



Heart Surgeon

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They say there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I am lucky to have never experienced loss in the finite sense of the death of someone very close to me. My job as a surgeon means I dance the veil that hovers somewhere between the here and there. I am not numb to the sense of the end, but I have learned how to accept the moment when it comes for my patients.

So, I was surprised by the way my divorce hit me. As a practical woman who broke the world down into stages, I could easily see that my relationship with my husband had died a long time ago. If anything, we had merely been going through the motions for as long as I could remember. Sparks of what we once were kept me holding on, that and the comfortable life we had built together. Routine and practicalities outweighed the question of “Is this all there is?” but my hand was unceremoniously forced when he decided to find a spark with his secretary.

After I was over the initial shock, and then the anger at being made a cliché I took some time to pause, which is something I had never done in my entire life.

My name is Juliet, although I have spent half of my life being referred to as Dr. Sansus. I had always wanted to be a doctor; head of cardiothoracic surgery wasn't always the dream but I found my calling in med school. That is also where I met Matt, my now ex-husband. He was a doctor in the A and E department where I was completing my residency.

The other staff called him Doctor Dreamy, near enough a straight steal from Grey's Anatomy. I watched the show, I liked it, but I was not interested in our Doctor

Dreamy in the slightest. I could appreciate the symmetrical angles of his face, the way his dark hair carried this “just out of bed look” 24/7 was definitely sexy and he did have a grin that could make hearts skip a beat. For me, though I was in my last year, due to leave studying behind and actually become a full-time, real-life, fully qualified cardiothoracic surgeon. I didn’t have the time nor the interest to date.

For Matt, he was not used to being invisible. He could have any woman he wanted, but my indifference made me seem more elusive. You see, I was the definition of average, average height, average weight, light brown eyes, light brown hair. I was the kind of woman you could see every day of your life and never be able to quite recall my features.

I am still the same now, though I make a little more effort. Golden highlights mean my hair shimmers in the light. I learned how to apply mascara; I wear a shade of pale pink lipstick that manages to make my lips look much more than they actually are. Growing older looks good on me, tiny lines in the corners of my eyes add something to the balance of my face. And I have status in my job which gives me an innate confidence- something that I never had back then.

Anyway, I think that Matt saw in me a challenge. I didn’t realize it at the time. If anything, he was more of an annoyance and I only agreed to go out with him so he would move on faster. Except, it didn’t quite work out that way. With our crazy schedules and adrenaline-filled days, our dates were sporadic, unconventional, 3 am dinners after 6 hours of surgery, coffee kisses were stolen between consulting, bringing a sandwich for the other to share in a hidden corner of the hospital.

I assumed he was dating other women as we could go days without seeing each other. Except he wasn’t. I remember after about a year he sat me down all serious and said to me, “Juliet. I think we should get married.” I was in shock, but then I thought ... why not. The sex was good, he was kind to me, we understood each other and the life we had chosen. We understood that 9-5, Monday to Friday was not going to be on the

cards and that the hard days would involve death. Good days would involve highs that we could only find in the beep beep beep of a heart rate monitor after a successful surgery.

So, I said yes and I became the second Dr. Sansus. Matt and I had some great years. We pushed each other and supported each other; a real team.

Then he took up a teaching post. For him, the long hours were losing their appeal, the no weekends, the hectic life, the 15-hour days. Matt wanted a slower pace and I of course supported him.

It was perfect for him really, a lot of traveling not just here but across Europe. He got to be social, meet people and see things outside the operating theatre all whilst passing on the knowledge he had from decades of experience in A and E.

At first, I missed him, of course I did, but I adjusted fairly quickly. It became normal for him to not be home. It became normal to be talking to him through the loudspeaker on my phone whilst multitasking. My career was taking off, I was offered the head of the Cardiothoracic surgery. His was static, which is what he wanted, but there became nothing new to talk about. We found ourselves on different trajectories and soon those daily phone calls ... became every other, then every three days, then they stopped altogether and were replaced with the "Just checking in" texts.

He deserved more. We both did. I suppose I just never expected him to cheat. Whilst there are worst things in the world, the betrayal cut deep. Especially from a man who had never even raised his voice to me. He didn't have it in him to hurt another person, he had spent his entire life saving people, so the shock that he could do that was the hardest hurdle to get over.

After that, a decision was to be made. He asked for forgiveness and I knew I could

forgive. I think I already had in so many ways, but it became about what was right for us both. I don't know if he loved her, I didn't ask, but it seemed like regardless of her, the realisation hit me that our marriage was over.

Consciously uncoupling, I forgot who first coined the expression but it seemed like the best fit. There was no animosity. No heated arguments over who would get what. We didn't have any children, and I think we both felt uncomfortable keeping our home, so we sold the house, split the money in half, and went our separate ways.

The stages of grief weren't triggered by the loss of my marriage. It was more the questions it raised about my life, the choices I had made, the place I now found myself.

I was nearly fifty two years old. My face had more lines than my concealer could hide. My friendship circle consisted of work colleagues and no one else. I attended the obligatory family events but never more than that. I couldn't remember the last holiday I took; I usually had to be reminded to take my vacation days.

I was successful, respected, an expert in my field. At work, when I spoke ... people listened. But outside of the hospital doors, even when I had something to say, there was no one there to tell.

I was not a materialistic person, so once the house was sold, I didn't keep many things. My clothes, a few keepsakes sure, but things like furniture I had no interest in. To be honest, I was never that big of a fan of how we had the place. Working in a white sterile environment meant Matt craved color, depth ... things. I personally am a great fan of white, modern, clean lines, and minimal. However, I didn't care enough to push the point at the time; now though my new apartment looked like it had been styled straight out of the Ikea magazine and I was perfectly happy with that.

I chose a place downtown. I wanted convenience. The hospital was only a ten-minute

walk away. I probably could have gotten closer but sometimes I liked to take that time, the commute between work and home to process my day. It was important to draw a line, to try and keep the difficult moments at work. Obviously, that was not always easy. I worked in a job that required my full attention all the time and any mistake could have huge consequences. Taking the time I needed to switch off could sometimes seem selfish but it was a definite necessity and it was beneficial to not only me but also to my patients.

I woke up an hour before my alarm was due to go off. It was my first day back after taking a two-month sabbatical. I had never taken time off work like that, well, maybe a day or week here or there but never a long period of time like this but I felt like it was the best thing for me. I really needed to recover to pull myself together otherwise I was a risk to everyone.

I felt nervous. I couldn't remember the last time I felt nervous about going into hospital, but I did. I pulled on my most sensible black suit and swiped a bit of mascara and eyeshadow across my eyes but I still couldn't take away the dark smears from a bad night's sleep.

I gave into my addiction early and had a cup of coffee before I left home then filled my travel mug to take another for the walk. It was one of the skills that took me far longer to nail than I would care to admit; walking whilst coffee drinking. I had lost many white shirts in the learning curve, but not anymore. Now I could navigate the streets and sip my latte like a Starbucks pro.

Working in the biggest hospital in the city had its pros and its cons. Sometimes it felt like the beating heart of downtown. All roads led there, all transport went to and from. Everyone knew someone who was in the huge concrete glass façade; patient or worker. Life began within its walls and life ended, and across the floors and departments were all the stages that came in-between.

I knew the hospital inside out and navigated the corridors, halls, and stairways with no thought. As head of the unit, I had my own office which afforded me a window, a luxury that was not be bestowed to many. I had a healthy mix in my role now of bureaucracy, paperwork, and soothing egos with managing people, direction, and practices, sprinkled in with my own hours in the operating theatre.

I liked the variety but it came with a lot of stress. Just as I was leaving for my break one of my top surgeons hinted at a cross country move. Hiring someone to replace him could take months, finding the right person, with the right skill set who would fit into the team was no easy feat. The last time I had needed to recruit it had taken me nearly a year to find the right person, so it was not a challenge I was looking forward to.

I was early so my secretary wasn't in yet which was probably a good thing. I needed to work my way through emails, agendas and meeting notes but no sooner had I sat down came a light tap at the door.

"It's open," I call out and I see my boss gingerly poking his head around the door.

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“Juliet, I thought I saw you making your way in. I thought I would catch you before the day officially starts ...” I watched as Jim closed the door behind him and made his way to the spare seat. A closed-door was an ominous sign.

Jim was a great boss. I couldn’t ask for better, he pretty much gave me the autonomy to run the department as I saw fit, as long as the essentials that generally revolved around budgets and stats were adhered to. He kept things ticking in a quiet and calm manner which made the atmosphere much more relaxed than in other hospitals, but a closed-door usually meant he had news I wouldn’t be fond of.

His manner influenced my observation of his appearance. Maybe if I met him in a bar, I might see the salt and pepper hair, his height, and his cheeky smile as attractive. However, his calm nature made him seem less sexy and more ... gentle.

“... how was your time away?” He asks softly with a hint of care and concern in his voice, and I offer him a sincere smile in return.

“Good, probably long overdue, but I feel much better now for it. Thank you, Jim. Really. I know that to give me that time ... was not the easiest. So, I really appreciate the effort you went to, to do that for me.”

“I think we all need time away from here. It creeps up on you until you don’t realize how much of our lives we dedicate to it. It is important to get that perspective. I have seen it with so many colleagues, and often it is too late when they see a break is due. I am just pleased you took the time when you needed it and have been able to come back to us feeling like yourself.”

I smile. “Thanks, Jim. So ... tell me the bad news.” His eyebrows raise, I have caught him off guard by being so direct. I have derailed his preplanned speech before he has the chance to begin. I watch him stumble then straighten.

“Well, it isn’t exactly bad news. It is ... Well, I think it is great news actually. I am hoping you will be very happy, but ...”

“... but ...?” I question,

“There is the potential for you to feel a little ... perturbed. However, you should know that I didn’t make the decision lightly. I weighed up all the options and I just felt ... after last time ... It was better that I acted ...”

I take a deep breath and adjust in my chair. “Okay Jim, you have to just tell me now before I go into myocardial infarction.”

“Well, we can't have that, we both know you are the best in that business,” he says with a cheeky smile and I fight the urge to roll my eyes, he is after all, still my boss. He clears his throat. “The thing is that Dr. Jerez was already talking about leaving before you went on your break and pretty much your first week off, he confirmed he would be moving. So, I put the advert out. Not to undermine you, but we both know how long it took last time.”

I smile, “Jim, you did the right thing. Saved me a job, in fact, you don’t need to worry about that.”

“Well, yes ... I wasn’t concerned about that part. The thing is that just a few days after we had an applicant, but they had already been offered a position elsewhere but really wanted to stay in the city ... So, I thought I would meet them.” His voice trailed off and I felt the conversation begin to turn. My manner shifting. “This applicant is perfect, Juliet. They have all the credentials and more. They are young,

smart, eager, hungry. I just know if you had taken the interview, you would have made the same decision.”

I take a deep breath. I can imagine my new surgeon now, he will be some young arrogant wannabe cardio genius. He will have charmed Jim with a smarmy smile.

Ugh.

My team is my baby. I take hiring so seriously, it is never just about ticking the right boxes, my surgeons need to really fit into the team. I want them to fill the slots we have but also to complement the others. We need to be able to work together fluidly, seamlessly. Jim is a great boss, but he isn't in my team every day. He doesn't operate with me.

“I suppose I'll do my best,” I say diplomatically though even I can hear the cold edge in my own voice. “When does my new surgeon start? He had better not be a prick, Jim.”

I watch Jim turn a flushed pink, his shirt seems fastened half an inch too tight around his neck. His whole body shows how uncomfortable he was. “Yes well, that is the other thing. Your new surgeon already did start In fact ...”

I cut him off. “He already started? Without me? Jim ... I was gone a few weeks! You couldn't wait?! You know that I am the best and the reason I am the best is because I have a way of doing things.” I sit back in my chair with a petulant swipe at the papers at my desk. “I can't believe that you would not only hire someone but then get them started in my team without waiting for me ... I mean if I had been gone 6 months, a year, okay I could understand but weeks, Jim. Weeks.”

Jim takes the difficult decision to cut me off early. Had I been in his position I don't know if I would have been so brave, but he slides across me.

“Juliet, I knew you would be upset but I had to act in the interest of the department. We were faced with the real reality that two of our surgeons were not available. I would never hire someone rashly or impulsively however I also would not unduly put patients at risk when I know that I have a great young surgeon asking me to take the available job, who can start immediately and continue the incredible work and ethos you have brought to this department and hospital.”

Indignation burns bright. I want to erupt. I want to explode, but Jim makes a good point that I can’t deny. His priority, as is mine, is the health of the patients. And Jim is correct, he is not a rash man. He wouldn’t have made the choice without weighing up all the options, including my response to the news. It seems to take an age for the anger to simmer and for me to calm but when I did, I nodded.

“So, when do I meet him?”

He responded with a slightly relieved smile, “I was hoping you would say that and you won’t need to wait long, your new surgeon is in the waiting area. Keeping a safe distance until the coast is clear ...” He chuckles and then stops himself as he can see I’m not quite at “jokes” level just yet.

“Well, I suppose I better meet him then?”

“Your new surgeon isn’t a he, Juliet, your new surgeon is very much a she. Doctor Arya Harris.”

My eyes widen. I didn’t anticipate my new young hungry surgeon would be a woman. I hate myself for a second for my assumption and I am pleasantly surprised to be corrected.

Dr Arya Harris.

If only I knew then, what affect she would have on my life.

I stride out of my office in a heat of frustration, even if she is a woman, I don't want to meet the new member of my team, instead, I want to be doing all the other important things that need to be done this morning followed by a seriously large cup of coffee.

I haven't had time to formulate an idea of Dr. Arya Harris in my mind, but if I had, she would have not been the woman that is sitting in the bright open waiting room of the Cardiovascular Department. It is a joke amongst doctors that when you finally finish your studies and your training, you add some letters after your name and ten years to your appearance. Working and studying for most of your adult life in a fast-paced high-stakes environment certainly does no favors in regards to greying hair or the bags under your eyes.

Dr. Arya Harris defies that. If I didn't trust in Jim's ability to confirm her references and credentials, I would have doubted that she was old enough to have even graduated. She turns as I approach and greets me with a small smile as she rises to stand.

She is around my height give or take an inch with long blonde hair that is pulled back into a high pony. The odd strand has escaped from the band and is in soft curls that frame her face. Her skin is so pale it shines like a creamy pearl under the strong fluorescent lighting and her eyes are the lightest of blues, so light they seem almost silvery at the right angle.

Her cheekbones would be the envy of a runway model, high and defined but instead

of her beauty being intimidating it is softened by the gentleness of her nature. She exudes calm, her manner is gentle and full of care. I can tell instantly she will be a much loved doctor, and if her technical ability is there, she will fit into the team without a single issue.

“Dr. Sansus.” She smiles and I feel my heart beat faster as I hear my name slip from her lips. Her voice is soft too, barely a whisper, but she has the ability to make the world around her stop so you can hang on to every word she offers to you. “It is a pleasure to meet you, I can’t tell you much of an honor it is to be working alongside you.”

I feel like a bitch but I can’t shake the cold edge to my voice. I was already frustrated and now Dr. Arya Harris has thrown me. I feel uneasy, I am unsure what I am feeling and why I am feeling it. A swirl of complicated and mixed emotions that I have never felt before bubble as I reply curtly to her.

“Good to have you onboard, Dr. Harris. I know you have already been with us for a couple of weeks so I guess a tour would be unnecessary however, I do have a way of doing things. I like to have a balance. I am not here to micromanage you, but at the same time, I am here to guide, direct and assist. As we will be working together in situations where we are often not given second chances, I prefer that we take some time in less ... intense surgical scenarios. That can be a few hours per week during consultations, surgical assessments, and if you are taking part in the educational program, some time with that too. How does that sound to you?”

If my tone and directness throws her, she doesn’t show it. If anything, she seems to shine under my direct authority. She offers me a nod and a resolute smile. “Absolutely, this is why I am here. To work and learn from the best, but please, call me Arya.”

Before I can answer Jim responds with a clap, rubbing his palms together with a

gleeful smile, clearly feeling himself let off the hook. “Didn’t I tell you, Juliet, Arya is going to fit right in, well she already has. Everyone is so happy she is on board, just as you are. Well, I had better get going. I will leave you two to get better acquainted.”

He bustles off and as he heads around the corner, I let the sigh I have been holding escape and my eyes roll. Arya's lips curl at the corner, and I can see she is holding back a laugh.

“Jim is a great, but too chipper for me this early in the morning,” I respond wryly. “Okay, Dr. Harris I need to get some things done, the first priority being coffee. I apologize that I can’t dive right into things with you but ...”

Arya cuts me off before I get into an explanation. “Please, Dr. Sansus, you don’t need to explain. It is your first day back and I am sure you have a hundred things to do. I won’t take any more of your time but let me say again how honored I am to be working with you.”

Arya Harris steps back before I have time to properly respond. Leaving our conversation on her terms, she turns and heads off down the hallway. She wears heels, and I watch as she tips taps gracefully, yet purposefully, along the bleached floor. She wears pants, not a skirt, but they look fitted, made just for her frame. The bottoms turn over so the bones of her ankles are on show, her slim delicate feet slip into soft creamy leather that matches and compliments her tan pantsuit. She wears a white shirt that is tucked smoothly into her pants and her jacket is draped over her arm.

She has a class that seems effortless. A style that I could spend hours trying to perfect only for it to seem like I was wearing someone else’s clothes. The way her hair is effortlessly swooped up, it would take me twenty minutes and it would never look like that. It isn’t just her physical appearance that plays on my mind as I head down to the cafeteria for my coffee. There is something about her whole demeanor. She is soft

and sweet, the way she looked up at me with her long lashes and slightly pinked cheeks. She was nervous and confident all in one go and I find the turn of her lips as she held back her laugh plays on repeat on my mind.

