed strength from her presence. “I could not have done any of the amazing things I have been allowed to do in my career, I would not be standing before you right now, had it not been for my wonderful mentor and friend, Doctor Elaine Martin. Elaine has taught me so much, and her presence in my life in all capacities has been a true gift.”



The words seemed to flow more easily now. “I have had friends in and out of the medical field who supported me, at both my worst and my best, and for them, too, I am so grateful.” Near the back of the room, City lifted her champagne flute and beamed.

And down in front, Jen was still there, so beautiful and amazing, with pride and love gleaming in her eyes. Ashley took a moment to smile down at her beloved, the greatest gift of all. “But five years ago, someone new came into my life. And they’re the last piece of the puzzle, the final key in the lock that got me here today. And would you believe, I hated her at first?” The room rippled with laughter and Jen blew a raspberry up at her. “She represented everything I was terrified of. Growth, flexibility, a generous interest in other people. Before I met her, I was a surgical robot—Chief Sundstrom has praised me to the skies and was kind enough to leave out the part where I may have been a technically excellent surgeon, but as a doctor, I did lack personhood. Humanity, even.”

Ashley swallowed. “Doctor Jennifer Colton came to Oakridge to overhaul our Organ Transplant and Procurement Department, and she did an incredible job. Even with me trying to roadblock her at every turn.” She chuckled as Jen shook a chiding finger at her. “Every innovation and advancement she brought to the team, I opposed, thinking I knew best with my trust in proven methods. And despite that, she succeeded. We have the most cutting-edge transplant team and equipment in the state of California, and if Jen has her way, we’ll be number one in the country within the next five years.”

More applause, but at this point, Ashley only had eyes for Jen. “Doctor Colton, would you join me here?”

Now a murmur was going around the room, but Ashley just watched Jen as she made her way to the dais, where Chief Sundstrom helped her up the steps. Beaming like a star, Jen crossed the dais over to Ashley and they stood together, arms wrapped around each other and looking out over the crowd. Ashley cleared her throat one last

time. “I have been so lucky to work with and learn from Jen Colton these last years. And I am so incredibly happy to say tonight that she is not only my esteemed colleague, but as of three days ago, she is also Doctor Jennifer Colton-Proctor, my wife.” As the room erupted in applause and cheers, Ashley looked at her wife, then out at Chief Sundstrom, at Elaine, at City and Maria. They’d all been present when Jen and Ashley had eloped in San Francisco, the most core critical people in the development and rescue of their relationship.

Everything really felt full circle and complete tonight, in this room. Ashley took a deep breath and smiled at the audience. “I, Doctor Ashley Colton-Proctor, am once again so grateful for your support, and I am looking forward to the next years of my life hand in hand with my wife and with California’s best hospital.”

With Jen in her arms, her friends in the audience, and a beautiful life around and ahead of her, Ashley had never felt more complete and content. And now, her speech done, she could think of only one thing that would really round the night out. Ashley backed away from the microphone and leaned down to whisper in her wife’s ear.

“Want to go visit the rooftop garden before we head home?”