All Along The Watchtower

by ariaadagio

Summary

Post-S6 finale, set immediately after Sanctuary & Death And All His Friends. Following the shooting, Derek struggles to recover from his wounds, both physical and spiritual. Derek-centric MerDer.[COMPLETE]

Notes

WARNING. This begins as a very dark fic with a lot of angst, but I absolutely promise it brightens up if you stick with it. I wanted to take a really in-depth look at recovery from a shooting, and I didn't pull any punches. Though this fic certainly does contain a ton of MerDer, this is first and foremost a Derek-centric story, and Derek is put through hell in this, so he behaves accordingly. If you want happy-go-lucky S1 Derek, you won't really be seeing hints of him until chapter 20 or so, and if you want nothing but schmoopy, no-plot MerDer, you'll hate this. Please, be prepared. That being said, if you like to see characters and couples working through their issues, this is the fic for you, and I promise, I don't put my toys away broken.
Meredith Grey had never been an athlete in school. She’d been too busy making sure she didn’t fit in with as many people as possible, assuming she showed up at all, to bother with something as inane as a varsity sport. But that was not to say she couldn’t have been an athlete if she’d chosen. Given proper motivation, she could run. She could hit, too, though, with the disadvantage of her petite frame, she had to use tools provided by the environment to get the impact she wanted. Like, say, a door for leverage, and a well placed supply shelf for emphasis. Yes, Meredith Grey was a Boston-cultivated scrapper in the best sense of the word, and she hoped Cristina would forgive her for it.

She barely heard the sound of Cristina hitting the supply rack behind her and falling to the floor in a heap of graceless surprise. She didn’t spare a glance to make sure her person was okay. She didn’t spare guilt that she didn’t spare a glance, either.

There was simply no time.

She swept her clammy skin against the cool metal of the door handle and pulled. The antiseptic-tinged air of the hospital outside their closet safe haven touched her lungs and gave her fuel exactly one time before she threw her body into hellbent flight.

She ran. Derek was close, technically, were she capable of real flight, and able to traverse the distance between her and him in a straight line, but she was not a bird, as much as she wanted to be in that moment. He was several long, winding hallways away when she considered the actual path she had to take, and the mere thought of all those floor tiles separating him from her made a sob catch in her throat.

She dared a glance toward the catwalk as she tore through the promenade. Quiet wind whispered against her ears, providing no distraction between each straining thud of her heart. The silent emptiness was utterly wrong in what was supposed to be the bustling, nerve center of this hospital, a place where thousands of medical professionals worked. It was wrong and strange, but the idea lasted perhaps a nanosecond in her brain before she caught a glimpse of him in the distance.

He moved. She saw him raise a knee before he flopped flat again like a landed trout, and though the quiet was strange, it did permit her to hear solid proof that he was alive, for now. He loosed a soft, upset displacement of air, not a scream or a sob or a moan, but something smashed between the three, borrowing jagged bits of each. Her heart wrenched at the unmistakable evidence of his pain.

He was alive, but he was hurt. Very hurt. How long did she have? Her brain didn't know what to do with the twisting combination of relief and blind panic.

“Derek,” she shrieked across the void between them, “Hang on; I'm coming!” Like a birthday gift with a pretty bow and a card, she was giving any potential shooter a veritable GPS coordinate to her vulnerable body, and she knew it, but she didn’t care. Derek made another noise of suffering, and she didn’t care about anything else at all.

She ran. She ran until it seemed like every sinew in her calves and thighs was going to split apart and leave her unattached muscles sliding down her bones into a pile of goo. She ran until her lungs were going to burst, and her laboring heart begged her to stop.

Unless the wound was instantly mortal, which was often only the case with certain penetrating
head shots, GSW victims typically had about 2-4 minutes of normal brain activity before bad things started to happen. Things like hypovolemic shock, hemorrhagic shock, or worse. Much worse. Derek had been shot in the upper right quadrant, which meant cardiogenic shock was also a possibility. If his heart was too damaged to pump blood, game over. If his lung was pierced, he would be drowning in his own fluids on top of that. And, without surgery, there would be nothing she could do but watch him leave her.

2-4 minutes. Minutes that were already ticking away.

The catwalk came into view as she rounded the corner. Her flip-flopping heart dropped into her stomach. He lay flat on his back, staring at the ceiling while a pool of his blood crept out from underneath his body like the slow bloom of a rose. She couldn’t tell if he was bleeding from the back, or if it was spilling over from the front. Bright, wet red smeared the right side of his shirt. Everywhere. Red.

He was still too far away for her to make an accurate assessment of the situation, but a shred of hope remained when she realized his hand was against the wound. If he had the presence of mind to apply pressure to his wound, surely that was a good sign. Surely.

She skidded to her knees beside him like a shortstop headed for home plate, ignoring the dull shock as her kneecaps bruised on impact with the floor. Her shoes slipped across the wet tiles. He stared at some point beyond her shoulder, and a little cough stuttered from his lips.

“No,” he gurgled. His body twitched, and his labored breathing ratcheted into higher gear, as though he were trying to give his rebelling muscles a command to move, and they weren’t listening.

“Mr. Clark, no...” His fear was an icy sword down her spine. She’d never heard him terrified before, and she never cared to again.

“Derek,” she said. “Derek, it’s me. I’m here. Mr. Clark is gone.”

She bit her lip as she started to triage. The hand she’d thought he had been using to apply pressure to the wound was just resting against his bloodstained shirt, as if he’d thought about attempting to stop the bleeding, but his brain hadn’t quite translated the thought to action.

She grabbed his shoulder and rolled him onto his side away from the growing puddle. He offered no resistance, submitting with a meek sort of unawareness that terrified her. She found no exit wound, but her palm came back slick with his blood. The back of his shirt was already saturated and sticky. She tried to make mental calculations about how much of his blood volume was on the floor instead of inside his body, but her hand started to shake, and math escaped her. As she resettled him on his back, she decided it was very bad, but it wasn’t the worst it could be. The surface of the wound didn’t bubble or hiss as he breathed, and he wasn’t spitting up blood when he coughed. Those were good indications that his lungs were intact, and that it was just pain that made his breaths so short and stuttered.

Her brain cascaded through her limited options with desperation. Treat the shock. Stop the bleeding. She could at least do that. How? Apply pressure. Keep him warm. Keep him calm. Keep him talking, or at least awake. She had nothing to keep him warm with, but she could freaking keep him with her. She could.

“Derek, it’s me. You’re going to be fine,” she told him as she pushed the heel of her palm against the hole in his chest.

“No,” he said.
Another arctic chill swept through her. He didn't understand her, that was all. He was still frightened, and he was trying to get away from his attacker, and he was not in any way responding to her assessment that he would be fine.

“No,” he repeated. The sound was pitiful and cut up at the end by a moan that made her heart throb.

She spared a glance at their surroundings, prepared to lay herself flat on top of him if it meant keeping Gary Clark away. She saw Cristina fly across the promenade, following the empty path that Meredith had taken moments before. There was no Gary Clark, though, and there was nobody else either.

There was nobody to help. Meredith had no blankets to wrap him with, and nothing but her hands to treat him with. A bucket of bright red, oxygen rich, arterial blood was stuck in his shirt and on the floor, not doing what it was supposed to – keeping him alive. A bullet had gone through his sternum, and was stuck somewhere in there, biting him with agony whenever he took a breath. Near his heart. Or in it, which would mean the only thing that was keeping him from stroking out and dying would be the fact that the bullet was acting as a stopper for an otherwise gaping, irreparable hole.

Her body started to shake as he made another sound of pain. It was just her and Cristina, and he was going to die. He was going to bleed to death in his own hospital, so close to salvation, and yet metaphorical miles away because some lady he didn't know had signed a DNR, and he had respected it, unlike her psychopath husband.

“Please,” she begged him. “Please, don't die. Please, Derek. You can't leave me.”

His stark, blue eyes were a shocking peal of lightning against the sea of red on the floor. He blinked, and she felt his blood-slicked fingers slip over top of hers.

“Meredith,” he slurred, his voice thick, low, and labored. The music of her name falling from his lips made her dizzy. He sounded drunk. Oh, god. She had to keep him with her. She sandwiched his offered palm between her own as though it were the only thing keeping him breathing.

“Help is coming,” she lied. “Don't die. Please, you don't get to die.”

His chest pressed against her hand like a jackhammer as he panted, his body radiating all sorts of respiratory distress. She lifted her free hand and slapped his cheek. Hard. Anything. Anything to keep him focused. He didn't recoil with pain. Didn't flinch. He just sort of ate the motion with his face and stared like a headlight blinded deer at her.

“I'm serious,” she said in her best Meredith-means-it voice. “Stay with me,” she said. “Even breaths. You can do it. I know it hurts.”

He wasn't listening. His breathing, laced with moans, remained a desperate pit fight for air despite pain. His gaze shifted away from her, his hand slipped loose, and the tenuous, rope line connection between him and her frayed. Ripped. Disintegrated. She wasn't getting through to him at all. She wasn't even sure if he still knew she was there. The loss ripped a path of devastation through her. Just like the bullet that had felled him.

Reality snapped into pinpoint focus. If she didn't get him back on an even keel with sentience, she was going to lose him. Forever. And she had nothing to help her but herself.

In that moment, the world fell away. The only thing there in the darkness was him. She knew that
even if she never took his last name or walked with him down an aisle in a church somewhere, she was forever, irrevocably Mrs. Derek Shepherd. In fact, she'd endure the title for the rest of her life if it just meant he would keep breathing.

She didn't know what part of her brain hadn't been convinced yet after all the years of their moth-to-flame routine. She didn't know she'd needed any sort of nudge to prove the divine providence of it all. After all, she'd freaking come back from the dead for him. She didn't know anything in that moment except that the man dying under her palms was the lost piece of the universe that completed her soul.

In the grips of that realization, Meredith Grey began to bargain with god or whatever was up there that had seen fit to carelessly throw this man into the destructive path of her life. Derek had been tossed her way on a vulnerable night at Joe's bar, and had, for some reason, stayed for the ride. If I know you, I'll love you? she remembered saying incredulously, not realizing that in a mere few months, she would discover the irrefutable truth of the statement. Now, she knew him very well, he existed in her space as though he were the one simple fact in her chaos, and she loved him more than life.

She put her mental foot down. She refused to let this roller coaster stop at the gate.

She bargained for all she was worth. Give me a few minutes, she thought. Just a few more minutes. Send us up the hill again for another loop. We should at least get to enjoy one more shot at free fall.

Desperation burbled from her lips like a runaway brook. “Hold on, okay?” she babbled. “Hold on. I love you. Please, don't die.” If you let him live, you can take whatever you want from me.

He started to fight her. Tried to push her away.

“Get out of here, Meredith, before he shoots you, too,” he mumbled. She'd never been so elated in her life that he didn't want her around. It was working. He coughed, and the agony in his gaze speared her, but she held on.

One more loop. Maybe a corkscrew this time.

She rattled his shoulder. If you let him live, I promise to believe. “Do. Not. Die,” she commanded as Cristina ran up behind her. “Do you understand?” she continued, yelling at him for all she was worth. “I can't live without you. If you die, I die.”

Please, please, please, god, she thought. And as the bargaining continued at an auction house pace, she brought him back from the brink.

For a moment, she stood in the hallway, staring. An orderly with blood on his uniform bumped her shoulder as he ran by, mumbling an apology as he went. She felt like she was frozen in the middle of a stage with a thousand people staring as the spotlight came down and lit up her face for scrutiny. She'd forgotten her lines. She didn't know what to do. The situation was beyond her capability to finesse her way out of because it was something she'd never experienced before. It was new and weird and uncomfortable.

It was awful.

The cardiac intensive care unit was a small, quiet, dimly lit ward, a stack of ten small rooms in a line with a heavily manned nurse station at each end. Billowing curtains with boring flower prints wrapped around the sides and back of each small cubicle in an attempt to give the patients privacy
from their neighbors, but nothing covered the front of each room except transparent plastic plating. It was conducive to the constant monitoring heart patients required, but it also meant there was no slow preparation for what she would see inside. Just the instant shock of seeing Derek, sick and alone in the dark.

“I thought...” she said, blinking back tears in her eyes when she saw him for the first time after his chest had been closed. The nurse coming out of his room looked up at her. “I was told he asked for me?”

The nurse, a warm, older, heavyset woman with brown hair pulled back into a stark bun, squeezed Meredith's shoulder. “Yes, dear,” she said. Her name tag identified her as Charlotte Kent. She looked frazzled and tired, but who could blame her? “He nodded when I asked him if he wanted to see you.”

Meredith bit her lip, staring beyond Nurse Kent's shoulder. “He's...”

“Still waking up, Dr. Grey. He'll be pretty out of it for a while. Don't expect much.”

“I know,” Meredith said. Her voice cracked. “I know. I've done post-ops for hundreds of these. But it's...”

The woman's honey rich voice dipped low and soft. “Different when it's somebody you love?”

“Yeah. I...” Meredith wiped her face with the back of her palm. “How much is the ventilator still assisting?”

Charlotte smiled. “About 55%. He's almost ready to come off of it.”

“55%,” Meredith parroted. That meant for every breath he took on his own, the machine was forcing him to take another. “That's—”

“Extremely good at this stage,” Charlotte said, cutting her off. “Dr. Shepherd is a healthy, vibrant man, who takes care of his body, and he'll be just fine. Why don't you go sit with him? He wants you there. I left a chair for you by his bed.”

Meredith swallowed as she forced herself to move forward, one foot after the other until her hands came to rest against the cold steel bed railing. A sick, twisting lump formed in her throat, and butterflies played tennis in her innards. She didn't know what to do. The urge to crush him in an embrace was so strong she had to squeeze the railing until her knuckles hurt. She wanted to. She wanted to, but it would hurt him, and those two warring facts made her feel like barfing instead.

He was alive, and after the hours and hours of not knowing, all while his blood dried on her scrubs, she wanted to vomit.

“I'm here,” she whispered, swallowing against bile. She wished that he would wake, just for a minute. Just so she could see. But she didn't dare ask it of him. If he wasn't ready to be awake, he wasn't ready. She started to shiver. Please, just for a minute, she begged him in silence.

He lay flat in a maze of tubes and wires and monitors. The ventilator mask cupped his pale lips and his nose and filled the quiet with a low hiss as it made him breathe. Though he wore a hospital gown, the ties over the shoulders had been undone, and the gown had been folded down to let his incision and the gunshot wound heal a bit in open air. A fuzzy blue thermal blanket covered him midway up the swell of his ribcage, and EKG leads cascaded over his exposed chest, some ending at sticky pads near his shoulders and under his nipples, others snaking under the blanket. A long, angry-looking incision, held together with Cristina's perfect stitching, bisected his chest and
stopped several inches above the seam line of the blanket. Fat drainage tubes poked through his skin, one of them near his clavicle, another terminating somewhere below the blanket, probably high in his abdomen. An automated blood pressure cuff constricted around one arm and sighed as it released. An intravenous line dripped medication and hydrating fluids directly into his system via a catheter shunt in his other arm. A pulse oximeter held his middle finger hostage. A little plastic name tag encircled his wrist, proclaiming him to anyone who wanted to know: Derek Shepherd. Sulfa drug allergy. Another tube snaking out from underneath the blanket at the base of the bed ended in a small, clear bag to collect his urine. It seemed like no part of him remained inviolate.

His eyes opened halfway. The flash of his pupils as they adjusted under his dark lashes broke her into tiny bits. “Hi,” she said. “Oh, god, hi.” You're alive.

She leaned over the railing and touched his face. The sharp forest of his stubble rasped against her palm and brought out all her pent up worry in a deluge of unfettered emotion. Her lip quivered, and she made an ugly, wet sound with her throat.

“Hi,” she repeated, feeling like a moron, but she couldn't stop touching him. She curled her fingers through his hair. It was disgruntled and greasy with old sweat and pain, but she didn't care. She felt the soft curve of cartilage that made his ear. The beeping heart monitor told her he was fine, and that his heart was working steadily, but she felt at his jugular anyway. The skin pounded against her fingertips. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. A joyous, unwavering timpani that she never wanted to end in a million years.

_I want to die when I'm 110 years old, in your arms._

He didn't move and couldn't speak, but he didn't seem to mind her shaky, sob-y, graceless appraisal of his health. He watched her with a half-lidded, quiet gaze. She wanted to touch him everywhere, but it felt like nowhere was safe. She didn't want to hurt him, and he was so...

“Does it hurt?” she asked in a wispy voice. She didn't want him to say yes.

His eyelids lowered further, almost to the point of being closed, and he took a weak, sighing breath, unaided, pulling air through the ventilator tube without its assistance. His head moved almost imperceptibly side to side, and then he stilled. No, it didn't hurt.

Relief tore through her like a brush fire.

She yanked up the top sheet and both blankets at the foot of the bed and pushed them back,
revealing more of the wire maze. The clear line of the catheter that spilled over the side of the bed was taped against his thigh and his calf and his ankle so he wouldn't pull it accidentally if he moved.

The only thing he had on under the covers aside from his loose hospital gown was a pair of pressure stockings, which were meant to keep the blood in his legs from clotting in his veins and causing thrombosis. The thin white leggings covered his thighs and calves and came to a stop at the mid-arch of his feet, which were otherwise bare, a function of the anesthesiologist needing to have a clear view of his toenails during his surgery. His toes were a fleshy blue color, a sure sign that his body did not have enough blood in it anymore to keep them warm on its own.

She pulled his left foot into her hands, feeling weepy at the chill that charged through her skin when she touched him, and pushed the pressure stocking back to his ankle. He offered no resistance, and at first, she found herself reluctant to do anything, as though she were holding a crackable egg in her hand and not a resilient, human limb made surprisingly heavy by the fact that he wasn't helping her at all. He probably couldn't, even if he wanted to.

Silence ticked.

He hadn't been shot in the foot, she forced herself to remember. She could touch his foot.

She rubbed the dime-sized callus underneath his pinky toe, felt the bones wobble under his skin as she massaged him. The callus was rough and hard and worn from countless miles in cross trainers and hiking boots and dress shoes, but she'd never felt anything so lovely in her life. His toes flexed, just a smidgen, and then he relaxed. He blinked, long and slow, and rested his eyelids at half mast. The ventilator shoved a breath through his torso, an ever-present reminder of his fragility.

She moved through each digit in slow succession, not proceeding to the next one until the skin of the present one started to feel more like skin and less like a cadaver in a fridge. She petted the under arch of his foot, pressing firmly to avoid tickling him. She couldn't recall the number of times she'd scraped her toenail against the skin there while they made love or by accident when she rolled during the night, and gotten kicked for her trouble. He would never admit it, but she knew he was sensitive there, which she'd always thought was kind of adorable. *I'm not ticklish,* he would always insist. She traced the long slender bones from his ankles to his toes, and then massaged life back into his Achilles tendon. When she finished, the foot was warm, and soft, and supple to the touch. She slid her fingers up his ankle, until they brushed the coarse, curly hairs peppering his leg.

Less than three hours ago, Jackson had convinced both her and Gary Clark that Derek was dead.

But he wasn't dead.

“Oh, god,” she whispered, not caring that he was staring at her in drugged befuddlement. “God,” she repeated, feeling horrible for it after she had spent all day promising to believe and all that crap. And she stood there. Holding his ankle. Sobbing quietly until the new-found warmth of his skin reminded her she was holding him. A human being. Her Derek. And he was hurt.


After replacing the pressure stocking with care, she moved to his right foot and repeated the slow process of restoring circulation underneath his skin. The next time she looked up at him, he'd fallen back into the oblivion of dreams.

“Thank you for not dying, Derek,” she told her sleeping husband, and she settled onto the chair beside his bed to revel in the simple fact that he was lying there, breathing, he had beautiful ankles.
and calves, and he wasn't going to leave her because he'd promised he wouldn't. He'd promised, and she believed him.

She believed.

She listened as his body slowly started to recover from the shock of surgery and the effects of the muscular paralytics and other drugs in his bloodstream. More and more of his breaths were his own. The usage percentage on the ventilator dropped from 55% to 40% in the mere space of an hour. She watched as his eyes moved under his eyelids, telling her he rested and recuperated, deep in the grips of healthy REM sleep. His skin pinked up a bit, particularly his lips, and his feet stayed warmer on their own. The catheter bag began to fill with gold-colored fluid, too, a reassuring sign that his kidneys were functioning at a decent clip.

Nurse Charlotte had been right. Derek was strong and healthy.

Strong, healthy, and hers.

The next time he opened his eyes, she had the presence of mind to tell him, “Cristina got the bullet out. She fixed you. And Gary Clark is dead,” just in case he was awake enough to worry about it. A stab of grief tore a runnel into her when he blinked out a fat pair of tears. Maybe she shouldn't have said anything, but she imagined wondering and not knowing, being as weak as he was, would have been a far worse kind of torture.

When the hospital PA system crackled to life, Derek was out again, replenishing himself for another bout of wakefulness that was sure to happen later. Dr. Webber's deep, soothing baritone filled the air. “This is Dr. Richard Webber. For those of you who don't know, Chief of Surgery Derek Shepherd, among others, sustained life threatening injuries during the shooting rampage that occurred several hours ago. The Board of Directors has elected that I fill the position of Interim Chief of Surgery until such time as Dr. Shepherd is sufficiently recovered to resume his duties. I want to assure everyone that Mr. Clark has been taken care of, and it is now 100% safe to move about freely within the building,” Chief Webber said.

“We have made arrangements for a full compliment of grief and trauma counselors to be available 24/7 in the surgery wing's conference rooms, and they are for use by any hospital staff or patient during this difficult time,” Richard continued. “They are here to assist you, and I encourage you to visit any one of them when your time permits. No appointment is necessary. I would like to ask that any staff who are approached by a member of the press please forward the request to our PR department, and do not attempt to answer any questions. Please, do not approach the areas cordoned off with crime scene tape. Police are attempting to take statements from all available witnesses, and have set up a base of operations in the hospital cafeteria. The ER is currently closed to trauma. Overflow and new patients will be sent to Seattle Presbyterian, but all existing patients will continue to receive the best standard of care here at Seattle Grace. For assistance with the location of loved ones, additional administrative staff has been reallocated to the main reception area. I thank you for your patience and love in helping us deal with this horrible incident. Seattle Grace is a family, and we have lost a lot of members today. My prayers go out to all the affected families. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me through Patricia. Thank you.”

A hiss of static and silence followed as Dr. Webber left the intercom. Meredith swallowed. Affected families. She stared at Derek's prone, unmoving form, realizing that the message was for them, among others. They were an affected family. He was her family.

His eyes opened for a third time in as many hours, and she leaned forward to kiss his forehead. She brushed a loose curl away from his face and smiled at him. “Hello again,” she whispered. “I'm
For the first time after his surgery, he moved. His hand shifted under the blankets. He tried to speak, either despite the ventilator, or because he forgot all about it. No noise came out. She ran her fingers through his hair. “You’re still on the ventilator,” she told him. “It’s all right.”

Her family. She bit her lip and leaned closer, reading irritated distress in his gaze. He couldn't talk, and it was starting to bug him. He wanted to tell her something. Something...

Dread poured through her as her thoughts of family wandered to completion. He was her family. But what about his family? He wasn't alone in the world like she was. He had loved ones. In the chaos, she'd forgotten all about them. He had a mom. He had sisters. All those sisters had children and husbands. And any one of them could be watching the news that moment and see that Seattle Grace was a barely recovered war zone. They would be beside themselves. Her heart began to pound with worry when she realized there were at least a dozen people probably going through all the thoughts she'd cycled through when she'd been running toward his bleeding, broken body. Was he going to die? Was he dead already? They needed to know. She needed to call Carolyn.

But she wouldn't leave him, not if he wanted her to stay. She'd grab the first nurse that walked by and throw a phone number his or her way, but she wouldn't leave.

He stared at her, his expression vacant and glassy from all the drugs in his system, but pointed. At her. “Derek, do you want me to call your mother?” she asked as she rested her palm against his forehead. “I’m so sorry I forgot.”

His silent gaze turned pleading. Yes. Call my mom. He blinked, and she kissed him, her mind settling as she gave it a new goal. “Okay. Okay, I'll call her right now. Is her number in your cell phone?”

Silly question. Of course the number was in his cell phone, which was in a box under the bed with the rest of the belongings they'd removed from his person before surgery. At least he didn't waste energy answering her query.

She stood, and he moved again. His arm shifted under the blanket. She watched as he strained at her, his fingers splayed and reaching for her like a man clawing for a life raft. “What is it?” she said, which was another stupid question. Yes or no. That was the extent of what he could communicate at the moment. Of their own volition, her feet moved her back toward the railing, and she watched him, confused, as he patted at her scrubs and his palm came to rest against her womb, trembling with the effort it required of him.

For a moment, she couldn't breathe. He couldn't possibly know about... He'd been out cold with his damaged heart exposed to open air when Cristina had announced to Gary Clark that Meredith was pregnant. He'd been...

Her stomach growled, the rumble of it audible even over the whir of the ventilator. His fingers flexed, and he got a loose grip on her scrubs. He pulled at her and heaved a breath that made him wince. That was when she realized he wasn't exactly aiming for her malfunctioning uterus, but he was too weak to get enough lift for his true target.

A sob fell from her lips. “I'll eat, too,” she said. “I swear. And then I'll be back.”

Like a switch had been flipped, he was done. Out. Gone. His hand relaxed, and he slumbered again. She moved his outstretched arm back under the comfort of the thermal blankets, and turned.
She only made it to the threshold before the shadow of a towering man stumbled into the way and stopped. He looked past her shoulders, his eyes red and puffy, and then he fell apart. “Oh, Jesus,” he said, his voice thick and low with raw upset. “I spent all day fixing Karev, and the whole time Derek—I heard thirty minutes ago and raced back here.”

Meredith stared at Mark. The harsh lighting in the hallway gave his face a gaunt, haunted cast. He looked like he hadn't slept in weeks and was barely on his feet. Which probably mirrored her own haggard appearance.

A nurse Meredith didn't know passed by, her shoes squeaking against the floor as she propelled herself down the hallway. The lights buzzed overhead with the faint crackle of fluorescence. Mark looked alone and tired and ready to fall down, an unstable island in the sea of empty space between Derek's door and the back wall.

“How could anyone ever do this?” Mark asked the universe, plaintive and desolate.

She didn't have an answer. But Derek was her family. Mark was Derek's family.

Meredith, you can't do nothing. She's your sister.

And?

And your family.

I'm not understanding.

She didn't know why it hadn't clicked before, but it did now. She collapsed against him and pulled her arms around Mark's slender waist. “He's going to be okay,” she said. “I got to him in time.”

“Got to him?”

“Gary Clark shot him on the catwalk. He was going to bleed out.”

I'm not gonna die. I promise.

“Jesus,” Mark said. He pulled back and looked at her, his eyes widening. “Shit. I... You knew about Karev, right?”

Meredith swallowed. She knew. She knew that Alex was not awake yet, that he was at Seattle Presbyterian on the critical list in their intensive care unit. She knew Lexie was probably sitting by his bedside, waiting, right that moment, much as Meredith had with Derek, except without the reassurance of knowing that he would wake up again in a little bit. Her heart broke, but she didn't have room for all the extra sharp pieces in her chest. There was just too much. She didn't have space for almost losing Derek, getting Derek back, watching him fake die, v-fib, and then recover, for losing a baby, and then dealing with Alex at the same time. “Lexie called me while they were closing up Derek.” Her chest started to throb, and her breaths shortened. “Alex is really hurt. Worse than Derek, I think.”

Her voice cracked like dry kindling, and she cried. She didn't know where it came from. The yo-yo of elation to desperate fear and back again all afternoon was wreaking havoc with her emotional sense of balance. She wasn't even particularly sad at the moment. And yet it all fell out of her anyway. Tears. Snot. Ugliness.

“Mark,” she said. She gasped and hiccoughed, and he rubbed her back, which only made her cry more.
“Will you please sit with Derek?” she moaned against Mark's shirt. Her face stung, and his scrubs were soft and warm. She was such an ugly crier. Ugly and weak.

She was standing right outside Derek's room. If he woke up again, he would hear this crap, and he didn't need to hear this crap. He wasn't allowed to be upset right now. He had to heal. He'd promised her he wouldn't die. He'd held up his end of the bargain. He would be okay. But not if he was listening to her sob like a gutted, gasping fish who'd just suicidally leaped out of the fishbowl of his hospital room.

“I don't want him to be alone right now, and I need to call his mom,” she said. “He wants me to call his mom. He wants me to call his mom, and I need to call her.”

Mark stared at her like it wasn't even a real question, would he sit with Derek, but his grip didn't abate. “I called Mrs. Shepherd on the way back from Seattle Presbyter. I told her I'd call her with an update as soon as possible. She said not to bother, that she'd be here on the first flight she can find with a seat, whether it's in pet cargo or first class.”

“I didn't even think to call her,” Meredith confessed. “I had plenty of time.”

“If he's not dead because of you,” Mark said, a wry smile crinkling his face, “I think she'll forgive you.” He brushed her cheek with his thumb.

Meredith sighed. “Barely. He's not dead because of Cristina. She's the one who fixed him. And because he promised.” You had to want to fight to live through a literal hole in your chest. “I'm...

Just a bystander that begged the operator for another lap on the roller coaster.

Mark squeezed her shoulder. “Just go do what you need to do. I'll sit here.”

She didn't realize how comforting the presence of Mark's big body was until he left her bereft. The chair by Derek's bedside squawked under Mark's weight. Derek's eyes opened at the noise, and Mark smiled.

“Hey, man,” Mark said, loud and falsely boisterous, the way he seemed to live life in general, but she appreciated it at the moment. “I know Meredith is probably better company, but you're drugged, and she needs a shower or something, so you're stuck with me for a few hours.”

She went to the cafeteria to grab a salad, but the crowd of police officers and throb of life and sobs there was incredible. Detectives sat at every table taking notes while streams of people babbled the details of their horrific experiences like polluted, dirty brooks expelling waste. Dr. Bailey slouched at one of the closer tables, tear tracks running down her face, her expression vacant. Meredith stared at the scene with a surgeon's detachment and backed away. A vending machine sandwich would have to suffice.

She went to her favorite back hallway. Her favorite spare hospital bed. She'd spent countless hours studying there with Cristina and with Alex. With Izzie and with George. She stopped cold when she saw a streak of dried blood at the doorway by the vending machine and the telltale spatter that marred the floor with rusty brown blotches all the way up the walk into the distance. Someone had been shot there, or ran through there while injured, or...

Something.

She couldn't bring herself to shove quarters into the machine.

The next vending machine she tried had only two sandwiches left. She didn't even care what kind,
and she didn't check the date on them. She grabbed one and devoured it, feeling slightly sick after she took her last bite. Her stomach churned and roiled and threatened to throw it all back up, but by the time she made it to the bathroom, it had settled, leaving her shaky, and pretty sure she would never be hungry again.

She hit the showers by the locker room, staring at her naked body as steam billowed around her, and water sluiced down her skin. Her palms came to rest against her lower abdomen. She'd had a baby there, and now it was gone. She stared at her bellybutton sort of like she had with the cafeteria and its overflowing burble of police officers. Distant. Disinterested. Because she knew if she let herself feel, the results would be bad.

She rubbed her stomach. Shampoo ran down into her eyes as it bled from her hair. Her waterlogged fingertips puckered. She'd been host to a tiny person for a little while. Two weeks. Maybe three. She and Derek had made something really kind of great. All by accident. As if on cue, her stomach cramped. Just a little, and then it went quiet. She ran her index finger in a circle around her bellybutton.

All her resolutions not to feel dissolved in a pile of tears, but the shower washed them away.

She made her peace with it as she sat against the cold tile and let the water stream down. Her heart didn't even have the opportunity to remain broken, because Derek was okay. Derek was okay, and she didn't have much energy for anything else at the moment. His piece of her soul remained intact and functional and warm and whole. And that was enough.

The water chilled. She started to shiver. She turned the water off and sat in the cold dripping shower for a long march of minutes.

She stood, pausing to let the world settle as her vision blacked out from the elevation change. She towed off. She dressed in methodical silence, threw her towel in the hospital laundry bin, and made her way back to his room without bothering to dry her hair or put on any makeup or anything. It didn't matter. He knew what she looked like without any of that crap on, and somehow, bothering with makeup after he'd been shot in the chest seemed silly. Worrying about a collection of cells that she'd hosted for less than a month and had only known about for less than twelve hours seemed silly. She would be sad, but there was too much to be grateful for, and that was okay.

Derek was okay.

Mark looked up as she shuffled through the door. “Hey, welcome back,” he said. “I was just telling Derek that I am a way better candidate for temporary chief than Richard. Don't you think?”

“I plead the fifth,” she said, a small laugh searing her throat.

“Whatever,” Mark said as he stood and offered her the chair. “I think he should lobby with the Board for me.”