But I am still pissed.

A nice smile and good sense of style does not make her a great surgeon. She is only a year or so out of her surgical residency. That doesn't mean one thing or another but it will be my job to mentor her. I will need to work closely alongside her and I am still not happy that Jim has taken my choice away.

I do have a plan though; I will try and slide Arya more into the educational program. It will be a great way for her to establish herself and it will certainly boost her credentials. Plus, it won't do any harm to have such a calm mannered fresh sweet face being the lead of the next resident group.

It is the logistics of that that are playing through my thoughts as I feel the buzz on my wrist alerting me to attend Operating Theatre 4.

I don't know how many surgeries I have completed. Hundreds, thousands even, but the feeling in my stomach is always the same. Unrested.

The excitement comes, I love operating. Not many people in the world feel like this. I remember watching some operating scene on a TV show once with my parents. My mom nearly passed out and gave the this look of pure shock that I could do something like that as my job. And if I were to be honest, the show made it look a lot less ... invasive than it is in reality.

But for me, I can't imagine doing anything else. There are two parts to it. First is the science, the awe of what we can do as humans. How far we have come in the sense of what we can achieve. I have seen hearts that have stopped beat once more. I have

watched arteries clear before my eyes. I have seen surgeons who have pushed themselves past the point of what seems humanly even possible to save a life.

The second is knowing that that heart belongs to a person. That they have family, friends, people in their lives who love them and who they love and for those moments in the operating theatre, their future and that of their family, depends on me and my team.

It is a double-edged sword. Sometimes I go home feeling the highest of the highs. A 5-year-old boy waking up with flushed cheeks and a pumping heart. A father hugging his children after a triple bypass. A young woman who has her whole life ahead of her, thanking me with bright sparkling eyes as she faces the whole world in front of her.

Then there are the days when even walking home seems a task too difficult. The weight of loss, the pain of failure too heavy to bear for that moment. I have learned how to cope, how to accept that I can't save everyone, but in my role now as head of the department, I feel my team's pain too and it can make it a little harder. Knowing they did all they could ... but the name is now etched on their own heart as a life they could not save.

It takes me 7 minutes to get from the canteen into surgery prep. We are at the cross over time. The on-call surgeon could stay to assist with the operation but I feel fresh and they have been working all night so I pull on my scrubs as Dr. Arya Harris steps into the theatre. She looks at me with surprise.

“Dr. Sansus, I didn't expect ...”

“I am here and the on-call surgeon is just about to leave for sleep. Better that I step in. Okay, let's have a look at what we have here today. This patient is in need of a Cardiomyoplasty they have already had thrombolysis with little effect. Okay ...”

Work mode takes over. For three hours we work on our patient. Arya moves with me seamlessly, she anticipates my needs before I can direct her, she offers observations and updates seconds before I am about to ask. Her cuts are textbook, her fingers move without a hint of a tremble. The assisting staff have already connected with her and they follow her direction with no hesitation or doubt.

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There are still moments of uncertainty. An obese male who has had a cardiac arrest and hasn't responded to thrombolysis ... The chances of open-heart surgery being successful is always a balance of unfavorable odds. But Arya never shows a hint of frustration, she is the height of calm, and that has an effect on everyone, including myself.

I find myself drawn to her, intrigued by her, and hungry to know more.

"I am a tough head of department, Dr. Harris," I tell her as I peel my gloves from my fingers, feeling the sugar crash after the hours of intensity and concentration. "Fair, but tough. I expect the best and in return I will push you, encourage you, and help you get where ever you want to be. I will be your biggest critic and your loudest supporter. If I think you made a mistake, I will tell you. Not to berate you, but so you can learn. Therefore, you should absolutely believe me when I tell you ... today, in there, you were flawless, you were a pleasure to work with."

I watch as Arya pauses mid unpeeling of surgical masks and gloves, her cheeks flush the softest of pinks and she gives me a smile that lights up her entire face.

"Thank you, Dr. Sansus. Really, that means a lot to me."

"You're welcome and so, in honor of our first successful surgery, it is a tradition that I buy you a drink. Are you free after work?"

If it were a tradition, it is one I had just invented, but I can't help myself. The words have left my lips before I have time to think about them. I have this impulsive need to get to know her, to understand her, to make her smile again.

My heart skips a beat when she smiles and nods.

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Being close to the center of the city, there were lots of places to choose from when it came to drinking establishments. Depending on your mood you could start throwing back tequila in Havana or feel the steady sexy pulse in the Blues Bros. I opt for an Irish bar that is always popular but not cool enough to be hip.

I like the atmosphere and prefer the bustle of people without having to push through a crowd or shout over the music. I haven't exactly dressed for after-work drinks, but I always keep toiletries and a spare shirt in my locker so it is easy to have a quick freshen up before I meet Arya in reception.

"How was your second first day?" I ask her as we amble through the quietening high street.

"It was scarier than my official first that's for sure." She says with a quick laugh, and I turn to question her with a slightly raised eyebrow. She blushes a little. "If I, were you ... I would have been so upset had someone hired me when I was on vacation. So, it was important to me that I made a good first impression. I wanted you to see that they had not made a mistake ... and had you been here, the outcome would have been the same."

"I was frustrated." I admit. "Only because, as I am sure the same is for you, my work is my life. This surgical department is my whole world. More so than ever." I add with a laugh that holds a tiny trace of bitterness. "Hiring someone new is an investment, hours of my time will be spent with that person and I don't want to waste my time or theirs. But ... to be fair to Jim ... he made a great choice and to answer your unasked question ... Yes, the outcome would have been the same." I finish with a smile as I hold out my arm and direct her into The Shamrock.

She walks in first and is already untwirling her silk scarf from her neck. It tangles in the hair of her pony and I reach to untangle it for her. The move is instinctual, my fingertips grazing the nape of her neck before I can put thought into the action or ask myself whether it was appropriate.

My fingertips glide over her soft pearly skin and I watch her shiver instantly, goosebumps appearing involuntarily as her own hand pauses to allow me to unthread the pale pink silk from her blonde hair.

I feel the fission of a spark. I'm holding my breath and my heart thumps fast and hard, enough to make the world lose focus for a second ... and then she steps out of my reach, turning and thanking me with a shy smile.

If our interaction affects her... she doesn't show it so I pull myself together and follow her to a booth. I slip out of my coat and slide very ungracefully across the worn leather seat. The waitress ambles over, looking very unchipper as she takes our order. I choose wine; I don't know why it surprises me when lovely feminine Ayra orders a beer.

"When in Ireland," she says with a smile and I laugh.

"I never got into beer." I reply, "Even in my college days. I drink coffee, water, and wine."

"My ex was the same, she said it was too ... bitter. She would swear she could taste the yeast. I personally think it can be refreshing after a long day but I can take it or leave it. I enjoy a glass of wine, but I need it with food otherwise I am the drunk one that sits in the corner and slurs to herself. Actually ... I probably do that without the wine." She laughs and leans back as our drinks are served, I watch condensation run down the side of her glass, pooling on the Guinness beer mat as her slender fingers curl around and she brings the rim to her lips for a light first taste.

She. Arya's ex girlfriend. The open revelation of Arya's sexuality shouldn't have surprised me but it does. Arya doesn't ... look gay. Although now I come to think about it, I am not sure what gay actually does look like. I am sure that I have known many gay people in my life, but I rarely make a personal connection enough with anyone to know their sexual orientation. I absolutely do not ask at work; it is none of my business and I wouldn't want someone to ask me about my own personal life.

But now Arya has offered the information freely it is mine to process. I envy her confidence and her directness to express who she is with no reservation. I just am not sure how it makes me feel suddenly about my own sexuality that I have never questioned before. I have questions that swirl around in my head ... when did she know, how did she know, was she 100% gay, had she been with a man? Did she want to be with a man? Was she bisexual? Demisexual? Pansexual?

However, even with my lack of social graces, I do know that these are not appropriate questions to ask a colleague when out for a first-day celebratory drink. Arya is eyeing me, watching and gauging my reaction and I realize the silence has lingered too long ... I panic, hoping she knows it isn't because I am homophobic, just curious about her and ...

"I just divorced." I blurt out before taking a large clumsy gulp of my wine, watching her eyebrows raise in surprise.

"I am sorry to hear that. Divorces are never easy, so I have heard. I have never made it to that level of commitment myself."

I laugh, "I was the same. Said the same, felt the same. But it somehow just happened, times were a little different twenty five years ago. There was an expectation to marry, it was the norm, even for those of us that were so career focussed. I did it and I don't regret it, but ... it has certainly left me feeling out of sorts with the world right now. Or rather, my place in the world right now. It is why I wasn't at work for a few

weeks. I needed some time, I guess that is why Jim hired you. I told him I would be back, but there were moments when I doubted that myself so I can't blame him for being unsure too. I guess you heard me in my office when I was ... frustrated with him. It wasn't about you personally. I didn't even know who you were, not even your name, it wasn't a personal issue ... more that I felt replaceable. Un-missed. Like even the one place in the world that I thought I was needed ... really I am not."

She pauses before replying, sitting back in her seat so her shoulders rest against the smooth leather curve of the booth seats. It is like she is weighing up all I have offered her and is formulating her response based on the sum of all she knows. I find myself waiting with bated breath to see what she will say, hanging on her every word.

"I can understand that. I also think it is a testament to you, how good you are that your whole department can function without you. It shows that you have built a team that works without a head figure when it needs to. Although, I think you underestimate the amount you were missed. Everyone I met spoke very highly of you and they all told me how much they learn from you, how you push them to be the best that they can be. If I had heard that from just one person ... maybe I would think they were biased or a couple might make me think you had your moments. But literally every single person. And not even just from cardio surgeons. Nurses and doctors from other departments told me how lucky I am to be in your department. So, yeah, without gushing too hard and making it awkward ... I think you may underestimate how much you were missed."

I feel the hint of a blush spread across my cheeks. I don't seek validation often, if I need it, I can find it in graphs, figures, lives saved, employee retention, things like that. But to hear it from another human, unprompted. It feels good, nice.

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“Thank you for saying that. I really appreciate it.” I reply with genuine, heartfelt sincerity. “So, Arya, tell me a little more about you. Because right now... I know next to nothing.”

“Oh goodness. Is this like the job interview we never had? Should I prep my STAR answers and display my high levels of competence?”

“I think you already showed your high level of competence in surgery today. Hmmm, how about we ditch the Situation, Task, Action, and Result answers and you just tell me about you, the real you. How did you end up here?”

“Well, I am Arya. I was actually born here in the city and I grew up just a few blocks away, but I moved away in my early teens. I wasn’t sure about coming back, but I did. I took a job at a private clinic but I absolutely hated it. I was actually about to move again, back into a public hospital out of the city when I saw the advert for this position. I figured if I was meant to stay, this would be the reason to.”

“Where did you move to out of the city?” I ask because I can see the way her body tenses when she talks about it. It seems like it was a move she was not all that fond of and the dilemma to come back and stay or go again has weighed heavily on her mind.

“I moved to the countryside, to live with my grandparents. They have both passed away now, but if it weren’t for them ... well, let’s just say they were my greatest supporters. They never had a doubt I could get here, even when I wasn’t so sure. They never got the cardiothoracic appeal though. A doctor yes, even a surgeon but I think the heart ... they were religious you see, and felt like the heart was one of those things that should be left to God. Anyway, they lived to see me graduate, then my

Grandma got cancer, it was fast and I am thankful in some ways for that. Chemo ... it's a real bitch and she was already in her 80s. She just accepted it, said it was her time and lived out her last few weeks as happy as she could be. My Granddad ... he tried to hold on for me but he couldn't. It is funny, I am not religious at all and I have seen the inside of a heart enough times to know that it doesn't beat for love. But only a few months after she had gone, he had a heart attack and died. Instant, just a perfect cardiac failure. He wouldn't have even known what was happening. And even now I can hear my Grandma saying to me, see Arya, your science knows more than me ... but it doesn't know more than God. Are you religious?"

My eyes widen, "Ouff ... well isn't that the question. I mean I am a woman of science. It doesn't leave much room for God. But you know the older I get and the more I know, the less I know about things. Does that make any sense? What is it Einstein said ...?"

"...The more I study science, the more I believe in God" Arya finished with me and we both laughed.

"Yes, so I mean it worked for Einstein but I am not so sure really. I guess I would say agnostic if I were to be pushed. I believe that nothing is known or can be known of the existence or nature of God so I prefer to just get on with my life either way."

"I think that I can totally agree with that sentiment." Arya smiles and raises her glance in a mock cheer to clink with mine. The glasses touch and I look up at her over the rim.

She really is beautiful. She barely has any makeup on, I have to really scan her face to see the soft sweep of mascara and gentle smudge of pink across her eyelids. Her silvery blue irises look otherworldly in the dimmed bar light. They are sparkling silvery swirls that are enchanting to watch as they offer all of her up whilst revealing nothing at all. "You really do have the most extraordinary eyes. Beautiful," I murmur

as I raise my glass to my lips, taking a long deep drink until it is drained, I barely taste it. My mind has wandered far off in another direction that I never imagined was possible for someone like me.

Who is this woman? And why does she affect me so much?

I feel feelings rise in me that I have never felt before. There is a swirling of longing deep inside me that makes me question all that I think I know about myself.

“I should get going,” I say with a hint of purposefulness. If I stay, I will have another wine, and with no food ... I will lose the only reservation I have about not opening up to her. Arya pauses, her lips pout and words linger on them ... but whatever thought she has she leaves unsaid.

“Me too. I have work in the morning and my boss ... she is a real ball breaker.”

We share a smile as we both rise. She reaches to pay but I bat her hand away and instead leave the money and a generous tip for the waitress. I watch as Arya’s hands rise and she slowly wraps her scarf back around her neck. The soft silk glides and then tightens around her soft creamy skin. I feel jealous, I want to touch her too, I want to wrap and unwrap her like a present on Christmas day.

I don’t know if she can see that longing in my face. The desires that I have are becoming more and more defined and distinguished in my mind, but she doesn’t respond. She just offers me a soft goodbye before she departs.

4

I find the rhythm of being back to normality within only a few days. My body resyncs to the right sleeping pattern. My brain switches from holiday mode to work mode. Days turn into shifts, rosters, day staff, night staff, on-call staff, board meetings,

schedules, funding, reports.

I thought that maybe finding the routine again would make me miss Matt but if anything, the opposite is true. It is making me realize just how much we had grown apart, the fact that I can slip so easily back into my old life and not feel the ache. I actually don't miss him or even worse perhaps, I barely notice his absence.

There are some changes though. I find myself starting to care a little more about my appearance. The usual roll out of bed, coffee, throw an outfit together, and fight my way down the high street ... those days are fading away.

Instead, I start to lay out little outfits the night before. I actually pay attention to see if my bag and shoes match. Make-up takes ten minutes instead of five and is applied with a little... effort.

The reason is obvious. Arya.

The first working lunch we took together by accident. A happy coincidence of timing in the cafeteria. Arya is one of those women who is always meticulously prepared. She comes with pre-made sandwiches that are not hurriedly buttered and thrown together with slabs of cheese. Oh no, these are precisely made, and layered to perfection so that wet tomatoes won't touch dry bread. Her butter is spread as though she has used a surgical knife and when she takes a bite the mayo oozes but not enough to drip.

I marveled at her sandwich-making commitment. She pitied my canteen macaroni.

And so, the chance of us lunching together evolved into a certainty – emergencies permitting. Those 45 minutes quickly became a highlight of my day and our friendship blossomed effortlessly. She has a way of making me feel like I am the funniest person she has ever met. She laughs at every joke, smiles at every story I tell,

nods, and encourages, but never rushes me to finish. Her responses aren't pre-thought-out. I never get the impression that she is waiting for me to end so she can start talking. Instead, she will pause after I speak and digest what I have said, weigh up her thoughts and opinions before offering me her response.

It is why she made me want to think about who I am as a person. The time she invests in listening to me, makes me want to offer her a more thought out version of myself, rather than any old self that I have dragged in on any given day. I want to have educated opinions, rather than them being something I've seen on Facebook. I find myself starting to read widely, to research and ask questions about science, the world around me, politics, art, history and so much more.

She is baffled that I have never really traveled. She is shocked that I never go to museums or shows or eat out at the weekends. I, in turn, can't believe she has the time and isn't completely exhausted. We dance around the tough questions. She holds back asking me about Matt, my divorce, why I didn't have children. I pause over asking why she lived with her grandparents and I hold back the many questions I have about her sexuality.

She seems to freeze when talking about her childhood, especially her biological parents, and I want her to share about that when she is ready. The reason I don't ask my questions about her sexuality is not because I feel she would shy away from talking to me about it. She is open about her past sexual partners and holds no reservation in using feminine pronouns no matter whose company we are in. She doesn't refer to her ex as a "partner" but as her, she, Sarah. No, the reservation about the topic of her sexuality doesn't come from my concern for Arya, it comes from my increasingly confused thoughts about my own sexuality.

Whilst there is no doubt that I love my blossoming friendship with Arya, there is definitely more there. I think about her in ways I never have about anyone ever before.

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I'm not sure if it is possible she feels the same way. Sometimes I feel the way she looks at me and I think maybe the feeling is mutual but the thought of it scares me.

In my head when I think about the possibility of it, the possibility of her, I am nervous about the sexual side of things. My one and only experience with a woman was in college and it was a drunken bottle spin kiss that I barely remember. Now I allow myself to think about it there perhaps had been flutterings before that, although minimal and not something I had ever pursued.

As more and more time passes though I know that my desire for her is only growing stronger.

I have never been particularly well informed when it came to sex. Matt and I had had a good enough sex life especially in the beginning but then I don't have much to compare it to. It was fun, happy, confident enjoyable vanilla. We learned quickly what the other liked and we were both more than happy to do those things for the other. We hadn't experimented all that much and whilst I had no doubt that he watched porn, especially when he was away ... I personally had never looked that much. Once or twice for the sake of curiosity, but I had enjoyed myself just as much with my fingers and imagination.