She glanced past Mark's shoulder to see Derek awake and looking somewhere sort of centered on Mark, but not quite. His eyes didn't twinkle like they usually did when Mark was making stupid jokes, but she was happy to settle for awake and sort of looking around, and Mark didn't seem concerned.

Then she realized that Derek was off the ventilator. There was no obtrusive tube jammed down his throat. No hulking thing covering his mouth. Just a lightweight, clear oxygen mask cupped over his nose and lips.
The sight of Derek, awake, breathing unassisted by anything but his own vibrant will to be alive, pulled at her like an inescapable gravity well. She sank into the chair beside his bed.

“When?” she gasped.

Mark stood beside her. “Charlotte took it out about thirty minutes ago. He's a bit stoned, but he's doing really well, considering.”

The oxygen mask covering Derek's lips fogged as he muttered something underneath. The soft, tenor hum of his vocal cords at work made her smile, even though he'd only managed a syllable or two, even though she had no idea what he'd said. Because he'd said something, which was even better than just breathing. Better by far.

“Don't worry,” Mark said with a grin. He gave the bedside railing a playful slap. “You'll be singing horribly again by sunup, I'll bet.” He turned, placing a warm hand on her shoulder. “I'm going to go grab a shower myself. Then I'll be back.”

She vaguely heard his shoes against the floor as he left, but it was a peripheral sort of thing, lost to the eclipse of Derek. Breathing. Sort of speaking.

“Hi,” she said. “You're doing really great!”

When he rolled his gaze to her, she came to realize Mark's slightly stoned assessment was a bit off. A lot off. Derek was on a lot of painkillers. A lot. A dump truck full. Mountains of them. He didn't seem to have much motor control at all, and though his gaze did eventually find her, it took the most lackadaisical path she'd ever seen. No wonder he didn't hurt. He was on a Technicolor trip in la la land made possible only by a close sister of heroin.

A fist closed around her chest and squeezed, but she ignored it. He was alive.

He pulled the mask down to his chin, where it rested in the crook of his neck. His grip was weak and pawing, made with awkward fingers that he didn't quite seem to know how to operate after having his brain disconnected from his muscles for so long. His hand lay discarded, still clasped over the cup of the mask as though he didn't have the energy to move it again. Vapors curled from the lip of the mask, and he breathed noisily.

After a moment of preparation, he croaked at her, “How are you?”

A bark of disbelief skipped from her lips. “I'm not even sure where it's safe to touch you, and you want to know how I am? Me?”

“Won' hurt me,” he slurred, his voice a bare thread of sound against the quiet. “M on good stuff.”

“Excellent stuff,” she agreed, wiping tears away. It was all right. She didn't want him to feel. He deserved some peace.

“Love you,” he said.

She bit her lip, leaning forward to brush his face with her palm. “You should leave the mask on,” she said, her voice breaking. “God, I love you, too. I love you, Derek. I saw him shoot you, and I thought you were going to die, but you didn't. You didn't die, and now you're here. Breathing. And talking. And being alive to tell me that you love me. It's perfect, but you need to put the mask back on, because if you keep talking, I'll never want you to stop even though it's got to be killing your throat. Plus, your pulse oximeter is going to start whining soon because there's no way you're getting enough air on your own yet.”
His eyelids drooped, and he stared at her like he'd arrived at his own private nirvana. “Y'babble a lot,” he said. He fell asleep between one blink and the next. Like he had originally planned to open his eyes again, but his brain had received a busy line signal when it tried, and he didn't have the energy to hit redial.

Even when she pulled his hand away from the oxygen mask and resettled the mask over his nose and mouth, he didn't wake up, and she was unable to stop herself from staring as she watched him inhale and exhale. All on his own. The disconnected ventilator had been turned off, and it rested underneath his heart monitor. Unused. Done.

She let him ride the lull for minutes upon minutes, marveling at the wondrous process of his respiration. His soft sighs were a gift greater than any kidney-in-a-jar or diamond or even a house on his land for just the two of them. Better than any promise or heartfelt declaration. He was alive. She pulled his hand through the side rail of the bed and held it. She stroked his thumb and the lines of his palm, keeping him safe and close while he slept.

When Nurse Kent returned an hour later, she frowned apologetically, carrying one of the special heart-shaped pillows they gave to recent bypass patients to hold onto while they coughed. “He needs to start clearing his lungs,” she said.

Meredith's grip on his palm tightened. “Can't it wait?” Meredith asked. “Please?”

The nurse shook her head, and placed her hand against Derek's shoulder. “Dr. Shepherd. I need you to wake up now,” Charlotte said in a commanding voice.

He opened his eyes, confusion and disorientation evident in his gaze. She checked his vitals and his pupil response while she talked at him, explaining what she was seeing and doing as she did so. She didn't need to explain much, since Derek already knew what it all was for.

She handed him the pillow. He took it with weak, shaky fingers.

“I want you to hold onto this pillow as tightly as you can, and then cough,” the nurse said. “It'll clear your lungs, and reduce the chances of post-operative pneumonia. Okay? When you're ready.”

Meredith bit her lip. He was too stoned to be thinking straight about how bad this was going to be, or too confident in how stoned he already was, or he would have hesitated more.

The results were immediate and torturous for her to watch. Air chuffed out of his mouth. All things considered, it was a weak cough. Barely in the realm of coughing, and more so in the territory of heavy, forced breathing, but devastating all the same. His breath clipped off into a weak, upset cry of pain, muffled by the oxygen mask, but not unlike what she'd heard from the promenade when he'd been busy dying on catwalk. His eyes watered, and tears spread down his face, but what was worse was that the sudden agony made him breathe hard and fast, more so than his recently broken sternum was willing to put up with, and the cycle devolved into a vicious stream of unending pain.

The nurse encouraged him, told him to hold onto the pillow as tightly as he could, but by the end of the wave, he lay against the bed, spent and pain-hazed, shaking, and looking like if this meant living, he wanted to die no matter what he'd promised.

Nurse Charlotte gabbed at him with enthusiasm, assured him that he'd done a great job and wouldn't have to do it again for a while. He remained silent, either unwilling or unable to speak again. The nurse took the heart pillow and stashed it beside his bed, again telling him how great he'd done, and then she left them alone in her destructive wake.
“It’s okay,” Meredith whispered. “You'll feel better in a minute. Please.” Please, feel better.

He found the willpower to move his hand, and she watched as he tapped the button that would give him more morphine with bloodless, shaky fingers. Then he tapped it again. And again. He stopped after the sixth click, but whether it was because he was satisfied with the results or because he’d given up on ever receiving enough to make him feel better, she didn't know. She glanced at the IV and noticed there was nothing left for him in the dispensary, though the last little bit that remained dripped down the tube as she watched.

The crushing silence killed her. He'd been too willing to speak despite the discomfort before, and now he wasn't saying a word, which meant bad, horrible things. “I'm sorry,” she soothed. If it hurt him to talk, she would go to hell for him to stay mute. She stroked his cheek, and on a whim, decided no amount of him being breakable right now would stop her from climbing into the bed with him.

She needed to feel him against her, and maybe, just maybe, her body would help him. He could use the warmth, if nothing else, and if it was truly a bad thing to do, Charlotte could yell at her later.

Meredith folded her petite body between the length of him and the railing, careful as though she were dealing with a china doll not to jar him or rest her weight on any part of him. Dodging all the monitors and wires was a feat, but she managed after a close call with one of the drainage tubes. He didn't move as she melded herself around him and propped her chin against her wrist against her elbow. She stared at the lines of his forehead, deep runnels of pain carved into his skin. The fog of his tortured exhales buffeted the oxygen mask.

He seemed stuck in that place, in agony, unable to move or speak, for eons. A stretch of time well beyond reasonable and delving into cruel and unusual passed, taking moment after moment hostage. She never wanted Charlotte to come back. Not ever.

“It’s okay,” she whispered against his ear, caressed his temples. Anything to help him.

After what seemed like years, he moved his head and looked at her. His stoned, blue eyes tore holes into her, and his fingertips brushed the fine hairs on her arm like a whisper against flesh.

“M fine,” he mumbled behind the mask, his voice weaker and a lot more lackluster than before, but when she was a mere inches away from his face, she had no trouble hearing him. “Good 's new inafeweeks,” he said.

She knew it would be quite a bit more than a few weeks, but it was a beautiful lie, and she let him swindle her with it voluntarily. Take me for a ride, Derek. “Promise?” she begged.

His sigh fogged up the mask. “Promised I wouldn' die, didn' I?”

She kissed him where his nose met his forehead and lingered there, hovering, wanting. His eyes closed, and he lay there, still like death, but alive. Alive. A breath carried his mind away from her, and his body started to relax out of the pain. His face tilted into her body, slowly at first, gaining momentum as his consciousness lost traction, but at the last moment before free fall, he forced his eyes open and stared.

“'K now?” he said.

He was such a big, dumb, self-sacrificing idiot, she decided with a sob that was a laugh. “Shut up, and go to sleep, Derek. I'm okay.”

She hadn't even finished the sentence when she realized he'd already obeyed. Every muscle
loosened, and the suffering left his face like a tide escaping back to the sea.

She didn't move for hours, allowing herself to linger in his fib, to pretend it was any night, that he was fine, that this was their marital bed, and that he was spent, resting against satin sheets after he'd loved her for a thousand, endless sighs, resting for no other reason than she'd worn him out with pleasure. The idyllic fantasy washed the backs of her eyelids in color and warmth and light, and she basked. He was completely fine. It was the sort of hyperbole she needed right now.

“Lay your head, man,” she told the sleeping piece of her soul, borrowing a quote from one of her favorite books. “It's a long time 'til dawn.”

Derek was okay. Would be okay. But a little bit of extra fantasizing never hurt.
Derek Shepherd experienced life sort of like a camera. Many times when he opened his eyes, the world had changed in his absence, and allowing the new kaleidoscope to come into focus robbed him of his energy. After a long, dazed battle, he would sometimes get a clear picture, and then snap. The lights would bleed out as the flash bulb went dark.

When he was asleep, sometimes, halcyon unawareness kept him in the dark, and that was all right. Sometimes, though, he dreamed.

When he was awake, the space behind his eyes was fuzzy and flowing all the time, like somebody had turned a faucet on in his brain. His bladder felt like it was always full, like he was always in the process of peeing. Talking was a knife of agony that slit his esophagus, and each syllable he bargained for exacted its price on his broken sternum. Breathing hurt as a simple act, but beyond that, the incisions where the surgical drainage tubes entered his body throbbed when he inhaled or moved or spoke. Even with the nurses harassing him to shift positions, he was unable to rest on his stomach, and his back muscles ached from being overburdened.

Asleep or awake. He wasn't sure which was worse. He did know that he didn't want to cough again. Not ever. He wasn't sure he'd be able to make himself do it when the nurse asked him the next time, even though he knew it was a necessary evil.

While regrettably not indestructible, he'd never been prone to sickness or injury, and he'd never even considered the fact that he might be a coward about discomfort. Or unwilling to go through the pain he sometimes subjected on his patients. But...

*Picture your spine and ribcage like the spine and covers of a brand-new paperback book,* Derek remembered being told by the local cardio god in one of his earlier days of residency. *When the surgeon has to get at your lungs and heart, the book's pages, he opens the book and lays it flat on the table, pages facing up. And, just like a new paperback, your chest doesn't want to stay open. It wants to stay closed. So, the surgeon uses his very own page holder. Your sternum is cracked in half and pried apart with a sternal retractor, and then it's held that way, forced open, for hours. A patient is going to be feeling like their torso is on fire after they wake up from that, which is why...?*

*Proper pain management is a must,* all of the residents had said in a chorus. Right.

He supposed it was a good sign that he was becoming more aware of how miserable he was, because it meant his body was starting to pull itself out of trauma mode and push itself into healing mode. His brain was no longer wasting energy barring him from reality just to keep him alive in the moment to moment. That coast was clear. Instead, it was figuring out how to use its resources to mend the broken bits instead. To keep him alive in the long term. At least, that's what he tried to tell himself. Pain being good was a difficult truth to sell when he hurt so much.

It took him a while to realize that all this thinking meant he was awake again.

Sound arrived first. A soft, familiar voice hummed against his eardrums to the right. Meredith. That took very little processing. His senses stretched. Somebody walked down a hallway somewhere near, wheeling something large behind him. A wet slopping noise. A janitor mopping? The tinny sound of a radio set on low volume tinkled in the distance, just loud enough for him to identify the lackluster beat of some insipid soft rock station. Quiet voices he didn't know, or couldn't recognize at that volume, hovered somewhere behind that. Nurse station three doors down?
Other senses came alive. New smells drifted by his nose. The dry, ozone scent of the oxygen mask was gone. His nostrils filled with the sharp scent of antiseptic, old rusty blood, sickness, and lingering body odor. His nose wrinkled. Him, he realized with disgust. That stench was him. He reeked, and his eyelids felt gummy from lack of use.

Enter touch. His face felt like it was caked with a thick grease and grime. No obtrusive weight hugged his mouth and nose, at least, but there was still something... Something light. Someone must have exchanged the mask for a nasal cannula while he'd been sleeping. He wiggled his toes. Pleasant neutrality. No cold. Meredith again, he assumed.

Meredith. He wanted... He opened his mouth before his brain really figured out what to do with that thought, and nothing happened. Meredith. He would keep working on that one.

Sight came only after several failed tries. A slit of light breached the darkness, blurry under the wisps of his eyelashes, and then went dark. He tried once more, and the light yawned wider. His dim hospital room resolved before his eyes like a reflection in disturbed water. Messy and disjointed at first. Gaining clarity. Crystal.

Meredith sat by his bed in a rickety chair, an old, familiar book clasped in her hands. Her hair hung flat and clumped into stringy sections against her shoulders, as though she'd let it air dry from wet and then hadn't bothered to brush it. She wore familiar baby blue scrubs with a light purple undershirt and her favorite black Converse sneakers. Puffy circles hugged her eyes, and her pallor seemed almost consistent with freckle-dotted flour, white and unhealthy and stressed.

His fault, he decided, cutting through the cotton in his head. His fault, but his relief at the sight of her made his guilt pale in comparison, and despite it all, he found her beautiful. He stared, unable to do much else, at his literal lifeline.

*I love you. Please, don't die.*

The murmur of her words formed syllables and took meaning as he watched through tired eyes.

“Cohn looked relieved,” she said, running a finger over her ear as she read from the book. Her sneakers squeaked as she wrapped them around the legs of the chair. “I was not kicked again. I said goodnight and went out. Cohn said he wanted to buy a paper and would walk to the corner with me. ‘For God’s sake,’ he said. ‘Why did you say that—’”

His body began to shake when he recognized the words. Meredith. He blinked, and the focus he’d fought so hard for blurred, but not because he was losing to sleep for the fifteenth round in a row. Just... losing to everything.

Her soothing voice stopped. Air whispered as she flipped the page, but she didn't finish Robert Cohn's sentence. “I can't believe I'm doing this,” she muttered at the book, an adorable look of consternation pinching her nose and eyes. “He'll think it's totally stupid—” Her gaze wandered to him. A moment passed. Her expression reddened. “Or he's awake right now, and he's getting a kick out of watching me humiliate myself or whatever.”

“No,” he said, but it was more of a dry gasp of... something. A reply? Or just surviving. Overwhelming need. Confusion. Resonating, unexplained sadness. Denial.

She looked at him, eyes creasing with deep concern. “Do you want some water?”

The thought of putting anything in his stomach right now roiled. He shook his head, wiping at his face with the awkward, disconnected clumsiness of a newborn who didn't know what his hands
were for yet. He wasn't crying. He wasn't.

But she knew he wasn't crying either. She said nothing about it. “It's just after midnight, which I guess makes the book even more appropriate, what with the title or whatever,” she told him instead with a quivery smile. Her fingers brushed the old lettering on the cover, obscuring all but the word 'Sun' on the front, which was barely legible in its own right. The cover had faded after years and years of repeated but gentle abuse. He'd had that same edition since high school.

He closed his eyes, preparing himself for the knife slice of real speech. “From my office?” he said. Pain snaked down his throat and bloomed somewhere deep in his chest. He sounded like a stranger to his ears. Hoarse and haggard and weak.

He heard her shift.

“I found it in your desk,” she said. “I'm sorry I went through it. I know it's your private space and there's secret work stuff in it that I'm not supposed to know about, but I didn't want to go home, not when you're here, and Lexie and Alex are gone, and you've got nothing here to keep yourself occupied, and I was hoping I'd find your iPod or something because it wasn't in your pockets when you got shot, and I swear I didn't look at any personnel evaluations or anything like—”

“Mere, breathe,” he whispered.

“Okay.” She sounded like a small, chastised child, and he hated it.

He remembered leaving the book in his top left drawer. He'd made the decision last month to reread it again and had brought it in from home. He'd been making glacial progress. Sometimes, he would pull it out for a page or two when he couldn't stand the paperwork and needed a break. He'd last read pieces of it only an hour before April had come into his office, drenched in blood that wasn't hers.

He remembered the feel of the cover, soft and worn almost to a state of threadbare defeat, as he had returned it to the drawer. He felt the weight of it leaving his hands. He remembered the knob of the drawer as he closed it. The way his breath tasted in his mouth as he inhaled once. Twice. And then as he went back to the monthly budget report. He remembered everything about the moment. And he didn't know why. Certain details of the day seemed hyper real, immutable.

Dr. Shepherd?

Sir, you shouldn't be here. This hospital isn't safe...


She smiled. “I know. I remembered. From before.”

“Keep reading.”

“Promise you won't tell anyone? I feel like I'm in The English Patient or something, and it's not like I've got a bankable voice talent.”

You do to me. The words bounced around in his head. “Hmm,” he rumbled and closed his eyes. “Please.”

The ache from talking and breathing and being awake spread all over his chest. She seemed to get it. She didn't prod him anymore.
“I love you, Derek,” she whispered. Her chair scuffed along the floor, the loud noise of it deafening in the relative quiet. A soft hint of familiar lavender parted the coiling, unpleasant odors of his dire state. Her fingers touched his face, warm and feather-light, and he felt the soft pull and twist as she parted his hair with a sweep of her palm and splayed fingers. The long tips of her nails soothed his scalp.

He wanted to say it back. I love you. He wanted to tell her how grateful he was that she was there, knowing he wasn't crying, reading his favorite book to him, not pestering him to drink water he didn't want, or remember things he wasn't ready to remember, but then her fingers wandered to his lips, soft and searching, and he didn't have the strength to part them with her in the way.

Round 15. Derek 0, Penetrating Chest Trauma 15. Perfect match.

“Rest your throat,” she said. Then she inhaled, and the story resumed. “Why did you say that about the girl in Strausburg? Didn't you see Frances?”

He listened until somewhere in the middle of chapter three, when Jake spoke of his injuries in the war, before the camera lost focus and left him blind in the dark.

“Derek Shepherd, I am never speaking to you again,” his little sister screeched as the door slammed shut behind her. Right in his face. A brand new, hand-drawn 'No Brothers Allowed Beyond This Point' banner stared him in the nose with its ugly block lettering, leaving him a battered island in the cluster of doors. Alone and tired.

He sighed and wiped at his busted lip. “Amy, come on. Don't be a brat.”

Something hard slammed against the door, and the whole thing rattled on the frame. “I am not a brat!”

“You're being a brat,” he said.

“My life is over because of you,” she wailed. “Go away. I hate you.”

“Your life is over?” He snorted. “Yours?” He raked his hand through his tangled hair and sighed, trying to ignore the slight wheeze that accompanied his exhale. He had a headache. He felt dizzy. Really, he just wanted to lie down and let his ribs unkink and his bones stop throbbing. He looked one door to the left, to the welcoming siren call of his bed, where he could crawl under the covers and die of embarrassment, but...

Footsteps echoed on the stairs, muffling when they hit the cream-colored runner in the upstairs hall, and Derek heaved a sigh. Great. Just great. She'd tattled, too. Though, he didn't really know what he expected from her. She was just a baby.

A warm hand connected to a strong wrist cupped and squeezed his shoulder. “You want to tell me why your sister called me at work sobbing so hard I could barely understand her?” said his dad in a deep, lord-what-now tone that he reserved only for the last few fights and scuffles of the day. “And why you look like a refugee?”

Derek rolled his eyes as the watch around his father's wrist caught the light. It was a handsome Rolex imitation that made his father look like a well-to-do lawyer or something, completely not his style, but Mom had gotten it, and Dad never took it off.

“Apparently,” Derek said, “Amy's life is over.” He squinted at the door, as if he could somehow burn it to ash with his stare, but it mostly just made his face hurt more.

Dad frowned and rapped on the door. “Bean,” he said. “You want to tell me what this is about?”
For a long time, the space behind the door remained silent, and Derek wondered if perhaps she’d decided to go on another one of her pouting, silent, drama queen sprees. The kind that always made the small household about as fun to live in as sleeping on a bed of tacks. He hated girls sometimes. Hated.

Another thump resounded from behind the door. The door opened, revealing Amy, tears streaking down her pale, cherubic face. Her eyes were puffy and red and tortured, and her long brown hair was scraggled and snarled like a Medusa in training.

“He didn’t show up, but he promised he’d help, Dad. He promised! Derek, you promised!” she said. She sniffled.

His dad glanced at Derek, perplexed. Derek shrugged. “Who did what now?” his father said.

“Derek! He blew me off!”

Hot knives of anger slipped behind Derek’s heart. “I didn't blow her off,” Derek said. “I heard some guys in the locker room after phys ed planning a prank. I swear, I only meant to—” He swiped a hand at his stinging eyebrow. Broken pieces of newly forming scabs came back with his hand. “I got held up.”

“You promised to help me with my science fair project, Derek. You promised, and now it’s ruined! I didn’t even place. My display wasn’t complete because you were supposed to bring the—”

He winced. “Oh, crap. The baking soda.”

“Yes, the baking soda!” she screeched.

His dad looked between the two of him, deep blue eyes worried. “Amy...”

“No,” Amy insisted. “I told Jenny that my big brother was going to help, and then he didn’t show, and they all laughed at me. My life is ruined.”

“Bean...” Dad said.

Her lip quivered. A brush fire of red splotches crawled across her skin. “No! You always take his side! It's not fair.”

Dad turned to Derek. “Why don't you go downstairs?”

“Dad, come on,” Derek said. “Just because I couldn't get there in time—”

“It's Tuesday. You were supposed to watch her immediately after school, regardless of whatever plans you two made,” Dad said. “She's an eight-year-old child, Derek. She can't be alone. As it is, I had to come home early from work, and I left Peter managing the store by himself.”

“Yeah,” Amelia snapped. She crossed her arms over her chest, petulant. “You were supposed to watch me.”

Dad and Amelia both stared at him. A lump formed in Derek’s throat. “Fine,” he growled. He dropped his book bag and his saxophone case in the hallway and left.

Round 16.

He knew Meredith was asleep before he opened his eyes. The raucous sound of her snoring hit his ears like a running vacuum cleaner. He listened. Enjoyed wouldn't be the right word. Neither
would disliked. He listened, and it helped.

When his eyelids parted, he found her draped over his bed railing, a sack of gangly, discarded limbs and a waterfall of messy, golden hair. Her hand rested by his ear, as though she’d reached to touch him and didn't have the energy for the last inch before exhaustion took her hostage.

The room was dark and still. He had no idea what time it was, or how long they'd been there, not that it was ever light, or that he ever knew. *It's just after midnight,* she'd said, but he wasn't even sure what day she'd meant. Had it been only one day? Eternity.

The cardiac intensive care unit was an interior wing and had no windows, and the clock hung on the wall behind him, not in front. Fix that. He knew from countless times walking past, buried in post-op charts or paperwork. More paperwork lately. Less post-ops. In the recent weeks, he would look because he had a headache, and he wanted to know how much longer it would be before he could go home and be with his wife instead of read proposals.

He'd looked in the morning. *The* morning. As he'd made his meandering sweep through the hospital, after the alarm had been sounded. His mind's eye saw the wall clock ticking the seconds away as he moved toward neurology, blurry, but real, like he could reach out and rip the second hand right off the face of it...

*Siri, you shouldn't be here. This hospital isn't safe.*

*I know it's not safe here. That's the point. This hospital isn't safe.*

Her snoring ceased. She snuffled, and then her breaths evened out again, still in the clutches of sleep. A watch hugged her wrist as she twitched with dreaming, but he couldn't get his tired eyes to focus on something so close to his face.

*Do. Not. Die.*

He remembered her hand, pressing into his wound as she begged him. The watch had been on her wrist, then, too. *Derek, stay awake,* she'd said. He'd hurt and wanted to sleep, and she wouldn't let him. She wouldn't let him, and now he was here. Half alive.

*You don't recognize me, do you?*

*Mr. Clark. Sorry. There's a lot going on here.*

“Mere,” he said.

She didn't budge. He reached with his right hand, arm fettered only by the blood pressure cuff, and touched her face. Her hair parted between his fingertips, soft and slightly tangled.

He tried again. “Mere, wake up.” Economizing words was an art, and he overpaid. A vise clenched around his chest and squeezed until he teared, but like she'd been shocked with a cattle prod, she snapped awake.

Her hand whipped to her face to scrape away a collection of sticky drool, and she almost fell backward. The chair squawked as she pinwheeled.

“I'm up. What is it? Are you okay? Do you need another blanket? Does it hurt?” she blurted before she really had any sense of what was going on. She blinked and swallowed and blinked some more, peering around as if she didn't know which direction the 911 page she hadn't received had come from.
“You should go to an on-call room.”

Silence. She scrubbed her face with her hands. “You don't want me here?”

“I do,” he said. Please, please, stay. “But your neck...” The words took the vise in his chest and set it on fire.

Her damaged expression melted, and he closed his eyes, breathing, existing. A stabbing sensation poked under his ribcage with each heartbeat. Quiet, now, his body whispered, deep in the roots of every sinew and pore. Quiet, before I break.

The air moved and whooshed as she resettled in the chair. She sniffled, a wet sound from the gut that left him heartbroken. The bed railing shifted as her fingers wrapped around it. Her palms brushed the metal. Back and forth.

“I don't think I can sleep alone,” she confessed, her voice tiny.

I have a situation. You should go someplace safe so you don't get hurt.

I'm already hurt.

His body shuddered. The room was much too small for a cot, not without impeding any staff member who was trying to monitor him. He knew he should argue, because she would wake up in pain in the morning. Knew he should. Couldn't. Wouldn't.

You hurt me when you decided to kill my wife...

“Okay,” he said. His voice sounded shaky and broken. He reached for the morphine button and slept.

His father found him sitting alone in the kitchen, staring at the small oak dinette table. Derek pushed the salt shaker with the pepper shaker to the edge of the table, and then reversed, in a solemn game of spice hockey.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” Dad said as he sat down in the nearest chair. He caught the shakers in his big hands and took them away, forcing Derek to look up.

The white, frothy curtains billowed in the cool, spring air. A siren passed by outside, but the intrusion was an ephemeral one. It was New York. There were always sirens. Derek sighed. “Some stupid seniors decided it would be fun to see if they could get Casey Whitmore to dress up for the prom. They were going to drench her with a water hose and take pictures. I heard them talking, Dad. I swear.”

Not that it mattered, much. Casey didn't even know he existed. He sat next to her in Geometry, and she'd never once looked at him except to pass papers across the row when the teacher handed them out.

He sighed, waiting for the lecture about responsibility. The one that his father always capped with tired cliches, like the pen is mightier than the sword, and all that. Every time he and Mark came home with new scrapes and bruises that Mark had invariably conned him into getting, his father gave them that one, as if it would somehow stick if he repeated it just one more time. But the lecture never came.

His father nodded as a serious, stern look came over his face. He stretched across the table and gently thumbed Derek's split lip. Derek flinched. “You want to tell me what happened?” his father
Derek shrugged. “I told them to leave her alone. She's in my class, Dad. She's just a sophomore. She would have been crushed.”

“And they hit you?”

Derek looked down at the table, picking at the place mat.

“I'm surprised Mark didn't join in,” his father said.

“Mark is in detention for fighting already. He wasn't there.”

The chair rumbled as Dad leaned back and sighed. “Should I be expecting a call from school for you, too?”

“No,” Derek said.

The janitor had found them before a teacher had. Rolling around in the dirt by the baseball dugouts. Clawing. Snarling. You're a good kid, Shepherd. Don't let me catch you fighting again, the old man had said as Derek had picked bits and pieces of sod out of his hair and spat blood to the ground. His cheeks reddened as he thought about it. A good kid. That's all anybody ever thought he was. Even bloody and cut up by violence like a common thug.

“Nobody is ever going to take me seriously,” Derek said, and then he looked at his father. “Are they?”

Dad sighed. “Der, I know that right now, you feel just the opposite, but some day, young man, you're going to rule the world.”

“Right,” Derek said.

“So, do you like this girl? This Casey?”

He frowned. “It doesn't matter.”

“Derek...” His father wilted with what had to be pity.

Derek clenched his fists. “I don't want to talk about it, Dad. I've had enough humiliation for one day.”

Derek woke deep in the bowels of an MRI machine, only vaguely remembering them telling him he needed tests. Checking Cristina's work or something. Making sure he didn't drop dead because she'd missed a stitch. Residents didn't do the sort of surgery that had saved him unsupervised. They simply didn't.

The narrow tunnel hugged his body too close. He couldn't move, and that made him claustrophobic. With a deep breath that made him wish he hadn't bothered, he forced himself to be still. It would be over, soon, and then the thunderous banging noises of the machine would stop. He tried to pretend it didn't sound like gunfire.

Seconds passed as his father considered him. “Let me show you something,” he said. He pushed back from the table, motioning for Derek to stay. Dad left the kitchen, heading for an unknown destination somewhere in the small house. His heavy footsteps clumped away into muffled, diffuse thuds. When he returned, he held a dark brown book in his hands.
His father pulled his chair around and sat next to Derek, close enough that the spicy smell of his familiar aftershave tickled Derek's nose. His father opened the book, a battered, musty photo album, and flipped through the yellowing, sun-damaged pages. The page came to rest on an old sepia photo with sheared edges and a long-faded, illegible date written in the white margins around it. A skinny, scrawny boy with black, frizzy hair stared back at Derek, frozen in time, as he held a trout and his cobbled-together fishing pole up for the camera's inspection.

“Just so you know,” Dad said, “I don't show this to people. Not even your mother.”

“Who is that?” Derek said. He touched the page, careful to avoid leaving fingerprints. The boy seemed familiar in a vague sense, sort of like Derek himself, but different. A broader nose, a wider forehead, eyes more deeply set...

His father laughed. “That's me, Der. Back when I was your age.”

“No way,” Derek said. His voice cracked and went high falsetto in his excitement. He clamped his mouth shut. Hot blush spread across his face and his ears, and he diverted his gaze.

“I look at you and I see myself, Der,” his father said. He squeezed Derek's shoulder. “You're young. Your body is changing. You feel alone. You feel like nobody understands you, particularly in this house, surrounded by women. But in a few years, I swear. You'll look back on this day and laugh at it. We Shepherds are always late bloomers, but you have great things to look forward to. Honest.”

Derek stared. His father had a broad, rugged face with a perpetual five-o'clock shadow that made him look distinguished and weather-worn. Laugh lines hugging his eyes made his face look like it was owned by a mischief maker. He smelled like cut leather and cedar and experience.

“I wish it would happen now,” Derek said. He couldn't imagine anybody ever trying to hit his dad.

“Well, you know what they say about that, don't you?”

“What?”

Dad grinned. “Good things come to those who wait.”

Derek rolled his eyes. That one was worse than the pen is mightier than the sword. “Dad...”

“I couldn't resist. I'm sorry.” He chuckled, deep and low and soothing, and then bumped his hip against Derek's. “Now, go get your sister. I have to go back to work, and you're going to help me make up the time I just lost to come referee this mess.”

“Can't we just leave her?” Derek said.

“I wish, but your mother would skin me when she gets home with the girls if she finds Amelia sobbing in the house by herself. Perhaps if we make her smile in the display window, she'll attract some customers.”

“I have to clean up first,” Derek said.

“Your mother moved the antiseptic to the medicine cabinet upstairs.”

“Okay,” he said, and he left to patch his wounds.

The gurney came to a stop in the hallway, and the orderly left him there, parked out of the way of
foot traffic. Why? The sharp hallway fluorescent lights made the air too bright. Even when he closed his eyes, he saw a blaze of flesh-colored light through his eyelids, and he just didn't want to be there. In the hallway. Where people would see him and want to try talking to him.

The mere idea of talking, of holding some sort of fluent conversation, made him nauseated.

Mr. Clark...

Shut up. No talking. You're not the man here.

His body had begun to throb in time with his pulse, along his ribs and underneath them. He breathed, except breathing made it worse. He tried to slow down, to even himself out and relax, but the rhythmic stabs to his side and his lung made him want to pant instead. The vicious catch-22 snapped its iron jaws shut around him. The agony wasn't loud and boisterous like a sudden trauma, like a gunshot. It was malignant, and festering, and it burned him in a quiet, hypnotic blaze, whittling him down every time he tried to inhale.

I'm the man. I told my wife I would be.

He wanted it to end. He wanted to go back to his nice, dark room, and hurt. By himself. Or with Meredith. But that was it.

I'm the man. And a man looks after his wife. But I didn't. I let you decide that she should die. I wasn't a man then. But I'm a man, now.

Whispers interrupted his suffering, and he realized, then, why the orderly had left him. He would be receiving VIP service. A familiar face greeted him as she exited the imaging room behind her. She wasn't a cardio-thoracic surgeon. He had no idea why she'd been overseeing the post-operative review of his innards, but couldn't bring himself to feel anything other than comfort at the fact that she, of all people, had taken a personal interest.

“Am I still in one piece?” he asked. His words cracked apart over the rocks on the air. His war torn throat made him sound like he was spitting up dry gravel instead of syllables.

Bailey’s hands tightened around his charts, and the way her face reflected his pain like a cool plate of mirror glass scared him. He began to wonder in the intervening silence if his body was a bit more broken than he'd thought.

“You,” she said, booming, almost accusatory, but then her voice broke and fell away, and in that moment, she was very much a vulnerable young woman. Not a Nazi. She reached for his hand and squeezed. “You're a very lucky man, Shepherd.”

Something in her eyes snapped. Somebody else had not been lucky.

It isn't safe here. Somebody has to protect people. From you. Handing down judgments. Like you're god.

“M sorry,” Derek whispered, perhaps wheezed.

Mr. Clark, please—

You don't get to be god.

She wiped her face with backs of her hands. Her lip quivered. “You don't get to be sorry,” she said, but there was no bite in her tone. Only relief. “You get to heal. Your insides are a mess at the
moment, but no more than they should be. Yang did a good job.”

“Hmm,” he said. “D hate to think she'd been taught poorly.”

Bailey laughed.

His gurney started to roll. He stared, blank and throbbing, at her upside down face. She said hello to people in the halls. He heard well wishes, and she shooed more than one person away with a violent sweep of his charts and hissing spitting words. “Don't you have better things to do than gawk?” she said. A few condolences seemed genuine and not born of rubbernecking, but he didn't have the energy to reply or indicate he'd noticed them. They stopped at the elevator, which dinged, and then they were alone again, away from the bustle and crush of activity.

“Drainage tubes...” he said as the elevator started to hum, and his body felt heavier. Going up. Up... “Starting to bother me.”

She moved, slammed her fist on the elevator halt button. Such an abused feature. It was for emergencies. Air whispered as she flipped the blankets back and peeled his gown away from him. Modesty synapses didn't fire. He just lay there, wishing it would stop. It. The burn. If she could make it stop, she could stare at him all day. Her warm hands fiddled with tape and gauze and touched naked skin. He couldn't hold onto the shaky, dry sob that skipped from his lips and made his whole chest want to seize.

Please—

No talking!

She froze. “If this is bothering,” she said in a low, dangerous voice, “I'd hate to see actual pain.” She mumbled something about men with stupid hair, but he couldn't parse it in the bedlam of sharp, jagged sparks her touch had caused.

“Trying to be modest,” he said. His heart wasn't in it. He sounded flat and dour, wheezy even, but she played with him anyway.

Her eyes sparkled despite a sniffle that followed. “Morphine is supposed to make you happy. Not delusional.”

Another gentle touch, and he moaned, panted, and the world turned fuzzy. The slow burn became a conflagration. He shook like some sort of leaf, and he couldn't make himself stop. His muscles tripped and skittered under his skin.

She frowned, referenced his chart, and went back to staring at his naked chest. He didn't move. Couldn't. Done shivering, his muscles locked up. Enough, they said. Stop torturing us. We're raw.

“The incisions around them don't look infected,” Bailey said. He watched the swirly blur of her scrubs as she leaned. “The tubes don't seem occluded or clogged. You're still losing quite a bit of fluid from them, though. I think they're probably going to stay in for a while. You seem to be one of those unlucky people who's really sensitive to chest tubes.”

Great. One of those people.

“Or it could be because you've been shot, and you have a hole in your chest, you damned, stupid fool,” she said, glaring.

He tried to catch his breath and couldn't. She put his gown back together with quick, economized
motions, and pulled the sheet to his chest while he lay there, passive. He didn't want to move again. He felt abraded. Cut to the bone. He didn't want to speak. Or breathe. Or think.

“More morphine?” he said. “Please?” It was the last thing he was going to say for a while. He was done. He raised a weak, shaky hand to his face and wiped away the tears. His palm ran over sharp, endless stubble. He tried not to imagine the skin oil and grime he was getting on his hand.

The elevator resumed, and Bailey moved behind his head again. She stroked his greasy hair as though it were something she always did. He supposed it was, just not with him. She was a mom. And, despite her notorious title, she was one of the most empathetic doctors he'd ever met.

“Shh,” she soothed.

Derek! Hang on; I'm coming!

He closed his eyes. She sang a lullaby. Abject misery gave way to gentle waves.

Two men argued by the cash register with Peter as Derek pushed through the door of his father's large hardware store. The tiny bell above the door chimed, and Amy and his father trudged in after him out of the chilly spring air, but neither Peter nor the unkempt pair looked up from their debate.

The arguing seemed heated but innocuous at first. Like the two men were trying to get a deal, and Peter wasn't budging. One of them was short and skinny, with wispy gray hair. The other was tall, fat, and balding, brown hair swept over his q-tip head in a blatant, obnoxious comb over. They both wore wrinkled suits with crooked ties and scuffed shoes that had seen better days.

“Everything all right here?” Dad asked as he stamped his feet on the welcome mat and passed by the cash register.

Peter shoved his spectacles back against his long, beak nose, and huffed. “Yes, Mr. Shepherd. These men were just leaving.” He glared and crossed his long arms across his chest.

Peter was a tall, lanky man with faint wisps of a red beard permanently stuck to his pointy chin. He worked in the store during the evenings and on the weekends to support his enrollment at Columbia or something like that. Derek had first met him four years ago. They maintained a casual sort of civility, but didn't really like each other. Much.

The two men looked appropriately cowed, and Derek's father nodded, leaving them and Peter behind at the register as he followed Derek and Amelia to the back of the store toward his office, where he had been working on the ledgers. The arguing renewed and escalated before they'd even reached the end of the aisle. Peter raised his voice. The fat man and the short man started to gesticulate.

Dad stopped and turned. “Hey,” he called as the short one pushed Peter, a menacing look on his face. “Hey,” his father said again, when his first interjection failed to halt the scuffle. It was his warning voice. The one he used when he was about the break up a fight between raucous siblings or rowdy brothers-in-spirit.

A loud crack and a thump followed. The roar was the sort of sound Derek had only ever heard in the movies and on television, so he didn't connect it with anything real at first, even with his ears ringing, even with his nose burning from the powder smell. Not a gunshot. Just a crash. Not a body on the floor. Not a robbery.

“Derek, take your sister and hide,” his father whispered. He pushed them back behind an outcropping covered with handwritten advertisements. Oil-based paints. Half off.
Derek's eyes widened when he saw a puddle of red spreading out from underneath Peter's body. His heart started to pound when he saw the gun. A pistol or something. Silver, with a dark handle and a long snout. Sort of like Dirty Harry's make-my-day revolver, except this wasn't a Clint Eastwood movie. There was no clickety-clack of a film projector behind him, telling him the credits would roll in a few hours. The man holding the gun was not a police officer.

And his dad was walking toward him. Toward it. Toward the gun.

"Derek," Amy hissed, but he covered her mouth with his hand and pinned them back behind the shelf as he tried to stop himself from panicking. Empty display boxes fell on top of them, and he couldn't breathe. He couldn't breathe. The office sat behind them, a mere ten feet away, but he couldn't move. The smell of cut pine and cypress nauseated him. What was Dad doing? Why was he—

"Hey!" the man with the gun said, the taller fat one, as Derek's father leaned over Peter's body. Shorty pawed through the open cash register.

His father splayed his hands, and he held them in the air. His wedding ring flashed in the fading sunlight. "Look, I know first aid," he said. "This man needs medical attention. I just want to help—"

The gun waved. Fatty glared. "Back off, asshole."

"Nobody else needs to get hurt," his father soothed. "This man will die. I just want—"

"To help," Shorty spat as he stuffed a roll of tens and twenties into his coat pocket. "Right. I believe my friend said back off."

"No," Fatty said. "I said back off. Asshole."

"All right," Dad said. "All right."

Fatty moved. "Give me your wallet."

"Take it easy," Dad said. He reached into his coat pocket, slow, like he didn't want to spook a horse that was ready to bolt. He withdrew his worn black billfold. "Here. Take whatever you want." He stretched out his hand and held the billfold out for them to take. They grabbed it, but their attention soon wandered.

"What about them?" Fatty waved the gun toward the back of the store. Toward Derek, and his squirming sister. "They got money on 'em?"

"No," Dad said, which was a bald lie. "They're just kids. I didn't give them an allowance this week."

Derek had a small wad of bills in the back pocket of his jeans from the work he'd done over the weekend. They felt thick and heavy, and he started to shake. His sister wouldn't settle down. She bit his hand in her distress, but he winced through it, and then, without even thinking, he wrenched her hard. She stilled, stunned. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't...

Shorty leered. "That's a real nice watch, mister," he said.

"My wife gave it to me," Dad said. "She's expecting me home soon."

"Isn't that sweet," Shorty said. "Give it to me."
Amy twitched and squirmed. “Daddy,” she whined into Derek's hand.

“Please, it's an anniversary gift,” Dad said. “It's not even worth—”

The gun kicked back in Fatty's hand. Derek clapped his hands against his ears, but it was too late to block the noise. His sister, surprised and unsupported, fell to the floor with a wheezy thud. The thunderous crack vibrated deep within Derek's chest. His eardrums, already tortured by the first shot when Peter had fallen, sucked in the sound, and then the world went quiet except for the dull sound of bells ringing over and over and over again in his head. The acrid smell of burnt, smoking powder clawed at the back of his nose and throat.

“—hematoma and a lot of blood in his lungs. The bullet would have chopped his aorta in half if it'd been a millimeter to the left, but I was able to get it out. Teddy and Bailey said the post-op scans look fine. I'd like to remove the drainage tubes and the catheter tomorrow and see if we can get him moving around, but for now, I think rest is really the best thing for him.”

He woke up in the silent bubble between one scream and the next, and so he made no sound at all. The startle made him move his arm to the railing. His heart thudded once, twice, and then eased into a dull march as his mind woke him up. Dreaming. Only dreaming. Vivid thoughts slipped away into a fog. Then he couldn't remember anymore what had terrified him, and after that, he couldn't remember being terrified.

The three women standing next to his bed all turned, except one of the faces wasn't supposed to be there. She'd aged since he'd last seen her, and was now a beautiful young woman, bloomed into adulthood and grace. The gawky, upset teenager he remembered was long gone. She wore her raven-brown hair down over her shoulders, loose and lovely. He hadn't seen her in a long time, he realized. The thought bothered him. It buzzed around his head like a gnat. Had he even attended her medical school graduation? Then his concerns became immaterial, because he figured out what was really going on.

“Amelia,” he said. “You're in my head.”

The figment of Amelia grinned. “Wow, you really are stoned, aren't you?”

Cristina made a dry, deep sound in her throat, covering her lips with her hand, and for a moment, he thought they weren't going to let him in on The Big Joke. It was Meredith who leaned close and whispered, “Amelia got here a few hours ago from LA.” Her voice sounded humoring, as if it was something that she'd already told him, as if they'd already had this conversation.

Had they?

He struggled to process this new information. “But...”

“I was visiting Addison,” the figment said before he had a chance to tell her she worked in New York, and therefore could not have been arriving from Los Angeles. The skin around her eyes ticked as she lied to him. *I'm not using anymore. I swear.* He'd learned to recognize her untruths. But when he blinked, the lie didn't seem to matter anymore.

He relaxed back into the pillow, enjoying the way his brain seemed to whirl like a slushy in a mixer in his head. The three women stared back at him, goggling like fish. Or maybe he imagined them goggling. It seemed odd, regardless.

“Bailey gave me more morphine,” he informed them.

Meredith snorted. “Yes. Yes, she did.”
“It makes you eu-euphoric, you know.”

Meredith kissed his forehead. “It sure does.”

“Too many u's.” He sighed. “Mere. Mere, I need to tell you something.”

She frowned. “What? What is it?”

“I don't think I can have sex in the elevator tonight,” he said. More like his brain regurgitated. But he did recall something about an elevator. Or was that from before?

Meredith's eyes widened. Maybe he'd been wrong.

“Rain check?” he said.

Cristina rolled her eyes. “Mere, you have got to record this so he can see it later. It's better than television.”

“It's a leg legit.” He struggled. “Legitimate. It's a question.”

Amelia smirked. “Well, that was worth the trip.”

The swirl behind his eyes sucked him back into thick mental taffy. He closed his eyes and couldn't open them. He couldn't remember why he didn't want to fall asleep. “I proposed there,” he said. And then he slept.

For a moment, neither his dad nor the two men at the register moved. A can of paint thinner had tipped in the commotion, and the glug, glug, glug of the liquid as it surrendered to the floor broke the silence. But everything seemed fine.

Then his dad stumbled, caught his hand on the counter top, collapsed to his knees, and went down like a bag of wet cement next to Peter.

Amelia started to scream and wouldn't stop.

“Shit!” Shorty said. “Take his watch, and let's go.”

“Dad,” Derek yelled. “No.” The world slipped away. He didn't care about the gun or the two men, who looked at the new body on the floor like it was a minor inconvenience and nothing more. Didn't care about his screaming sister.

The space between him and them closed as his strides ate the floor tiles. Another shot cracked in the loud space, and Derek felt something zip by his ear. Plaster exploded from the wall behind him in a shower of dust and bits.

“Jesus, Ron. You really want to shoot a stupid kid?” Shorty said. He grabbed the gun from his friend and pocketed it. “Just take the guy's watch, and let's go.”

“Dad,” Derek repeated. He slid to the ground beside his father, who blinked and stared at the ceiling, bell rung by the unexpected trauma. He shook his dad's shoulder. “Dad, Dad. Dad!”

Fatty leaned down and grabbed his father's wrist. His dad opened his mouth, tried to speak. No words came out. The man didn't listen, anyway. The watch came loose from his dad's slack wrist, gold flashing under the light of the counter top display case, and then the two men ran into the street.
Wheels screeched against the pavement, and then...

Silence.

“Dad,” Derek said, shifting to find purchase amongst the gore-y chaos on the floor. “Dad, please.”

Amy slipped on the paint thinner, skidded, and came to an awkward rest at their dad’s other side. She kicked the container by accident and it skipped to the side. There was a twisted, battered hole in the side of the can.

For a moment, his dad lay there, eyes open, breathing, stunned. Then he blinked. “Are you and Amy okay?” he asked, his voice thick and strange, like there was a weight in his chest that shouldn’t be there. He didn’t look at them. He stared at the ceiling. He fumbled, unseeing, at his coat. The first button unlatched.

“Yes,” Amy said, her tone on the razor sharp edge between barely held together and hysterical. “We’re fine.”

“Good,” his dad said. He blinked again. His face tilted to the side, like he didn’t have the energy to hold his head up anymore.

That was when Derek saw the blood. The last button on his father’s coat came free. His father’s white shirt, hidden by the dark wool of his duster, had been saturated in mere seconds.


His father found Derek's hand and squeezed it. His grip was really strong. And warm. That had to be a good sign. Right? “Put your hand here,” his father said. Derek bit his lip when his father guided his fingers to the break in the skin on the soft part of his belly, and the wet, ruined flesh and gore beneath it. It was like touching shredded beef, and Derek's gag reflex kicked in, but his father held on. “Put your palm into it.”

“Like this?” Derek said, pressing down hard. His eyes watered as he swallowed and choked. He would not throw up. He would not. Throw up. No.

His father groaned and closed his eyes, panting. “Yes,” he said after a moment. “Peter. Is he all right?”

Derek glanced to his right, taking quick breaths through his mouth. If he didn't breathe through his nose, he couldn't smell it as much. It. The gaping wound in his father's abdomen. Peter stared back at him, his eyes not focused on anything in particular. He was just gone. Like a wax mannequin save for the gaping hole in his chest and the spreading blood slick on the floor.

“His eyes are open,” Derek said. “He’s not moving.”

“All right,” Dad gasped. He closed his eyes.

The ringing in Derek's ears subsided, replaced by the dull shriek of panic. Do something. Do something, do something! “Amy,” Derek snapped. “Amy. The phone. In the office. Call 911.”

She stared at Dad, her hands tugging desperately at the lapel of his jacket. “But...”

“Amy, go,” Derek said. “He needs help, and I can't move my hand.”
Her eyes widened, and she said nothing, shell-shocked as she turned away. Her reluctance to leave turned into a frantic dash.

“Dad,” he said. “Wake up. Stay awake.”

His dad stared at Derek, blank, a fever-bright shimmer in his eyes. Between them was a wall of panting and struggle and war, and neither spoke.

Derek dared to look at the wound. His fingers clenched. Blood and gore spattered his hand, bits that weren't supposed to be on the outside of the body, but he had no idea what. His stomach flip-flopped. “Am I doing this right?”

“Derek, listen to me,” his father slurred. “This is very important.”

Derek's heart pounded. His father's color faded from ripe peach to gray as he watched, and little dots of sweat collected at the edges of his forehead. The crinkles around his eyes, usually long lines of laughter, had become a latticework of pain.

Derek swallowed. “Dad?”

“I'm sorry.”

“Sorry for what, Dad?”

His dad took a breath. His body relaxed. A light filled his eyes, like he was staring at a Christmas tree in the dark of night, after the last ornament had been put on. And then he died.

“The ambulance is com—” Amy came to a halt somewhere behind them. “Dad? Daddy!”

“Wake up. Derek!”

His eyes opened to agony. Flames licked along his incision, and the vise in his chest squeezed so tight he could barely breathe. “No,” he gasped as the fire engulfed him, and the distant echoes of ambulance sirens wailed in his head. Not ephemeral. Not. His stomach churned, and nausea twisted his vision.

Derek, listen to me. This is very important.

This is very important.

Very important.

“Derek, wake up!”

Important.

He blinked. The sirens stopped. Meredith's arms wrapped around him.

I'm sorry.

He clutched her like a shield.
“Okay. They're going to find Teddy,” Meredith said as she raced back to the gurney where Derek lay. “It's gonna be okay. It's gonna be okay. It's gonna be okay.”

“Kiss me,” he said, and so she did.

Touching him this way was the first kind thing she'd done to him in what seemed like years, and it made her want to sob, but she refused herself the luxury and pushed the feeling back down where he wouldn't have to see it or hear it. Not after what he'd just been through.

She'd had to hit him more than once. Stay awake, she'd said. Over and over. Yelling. And then she'd had to watch him moan when she and Cristina and April had forced him to get up. Forced him to climb into the wheelchair that Cristina had managed to scrounge from a nearby hallway. Forced him to stay awake and talking. Forced him onto the gurney in the operating room. Forced him over and over to make his body do things he had no reserves or fortitude left to do.

All that movement had been nerve-wracking and horrible on so many levels, because he'd been in agony and making noise, and they hadn't known where the bullet was, but circumstances meant either risking a spinal injury and moving him, or killing him by leaving him on the floor.

The torturous test of endurance hadn't ended with getting him to the operating room, either. After they'd gotten him settled and still on the gurney, they'd had to touch him. Not like a wife touches a husband. Like a doctor touches a victim. Getting things fixed was paramount, and a patient's comfort sometimes took a backseat to that.

Watching him bear all that had been heart wrenching for her because it had left her wondering if those would be his last memories of her.

Memories of her hurting him.

They'd stopped the bleeding, at least, and he'd reached a certain level of stability. He had his eyes open to bare slits, but they were open, and she wasn't forcing him anymore.

She could be kind again, and it made her entire body wilt with relief.

“I'm not gonna die,” he said. “I promise.”

“Good, because that would be the worst breakup ever.” He tried to chuckle, but the results were an explosion of pain across his features, and his shallow breathing sharpened into something frantic. “Sorry, sorry,” she babbled as she reached for his hand. “Sorry!”

She leaned over the table and watched, silent, as he tried to breathe. His lips, pale like chalk, parted. He wasn't breathing through his nose anymore, like he just couldn't get enough air that way. His chest rose and fell as though he were recovering from running up an endless flight of steps. The effort...

Her throat ached.

“It's gonna be okay,” she whispered as he labored. She squeezed his shoulder with her left palm and stroked with her thumb along his deltoid. His skin was cold. Cold, and clammy. Even through her gloves, he felt shivery. And his breathing was getting worse.
Splinters of dread jabbed her soul. His lungs had seemed all right based on her initial triage, but it'd been many minutes since then. Many minutes with a bullet sitting in his chest cavity. Bullets, which traveled in a parabolic path to begin with, did odd things when they hit bones and organs. They ricocheted. They bounced around. She rarely saw victims where a bullet had simply taken a straight line to its resting place. Even if his lungs weren't damaged, there was a bullet stuck behind his breastbone, and it had torn who knew what sort of jagged path through his body once there. Even if the wound wasn't bleeding onto the gurney, he was still bleeding. Inside. The blood didn't have anywhere to go. It would sit there in his chest cavity until he filled up, and then he would die.

“Tell me something,” he said.

She blinked. “Like what?”

“Anything,” he said as he pushed up his eyelids and gifted her with stark blue irises, watery and lit up with agony. “Tell me anything.”

Distract me, he meant. Distract me so I don't have to think about the fact that breathing is like trying to stuff an elephant into the back seat of a Prius.

I'm pregnant was the first pair of words that came to her mind. That would be a pretty big distraction. A coherent sentence formed. I'm pregnant, and we're going to have a baby, Derek. But her brain skidded to a halt just as the syllables reached her lips, ready for launch. I don't want you to be alone if anything should happen to me, he'd said. I don't want it to just be you, he'd said. I'm pregnant was basically giving him permission to kick the bucket, she realized. I'm pregnant was bad. Very bad.

Her fingers clenched, and she couldn't breathe. For just a moment, she couldn't breathe, until she heard him fighting so hard through another inhalation it snapped her out of it. Not breathing when he was trying so hard seemed like waving her house key at a homeless person or something. She couldn't just not breathe.

“Derek,” she said, and then her throat seized, and the world turned blurry. The shiny silver and dull green surfaces of the operating room melded, until she blinked. Wet slivers tore down her cheeks.

She tried to think of something else to say. Anything. All manner of subjects flitted through her head, from the obscure to the inane, but they all seemed like ridiculous things to be discussing with him if this was going to be the last discussion they ever had, and despite his promise, that worry remained behind her heart, clenching harder with every heartbeat as she thought of his chest cavity. Filling with blood.

Her mind churned. He wanted to be distracted. He was maybe dying, he wanted to be distracted, and she had nothing. Nothing except a positive pregnancy test death warrant, and she couldn't get her brain off of it.

“I'm...” she wheezed. The mere thought of speaking was like a mule had kicked her in the gut. She couldn't and wouldn't say the words, but all she could think about was drooling babies and diapers and bottles and sleepless nights and him and her taking turns answering a wailing little person's demands at all hours of the night until both of them were so tired they couldn't think straight but it was wonderful and she couldn't— “God, you'd make such a perfect dad,” she blurted, and the screaming in her head faded to a whisper.

She stroked his bicep as he stared at her, perplexed behind the hazy wall of trauma in his gaze, as if to say, where on earth did that come from? He lay quiet, gasping softly. He blinked, and his
mouth opened and shut and opened again, like he had a million things to say but couldn't think of which one to try first. He settled on, “You think so?”

He peered at her, panting, and she couldn't keep her hands off. She yanked off her gloves with a loud snap and touched him, skin to skin. She wanted him to remember nice things. Nice things that weren't painful or scary or bad. She touched his face and pulled her fingers through his hair. He leaned into her caress, and his breathing slowed, a drop in a massive ocean, but it slowed.

“I know so,” she said as she kissed him again. “I know. I... It's why you can't die. Okay? Besides the fact that I love you, and you just can't, you'd make a perfect dad, and you're not one yet.”

She kissed him, and she tried not to think about how weird it felt, to be kissing him and not have him kiss her in return. She was used to his hands, running through her hair or racing along her spine, cupping her hips or petting her underneath the waistband of her pants, touching her until she felt raw and shivery with love. But Derek's hands lay by his sides, unmoving, his muscles spent. She was used to laughs, and the softness of his breaths hitting her face. But laughing hurt him. She was used to banter and wit, sparkling eyes, and soft moans. Derek Shepherd made the most beautiful moans when he was aroused, low and gritty, deep within his chest.

She cupped his face, and gave as much of that to him as she could. “I love you, Derek,” she whispered. “I love you.”

A soft, exhausted sound rumbled in his throat, and she pulled back, gazing at him. “We should practice more,” he said, wistful.

She grinned. “Maybe in a few hours?”

“I'm game,” he said, his voice weak. “Unless you expect me on top.”

Her laugh faltered when his body hitched. He didn't make any noise, didn't say a word about his suffering, but she heard it all the same. She felt broken on the inside, but she smiled. Made herself smile.

“Teddy will be here soon,” she said. “She will, Derek. It's going to be okay.”

When he picked up his spears for the battle to breathe, she went with him. She laid her hands on him wherever she could that wouldn't hurt him to remind him of her touch, her warmth, hoping it would help somehow, hoping to give him... Something. Only minutes had passed on the clock since Cristina and April had left, but it felt like forever had pulled out a freaking tent and made camp while he struggled.

Where the hell was the cavalry?

His body started to shake, and his head tilted to the side.

“Are you cold?” she said, but he didn't answer. “Derek?” His eyelids drooped, and he still didn't answer. She shook him, and he blinked, dazed. “Derek!” she said. She pulled his hand into hers and squeezed. Hard. She didn't want to hurt him anymore. She didn't. “Okay, Derek. Now, it's your turn. Come on. Tell me something. Anything.”

“I can't breathe.”

“No,” she said. No. Not yet. “No, Derek. Yes, you can. You can breathe.” She tried to show him even breathing, to give him something to match up with, but he couldn't. He stared at her like he was drowning, saw the shore, and knew he couldn't get there before the waves pulled him under.
“Tell me about. The dirty sex. Tonight,” he said.

“The what?” she said, startled by the subject change. She wondered who was attempting to distract whom. She didn't know anymore. Nothing seemed real or right.


She gripped his hand, her muscles so stiff with tension they throbbed with a deep, unrelenting ache. “Well, it's going to be downright skanky,” she assured him. “I bought some really fun underwear last weekend.”

“What kind?”

“Itty bitty lace ones,” she purred, even though her stomach was churning because he was maybe-dying, and they were talking about sex they might not have. “I got whipped cream, too.”

“Pretty skanky,” he agreed. “Where are. We going. To have it?”

“The dirty sex?” she said. His head shook a little as he nodded, breathing, breathing. God, it was so hard to watch him struggling. Stress burbled off her lips in a tight, twisty laugh. She forced herself to smile. “Well, I was thinking we should be creative,” she said. “So, then we can have a kinky, skanky story to tell our horribly embarrassed child one day when we're discussing the glorious days of yore or whatever.”

“Kitchen?” he said.

She shook her head. “That's hardly original, Derek.”

“But it's dirty,” he said on the coattails of an exhale. “Elevator?”

Her jaw dropped. “At the hospital?”

“Where else?”

Thoughts of the elevator, their elevator, made her eyes blur with tears. “I'd really like that,” she said. She leaned forward, breathing in his space as he struggled. She brought her forehead to his and stared him in the eye. Fathomless, suffering blue stared back. “We have a date, Derek Shepherd. I expect you to keep it.”

He laughed, really laughed. The warm sound of it made her entire body vibrate as stress sluiced away, until he wrung out the last syllable of it with shaky, frantic sobs. “I really can't breathe, Mere,” he said. His eyes watered, and the stress piled back into her.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay, shh. Just hold on a few more minutes for me.”

She almost fainted with crushing weight of her relief when the door opened and Cristina returned, followed by April, Jackson, a nurse, and an anesthesiologist she recognized, but only by sight.

“Hold on,” she said, looking back at him. “Where's Teddy, Cristina?” she asked as she stroked his sweaty hair.

“She's not here,” Cristina said.

“Well, if she's not here, who's going to—” Meredith stopped. The chaos spinning in her head splattered into a giant, gooey mess against the windshield of reality. She gripped Derek’s shoulder. Maybe too hard. He didn't complain. “Oh. Oh, god.”
“Yeah,” Cristina said.

Meredith wanted to panic. She wanted to panic, but Derek was lying on a gurney, suffocating by degrees, and there wasn't time. Cristina was a capable, qualified surgeon. Cristina was her person. “I'm pretty sure he's got a hemothorax,” Meredith said. “I don't have my stethoscope, so I couldn't check.”

Derek wheezed. “I'm sure I do.”

“Then I guess we start now,” Cristina said. She clapped her hands. “Let's go, people. Let's move it.” She stared at her crew for a long moment, long enough for Meredith to see the worry in her eyes, and then she went into the scrub room to prepare.


Hours later, Derek was dead, and Meredith collapsed to the floor, screaming. Gary Clark walked past her and exited the room.

Meredith blinked awake, but memories held a noose around her neck for moment after moment. She stared at the floor for the longest time, unable to do much else. The low-backed examination chair Charlotte had given her provided very little support. She'd pushed the back of it into the stack of equipment by Derek's bed and then propped her feet against the bed railing, all so she wouldn't slip and fall if she closed her eyes for a minute.

She couldn't remember when she'd done that. Closed her eyes. But she had. And closed her eyes must have quickly devolved into sleeping, percolating over moments now past. Somewhere. Somehow.

She sighed, raising her head. Her neck hurt. Her knees screamed at her over their abuse. Her mouth felt like paste, and her eyelids wouldn't quite function. Stuck. She wiped the gum and grit away from her eyelashes and swallowed. Then her brain kicked in, and she flinched with rapid, panicky stress. Derek was—

Fine. Sleeping. Quiet. Unaware. And Meredith couldn't help the rickety laugh that wheezed from her lungs. “Getting lunch -Amy” said a scribbled yellow Post-it stuck to Derek's forehead.

Meredith snatched the paper away and crumpled it. She stroked his forehead where the adhesive had been, but couldn't help wandering to his cheek and his chin and his crooked, once-broken nose. His face had gotten fuzzy and sharp over the last thirty-six hours, and she wondered if he'd had time to shave the morning before.

Yeah, I like to say hello to my wife every forty-eight hours. You didn't come home last night.

She vaguely recalled the scrape of his stubble as he'd kissed her, oblivious to the fact that he would be nearly dead in an hour. She'd been oblivious, too. She missed that.

He was more awake, now, more self-aware, and she doubted he would be much interested in being doted on or fretted over, but he was going to want to clean up soon. She didn't think he had the energy to hold a razor above his heart level for several minutes. An unsupervised shower, at this juncture, would be a pipe dream for him, and the idea of seeing if he would accept a sponge bath almost nauseated her with worry. She had no idea how she would ask him if he wanted help, he would feel emasculated when she did, and it would be bad. Deciding how to treat him in this situation was like trying to figure out rocket science on a narrow deadline. She'd been tossed into the deep wilds of uncertainty without any sort of warning or prep. She had no map, and she felt
alone. Alone and lost.

His limbs twitched. Something low-pitched and odd fluttered over his lips, not a grunt or a groan, and she froze. He'd been quiet and still all morning, ever since the morphine had knocked him out again.

“Derek,” she said.

His heart rate climbed on the monitor as she watched, tripping from the slow plod of sleep into something more effort-driven. More desperate. She shook his shoulder. “Wake up, it's just a dream,” she said.

“Mmm,” he said, almost a word, stuck in the back of his throat. His hands, face, and torso jerked as he flinched from some phantom impact. His breath caught like a knife had been slipped between his ribs, and the silence of him not breathing made her heart twist.

“Wake up,” she said. “Derek!”

He came alive like a firework explosion. “No,” he blurted. He punched his hands against the mattress and sat up. His eyes flared wide, unblinking and unseeing, and he shivered with the momentum of his awakening. His breathing resumed with shuddering, sucking pants that had to be ripping his chest apart with pain.

“Derek, wake up,” she said, trying to break through sightless panic in his eyes. Her chair snapped back against her knees as she stood and pushed it away. She leaned across the bed railing and threw her one arm behind him and the other in front, high across his shoulders and neck to support him and keep him from going farther forward and hurting himself. He tilted, the bony tips of his clavicles brushing her arms, and she bit her lip. She didn't want him to hurt himself, but she didn't want to hurt him either, and if he pushed forward much more against her arm...