But now I find myself exploring porn in a way that I never have before. Opening up the incognito tab on my phone when I lay in bed, like someone somewhere would actually give a flying fuck that I Juliet Sansus was searching lesbian porn.

I didn't find much excitement in the overly produced porn star shows that seemed about as real as a Marvel movie. The ones that catch my attention are the homemade

movies, or at least they claim to be homemade, I'm never sure if they actually are.

I like the videos that actually seem real. I like when one of the women seems nervous and the other woman takes over and guides her. She shows her how to touch and how to give pleasure. I am mesmerized by the softness that is possible between two women. I am amazed how what I know as foreplay isn't that at all. It is the main event and doesn't last seconds, but minutes ... hours ... until the skin of the women glistens with sweat and every word whispered or moaned seems like they are both repeatedly brought to the edge of their climax.

And climax, they do, loudly and realistically, sometimes gushing their enthusiasm over the hand or mouth of their lover. I realize I love to watch these women in the throes of rapture and I start to see the difference between what is real and what is faked. Or, I think I do, at least.

My taste evolves, each night I watch more and more. Learning and observing until I start to feel more comfortable and confident in the touches that I have never given nor experienced. My searches become more focused, longer, and more detailed.

I move from shy girls and first-time touches to more experienced women. I fall into the porn world of rope, bondage, restraints. I don't linger on the whipping, because the pain has never been an aphrodisiac to me, but the tease, the forced patience ... long and slow, drawn-out edging where the girl would practically sell her soul for more touches- those videos set off feelings inside me that I have never felt before.

It isn't long before those videos merge in my imagination. Faceless women of course become Arya in my mind. It is her soft silk scarf that wraps around my wrists, her perfectly steady surgeon's hands that linger over my inner thighs, her soft delicate fingers that glide over my wet glistening folds until I am begging her for more.

The first time that I climaxed thinking about her I felt guilty, like I had overstepped

the line and violated her in some way. But it soon became clear that I couldn't stop myself, every night when I laid in bed ... I thought of her. I imagined how it would be to have her here with me. To touch her, taste her and tease her and in turn give myself to her.

I look forward to the end of each day where I can strip off totally naked and slide between my soft white sheets. My hands are patient... I follow my favourite things from the videos... first my nails against my neck... down over my chest to my nipples which I circle slowly ... I inch in closer and closer so my nipples are hard and aching before I have even felt a touch. And when that touch comes it is like a live hot wire straight between my legs ... my back arching as my legs slide open, my thighs parting wide ... so I can feel the air kiss my aching sex but with no further relief ... Yet.

I tease myself for as long as I can, until I feel my own wetness drip down between my cheeks, pooling beneath my ass. I open and close my legs, rubbing my thighs together in a rhythm that starts slow ... but works faster and faster until I can take no more.

Then I would split my legs so both ankles drape off either side of the bed and let my fingers dance through my sex. The sweet sound of my own wetness... I never knew I could be so wet. So hot. So turned on. I thought the moaning in porn was always exaggerated, and gasps and breathlessness from the exercise were more the reality. But I was so wrong. I find myself moaning so loudly I wondered if my neighbors can hear me. After my crashing orgasm it must have taken ten minutes for the world to come back into focus.

I have had orgasms before, don't get me wrong, but nothing as intense as I feel now. Sometimes now, I push onwards after my climax, forcing myself to ride over the sensitivity. Every inch of my skin glistens in sweat, my body aches as though I have been at the gym for hours, between my legs is tender to the touch ... but I feel myself building again towards another inevitable crescendo- the wow of my first double

orgasms.

And it is Arya's name that lingers on my lips. It is her touch I imagine, want and need when I come.

But as these desires explode within me, so do the doubts. I am 15 years Arya's senior. I'm her boss. She is stunningly beautiful and could have her pick of women, not even just gay women, I am sure that her soft pink lips and enchanting eyes could entrance anyone. Why would she want me? I am at least ten years past my sexual prime and around thirty past my physical one.

My expensively highlighted hair might not show the greys that I am sure am in there somewhere, but it doesn't take away from the fact that I am a lot older, and in the age range where I am starting to see lines, sagging skin, differences in myself physically.

I had been with one man for most of my adult life. Men are a different breed when it comes to sex. The desire and need overtakes them and sometimes I used to feel like Matt didn't even see me when we were fucking, he was lost in his own primitive nature. That wasn't always a bad thing as often I was lost in my own world too while we fucked.

I most certainly do not feel that way about Arya. In fact, I have had to almost draw a line in my mind to separate our friendship, our working relationship, and the desires that I have for her because if I let my lust for her that is building every day manifest in an outward display of affection ... I fear I would only ruin our friendship and feel the cold hard sting of rejection.

5

Spring passes and the city awakens from its wintery slumber and embraces summer in all her glory. I swear even the hospital breathes a new lease of life when the long

summer days come around. I enjoy that I can walk to work in the light and when I leave at whatever time it may be, the sun is still out high in the sky.

I feel at my best mentally and that makes me act healthier too. I ditch the frozen meals and processed crap and eat out on sunny terraces with actual fruit and vegetables. I actually use my gym membership for a change and my coffee intake drops to the levels of a normal human. I am definitely a summer baby. A highlight in my younger years was my July birthday and I always enjoyed a relaxed outdoor celebration with friends and family. But now it has a twinge that comes with it as I grow another year older, and now I do it alone. Single; actually, divorced.

I have read in women's magazines and seen references to it in movies and series that when a woman becomes single, she is often shunned from her social group. I haven't exactly noticed that because most of my friends are work colleagues but there has been a definite shift. A realignment. Colleagues I still work with or who are active in my professional life still invite me to things as though Matt was never present. And people with who he now works more closely with have certainly dropped out of my frequent messages circle.

I feel sad about it, as though they don't believe I am mature enough to handle seeing Matt socially. But, of course I am. After everything, I wish him the best and hold no malice, but it was Arya that pointed out, that it wasn't about my feelings.

"You are a walking reminder that relationships are fragile. The thing is Juliet, is that if they see just you or just Matt, they don't have to acknowledge really that you have separated." She explains with one hand held up to the sun as we meander around the city park on a sunny Sunday afternoon. "but if you are there together ... but not together ... there has to be an acceptance that you two have in fact chosen to end what you had. And some women are scared of that, some are jealous of it, and others ... just don't want to think about it. So, that is why you are not both invited. It isn't actually about you or Matt. It is about the insecurities they feel in themselves."

She looks perfect. She is dressed in a light floral print skirt and loosely tucked tee. Her blonde hair is down, which is unusual for her, but it looks so naturally golden in the mid-afternoon sun. Her skin is still pale, I bronzed in the first few minutes of seeing the sun, but not Arya. She still has the pale sheen to her skin but there is a soft hint of pink across her cheeks and shoulders.

“I didn’t think about it like that,” I reply honestly and she mock rolls her eyes.

“That is because you give people far too much credit. You imagine that they are thinking about you and your feelings when in actual fact they are only thinking of themselves in most cases.”

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She sounds cynical, which is not how she normally is. She can be a bit of a contradiction at times. She usually sees the best in most people she meets and then in other glimpses of her she has a hardened cold view of the world. We still dance around talking about her childhood, I still don't know the details or any real information except that her mother is still alive and she never knew who her father was. Her mother from what I can gather is still in the city but they have had no contact since Arya left as a teen, and that is the way Arya wants it to remain. I haven't pushed her.

I have no real experience in family controversy. I had a completely normal childhood, I felt loved by both my parents. My father wasn't a drinker, my mom was quiet and kind-minded. My brother was born a few years after me and there was love, bickering, normality.

Studying and my job inevitably pulled me further and further away. I studied for years in a different city and then I never returned home, building my life here with Matt instead. My family visited me. I visited them. It has always been warm and pleasant; they are proud of me. My dad sure likes to boast about his surgeon daughter, and my mom quietens him but I can see the pride in her eyes too. It makes me feel good. I had expected a little backlash when I told them about Matt and me but they were very calm.

“You know what is best for you, better than anyone else sweetheart.” My dad had told me and that was that. We continued in the same manner as we always had. John, my brother, had been a little more shocked. I think because he saw my life as this perfect picture of hard work and stability. He didn't say anything out of line, but he called more. He checked in more often than birthdays and Christmases and Mom let

slip that he was a bit worried now about me living in the city alone.

I rolled my eyes at his typically masculine need to protect a woman complex but I assured her and everyone else that I was just fine.

And as I walk around the park with Arya ... I am actually starting to feel just fine again. They weren't just hollow words that I am hiding behind. Better than fine, even. Like I said, summer always makes me feel better. But it is more than that. It is her too.

We connect on so many levels. Working with her is effortless. I don't even need to use words, I can read her body and it is like she can read my mind. We work in sync, anticipating each other flawlessly.

The other doctors and medics have noticed too. They comment on how we perform surgery together as though it is art. I feel a spark of something the moment our names are mentioned in the same sentence. I look for our names on the roster, and hope we will be scheduled together. I try not to make adjustments to force it to happen, even though I do have that power. I let it happen naturally, I would never abuse my power in that way, but when it aligns ... my heart beats a little faster.

"Juliet, are you even listening to me?" Arya cuts through my thoughts and I turn to her with a glazed expression.

She laughs, "Well, it wasn't that important anyway ... just ... please, Juliet. You have to think about yourself a little bit more. These people who don't invite you, well for want of a better word, fuck them. They are the ones that lose out on your total fabulousness."

Now it is my turn to laugh. "My total fabulousness?" I reply with a raised eyebrow as I look down at my mismatched outfit. My shoes have been chosen for comfort, not

elegance. My shorts did made my ass look good in the mirror but the tight black denim didn't quite pair up with the light loose vest I had pulled on in a rush. My hair had started down, but as I felt the heat, I had scraped it back in a half-up, half mess pony. I am the definition of un-fabulousness.

"It baffles me how un self-aware you are." She replies with a shake of her head, I let the silence come, not sure how to respond.

"The thing is, Juliet ..." she pauses as though treading water and unsure of the depth. "You are completely oblivious to the effect you have on people. I get that when you look in the mirror you see the flaws. We all do. But you know, it is important to find the balance. Look."

She reaches for my hand and I tense ... the shock of surprise at her touch makes me hold my breath as she turns my palm over in her hands. "You look at your hand it is like all you see are the signs that you are older. The scars. The lines. But no one else sees them, like for me ... all I see is how steady they are, your elegant fingers, the softness of your fingertips, how you can hold a blade-like it is an extension of you. Your hands move deftly and easily as though with no thought ... they have saved so many lives, they will save so many more. They're beautiful, soft, special, sexy ..."

She pauses again as she looks up from my hand and her gaze meets mine, our eyes lock. It is like the air stills around us. My pounding heart thuds so loudly I can hear it in my ears. My pulse races and I feel her thumb brush over the artery in my left wrist ... I know she can feel it, and she will read the quickening of my pulse. She bites down on her lower lip, she is hesitant.

But it is not only that she can read me, I can read the physical change in her too. Her pupils dilate and her cheeks flush a rosy pink. I feel the tiny tremble in her grip, see the quickening of her breath as she releases her lip from the grip of her teeth.

I move without thought, and certainly without consideration for the consequences. My hand turns to hold hers. My other hand reaches up to run through soft blonde wisps of her hair. I brush the strands back from her cheek and I lean in. My head moves with a certainty that I rarely possess outside of work.

Her head tilts, resting in my palm, letting me draw her into me as I move into her space. Her eyelashes flutter. I am so close I think I could count each one... and then our lips meet.

It isn't an explosion, there are no fireworks, but something shifts deep inside of me. There is a tenderness to it, the kiss is so soft I feel like I could melt into her. My fingers thread, entwining with hers and we draw closer. She tastes like honey and almonds, creamy and sweet. She gasps a little as my tongue presses and swirls, desperate to taste more of her. We speak a language without words. It is our desires, our bodies that are talking for us now.

In the same way that we anticipate each other in theatre, we anticipate each other now. My leg slides outwards as hers presses in, giving me a brush of the bare skin of her calves. I shiver and as I do, she squeezes my hand tight until her short nails mark my palm.

It is dizzying. I don't know how I stay standing. I don't know how long it lasts. But the moment it ends, I only wish it would start all over again. We look at each other, still holding hands, breathless and with swollen lips and she smiles. Then I smile ... then I giggle. Fuck, I feel like a teenager. Except I am not.

6

That is all the time it takes for my doubts and insecurities to rise. I allow myself a few minutes of perfection and then my own thoughts spoil it all. I step back and I move to pull my hand from hers but Arya holds on tight.

“Don’t do that.” She says softly with a light squeeze, she moves, still holding my fingers. She guides me to a bench where we both sit. “Don’t shut me out. Talk to me.”

“I haven’t ... the thing is I don’t ... Well, I am not sure ... I just don’t think ...” I stop and start and she laughs softly giving my hand a gentle rub of her thumb in reassurance.

“Deep breaths, one at a time. Tell me the biggest thing. Then the next. Don’t stop, just tell me all of them. All of the doubts. Then we will work through each one. Ready ... go ...”

I nod and take a deep breath in. “I have never been with a woman. I don’t know what I am doing. I’m not even gay. I am way too old for you. You are too beautiful for me. I am your boss, it isn’t appropriate. I just don’t think I am good enough for you.”

“Ouff.” She replies, her eyebrows raised in absolute shock. “I mean, I thought it was probably about work. I had guessed you hadn’t actually been with a woman before ... but not good enough for me ... Juliet ... You are amazing, beautiful, smart, intelligent. You literally take my breath away every single day. You don’t need to think like that at all. Ever. I was thinking that you might think I wasn’t enough for you, I never imagined ...” Her voice trails off and I blush a little.

“Oh, come on Arya. You know how beautiful you are. I have literally seen people stop in the corridors when they see you. How many people ask you out a week?” She frowns at me.

“You mean ... how many middle-aged men leer at me, corner me, and hound me to go for a drink with them? Then if I tell them, I am gay ... I see the ding ding ding, behind their eyes of wow, porn star lesbian fantasies which inevitably slide into ... ‘I am cool with that; I have always wanted a threesome.’ And I am actually a little bit

sick in my mouth at the thought of it. You mean those people that ask me?”

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“Does that really happen to you?” I asked shocked.

“Yes Juliet, that really happens. So no, I don’t really see that as a positive thing. What I see as a positive is this beautiful woman, who I am insanely attracted to, just kissed me in a park and it was the best kiss I have ever had in my life.”

“Was it really?” I ask lightly as I turn to her, looking her in the eye for the first time since our kiss finished.

“Yes, it was. Really. But you are my boss, Juliet and I should tell you now ... I don’t do commitment. I am not looking for a relationship, or something serious. I am just not ... made that way and I really wouldn’t want you to do anything you might later regret- a casual fling is what I can offer.”

I am her boss and taking things further with Arya would most certainly open the proverbial can of worms. We have all signed agreements to cover the hospital in regards to lawsuits. They had tried a zero tolerance policy rule but it had been highly unsuccessful, only encouraging secrets, hidden affairs that resulted in more litigation. So, they had taken a slide into the “you must notify the HR department if you begin a personal relationship with a colleague.” If I did that, the repercussions would probably mean one of us would be switched out of the department, in all probability it would be Arya but there was no guarantee. Either way, it would be a big deal. One that I wouldn’t do on the back of a casual fling. Do I even want a casual fling? Am I even a casual fling person? I never have been before.

“You are not looking for a relationship with anyone? Or just me?”

“No, no. Not just you. With anyone. I just ... I fuck it up. I am not made for it. I can’t do it. I tried, really I tried so hard but I just can’t. Well, anyway that isn’t important. The answer is no, not just you Juliet, with anyone. It is better this way. All I do otherwise is hurt people I care about. Does that change how you feel about me?” She asks with a sad tone that nearly breaks my resolve.

“No Arya, not at all. I don’t understand, but I don’t need to. I can accept that that is your choice.” I feel my voice changing, growing stronger, more clinical, I am moving into fact and away from feelings and this makes me feel more comfortable and confident. “I don’t know what I am looking for either, not in the slightest. But I am not sure I could start something with you, knowing it would be going nowhere. We could ruin our friendship, it has the potential to change both of our careers and I would never want to take the risk of doing that to you for something where you weren’t in it, in it. Do you know what I mean?”

She takes a pause; a deep inhale and I watch her chest fill out as her lungs fill. I think she is struggling to speak her mind, hiding behind something, but I have been open and honest and I don’t want to push her further if this isn’t what she wants. She gives herself a tiny shake before her eyes meet mine.

Except they don’t, not quite. “I think on the balance of things ... we should stay as we are. Friends.”

She smiles, and I smile. I can’t stop thinking about kissing her.

“Friends.”

We fall back into normal conversation, our closeness, her ability to capture my attention, and my need to talk to her mean the silence does not linger, but we cut the afternoon short and go our separate ways. The air sits heavy with the sense of something.

For me it is regret. Regret that things ended before they ever even really began. I fall through the front door and plant myself in front of the fan. I am hot, but the noise annoys me. Everything annoys me, frustration simmers and I know the answer. I pick up my phone and open up my messages. Arya is the last person I messaged anyway so it takes me 3 seconds to find her beautiful face on my phone. My thumbs swipe, typing out all the things that I want to say. And then I delete and keep it more simple.

Juliet - Hey you ...

Arya - Hey you too

I smile as her reply comes through instantly and then I feel the nerves as I imagine her sitting waiting for my reply as I type it out, word by word.

Juliet - The thing is Arya ... Is that I meant every word that I said, but then a part of me, a really big part of me is saying I don't mean it at all and that I can handle a casual fling. I can handle a one-time thing even, but I just don't want to go the rest of my life not knowing what it was like to be with you.