He stopped, arriving at the precipice, caught in the twilight between unconscious and awake. And then the solid coil of dream-born tension unraveled from his body until he was a loose, beaten rag doll in her arms. He gripped her arm like he would a pull-up bar and leaned to the side, into her embrace, against her skin.

“Ow,” he said, his voice deep and dark against her body, shivering. His face found the crook of her neck, and he breathed her in.

“It's okay,” she said. “It's okay. It was just a bad dream.”

“Yeah,” he said. “A dream.”

He wouldn't let go of her right arm as she held it in front of him. She tested her other arm instead. When she was certain he wasn't going to fall backward in half-awake confusion, she splayed her fingers against his sleek muscles and ran her palm up his spine. He shook, and he still wouldn't let her go. She stroked his hair and whispered at him.

What she wanted to do was pull him against her and never let go. Instead, his injuries made him fragile. Unfit for the crushing, desperate embrace she longed give him. And she hated it. She hated that she couldn't even hug him. Not really, anyway. Not yet.

“Do you want some water?” she asked. “Something to eat? You haven't tried to eat anything yet.” The nurses had come by with graham crackers and a glass of water more than once, and each time, he'd refused, looking pale and nauseated, and so they hadn't pressed it.
He didn't say anything. She hit the button and raised the back of his bed with her free hand. The bed hummed. His grip loosened, and his hands fell slack to his sides, but he didn't fall back to the mattress, exhausted, like she expected. He sat there, breathing, trembling, and pale.

She tried another tactic, giving him her best bright-and-shiny smile. “Hey, look at you. You're sitting up on your own, at least. Cristina wasn't going to have you do that for a while. How do you feel?”

“Disgusting,” he said, and she swallowed, torn between wanting to press him about his awful dream, trying to find some way to make him feel better, and simple elation that he sounded so much healthier than he had the day before, when he could barely speak. He wasn't wincing with his words, wasn't breathy or weak or hard to hear. The punishment he'd just given his chest had done a number on him, but he was still sitting up on his own, unprompted.

“I could help,” she ventured, praying it wasn't the wrong thing to say. “If you want to get cleaned up or something, I could help.”

She wasn't even sure he was listening to her. He stared at nothing in particular, eyes haunted and disturbed, like he couldn't wash the sight of his mind's eye from the backs of his eyelids no matter how much soap reality gave him.

“Hey,” she said. “Derek. Hey.” She touched his shoulder, her body shuddering with the sheer force of his disquiet. It radiated from him in waves, like the pounding, throbbing dissonance of a subwoofer turned up too loud. “Do you want to talk about... Are you okay?”

He blinked. “No,” he said. And then like a tree, his resolve toppled with the final ax fall of a deep breath. “Ow,” he whispered again, his voice shaking and thready. He lay back against the bed and pillow and closed his eyes, his hand wandering for the morphine dispenser.

“Do you want the bed back down?”

“No.”

A light knock at the door entered the small space, and Derek's eyes drifted open. Meredith bit her lip. There was no way this was going to go well. Visitors. Not when Derek was so disturbed he was still shaking. Not when he was in so much pain and had just taken another hit of morphine.

“Richard,” Derek said.

Richard Webber stepped over the threshold in a clean pressed suit and shiny shoes and peered around the room like he'd never seen it before, at everything but Derek. His assessment slowed on the dormant ventilator and the stack of working monitors, and then he moved to Derek. Chief's fingers twitched against the six inch stack of papers and folders in his hands, like he didn't know what to do, didn't know why he'd come. “I stopped by to see how you were doing,” he said.

“I'm okay,” Derek said. His syllables had lengthened, and his stare had a dusky, not-all-there quality to it. She hoped the morphine had helped. It certainly helped him play the white lie game, the one where somebody said hello, how are you, and you said fine, even when you wanted to keel over dead or strangle someone, because being fine was the acceptable, expected response. Nobody actually wanted a laundry list of what was wrong. Nobody.

Richard smiled. “Well, don't worry about Seattle Grace, all right? I'll keep her together until you're ready to come back. I wanted to thank you. For leaving my name in the approved contingency plan.”
“Okay,” Derek said.

The conversation halted and died an awkward, violent death as silence crushed the room. Derek closed his eyes again, and Richard cleared his throat. “Well, I'll, uh... Leave you to it. The healing.” And he left.

Meredith stared as Richard departed, unable to stop the sigh of relief that tore through her lungs. That hadn't been so terrible. That hadn't been—

“Who's dead?” Derek said.

She turned to find him staring at her, eyes red. “What?”

“He was carrying a pile of death certificates, Mere.”

“You saw—”

“Yes, I saw,” he snapped. His skin drained of color, and he fell silent, breathing.

She stared at her lap. She'd seen the finalized lists posted all over the hospital, and she'd seen the in-progress lists cluttering her email in-box. For a while, they'd been sending out updates by the minute, and she'd had to turn her phone off, because she'd gotten tired of the constant dings, telling her to check for new messages. She didn't know what to say.

“None of your friends?” he prodded.

She bit her lip. “Alex isn't waking up...”

Lexie called her every few hours with tearful updates, updates that were getting more panicky the longer Alex didn't budge from his comatose state.

_I don't know what to do, Mere, she'd said. I said I loved him, and now he's almost dead._

_He is not almost dead. He's not. He's fine, and he just needs a little extra time to wake up. That's all. Getting shot in the chest sucks._

_How's Derek?_

_I don't know. He's awake, but... I don't know._

“You should visit him,” Derek said.

Meredith shook her head so quick and hard the motion made her neck hurt. “I can't.”

“Why not?”

“Because I just can't do it right now, Derek. I can't.”

Derek stared at her, his eyes dark and foreign and hurting.

Her breasts quickened with the onset of sobs, but she tamped the urge so forcefully it made her face hurt. Her eyes burned. Her torso shook. Something inside her wanted to break, but she couldn't let it. The world was wrong.

When the world was right, even if he was crushed about something, she couldn't be in the same room as Derek and be almost crying like this without him wrapping around her and whispering
something to make her feel better. He'd even danced once. *Come on. Get up. Get your ass over here. I'm not doing this by myself.* Now, he was like a stranger, and she couldn't make heads or tails of it. No map. She had no map at all. And she was alone.

“There was a stack,” he said. “Of certificates, Mere. He hurt all those people to find me. Alex is —”

“He hurt all those people because he was a freaking lunatic, Derek.”

“He thought I killed his wife,” he said. “I'm the reason he came here with a gun.”

She twisted her hands together. She'd seen this before, and she didn't want to be there, in that head space again, watching him push his own self-destruct button.

*Go home, Meredith. Just go home.*

“Derek,” she said.

He stared into space. His temples moved as he clenched his jaw, but he said nothing.

She stood, shaking, leaned across the railing, and reached for his face, pulled his stare to hers. “Derek,” she said, and she looked him in the eye. He took a quick breath, and another. His gaze was like a minefield of broken glass, slivers, sharp bits, and jags of his soul cracked open for her to see. “Get off this train of thought before it starts. Now. I am not in the mood to chase after you again while you play Babe Ruth with a pile of empty beer cans. I couldn't deal with that on top of everything else.” Not now.

He pulled away from her like she'd hit him, *stayawakeDerek*, and looked down at his hands. “I'm pretty easy to chase right now, anyway,” he snapped. “And I don't think I could lift a bat.”

“Derek...”

His lower lip trembled. His visage of fury cracked and gave way to a deluge of something else. Something worse. His fingers worked across the hem of his blanket, like he didn't know what to do with the pent up, twisting energy. He moved his head back and forth. No, no, no. As if denial would somehow change the outcome of the memories clotting his head.

“A man shot me,” he said.

She leaned forward and grabbed his hand. “I know. But it's over, Derek. It's over.”

“A man shot me, Mere, and I...” He sucked in a breath, wincing as he did so, and the semblance of calm he'd been fighting so hard to maintain stripped away, left him bare and raw for her. He moaned, soft and low, and then he was crying. Really crying. His breaths spluttered in his chest, and he fell to pieces. “Why?” he said, and she had no answer for him. She didn't know why.

“We'll get through this,” she said. “We will. We got through everything else.”

He stared at her, tears streaking down his face. “When is the memorial?”

“I don't know.”

“I should—”

“Lie back, and rest, Derek,” she said. “That's what you should do.” She hit the button on the bed and lowered him flat. It made her stomach twist to do it without asking him, to treat him like a kid,
but he didn’t protest or fight. He blinked, silent, as he watched the ceiling crawl above him, and cried.

“I feel dirty.”

She sighed. “I know. I know you do. Would a...” Her fingers twisted around the bed rail, squeaking. “Would it help if I brought you your razor? Please, Derek, I want to help. I don’t mind helping.”

But he was already gone from that conversation, all screeching tires and burned rubber, making an illegal u-turn into the treacherous pit of badness he’d been stuck in moments before.

“I shouldn’t miss the memorial,” he said.

A soft, feminine sound scuffed Meredith's ears. She turned and saw April standing at the doorway, her stupid little diary clutched against her chest like it was the only thing keeping her afloat. The woman's big doe eyes were watering and shaky.

“Excuse me,” April said in a tiny voice as she shuffle-stepped at the threshold, awkward, unsure. “I'm sorry, Dr. Shepherd, I just...”

“Dr. Kepner,” Derek said. He drew his palms across his face as if trying to remove the traces of his torment, but it didn't work. His eyes were bloodshot and scary, and his skin had a wet, shimmery quality under his lashes. His cheeks streaked with a hot flush, and he looked away.

He was crying with his wife. He was crying with his wife, not his staff. He would never want his staff to see this.

Meredith glared at the woman, tried to mouth go away, not now at her, but April acted like Meredith wasn't even in the room. The sight of Derek in the bed, weeping, had snared her, and her eyes wouldn't peel away.

“I wanted to get a card,” April said, stuttering. “Or something, but nothing seemed like it would be...”

“April,” Meredith snapped, not caring if she sounded mean. “What do you want?”

“I just wanted to say I'm sorry,” she said. “For your loss. I know this is—”

Derek blinked. “What loss?”

April's eyes widened in horror. “Oh,” she stammered. “Oh, I...”

Meredith jerked to her feet and pointed at the hallway. “April,” she said. “Outside. Now.”

They marched outside. Meredith opened her mouth, but the words stuck against the back of her throat like bitter flies to flypaper, and she couldn't find any sort of coherency. Couldn't hold any thoughts in the maelstrom of her fury. She felt the hairs on her neck crawl and glanced to the right. Derek watched them, suspicion clouding his hurt, drugged gaze, and she couldn't take his scrutiny. She clutched a tent of April’s lab coat in her hands and dragged her down the hallway to the nurse's station. Out of view. Away from Derek. He didn't need this right now. Not from the woman who'd gotten him shot.

“I'm sorry, Dr. Grey,” April said, sobbing. “I'm sorry. I thought. I thought—”
Anger solidified in Meredith's chest like a coal hardening into a sharp, peerless diamond. Pressure built and built, crushing everything inside, until her vision went black with ire, and she couldn't stop the words anymore. “I don't care what you thought,” she said. “Derek is barely able to sit up on his own. You think I'm going to tell him about losing a baby he didn't even know about yet?”

“I...”

“Go away, April,” she snarled. “I'm sorry about Reed, but you have no right to be in our space right now. Our space. Me and my husband's. My husband's. He almost died, and we lost a baby, and you need to go away. We'll deal with our stuff. You deal with your stuff. Separately. See a counselor or whatever. I recommend Dr. Wyatt.”

April's face paled to an ashen, disturbed gray.

“I'm sorry,” April repeated, and then she fled.

Meredith collapsed over her knees in a furious squat, panting. Hot, snarly tears of anger had begun to seep from her eyes, and she couldn't breathe. She couldn't breathe. The nurses at the station, nurses she didn't know but knew she should, since they were watching after Derek, bit their lips and made it perfectly clear they weren't staring at her. No, they shuffled through printed computer records, or checked their watches, or wrote scribble-y things with pens.

This would be all over the hospital in minutes. She knew it.

She sobbed. Just once. And then she tucked it all away and stood up, wiping at her eyes. She could do this. She could do this. She could. She didn't need a freaking map, and somehow, somehow, she would make it through this horrible. Fucking. Day.

When she re-entered the room, his eyes were closed, his breaths low and deep and even. Laying him flat had probably been the last straw on his strained body. He'd been awake, emotionally stressed, and then it'd been quiet, he'd been flat, high on painkillers, and bam.

Winner by knockout.

She let him sleep as she re-settled on top of her squeaky chair, but the quiet respite lasted only twenty minutes, a drop in the bucket of eternity. Better than nothing, but he needed so much more than that. Even breathing skipped in his chest, became something more controlled, and without looking, she knew he was awake again. She swallowed, dread coiling in her gut. She wanted to cry, almost wished they could knock him out, just to get him through the hard part of healing before he could let his brain kick in and torture him with more dark and twisty thoughts.

“What loss?” Derek said, as if their conversation had never been interrupted.

“Nothing, Derek. She just meant all the people who—”

“She said my loss,” he said. “My loss. I'm stoned, Meredith, but I'm not that stoned.” He reached for the button and raised the bed, glaring at her.

“Derek...”

His face crumpled. “Who died? Who died that you don't think I can handle hearing about? I've seen Bailey and Mark, and... Who died?”

“Nobody.”
“Dr. Hunt,” he said. “I haven't seen Dr. Hunt.”

“Owen got shot high in the shoulder, straight through the trapezius muscle, just in the meat, no nerve damage or anything. He's at home on painkillers, but he's fine. Do you really think Cristina would be here if he wasn't?”

“Yes, she would,” he said, and she realized she couldn't exactly refute him. “She's always here. She worked when Burke was shot. She's—”

“Dr. Shepherd, how are you feeling this afternoon?” Charlotte interrupted as she bustled through the door. She held a small Styrofoam plate of graham crackers in one hand, and clutched a plastic cup with a red-striped folding straw in the other.

He loosed a frustrated, shaky breath. “Charlotte.”

“You're sitting up a little. That's good!” Charlotte said, smiling and bright, as if she didn't know what sort of horrible, vicious, man-eating lion's den she'd entered, a den with snapping jaws and ugly black energy. “I brought some crackers for you. I'd like you to eat one. Just to get your stomach to start working again.”

She pulled the tray table across Derek's lap and placed her bounty front of him. Little bits and pieces of crumbs scattered across the plate, collecting at the edges. The meal was meager, but it wasn't supposed to be filling. Derek needed to eat. He needed to, and this was supposed to be easy stuff that would wake up his digestive system enough that he might want real food in a few hours when the orderlies were making rounds with dinner.

“I'm not hungry,” Derek said.

“I know, but you need to eat,” Charlotte replied, her voice even and patient, and Meredith wondered how she did it. Remained patient with patients who belied their nomenclature and made you want to hit and rip things until they were broken. “I'll leave you alone for a little while after you finish one square and drink some water. I promise.”

Derek stared at the contents of the plate like the crackers were some sort of foreign, two-ply cardboard. Charlotte frowned, and Meredith thought she saw something snap behind the woman's eyes. Charlotte's lip twitched, and she sighed.

“Eat or cough, Dr. Shepherd,” the nurse warned. “Which would you prefer?”

Meredith sighed with relief when Derek picked up the cracker in crushing defeat. She stared at Nurse Charlotte. Thank you, she mouthed. Thank you so much. Charlotte caught the motion and winked, but didn't take her eyes from Derek, watching him, ready to catch any attempt by him to bamboozle her and make her think he'd done something he really hadn't.

He chewed the cracker as he glowered. He polished away one square and left the rest, looking pale and upset, but Charlotte ignored him. “That's great, Dr. Shepherd. Now, take a sip. The water will feel good. I promise. I have yet to receive a complaint from anybody else on this hall.”

He blinked. A loose tear slipped down his cheek. He picked up the cup and sipped. Once. Twice. His Adam's apple bobbed along his throat. Even in the dim light, she saw the water line in the cup descend to the bottom and disappear. He slurped once and then stopped. Meredith touched his hand when he set the cup back down, but he didn't look at her. Wouldn't look.

“Charlotte, can you get me a list of the people who died?” he said.
Meredith frowned. He thought she'd lied. He thought... “Derek...”

“They sent out lots of e-mails over the hospital listserv, Dr. Shepherd,” the nurse said. “You should be able to see them on your phone, but I can get you a printout—”

“Is my phone still under the bed?”

The nurse glanced at the storage compartment under the bed and made a small step toward it, but Meredith shooed her away. Tears of anger returned in force, backed by platoons of more tears, all with sharp knives and armor, just waiting for the opportunity to charge down Meredith's face. “I've got it,” Meredith muttered as she bent over, and her hair fell into her face. She clawed it back behind her ears.

Nurse Charlotte whispered something soft at them, encouraged Derek to finish his stupid crackers, and then she left while Meredith was stuck under the bed. Stuck. Her hands found the smooth plastic bin, felt at the rough label made with masking tape and black marker. “Dr. Shepherd,” said the label in a messy doctor's scrawl. Jackson's, maybe. Or April's. Or...

She pulled the box into her lap and scrabbled for her chair, off balance and trying to ignore the watery glaze that covered the world, trying to stop the army revolting in her tear ducts. She fingered his bloodstained leather belt and the black watch he always wore. The glass panel over the digital readout had a crusty red splotch on it. She shoved aside his cell phone clip and his shiny, pointy black boots, the ones she'd always thought he looked sexy in, and had told him so, long ago. They'd thrown out his shirt and his pants and his underwear, thrown them into the bio-hazard bin. They'd been damaged beyond repair. Too drenched with blood and sweat, too soiled with dirt from the floor and with gunpowder.

She remembered fingerering the hole in his shirt after they'd removed it. The perforation had been the size of her pinky finger, or maybe a pencil eraser, torn and jagged, wet with his body fluids and bits of obliterated flesh. Little loose threads had snarled in the empty space where solid shirt should have been, and they had caught against her nail as she'd slipped her finger through to the other side. She hadn't been able to believe something so small could cause so much damage. But it had.

“Here,” she growled, jabbing the phone at him like a weapon to ward away the memories of him lying on the floor. Dying.

The phone beeped as he turned it on and navigated to his email. The screen glowed against his face, haunting and pale, and he stared. His lungs hitched when he found the bulletin he wanted, the long list divided by fatalities and injuries in crisp, clear type, alphabetical and neat. Clinical and cold. He scrolled down as he read the names. Beep. Another page. Beep. Another, another. Beep, beep.

Dr. Shepherd, Derek C. was listed under injured but stable, one of the last names in the long crawl of death and pain. She knew. She knew because she'd received the same email on her own phone. The injuries list was much shorter than the fatalities list. Gary Clark had wanted to kill, not maim, and he'd been successful. Chillingly so. But at least he'd failed where it mattered to him the most.

She shuddered.

“I told you, Derek, nobody—”

“Seventeen,” he whispered. “Seventeen people died.”

Her throat constricted. “I know.”
He hit the scroll button again and paused. “That security guard. Paul Wandell. I said hello to him in
the morning. His kids had a dance recital, and he was... He had kids, Mere, and now they're alone.”

“Derek, please,” she said. “Please, stop.”

He stared, shell-shocked and lost in the faded edges of his memories. “I wonder how old they are.
God, seventeen people, Mere.”

One person.

The air in the room hazed away from her, and she stood on the promenade all over again, watching
him fall to the ground, hearing the crack as it buffeted her ears. Cristina had pulled at Meredith's
arms so hard her shoulder sockets had ached for hours after that moment. Meredith screamed and
screamed and screamed, and she couldn't stop. She hadn't in the memory, and so she was stuck,
yelling her throat raw, watching Derek over and over again. He tumbled to the floor and smacked
the back of his head into the hard tiles, stunned with the impact of the bullet as it ripped through
his sternum.

She remembered the way he'd looked at her as they'd covered him with the mask that would bring
him anesthesia. Breathe deeply, Dr. Shepherd, Jackson had said, which, at the time, she'd thought
had been ludicrous, since Derek clearly couldn't do more than gasp. She'd stroked his sweaty hair,
said she loved him, and before he could reply, his eyes had closed. Slowly. She'd seen one last
flash of his pupils before he went still and silent. She'd kissed his forehead, given the deep,
beautiful lines around his eyes a last, loving appraisal with the pads of her thumbs, and then the
nursing staff had pushed her away so they could intubate him. She'd gone to find Cristina in the
scrub room with that picture in her head. Her husband. Intubated.

She realized she was a selfish person, then. A selfish, horrible person. Because all she could think
about was that Derek wasn't one of the seventeen. The rest was just superficial details that she
couldn't bring herself to worry about.

In that moment, Meredith Grey snapped.

“I'm thirty-two,” she said.

He blinked. “What?”

“When I saw you get shot right in front of me,” she said. “I was thirty-two, and I'm going to be
seeing it in my head for the rest of my life. But you're still here. You're breathing, and you're not to
blame for the ones who aren't. Please, would you just...” Her voice faded, spent and wasted.
Destroyed. She had more syllables to say, but she couldn't say them, because she had no idea what
they were. Her lip quivered. “Please.”

“I wish you hadn't seen it,” he said.

“But I did, Derek. You would have died if I hadn't. And now we're here.”

They sat in silence, seconds slogging by like ants caught in molasses, stuck, stuck and drowning in
mire and thick tar. He stared at his phone, stared, like he couldn't bring himself to look at her,
couldn't bring himself to face her as she fell apart. A low, throaty, choking sound gripped him, and
his tears resumed, spattering down his face like loose raindrops in an endless storm. He looked at
her then, raw upset in his gaze, his face marred with red streaks of irritation and embarrassment. Of
deep, harrowing sadness.

“I want the drainage tubes and the catheter out,” he said, his voice broken. “I want to get up.”
She took his hand and squeezed, forcing her legs straight as she stood. “I'll tell Cristina right now.”

She pulled away, but he didn't release her. “No,” he said. “Stay. Come here. That can wait a minute.”

He pushed the tray table with the stale crackers away.

“But...” She stared at him. He still had the drainage tubes. The EKG lines. The intravenous line. Everything. She couldn't imagine fighting against that whole maze of medical keep away signs. She'd barely been able to get into the bed with him after ten minutes of wiggle-shifting between him and the railing when he'd been thrashed and broken with pain. She couldn't just—

“You won't hurt me, Mere,” he said as if she'd spoken her concerns aloud. “Come here. I'm not glass.”

He gestured with his arm, and she imagined herself, nestled against his frame. Whenever she was upset, he would hold her on the couch, body to body, breath to breath, and he would whisper at her and rub her back and make her feel better. In that moment, she couldn't imagine herself anywhere else. She needed it.

She needed.

She wiped her tear-stained face and collapsed against him. His body felt warm and soft, and in all the near death and dying of the last two days, she'd forgotten how reassuring his shoulder felt against her ear, how good his arm felt wrapped around her torso, and how strong his heartbeat sounded through his skin. Her map filled in with details, and she could almost find herself again. He made shushing noises at her and held her and did all the things that made her forget he wasn't healthy, until she looked and saw how uncomfortable he was. She was lying against him, putting pressure on his chest, however little, however light and tiny she was, and he was hurting.

“You're such a liar,” she sobbed.

“Shut up, Mere,” he said, his voice quivering but sure. “Let me do this. I need to. If it really starts to hurt, I'll tell you.”

She didn't have the energy to fight him. Tiredness clawed her into little wasted bits. “Okay,” she said, and she couldn't hold it in anymore. She was dizzy with exhaustion. Her brain hurt. Shards of upset tore gashes into her soul.

She cried.

“I love you, too,” he said. “I'm here. I'm sorry.”

She lost herself in his velvety, rumbling reassurances, lost herself in the quiet waves of his breathing against her ear. For a perfect, endless minute, she wrapped herself in his words and his softness and his strength, and she knew where she was again. There. In Seattle Grace. Next to her husband. The man she'd sworn her life to on a Post-it note.

Her eyelids drooped, and she rested. Her breathing slowed, and she heard herself start to snore, but she was too far gone to care. Too far into a full mental collapse. Wishes and sighs whirled around her head and sucked her under.

She heard his soft, choked, “Hi, Mom.”

She even heard the soft, earthy reply. “Oh, Derek...”
But the words had no meaning to her. Then she slipped into dreaming.
“So, then Derek and Mark stumble in,” Rachel said. “Derek's shell-shocked, his eyes all big and round like he doesn't know what the hell just hit him. He's covered head to toe in mud and dirt and leaves, and he says—”

Meredith closed her eyes, leaning back against the wall as the syllables bled into one endless rumble. They laughed at the end of the story. Laughed like the entire freaking army of cackling, nagging estrogen that they were. They’d been telling stories for the last twenty minutes while they waited in the hall in a dense flock of sickening, saccharine Shepherd solidarity.

When Derek's baby sister Amelia had arrived early morning the day before, Meredith had been a bit nervous, never having met her, or really any of Derek's sisters except Nancy. Well, a lot nervous. A lot. What exactly were you supposed to say when you met your husband's family for the first time, and he was nearly dead? It wasn't the sort of situation that begged getting to know each other over tea or dinner or whatever the hell actual not-dysfunctional families did when they had to meet their unwanted in-laws. Though, along that route, she wasn't entirely convinced his family wasn't dysfunctional, and she wasn't exactly an in-law.

But Amelia-call-her-Amy was pretty easy to get along with. She'd been panicked about Derek's status as a not corpse, and already upset from some sort of disaster back in Los Angeles, and there hadn't been much time for scrutiny or criticism or anything like what Meredith would have expected with a casual family visit. Amelia didn't much seem to care about the circumstances in which Meredith and Derek had met, or about their flimsy Post-it marital status, or about anything to do with Meredith at all, really.

Amelia was a fellow doctor, an up-and-coming neurosurgeon, and that was about all Meredith had gleaned in the brief moments they'd been alone. The woman seemed to fill the silences with brooding, sort of like Derek did when he was at his most dour, but when Meredith had asked about it, all Amelia had said was, “I lost a patient, and I almost lost my brother. Isn't that enough?” Then she'd refused to go into more detail, looking shaken and haunted.

When Derek was awake, Amelia hung around like a fly, always buzzing, always there, with big, guilty, hurt doe eyes, but when he was asleep, she found reasons to be far, far away, and, well, Meredith wasn't going to press her luck. She was much more happy to be ignored than to be pried apart and smashed with questions like a nut in a nutcracker.

Then the rest of his family had come. They'd all managed to nab the same flight from New York, the whole pack of them, and they had descended on SeaTac from LaGuardia, and finally into Seattle Grace, like rabid, eager wolves. Rabid, eager, upset, panicky wolves who wanted to know that their dearest son, brother, whatever, who had abandoned them to a life of rustic shame in Seattle with his dirty ex-but-not-ex-mistress, was not going to drop dead on them. At least not in the next few days.

There was his mother, who Meredith actually sort of liked. Contemplative, discerning, worried, she didn't seem to say much when the whole group was there. The gabby sisters-from-hell were another matter. There was Nancy, the bitch, who still seemed to hate Meredith for no other reason than the fact that Meredith existed. Kathleen, the shrink, who seemed to find everything about Meredith a fascinating, deeply freaky case study. And finally, Rachel, who'd said all of three words to Meredith since arriving, not out of spite so much as targeted obliviousness.

They all looked like Derek to some degree. All of them had thick, dark hair, smirk-y faces, and
deep, expressive eyes that could tell you ninety-nine things about what they were feeling or thinking in two glances or less. Meredith wanted to love them. She did. Because they were part of Derek.

Derek loved his family. Derek missed his family, though he didn't speak of it very often. He'd grown up with them and spent a large part of his life with them all in spitting distance. For roughly forty years, he'd been in their orbit, always visitable and surprise drop-by-able. He'd probably even complained about it at the time. Then Addison had cheated. He'd left that all behind and moved to Seattle, where he had nothing and no one.

Now, he was alone on the West Coast except for her and Mark. His big family had been reduced to two points of light in a vast sea of darkness. He would never admit it, but he missed them all, bitchiness and nagging notwithstanding, which she supposed was what real families did. Loved each other despite everything. They all clearly loved Derek despite the fact that they seemed to think he was dumb as blocks. And for that, she wanted to love them very much. Not the dumb as blocks part. Just... Whatever.

Instead, they mostly made her want to scream.

The night before, they'd popped in after their flight had landed. Just for a few minutes to say hello before trudging off to collapse at the neighboring hotel or whatever. That had been awkward.

That had been nothing.

In the morning, they'd returned, laden with Starbucks coffee and bags and bags of things. For four solid hours that morning before a too-short lunch, and then again until the orderlies had come to transfer Derek to a step down room, the entire pack of them had talked and talked and talked at him, and he'd listened, a fever-bright glint of excitement in his eyes. They had occasionally let him get a word in, not that he was trying very hard. He was tired, and he'd been pushing himself too hard to stay awake and visit with them. All that effort just to be awake and paying attention had turned him into a taciturn creature. They seemed okay with that, expected it even, given his injuries and the state he'd been in when they'd arrived. Haggard, on painkillers, and crying, with sleeping Meredith curled up in his arms. She'd had to climb off of him, groggy and drooling while they all stared.

Awkward. No, she amended. Mortifying.

He'd been acting almost balanced since then, though she speculated it was mostly because with them always there and always talking and always being in his space, he didn't have the time or the energy to be upset. Maybe that was a good thing. She didn't know.

She did know that she didn't like how exhausted he looked, and she had no idea how she was going to intervene on his behalf. That was what she was supposed to do. Intervene on her sick husband's behalf. Right? That was what normal wives of normal husbands did. Except the idea of inserting herself between him and his stampeding sisters seemed about as appealing as a spinal tap, and she wasn't sure any good would come of it. His sisters would hate her even more. Or at least shift from neutral into dislike, if they weren't there already. Derek would get upset, too, which was the part that made her loath to act, and not so much his sisters' ire.

Worse and worse horror scenarios mounted, until the Derek in her mind's eye was ripping up the Post-it note with spitting, hissing fury, and vowing to return to Manhattan behind the wheel of his trailer. She begged him to at least take a plane, because he was hurt, and driving would be very taxing, but, no, he wanted the scenic trip to see pretty mountains, the elk infestation in the western national parks, and golden waves of grain, or whatever.
“You okay?” Mark whispered as the Shepherds laughed at another silly story of Derek in his younger days.

“Fine,” she insisted through gritted teeth.

They all stood in the hallway outside Derek's new room. He'd just been moved out of intensive care, and he finally had a big, private VIP room, with a bathroom and a door that shut and windows to the outside. There was a sofa and a television set and a small reading chair and space. Blessed space. Meredith had already asked for a cot, which the orderlies said would be brought to the room sometime around dinner. At least his family would sleep tonight. She hoped. And then Derek would have some needed peace and quiet. Surely, last night wasn't a fluke, and they slept like normal people.

Mark placed a warm hand on her back. “Let me check and see if they're ready in there.”

He pushed through the crowd of she-Shepherds toward the door and gave it a practiced, brief knock, just like doctors did before they entered a room where they knew a patient would be undressing. He turned the handle, opened the door a slit, poked his head in, and spoke some whispered words. Silence. Meredith watched Mark's hand crawl along the edge of the door as he listened to whatever response he was getting. And then Mark backed out again and closed the door.

“Few more minutes, at least,” Mark said.

Meredith bit her lip. She wasn't sure she could stomach waiting out here for a few more minutes. “Is he okay?” she asked.

Mark nodded. “Yeah, it looks like they're pulling out the first chest tube right now. Foley catheter is done.”

“That's good,” Meredith said. “That's... He'll be able to walk around.”

“He will,” said Mark. “Of course, then we'll probably need to tie him down. I fully expect him to stage a jailbreak. He's never been a big fan of hospitals. Not as a patient, anyway.”

Kathy snickered. “Oh, god. Remember after he crashed his bike?”

The whole lot of them broke into a rolling, endless wave of laughter. “Him crashing his motorcycle is funny?” Meredith said.

“No,” said Rachel, wiping tears from her eyes. She shifted. Her look became sober. “No, of course not. But watching him, concussed and on painkillers, trying to convince the doctor he was well enough to go home, was not a pretty sight.”

Mrs. Shepherd frowned. “Rachel, dear. That's enough.”

They all fell silent.

Meredith stared at them all, bewildered, and tried very hard not to be curious. Derek had never talked about his crash beyond the fact that it had happened when he was in medical school. He'd sold his bike as soon as he'd healed enough to be worried about owning an object that now scared him to death. That was all she knew.

“Excuse me,” said a low, deep voice as Jeff Willit, one of Seattle Grace's physical therapists, pushed his way through the crowd. He was a tall, well-built man who, really, should have been a centerfold for Sports Illustrated or something. Meredith knew he liked to play soccer and
basketball and pretty much anything else that classified as a sport. He was always trying to recruit for Seattle Grace intramural teams, and he would put out sign-up sheets from time to time.