I exhale a deep breath I have been holding and I wait. I see the read. Then the three dots ... I know she is typing. The minutes tick by, and I am held in suspense. I feel as though I never blink. I just stare at the screen waiting to see what she says.

Arya - I feel the same. We have the Zenith conference on Wednesday afternoon so why don't you come to mine on Tuesday evening and we can prep. Casual drinks, no pressure and see how it feels.

I nod even though she can't see me. It is perfect, casual. We need to talk about work anyway so why not sit down and have a few drinks, we don't need to leave until early afternoon for the presentation so we have time to ... recover. I can't help it, even the thought of recovering after a full night with Arya makes me pulse between my legs.

Thankful for the fan I let the cool breeze hit me as the heat rises in my body.

Juliet - It is a date.

Arya - Do you put out on first dates?

Juliet - I guess you will have to wait and see. Sweet dreams x

I laugh to myself and I lay back against the couch. Looking out the window the sunset long goes but the lights from the bars, restaurants, and streets light up the city so it is never really dark. I have forgotten what true darkness is, the stillness of my hometown where the air was so silent it seemed thick.

But my thoughts are a long way from there tonight. As my hand slides inside my shorts and my thumb traces over the lace of my panties, all of me is wrapped up in Arya. And now I have her taste on my lips to add to the fantasy of her as I bring myself to orgasm over and over again.

7

A date, even an unofficial one, comes with a high level of expectation. Especially as Arya and I both know what is on the cards. It sends me into a mild panic. What should I wear? How should I have my hair? Should I take wine? Do I take things for sleeping over? Would that be presumptuous?

I have no idea whatsoever, but I dash out of work on Monday and head straight to the salon.

I went for the full deal. A head-to-toe pamper. I wanted painted nails, smoothed heels, waxed legs, lotioned skin. I basked in the attention and then relaxed in the spa, bubbling away in the hot tub until my fingertips went wrinkly from too much time in

the water.

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Next came my face. No easy feat. But Maria worked wonders, my eyebrows reshaped, my face creamed and softened, and then she provided me with a complexion-matched makeup kit that set me back a small fortune. My hair was cut and styled, lowlights and highlights run through in a spectrum of browns from light golds to deep chestnut.

Each thing was subtle, only a slight enhancement but all put together the effect was a good one. I felt so much more confident suddenly.

My next stop was shopping hell. I actually didn't mind shopping; I was a take it or leave it, person. I could enjoy it for the right things and despise it for others. Clothes were not usually something I loved but I didn't despise them either. I was very much on the fence with it.

What I wasn't a fan of was the late-night complex mall. I worked in sterile units, glaring overheads and a world of no natural light. Coming here was not my idea of a relaxing time. I wasn't sure how anyone could sit in the faux gardens in the middle and sip coffee as though they were actually outside. To me, it all felt wrong and I preferred to brave the weather and elements on the high street. Unfortunately, though the indoor mall was open a lot later and was certainly more convenient in this instance.

I made my way into the big department store and headed straight for the lingerie. I figured I would start with the last thing to come off. The thought of taking my clothes off in front of Arya both terrified and excited me. I thumbed through the racks but I already felt overwhelmed. There were pieces of cotton, silks, chiffon, lace, ribbons, clasps, leather, ties. Those were just the materials, the styles were endless ... panties,

boy short, thong, briefs, thong, g string, peek a boo. Then that was just thinking of each of them as one-off pieces. But it didn't work like that, they need to be matched and partnered with a bra, corset, stockings, suspenders.

Basically, I was out of my depth.

I normally hate it when someone approaches me in a store ... I think why can't they just leave me alone and let me look in peace at my own pace? But not today. Today, I practically pounced on the young assistant the moment her eyes made the slightest contact with mine.

"Can I help you, Ma'am?" She asked softly in an unassuming way and I felt an instant relief.

"God, yes please. I need some underwear. For a.... for a... um.. first date."

Her name was Ashlyn. No idea how it is spelled but it sounded pretty. She was American natively but moved here in her early teens due to her father's work. I don't know if she told me these things to calm me as she surveyed my figure with a critical eye but it worked.

"Hmmm, you're very slim, tall, toned. Not a lot of curves but we can allude to that ... really, I think you can pull off most styles. It is more about the image you want to project you know ... Are you feel cute? Sweet? Sassy?" She leaned in a little closer with a smirk "Dominant?"

"Christ, no. Nothing like that." I replied in a total flustered and she smiled.

"I am just joking with you." She said playfully. "But really, how do you want to feel?"

“I want to feel sexy,” I say in a strong voice and she nods.

“Sexy we can absolutely do for you, Juliet. Coming right up.”

I mistakenly took the “coming right up” as a this was going to be a quick job, but it was anything but. In actual fact, it took about two hours before I finally felt like we had pieced together the look I wanted for my first sexual journey with a woman. And after baking under the neon-like glare for that long, it took a little imagination to see the sexy through the flushed skin and slumped limbs.

Ashlyn was very direct, whilst wrapped up in a sweet southern charm. She gave me a sweet smile as she shook her head, a complement would come as she told me that under no uncertain terms would that style really work for me. She seemed to have sex practicalities down to a T too ...

“It won’t be practical.” She dismissed the corset. “Unless you’re wearing them solely to rip them off ... don’t bother.” She waved away the suspender combination. “I like the heels but how tall is your date because you’re already pretty tall ...” Her voice veered off as she confirmed I would in fact tower above Arya.

Once we were both, Ashlyn was more than me, happy at the chosen pieces she wrapped them carefully and handed them over with a huge smile. “Over them ... get something simple. Nothing too fancy, just sleek you know. If you are showing your legs, cover your chest. If you are showing some breast ...” She said with a wink. “Cover the pins. Let him work for it, don’t give it away too easy, the prize is underneath, and I don’t mean the fancy undies. I mean you. Also ... think about the actual stripping off ... If it is too tight, too delicate, it will be a pain you will be feeling nervous. Am I making some kinda sense?” She said with a huge smile.

I nodded and thanked her profusely before hurrying off to the womenswear section.

I followed her advice; I went for a simple black dress. The fabric was light like sheen and hung sexily from my chest and fell in soft cascades down to my ankles. It hid my figure but then revealed my curves and lines every time I moved. I felt good in it, sexy and beautiful which is how every dress should make a woman feel.

I paid for it all and I didn't even look. It had probably been the most money I had ever spend on my personal appearance in one day, but I didn't really care. Sometimes it was needed, that splurge to make us feel good about ourselves, I just hoped Arya would think it was a worthwhile investment.

Tuesday dragged and I don't say that often about a full day in the hospital. I went from meeting to meeting, but each one was drawn out so I watched the hand move around the clock in slow motion. Everyone was on go slow. There was no urgency or rush, my secretary could feel my discontent and kept a healthy distance, which I understood but only exasperated me more because then I had to hunt him down just to get him to do what I needed, which I could have done myself in the time it took to find him.

If Arya was in my orbit, we never connected. I looked for her at lunch but she never appeared and, in a way, I was pleased. I felt the nerves rising throughout the day and seeing her in this capacity may well have been enough to totally derail me. I forked through my pasta but I didn't take a bite, feeling my stomach swirl with nerves, anticipation, and doubts.

I didn't rush home from the hospital. I really want to take my time getting ready. I don't want to feel stressed or rushed and I have a couple of hours, so I run a nice hot bath. I shrug my shoulders, letting my robe fall on the bathroom tiles. Raising my leg, a pink painted toe skims coconut scented bubbles across the steaming water. I close my eyes and take in a deep breath before I sink into the tub. The water caresses my naked body, pinking my pale skin ... Flushes spread across my chest as I softly lather myself.

I cover my fingers in shampoo, my fingertips massage my scalp as I work up a thick almond lather before I slip under the surface to wash it all out.

I leave the bath and I reach for a thick white towel. Wrapping myself up in its soft warmth as my nails trail through wet curls. Bare feet pad along plush carpets as I head to the dressing table. Running the dryer through my hair, letting chestnut curls fall in loose rings over my shoulders with soft bounces. It has been such a very long time since I have done this- made myself beautiful for someone. Looking in the mirror I take my time. The sweep of foundation, the brush of a blush, a flick of kohl, a smudge of shadow, curling my lashes, and finally deep red paints across my lips. Slutty? Maybe, but I like it.

Standing slowly, I drape the towel over the rack. Flicking through drawers I pull out the stockings, tan. Resting my toes on the chair I run the glossy sheen up my smooth legs until the black lace tops stick tight to my thighs. Pulling on the tiny red panties that barely cover my ass, the undercurve of my cheeks left bare, lace that kisses the parts of me that were freshly waxed yesterday and rests on my hip bone.

I take the matching bra. A size a tiny bit too small so when the clasp clips tight my breasts spill over the cups, begging to be freed. I reach into the closet, taking out my black dress. It's beautiful, a piece of art in its own right. Slipping into its soft silk, pulling the zip up along my side, it nips me in tight at the chest, before following my curves, accentuating them, thin straps rest on my shoulders.

The length is long, falling to the floor but the slit, less so. Rising to the tops of my stockings so when I walk a flash of lace is teased. Slipping glossy stockinged feet into strappy sandals I bend and fasten the strap, a caress of tight leather against my anklebone. Standing tall, I smooth out non-existent creases as I stare in the mirror.

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Is it enough, am I enough?

Is it too much for a casual drink at her house? Perhaps, but it does make me feel better about myself.

Running scent along my inner wrists, a spray against my collarbone, I give my hair the last shake, a deep breath. Grabbing my bag, and an expensive bottle of wine I step out and make my way down to the curbside for my ride.

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The taxi drops me at the front entrance of her apartment block, it's a warm evening, I am glad when the cool AC hits me. My sandals clip across the marble floor as I make my way through the lobby, heading off into the elevator. I press the button with my fingertip. The doors open slowly with a soft ping and I step inside.

I have never been to her apartment before and she has never been to mine, maybe we both knew that might be too tempted if we were alone together. But either way, here I am. Ready to be too tempted. I know the floor and the number so even as I watch the elevator rise and run through the floors I still jumped when the ping came. I make my way to her front door but before I can raise a finger to the bell, she opens it.

Arya is of course, stunning. She completely takes my breath away and yet her outfit was is simple I would walk past it on a shelf without a second thought. To overcome the heat, she too had opted for light chiffon, but whereas mine is dark. Hers is all white.

It is a light dress that falls to her mid-thigh and I can't help but glance down at her long toned legs. There is a print on the dress but it is very faint, it looks like blue flowers, but I couldn't be sure without leaning in closer.

“Come in. Come in.” She grins beckoning me and it is then I notice the wooden spoon in her hand. “I am cooking us a delicious meal of vegetarian lasagne and salad, but trying to do it without staining this dress is certainly turning into a challenge. Ohhhh red! Expensive too.” She adds with a grin. “Come through, you can leave your bag in the lounge. Please, I have to go and layer pasta but look around, be nosy, snoop. Mi casa es su casa.” She laughs and dances off into what I assume is the kitchen.

I drop my bag with a light thud in the hall and slip my sandals from my feet. The floors are wooden, stained, and cool under my toes. I make my way down the hall and make a mental note of where things are ... The kitchen is first, then the next door on the same side is the lounge, I assume they connect. The opposite side is the bathroom, then an office, and then I assume the end is Arya's bedroom.

I hover at the lounge doorway, contemplating her offer to snoop, part of me wants to. Part of me wants to look at every single thing she owns in order to learn more and more about her. But I resist the temptation, some things are better left to be discovered in their own time.

I am right about the lounge and kitchen. As I step in and feel the softness of a silvery rug under my toes, big windows greet me at the front, offering stunning views across the city. I hate to think what she must pay for a view like that, but then again ... she works hard and makes decent money so why the fuck does it matter what it costs?

It is decorated with impeccable taste. Greys, wood, and splashes of lemon add a vibrance and a little of the Arya flair I have come to adore. I look around and try and take it all in, the bookshelves are crammed with an array of medical works and then

flashes of romantic fiction. Her center table is glass and sleek but her vase is overflowing with splashes of all shades of yellow flowers.

Where the rug ends, the dark stained wood begins and the transition between cool and warmth, soft and hard is sleek. Her style belongs in a magazine. I step closer towards the dining space and kitchen. It is all open plan but with the interior decoration thought out to perfection, there are clear set places, changes in mood, lighting, and textures to show where one place starts and another end.

“You have a beautiful home,” I say truthfully as she stands, after placing the food in the oven.

“Thank you, really. I took a lot of pride in getting it just right. I had most of the furniture and things already but, putting it all together, moving from a house to an apartment ... It was a real challenge but I think I made it work.” She says with an almost shy smile as she makes her way around the kitchen island closer to me. She looks at me and fixes me with those pale blue eyes. “I have been such a bad host ... I didn’t even tell you just how beautiful you look.”

That is all it takes. Those soft sweet words. She moves in closer and I do not resist. No hesitation at all as we kiss. It feels so natural to be even though she is a woman, or perhaps because she is a woman. Perhaps the rest of my life, I was getting it wrong. My heart pounds in my chest and before I know what I am doing, I am moving her, guiding her to the dining room chair.

I want her. I don’t know what I am doing, but I want her so badly.

Arya sits back in her chair, her dress starting to gape, barely covering her breasts. Our fingers brush ... the backs of my nails trace up to her arm as I lean forwards. I move in, breath held as I take a light soft kiss from her lips. My knees slide forwards and rest on either side of her thighs and I rise upwards, swaying my hips, moving them in

slow circles. Delicate fingers trace upwards and curl through her golden hair. My lips move to her jaw, kissing along the bone before letting my teeth trail down her neck, leaving smudges of lipstick. Rolling her head back for me she offers up her smooth skin and my lips linger as I kiss her over and over.

I gently peel open her dress exposing her full round breasts.

Fuck, she is so beautiful.

My lips continue their descent, kissing over the swell as my hands rest just under the curve of her breasts to push them upwards and together. Her nipples harden as I kiss them. I linger with a teasing smile and then my tongue circles slowly. I hear her moan lightly. I take her nipple in my teeth and grip it gently pulling. She moans again, only louder.

I rise slowly to stand before her. My fingers find the zip and with a shrug my dress drops. This was the bit I hadn't been sure of. This was the bit I have definitely stressed over. But now, seeing the desire in her eyes, I know I am not worried at all about her seeing my body. I feel confident in my underwear. Her eyes scan over my body and I see nothing but lust in them. My body tingles under her gaze. I need her more than I need air to breathe.

I slip out of my underwear. My breast spill out as the bra unclasps. My panties slide to the ground.

Naked before Arya I watch her stand. Her dress falls, she has no underwear on and her nakedness takes my breath away. Of course, she is as beautiful as ever, lithe and pale before me. I react instinctively and drop to my knees to find the very core of her. This is what I have wanted most. Sure, I wonder if I will do it right, but I know I have to taste her. I have to know if it is as good as it is in my head. Her delicately delicious sex is inches away from my lips. Her lips are pale pink and her blonde pubic hair is

neatly trimmed. She glistens with wetness. I lean in, my eyes falling closed as her fingers run through my hair and I kiss her sweetness with an aching need to taste and please. My breaths quicken in pleading moans, seeking approval and permission to dine on her.

Her hands fall from my hair and rest on her hipbones. Fingertips reaching, she parts her vulva, spreading her smooth silky folds, and offers herself to me. My chin rests against her thighs as I move in, tilting my face upwards as my tongue darts and trails through her pussy. I take my first taste. She tastes of sex and sweetness. I want so badly to have the words to describe the taste of her, but I am lost for them. Tasting her feels like the most natural and exquisite thing I can imagine and I lean forwards and double my efforts. My mouth and tongue are feasting on her as though I've been starving my whole life. I'm lost in her. Completely lost in her.

I don't know what I am doing, not really, but Arya guides my mouth, with one hand in my hair she directs me as her hips move against my tongue. I notice the changes in her body, feel the way she writhes as my tongue flattens then she shudders as I swirl. I begin to focus properly and read her and anticipate her. My palm slides up her inner thigh and with one finger I find her entrance. My fingertip swirls lightly with a slight pressure.

"Is this ok?" I murmur as I take a second with my mouth not on her.

She looks down at me and smiles her most beautiful smile.

"Yes, please." Her voice is breathy and earthy and more sexy than I have ever heard it. "You are doing great," she says and I feel thrills run through my body at the thought that I am pleasing her. I want to. I want to please her so very much.

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I push a finger inside her. She is tight around my finger and I feel her coat me in her wetness, I feel her pleasure drip in creamy strands. I add another finger and curve them upwards as I know I'm seeking her G spot. I move my mouth back to her clit.

(Of course I have done my research- I'm Juliet Sansus!)

I start to move my fingers, just a slow rhythm that matches my tongue against her clit ... flick ... flick ... flick ... flick ...

The effect is fast. She rises up on her tiptoes and her whole body tenses. "Fuck, Juliet. Fuck ... fuck ... FUCK!" Her grip in my hair tightens hard and she thrusts her hips against me then I feel the crashing wave and hot flood of her climax on my fingers and against my face.

I lap at her. I taste every sweet drop of her until she begins to squirm. Sensitivity takes it to hold and she pushes me away before collapsing on the floor beside me in an exhausted wet heap. She turns with flushed cheeks she looks straight at me and gives me just one word. "Wow."

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Hours later we lie on the floor eating cooled lasagna straight from the tray. The wine is open and it certainly takes the edge off of our nerves. I feel young again, like a teenager. My body has been satisfied in ways I never imagined possible. If Arya thought wow about how I touched her, then there isn't a word for the way she made me feel as she explored my body.

It seems unfair to compare her to Matt as a lover, but it is of course exactly what I did. In later years with Matt, our sex was infrequent and perfunctory, but even in the early days ... he didn't take his time with my body as Arya did. She wasn't chasing my climax, but rather enjoying the exploration and enjoying me.

I have never felt so special, so wanted, so adored. All of my insecurities faded away the more I melted into her. There was certainly no rush.

We never left the living room. Instead we spent the night on the floor, rolling between the cool hardwood when our bodies glistened with sweat, back to the soft warm rug when the trembles subsided and we sought each other's warmth.

The next day I float through the presentation. I listen avidly but have no recollection of a single word said. My limbs ache, my skin wears the marks of her nails and teeth. Just when I manage to pull myself out of my daydream, she catches my eye and gives me that soft sweet smile and my body explodes with lust once more.

I am addicted. Obsessed. Hooked on her drug. Is it a gay thing? Is it an Arya thing? I have no idea, but I feel like I have been asleep for so many years until she has awoken this hunger within me. It seems impossible that we could only be a one-night thing. Already I ache for her next touch. I wonder to myself if I have always been gay. I don't know. I have never denied myself urges that I have felt towards a woman but I have definitely been sexually attracted to other women other than Arya. But I have also been attracted to men.

I wonder for a minute if I might be bisexual. But then, I also think, it surely doesn't matter. I'm at a stage of my life where I don't need a label. I'm clearly open to dating and fucking women. I wonder if I would still be open to dating a guy should that ever come up again and I don't know the answer to that.

After the conference, I linger. I wonder if we should talk, if I should go home, if I

should just wait and see what she wants to say but I don't see her. My mobile pings a few minutes later

Arya – Sorry, I have been pulled away about a thesis I submitted in postgrad. I will call you when I escape.

Juliet – No problem! Enjoy.

Over the next few days, I barely see Arya. Work is crazily busy to the point where I have to stay hours and hours after my normal finish time. I come home mentally and physically exhausted, dragging myself to bed only to pass out within seconds of my head touching the pillow. And I know it is exactly the same for her. Mismatched schedules, un aligning surgeries, and a range of other things intervene in my Arya time to the point where I feel a needy pine for her.

There are moments though when we cross paths. When I see her in the corridor or when I catch her walking through the reception when she leaves the theatre just as I am about to enter.

Those moments make my world freeze, my body changes physically as I take her in. It doesn't matter what she is wearing, how she has her hair if she is bright-eyed and alert or tired and drawn after a long day. All I can see is how beautiful she is and how much more of that beauty she hides from the world ... but I have had the chance to see ... feel ... taste ...

My hunger and need are insatiable. I know I am a ticking clock waiting to talk to her properly. Whilst I know we have both been busy my mind can't stop wondering if she is avoiding me a little.

The one thing that keeps me a little more sane is the messages between us. I have never previously been a big texter. For me, sending a message has always been

something functional. I am home ... I am running late ... Do you want white bread or seeded?

Arya opened me up to the world of instant communication being more than just a convenient thing. She sent me poems, photos of things that made her smile. She asked me questions. She left me voice notes as she dashed between one surgery and the next.

My chat history with her was becoming a romance story unfolding before my eyes. I look for her name on my screen and my heart leaps if I feel a vibration in my bag and when I see that the text didn't fit on the pull-down screen it makes me even happier to think that I will have more of her to read and learn. I decide to bite the bullet and just be direct.

Juliet – Arya, I want to talk to you ... about us. (And don't panic about the word us, I just don't know what other word to use.

Arya – Hahaha. You know me so well. I was thinking about that too. I hope you don't think I have been avoiding you since last week. It has just been so busy; I have been wiped. But ... I have been thinking about you.

Juliet – I have been thinking about you too. And the thing is that ... Well, I am just going to type this and press send so I can say how I am feeling without any regret. I know that we said a one-time thing. And I know how you feel about commitment and I know you are not looking for anything long-term. But. How do you feel about making it a short-term casual thing that happens again?

Arya – and again ... and again ... and maybe again ...

Juliet – Is that a yes?

Arya – It is absolutely a yes. I know you haven't been with a woman before and I mean, I can read the signs enough to know you enjoyed it. But I wasn't sure if you would want to try again. I knew you would have some processing to do. For me... I haven't been able to think of anything other than being with you.

The conversation continues but it is like the air is lighter around me. She feels the same. The thought makes my heart sore and my body tingle in all the right places.

Arya and I fall into this world of two parts. In the hospital, we are colleagues and close friends. We flirt a little in private or when talking alone but never in front of others. We are totally professional, especially when it comes to the theatre. In fact, if anything, she pushes me to be the best surgeon and perform the best surgeries I ever have in my entire career.

Then there is the other side. A new side of myself that I am exploring, and then learning and growing into the woman I have always wanted to be. She makes me feel sexier, younger, more alive. Doing things I would never do before. I send her a message as I am leaving the hospital making my way home.

Juliet – Come to mine straight from work, use the key under the mat. I have a surprise.

Arya – I can't wait

It has been a long, hard day. I slip my key in the lock and stumble through the front door. Shutting it softly behind me, I hear the latch click as I lean back against the wooden frame. Closing my eyes, I take a long deep breath as I let my bag fall from my hand. My fingertips move to the zip, they tug as I pull the metal clasp down until I undo it. I shrug my jacket off my shoulders. I let it fall in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Raising my left foot, I twirl my ankle; my shoe slips from my foot, and I let out a long soft sigh as my stocking-covered toes find the soft thick carpet. Raising my right

foot behind me, with a tug on the heel, that shoe too falls away and I leave them strewn across the hallway fall as I pad through into the kitchen.

Reaching for the wine I pour myself a full glass of merlot, and with a flick of a remote Norah Jones's sultry swoon echoes around the room. My hips gently away as my hands dance over the soft silk of my white shirt. My fingertips move to my buttons, flicking them through the holes one by one. My nails trace along my collarbone, slipping under my shirt as I pull it from my skin.

My palms slide around my sides, resting against the soft indents at the small of my back, fingers finding the zip of my black fitted skirt. My thumbs slip under the material, and I snake my hips as slowly peel my skirt from my thighs. Moving in time with the music, with a casual roll of my hips it falls to the ground, leaving me standing in black lace French panties and racy dark stockings that cling to my legs.

Standing up on my tiptoes spinning slowly, my hand reaches up and pulls the pin from my hair, letting it fall in cascades over my bare shoulders. Taking another long drink of merlot, the red stains my lips, making them darker... Fuller... Needy for a kiss. I walk through into the living room, the lace rides up my ass. I can feel the fabric tight against my vulva. I'm so acutely aware of my own sex these days.

I sit on the armchair, falling back into the soft cushions. I slide my feet wide, my legs parted. My dark stockings shimmer in the soft light, the lace tops resting against my creamy thighs. The strip of black lace sits snugly between my legs, dark against my pale skin, hiding my needy pussy ... But the desire burns beneath. My breasts rise and fall slowly, spilling from the lace, the light blush of my nipples peeking from the fabric. As I hear the key in the door...

She enters and it takes a moment for her eyes to adjust, and then I feel her gaze run over me drinking me in. She moves slowly, shrugging out of her coat, the keys are dropped, her bag discarded and she is on her knees before she even reaches me so she

has to crawl the rest of the way.

Starting at my knees her fingers part them a little wider as her tongue runs along the inside of my thigh, following the sheen of the stockings. I can feel her breath on my skin, warm and wet as she inches closer.

She pauses, hovered over my panties. I wait for her to peel them away but she doesn't, she opens her mouth wide and bites down. Her teeth scrape over my sex, softened by the fabric but the shock and surprise make me writhe for her.

“Did you think I would lick you nice and slow, soft, gentle ... ?” She asks with a smirk as she starts to pull on my thong, the fabric pulls tight between the cheeks of my ass. It digs in more and more as she taunts me. “Oh, Juliet, I haven't even started with you and you think you can out play me ...?” I watch her, fixated. I have never felt this way, I have never felt so much raw passion inside me. I think I could orgasm now but I won't, I will wait and let her have her way with me.

She plays lightly with my panties, pulling the fabric tight against my pussy, letting it slip between the lips of my vulva, and pulling it back and forth. It brings a light pain but also a pressure against my clit each time, edging me closer and closer to climax.

I feel the sweat on my skin, heat rising through me. My heart beats so fast it is like I can feel it in my toes. “Fuck ... Please ... Please, give me more.”

She laughs a little, a tease, “Oh Juliet. Patience.”

She peels my panties away slowly. They are wet and pressed so tight it takes a light pull before they come away from my hot wet sex. I feel the cool kiss of air and then she blows and I jolt. The instant cooling against my clit makes me wild. I reach for her, my patience lost.

“That’s it, Juliet. Show me. Show me what you need. What it is that you want?” She taunts me and I have no will to resist what she is doing.

I pull her blonde head against my sex hard stealing the words from her lips. She does exactly what I need. Her lips move with the thrusts of my hips, her tongue swirls slow ... “No ... Not slow! Fuck! Faster. Yes, Arya. Fuck! Yes Faster.”

She follows my lead, aiming to take me to that place. It hits me like a speeding train, my thighs close around her head. My ankles cross at her back as I pull her hard against me, pressure pressure pressure. I need it. I have to have it.

She flattens her tongue and presses hard with force and I let go of the restraint I was holding. I come hard, my orgasm feels like it shatters me from the inside out. I feel my hot wet pleasure flood against her face ... I feel her lapping it up, her mouth opening to drink me in, it makes me go harder and harder.

I finally let go of my grip and I release how hard I had been holding her. I pull her up to me on the chair, wrapping my trembling naked body around her fully clothed frame. I can barely get out any words.

“Shush, it is okay.” She says softly, pulling me close to her, holding me tight, she kisses my hair. Not only is my body soaring, but my heart is too.

“We never eat at an appropriate place.” She giggles as she walks through from the kitchen with her arms full of snacks. I have pulled on a light t-shirt but other than that I am still naked, and I have barely moved from where she found me, and nor do I have any intention to move very far either.

“I love that look.” She smiles at me as she feeds me a carrot stick dipped in sour cream.

“What look?” I ask shyly before I chomp down.

“The whole ... I have just had the best orgasm ever and I am so smug right now look.” She laughs.

“Well, I am not so sure ...” I begin. “No, I am sure. That is absolutely and completely accurate.”

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She smiles to herself as she settles down beside me and I watch her. She picks up the food and crunches down on it but I don't think she really tastes it. Her mind seems way off, distracted, thoughts lost somewhere else."

"Penny for them," I say lightly as I take her hand in mine, giving her contact.

She takes a deep breath. "I am just thinking about how happy I am." She replies and then a big fat tear leaks from the corner of her lovely blue eye and rolls down her cheek.

"Oh, Arya!" I gasp, knocking over the carrots as I pull her to me wrapping her uptight. "People who are happy don't cry. What is wrong? Talk to me?"

She gives herself a little shake, then a laugh and a sniffle before shaking me off. "No really, Juliet, I am happy. So, so happy with you. I just. I just know I am going to fuck it up. This is why I don't do commitment. I should have known from the start really that I liked you far too much for this to just be a casual thing but I couldn't stop myself and well ... here we are and it is amazing. Great. Mind blowing in fact but I just need you to know that I can't give you more than this. Even if I want you to ... I just can't."

I lean back against the chair, reading her body language which is telling me she needs me to give her some space. My mind tries to catch up with the turn in the conversation. My body, still tingling, is slow on the uptake but my thoughts take hold.

"Arya ... Sweetheart. I am not asking for any more than what you are giving me. I

am so happy right now taking this journey with you, but why do you think you are going to ruin it? If I am happy and you are happy. What is the problem?" I ask with genuine concern, trying to understand the turbulent thoughts that are passing through her mind and flickering one by one across her face.

"Oh, Juliet." She says with a heavy sigh. "There is just so much you don't know about me. About my life. My childhood. When I went to live with my grandparents, it wasn't because I wanted to leave the city or they wanted to raise their granddaughter alone. It was because my mother couldn't look after me." She spoke the couldn't with such bitterness it surprised me. "She couldn't look after me because she was too focused on scoring her next high. Or selling herself for more drugs. Or having disgusting perverts in the mold-ridden shack of a home. We had nothing. Days without food. Without clean water. Then she'd get her check which was supposed to be for her to look after me and instead come home with candy, moms' special candy, and liquor."

I felt her entire body tensing. Reliving memories is the quick flash that she would much rather forget.

"My grandparents didn't even know about me. She left them when she was 16 and never looked back. It was social services that stepped in. And I was lucky you know. They were so happy to have me. They loved me so much. Other kids, they don't get that. They get put through a system. They don't get to study; they don't get scholarships. They don't become Doctors. And I know how lucky I am Juliet, really I do but I was fucked up. The things I saw. The way it was. I am fucked up. I don't know how to form romantic attachments. I don't know how to let someone in full, how to trust and the moment I do... I just run away because I can't deal with it. I can't accept love."

"Oh, Arya. Please." I murmur softly, beckoning her to me, not wanting to push for the contact but needing to show her that I am here and that she doesn't need to worry.

It is going to be okay.

“Arya, you don’t need to worry about any of those things, okay? You are my friend. We are friends first and foremost. That will always be the most important thing. This, us, the rest of it is just a bonus for however long it lasts, okay? No pressure. No commitment. Just two friends enjoying each other.”

She pauses and then slowly nods, allowing herself into my arms. “What did I do to get so lucky as to find you?” She asks lightly and I squeeze her a little tighter, peppering her soft blonde hair with kisses.

I want to hold her and protect her forever.

I don’t answer her, I don’t trust myself to because I am not lying, we are best friends. I would do anything to make her feel safe, protected, cared for but my feelings run deeper than that. I know it, I can feel them. If she had asked me right now to be with her forever, there would be no doubt. Maybe she can feel that. Maybe that is why she was panicking, but for her, for us to continue I will hide those feelings until she feels the same ... or she wants to let go.

11

I have never been one for keeping secrets. In fact, I am usually a very open and transparent person sometimes with a perceived coldness. I suppose I just live in a world where information is shared quickly and efficiently and there is no space for opinion, only room for the facts.

I didn’t feel like I was hiding my true feelings from Arya exactly, because the foundation was the truth. However, the rest of it I hid, and even though my feelings for her grew, like a sunflower in a dark room, I kept my petals out of the sun and only let them blossom in the silence of a secret.

And my feelings for her were not the only secret I was keeping these days. Our entire sexual relationship was taking place hidden from the ever-watchful eyes of hospital faculty. The benefit of us both being women and perceived as straight, meant we could pass under the radar without raising much suspicion.

Women spending a lot of time together was easily passed under the guise of friendship which meant that Arya and I could go through our days at work spending time together in an almost completely platonic fashion. Then we could meet outside of work, in public, in a much less platonic fashion, and still have no issues. We once saw a colleague in the mall, Rodger, and he stood chatting with us for twenty minutes. There was not a hint of suspicion or raised eyebrows. Just two female colleagues shopping together at the weekend ... totally normal. Except an hour or so earlier Arya made me climax so hard in the shower my legs were still shaking.

Professionally it made no difference. The moment we both entered the theatre together there was no Arya and Juliet. In fact, there was no Juliet even without Arya in the room. When I am in surgery, I am Dr. Sansus. No exception. My personal life, thoughts feelings, and opinions are of no relevance, only the job at hand. The only thing our closeness did in theatre was to allow us to work together smoother and more efficiently than I ever have with another surgeon in my entire career.

There was a soft knock on my office door, and I knew just by the pattern that it was Arya.

“Come in,” I call and she slips in quietly pulling the door closed behind her. She dances towards me, lightly on her feet with a box in her hand looking very sheepish. “Everything okay?” I ask.

“Mhmm.” She purrs as she lowers into the seat opposite me. She keeps her knees a few inches apart and my gaze drifts to the hem of her A-line skirt which rides up her thighs just an inch or so ... still modest but so incredibly sexy. “I bought you

something. Well, me. Us. A joint gift if you like.” And she hands over the none descript cardboard box, which is still sealed with the delivery label intact.

I reach for my pen and run the nib through the cellophane sealed edge, tracing the line until it snaps and I can pull it open. Inside is another box that boasts luxurious intimacy and intense filled pleasure. I look up at her but she doesn't reach my gaze, just nods at the box encouraging me to continue. I slip the lid from the top and I gasp.

My fingers reach without a pause, my tips glide over the perfectly polished smooth glass, tracing the curves ... one ... two ... three.

“It's glass ... is it safe?” I ask her.

“Perfectly. They are toughened. It won't shatter or break. And the good thing about glass is ... here let me show you.” She leans over, her hands brushing mine as she takes the dildo from me. I watch mesmerized as she brings it to her lips and sucks the smooth, curved bulbous tip. Her lips pucker and close tightly and in the prism of the glass I can see the refraction of her tongue as it swirls ... and then she pulls it free with a light pop. Reaching forwards, she takes my hand and turns it in her palm. Then she slowly glides the tip along my inner wrist.

“Can you feel the warmth?” She asks softly, and I nod barely able to speak. I can feel the trace of her saliva on soft sensitive skin and the heat tingles against my pulse as it quickens. “I know you haven't before ... and I thought maybe you might like to try ... if you don't like it, we could stop ...”

Each word she whispers is glazed with husk. I can feel the sex in her tone and her body responding accordingly. I want her.

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“Lock the door,” I say to her and she grins back at me standing.

“Here ...” she commands and she gives me the dildo. “Make it warm, really warm.”

As she moves to the door and I hear the lock catch I mimic her actions. Slipping the glass between my lips. It feels foreign, there is no give in the material, just a hard thick mass between my lips.

“Deeper.” She directs me as she steps round to my side of the desk and with her palm, she pushes my knee guiding my wheeled chair back so she can step between my parting thighs. I push the glass further into my mouth and I suck a little harder. The sensation is not unpleasant but the tingles I feel between my thighs are from the anticipation of what is to come. Not the action itself.