He'd asked her about volleyball once, but he'd given up and walked away when all she'd had to say was, “Volleywhat?”

The Shepherds parted, staring at the man as he approached the door and swept aside his thick brown Fabio hair. He knocked, opened the door, and disappeared. The latch clicked shut behind him.

“Wow,” said Nancy, and they all fell into appreciative silence for what felt like eons.

Eons until Rachel coughed. “So, Meredith. Tell us a story.”

Meredith chuckled. She didn't know why. The sound was a nervous, itty bitty tick that seemed to skip from her lips with little provocation. “A story,” she said.

Kathy's eyes gleamed. “Yes. We've been talking about Derek for the last thirty minutes, and you haven't said a word. Surely, he must have done something dumb since he got here. He's Derek.”

“I don't think—”

“How about cheesy romantic?” Rachel asked, sweeping aside a long, dark lock of her bangs. She was leggy and fabulous, just like Addison. All of them were. It made them a little easier to hate. “That's his other trademark. Dumb and cheesy romantic are his signature things.”

Meredith blinked. They all stared at her, waiting, expectant. “Well, he...”

“Yes?” said Nancy.

Mrs. Shepherd stared. Stared at her with a scary, omniscient mom look in her eyes. Like she knew something and wasn't letting on. Meredith swallowed. The hallway felt suddenly sweltering, and she pulled at the collar of her shirt. All his sisters stared. She wondered if they knew. About the Post-it. If they knew. Or if they still thought of her as a temporary fixture in Derek's life, something that would get swept away as soon as he laid eyes on someone a bit more age-appropriate and pretty. She hadn't had the guts to ask.

“I...” she stuttered.

“He was going to propose with a teddy bear,” Mark said, saving her. “And a big heart-shaped thing filled with rose petals. And candles. Lots of candles.”

“What?” Meredith said.

Mark looked at her, helpless and grinning. “It was my fault. I suggested it, but he went with it.”

“When was this?”

“Back when Addison's brother got sick. He kept bitching while we were setting up that it was awful and that he'd become a giant cliche, but he was so nervous, and I knew you'd say yes anyway, so I told him it was fine.”

“You knew I'd say yes?”

Mark shrugged, eyes sparkling. “It's not like it's rocket science, Grey. You two are disgusting.”
“You know I said no, right? Several times, actually,” she countered.

“Yes, but that was only after he went crazy.”

His sisters looked at Mark, perplexed, and then to Meredith.

“He didn't go crazy, Mark. He was...” Drunk. Self destructing. Losing his nerve. Dying inside because he couldn't bear the thought of hurting other people.


Kathy frowned. “What are you talking—”

“A teddy bear,” Meredith interrupted, practically choking on the words as she stuffed them through her lips. “Seriously?” Derek had enough to deal with already without being psychoanalyzed by his shrink big sister.

“Yes,” Mark said. “One of those big carnival-sized ones. Big, white, and fluffy. He must have packed it all away when Addison called him about Archer.”

Rachel's smile couldn't have been more gleeful. “Our Derek proposing with a stuffed animal. That's pretty classic.” They all laughed, and Meredith relaxed a bit. Disaster averted.

“So, when are you two getting married for real, anyway?”

Maybe not.

“Um,” Meredith managed. Hot. She felt hot.

Miraculously, it was Mrs. Shepherd who intervened. “Girls, this really isn't the time,” she said in a soft, earthy voice. His mother looked at her. Smiled. Really smiled. “I imagine, after the first time, Derek's not so much interested in the institution of marriage as the meaning behind it. I'm just happy he seems to have found the right girl this time. Leave him and Meredith be.” And then the older woman steered the conversation back to something a bit more palatable, leaving Meredith stunned, blinking, and speechless.

Did she know then? About the Post-it? Meredith wondered how that phone conversation had gone and why she'd never heard about it.

It seemed like ages before the nurse left Derek's room. She smiled, wheeling her cart of supplies away. Meredith eyeballed the piles of bloody, dirty gauze, stained dressings, torn open packets of topical anesthetic, and the two cloudy-colored chest tubes. Normal. Totally normal, she reminded herself.

“All set,” said the nurse as she trundled by, and then she was gone.

His sisters collapsed toward the door in a shuffling, noisy, eager pack. The bedlam, the sight of all of them, moving and chatting and babbling twisted something deep in Meredith's gut. He'd just had his surgical drains removed. And the Foley catheter. He'd had no break. Nothing. The entire day, they'd been here. Two seconds after the nurse had left, they were pushing toward the door, not giving him any time to recover or think or breathe.

She snapped.

“Could you maybe go in shifts, or something? So you're not all there crowding him?” Meredith
said. “The only reason the nurses haven't been all over you people for breaking the rules is because he's the Chief of Surgery.”

The snarling, wretched heat returned as they all stared at her. She started to shake. “I'm sorry. But he was shot less than three days ago. He had emergency open-heart surgery. He's exhausted, and you're all here, all the time, talking and laughing, and he can't rest when you're doing that.”

Nancy frowned. “He's seemed fine.”

In what realm of the word fine, Meredith wondered. Fine as in not dead was about all she could come up with.

The four of them turned to Mark, who held his hands up in surrender. “He looks like crap, to me. I'm not really into measuring gradients of crap.”

“Well, he's not fine,” Meredith growled. “He actually looks worse since you all got here than he did yesterday morning when he couldn't sit up, and he was drowning in morphine. Not that he'll ever tell you he needs a break, because he's Derek. He's hurt, he's missed you, and you're keeping him from thinking about all the bad stuff that's just happened. But really. You're all medical professionals. All of you. How could you possibly think what you're doing to him is okay?”

Her breathing thundered in her ears. Everyone stared at her. Everyone. Mark, who stood behind the crowd of them, snickered. Feisty, his appreciative gaze seemed to say as he shook his head, though when Nancy turned to gauge his reaction, he turned stoic and unaffected in less time than it took him to collect a phone number at Joe's.

Silence.

Mrs. Shepherd sighed. “You're right. You're absolutely right, Meredith.” The woman shifted, as if she couldn't decide what to do with the upset energy that had just overwhelmed her. Her face shut down, like she was used to not permitting herself to cry. “We were worried,” Carolyn said. “And his father... But that's no excuse. We're...”

All of Derek's sisters glared, but for a moment, Meredith couldn't peel her eyes from Carolyn. Meredith felt as though she was staring in a mirror.

Be strong, Meredith, Ellis Grey had said. Strong women don't cry, and I will not permit you to cry. Stop it.

His sisters closed the gap between Carolyn and Meredith like a shield, as though they expected Meredith to launch into the fray, all sharp claws and screeching.

Great.

Meredith stared back at the flock of them. She refused to let them cow her, despite the antsy feeling in her feet that was urging her to run the other way. Fast. She redirected her urge in a healthy direction. She moved toward the door. “You can come in when you've figured out how to do it in smaller groups,” she said, forcing her voice to stay even even though her certainty was losing a battle to sheer, relentless panic.

She fled to safety before they could reply.

To Derek.

A slanting shaft of sunlight bisected the room, and her breath caught as she entered. Derek was
standing up. Like it was any moment of any day. Well, not quite. He had his hands cupped over the 
physical therapist's shoulders, and they stood face-to-face like a pair who were ready to dance, but 
the setup seemed more like a precaution than anything else. Derek's arms were loose, his body 
straight, his legs spread at a normal width, and his grip didn't seem like it had the air of holding on 
for dear life. Just for a little extra balance.

“That's good,” said Jeff. “That's very good. Why don't you walk to the chair and sit for a while?”

Derek's foot moved. Just an inch before he stopped. He bowed his head, and the sunlight caught 
his profile and set him alight. The wayward tips of his dark, mussy hair glowed like embers. “I'm a 
little woozy,” he said.

Jeff nodded. “I can imagine. Just take it slow. You won't fall.”

She bit her lip. Derek was standing. Out of the bed. For the first time in days. She didn't know why 
she was so surprised. They'd removed the Foley catheter. They'd want him moving as soon as 
possible. Moving around and building his stamina.

In the bald daylight, he seemed shockingly pale. His face had no color, an unhealthy contrast with 
his almost-black hair and the sharp forest of his stubble. Dark circles of exhaustion had puffed up 
under his eyes. His face and limbs seemed thinner, too. Like he'd lost weight. Except Derek had 
already been on the very thin side of healthy, and a few lost pounds made him seem gaunt and 
feeble.

But he was standing. She eased against the wall and folded her arms, forcing herself to stay back 
and not interfere.

Derek swallowed, moving away from the orbit of Jeff's support, and walked, pulling his IV pole 
along with him, but not leaning on it in any overt way. Jeff followed close behind, his arms 
stretched and ready to catch or provide emergency support. Derek's strides were stilted, unsure, and 
slow, like an old man who'd been forced to move without his cane or a walker, but he made it to the 
reading chair in the corner with no assistance. He leaned in an exaggerated, slow motion to protect 
his chest, and collapsed as soon as his fingers gripped something solid.

He sank against the pillows of the chair and panted, his eyes shut against the buffeting sunlight. 
“Oh, I don't want to do that again yet.” He wiped his face with shaky hands.

Jeff smiled. “Rest here for a while until you're ready to go back. That was great, Dr. Shepherd. 
Really, really great. Are you in any pain?”

“I'll be all right,” Derek said. “I just need. To catch my breath.”

Jeff nodded. “Well, you can page me or a nurse if you need help. It'll get easier. See if you can sit 
here for at least thirty minutes. It's good exercise for your back, even though you're not moving.”

“Oh, Derek, sweetheart, you're looking so much better.”

He looked at them, eyes flaring wide with startled surprise. “Mom. Mere. I didn't even see...” He 
lost his breath and his composure and his voice, shivering. Not with cold so much as exertion. He 
ran a hand through his hair and looked at the floor, his eyelids drooping. A small sound rumbled 
deep in his throat, and when he looked up again, he seemed barely sentient. “Where's?” he 
muttered, his voice confused. He looked, gaze hooded, around the room.
His mother frowned at him. “They're outside. I just wanted to say good night. We'll come back in the morning.” She turned to Meredith. “During visiting hours. In small groups.”

He blinked. “Okay,” he said, his voice deep and weary.

Mrs. Shepherd smiled despite a watery, pained look in her eyes. “We all love you, sweetheart. Get some sleep. We didn't mean to wear you out.” And then she left.

Meredith stood in the middle of the room, unsure about what had just happened. She'd told the Shepherds off. And. They'd listened?

Jeff nodded at her. “Maybe we should see if we can get him back to the bed after all,” he whispered, looking in Derek's direction with a pointed stare. “I wasn't expecting him to pass out like this. Has he been tired? It's been long enough since his surgery that he should be okay with very short walks.”

Meredith sighed. “He has four pushy sisters and a freaked out mother.”

“Ah,” said Jeff.

Derek wasn't exactly out yet, but his head was tilting slowly, like a tree about to topple for a lumberjack, and his breathing had eased from panting into soft, solid lengths.

“Leave him be,” Meredith said. “I'll watch him.”

Jeff shrugged and left, closing the door behind him, and that left her and Derek alone. Blessedly alone.

For the first time in hours, silence laved her eardrums, and she felt her muscles begin to wilt. She heard the vague noises of the hospital outside the door, but they were distant, removed, like soft echoes from outside a cave. Tension she hadn't even realized she'd been harboring bled away. She walked to the chair where he sat and collapsed in front of it on her knees with a sigh.

She put a hand against his thigh, splaying her fingers. The pressure stocking was smooth like silk and very thin, one of few remnants of his intensive care unit stay. His intravenous line was still active, and his nasal cannula sat against his pillow, ready for use when he was lying down. But sitting up, here, in the chair, nothing. No EKG lines. The surgical drains were gone. All of it was gone.

“Hey,” she whispered.

His hospital gown rustled, a whisper in the quiet. He looked at her, dull eyes open in the barest crescents, but he didn't speak. The sun glowed brilliant orange gold. He blinked once, and then his eyes closed.

“I walked,” he said.

“I saw,” she said.

“It was exhausting.”

“I know,” she said. She rubbed her thumb along his kneecap. “You have a big, freaking family, Derek.”

He laughed, and she regretted the wince of pain that spread across his features. His eyes opened,
just for a second, watery with discomfort. “At least they didn’t bring the kids,” he said, voice weaker.

“Or the husbands,” she added with a chuckle. She rose to her knees and touched his face. He leaned against her palm and stilled. “Do you want to try and go back to the bed?” she said. “I’m sure it’s more comfortable than this little chair.”

“Maybe later.”

His eyes shut. His body tilted against the arm of the chair. And then he slept sitting up, propped awkward and kinked to keep his balance without his conscious thought.

She considered waking him and trying to get him to move so he’d at least be more comfortable, maybe not develop a crick in his neck or a permanent bend in his abused spine, but he’d been so tired. All day. Then he’d walked.

She couldn’t bring herself to prod him back to life. Instead, she shifted, molding her back against the chair next to his leg, and rested her cheek on his knee. She let her thoughts drift as her own exhaustion chewed away at her mind. The sun beat down through the window and bathed her with pleasant, unwavering warmth. Her eyelids dipped once. Twice.

She didn’t mean to fall asleep when she was supposed to be watching him. She didn’t. But somewhere along the way, she did.

When Derek’s new nurse, a slight woman named Marcia Holding, arrived with a glass of water and his afternoon cocktail, Meredith sighed and attempted to stretch, blinking the cobwebs away. Her muscles wailed at her. She glanced at her watch, squinting. An hour. A nice nap, at least. The sun had sunk a bit lower in the sky outside the window.

Derek woke, but he took quite a bit of prodding from Marcia before he was able to take the glass and the pills. The nurse took the glass away from him after he’d finished and departed, leaving Derek disheveled and blinking and her squirming up from the floor. She wished she hadn’t fallen asleep drooling on his bony knee with her spine curled like a question mark, but there wasn’t much she could do about it at this point.

“I have to get up,” he said as she stumbled away from the chair and lunged to wake up her quadriiceps and calves. Her skin started to tingle as pins and needles jabbed her up and down her legs, and she resisted the urge to hop and stamp her feet.

She tested her ankle, and it took her weight without flopping around. That was good. She glanced at him and smiled. “Ready to go back?” she said.

“No, I mean...” His face bloomed scarlet. “I have to get up.” His hands wandered shakily to his IV pole, and he rose to his feet without waiting for her to set herself up to help or support him. His body pitched forward, and he let loose a gasp of surprise.

“Derek,” she hissed. Her muscles burned with energy as she reached to catch him. Her ankle twisted and pinched, but she ignored it. She grabbed his shoulders. He stumbled into her, almost lost his balance entirely before they managed a hesitant equilibrium. His arms slipped around her hips, and he breathed in her ear.

“Little dizzy,” he said, his voice faint and lost against her throat.

“You think, Derek? You’re only on about a gallon of narcotics right now,” she said. “Take it easy, okay?”
He turned and took a step toward the bathroom. The IV pole trundled after him as he took a second step. A third. A fourth. She grabbed his waist, not caring whether he wanted help or not. He stopped midway to his goal with a gasp, eyes closed, and he loosed a curdled, sick sound that made her heart break.

“Okay, a lot dizzy,” he amended.

Well, stop being a big, dumb idiot and let me help you, she wanted to say, to snarl, to growl. She rubbed her palm against the flat of his stomach. “I've got you,” she whispered instead. Please, believe me.

For a moment, they stood there, a lopsided island in a sea of space. She was small. She knew it. She knew she wouldn't be able to do something as significant as carry him if his legs were to give out, but she could help. If all he needed was balance and maybe a little support, she could help, and that would be more than enough. She just hoped he would see it that way instead of protesting more.

He believed her. His weight against her increased as he let her take some of the burden from him. She sighed with relief and squeezed him. “It's okay,” she said.

He took another step and another, and they shuffled into the big bathroom with the IV pole in tow. He stopped at the mirror, looking at himself for perhaps the first time since the shooting. A small sound coiled in his throat. He touched his face, fingers running over his scraggly beard and his pale skin, and watched the haggard stranger staring back at him do the same.

“Your razor is outside in the duffel bag I packed from your office,” she said. “If you want it. And I found a toothbrush in your desk. There's a pair of your sweatpants and an old t-shirt I pulled from your office, too, but that's it. I'm sorry. I haven't been home, and I—”

His lower lip quivered, and he brushed at his eyes with his palms. “Mere,” he said, his voice soft and lost.

“I know, Derek.” She leaned onto her toes and kissed him. “It's okay. We'll fix it.”

The toilet posed a whole new obstacle. She swallowed. “Derek, are you okay to... By yourself. I mean.” He bristled and turned a bright shade of scarlet, which made her feel horrible, but he didn't answer right away either, which made her feel worse. She rubbed his back. “Look,” she said. “I'm going to get you a towel, your razor, and some other things. I'll be right outside. Okay?”

“Oh,” he said.

She left the door open just a crack as she left and went to grab the duffel bag where she'd stashed his things and the miscellaneous toiletries she'd managed to scrounge up for him. If he still hadn't done anything by the time she got back, she figured she'd intervene with a bit more force, but for now? She couldn't stomach it. She just couldn't.

A thump sounded behind her. “Motherfucker,” he growled, his voice quivering with deep, harrowing pain, but muffled by the door. She bit her lip. Her fingers clenched. Silence followed. She wanted to go back and help. She wanted. But he didn't ask for help, and the thump hadn't been a big one that said he'd fallen or done something bad to himself in a permanent sense. After a brief less-colorful curse and another stretch of tense silence, the quiet gave way to a familiar low-pitched liquid noise. She sighed, tension draining from her body.

All right then.
She let herself worry about other things. She wondered what she would do about the intravenous line he sported, but in a moment of inspiration she grabbed the plastic bag full of last-minute macaroni paintings his sisters had brought him from his nieces and nephews. Get well soon, they said in rainbow pasta print and smelly Elmer's glue. They were sort of adorable, and he'd accepted the offering with a wistful smile when Kathy had bestowed him with it.

Meredith dumped out the papers onto the sofa by Derek's bed, careful not to bend them or rip them, and took the plastic bag. It would do just fine. Slinging the duffel over her shoulder, she went back to the bathroom and knocked softly as the toilet flushed.

“Derek, I'm going to come in unless you say something,” she whispered against the cool gray surface.

Nothing. He said nothing.

She pushed open the door and found him sitting on the toilet, staring at his knees. “My chest hurts when I push the wall for balance,” he said, as if to explain why he, of all people, would be in the position he was in. He didn't look up.

He wasn't supposed to be pushing anything. Or lifting. Or pulling. But she kept her mouth shut.

“I brought you a towel and a washcloth,” she said. The plastic bag crinkled in her hand. “And this is for your wrist.”

He snorted, but the noise ended with a small whisper of pain. He blinked, eyes red. He breathed, long and slow, and for a minute, he didn't reply, as if he couldn't figure out how to treat his body that wouldn't punish him in return, and that bothered him. When he'd ridden the wave, he swallowed and looked at her.

“Is this your not so subtle hint?” he said.

She sighed.

At this point, the shower thing wasn't so much about him being clean anymore, not in a clinical sense. Seattle Grace's nursing staff would hardly let him stew in filth just to save his pride. Just... It was something she knew he needed, and he wasn't giving her a freaking inch.

The nurses made their sponge bath rounds in the evenings after visitors were gone, and they would be by again that night like clockwork. They'd cleaned him up a little the day before while she'd waited at the nurses' station out of sight to give him privacy. She'd spent most of the time grumbling at herself for not offering to help. It had to be embarrassing for him, being washed like that, and she imagined it would be a little less bad if it were her doing the washing. But he'd barely looked at her. Certainly hadn't asked her for help. And she just hadn't been sure how to handle the situation.

“Derek, it's not a hint,” she said, feeling helpless. “It isn't anything. You've wanted a real shower since yesterday, and now you have a bathroom to do it in. I figured you'd want a towel unless you plan to drip dry or whatever. You do what you want. If you want to wait for the freaking nurse, you can do that instead.”

She crossed her arms.

“Admit it,” he said. “You think I'm dirty and unattractive.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but then she saw his eyes, glittering. He gave her a small smile.
Teasing. Only teasing. Her fight response deflated, and she laughed. Really laughed. For the first time in days. It felt liberating, and she watched his smile slide wider. How had she gotten used to him not teasing her in the mere space of two days? Had he really been that bad?

Yes, a small voice whispered. Yes, he really had.

“I would hardly be offering you a co-ed shower if I thought you were unattractive,” she said. “In fact, I think you're pretty sexy.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. I have a thing for men in flimsy hospital gowns.”

His lip quivered, and he blinked. He looked like he wanted to laugh at her, really wanted to, and had to struggle to hold himself back so he wouldn't hurt. Instead, he offered her something clipped. Not quite a laugh. Not quite. Just a soft, stutter-y sound, deep in his throat. “That's a bit kinky,” he said. “Liking men in pain.”

She shrugged. “I think it's a remnant of my crappy childhood trauma or something like that. I'm sure Dr. Wyatt could tell you more about it.”

“Hmm,” he rumbled.

He stood, wobbly and slow, and he reached for her body to steady himself. His hands shook. “No funny business in the shower, all right? I'm fragile,” he said, a haughty sort of mirth in his tone, but his voice was breathy and he stood in the center of the bathroom against her body, trembling. The simple truth was that he really was fragile. And that thought sort of terrified her.

The duffel bag fell from her shoulder with a thunk. She drew him into a kiss. His stubble scratched her face. His lips moved, just a little, and she tasted him.

He breathed her body in with a deep, searching breath. “I said no funny business,” he whispered, but he lingered at her lips, touching.

“Kissing my husband is hardly funny,” she replied against him.

He sighed, pushing his nose into hers, and closed his eyes. “I like kissing,” he decided. “More kissing, I say.”

She laughed as he leaned into her. “Definitely more,” she said. “But later.”

He made a soft, relaxed sound, deep in his throat. It felt so nice to hear him content. However brief.

She went to work on his wrist. She capped off the catheter and pushed the IV pole out of the bathroom so it wouldn't get steam on it. She tied the bag close to his skin. The plastic crinkled as she smoothed it against his arm, where it came to a stop at the base of his elbow and at the knobby bones in his wrist, but she couldn't help trailing along his bicep, letting the soft, fine hairs tickle the pads of her fingers. He felt so good. Shaky, but solid, and it was...

Something she needed.

“It seems watertight, but I'm not sure,” she confessed as she went back to the seam of the plastic around his elbow.

“I'm sure it's fine,” he said. “It's not like I'm submerging it.”
She touched him. “Nope,” she said. “This is just a shower, not a swimming expedition.”

His hospital gown was feather-soft and worn, and it slithered under her palms like silk. The flat plane of his stomach rose and fell under her hands. His hips, lean and sleek, were solid. His hands rested against her shoulders for balance, not gripping with any sort of desperation, just resting. He seemed fine standing still as long as he had something to ground him.

She took her own shirt off first. Her shoes and socks. Her pants. Her underwear. Until she stood before him naked and unashamed. It wasn't like he hadn't seen it all before. Hundreds of times, he'd seen it. He could probably catalog every feature from memory, just as she could with him.

“I love you,” she said.

He wanted to laugh again. “A free show when I can't even stand on my own? You must love me.”

“Hmm,” she purred. “So much it's scary.”

_I pick you. I choose you. You don't. Get to die._

She waited. Sixty seconds. Just to see if he was going to try to do something by himself. She wanted to give him that much, but he didn't move. His hands stayed resting against her, and he stood, breathing. He blinked, long lashes falling down over his face, and he sighed. “I'm okay,” he said. “It's okay. I'm…”

She smiled. “Okay.”

“Yeah.”

She crouched and rolled down his pressure stockings from the lean meat of his thighs to his ankles, where they pooled against the cold floor tiles. “Can you lift your foot?” she said, placing her palm against the ankle she wanted him to move.

His grip dug into her shoulder, and his breath caught, but he managed, and she pulled his left stocking away. Then she did the same for his right.

She rose to face him and peered into his gaze. He watched her, silent, assenting but not moving. She loosened the ties over his left shoulder first, and then his right and along his side. With nothing to support it, the gown slid into the waiting arms of gravity, and he stood before her, thin and pale and hurt. Naked except for his wound dressings.

“It doesn't hurt right now?” she said, unable to stop the burble of concern as she stared at them. He had a long rectangular bandage covering the dip between his pectorals from his neck to his abdomen, a square patch under his left nipple over the bullet hole, and little butterfly tabs over the narrow cuts where his drainage tubes had been.

He shook his head. “Just don't make me laugh, please.”

“Is that why you've been so grouchy? A precautionary thing?”

“Touche,” he whispered. “I'm sorry.”

She gave the bandages a final appraisal. She wouldn't pull them off now. The water from the shower would loosen the adhesive so she wouldn't have to yank at them, and she could replace the bandages after, or call a nurse to do it.
She moved with him into the shower. He didn't need much help to walk at all, just something to balance on. Something to tell him where the ground was, and which way was up, facts that his muzzy, tired brain was apparently unable to produce on its own.

He stood by the big bench at the back of the shower but didn't sit while she fiddled with the shower knobs to get the perfect temperature. He liked his showers just short of scalding, usually, but she tamped the heat down to a comfortable lukewarm, afraid the steam and the swelter would make him more lightheaded than he already was.

When the shower head exploded into warm, beating rain, he moved under the spray and sighed with a sort of world-weary relief that made her glad they'd somehow arrived at this unspoken peace treaty. Her helping. Him accepting. Just neither of them actually saying she was helping or that he was being helped.

She gave him the bar of soap and the washcloth first, and he did a haphazard job with his arms and his stomach, with his privates, and around his various bandages, but he couldn't twist to get at his back, couldn't bend to get his legs and feet, and couldn't raise his arms to wash his face or his hair. His slow, economized movements, and the stilted way that he shifted told her novels about how uncomfortable he was, and how little his body was willing to give him for his efforts. He'd said he wasn't in pain, but she began to suspect he'd meant it wasn't any worse than usual, that it was a constant but tolerable hum in his bones, reminding him of his unwellness. He relinquished the soap to her and stood against the rail, back to the pummeling spray to protect his incision.

“Okay so far?” she asked.

“Still dizzy,” he said.

“Let me know if you need to sit. The bench is right here. We'll manage.”

He gave her a little nod and closed his eyes as she set about to soap him down from head to toe and wash the dirt away. What first, she wondered, as she stared at her pale canvas. As many times as they'd taken showers together, she'd never really done this. Washed him. But she knew how he liked to be touched and stroked and petted, and she could work with that. She imagined the way his hooded stare turned glassy and faraway when she ran her fingers through his locks during sex. What first?

Definitely hair, she decided. She grabbed the little complimentary shampoo packet from the shower rack and poured a silver-dollar sized dollop into her hand. She had no idea what kind it was. She didn't really care.

He breathed as she tore runnels into his wet, dark locks with her nails and lathered. She threaded water and warmth deep into every tangle and clump, massaging away the grease and grime and old sweat. His hair plastered against his scalp. She pulled the tips of her fingers from his sideburns to the nape of his neck and rubbed. Again. Again. Again. Sudsy water streamed down his back in the valley formed by his muscles and his spine.

“Thank you,” he admitted, deep and quiet in the thunder. “I'm,” he began, but he never finished. The word was lost in the embrace of a moan. The water pelted them. She ran a hand up the rolling slope of his vertebrae, slipping along his wet, soapy skin, and he leaned back into her touch like a wanderer returning home. His body shuddered.

She grabbed the bar of soap and the washcloth from the rack and caressed the sleek, bunching muscles in his back. He flexed, and she remembered the last time she'd touched him there, both of them deep in the earthy throngs of shouting orgasms. Suds bubbled down his latissimus dorsi, and
she stroked him spine to side along the diagonal of his muscle fibers. The washcloth rasped in the echoing space as she scrubbed and kneaded. He shook as she traced the bony line of his shoulder blades, which cut against his skin like a razor when he shifted. She rubbed soap deep into his trapezius muscles.

The last sound he gave her was a groan, but the noise had a sharp, dissonant edge. His posture seemed strange, like a question mark or some other curly cue, and not the straight, sleek line she'd seen in profile so many times in the dark or early dawn. She'd missed something in the din of the storm coming down around them, and she stilled.

“What is it?” she said.

“My back,” he said. He pushed his cheek against the cold tile wall and panted.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No. I've been sleeping on it for days. It hurts by itself.”

She put the washcloth on the railing and touched him, skin to skin, jabbing her thumbs into his pressure points. Up and down she went, spearing knot after painful knot. “Better?” she said.

He sighed against the wall. His head moved. A nod. Barely.

“Still dizzy?” she prodded.

“Yes,” he said. “But I'm okay.”

She grabbed the washcloth and resumed. She cupped his ass with her palm and stroked down to the hollow of his knees. His legs almost buckled, and she paused, breathing against his naked hip as the water sluiced between them. “Okay?” she said.

He shuddered. “Sorry.”

She shrugged and repeated, this time with gentler, slower movement, careful not to push him off balance, and then mirrored the motion from the crease of his groin to his kneecap, and from his hips down the slope of his quadriceps. She knelt and rubbed his calf and shin and the spaces between his toes, toying with the soft hairs that peppered his skin. Then she rose to her knees and did the same with his other leg, except this time, even when she was gentle, he faltered.

“Are you sure you're okay?” She hated bombarding him with the same questions over and over again, but this would not end well if he fell.

“The room is fuzzy,” he said, his voice low. Scary. Like he was going to faint.

“Do you need to sit? Derek, be honest.”

“M'okay,” he muttered, his voice tiny, but she'd had enough.

“Okay, Derek. Time to sit. I mean it.”

She guided him to the bench, and he sat, shaking as the water pelted around him. He rested, shoulder to the wall in a slouch, staring dully. His head thunked against the tiles. He was breathing hard, and his eyes looked glassy. Were this any other day, in their shower at home, she would have thought him aroused. In this case, he clearly wasn't.

“Does it still hurt?” she said. “Maybe we should stop.”
“No,” he whispered.

She frowned. “No, it doesn't hurt? Or no, we shouldn't stop.”

“Please, don't stop,” he said. His low-pitched whisper sent a shiver down her spine. “I'm fine if I just sit. Please.”

She knew they should be done. She knew it. He couldn't stand anymore. He was in pain. He needed rest.

Please.

She couldn't do it. Not when he said please like that, like he might break if he didn't have a few more minutes in this space with her, forgetting everything else.

She washed his hair again and gave him another once over with the washcloth while he rested on the bench, not so much because he needed more cleaning, but because he seemed to crave her touch, seemed to relax and uncoil just a bit more every time she stroked him and let the water wash the badness away. She did it again and again, long after it was unnecessary, until he stopped saying much. Until his face dropped forward, and he seemed to be staring at his lap for the duration because he didn't have the energy to hold his head up.

She stroked his wet hair and sighed. “You just don't know when to quit,” she said, but she doubted he heard it in the din of the water and his exhaustion when she barely heard it herself. She was a hypocrite anyway. Better that he hadn't.

She turned the water off, and the thunder ceased. He was too tired to protest at this point. Too wet and slippery and waterlogged. The drain gurgled, the spigot dripped, and he sat on the bench against the wall, breathing the drenched air while he stared at nothing. Getting him standing was a battle when he couldn't pull or push without hurting himself, and she couldn't grasp him under the arms or around his chest. They fumbled at each other, a tangled, sopping mess of naked skin, until he stood against her body, shaking and bleary-eyed.

“'I need a minute,” he said.

“I know,” she said as her eyes watered. “Only a few steps and you can rest for a while.”

He sat on the toilet seat, only semi-awake, but his body was boneless and slack, and then he actually started to doze once she'd settled him. Her husband couldn't take a shower by himself. She'd known on a fundamental level when she'd offered-but-not-offered to help, but it hurt so much more to know in a visceral sense. He couldn't take a shower by himself. Literally. He was so tired. And uncomfortable. And suffering. And it wasn't fair. Derek was the sweetest, gentlest doctor she'd ever met, and it wasn't. Fucking. Fair. How dare a patient do this? For revenge over something Derek couldn't possibly have controlled or fixed. How dare anyone do this at all? To anyone?

She sniffed once and forced herself to pull herself together.

She dried herself off, more as an afterthought than anything else, and then worked on him. She scrubbed his hair into a frizzy mess of dry-ish, explosive tangles. She tamed the snarl with a comb and some perseverance. She hoped she wasn't pulling too hard, but his eyes stayed shut, and he didn't say a word, enduring until his hair was wet but straight and clean against his scalp. She paused to throw her own clothes back on. She pulled out his sweats and his shirt and folded them on the lip of the sink.
She eyed the wet bandages. She didn't want to touch them. She didn't. But they were all soggy, now, and they needed to be replaced. She scraped the corner of the incision bandage with her nail. The water had rotted the adhesive away, and the bandage peeled from his skin with little effort. Then she removed the one over the bullet wound. The butterfly sutures could be left alone, at least.