She takes the base away from me and slowly, gently guides it from my mouth. My lips ride over the curves until it frees with a light pop. “Open your legs.” And I do, sliding them wide. “Take off your panties.” The word take has barely left her lips before my ass is rising up off the chair and I pull them and my panties down all the way to the floor. I slip one ankle free, leaving the other tangled just so I can part my legs quickly.

She is clumsy and I know it is on purpose. She lets the glass lazily slide up my inner thigh and my flesh makes it warmer and warmer. She lowers to a kneel and hooks my knees under her arms dragging me to the edge of my seat so she can access me with no restrictions.

She parts my vulva a little with one hand and I watch as she brings the smooth tip to

my folds. She runs it through slowly, letting me adjust and adapt to the texture and feel of the glass. Up and down she makes the tip swirl, rimming my entrance in slow circles. She increases the pressure a bit at a time until I feel myself spread and the glass dildo slips inside me.

I grip the handle of the chair hard as I let out a soft low moan. I feel suddenly very full and it feels good. Arya has the palm of her other hand pressing down on my pubic bone and her thumb expertly tending to my swollen hungry clit.

I thought my body would reject the glass, I thought it would feel like a foreign object that shouldn't be anywhere near me, never mind inside me. But it felt so good as the temperature changed from cool to hot inside of me, it slid slickly in and out of me and the curved spheric ridges made my muscles ripple each time she thrust it inside me and more so when she pulled it back.

I am building fast ... my wetness coats the glass and she moves faster and faster in and out of me while her thumb remains painfully slow on my clit.

"Please," I begged with barely a whisper and she looks straight at me.

"You want to orgasm for me, Juliet? You want to come with this big thick glass dildo stretching you open for me? You want to climax so hard you'll ache all day for me?"

I can feel the sweat on my skin, the trickle of my wetness running between my legs onto the chair.

"Yes ... fuck ... yes ... please ..." and as I murmur and plead, she presses her thumb harder giving my clit the pressure I need.

My climax comes within seconds. Uninhibited. Unashamed. My toes curl and my head falls backward. I try my best not to make a sound but I hear muffled moans

escaping my lips. The moment it starts to subside, Arya slides the dildo out of me. She is there to comfort, to bring me down slowly. To wrap me up in affection so I can fly higher and higher even though the shudders have begun to slow.

“Wow.” I manage to say after what feels like hours.

“Wow indeed.” She replies with a cheeky smile.

12

They say that if one thing is going well in your life, you can almost guarantee another will totally fall apart. I have never really placed much in that theory. I have always lived a balanced and well-adjusted life. But with the kind of intensity I was experiencing with Arya, it was almost inevitable that something else would break.

Our one time thing, turned into a casual thing, which lasted weeks, which then drew into months. The only problem is that with every passing day my feelings for her only grow in intensity. I have numerous times had to stop myself from saying the three words that would send her speeding out of my life like a rocket launching.

But just because I haven't say them, doesn't mean I don't feel them. Arya and I spend four or five nights a week together and all of our days off when our schedules align. My routine revolves around her, my mood reflects the amount of time we have spent together and I find myself getting snippy if too much time has passed without her warm eyes and enchanting smile lighting up my day.

I tried to fight it and tell myself that eventually, we would burn out. That the sex would lose its spark, that friendship would become the defining definition of our relationship. But even when I said it to myself the words sounded hollow and I didn't really believe it.

The push came from an unexpected direction.

It is not unusual for me to get calls from unknown numbers. I have never been a two mobile kind of person, instead opting to combine my work and personal phone by just having a dual sim. So, when unknown flashed on my screen it was usually something hospital related so I answer it with no qualms.

“Dr. Sansus,” I say.

There is a pause and I wait ... “Hello ...?”

“Juliet?”

Matt no longer holds the power to make my knees go weak. His voice doesn’t inspire a burst of love or warmth or affection. But there is a tightness in my heart at the familiarity of his voice.

“Matt?” I questioned, though there was no doubt it was him. Just surprise.

“Yes. It is me. I am sorry I withheld my number. I wasn’t sure you would answer if you knew it was me calling.” He says with a chuckle and I can picture him giving that schoolboy cheeky smile that could melt a million hearts.

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“I would have answered,” I reply honestly.

“I think I knew that but you know, my pride didn’t want to test it.”

I appreciate his honesty.

“Well, either way, you got me. Everything okay?” I ask as I sit down on the sofa,

It is an early Saturday morning, we are both off but Arya is out at the market. We are heading out of the city for the day to relax at the lakes for some much-needed nature time, but she insisted we need to take a picnic so she is in charge of refreshments.

“Well, there isn’t really an easy way to say this so I will just say it. I know me and him weren’t exactly close and we hadn’t seen him in at least ten years. But I felt like you would wanna know Jules, Pop passed away a couple of days ago. Apparently, he had cancer a while and knew it was coming but ... yeah. I am not going to go to the funeral or anything. I mean he didn’t call to tell me he was sick, you know. But I just wanted to tell you. Seemed like the right thing.”

Matt was right. We hadn’t seen his father since Matt’s fortieth when we drove down only to find him very unhappy to see us as it coincided with his poker game. It was the last straw really; Matt didn’t have much emotional attachment to his father in the first place. He had been out of his life much more than he had been in it so for him it had been an easy decision to make.

I had pushed the subject a few times but Matt was insistent that he felt no ill feelings but he didn’t want that emotional baggage hung around his neck any longer. It

seemed his father felt the same as he never reached out, there was no more contact just an end of a relationship between the two.

“I am sorry to hear that Matt. I know your relationship was strained but even so. I am sorry that he’s gone. No matter what his faults he was your father.”

Matt sighed heavily. “Thanks, Jules. It feels strange you know, but I am okay. Maybe I shouldn’t have called ...” His voice petered off which left the statement hanging like a question.

“No, I am pleased you called and told me. Not much I can do but I am glad you thought to let me know.”

“I think of you a lot, Jules. I know what I did ... I know I hurt you. I know that I broke us beyond repair. But I still miss you. I still go to call you and then I remember I can’t. I hate what I did to you, to us. I hope you know that.”

I sit back in the chair. I did know that, I knew Matt regretted hurting me, but it doesn’t change things. I have moved on. When I speak to him now, after all these months the feelings are of a kind of love but not the love that we had once had.

“I know Matt, I know you didn’t mean to hurt me. And I think that if I were, to be honest, and fair, I could take more responsibility for the part I played. Your actions hurt me deeply, but they were just the symptoms of the deep cracks within our relationship. I was not the best wife to you. You deserved a lot more than I gave you.”

“No Jules ... don’t do that. We had problems sure. All couples do but that was both of us. We both needed to work harder. I took the easy option.” I can’t help but smile.

“Don’t let Amber hear you call her the easy option.”

“Oh, well, we broke up Jules.” I feel my eyebrows raise and a small shock inhale. “Yeah, we just weren’t the right fit long term you know? I tried, especially after you and I ... well anyway. It was a joint decision, no hard feelings. Just went our separate ways.”

“I am sorry to hear that Matt. Really I am. All I have ever wanted is for you to be happy.”

“I know. Are you? Are you happy Jules?”

I pause and look around my small downtown apartment. There are touches of Arya now. Her scarf is on my coat stand. One of my mugs is now her mug. A book she is reading is laid on the arm of the chair and the fruit bowl contains items I have never bought in my life.

“I am, Matt.”

His voice goes quiet like he doesn’t want to know but he can't stop himself from asking. “You moved on?”

This is the moment I know that I cant continue with Arya the way that we are with my feelings unsaid and the future so unknown. I saw a picture once on social media of a glass cabinet and inside all the plates had fallen to the front and were now, unbroken but resting against the door. The caption was, “me keeping my emotions in check.” And I had laughed.

But someone far wiser than me had commented with the advice of opening the cabinet door. Their reasoning was that right now, every day you were waiting for the disaster to come, knowing it was inevitable that either I would open the door, someone else would open the door or the force of the plates would finally force it open of its own accord.

They explained that right now there was only limbo and there could be no moving forward, unable to use a single plate. But if they were to be brave and slowly open pull the handle, the worst that could happen would have happened. Then you can only move forwards and maybe, amongst the shattered pieces of porcelain one plate may have made it. And already you were better off than you were before.

It is, in a long-winded way, how I feel now about Arya. The not knowing, leaves me in limbo. I can't move forwards with her or start and see how my life could function without her whilst I am keeping the door to the cabinet firmly sealed.

“Jules?” Matt asks again and this time I don't hesitate.

“Yes, Matt. I have moved on.”

Maybe she sensed a change in atmosphere when she walked through the door but either way, when she comes home Arya has her serious expression on. “Let me just put this stuff away.” She says before I have even said a word and I realize that perhaps it is me who has the serious expression.

So I wait for her to put the bags away and unpack all of the shopping that should have been going straight into the picnic hamper. She is slow and methodical and I watch her without seeing her. My mind already tries to form the words to make the sentences I need to say.

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“Okay. I am here.” She says softly, sitting on the armchair opposite me and I take a deep breath.

“Matt called. Don’t worry, he is fine and I am fine. It was to tell me that his father passed but they weren’t really close it was more of a courtesy to me I suppose, maybe he was looking for a little comfort too, I am not sure but anyway, he called.” She nods slowly in response.

“Okay ... but you are, okay?” She questions.

“Yes, I am okay, but he asked me, Arya. He asked me if I had moved on and the honest truth is. I have.”

I see her let out a breath she has been holding. “Well, that’s great news. You had me worried I thought that something bad had happened.”

“No Arya, not bad,” I say as I move to her, making my way across the room to close the distance, I take her hand in mine as I look deeply into her eyes, hoping she can see straight into my soul at this very moment.

“But it made me see, what I have known for a while. I love what we have Arya. The way we work together, our friendship, the way you make me smile and laugh, how you touch me, how I touch you, and the hours that we lose ourselves in each other. I love all of those things because ... I have fallen in love with you. I know that you are afraid and it is okay to be afraid, but I think that we have something really really special and I can’t risk any more not telling you how I feel.”

I watch her expression as I pour out my heart. The moment I say I am in love with her, I see her face light up. Her eyes twinkle and a smile forms in the corners of her mouth. I think yes ... she feels the same. This is it; I did the right thing. My mind fast-forwards a hundred miles an hour. My heart soaring as I reach forwards to kiss her, to love her, to adore every inch.

Then the expression of panic descends over her features and I watch her blue eyes darken and her smile fall from her lips. She moves her hand from my palms and the barrier of space comes between us like an impenetrable wall.

“Juliet. I can’t deny that I have feelings for you. Strong feelings. But I told you, I told you in the very beginning that I can’t give you that. It isn’t even about what I want. I can’t do it. I won’t do it to you. I won’t hurt you that way by making promises to you and then failing.” She stands, moving away from me. Her eyes are wild as she starts to pace back and forth, she is in panic mode, fight or flight.

“Arya. I am not asking for more than we have just to know that you see this as more than a casual situation that you are invested in it, in us, in the future.” I sound whiney like I am pleading, I feel weak and anxious but I don’t want this to be the moment. I don’t want this to be the end.

But I can see it. She shakes her head. Her eyes are filling with tears.

“I can give you stability. I can give you space. Whatever you need to make this work, I can be that person for you. You know I can.” I slide from the sofa onto the floor. Before I realize what I am doing I am on my knees looking up at her, my own eyes filling with tears as I plead, no, I beg for her to reconsider.

But it is too late.

“No Juliet. I can’t. I am sorry.”

She untangles herself from me. The tears stream down her cheeks silently, I don't even think she knows how hard she is crying. It is like her emotions have no control but her mind has shut down, switched off.

She collects her bag from the kitchen counter. I don't want to watch her leave but I don't want to miss out last seconds together. I am still desperately hoping that she will see reason between here and the door.

But she doesn't. She steps out of my life with soft footprints and a gently closed door. There is no scene, no shouting, no anger. But the pain is like none I have ever experienced.

The sun streams through the windows all day, bright and light. A constant reminder of where we should have been. At the lakes, eating exotic fruit, laughing, flirting, being in love whilst not saying it.

Instead, I just lie broken on the floor.

I can't breathe without her. My tears engulf me.

So this is what a broken heart feels like.

13

I thought I had experienced pretty low lows following my divorce, but this is a different ball game. At least then I didn't have to pretend so much. I was allowed to be sad, people understood. They made allowances for the lack of makeup, the bird's nest hair, the crazed expression.

Now I suffer alone and in silence. No one knew about Arya and me, so there is no one to tell. There is no one to talk to and all the things that had made us so amazing,

the way she fit effortlessly into every aspect of my life ... well now every part of my day held an Arya shaped hole.

I feel like I have faded to grey whilst the rest of the world around me continues to sparkle in vibrant colors. I eat my lunch alone in my office, I no longer venture down to the cafeteria. That is when I even remember to eat.

I am getting skinny and I didn't wear it well. It makes me look gaunt and older and my clothes hang from my frame. I see so much difference in my face when I look in the mirror, the glow and the vibrancy that Arya gave me is gone. I think my colleagues must think I am ill and it seems like the best reason to explain my complete change in behavior so I make up a lie that I have been feeling sick - maybe a food intolerance- and I am waiting for results.

It brought me some time to get my act together. I could start eating properly. I could put some weight on and start looking after myself. Except I didn't. I spiraled harder and further.

I saw Arya usually once or twice a day in the hospital. Sometimes those encounters were just that. A brief passing and nothing more. Other times were hours spent in surgery together. What had once been a highlight of my working career was now time filled with dread.

We worked exactly as we did before, effortlessly, and it was the forgetting in those seconds that made remembering just so much harder to bear. I wanted to shake her, to scream, to shout. Then I wanted to ask if she missed me too? Did she ache for me? Did she reread our messages over and over? Did she dream of my touch?

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We never spoke again of personal things though. Every spoken interaction was purely professional and I responded in the only way my mind could cope ... with a cold guarded wall.

I didn't want to be that person, and I certainly would not do anything to make her job more difficult or affect her career in any way. I couldn't imagine causing her any pain intentionally. But I couldn't stop the cooler tone in my voice. The lack of eye contact, the minimal connection. I had to keep her at arm's length just so I could make it through the day without breaking down.

And then I went home and sobbed about it because all I wanted was to give her warmth and care.

She was always professional and though I could see the hurt in her eyes she never responded with anything other than softness which only made it worse for me.

The time at home was the worst. Hours and hours of alone time, of thinking about her, of being lost in memories and filled with regret. I had nearly called Matt so many times to rant and rave at him for pushing me into saying anything.

Then the rational part of my head acknowledged that he hadn't actually done that at all and it was in fact my own feeling for Arya that had been the thing to push me into my confession. I do regret it now, because it has left me with nothing.

The days are beginning to draw shorter and the air is thick with the autumn chill. This is already my worst time of the year, the limbo between summer and winter. Where you left the house in shorts only to be poured on an hour later. When you took a thick

coat for the wind only to be sweating as you took ten steps. I know, you may say, that spring is the same, but spring gives you hope. The days growing longer, the sun smiling down at you telling you she is bringing summer soon. Autumn only brings the inevitable cold and gloom of winter.

I take a few conferences I would normally make some excuses for just to get out of the city, out of my house, out of my head. It does the trick of being mind numbingly boring but it doesn't help in the long run.

After a couple of months, I decided to venture out and I make the bold choice of going to a gay bar in the center of the city. I was never much for bars in the first place so I am not sure why I thought this would be my kind of thing but I feel like it is important to experience it.

I have doubts about my sexuality. I still am not sure if I am bisexual or gay or just Arya-sexual. Could another woman make me feel the way she did? Could any other person for that matter? It all seemed highly doubtful. I am surprised when I enter at how light it is, busy, and just normal. I walk up to the bar and sit at a stool; my eyes as wide as saucers.

"First time?" The tender asks with a knowing smile. I must still look like that fifty something straight woman I was before Arya. Maybe I should have dressed less conservative and more... I don't know... more.. gay? The bar tender is stunning, tall and beautiful with cheekbones I would kill for. She has long thick dark hair and perfectly lined eyes that I couldn't do if you offered me a million dollars. She looks effortlessly cool in a way I could only imagine being.

I nod.

"You a cop?" She asked as she pulled the liquor down from the top shelf and slid the bottle down to another patron.

“Cop? Me? No.” I stutter. “Why?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know, you just looking at me like those cops do before they bust my ass,” she says with an eye roll but I see a smile creep at the corner of her mouth and I have no idea if she is joking or not.

“Well, no I am not a cop. Can I take one of those?” I gesture to the tequila she is about to pour for someone. I have never chosen a tequila shot in my life before.

She doesn’t respond just tosses a shot glass down the smooth oak and slides the plate with lime and salt. When she has finished pouring the others, she fills me up. I line a trail of salt over my delicate inner wrist and with a swipe of my tongue I lick ... Reaching for the glass ... Downed in quick succession, the lime barely brushing my lips as I take a full deep suck of its juiciness. The tequila burns as I close my eyes taking a deep breath before I nod for another. I repeat a few times until a haze kicks in.

I have piqued her interest and she begins to clean the glasses but she shoves the tray down with her hip so she can chat to me as she works.

“So, if you’re not a cop...” I look up at her with raised eyebrows.

“I am a doctor. A heart surgeon to be precise.” I say with a mock cheer as I raise another shot glass and down the tequila.

“Explains it.” She says with assurance in her own instincts and continues to clean.

“Explains what ...?”

“Oh, you know, the look you gave me. Like my mama used to when I stole sweets from the store and she just knew from the way I walked I’d done a bad thing. Not

sayin you think I had done a bad thing but you made me pause for a second you know?"

"Actually, yes I do know. We are trained to assess physical features for signs and symptoms within the first 30 seconds of meeting someone for the first time. The look I gave you, it me subconsciously reading your vitals to see if you are in cardiac arrest. Another."