She stared at the long incision bisecting his pectorals, the slit cuts for the drainage tubes, and at the circular but jagged gouge under his left nipple where the bullet had cut through his skin. He would have scars. For the rest of his life. Big ones that would never go away.

She debated leaving him there to grab a suture kit from the supply closet. She should have thought of that sooner. But she couldn't do it. She couldn't leave him sitting here. She would leave the wounds uncovered, for now, and drop a note at the nurses' station that the bandages needed to be replaced after she'd gotten him out of the bathroom.

“Derek,” she whispered, and his eyes slipped open like liquid.

The brief nap on the toilet seat had replenished him enough to contribute. She shaved him with his triple blade razor. He used to favor an electric one until she'd told him she liked the shave from this one better. Then he'd switched without comment. He leaned his head back and stuck his tongue into his cheek for her so she could give him a smoother finish. She held his chin while she rasped the blade against his neck, near his jugular, and down, down, down against his throat. For a moment she had to stop. Take pause. The trust he put in her was enough to make her shake with... Something. Everything. Her body shivered.

Stay with me. Even breaths. You can do it. I know it hurts.

He looked at her, eyes dark and hooded.

“What?” he said, though his serious look seemed ridiculous when his face was covered with white, fluffy shaving foam, and he was naked on the seat. She swiped the bits and pieces of hair and foam away with his towel to give him some dignity, and tossed the sopping terrycloth to the floor in a heap.

“When you were shot, I'm sorry I had to hit you,” she said.

His lip twitched. He wanted to laugh. Again, he wanted, but he didn't. “Mere,” he whispered. “Meredith. When I was shot...” His voice croaked, and he paused. Tears welled up in his eyes, but he pressed on, and they didn't fall. “When I was shot, and you hit me, all I saw was the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“Derek,” she whispered.

“Being hit was not on my list of thoughts. I promise.”

“You had a list?”

“Yes. Starting with, ‘Fuck. This hurts.’”

She frowned at him. Him making light of things seemed wrong given how pissy and angry and guilty he'd acted the day before. His shoulders moved in a cautious shrug.

“Mere, if I don't laugh about it...” His lip quivered and a torn sound split her heart in two. “I'm...” A wet sound broke the air between them, and he looked away, blinking.

She gave him a moment to regain his composure, gave him space, and let the minutes pass. In that
moment, she hated Gary Clark. Just in that moment. When Derek sniffed and wiped his eyes, she continued, not commenting. She didn't think he would want her to comment.

Getting him into his sweats was next. She put them on the floor by his feet, and he sort of stepped into them while she pulled them up his thighs. They were loose on his waist, confirmation that he had indeed lost a bit of weight. A lot of weight. But the elastic held, and the pants were soft and his. He seemed to appreciate that.

He sat down again, panting with exertion.

“Will you talk to me now?” he asked as he caught his breath.

She frowned. “We've been talking. We're talking now. Witness the talking?”

“I meant about yesterday.”

“Oh,” she said.

“The loss you won't talk about.”

“Oh,” she said again. “You saw the list. Nobody was—”

He sighed. “Give me some credit, Mere. I'm hurt, but I'm not stupid. My brain still works.”

Her throat closed up. She grabbed his shirt from the sink. She was going to hand it to him to put on. She was. Instead she collapsed on her ass against the back wall and stared at him. Her eyes blurred. “I'm sorry,” she said. “I don't think you're stupid. I swear I don't.”

“When Dr. Kepner said your loss. She didn't mean mine. She meant ours. Didn't she, Mere. I've been thinking about it all day.”

“She said your loss,” she whispered.

He shook his head. “Mere, you just shaved me, and I let you, because holding up my arms hurts, and I don't want to be covered in a scratchy beard. You washed me, and I let you, because I can't do it anymore, I need to be human, and I don't want any more strangers touching me today.” He brushed a palm against his sweatpants. “I can't put clothes on by myself. A nurse who, up until this day, I've known only professionally, pulled a catheter out of my penis a few hours ago, and now I may not be pissing in a Foley bag, but I can't even stand over a toilet without feeling like I'm going to fall, and so I sit. My sternum is broken. I have a hole in my chest. Everything hurts, no matter how many painkillers I take. Everything. I'm exhausted. And I have no dignity left at all. At least let me help my wife. I can do that. You convinced me of that much yesterday. Okay?”

“Derek...” she said. She blinked, and hot, wet tears streaked down her face.


She wiped her face with her hands and stared at him. Her throat felt raw and torn. “I was pregnant,” she said. “When you were shot. I was... That's the stuff I wanted to tell you. With the dirty sex. I was pregnant, Derek.”

Whatever he had expected to hear, it wasn't that. He blinked. “But...”

“I thought you were dead,” she said. “And I was screaming and screaming and then... I lost... I'm
so sorry.”

“But we weren't trying yet,” he said, his voice deep and low and stretched out like he was trying desperately not to fall apart in front of her. The look in his eyes cut her to pieces.

“Well, I wasn't trying to fall in love with you either,” she said. “Look how well that turned out.” Her fingers clenched against his shirt, and she twisted it into a tight funnel of fabric as thick around as her wrist and kept twisting. She wanted to die. She didn't think this conversation was going to make him feel very empowered.

“I need to wear that,” he said. He stared at the Bowdoin shirt she abused.

She pushed herself against the wall and stood, wiping her eyes. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry.” She didn't know what else to say. She handed the wrinkled mess to him. He flattened it against his knees, but he couldn't lift his arms over his head without wincing, and so he sat there, shirtless. The angry incision and the bullet wound glared at her. She bit her lip as she knelt in front of him, staring.

“Are you okay?” he said. “I mean... Your... You.”

“I'm fine.”

“Did you get checked by—”

“I said I'm fine, Derek.” Her snapping, harpy voice bounced around in the bathroom, discordant and unpleasant against her ears as it echoed off the tiles. She growled, more to herself than anything else. “Here,” she said. She picked up the shirt and helped him get his arms through the sleeves, and then she pulled it over his head.

As the soft, gray t-shirt settled against his torso, he pulled at the hem, straightening it. It looked wrinkled and more than a bit ridiculous, now that she'd twisted it to all to hell, but, again, he seemed happy enough with the fact that it was his, and he was wearing it.

He took a breath. “Meredith, you should—”

“I don't want to get checked,” she said. She rummaged in his duffel bag for the spare toothbrush she'd found in his desk. Who kept a spare toothbrush in his desk? He did, apparently, because he was Derek, and he was a freaking health nut who had floss and other crap where most people only had pens and slightly chewed erasers. She jabbed the tooth brush package at him like a spear, and he took it “I was only three weeks along or so. There was a little cramping and some blood. I'm fine. I am. It doesn't hurt anymore. Pregnancies that terminate this early don't need doctor visits, Derek.”

She felt silly to be lecturing him about it. He was a smart man. He was a surgeon. And he'd been married to a world-renowned obstetrician.

The toothbrush package crinkled as he fiddled with it. “Mere...”

“I made the decision when I saw you waking up after surgery. I'm fine.”

“You just decided to be fine?”

Her lower lip quivered, and she lost her composure all over again. “Yes,” she said. She placed a palm against his cheek. It was smooth and dry, and she couldn't help but roll her fingers back through his wet hair. “You're alive. You being alive is what I needed. The rest is sad, but in the grand scheme of things, it's immaterial or whatever. We can make more babies later as long as
you're still alive. There is no other you, and I need you. Please, don't be angry at me.”

“Why would I be? Mere, why would I be...”

With an awkward, shaky motion, he stood up. For a moment he was fine, and then he flailed. She grabbed his hands and held him as he stumbled to the sink for support.

“Mere, why?” he said.

He crushed the toothbrush packet and threw it in the trash bin by the sink. She watched him brush his teeth on his own while she tried to think of a way to turn her garbled, messy thoughts into words. He had to stop in the middle for a break to rest his arm, but he brushed without assistance, and that made her heart twist into a tangled mess. Nobody should be this ecstatic when her husband brushed his teeth by himself. She hated Gary Clark. Just a little bit more than before, for just a moment longer.

“Because I didn't tell you,” she said. “And I... Yesterday. You were angry at everything, and you've been in a lot of pain. I didn't want to upset you anymore, not after... All this. I didn't want... I thought I could wait. Just for a little while. Until you were better.”

He spat into the sink. “Mere, I wasn't angry.”

“You were angry, Derek. You're angry now,” she said. She touched his shoulder while he ran the dirty toothbrush under the faucet, but somewhere between toothbrush washing and when he went still, her touch turned into clutching. His muscles tensed in her grasp, like a fire was welling up inside him, and she knew. She knew she was right no matter how much she didn't want to be. She sniffed, and she hated Gary Clark a bit more. “You're angry at everything. And scared. Maybe it's not burbling over right this second because we're talking about babies and you're brushing your teeth, but it's there. And you're having nightmares. I may not have any freaking idea what to do about it, but I know you. I know you, and I...”

He bowed his head and stared at the drain with a hopeless, endless gaze. His knuckles turned white as he gripped the porcelain. “I wasn't angry at you. Not yesterday. Not today. Never. I'm...” He turned to her and tilted her chin to him with his hand. “You saved my life.”

His face had a pale, dumbstruck, frightened look to it, like he still couldn't quite grasp that his life had needed saving at all, let alone from a crazed gunman bent on revenge. She looked away, at his neck instead of his face. She couldn't watch his face because it made her upset all over again. It made her hate even more, and she knew she shouldn't. Gary Clark was dead.

“Cristina did,” she muttered.

“No,” he said. The watercolors of the world tilted backward as he forced her gaze up again. Up at him. He kissed her lips. “You did. I wouldn't have lived long enough for her to touch me if...” Something in his eyes broke, something dark and upsetting. He blinked, and he was crying. Crying like a dam had broken loose. But he puffed out a desperate, frustrated sigh and grunted, forcing himself through it with shaky breaths. He built himself back up, brick by brick. “Take some credit, Mere, for god's sake.”

“I don't want any credit. I just want you to be breathing. And healthy, and okay, but...”

He stared at her, face desolate. “I am breathing, Mere,” he said, almost as if he were trying to convince himself more than her.

She blinked. “I know.”
“I'm working on healthy and okay, I swear.”

He moved. Toward the door in a sort of stumble shuffle shamble. His shaky hands found the door frame, he paused, took a deep, shivery breath, and then he moved back toward the bed. Midway, he wavered, and she wrapped her arm around his waist to give him balance. He put his hand on her shoulder, blinking like if he did it fast enough, his gaze wouldn't be blurry, and he wouldn't be upset or on the verge of falling apart. She knew. She knew he was trying to show her he was trying to be okay, and it wasn't working. It wasn't working at all.

He reached for the bed railing, and then he pulled his hand back like he'd been slapped. “Fucking,” he half hissed, half moaned, unable to finish the curse. He inhaled, and then he couldn't stop, because each time he sucked in a breath, which put pressure on his sternum, she watched his face crumple into agony, and he gasped, starting the cycle again. He put a hand on his breastbone and his lips tumbled open, like he was hoping the inferno at his incision site would escape in a snarl of fire and stop torturing him. His torso started to shake, and he sat on the edge of the bed as though his joints were made of glass, and if he moved more than an inch at a time, they would shatter. When he caught his breath, he looked like he'd run a gauntlet and lost.

“Derek...” she said. She wanted to hug him. Instead, she stood between his knees, her thighs stopped by the mattress, and cupped his shoulders. She stroked his arms. “I don't expect you to be Superman. You're Derek. You're just a person. And you were hurt. Really, seriously, light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel hurt.”

She watched the ghost of Gary Clark slink and cower in the shadows of his face. Derek blinked. “He was going to kill me,” he said.

Mr. Clark, no...

“But it's over,” she told him. “It's over, and you're all right, and I'm all right.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “We're okay. And Gary Clark is dead. He's dead, Derek. He can't hurt you, or anyone. He's dead.”

“The men that shot my dad got away,” he said, and she stilled.

She didn't know what to say to that. She didn't have any idea at all. Her mind swirled as she recalled the way Derek had acted around Mr. Dunn, the serial killer, and the pieces clicked into place. She trembled with uncertainty. I'm sorry was all she'd had to say when he'd told her how his father had died. I'm sorry. Just a bad day all around, I guess. The degree of her insensitivity cut her to the quick like a ten-blade, and she clenched her fingers, gathering tents of his wrinkled shirt in her hands.

He wiped his hands against his face, leaving wet, salty remains behind.

“Is that what you've been dreaming about?” she said.

“Sometimes,” he said.

Silence settled down around them like a blanket. Millions of things to say ran through her mind, but not a single one seemed appropriate. She settled for standing there, in his space, to let him know she was there, because if she said something stupid again, something like Just a bad day all around, I guess, she would never forgive herself, not when he was this fragile.

He shook his head and sighed. “We really made a baby?”

She sighed. He apparently wanted to change the subject even more than she did. She smiled despite
the ripping pain in her gut that told her this was far from over. She smoothed a lock of his hair that had dried funny and sticking out, and then collapsed beside him.

“We really did.” She leaned against his shoulder, and he rubbed her back while she touched his thigh. “I was so happy, Derek.”

His hand stilled. “You were?”

“I didn't think I would be,” she said. His shirt was soft, even if it was wrinkled. And he smelled like soap and clean things. Strange soap, with no aftershave, while they sat in a strange bed. She missed the subtle scent that was just him, male and heady and hers, the scent he left behind on pillows and shirts and places he spent time. She sighed again and wished she could just curl up against him and tell him the story while he stroked her. She rubbed her palm along his thigh, feeling selfish, and unable to stop the yearning at the same time.

“I threw up breakfast for a whole week before it clicked,” she said. Wistful. She sounded wistful about vomiting. How had that happened? How had any of this happened? “And then I didn't want to buy a test. Because I didn't want to know. I was ready to be upset. Like earthquake preparation or whatever. You know how to respond, like running under a solid door frame. But you know you're going to freak out when it actually, seriously happens.”

“Us procreating is like dying in a massive earthquake?” he said. “You're making me feel really great about this, Mere.”

She pushed his shoulder lightly, careful not to push too hard. “Derek,” she snorted, and she laughed. God, she loved how he could make her laugh. Even when the world was crashing down. Even when she was afraid to hit him even in play, or hug him because she didn't want to squeeze too hard. Even when they'd lost a baby.

“I finally grabbed a test from the supply room, and then...” Her voice fell away. She kissed him through his shirt and rested, staring but not seeing.

“And then?” he murmured.

She shrugged. “Then I wasn't upset. And I couldn't wait to tell you. That's when you found me in the hall. While the shooter was loose. I was on my way to tell you, Derek. I'd given up waiting for the dirty sex. I was too excited, and Cristina really wanted to see you cry.”

“She should stop by now, if she wants to see that show.”

“Derek...”

He sighed. “I have to admit, I'm a little disturbed that Cristina found out my sperm worked before I did.”

“I'm sorry,” she said, and she meant it. She meant it deeply. “She caught me right after I was finished in the bathroom with the test, and I was busting at the seams. I came to your office and scheduled dirty sex right after.”

“And then I got shot,” he said. It was the first time he'd said it that night without any intonation. She looked at him. He seemed all right, for once.

“Yeah,” she said. “And then you got shot.”

He blinked, but his eyelids languished while they were closed, and he drew a deep, upset sort of
sound into his chest. “I'm really tired, Mere.”

“I know,” she said. She forced herself to smile. She'd attacked his family for keeping him up all
day, and then she'd done the same, but at least he felt like he could tell her. When he was exhausted
and couldn't talk anymore. He could tell her. Unlike his family.

He smiled. “I asked for it, Mere. Not your fault.”

She stilled, wondering if she'd spoken aloud. He winked, eyes sparkling despite his exhaustion. “I
love you,” he said, his voice thick and heavy. I love you. I get you. Simple fact. His eyes spoke
volumes. And then he wilted in the undertow of too much for one day.

She helped him lie back against the bed without jarring himself again. The sheets whispered as she
helped him slide across. She reseated the nasal cannula over his nose, and the bed hummed as she
laid him back flat. She hooked up the IV line while he watched her, quiet and breathing. She pulled
a fresh set of pressure stockings from the cabinet by the bed, rolled up his pant legs, and helped
him into them. His feet seemed cold again, and she wished she had socks for him. She made a
mental note to go hunting later as she rubbed warmth into his toes. Maybe the gift shop had some.
If worse came to worst, she could head home tomorrow for a little bit while his family was
invading his room like a born again Normandy.

He pulled the blankets over his body and sighed. “I feel better,” he said.

She smiled, this time not forced. She smiled, and it felt wonderful. “Good,” she said. She sat by his
hip and leaned over him, kissing him, and as she hovered there in his space, nose-to-nose, she
watched him watch her. “I want to try again, Derek,” she said. “When you can. When you're ready.
For the dirty sex.”

He grunted. “When I can? You know that part's not broken. Right?”

Hot blush streaked across her face, and she pulled back, startled. “I meant. I mean when you can
exert... When. I didn't mean to imply that you can't. Um.”

“Hmm,” he said. “Just a bit shell-shocked from the catheter. Give it a few days to recuperate.”

She giggled. “Derek, you're such a freaking letch...”

“Sex in the elevator while I'm in a wheelchair after heart surgery would be pretty dirty,” he said.
“You have to admit that at least...” But then his body relaxed, and he slept before she could admit
much of anything. She stood and raised the bed railing, leaving him secure and dreaming, maybe
even about dirty wheelchair sex from the odd twist of his lips, a smile halfway to carnal pleasure
and other naughty things.

Pushing aside the discarded macaroni drawings she'd left there earlier, she settled herself onto the
sofa, stretching out her aching back. The hot, orange sunlight streaming through the windows
dipped low faded to the deep purple of twilight. She watched him breathe as he slept. In and out. In
and out. She still couldn't get over how such a simple thing could sound and look so miraculous.

He didn't wake when the orderlies brought in the cot for her and set it up beside his bed near the
window next to the reading chair, even despite the racket they made, what with their grunting and
heavy breathing. The bed squeaked, too, and it twanged when they banged it into things. It even
made a loud resounding crash when they flattened it against the floor, but he still didn't budge.

He didn't wake when the orderly brought his dinner, either. The slight, curly-haired woman
whispered, “Dinner time, Dr. Shepherd,” over his reclining form. She pulled the tray table over
Derek’s bed at his waist and left the tray on top of it. The woman nodded at Meredith as she left and closed the door behind her, drowning out the distant sounds of people and movement and things into something almost silent, but not quite.

The food steamed and stank and made Meredith's stomach growl while she tossed and turned on the cot. She debated whether to wake him up for it, but decided sleep was probably the better for him of the two options. It still stank, though. Like food. Food she hadn't eaten in she couldn't remember how long.

Feeling like a felon, she crept over to his tray table and took a forkful of limp string beans from his plate. She chewed. The beans and spaetzle split apart in her mouth with little assistance, telling her they were processed and probably microwaved, but she sighed anyway. Food. God, food, how she'd missed it. She sampled the mashed potatoes as well. They were too salty, too buttery, and not even a small chunk of potato remained in the frothy, grainy mix to tell her that they were real and not instant. She couldn't tell if the chef was simply whip-happy, or if they were really the kind of mashed potatoes that started in a box. She took one more bite, and then she stopped.

“You sure you don't want some?” she asked his sleeping body.

He didn't reply.

“You're sort of missing out,” she said. “It's pretty good. Well. It's not horrible, I mean. Or maybe I'm just starving.”

Nothing.

She poked at the main course with Derek's fork. “I think this might be real steak, Derek. This is like the pinnacle of the entire hospital menu, and you're missing it.”

Silence.

She jabbed the fork at him and glared. “You. Are missing it!”

She kneaded her hands together when he didn't stir. He wouldn't mind if she took just a little bit. A rubbery piece of steak was in her mouth before she could talk herself out of it, and she gagged. Seattle Grace definitely needed to include A-1 with this meal. Or at least ketchup. Anything to hide the yucky lack of flavor, a lack that meat was not by any stretch of the imagination supposed to have, even when it was this well done.

“I. Am a horrible. Person,” she told him as she chewed.

She poked at the little slice of cheesecake on the side, but she couldn't bring herself to steal that, too. That was just too mean. Stealing cheesecake from her husband when he was sick. Too despicable and wrong.

The orderly came thirty minutes later to take the tray back. She pouted, not only because Derek hadn't woken up to eat any of what she'd left for him or to witness her martyrdom about the piece of cheesecake, though she'd broken down and stolen the cherry garnish at some point, but also because she really was sort of hungry still. She made helpless, starving faces at the orderly's back as she walked away with the tray, and then Meredith made an executive decision.

She would eat, if only to reduce her chances of grand theft eggs in the morning.

She didn't bother to change back into her scrubs or into something more presentable. Nobody would care. This was a hospital. People walked around in their pajamas all the time, and her
pajamas looked more like gym clothes anyway. On her way down the hall, she stopped by the nurses' station and told them about Derek's bandages. Then she went to the cafeteria, which was now empty of police officers, and grabbed a pita sandwich to take back to his room. The steaming chicken and Caesar dressing smelled delicious. Delicious and good and tasty and... She didn't make it. She scarfed it down in the elevator, nearly choking she inhaled it so quickly. Her stomach rumbled its thanks as she polished off the last leaf of lettuce.

When she returned, she found him sitting up again, chatting with the nurse who'd brought him his pills and a fresh set of wound dressings. Well, more, the nurse was chatting at him while he worked on his chest, and he was replying in short sentences consisting of yes, no, or his trademarked hmm noises. His hair stuck up in all directions, having dried while he slept, and he looked more than a bit groggy. After Marcia finished with his bandages, she pulled his shirt down. He tossed back the cup, and Meredith watched him down an Oxycontin tablet, followed by some Percocet. She really couldn't blame him for being too dizzy to walk straight, not when he was on that kind of mind-blowing cocktail.

When they'd moved him from ICU, they'd taken him off morphine in an attempt to get him on the drugs he'd be using when he went home. Just to make sure, while he was still in their supervision, that there weren't going to be any gnarly side effects, and that the medication worked for him and gave him an acceptable amount of pain relief.

She waved at Marcia, who smiled. “You saved me a lot of work today, Dr. Grey,” Marcia said.

“Don't let her fool you,” Derek said with a smirk as he blinked muzzily in Meredith's direction. “She just wanted to see me naked and vulnerable.”

Meredith laughed. Marcia blushed. And then the nurse left.

“You really want to try now?” Derek said when they were alone. His voice had been scraped raw with a fierce sort of hope, like he'd convinced himself, in the back of his mind, that she'd never really want to try, and now she was dangling the opportunity at him like bait on a hook for a gullible tuna or something. He looked over from the bed, eyes still hooded with sleep, like he wanted to collapse back into dreaming, but not before he said what he wanted to say. “I mean not now. But...”

She padded over to the bed, pushed the railing down, and sat by his hip. She stroked the weave of the blanket. He stopped her with his hand, and she said with a small nod, “Now. Yeah.”

“You're sure you're ready now?”

“I love you. You'd make a really great dad.”

“You shouldn't do this just because I want it,” he insisted.

She shrugged. “I'm not. I want it, too.”

“I'd understand if you want to get through your residency first, or...”

“Derek?”

“Hmm?” he said.

“I really do love you,” she assured him. “But shut up.”

He couldn't stop himself from chuckling, and she waited while he recuperated from that, stroking
the side of his face. She hated that he couldn't laugh when he wanted to. That was the worst of all of this.

“T'll make a deal with you,” he said when he found his voice again, low and throaty with lingering discomfort.

“Yeah?”

“I'll shut up if you get checked out.”

She kissed his temple. “It's late, Derek. I'm not sure anyone in OB will be available. I suppose I could go to the emergency room...”

“Try,” he said.

“If I do this, will you shut up, get some sleep, and eat the entire meal they put out for you next? You missed some moderately acceptable steak this time around, and I didn't see you do more than pick at the salad they brought for lunch today.”

For a minute, he didn't respond, and she wondered if he'd fallen back asleep. “You drive a hard bargain,” he mumbled. “I'll have to think on this.”

“Derek...”

He waved his hand. “Go. I'm closing my eyes right now.” Except he opened them and watched her.

“They're not closed.”

“They will be,” he said. “I'm thinking about the delicious fake-egg substitute and the greasy, drippy, processed sausage they serve on Saturday mornings, and I can't contain my excitement. Couldn't you have at least picked pancake day for this sort of bet?”

She laughed. “You're such an ass.”

He winked. “But you love me. You said so.”

“I do,” she said, and she stopped at the threshold to look back at him. “How did that happen?”

“I told you, Meredith,” he said. His eyes flared, heady and full of awe as he looked at her. “I'm someone you need to get to know to love.”

She snorted. “So, you're blaming me for this whole mess?”

“Well, I was drunk.”

“And vulnerable?” she guessed.

“And very good looking,” he added.

“You mean an ass.”

He sighed. “Mere,” he said, his suffering tone belied by his expression of glee. “Go get checked.”

“Derek,” she mimicked him, straight down to the sigh and the way he'd rolled his eyes. “Close your eyes.”
He grinned. “On three?”

They shared a playful, connected stare. She licked her lips, and he watched her like he couldn't decide between collapse and chasing her despite horrible consequences. Collapse or chase? Collapse was gaining ground. She knew, in that moment, that even if they didn't count, he wouldn't make it more than a few minutes, but what the hell.

“One,” she said.

She tapped her index finger against the door frame, a haphazard tick of motion to vent her thrill from her body. They were playing. They were playing, and it was nice.

“Two,” he murmured.

His eyelids drooped, but she drank in the lazy, carefree smile that spread across his face. He looked like he almost felt human again. She flipped the light switch with that image caressing her retinas, and darkness bathed his room.

“Three,” she whispered into the shadows, and she left him to sleep, closing his door behind her.
Chapter 5

A two-headed woman with four eyes stood over him, arguing with the One who sat by his shoulder. Every time he closed his eyes, his shoulder shook like an earthquake, and he had to wake up again. Had to. Didn’t know why. His chest hurt, and he wanted to sleep. The sounds that hit his eardrums seemed to waver in and out. One moment, all he heard was the thunder of his breaths. Another moment, pounding silence. Another, words.

When sound turned on, silence became words. “We can’t use that thing,” the One said, her words a cacophonous spear in his brain. “We don’t know where the bullet is! We need to keep his back straight, and he could bleed out anyway if we let him sit up.” Earthquake. “Stay awake, damn it!”

“How do you see anything else to use? It’s all I could find.”

Off. His heartbeat stuttered in his ears. On.

“—looks really bad...”

“Shut up, April. He can hear you, for god’s sake. Derek!” Something squeaked by his ear. Earthquake. He stared. “Derek. Derek, stay awake,” the One said. “Can you move? We need to —”

Off. Mouths moved. What did they say? He blinked. The left side of his body had been set ablaze by a wailing chorus of unhappy nerve endings, and he couldn’t fill his lungs.

On. “—lease, Derek,” the One said. “Please, get up. Get up. Get up!” Something pulled at him. “We need to get you into this wheelchair.”

“He’s in shock. Everybody grab hold. Mere, you get his feet, we’ll push him up on three, and then we’ll all lift. One. T—”

Off. Hands grabbed at him. The world lurches forward, and he stared at the floor in front of him because the ceiling was gone. Blood spread all over the floor in a lake. His blood? He blinked. What was... Why? Fingers gripped under his armpits and yanked. The fire in his chest ignited down his arms. He screamed. He didn’t hear it, but his chest burned. The hands at his feet let go.

On. “—hurting him. Stop. Stop, stop. Please.”

“Meredith, he’s got a bullet in his chest. He’s going to hurt no matter what the hell we do, and we need to get off this catwalk. Now. Pick up his feet and deal with it.”

“Meredith,” he said. Slurred. Why did he? Imitating. All three of them stopped.

“Derek?” said the One. “Derek, please. We need to move you. Can you stand? Please, can you stand, so we don’t have to drag you? Please. I love you. Please, stand. Please. I know you can do it.”

He didn’t understand the words anymore. He didn’t know the people. Just the intent. The desperation. The syllables didn’t make sense. But he wanted to help. He wanted to make it better. Why? Meredith. He wasn’t even sure what that was anymore. A person? An idea? But he knew a Meredith would want him to listen. He stared.

Fire sliced his face. The world swept to the side. He blinked again.
“Derek,” said the One. Beautiful face. “Please. Focus. Focus for me. It's me. It's Meredith. And I need you to—” Off. But he saw the word finish on her lips.

Move. He could do that. Could he? Yes. His hands found the One's shoulders and grabbed. Something gripped him around the waist. He pushed with his legs, pushed until his muscles shook. The floor fell away, and he was spent.

He collapsed against her, falling. She buckled but held, and he was up. Not falling. People wrapped around him on all sides and let him drop, slowly, into a chair. There was a chair? He couldn't breathe sitting up. Fire in his chest. He coughed.

Fingers ran through his hair. Arms around him hugged tighter. Warm when he was cold. The One said something next to his ear. He felt the soft beats of air against his skin. On. “—love you. I love you. It's okay. You'll be okay. Just hang on. Please, hang on.”

She melted away, and the world started to move.

Silence. Off.

Somebody tapped the wall by his door, and the sleep he'd so precariously purchased evaporated.

“Dr. Shepherd, I'm sorry, but you have to wake up now,” said an apologetic whisper. The light flicked on and speared his eyelids like a storm of tiny, stinging daggers. Shoes squeaked against the floor tiles. The empty space by his bed filled with a warm body, a person watching him. A hand touched his shoulder.

Not Meredith.

The sluggish desire to flinch away died as the bed hummed, and the world moved. His body folded at the waist. Air buffeted his face as somebody moved. “Hmm,” he groaned, but the noise stuck in the back of his throat like saltwater taffy and sounded almost pained. He scrubbed his face with his hands. His head spun, and he wanted to go back to sleep.

“Dr. Shepherd, it's 6 AM,” said the voice. “You need to take these.”

He pushed his eyelids open into slits, unable to bear the sharpness of the light. “What?” he said. In the blur beyond the fuzzy haze of his eyelashes, he saw the tray table over his lap, a cup full of water, and a white, indistinct spread of dots. Pills.

Sleep launched a final assault. His eyelids dipped shut. His head fell forward. His chin touched his chest. His awareness of the world began to falter, and the light didn't matter as much anymore.

The hand at his shoulder became more insistent, and it shook him. “Dr. Shepherd, you need to take these, or you're going to start feeling a lot more pain. I know you're groggy, and it's early, and I'm the last person you want to see, but trust me. Take them.”

“Weren't you just here?” he muttered.

“I'm sorry,” she replied, as if that somehow helped.

He would have rolled away from her, would have snuggled back under the covers on his stomach and stuffed his face under the pillow with a groan that would have made Meredith snicker, because he was a morning person, and anything that made him act grumpy in the morning was a source of amusement for her. He remembered doing some sort of groan and roll maneuver many times when Cristina would barge into their bedroom, crawl into bed, and start yammering about the newest
crisis in her life while he was still trying to sleep. Groan and roll. Like the new duck and cover. Except he couldn't roll without squashing his healing chest, he couldn't sleep on his stomach, and this was not home.

The sheets smelled clean and stark. The bed was narrow, meant only for one person. He had no privacy or personal space. And Meredith was not beside him.

“Meredith?” he said.

“She's not here right now, Dr. Shepherd.”

He stared at her cot. A head-sized impression carved a dent in the pillow. The sheets and blankets sat askew, like she'd been there with him, tossing and turning all night trying to escape the noise. She was gone, now, though. Something tugged at his memory and then slipped away in the mire.

He grabbed the cup and washed pill after pill after pill down with it, until he wanted to gag. No more, he wanted to say, but then the glass of water and the tray table disappeared. The light didn't hurt his eyes anymore, but he felt detached and far away from things. The air seemed fuzzy, and noises seemed muffled.

He'd never been a diehard coffee person, though he did partake, but after five days of being prodded and poked and in pain, he thought he might need an intravenous line of the stuff to remain functional. Wake up, he tried to tell his body. His body said fuck you.

He sat with his head tilted toward his lap, staring at his fuzzy blankets. The weave of the blanket blurred and split into doubles as his eyes wandered out of focus. All night, he'd tried to sleep. All night. In the lull after 3 AM, a magic, noiseless time, he'd managed. Now, the sleep he'd struggled for was gone, and he felt as though he'd been mugged.

The nurse handed him the heart-shaped pillow he'd grown to despise more than anything in the world. Lethargy bled into dread. He blinked. He had to wake up, damn it. Had to.

“I don't want to,” he said, picking up his head.

He inhaled, short, soft little gasps that made him think he might be panicking. Was he panicking? No. Preparing. The room came into focus as his eyes caught up with sentience. He stared at Marcia, who looked like she wanted to cry. If he weren't in such a wretched mood, he might feel bad that he was being a horrible, argumentative patient.