"Well, then sugarplum you go ahead and keep checking on that for me won't you." She said with a grin as she filled my glass. "But I got my own power like that. They didn't teach it me in no fancy college though. I learned it right here behind this bar."

"Yeah?" I ask intrigued.

"Mhmm. Like I knew it was your first time in here. I know you are also nursin' some kinda broken heart. And I can tell you for free you aint gonna find the cure at the bottom of this bottle." She leans in a little closer. "I can also tell you that what you are lookin for ... you aint gonna find in here full stop sugar. I been in this place a long time. Too long. You wanna experiment? Get drunk, get high, spend a night or two that might make your toes curl for the right or wrong reasons ... sure, you in the right place. But if you coming here for answers, when we both know you got them already? This place is only gonna make it a whole lot worse tomorrow. You feel me?"

I sigh. My fingers curl around the shot glass but I don't take the drink. I slide it back "You are right."

"Mhmm, I know sugar. I read hearts, just not the same kind you do."

I smile and leave some notes on the bar. It is way too much for the drinks, but not nearly enough for the counsel.

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“Take care,” I say as I stand, she doesn’t reply just gives me a soft nod and I make my way out.

The cold air hits me the second I step outside and I go from tipsy to stumble in 0.02 seconds. Luckily, I don’t live far and the way back is down the busy entertainment street in the city so I feel safe. I pull out my phone and click on Arya.

Juliet – I miss you.

I don’t take a step before I get a reply.

Arya - I know. I will make it easier. I promise. I am sorry. I am so sorry, Juliet.

Juliet - I dontt know wh at that means!?

My eyes can barely focus and my drunk fingers miss swipe across the keyboard but I don’t give much thought to it as I press send.

Arya – I will make it better. I have to go. Be safe.

I try not to overthink and the tequila helps me with that. I can’t focus on a chain of thoughts for longer than a few seconds which gives my brain the time it needs to actually switch off from the Arya monologue. I stumble home and fall through the front door.

I don’t make it in bed, more of a sprawl over the bed. Which is where I remain for all of Sunday. I think I had 5 tequilas but my head screams that it must have been 55. I

am way too old for shots. I dare not even look in the mirror. My ghostly look could not be improved with a tequila hangover, that much I am sure on.

I reread Arya's message at least one hundred times. Each time reading more and more into it with no real answer other than I would have to wait and see.

14

My answer comes the following Wednesday. It is actually a quiet day in the cardio department and everyone is taking advantage by catching up with paperwork, reports, and emails when I receive a ping.

Subject Line: Reference Request

Dear Dr. Sansus

My name is Dr. Josh Cook, and I am acting head of the Cardiovascular Department in Stevenson City Hospital.

I don't think we have ever crossed paths, although I did once attend a presentation you gave around the research on Coronary stents which has stuck with me for many years and I am of course an admirer of your work.

I am writing to you as we have received an application for a temporary position in the department and I was a little surprised to receive an application from Dr. Arya Harris. I know only recently she took the full-time permanent position with you and a doctor with her credentials would be most welcome but I wanted to confirm her references before we invited her to take the position.

Thank you for your time,

Kindest Regards

Dr. Josh Cook

I sit back in stunned silence. I guess this is her solution. She didn't want me, didn't want to be near me so she would go to Stevenson City Hospital on a temporary contract rather than stay here. In the city, she calls home, in the apartment which she has lovingly redone, in one of the best cardio departments in the world.

First, I am angry. I don't deserve this. Surely, I don't.

Then comes acceptance. It takes hours of staring at the same screen, of holding all my calls and letting the tears stream down my cheeks. She has made her choice to disappear and start again and she is only doing what was best for her. What I need to do though, it seems impossible: Move on. I don't go to her. As the hospital falls quiet, I wait for the normal hustle and bustle to quieten down, and then I begin my reply.

Subject Line: Reference Request

Dear Dr. Cook

Thank you for your kind words in regards to my presentation on Coronary stents it is certainly an area of my work in which I have spent a lot of time working theoretically and practically to improve our current methods for higher long-term success rates.

I can confirm that Dr. Arya Harris is a highly well-regarded member of the current Cardiovascular Department here and I am Head of the department. Dr. Arya Harris was offered a permanent contract with us a few months ago. The terms of which can be requested by our Human Resources department if you require the exact dates.

Dr. Arya Harris has only been with us for a few months but in that time, I have come

to work closely alongside her and I can assure you that your department would be very fortunate to have her join your team. I can say with complete candor and sincerity that she is one of the best surgeons I have had the pleasure of working with and the perfect colleague.

She is focused, attentive, and dedicated to her profession. She is a natural with the patients, a thoughtful colleague, and an inspiring surgeon. I understand that she is choosing to move on for personal reasons but the department and I will be very sad to see her go.

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Thank you for reaching out to me, if you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kindest Regards

Dr. Juliet Sansus

I press send before I can change my mind. I know it is the right thing to do. She deserves the position, she actually deserves better but it is her choice now on where to go. She has made the decision and I have to try and respect that.

I grab my keys and shut down my laptop. I don't bother tidying away, I just flick the light and lock my office door behind me, and head out the back way of the hospital.

Even after all this time, it is like I hold a second sense when it comes to her. I know she is within my vicinity as though the air changes around her and my body can feel it. I look around allowing my eyes to find her. I slow my step to let her pass but she doesn't, she comes beside me, falling in line with my step.

"I just got off the phone with Dr. Cook," she says softly.

"Oh ... that was fast. I only just replied," I reply, looking straight ahead, avoiding making any eye contact with her.

"Yes. He did mention that. Said you had just responded and HR pending the position was mine if I wanted it. I don't know what you said, but he used the words glowing and best reference he had ever received." She pauses and I don't fill the gap. "So, I

wanted to say thank you. I mean, you didn't need to, you could have just referred him to HR. I would have understood."

I clear my throat, trying to shift the ball of emotion which now seems to be choking me. "I was angry. I was hurt that you didn't tell me personally and I had to find out that way. But I would never ever do something to jeopardize your career like that Arya. If you don't want to be around me anymore, I don't have to like it or even be okay with it but I'm mature enough to let you go."

"Oh, Juliet! Don't say that. It isn't that I don't want to be around you anymore, but how can I? Look at how much I have hurt you. How much pain I have caused? I see it in your eyes, and I did that to you. I hate myself for it, and I miss you. Fuck, I miss you so much. But I am not allowed to miss you because I am the one who fucked up. I am the one who hurt you. So, I am just trying to make it better for you. Better for me. For both of us so we don't have to keep seeing each other and keep feeling like this anymore." I can see the anguish in her expression, I can feel the pain in her words but I still don't understand.

"But Arya, if you feel like that and I feel like this, then why? Why can't we try again? I know that you are scared." I turn and face her, looking her straight in the eye as my hands clasp hers. "I know you are afraid but you can rely on me. Haven't I shown you? Can't you see that I won't leave? That I won't hurt you? I love you! I would never do anything at all to make you feel unsafe, unloved or unwanted. I want to spend the rest of my life doing the opposite!"

I don't penetrate her walls; I see it in her eyes before she speaks a word.

"No Juliet. I can't do it to you again. I know what will happen, we will go back to exactly how we were. Both falling, both on this path, and sooner or later, I won't be able to give you what you need, what you want, what you deserve. And we will be right back here, except worse than this time because I will have hurt you again,

knowing full well I would. My mind is made up. I am going to take the job at Stevenson City Hospital, already told them I would. I have to give 12 weeks' notice here unless you replace me before. You will have my resignation on your desk in the morning.”

She pulls her fingers from my light hold, turns on her heel, and walks in the other direction and I walk home in deafening silence and I feel the tears on my cheeks.

15

Arya is as good as her word and I receive her perfectly handwritten letter of resignation. It is short.

Dear Dr. Juliet Sansus,

Please accept this letter as notice that I am resigning from my position here as a Cardiovascular surgeon. My final day of work will be 12 weeks as of the acceptance of this letter of resignation as per the terms of my contract.

Thank you for the support and the opportunities you have provided me with, it has been an honor to work with you and learn from you. You and your team have created a department that makes it a pleasure to come to work each morning, and I will miss you all.

If I can do anything to help with your transition in finding and training my replacement, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Arya.

Dr. Arya Harris.

Twelve weeks took us to Christmas. Jim was in shock when I told him she was leaving.

“But just a few weeks ago she was telling me how happy she was here! That she couldn’t believe how fortunate she was to work in the department and alongside you! What happened?” He asked in surprise.

“I don’t know Jim. She just said personal reasons and I didn’t want to push. All I know is that she is going and I need to find a replacement as soon as possible.”

He looks me over and thinks about pushing the matter himself but then thinks better of it. “Okay, Juliet. I will reissue the job advert. I am sorry it didn’t work out with Dr. Harris, I know you thought very highly of her.”

His words hit me. It is the first time anyone has offered sympathy for the pain I am going through in losing Arya. Not their fault, it is after all a secret, but even so. It was a comfort.

“Thank you, Jim.”

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I learn over the next few weeks to get over my hurt and pride and be in the same vicinity as Arya. My twelve-week countdown makes me painfully aware that soon I will probably never see her again and as much as it physically aches to be around her, it is much better than the impending future of nothing.

I am making my way through the trauma unit hub of emergency to collect some paperwork from the front desk when I see her prepping for surgery. Pulling her blonde locks up into a high pony as she glances over a medical chart. I can tell from her demeanor it is not an emergency patient, there is a calm of preparation in her stance.

Suddenly the front doors power open with the force of the crash team. We are not based in Accident and Emergency but we are only a hop skip and a jump away as cardiovascular needs to be easily accessible for the paramedical staff. Those seconds, in a heart attack, can make all the difference.

In my resident days, the crash of those doors would, without fail, make my heart race. Whether it would result in surgery, whether it would be me operating was always an unknown in those first few minutes. But the rush of outside air, the medic team relaying the stats, the speed and urgency of the handover all made my adrenaline surge.

And it is no different even now. I look up from my paperwork to watch my team respond. Arya is there first; in two strides she clears the waiting room and is taking in the information from the ER staff with the bed. If I hadn't been where I was at that exact second, I would never have believed it.

“Prep theatre one.” Arya calls out as she moved to the side of the wheeling bed, “Patient history...” Arya's hands tighten around the metal bar of the hospital bed and she comes to a complete standstill. The medic is unaware of the change in Arya and continues and the bed crashes sideways knocking Arya off her feet.

“Patient is 68-year-old white female, name Camila Harris, history of drug and alcohol... Oh shit...” the paramedic stops midsentence to grip control of the bed and to try and catch Arya. But I get there first. I can see the patient has long shimmering blonde hair that is so familiar to me. Her hair is streaked though with greys. “Sorry!” He starts to apologize. “I must have clipped the wheel, are you okay?”

Arya can't seem to move her lips so I take charge. “She is fine,” I glance at his name stitching, “He is fine, Rob.” Using his name snaps him out of his worry and gets him back to the task in hand.” If you can take the patient through to theatre one. Sarah, can you prep the room, get me the history, I need a scan and a full bloods sent off. I will prep for surgery.”

“Arya, sweetheart,” I murmur softly against her ear as I help her up. “Come on, come with me.”

I guide her up and out of the entrance off into the prep room for surgeons. She practically collapses on the small wooden changing bench and I head to the fridge returning with chilled water. “Here, take a drink. You're in shock.”

She takes the bottle from me but just places the cool plastic against her forehead. “Okay, now breathe okay ... in ... and ... out ...” I nod, encouraging her, making eye contact with her until she is mirroring me. “That's it. I am going to go into surgery now, okay? I am going to leave you here and when I come back, I am not going to leave your side. I will be here for as long as you need me to. But right now, I have to go and save your mom. Okay?”

She looks straight through me with those silvery blue eyes that light up my soul. They are swimming with tears. Emotions. Memories. Regret. Finally, she manages a nod and she mouths “Thank you.”

Moments like this test you as a doctor. The ability to switch off from the pressure and just channel that energy into the task at hand is crucial to success as a surgeon. Camila Harris lays on my operating table and my eyes scan her stats. It does not look good. She has a history as long as my arm of alcohol abuse, narcotics abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, domestic violence, addiction to painkillers, rehab, cognitive therapy. The kind of damage all this will have done to her body makes survival from a heart attack so much more difficult.

Her recent history is a little less detailed, it seems her latest round of court mandated rehabilitation could have been the push to get her off the drugs and booze. But the years and years of addiction have taken their toll. She is underweight, her organs neglected and her heart working much harder than it should have been for years just to compensate against the effects of the substances she was pumping into her system.

I don't judge my patients. Never. She is no different from others who neglect their health in other ways. Hell, I could be so much better. But there is an added sadness that those choices she made robbed her of a real life with Arya.

It is for her I go to work now. I want to give Arya the chance to have a relationship with her mother that she has been too afraid to consider before now. I want her to be able to decide later, tomorrow, next week, if there is more she wants to say, things she wants to know, any bridges that can be built. I don't want her to have it taken away in this operating theatre, under my hands and my scalpel.

I work like I am under the spotlight, with every action I take under review. Every cut, every stent, every stitch. The team seems to sense the atmosphere. They are more alert, the stats constantly monitored the slightest change repeated, reviewed.

The minutes drag into hours and I don't let Arya into my head. I have to focus. But she hovers on the very edge of my mind.

Things start to go wrong.

"We are losing her..."

I work faster, my hands more intent. I need to find the source of the bleed. She is Arya's mom. I need to save her.

I take a deep breath and slip out of the OR and make my way down the hall to the prep room. It is our own space to change, to decompress, to cry, to scream, to do whatever we need to do after a long hard day. Arya is in the same position as I left her but staring into space. It is like a minute hasn't passed but the moment I enter she looks at me, her entire gaze filled with questions. I still have on my bloody scrubs and I am exhausted.

"She made it," I say softly and I watch the air leave her body and the tightness she was holding onto releases.

"Thank you," she murmurs.

I sit down on the bench beside her. "You never ever have to thank me. I was doing my job. I do that every single day. I am just pleased I was able to save her. It was close at times."

"I imagine she wasn't in the best health," she says wryly.

"Her history has serious implications. A lot of pressure on her organs for a long time, but the bloods came back. She is clean and sober. She seems to have been for months, maybe even a couple of years."

Arya took a deep breath in and nodded. “Okay, that’s good. Good for her recovery I mean. She will need to stay that way now. Focus on her health and rehabilitation. I guess they will need to be mindful of her meds after. Minimal pain relief, no opioid-based medications and she is ...” she turns to me and catches my smile ... “has been treated by the best doctor I know and therefore all that is already on her file.” She finishes and I laugh.

“Yes. It is all there, although you can check if you want. Make sure I didn’t miss anything?” It is a gesture of comfort. I know I haven’t and she knows I haven’t but she nods anyway and shuffles and I take my cue.

“She is in room 6a. If you want to go and see her, although she will be out for another hour or so yet I would think ...

“ .. Juliet wait. I don't want you to go.”

I stop still and I wait. I do the opposite of what I want to do, which is dive in, wrap her up, and never let go. Instead, I pause, taking my own deep breath and letting her speak.

“I have been sitting here for however long and all I can think about is how there are two women in the world that I love. My mother, for all she did, all she didn't do, I can't help it ... I still love her. And that is why it hurts so much, why she hurt me so much by not caring, by not coming back for me or being there for me. I was so scared of feeling that rejection again. It has hung over my entire life. It has bathed my life in this dark cloud where I am just too scared to love anyone because if my own mother couldn't love me back ... how could anyone else.”

Her silvery blue eyes seek mine and her hands reach for me, pulling mine to hers, cupping them, holding them tight. “But I do love you. It doesn't matter if I run away or if I leave. It is too late. I already love you and the only person who is feeling rejection, the only person who I am punishing is you. And it isn't fair, it isn't fair for me to punish you for the fact my mother is or was a drug addict. I don't know what we could have, I don't know if we will fizzle out if it is just a phase if we are better as friends. But what I do know is that I want to try. I don't want to leave. I don't want to run away and escape. I want to be in this. With you and make this an 'us'. If you will have me?” She started to laugh through her tears, “Please say you will have me because I can't take the rejection ...”

I silence her words with a kiss. My lips crash hard against hers, it's rough and needy, a deep intense kiss that is filled with all the words I have wanted to say for weeks,

months, maybe my whole life.

“I could never reject you. I love you. I love you more than I knew it was possible to love someone.” I whisper against her lips, peppering her softness with my love.

“I love you too, Juliet.”

16

Arya decided to wait until the next day to see her mother. We spent the night together wrapped up in each other's arms not really talking but just being, living, existing together. My head tells me to be cautious, that she is in shock and she might change her mind. But my heart knows the truth. In seeing her mother as a real human being and not the image she had of her in her head from childhood, the walls broke down and Arya finally allowed herself to feel the feelings she had held back for all these years.

We walk to the hospital together, and it takes all of my willpower not to hold her hand.

We had talked until the early hours of the morning. There seemed suddenly so much to discuss about us and our future. Arya agreed she wanted to stay at the hospital, it was me that had been having thoughts otherwise.

I love my job, with all my heart, but unwittingly Dr. Cook had pulled at my subconscious. I have been working on Coronary stents research for years now and it is something that I feel so passionate about but I rarely have any time to dedicate to it. Every year I am offered a research position at the local University and I always knew the position would come with teaching hours that would allow me to give something back and help shape the doctors of the next generation.

If I thought I would never perform surgery again I would be more hesitant but I knew that through my research I would be in the hospital and available should the time ever come. I, myself had called upon research staff to assist in emergencies so I knew it would happen.

Arya thought I might be being hasty and just telling her I wanted to do that to keep her happy but I wasn't, it felt like the right time but until I had had the conversation with Jim, I didn't want to flaunt our relationship and cause him an HR headache in the process.

Entering the hospital as a member of the public feels strange. Even though both of us could take the staff entrance and go the back way in, Arya wanted to do it properly and see her mother as her daughter, not as a doctor and I respect that.

I wasn't going to go in with her but she insisted. "Please Juliet, I can't do this without you. I can't do it alone. Please." I don't answer, just thread my arm through hers and we enter the room together.

It always takes me a second to see a patient awake and well to make the connection between them and the person I was doing surgery on the previous day. I have seen Camila Harris's heart, but yet I still didn't know her eye color.

Of course, they were silvery blue, just like Arya's.

Camila is in bed but sat up a little with the TV on in the background. But the moment she sees Arya all that is forgotten.

"Arya." Her voice is husky and sore, her throat scratchy. I don't know what Arya was expecting. Probably not the frail old woman with tangled blondish grey hair who was now recovering from serious heart surgery.

“Hi, Mama.” She said softly, moving away from my touch to step closer to her mother.

“Was it you? The surgeon? They didn’t want to tell me a name.”

Arya stepped closer, her eyes studying the woman in front of her. Was she looking for a trace of herself? Of her past?

“No, it was Juliet. Dr. Sansus.” She gestures to me and I give a short nod and a smile. Camila smiles thanks at me for a second but almost immediately her gaze goes back to Arya.

“I am sober. Have been a couple of years. I tried to find you, I found out you were a surgeon. I am so proud of you, Arya. I am so sorry. I am so sorry for what I did... for how I... I am so ...” Camila starts to cry. Not light tears, but sobs that rack through her weak body. Arya moves to her in seconds and wraps her up.

“It’s okay mama. We have a long way to go, but we have time.”

And she looks straight at me as she says it and she is right. We have time.

Epilogue

Five years later

I glance at the clock and curse. It is already 5.25 pm, even if I dash out of here now, I will still hit the rush-hour traffic, and no way would I be back any earlier than 7 pm. I will have to meet them on this side of town. I pull out my phone and fire off a message letting her know the plan and I catch the reply of agreement before I get back to it.

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My days at the hospital seem like a distant memory, not that I am particularly far away from that world now and I still spend two days there a week assisting as part of my research agreement. But the rest of the time I am out of the center, out of the hustle and bustle of the downtown city, and tucked away in the research facility.

I work in a new world, or at least that's what it feels like. The campus is just a subway ride away from the center of the city but the other side of town from our apartment and years later I still haven't mastered the commute and actually getting anywhere on time.

Luckily my wife is very understanding. I grin as I think it. It still feels strange to me to call Arya that. My wife. I have been a wife for two-thirds of my life but I never expected to have one of my own. And how lucky I am to have her.

Our wedding had been much more of a holiday than anything. I didn't feel the need to invite a load of people. Everyone knew how I felt about her, it was clear as day. My family held no objections to my new sexuality. Only a quiet assurance that I was happy and that this is what I wanted was all that was required.

We flew to the Caribbean. Maybe it was a cliché to have a beach wedding out there, but it was perfect. We took 4 weeks' vacation, something I have never done in my life and I savored every single second. The wedding itself was short and the witnesses were just random guests who happened to be at the right place at the right time.

We chose dresses for each other. For Arya, I picked a light floating dress that was made of the softest blue, sprinkled with silvery streams of glittery thread so she shimmered as she spun in the setting Caribbean sun. Her hair was so blonde, her skin

flushed with a kiss of bronze and a smile was permanently on her lips. I had never seen anyone look so beautiful.

For me she chose red. Not a color I would have picked for my wedding. But the moment I saw myself in the mirror I knew she had been right. My skin was three shades darker for lounging pool days. My hair was thicker and darker too so the red looked so sensual against my complexion. The red was rich and dark like a good red wine and the skirt was long to the floor. It was romantic, soft and caressing. I felt good in it and that confidence showed in the photo which was now framed on my desk.

I sigh, reaching forwards to stroke her lovely face in the photograph, what I would give to be back on that beach sipping margaritas. We are due a holiday, I resolved to start having a look and see what I could arrange; Maybe a surprise would be just what Arya needed.

I glance around my lab, the research facility has been the cherry on top of our suddenly perfect yet slightly complicated relationship. Jim, my almost ex-boss, had been very supportive if not worried of the HR migraine that was about to descend.

I had already thought of that though and it was important to me that Arya felt like she could continue in her position and develop and grow her own career. Which is what brought me out here to the Research Facility. At first, I had figured I would take a job at the university and get on with research that way but Jim had nudged me into the private sector. It was not somewhere I ever thought I would end up.

It had come with a lot of conditions on my end. I didn't want to be some corporate sell out and I needed to feel like I was doing something more than lining big pharma's pockets. On the plus side, I had something they wanted. The knowledge and experience to advance their research and so I could negotiate myself a pretty good deal.

That deal involved too much money and a research floor that looked like it was something from the future. I was given a team, a budget and state of the art equipment that made my job so much easier, and two days at the hospital. I needed that. I needed to keep connected to my patients, to the job, to beating hearts, to life. It is what drove my research further and further.

And now I wasn't employed by the hospital, rather rented out, so Jim didn't need to worry about his HR issues. Instead, he could focus on my replacement as head of the department and leave Arya and me to the hidden whispers and surprised looks as word got out about our relationship.

She took it better than me in the beginning although now it is completely normal. I assume it was more of a scandal because I had previously been married to a man and many of them knew Matt so it was easy for them to assume my heterosexuality.

Matt. It had definitely been a kick to his bruised ego. Was it me? Was it the sex? Didn't I do it how you liked it? Did I hurt you? Obviously, it was hard to get him to look outside of himself and see that it was not any of those things. In fact, it was nothing to do with him at all.

I hadn't thought a friendship with my ex-husband would ever be possible but it had somehow manifested. Matt was a good guy, sure he had slept with someone else while we were still married. But there was no doubt now in my mind that our marriage was gone before that point.

That didn't make him a monster though. The pain I had felt had subsided, the hurt I worked through and time gave me the chance to forgive him and love him again for the qualities I had always loved him for.

Many partners would not be so understanding of an ex husband friendship, and Arya definitely had strong opinions on Matt before she met him ... but she hadn't factored

in the famous Matt Sansus charm. He had her hooked from the first hello. I watched it happen in slow motion and I gave him a knowing smile as he charmed the pants off her before he whispered to me with a grin “How am I doing?” Which I reciprocated with a dig of my elbow in his ribs.

Matt became the serial dater. I tried to tell him it wasn’t a sustainable way of life but the women came in a steady stream. Hooked by the charm, the dashing grey, the Dr prefix, and his sexy smile ... they knew he was not the settle down type, he was honest about what he was looking for and they still wanted to date him, so who was I to have any complaints. Plus, he was happy and that meant a lot to me.

I work late so I could miss the rush and then I pull on my coat and make my way out of the Facility. I needn’t have bothered with my coat; it is a gorgeous late spring evening where the air is warm and full of promise for the summer to come.

It is the last day of the month and therefore the ritual of dinner. It is supposed to be at ours and I know Arya will have been to the market already and planned it out to perfection. I also know she won’t have batted an eye that I changed the plans because I do most last days of the month.

I head to our favorite place opting to walk rather than getting the bus. In the rain, I don’t risk it but in this kind of weather, it is a pleasure rather than a chore. We will all take the subway back to the other side of the city together later so I will get my unwanted time of public transport in then.

Koda is a tiny little bistro restaurant that you would be forgiven for missing the first hundred times you walked past it. But Arya has an eye for places like that and whilst I could honestly say that it would never have crossed my mind to call Japanese food my favorite cuisine, this place is indescribably delicious.

We have ordered everything on the menu at least five times over and I have never

tasted one thing I didn't love. In fact, every time we would say "Oh my god, this is the best! We have to order it next time." This has happened with every single thing on the menu.

I am first there and I get the warm VIP welcome and taken to my favorite seat by the window so I can watch the world go by unobserved.

Arya and I have not had it easy. Like any relationship we had to find what worked for us, how we could be together happily. We both had stressful jobs, Arya has had a lot of therapy and she has had a lot of emotional pressures to work through that I sometimes could be insensitive to. For me, some answers seemed simple but it could take her a while to work her way through them. I like the solution as quickly as possible and for Arya, I have had to learn patience.

In return, Arya had to learn how to let me in. She had to learn how to share, not physical things, but emotional things. She had to learn to put her faith in me and us and believe that I wouldn't run away. She needed to learn that she could trust me and rely on me. It has been a slow process but one which I have cherished. Every day my love for her only grows.

My insecurities are still there. My age still scares me. As she creeps towards her forties, I make my way to sixty. Sixty is a milestone I am in no mood to celebrate. She makes me feel beautiful every single day and the parts of myself I hated and hid, she sought out and adored. In that department, I am definitely the taker and she has always been so happy and willing to give me love and attention.

I had read that lesbian relationships tended to find a lull in their sex lives. The phrase 'lesbian bed death' had been tossed around and whilst I found the lack of research to back up the statement annoying, I had wondered how long we could maintain our need to tear each other's clothes off.

The answer was at least another five years.

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Usually, these days we could wait until we got home and it didn't happen in some random corners of the hospital or bars, or restaurants. But not always.

She had awakened the fire of lust in me that I still had no way of controlling. A single look could travel from her eyes to my thighs and in less than a second, I would find myself aching for her. There was a physical need in me to have her, touch her and taste her. Again, and again and again.

Sometimes she would deny me and make me pine for her until it became too much, and then she would give me hours of toe-curling pleasure. We delved into the world of stimulation. Trying new toys, accessories, and extras. We both had our favorites and I could honestly say that just her and I alone was the best it could ever be ... but it added something. A variety, a spice that kept me hooked and addicted to the Arya sex drug of lust and desire.

She was my only woman. I was definitely not hers. So, I of course had my doubts occasionally. If I had a dollar for every insecure question that crossed my lips. "Is it always like this? Can I do more? Do you need more? Did you prefer another woman? Would you like me to try something else?" the list was endless but so was Arya's reassurance. She took the time to make me feel special and loved and wanted, the same as I did for her.

I watch them make their way to the door and it makes me smile. It had taken Arya a long time to be able to be comfortable around her mom. I could understand completely that 25 years of hurt and pain had meant that that particular door was not easy to open.

We had taken the slow route, just letting them get to know each other again. It helped that Camila was sober, I don't think Arya could have done it if she was still in the same place as when she abandoned her. She had waited during the first couple of years for the relapse. She kept her distance, certain that the drugs or the alcohol would get the better of her.

But I don't know if it was the heart attack and near brush with death or the fact that Arya was there and in her life, again but Camila stayed strong and fought against her own demons. And with each passing day, week, month, year, the faith and the trust from Arya began to rebuild.

It built slowly though. We were not at a dinner three nights at Mom's house, kind of place. But we did, once a month all go out for food. Well, technically we are supposed to eat in at ours but due to me often being unable to leave on time, they generally came across the city together to meet me. Part of me knew that Arya valued that time taking the subway, if she was alone at home with her mom she could falter and stumble, retreating into herself. But being outside and active seemed to help the conversation flow better and ease her nerves.

"Hey, you." Arya beams as she leans over the table to give me a light kiss on the cheek.

"Hey, you too." I grin back before turning to Camila. "Camila, lovely to see you. I am so sorry I ruined the plan ... again." She wafts my words away with a wave of her hand before leaning in for a hug.

"Hush now. I always plan to come across town and then if I don't it is no bother. I know you are doing something important and I can take a trip with my daughter for something like that."

I catch the smile Arya gives her and it makes my heart melt, seeing her happy,

relaxed, and building a relationship with her mom, she really is a strong and special person.

Sometimes even the strongest fires need a little extra gas to keep the flame burning as bright as possible. On Friday I left the facility early taking a half day so I could surprise Arya. I take my time setting the scene ... paying special attention to myself, what I am wearing, the room.

She messages to tell me she will be an hour late and it is nearly pitch-black outside when she makes her way through the door. The room in darkness except for a few red candles flickering giving a soft warm glow. The room is almost cleared except for a wooden chair in the center. Shrugging off her jacket she makes her way over and sits, a slow smile spreading on her surprised face.

She hears me move behind her, but she doesn't turn around. My nails trail over her shoulders, down her skin, running along her arms until I reach her wrists where I softly take them, drawing them behind her back, and I loop a soft silk tie around them binding them behind at her lower back.

I flick the remote and soft sexy music begins to play through the speakers.

The music starts as I move in front of Arya. My hair falls down in soft curls around my face, my lips are painted a warm red, and my eyes are smoky, sultry, offset with my light sparkling blue. My body is covered in a red silk dress, tied loosely around my waist. My hips sway to the music.

My hand slides down my body, glancing over my curves, red nails dancing over the silk as I take the knot. Looking up at her under thick lashes, I pull ... letting my dress slip open, and with a soft shrug it falls from my body landing on the floor leaving me standing before her, naked.

She responds, her eyes wide as she leans forwards, pulling against the ties at her wrist. Watching her pull, I can feel how much she wants me.

I straddle her on the chair. Biting my lip, I tremble a little, my nerves showing ... a one on one show. Just me. For her. My fingers run through her hair as I look at her. She is so beautiful, my wife. I feel again so lucky to have her. I lower my face, giving her a soft light kiss.

Rising up a little, my hair falls over her face as I guide my chest to her mouth, letting her nose run through the valley between them. I moan as I feel her lips, her kisses, and her tongue on my skin. My hand trails down her back and with a soft pull I free her hands ...

Pulling back, my ass resting on her thighs, my naked pussy just inches away from her, I smile. "All yours" I murmur but the words have barely been uttered before her lips crash against mine.

In seconds she has scooped me up and lowered me back onto the floor, her knees between my thighs keeping them pinned open as she begins to undress herself with a feral need. It is my turn to look with wide eyes as she frees her flesh from its fabric confines.

She is so fucking beautiful. Age has only been kind, adding a softness to her curves that makes me salivate for her. I reach up and my nails mark her skin as I drag her to me. My legs part and one of her thighs slides between mine and the next feeling is her thigh pressing against my wetness.

"Fuck ... Arya ..." I moan as the contact comes hard with a needy pressure. I return with a thrust of my own thigh between hers.

My palms cup her face as I draw her into me, my lips are hungry to kiss, and they do.

Over and over. Starting at the edge of her lips, moving across, every inch I pepper in soft needy kisses. There are no barriers between us now, it's hard to see where I end and she begins. I feel her full breasts press against mine and I need to touch, my kisses run down her neck and along her collarbone. I feel her moan, it vibrates through her body and her legs tighten around my thigh, she slowly starts to rock her body against me, her wetness making each slide an easy glide.

With each of her movements, I feel that pressure against my sex, her thigh claiming each wanting rock along my leg which only makes me press myself more firmly against her. I take her breasts, both of them in my palms and I cup them as I raise my head up to seek out her kisses once more. We build together, moaning into each other's mouths, I taste her gasps as she feels the squeeze of my hands.

I pant against her lips and she responds with a soft bite, the shock sends me over the edge, the release that has been building explodes deep within me. I cling to her and I feel her body mirroring mine.

Waves and waves of pleasure rush through us as we ride out our orgasms. I can't tell where mine ends and hers begins.

As our legs entwine and we fill the gaps between us, my lips find hers. It isn't sexual, although I can still feel the press of her sex against my thigh, her hard nipples grazing my own. I feel that rush of heat ... but it is sensual. It is slow now, my lips graze hers and I watch her eyelashes flicker closed and then open again. Those deep swirls of blue, pools of secrets I know, and sensuality that I love. I could drown in them.

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Waking entwined together, we have slept more times on this floor than my back would like to remember. She laughs as I stretch and grow. “Hey ...” I curse at her as I swot her with a cushion from the sofa.

“Coffee?” She asks knowingly and I moan appreciatively.

“Fuck, yes. You know the way straight to my heart.” I say as she stands gracefully, reaching up onto the balls of her feet so she can reach and stretch. I watch her nakedness, displayed in the early morning sun and I feel the heat straight between my legs.

I could have her again. And again. And again.

She catches my gaze and laughs reaching for my silk robe and pulling it on. “No, No, No. Maybe later. If you are lucky,” she says in a soft singsong voice as she dances her way over to the kitchen and begins setting up the coffee machine. I watch as she moves effortlessly, our home etched in her muscle memory, her brain on autopilot as she makes us two perfect hot cups of freshly ground and brewed coffee.

“And is there a reason why ...” I ask and I pull myself up to take the cup from her fingers?

She glances over the top as she settles down on the sofa. Taking her sweet time, she leans in and takes a sip. I watch as she savors the taste making me wait for her answer. She knows I am watching her every move.

“Oh well, no reason. I just figured I would make you wait.” She says seriously and

then her face breaks into a huge smile. I take a gulp of my coffee, too deep. It burns my lips and then my tongue but I barely notice. I am already settling the cup down on the hard wooden floors. As I move onto my knees the blanket falls from my body and drops to the floor leaving me naked and bare.

There are glistening lines of wetness smeared across my thighs from the night before. She and I, painting my skin in our love and lust for each other. I crawl slowly, making my way to her. I watch as she sinks back into our soft sofa, my silk robe falling undone and exposing her body as she lets out a tiny soft sigh of anticipation. She slides her ass forwards so her thighs can spread and she blossoms right in front of me.

I lean in, nice and slow. My kisses start at her knee, my teeth graze her for a light bite. I take a taste of her flesh I watch her hands tremble and I move up, reaching to take the cup from her palms and as I do our fingers brush ... just for a second but that light tender stroke of her delicate hands makes me pause. The sparks fly between us and I feel it in every inch of my body.

I know a heart inside out. I know how it works, I know how it beats, I know how it powers our bodies and our brains and how it is the organ that gives our entire body life.

But there is not a single doubt in me, that Arya is forever etched in mine.