“I know,” Marcia said. “I know you hate this, Dr. Shepherd, but I think if you get pneumonia, Dr. Grey wouldn't be very happy with you, and I'm sure you don't want to go back on a ventilator because your lungs have given out. Do you?”

He blinked. *You're still on the ventilator. It's all right.* Not all right.

*Hi,* Meredith had said, her face dissolving into tears. *Oh, god, hi.* She'd touched him, palm to his face, and he hadn't been able to figure out why his body wasn't moving the way he wanted it to, the way he commanded. The room had been dark and quiet and strange, but familiar. Why did he know it? His body had felt cold, like a block of ice through to his bone marrow, and he'd shivered, but he couldn't fix it. Mere, he'd wanted to say, except he couldn't speak. Mere, why am I stuck?

*Does it hurt?* she'd asked. No. But he hadn't known why she expected him to hurt in the first place, and he hadn't been able to ask. She'd made him warm and safe. Why was safe important?

Exhaustion had pulled him under.
He'd woken again to a repeat of the same confusion, but at least she explained. *Cristina got the bullet out. She fixed you. And Gary Clark is dead.* For some reason, he'd found those ideas upsetting. What bullet? Who was Gary Clark?

Bits and flotsam had returned as the moments turned into hours, like little glass pieces in a once-shattered puzzle. He'd remembered, eventually. His body hadn't been working right because it'd just been shot, in shock, and then under anesthesia for who knew how long with his chest cavity pried apart.

Gary Clark had shot him.

“I'll try,” Derek said. He gripped the pillow to his chest and forced a quick chuff of air from his lips, hoping it would be enough to appease his persistent caregiver. Something in his chest shifted and started to burn, but the thrum of pain was brief. Something he could handle.

Nurse Holding frowned. “Dr. Shepherd...”

“Marcia,” he said. “You're asking me to stab myself over and over with a giant machete. I'm sorry I can't be more enthusiastic about it.”

He was being horrible. A horrible patient. The kind of patient that sent doctors like him home at night wishing they could murder puppies and small children, and as a doctor, he rarely had to interact with any of his post-ops for more than thirty minutes a day. He couldn't imagine how the nurses felt. Nurses who had to deal with difficult patients for hours on end. Nurses who had to deal with a difficult patient who was technically their boss.

He pulled the pillow against his incision, enfolding it in a tense embrace, and then he gathered a breath deep into his chest and coughed. Really coughed. Something broke inside. A sliver of pain cracked him open wide like a crowbar. An embarrassing, choking yell he couldn't help erupted from his lungs when the first wave of shock hit his incision. The agony didn't stop. The pain made him inhale, which slammed him with another knife and another. Every time he wanted air, suffering plunged deep. The room went fuzzy and swirled around his head.

“Really good, Dr. Shepherd,” said Marcia. “Can you give me one more?”

No, he wanted to cry, but she'd been with him for days now, been dealing with him for days. He pulled the pillow against his chest, pressing until his arms shook. He filled his lungs to the brim and coughed. A dry, choking sob followed the cough. No more, he wanted to say. Please, please, no more, except he couldn't bring himself to speak. He clutched the pillow and lay there, gasping and being stabbed. Over and over.

“Squeeze my hand, sweetheart,” said a soft, low voice, and a warm, weathered palm found his.

His mother touched his hair, and he squeezed. He trembled, and his body felt like it was going to break. The tendons in his arm snarled with ache. His elbows locked with tension. And still, the knives impacted. Every time he breathed.

“One more, Dr. Shepherd,” Marcia encouraged. “Just one more.”

“Mmm,” he moaned, his eyes quashed shut, and then he forced himself full of hurt again. Pain sliced into his breastbone, sharp and unforgiving despite his lackluster last effort. It wasn't his best cough. Hell, the weak stutter of breath barely even counted, but his battered diaphragm was done. His chest was done. His body was done, and he didn't have the energy to do much else. If this wasn't good enough, there wasn't much he could do about it.
His mother rubbed his shoulder in a way she hadn't done since he'd been fifteen and shell-shocked and silent in her arms. His father's blood had still been stuck in his shirt and dried on his hands, and she'd held his skinny body against hers, as if she hadn't been able to convince herself he was okay. They'd found a sort of solace in the waiting room of the hospital where the body had been taken. Police officers had trudged in and out, whispering quietly at the edges of the corner they'd sequestered in the bustling space of Mount Sinai’s emergency room waiting area.

Somebody had covered him in a blanket. He didn't know who. A detective, maybe. Not his mother. His little sister had been hysterical, and they'd taken her away because his mother hadn't been able to be a functional parent right then. Hadn't been able to be a functional anything. But she'd rubbed his back, and they'd sat there, blank. Waiting.

Waiting for nothing. The body had been taken to the morgue. There was no exhausted doctor that was going to come in any moment with hopeful news. But nobody had been in any shape to move, and so they'd waited. One of his aunts had taken his other sisters somewhere away from all of the confusion, and even in the hectic midst of one of Manhattan's busiest hospitals, his life, for once, had seemed quiet. Nobody had been pushing him or whining at him or teasing him or wanting something that was his. Nobody had bothered him. His mother had breathed softly in his ear, and beyond that, he'd heard nothing, just felt the soft rasp of her palm against his shivery back while he'd stared into space.

By the time Derek came back to himself, Marcia had left him, and the sky had lightened a sliver from pitch black into dark, deep blue. He stopped clutching the pillow and breathed, and his mother's hand ran up and down his forearm in a quiet whoosh, whoosh, whoosh.

“Just keep breathing, Derek,” she said.

“Mom.” His voice sounded raw and torn, like he'd screamed for hours, though he knew he hadn't.

“Shh,” she soothed. “Sleep if you want.”

He reached for the button to lower his bed, but before he found it, his body lowered. The sheets rustled as she pulled them and the fuzzy thermal blankets up against his body. The weight of the evil heart-shaped pillow disappeared, followed by a soft, whispering thud, and, with nothing left to clutch, his arms fell to his sides, limp.

“Are you comfortable?” she asked.

No, he wanted to say. His back hurt. His chest ached. Every muscle in his body twinged with annoyed discontent. Why haven't you moved us lately? Despite it all, it didn't matter. His muscles could bitch all they wanted. The operator was too spent to appease them.

His eyelids dipped and closed, but now that he'd been pried firmly from sleep's grasp, he couldn't quite seem to find his way back to it again. Every time he arrived at the precipice of the abyss, something would happen in the hall. Some noise. He didn't manage much more than a doze. He had a vague awareness of his mother somewhere in the room, breathing, and he didn't dream. Sounds of the hospital outside his room fluttered against his ears. A team thundered past with a crash cart, and the distant sound of shrieking alarms and frantic voices echoed beyond that.

When he gave up and forced his eyes back open, the sky outside had lightened from dark blue to depressing gray. Rain splattered against the window. His mother sat in the reading chair, reading in the dim light. He stared at her through the bed railing.

She wore a dark purple sweater and faded blue jeans. She held the book toward the window,
letting the dreary daylight hit the pages. Why hadn't she turned on the lamp by the chair? He squinted at the book title, but couldn't read it in the deep shadow. She dogeared the page and set the book beside her.

“I'm breaking the rules. I know,” Mom said. “No visitors before 10 AM.”

He couldn't bring himself to be startled, even in the haze of slow thinking gripping his brain. She'd always had that. That sixth sense that would tell her when one of her children was in her vicinity, staring, even when her back was turned, even when said child wasn't speaking, or crying, or whining, or anything at all. She just seemed to know.

“Meredith called,” his mother said, as if that explained everything, but it just made him feel more clueless.

He closed his eyes and brought his hands to his face, swiping the sleep away. Meredith. Where? That's right. He remembered. He'd sent Meredith home. Or rather, he'd asked Cristina to take her. Sometime last night. Or... Early morning? Some time dark. Meredith hadn't wanted to go, and so he'd offered her breakfast and lunch and a walk to the end of the hallway for it. For her to get some real sleep in a real bed. The walk had been what had convinced her.

*All the way down the... Derek, are you sure?*

*Absolutely. I feel good.*

Slight white lie. He hadn't felt well or good since the morning he'd said hello to her, and she'd scheduled dirty sex that night, but he couldn't see the harm in making Meredith smile. Getting her to grin at unexpected moments had become the highlight of his hospital stay.

His mother stood, brushed her palms against her jeans pockets, and turned toward the bathroom. He closed his eyes.

*They paused in the hallway and ducked into an alcove. He couldn't sit up straight. His chest hurt, and he couldn't breathe. He wanted to be flat. The three women stilled behind him and went silent. A hand came around and covered his mouth, gripping him so hard it hurt. He blinked. Why?*

“I think he went left,” somebody whispered.

“Left goes nowhere. He's going to turn around. We need to move.”

*His body whipped backward in the grips of inertia. He moaned, but they didn't stop. They moved. Fast. All he could do was watch the walls of the hospital fly by.*

His mother stood over his bed, staring down at him as he came back to himself, his heart beating like a drummer pounding out a frenzied solo. His chest ached. He couldn't remember when she'd moved from the chair to the side of his bed. Couldn't recall her footsteps, and the disorientation bothered him.

He swallowed, feeling detached and strange. The painkillers made it a little hard for him to recognize subtleties. He had the vague sensation of his body sitting several feet in front of his brain, and the delay between thought and action stretched the longer he was awake. The air seemed hazy. Thick with cotton. And when he moved, even just a little, the world sped up into something terrifying and hard to process, like every object around him was a car on the Autobahn, and he was a simple pedestrian debating the insanity of crossing.

“Do you need anything while I'm up, sweetheart?” Mom said.
“I don't need a babysitter,” he snapped. Want. You don't want a babysitter, whispered a tiny voice. Want is the key word. Not need.

She shrugged. “Good, because I'm not here to babysit you. Do you need anything?”

His bladder was full, but he didn't want to get up to fix it, and there was no way in hell he would ask his mother for the plastic urinal sitting like some sort of flag on top of his heart monitor, several feet out of his immediate reach. Emptiness gripped his stomach with a distant ache. After eating meal after meal to appease Meredith, his body had started becoming interested in nutrition again. He wanted food. His back shivered with stress. He wanted to relieve it. Except rolling onto his side made everything inside his chest feel like it was going to tumble onto the bed, and shortly after that, the shooting pains began, which left him with the option to sleep on his tortured back, or not sleep at all.

The fight bled out of him as the insurmountable list kept growing in his head into something unmanageable and hard to remember, and then he couldn't remember what his mother had even asked. The shivers in his back became barbs of pain, and he shifted.

“Mom,” he said, his voice breathy. His eyes stung. He blinked when he realized he didn't remember what he'd been planning to say. At all. “What?”

She frowned. “Meredith said she'd be at home for a few hours, and that's all she said. Your name didn't even enter the conversation. I connected point A to point B and decided you might like some company, that's all. I'm not here to hover or babysit. If I'm bothering you, I'll leave.”

He stared at the ceiling, trying to hold onto the upset twisting at his brain. “I'm not very good company.”

“You're awful company,” she agreed. “Shame on you. Yelling at your mother. Barely talking. Sleeping all the time. I expected a world class tour when I got here, and I still haven't seen this trailer of yours that Nancy says is awful.”

A noise cracked at the back of his throat, and he blinked. The room blurred. “Mom…”

“Derek,” she said. She touched his arm. When he dared to look, he found her smiling at him. “Derek, I'm teasing, dear. I'm sorry. I didn't realize you would take me seriously.”

“Oh.” He closed his eyes and tried to settle the floaty feeling. His back twitched as a spasm jerked all his muscles in tandem. How could he be this disconnected and still this uncomfortable?

“If you want to go back to sleep, that's fine,” Mom said. “I brought a very entertaining book. It's about a group of women who make quilts. You'd probably loathe it, but I find it to be a good dose of escapism.”

“I'm…” He wiped his face and fumbled for the button that would raise the bed, but he couldn't find it. The pads of his fingers found nothing but cold sheets, the plastic trail of his nasal cannula, and then the bed railing. “Just…”

“Up?” his mother said. He saw the remote in her hand.

“Yeah.”

He tried to ignore the spinning feeling as his head gained elevation. He breathed, a soft, wet sound in the quiet. He tried not to stare at the door. He wanted... “That's all they do? Make quilts?”
“That's all they do,” Mom said.

“What's the plot?”

“They make quilts.”

“The plot is that they make quilts?”

“Yes.”

“You're right,” he said. “That sounds loathsome.”

Mom laughed. She touched his face. Brushed her warm palm against his sideburns and ran her nails through his hair. “Oh, sweetheart,” she whispered. “I've missed you so much.” But she didn't say anything else for a long time, and he found himself drifting. Drifting away. The bed railing fascinated him for some odd reason, and he lost track of her as she moved away and did...

Something.

Noise drew his attention back to her. She pulled the small backless examination stool against his bed and sat with a heavy sigh, close to him so that he could talk to her without turning his head and staring across a void of empty space. He stared, and it took him at least twenty seconds before he connected what his eyes were showing him with thoughts.

“There are better chairs in the break room down the hall,” he said. “Ones with backs.” He imagined himself walking there to get one for her himself, dressed in his navy scrubs, fresh from an operating room where he'd made a save.

_You're not the man here._

She shook her head. “I'm fine for now. Tell me about Seattle. Why do you like it?”

He leaned back against the pillow. Rain plinked against the window and ricocheted into the grayness. He watched and let the gray lose focus. If he lost focus, he didn't see the muzzle of the gun, or the way Gary Clark had looked at him with hate. Derek thought. Why Seattle?

“It's quiet for a city,” he said. “It's the first place I've ever lived where I can hear myself think. I like the ferryboats on the water. And the green. And the rain. The people here. They're... less worried about everything.” _You hurt me when you decided to kill my wife._ The gun clicked as Mr. Clark pulled it from his pocket, and Derek found himself staring down the barrel of a black pistol. “Or...” His voice broke. “I don't know.” He didn't remember the impact; he just remembered staring up at the ceiling. He couldn't breathe. Dr. Kepner screamed and started talking, but he couldn't remember the words. “I'm...”

“I planted a new rose garden,” Mom said, pulling him from the undertow as though he were four again, and wandering too far away from the beach. He'd lost his watering can, once, but Mom had grabbed his arm, and he'd swung into the air as a frothy wave had swept the can away. He'd been very upset about the watering can, but she'd shrugged. _It was either save the kid or save the can. I think your father would have been a little upset if I'd chosen to save the can, don't you?

_I guess, Mommy._

He blinked, and the painful memories scattered like the raindrops hitting the window. He breathed. Focus. He could focus on the now. Except he couldn't remember what his mother had said. He swallowed. He wasn't sure if he liked the now any more than the then.
“I planted a new rose garden,” Mom said again. A re-prompt. Like she knew he had the mental capacity of a guppy.

“What happened to the old one?”

“Black spot and an early frost,” she said. “Wiped everything out. But I bought some new hybrid teas, and they’re blooming. Do you do much with your land here?”

“Oh, he said. “We’re planning a house. The construction workers broke ground just a little while ago.”

“Derek, that’s wonderful. I’m sure it will be beautiful. Do you have plans that I could see? Or pictures?”

“Meredith has them back at the house. I’m…” He thought of her, sleeping in their bed, in their home, covered in their sheets. He thought of himself, lying down beside her, skin to skin and warmth to warmer. She wrapped her arms around him. They didn’t talk. They slept. But she held his body, which didn’t hurt, and he finally found repose that wouldn’t abandon him too soon. He closed his eyes as longing welled up inside like a tidal wave.

“She’s very good for you,” Mom said, her voice soft. “Meredith.”

“I’m sorry she kicked all of you out.”

“Nonsense,” Mom said. “She was right. All of us lost our heads for a bit.” She shifted, and the chair groaned. “We saw on the news, and you didn’t call, but you would have called if you were okay. It would have been the first thing. Then the phone rang, but it was Mark. And we just… Lost our heads.”

His breaths started to skip in his chest, sending slivers of pain deep inside. “Mom, I—”

“Hush,” she told him. “Just hush. Mark called. We’re here. You’re alive. Mark is safe. Meredith is safe. I won’t insult you and say that everything is fine. But it’s not the worst, Derek. It’s far from the worst.”

He looked away and closed his eyes against the flood.

He lay on the ground, his body shutting down. Gary Clark stood over him with the gun pointed at Dr. Kepner. Derek couldn’t understand the words. She spoke too fast, and he couldn’t breathe. Then she ran, and Mr. Clark brought the gun to bear on Derek again.

“No, Mr. Clark,” he said. Gasped. “Mr. Clark.”

Derek held up his hand as though it would mean something, as though it would stop a bullet or entreat the man to have some mercy, but Mr. Clark stared, an angry, distraught Grim Reaper. He aimed the gun. A roll of agony like a typhoon forced Derek flat, blinking. He waited to die.

Mom picked up his hand and squeezed it, hurrying him back into the present. “It’s not the worst, Derek,” she said. “It’s not the worst.”

He punched the railing with his free fist. The bed jostled, and his chest felt like it would break. Mr. Clark took aim again, and Derek flinched. “It feels the worst,” he said. “A man shot and killed seventeen people just to find me, one of Meredith’s best friends is in a coma, we lost a baby, and now I’m… I can’t…” Breathe. Think. Do anything.
His mother blinked, a dead look of shock flattening her features. Her fingers tightened around his.
“Oh, sweetheart.”

The fury and frustration heating his body cooled when he realized what he'd said, what he'd blurted. “Please, don't tell them.” You bailed on Thanksgiving. And Christmas. And you live in a trailer. And you're getting a divorce. And then there's the slutty intern. “I don't want the third degree from them. I don't want them giving Meredith the third degree.”

“I won't tell them,” Mom said quietly.

“It just...” He sighed. “It feels the worst. I'm not even... I didn't know about it. Before. She just told me two days ago. She thought I'd died, and the stress, I guess... Or something. She thought I'd died. I was dying. I...”

Meredith talked with Cristina and April in the corner, whispering. He couldn't breathe. An elephant sat on his chest, and every nerve in his body wailed with pain, enough to make him nauseated on top of all that. He was too cold to shiver. His eyelids wouldn't move more than a millimeter either way. An indistinct, hazy detachment pulled at his mind, urging him to let go, but what scared him more was that he wanted to listen to it.

Meredith babbled at him as she returned to the table, assured him it would be fine, touched his hand and his shoulder, but the floaty feeling made her words hard for him to understand beyond her tone of voice.

“Kiss me,” he said. Pull me back to earth.

Their lips touched.

“I'm not gonna die,” he said as she pulled away. “I promise.”

Except he'd thought at the time that it was another white lie. Another way to make her smile for him one last time. Meredith kept acting like he was the hero of the fucking universe for keeping his word, and that only made it worse. He was alive, yes, but he'd had nothing to do with it. Whatever kept him breathing?

Not him.

You're not the man here.

And that was scariest of all.

“Mom.” He felt like he was sinking, like the mattress was pulling him in, and he wanted Meredith more than anything. His fingers clenched, and his sight blurred. A blink, and something spilled against his cheek, wet and crawling like a bug.

“Hush, now,” his mother said. “I'm here.”

She stood and leaned across the railing, and he couldn't stop himself from wrapping his arms around her. Something in his chest shifted. His torso wailed against the movement, but he couldn't help it. Couldn't... His fingers pulled tens of her fuzzy sweater into his palms, and he mashed his face against her neck and breathed in the scent of her perfume, something old and rosy and singular to her for as long as he could remember. In the space of seconds, he'd been reduced to infancy, wailing for his watering can. He supposed he'd almost died then, too, at the tender age of four, but just like five days ago, once and then again, somebody else had plucked him from the snapping jaws of a gruesome fate.
“He was going to shoot me again,” he said. “I was going to die, and I couldn't do anything.”

He couldn't do anything.

Her fingers pulled through his hair, and she listened, but didn't comment. Her breathing slowed into something schooled. Her hands, smooth and soothing against his back, lost their varied rhythm, and became more like windshield wipers on a low setting. Back and forth. Back and forth. Methodical. Like she was trying to box herself up and shut her feelings off.

He blinked and dropped his arms, struck numb. What the fuck was he doing?

He took a steadying breath despite the pain it caused him deep inside, and he closed his eyes. The effort to stop the floodgates nauseated him, but he managed. His eyes burned. His throat felt raw and full, like he'd swallowed an egg and it'd gotten stuck just above his Adam's apple. He didn't speak again for a long time, convinced that if he opened his mouth, it would all come out again, all that whiny, horrific sniveling.

His mother released him, and she sat back on the chair and stared at him with familiar, knowing, sad eyes that made him feel even sicker inside. Hers was a timeless look that he'd seen at countless troublesome points in his life, and it usually followed whenever he told her in no uncertain terms that he didn't want to talk about it. It. Whatever it happened to be at the time. Her stare was one that said, “All right. But I'm here.”

When the orderly arrived promptly at 7 AM with a still-steaming Belgian waffle and some orange juice, Derek thought he might vomit. His earlier hunger had collapsed with his stress, and now the smell alone of food made him twitch.

“Have you eaten?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“I had some coffee before I came up here,” Mom said. “I'll grab a danish later after I've woken up a bit more. Eat. Don't let me stop you.”

He stared at the golden waffle, which was covered in a golf-ball-sized glob of melting butter. A little ceramic cup on the side held a thick puddle of congealing brown syrup. His innards twisted.

He forced another breath deep into his chest. Calm down. Calm. The fuck. Down. If he didn't eat, his mother would know without a doubt that something was still wrong, and he'd promised Meredith. Breakfast, lunch, and a walk down the hall. He'd promised, and that at least was a promise he could keep without external assistance.

“Is Meredith okay?” he asked.

He shoved the butter globule to the side with his fork and didn't touch the syrup except to move it as far away from his plate as possible. He stabbed the soggy waffle and worked a block of it away from the larger piece.

“She sounded fine on the phone,” Mom said. “Maybe a little worried about not being here for so long.”

“She's not taking care of herself,” he said. “We've started trading.”

“Trading what?”

He chewed and swallowed, tasting nothing but paper. The waffle felt like a brick in his stomach. He took a sip of orange juice, but the sharp, acidic citrus only made the brick feel like it had jagged
“I tell her I’ll take a walk,” he said. “Or eat. Or something. In exchange for her doing something. Like going home to sleep.”

His mother remained silent for a long time, staring at him. The distance between them felt like the miles between Seattle and Manhattan, though she still sat right by the railing. “She's just worried about you,” she said.

“She's barely gotten any rest since this happened,” he said. This. The gun clicked. He jabbed the fork into the waffle and took another bite. He managed not to gag. “I have nurses and visitors and orderlies coming in at all hours.”

“Hospitals are some of the most exhausting places in the world for people trying to heal. It seems counter-intuitive, but...”

He set the fork down with a small tap against the tray. His throat felt thick and full again. He couldn't do this. He couldn't be fine anymore. He shouldn't have said anything. He shouldn't have permitted the gates to open. Jamming them shut again with so much bursting through was a Herculean affair for the healthy. Not him. Not when, physically, he'd already been torn apart.

He closed his eyes. The room revolved around him, drunken and sluggish, but moving and unstoppable. Disorientation took the churning in his gut and made it tenfold worse. He wanted Meredith. Meredith made his world stop. Surely, she would stop this horrible spinning.

“I want to go home,” he said. With a deep breath, he faced the room again. Colorless walls inside the room. Endless, dreary clouds outside.

“Have they said when you'll be released?”

“Two more days at the earliest.” He stared at his half-eaten waffle.

“You look a lot better today, I think.”

“I look like I was shot, Mom,” he snapped, and the last vestige of his resolution not to be upset in front of her shattered like a bomb had gone off inside his head. He clenched the hemline of his blanket, because if he didn't, his hands would be shaking.

“No, Derek,” she said, her voice soft. “You look like you were shot five days ago. And now you're healing.”

A searing, ironic laugh skipped over his lips, and he winced as he paid for it in backlash. He shoved his tray table away. He pushed the blankets off his body. Chilly air hit him through his thin pajama pants.

“Derek, what are you doing?”

“I need to use the bathroom,” he said. “Is that okay with you?”

She looked like she wanted to say something, and he stared at her, ready to be nasty, ready to bite. If she said one word about the fucking urinal, he would probably say something he would never forgive himself for. Instead of berating his stupid choices, though, she smiled.

“All right,” she said, and she made no move to help. She stood, but only to return to the couch for her book.
Appeased, he scooted forward. The nasal cannula dug into his nose and upper jaw as the line cut him short. He yanked it away. It landed on his pillow in a tangled, distorted heap. He fumbled at the railing, infuriated with the long, exaggerated movements he had to perform just to keep his chest from flaring into agony.

He could push the bed railing down. He could slide over the side of the mattress. He could find his footing. But the expedition felt like a sports replay in slow motion, made only more torturous by the burbling anger that he had no way to release except by snapping at his poor mother, and the underlying fear that he wouldn't be able to do this. Walk to the bathroom.

The pads of his feet flattened against the floor. Cold seeped through his socks from the immaculate tiles. His back jabbered at him. Pain. Pain, pain, pain. He tried to straighten up, but he couldn't. Not quite.

He took one step. Another. He hobbled at the speed of a geriatric hip-replacement candidate. One step. Another.

“I'm fine,” he said when he felt his mother's eyes on him.

The room whirled around his head. He gripped his IV pole and gritted his teeth. He'd walked yesterday while Nancy and Kathy had accompanied him as perky cheerleaders. He'd walked the day before with Meredith. He could fucking walk, now, no matter how upset and tired he was.

A catalog of slow steps later, he shut the bathroom door behind him and sighed.

The mirror showed him horrors. His scratchy beard had started poking through his skin again, rusty black-brown and a few gray hairs mixed against his chalky skin. His eyes were puffy and bloodshot, his face haunted. Chunks of his hair stuck out in all directions. He wanted to shave. He wanted to comb his hair and wash his face and brush his teeth. He wanted it all so badly his brain ached with the desire, but the thought of all that effort and pain just to look like a presentable victim instead of a trashed one left him staring. Just staring. His breaths tightened into something painful. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he couldn't fucking breathe because it fucking hurt.

He shuffle-stepped over to the toilet and closed his eyes. The room kept revolving around him, even when he wasn't looking at it, except when he was standing, the dizziness wasn't just an annoyance. His breath caught. He held onto the IV pole because that was all there was between him and a trip to the floor, or at least, that's what it felt like, and he didn't want to test himself without support. The wheeled feet on the pole were a problem. He'd tried numerous times, and he couldn't get the pole close enough to the bowl to use it as support, not without bending his arm back farther than his chest wanted it to go. Biting his lip, he raised his arm. Maybe he could take his weight this time. Maybe. It'd been five days. Maybe his mother was right, and he'd healed. Just a little. He flattened his palm against the wall and leaned. Agony lashed up and down his breastbone, and he reeled backward, unable to stop the moan that skipped from his throat.

This shouldn't be rocket science. He swallowed.

He wasn't sure he'd be able to get up again if he sat, but like the last however many discouraging trips, he didn't have a choice. He dropped his pants, he sat, and he peed like a fucking girl. Shut up. No talking. You're not the man here. I'm the man, Gary Clark had said.

He leaned over his knees, feeling nauseated and sick as he emptied himself.

*Let's reassess in a few days,* Cristina had said the day before while Dr. Altman had stood by, watching. Cristina had taken one look at him and decided he wasn't well enough to go home,
wasn't well enough to take care of himself at home if Meredith or someone else wasn't there, and Dr. Altman had agreed.

Reassess. Like he'd done with his palm against the wall, only to fail. They'd make him stay here longer than two more days. He knew it. His body wasn't going to fix in two days what it hadn't in five.

He reached for his duffel bag by the sink, ignoring the way his arms and his chest told him this was a bad, bad idea, stretching so much. Meredith had gone home yesterday and brought him some clean shirts and socks and pajama pants, a whole pile of warm, soft things that were his. He dragged the duffel bag to his feet and jammed his hand deep into the mess of clothing. He pulled a shirt free, a black Fruit-of-the-Loom cotton shirt, nothing on it but a stray golden hair the length of his forearm. Meredith.

He didn't bother to swipe the hair away. He brought the shirt to his face and inhaled. The fresh, clean scent of Meredith's favorite detergent wafted against his nose, and he calmed down a little.

He pulled a clean pair of cotton plaid pajama pants and white socks from the mess in the duffel, and put those on the lip of the sink with his shirt. He tried to reach the toilet handle to flush while he was still sitting, but his back snapped bloody murder at him, and he couldn't do it. With a soft groan, he forced himself to his feet and back into the spinning, dizzy nebula of the room. He turned and hit the handle with his palm. The bowl came alive with a roaring whoosh.

He stumbled out of his dirty pajama pants and grabbed the new set from the sink. The roll of his clean socks lost its precarious perch and fell into the bowl of the sink. The reflex to catch them didn't fire. He watched the roll fall and settle over the drain. The sink was mostly dry, and he couldn't bring himself to care about his socks yet.

He stared at the pants in his hand and let gravity unfurl them. He tried to get them the right way around, with the elastic waist open toward the ceiling, drawstrings facing away from him. Simple. This should be simple. He fixed brains for a living. But what should be wasn't what was. Exquisite tiredness swept over his body as he fumbled with the drawstrings to get them out of the way.

He held the pants at knee level and tried to step-shift into them. He succeeded, barely, and he rested with his hip against the sink, panting like he'd run for miles and miles. His vision fuzzed at the edges. Thoughts stuck in his head like gooey molasses. He decided he might fall. He didn't even try to catch himself. His body slipped. An inch. Then the world found him again. The bathroom snapped into place, and he knew he was by the sink, breathing. Barely balanced, but standing.

He swallowed.

His eyes started to burn again. This shouldn't be so difficult. None of this should be so difficult. Normal heart surgery patients were past this point by day five. Normal heart surgery patients who hadn't been fucking shot. Normal heart surgery patients who were already going home.

He reached behind his head and grabbed the collar of his t-shirt. Something in his chest stretched and twinged. He pulled up and over his head. The soft, worn shirt came down over his face and his arms and promptly got stuck on his intravenous line.

He cursed and fumbled with the damned thing, trying to get the line to release from the shunt in his vein, something he'd done countless times to seizing, psychotic, or simply crazy patients, and yet it had never seemed so complicated as it did now, when he wasn't even moving. The line fell free after several tries and swung like a pendulum through the air, back and forth. His dirty shirt slipped
to the floor.

He grabbed his clean black shirt. Where his pants had been complicated, his shirt almost seemed impossible. Getting the front of the shirt facing the right way for application to his body, and then shoving his arms through the correct arm holes drained what little energy he had left. In a last ditch effort, he raised his arms over his head. His chest quivered with discontent, but he was fine. He was fine. He was fine.

When he bent his elbows and tried to bring the shirt down over his head, his incision line exploded in a roaring column of fire, and something popped audibly. Something that wasn't supposed to pop. He couldn't stop the yell of pain that punched from his lungs. The shock sent him to the ground with a jarring, agonizing thud that resounded up and down his spine like a ringing bell, and he rested against the sink, head spinning, shirt stuck and twisted about his neck and elbows while he choked.

*You're not the man here.*

Gary Clark took aim again, and there was nothing Derek could do but wait.

The bathroom door whooshed open. His mother burst into the room, moving faster than he'd ever thought she could move at her age. “Derek, what—” she blurted, but her voice cut short when she saw him on the floor.

He wanted to die as his mother helped disentangle him from his shirt. He leaned his head back against the sink and stared at her, eyes blank and dull. Her gaze, soft and brown and concerned, didn't match his face at all. He had his father's coloring and hair to the dotted i and the crossed t. He wondered how it felt for her to see her dead husband on the floor of the bathroom.


He blinked.

“Did you hit your head? Are you hurt? What happened?”

“Something popped when I put my shirt on,” he said, his voice hollow and far away.

She lifted the shirt she'd just helped him straighten out, and she felt his chest and stomach, clavicles to bellybutton. Her touch was warm and methodical and gentle, practiced and professional. “Nothing seems displaced,” she said. “I think you might have just popped your sternoclavicular joint. If your breastbone starts to ache or swell, you need to tell your doctor immediately, though. You're not supposed to be reaching over your head like that for a reason, Derek.”

“I'm sorry,” he whispered as his eyes started to leak, unbidden, and he just couldn't hold it in anymore.

She frowned. “Whatever for?”

“For putting you through all of this again. I'm...”

She grabbed his face with both hands and stared. He couldn't look away. “You haven't put me through anything, Derek. I am your mother. You're sick. It's no different now than it was when you were a baby. If you're sick, I will be there. And I will help. It's what mothers do, and I knew that when your father and I chose to conceive you.”

“I'm not sick, Mom,” he said. “Somebody did this to me. With a gun. Just like Dad.”
“A virus or a bullet, it's all the same,” she said. “You'll get better. Until then, I'll help. Can you stand?”

She settled back on her haunches and stood with a groan that reminded him he'd just had his sixty-eight year old arthritic mother on the cold floor. To help him with a fucking shirt.

“Mom, I'm so—”

Something in her eyes snapped. “Do not apologize to me, Derek Christopher Shepherd,” she said. “Do not apologize to me for another man's evil. I won't have you thinking I'm some burdened waif for having to see you be hurt this way. I'd rather see you this way than dead, and I'd rather have you talk to me than not talk at all. None of this is your fault, and I will not have it. Do you hear me, young man?”

He swallowed. “I think I'm going to throw up,” he said.

She pulled the trashcan to him and he clutched it, breathing. His throat remained constricted and stuck, but nothing happened. He tasted bile, but the brick waffle stayed down. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Maybe not,” he decided.

“Sweetheart, can you stand? I don't want you on this cold floor.”

Can you stand? He wanted to laugh again. Wanted to. But then he thought of what would be entailed with him not standing. She'd need to call a nurse. Several nurses. Nurses who worked for him. With his chest so fragile, they'd need to roll him onto a backboard or something. Just to get him off the floor of the bathroom. His skin bloomed red and hot just thinking about it.

“I think so,” he said. He could. He could do this one thing. Please.

She took the trashcan from him, and he shifted, forcing his legs into an Indian style cross. He dug deep into the last of his last reserves. He pushed up with his feet and his shaking thighs, making a tired, pained sound with his throat, and managed to get off the ground without using his arms at all except for balance as he swung them forward in front of himself. His mother grabbed him around the waist, and he made it all the way to vertical before he wished he was still on the floor.

Mom grabbed his clean socks from the sink and helped him back to the bed, pulling the IV pole along with them. He collapsed against the mattress. She fixed his IV. His head pounded, his back screamed, and the lights seemed too bright, but at least he didn't need to use the bathroom anymore. That was something. Right?

“Were you going to put these on?” Mom said. She waved the roll of white socks at him.

“Yes.”

He stared at his lap and waited for the new dose of humiliation, but she handed the socks to him instead of trying to put them on his feet. He didn't have the energy anymore. His socks could stay dirty. He left the clean roll resting by his hip, forgotten as soon as his fingers abandoned them. He closed his eyes and let the heavy feeling in his brain sweep him away.

_Breathe deeply, Dr. Shepherd._

“Derek,” Mom said. “I want you to promise me something. Can you do that?”
“Hmm?”

“I know you think I can't deal with this because of Dad. I know you think you have to be strong for me and for your sisters and even for Meredith, though maybe not as much. But I want you to talk to me. All right? Even if it's about what that monster said to you, or how you felt, or what you saw. I can't guarantee it won't upset me. I can't. But I want you to promise you'll tell me anyway, if it's something that you want to tell. Will you promise me that, please?”

Breathe deeply, Dr. Shepherd.

Meredith had stared down at him, the soft gray of her eyes gloomy and worried under the beating lights of the operating room. I love you, she'd said. And he hadn't been able to say it back.

“Mom,” he said. And then he fell asleep before he could promise anything.

The waves slashed at the empty white beach. Millions of stars hung from the heavens like frozen fireflies in the black. The moon rested low on the horizon, a big pie plate of light that swallowed half the sky. Wind blew across the water and the sand, a slow, breathy hush across the world.

“What is this place?” Derek asked.

His father turned as a wave crashed to shore, gurgled, and slipped away into the dark. He shrugged. “Somewhere in your head, I suppose. We all have pieces like this.”

Derek raised an eyebrow. The breeze sent fingers through his hair. “Pieces?”

“Pieces where we go to heal.” His father smiled. “I used to love taking you to the beach with your mother and sisters. Do you remember when we went to Sandy Hook?”

“Yes,” Derek said. “Every summer. That's where I lost my watering can.”

Dad shook his head and laughed. “You're never going to forget that, are you? So many good things happened there, but it's always about the watering can.”

“What can I say, Dad?” Derek grinned. “My mind was young and impressionable. Losing my awesome watering can made an impression.”

Dad grunted.

“I kissed my first girl there, too,” Derek confessed. “But you were dead.”

“Oh? Was she pretty?”

He sighed. “Not as pretty as Meredith.” He pulled at the memory, but it clung to the edges of his subconscious. He remembered the feeling of the kiss. Nerves like bugs in his gut. Anticipation. Contact. Her lips had been soft and full. She'd grabbed his hair, and he'd known then that he liked it sexually. Having his hair touched. “Her name was Lisa, I think. Or maybe Liza.” He reached for more, but his grasp returned with nothing. Just a name and feelings long past.

“You needed that to get to here,” said Dad.

Derek nodded.

They watched the water for a while. Frothy, foamy, white waves spit up over the sand and swept away. The bald light of the moon reflected off the surface of the water, turning what would have been a dark, swirling pit into a choppy plane of sparkling glass.
A shadow crept behind his father.

“Derek, listen to me,” Dad said. He turned and cupped his hands over Derek's shoulders, and he squeezed. “This is very important.”

“Dad?”

His father opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. A loud crack of thunder broke the peace. Red bloomed under his father's left nipple. Dad looked down. He touched the wound. His fingertips came away red. Then he collapsed to the ground, leaving Gary Clark standing with a gun pointed at Derek.

Two women talked in the next room, and Derek could hear them through the wall as though it were made of paper, but their voices weren't what had woken him up. His eyes drifted open. He had no idea how much time had passed, but his back seemed to think it'd been years. A glance at the clock told him years had, in actuality, been about fifteen minutes. Sharp, spasmodic pains punched through all that Percocet and all that Oxycontin, and made him more miserable than he'd ever been in his life.

“Everything looks fine, Mrs. Fischer,” said the earthy voice of one of the orthopedic surgeons he had worked with a few times. Dr. McCullough, or something. The wall muffled her voice, but only slightly. “I think you'll be able to go home tonight as long as your husband agrees to stay home with you for the first day or two.”

Derek clutched the blanket by his hip. The rain outside had slowed into a drizzle. His mother had returned to the reading chair, and the pages rasped as she flipped them in the gloom. It took her perhaps two minutes between each flip, and he listened. Flip. Flip. Her breathing had a soft, comforting quality, and he tried to let his mind drift.


“Will you promise, Derek? I know you're awake.”

He looked at his mother, who'd shifted in the chair and put her book down. She stared at him expectantly. He tried to remember why, but all the cotton in his head made it hard to think, and his traitorous back broke even the most simple thoughts into pieces.

“What?” he managed in the lull between throbbing waves.

“Promise to talk to me,” Mom said. Her eyes shimerred. “Instead of bottling it all up. I can bear a lot of things, but I can't bear that anymore. Don't do that to your body on top of everything else that's already been done.”

“Okay,” he said. His voiced sounded strange in his ears, like someone had jabbed a knife into his spine and twisted. He sat up, unable to be still under the pressure of all that discomfort. He looked, bleary-eyed, at the couch. He could get there.

“Derek,” said his mother. He heard her footsteps. He gripped the bed railing and squeezed. The room went fuzzy as she came up beside him. “Are they not giving you enough pain medicine?”

“My chest doesn't hurt.”
She brushed his cheek with her palm. “That's not what I asked, sweetheart.”

He pushed the nasal cannula back over his head and shoved himself to his feet. He could make it to the couch. He could get there. He stood, his body crooked. His lower back barked at him. He trembled with fatigue. His whole body. Like a tuning fork. He clutched her shoulders, independence dissolving into defeat.

“I just want to get to the couch,” he said. “Please, I need to.”

“All right,” Mom said.

She shuffled with him as he moved like some sort of damaged refugee across the floor. He didn't even care anymore that she was helping. He wasn't sure he would have made it without her, and he needed to move. He needed it.

“Don't sit yet,” she said when they reached the sofa.

He hovered on the precipice of collapse. “What?”

She yanked the blankets from his bed and wrapped them around his body, tight and secure like a cocoon. “For support,” she said. “I've had patients tell me it helps.”

She guided him the rest of the way, and he sat. She brought him a pillow and stuffed it behind his back, between him and the sofa. She stuffed another one by his side between his ribs and the arm of the sofa. He leaned his weight against the arm of the seat. His ribs pressed in. His chest felt a little weird, but not bad, and it gave his back some amount of relief. What had been wailing pain all morning faded to a whine.

He felt like some sort of big puffy snowman on the couch, bundled and padded on all sides, but he couldn't bring himself to protest. He couldn't bring himself to speak at all. He closed his eyes. The room spun around him in slow, disorienting revolutions and made him feel a little sick. Sleeping sitting up like this was not a long term solution, and he didn't want to think about what things would be like a week from now, or even tomorrow. He didn't want to think.

The sofa cushion dipped as his mother sat beside him with her book. Her body gave him support on a third side. She pulled her book open to page sixty-two and started reading. Darkness gripped this corner of the room, even more so than where the reading chair sat.

“At least turn on the lamp,” he said. He tried to move his arm to do it for her, but he'd been wrapped up like a burrito and couldn't move. He swallowed, paused, and wondered if she'd planned this, but he couldn't bring himself to care, and so he sat, still, a suffering island held stationary by the water.

“It won't keep you up?” Mom said. “You always used to hate lights. You couldn't sleep if the hallway light was on, even when your door was closed.”

“I can't sleep anyway,” he admitted. “I can't sleep here. There's too much noise, everything aches, my head is spinning, and I miss home.”

She touched his shoulder, hesitant at first, and then her arms wrapped around him. “I know,” she said. Her voice sounded helpless, like she wanted to take it all away for him, but knew she couldn't.

“I'm sorry,” he said, feeling useless all over again. “I'm really sorry, Mom.”
She sighed. “You are so like your father, it's uncanny sometimes.”

“What do you mean?” he said.

The flat of her palm found his upper back, and she rubbed. He closed his eyes. “He was always apologizing for things that weren't his fault, just like you,” she said. “Nobody can control the world, and neither of you ever learned that lesson.”

“I'm a surgeon,” he said. “Every day I see that I can't control the world. Every day when I want to fix something, and it breaks instead. Or at least, I used to. Back when I still actually cut.” He sighed, and he couldn't help the bitter edge in his voice when he added, “Back before this happened.”

“Well, yes, sweetheart, I know that,” Mom said. “But does that knowledge stop you from being upset when you fail, even when you know that there was nothing else you could have done?”

“There's always something else I could have—”

“I think you've just proven my point,” she said. “Don't you?” She bumped into him with her shoulder, a playful, light jostle.

He shifted. The blankets and the pillows helped ease the strain of sitting up as well, and for the first time in days, he realized he actually felt, not comfortable, but at least not like an abraded, open wound. The relief, however, was a sort of torture all by itself, though, because he wondered how long it would last before his body found new reasons to complain about its hindered predicament.

“Your father would have been very, very proud of you,” she said. “You're a fine young man despite all the flaws he gave you.”

He couldn't help but chuckle. He grunted with the pain and forced himself past it. “Thanks,” he said, a sheepish grin sliding over his face as the discomfort waned. “Your confidence in me is astounding.”

Her eyes twinkled. “I knew I still had it in me somewhere.”

“What?”

She touched his face. Her thumb paused at his lip. “Getting you to show me that beautiful smile of yours.”

“I told you I wasn't very good company,” he said.

She shrugged. “You're healing, Derek. You're allowed to be bad company. I just wanted to see my son and read my book. Thank you for humoring me.”

“Hmm.” His eyelids dipped.

“Sleep. It's all right.” Awareness flickered. “Shh,” she added, and her soothing did him in.

He rested against her shoulder, staring through his eyelashes at nothing in particular. His breathing stretched out. “Lamp,” he said, and she reached across him. Light speared his pupils, and he blinked while they adjusted.

The mere act of clearing his mind and sitting without horrible, lancing pains, did wonders for his tired brain. Even despite the sharp yellow light, despite sitting up, despite the dull, whining ache in
the back of his awareness, he almost managed to doze. Almost.

His eyes closed all the way. She rubbed his shoulder through the blankets absently as she flipped another page. His brain just wouldn't let go, and he sighed with frustration, a small bluster of upset air that sounded sort of like a gasp of pain, but wasn't really.

He gave up. He gave up trying and contented himself to sit there, a quiet block of not healthy. The narcotics made it easy to sit and stare and do nothing but think in a disconnected jumble. His thoughts started to twist inward on themselves.

“Mom?” he said.

She placed her finger on the page, holding her place, and looked up. “Yes?”

“Before Dad died, he said, 'Listen to me, Derek. This is very important.' Then he apologized. And then he stopped breathing.”

She paused, and she blinked. “Derek,” she said. “You never told me this.”

He stared at his lap. Her bedroom had been next to his on the other side from Amelia's. He remembered the muffled sounds of her sobbing night after night, after she thought they'd all fallen asleep. She used to say his father's name a lot when she slept, too. Michael. Always plaintive.

He couldn't figure out how to reply.

“Tell me, now,” she said.

“I've never been able to figure it out,” he said. “If his apology was the important thing, or if he never got to say what he wanted to say.”

She considered him for a long, long time, and he wondered if she'd gotten lost in the twists and turns of old memories. “He wouldn't have started to say something he wasn't sure he could finish,” she said.

“I wish I knew for sure.”

“I do.”

“How?” he asked.

“I just do,” she said. “He wouldn't have wanted to leave you alone. He would have been very sorry.” Her eyes spaced, and she left him behind as memories took her far away. Her eyes misted. “And I did tell you he liked to apologize for things that weren't his fault.”

Silence stretched. For some reason, her answer, her surety, didn't bring him the peace he'd thought it would. Instead, he felt empty.

His mother smiled at some stray thought, shook her head, and then chuckled. “He would have loved Meredith, you know. Very much.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. She's a scrapper. Feisty. She's, what, a hundred pounds soaking wet, and she stared all four of your sisters down like a bull-fighter. You wouldn't think she'd be able to cram that much spirit into such a little body, but she's figured it out.”
It's the chase, Meredith had said. Isn't it.

What?

*The thrill of the chase, she'd said, but he'd lost the words and gotten stuck watching the cute way she cocked her head while she reasoned. I've been wondering to myself. Why are you so hellbent on getting me to go out with you? You know you're my boss. You know it's against the rules. You know I keep saying no. It's the chase.*

Well, it's fun, isn't it?

"Tiny, ineffectual fists," he said. He snorted. Another brief pain bloomed in his chest, but it was all right. It was all right, and he was fine. Thinking about Meredith. When he saw his mother's curious look, he smiled. "Sorry, I guess you had to be there."

"Will you see if she'll come for Thanksgiving this year? I know she's not very comfortable with big families. But I'd like you to ask her. Maybe in a few weeks, when things aren't so raw with you two."

"I'll ask," he said.

"Good," she said. She went back to her book and read another few pages.

A light knock rapped on the door. The distant hospital bustle became loud and cacophonous as Amelia poked her head into the room. "Hey," she said, her voice soft. She glanced at him on the couch, buried in blankets and pillows, and her eyes creased with concern. "I just wanted to say goodbye before I left. Rachel said I could take her shift."

His mother stood with a groan that spoke of joint pain and weariness, but determination. "Already, sweetheart?"

"Yeah," said Amelia as she stepped fully into the room. She wore her hair in a simple ponytail, kind of like Meredith wore hers from time to time, but with a bit more of a polished look to it. "I got a call from—"

"Say no more," Mom said as she shuffled toward Amelia. "Give your mother a hug?"

They embraced, fingers grasping tightly at each other. Derek closed his eyes as his mother mumbled something soft and indiscernible at Amelia. Probably explaining why he looked so horrible. He let his mind drift.

Mom cleared her throat. "I'm going to clear out for a bit so you two can say goodbye. I think maybe I'll grab something from the coffee stand downstairs. Derek, sweetheart, I'll be back after lunch. Do you want me to bring you anything?"

Meredith. His bed. Home. Any combination of the three. "I'm fine," he said instead.

He heard Amelia's high-heeled shoes punch into the floor as she walked across it and then stopped several feet away. Silence. He felt her eyes peeling off layers of his skin. "I know I look ridiculous," he said. "Get it out of your system now, please." He waited for the laughter. For the comment about abominable snowmen.

She shifted, and she closed the distance between them. Her small body collapsed onto the sofa next to him, and she laid her head on his shoulder. "You don't look ridiculous, Derek. You look like you want somebody to come back and finish you off. Mom said you're in pain and that you're having a
little trouble moving around.”

“I'm wrapped so tight I can't feel my arms. Of course I can't move.”

“You want me to get you out?” she said.

He swallowed. “No.”

She squeezed his shoulder and sat with him, silent for the longest time. He hadn't seen her one-on-one this entire time. Meredith had always been around before the rest of his family had gotten there, and then Amelia had been lost in the larger pack of his family, always hovering at the fringes, not saying much. Amelia tended to clam up in larger groups. This would have hit her closest to home, too, closer than his other sisters. Closer than his mother. Amy had seen what had happened to Dad. She'd been there when Derek had watched the last breath leave his father's chest. He remembered the way she'd screamed and wouldn't stop screaming.

“Amelia, are you okay?” he asked.

She bristled. “I'm fine. What makes you say that?”

He paused at her cool, even tone. He'd definitely hit a nerve, but... He realized he wasn't really sure what he was poking at. He hadn't seen or spoken to her in years. Even after he'd moved to Seattle, his other sisters had sent him emails. Voice mails. Snail mail. Endless bombardments of stuff that let him know he was not in any way free of them, no matter how many thousands of miles stretched between him and them. But he'd received nothing from her.

“You haven't called me at all,” he said, deciding to start with the easy route. Maybe the problem was something simple and had nothing to do with their dad. “Nobody else seems to want to leave me alone. They want to weigh in on the trailer, and the divorce, and Meredith, and the Post-it, and my job, and everything else that they think is wrong.”

She shrugged. “I've just been busy,” she said. “You haven't called me either. What's your excuse?”

“Do you need a laundry list from adulterous wife to shot in the heart? My life has been a mess.”

She snickered. “You make it sound like a Bon Jovi song.”

“You would know,” he groused. He knew all of Bon Jovi's songs by heart. At least the glam hairband tunes from the 80s and early 90s. Not because he liked Bon Jovi, not even close, but because the walls in their old house had been thinner than paper, and her room had been next to his on one side.

“Bon Jovi is way better than The Clash,” she said.

“At least I didn't play The Clash on my stereo all day and all night every day and every night.”

“Yeah,” she said. “You were too busy being bossy and important for silly things like that.” Her voice dropped low, and she imitated him as she said, “Amy, do your homework. Amy, clean your room.”

He sighed, feeling like he'd just thwacked a gong, and it rang in the space between them, discordant and humming with too much energy. He'd definitely hit a nerve.

“How's your fellowship going?” he ventured.
She tensed. “Why do you care?”

“All right,” he said. His own exhaustion had already blown his patience to smithereens. “Can you give me a list or something? Of the things I'm allowed to say to you without you wanting to jump down my throat? I'm a little too fuzzy right now to figure it out by myself.”

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry,” she said. The dam broke, and suddenly she was crying. Crying all over him. “I've just... I've had a really bad couple of weeks. And I didn't... I didn't want to come here.”

“Because of this?” he said. He would have gestured at his chest, but his hands were stuck by his hips.

She looked at him like he'd slapped her. She blinked and wiped at her face. She touched his shoulder, and then she touched the blankets that kept his back stabilized. Her lip quivered, and he watched a billion things march through her expression. She loved him. She hated him. She wished he wasn't hurting. She wanted him to hurt. She felt jealous and horrible for feeling jealous all at once. She was a mess.

“I don't know,” she stammered. “I just...”

Lie. She did know, and the bullet they'd dug out of him wasn't the reason. He saw the fib immediately, despite his tiredness, despite his dizziness, despite it all. He knew her lies from miles away. I swear, this is the last time, she'd slurred. I'm not using anymore, she'd sworn. I'm fine, Derek, leave me alone, she'd said. All lies.

She'd been touchy about her fellowship, too. He refocused in that direction.

“Would it help you if I wrote a recommendation?” he said, looking at the floor. The tiles seemed to shiver as his eyes lost focus.

She gasped. “How did you...” Her body deflated. “Right. What am I saying? What self-respecting neurosurgeon wouldn't have some sort of network going on with you. You're Dr. Shepherd. I'm sure Dr. Ginsburg told you how stupid I was.”

“She didn't talk to me at all,” he said.

“Great. So, you just guessed that I'm a failure? Just pulled it right out of your ass? That's perfect.”

“I know you, and I know when you're lying,” he said. He'd had to pick up after her for years. Of course he knew. “It has nothing to do with me thinking you're a failure by default, which I don't, by the way. I never did.”

“Nobody ever asked you to be my dad, Derek,” she said.

“There was nobody else to do it.”

She wiped her face and sniffed. “That still wasn't your cue.”

He sighed. He remembered her door. Slamming in his face. Time after time after time. He also remembered chasing the monsters out of her closet, being the one that picked her up from school, and making her peanut butter sandwiches without the crusts for lunch because they were her favorite. He remembered smiles. He also remembered the incongruity of those smiles with her face when she'd blitzed herself out of her mind, and how pale she'd been when the hospital's emergency staff had revived her.
He stared at her profile. She'd healed and become someone lovely. “Is there any way I can help?” he said.

“I'd like to think I can manage my neurosurgical career without the mighty Derek Shepherd swooping in to save me.”

He closed his eyes and rubbed his fingers along the bridge of his nose. Tension made his eye twitch. “Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've done anything noteworthy in the field?”

“It doesn't matter,” she said with a sigh. “You're immortal.”

“Well, I'm sorry, Amy,” he snapped. “I'm sorry that I'm good at my job, and that I started doing it first. What do you want me to do? Quit?”

Her shoulders slumped. “I don't know,” she said. Truth. “I don't... I'm sorry. I'm just... I lost somebody. Before I came here. He died. He was a good friend of Addison's, and he died. Under my scalpel.”

“Oh, Amy,” he said. “I'm sorry.”

“It never gets any easier. Does it?”

_They don't tell you when you become a doctor it's going to be like this. They don't tell you that you're gonna lose more patients than you save. Sixteen. I'm sick of the death._

He looked at his lap. “No,” he said. “No, it doesn't.”

“Well, I...” Her voice cracked, and she looked at her watch. “My plane.”

“All right,” he said.

She kissed his cheek and smiled as she stood. She pulled at his blankets. “Let me get your arms free at least so you're not trapped with nobody here to get you out.”

The support from the blankets gave way, and he sighed as some of the ache renewed. Not a lot. But enough to remind him he didn't want to get up. Or move. Or do anything. She piled the blankets by his hip and then grabbed his pillows one by one to fluff them before replacing them.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice a low murmur.

She smiled. “I charge by the hour, you know.”

When she turned to leave, he watched her, a nagging thought tugging at his brain. “Hey, Amy?”

“What?”

“When I first got started, I had to apply to twenty-six different hospitals before I found somebody who would take me,” he said.

Her mouth fell open. “You never told us that. You made it sound like everybody wanted you.”

Truthfully, his grades right out of medical school had been abysmal. His motorcycle crash and her overdose had obliterated his study habits and tanked his grades for his second and third year to somewhere in the realm of just barely passing, a place no hospital liked to see its prospective interns. The only reasons he'd finished with an acceptable cumulative GPA were the straight As
he’d gotten in his first year and some very understanding professors.

“Gee, Amy, I wonder why.”

She blinked, and her gaze sobered. “Look. I... I know this must have been really scary. For you. I mean... With what we went through with Dad. If you ever want to talk about it...”

“I know who to call,” he assured her.

“Yeah,” she said. “Besides. I know you’re not perfect, now, so it’s not like it’ll ruin your image.”

“Cute,” he said. “Very cute.”

She walked back to the couch and hugged him again. “Love you, big brother.”

“I love you, too, Amy,” he murmured against her neck. He watched her go with a slightly bouncier step, and he felt better. Better now that he’d fixed something. Or at least sutured a gushing wound.

She stopped at the door. “Oh,” she said, snapping her fingers. “By the way.”

“Yeah?”

“Your trailer is stupid,” she said. “I love Addison, so on-the-record your divorce was lame, but off-the-record, you needed it, and I’m glad you’ve found some peace out here. Meredith seems very sweet. It’s more than a bit squicky that she’s younger than me, but I like her so I’ll deal with it. The Post-it is a bit off-the-wall, but it works for you, I guess. And I think your promotion doesn’t suit you at all. Go back to cutting, even if it means you’ll be showing me up.”

He smiled. “Good to know. Thanks.”

“Anytime,” she said, and she closed the door behind her.

For the first time in several hours, Derek was alone. He closed his eyes, and his body wilted. He leaned against the sofa arm and let his mind drift. The room spun around him in a slow, sickening waltz. For a minute, he thought he might doze again. For a minute. His awareness of the room began to slip away. His head fell forward. His muscles shut down and relaxed for sleep.

Somebody paged Dr. Weller over the intercom in the hallway. The words were distant, muffled, as though from the opposite end of a bad telephone connection, but they were loud enough to break into his respite. He snapped back into something half-awake. What. How long? He brushed his hands over his face. The clock on the wall came into focus. Ten fucking minutes. Ten.

The ache in his lower back returned like the precursor to a rain storm. Quiet. Rumbling. Foreboding. Black, angry clouds hung low over the horizon, ready to burst. He shifted, trying to ease the tension gnawing at his muscles, but try as he might, where before sitting up had stopped the twinging pains, lying flat seemed like it would be the only respite.

A breathy sob caught in his throat. He couldn't take much more of this. Nothing was comfortable for more than an hour or two at a time. Noises pinged his eardrums every time he closed his eyes. He couldn't sleep. He just wanted sleep.

He forced himself to his feet and shambled back to the bed, only to realize once he'd gotten there that all his pillows and the thermal blankets were strewn on the couch. He stared at the mattress, blank and stupid. He felt like somebody had stuffed his brain in a blender set on puree. His eyelids lowered, but he pushed them back up with sheer will. What? Pillows. Right.
He stared at the couch, at his big fluffy pillows lying on the seats. He blinked. Why did this feel like an impossible math problem?

Marcia came in with his pills, and when he turned to face the door, the room revolved around his face in slow motion. He let the carousel spin an extra time before he caught hold.

“Dr. Shepherd,” Marcia said. “I have your medication.” She glanced at the disheveled sheets on the bed and the blankets and pillows all over the couch. “Goodness, what have you been doing?” She set her things down on his tray table and bent to pick up his bedding.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “The couch was comfortable before, and now it's not.” His brain wasn't processing anything anymore. He shuffle-stepped toward the couch and bent to grab a pillow, moving slowly and exaggerated in the hopes that it wouldn't set something off inside of him.

Marcia frowned. “Dr. Shepherd, are you all right? You don't have to do that.”

“Tired,” he said.

“Hey,” Meredith said. She rolled over and faced him in the dark, eyes glittering. “Can't sleep?”

“I want to,” he said.

Her hands splayed against his naked ribs. Her body rustled against the sheets. “Let me help,” she said.

And then he was on the bed, lying flat, staring at the ceiling as Marcia resettled the nasal cannula. She tuck the thermal blanket under his armpits and took the empty cup away from the tray table. How had that happened? He blinked. Maybe he didn't care. He blinked again. The cloudy, spinning feeling renewed as the fresh dose of painkillers seeped into his bloodstream. His body shut down, and he slept. Finally.

The empty operating room echoed with his breathing. He stared at the instrument tray by his hands. He picked up a fifteen blade from the tray. The metal caught the sharp overhead lights and sparkled. He stared at the table. His ferryboat scrub cap sat in a careless heap by the headrest.

“Why did you bring me here?” he said.

Arms wrapped around him and rubbed his stomach. Meredith breathed against his ear. “Because it's your place. You need to sleep.”

He put the scalpel down and turned. “You don't understand.”

Her eyebrows raised. She pressed her palm flat against his chest. “What don't I understand?” she said. She looked him up and down, and her face melted into a luminous grin. “You look really good in your scrubs, you know.”

“He'll follow me here, Mere. I don't want him to follow me here. If he comes here, I won't have anything left.”

“It's okay,” she said. “You're safe.”

His veins boiled. Heat welled up inside him. With a roar, he shoved the instrument tray aside. Scalpels and other metal tools tinkled as they hit the ground, echoing in the empty, acoustic space.

“I'm not safe anywhere!” he said. His breaths hit the air in loud, exhausted chuffs. He kicked a
spinning ten-blade away. It skittered toward the wall and stopped with a hollow plink. “I need to get out of here.”

He looked around, but there was no door.

“I told you,” Meredith said. Her long lashes swept low over her gray eyes. “You’re safe here.”

He took a step, lost. When she wrapped around him again, he collapsed. She took him to the ground, and they curled up against the base of the operating table. “I’m tired,” he said. “I’m so fucking tired.”

She pulled him into her arms. “Rest here for a while then.”

He breathed the scent of her skin, and then pushed his nose into her loose hair. The soft aroma of lavender swept over him, and he sighed. “I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“I know, Derek,” she said. “It’s okay. We’ll fix it.”

He lay flat, relishing the black, fuzzy space behind his eyelids where the world flowed in and out. His brain squished and expanded and squished. He swallowed. He blinked. Once. Twice. The blurry room resolved.

Rain clouds had surrendered to hesitant, diluted sunshine, which fell through the window panes at a slant and covered him in a soft, soothing warmth. The clock had eaten four uninterrupted hours, and the first random thought that hit his consciousness was that he’d missed lunch by quite a bit, and he couldn’t keep his promise to Meredith.

A scribbled note on the back of an old receipt sat on his tray table. He reached for it, but his hand felt like a foreign country. He couldn’t convince his fingers to move without signing a million treaties. The paper crinkled in his awkward grasp, and he drew the paper to his face. Close. Inches. His eyes weren’t working very well either.

“Stopped by with Rachel after lunch, but you were out cold,” said the note in his mother's elegant script. He paused. His eyes hurt. “The girls and I decided to go shopping to give you some space. - Love Mom.”

He wiped his face with his hands and sighed. Fog and sleep slipped away from him with every breath. His muscles started to wake up and twinge. Even when he was barely drinking any fluids, the IV made sure he stayed hydrated. He had to fucking pee again.

He raised the bed and pushed the bed railing down, but he didn't get up. He leaned. His torso whined a little at the strain, but it didn't hurt too much. His fingers wrapped around the urinal, and he pulled it to him. He glanced at the door. Anybody could walk in. But...

He looked at the bathroom. No. He didn't want to move any more today. Not that much.

He pulled the urine under the blankets and closed his eyes, willing Marcia to not pick this moment to walk in. She didn't. He put the full urinal on his tray table. Somebody would take it. He tried not to think about it. Somebody cleaning up after him like that. He tried.

His back muscles throbbed, and he forced himself to stand and straighten up, to give them a break for a little while. He stretched as much as his body would allow. He didn't walk. He just stood. He held his IV pole for balance, but he forced himself not to hang onto it with his weight. His arm shook. His leg muscles quivered. He timed himself. He closed his eyes. Every time he felt like the ground would rush up and swallow him, he pushed his eyelids back open, absorbed what the
minute hand on the clock told him, breathed, and re-balanced.

He made it to eleven minutes and thirty-two seconds before a tall man in a crisp, clean suit and duster knocked lightly and pushed the door open without waiting for a reply.

“Derek Shepherd?” said the stranger, but there was no uncertainty in his tone. Like he already knew the answer. Yes. The man had sharp brown eyes, no beard, and a buzz cut that screamed ex-military. He was built like Mark, but towered at least three inches taller.

Derek’s fingers clenched his IV pole, and his breathing hitched. “Why?”

The man reached into the pocket of his long duster. Derek's heart pounded when he saw the gun holster. His brain stumbled through a thousand panicked, scatter-shot thoughts. This was a hospital. A public place. Thousands of people worked here and walked the halls at all hours. A crowded, noisy nurse station stood thirty feet outside his door. Nobody would—Except someone had. And now he couldn't run and couldn't fight.

“I'm Detective Raymond Wolff with the Seattle PD,” said the man. He presented his big, shiny badge.

Panic crashed and broke. Derek's face heated as he watched the badge hover for a spread of seconds. A plainclothes police officer. A fucking police officer. Not Jack the Ripper or Gary Clark or anyone. Detective Wolff stepped forward, cautious, badge out, like he knew he was approaching a bomb, and he proffered his credentials for Derek to inspect, but Derek didn't move.

“I'm very sorry to disturb you,” the detective said as he stuffed his wallet back inside his coat pocket, “But I was wondering if this would be a good time to take your statement.”

Derek swallowed. “My statement?”

“About your injuries, and about what happened here,” said Detective Wolff. “I'm just trying to close out the case file on Mr. Clark. You, Dr. Grey, and Dr. Karev are some of the last few people I need to talk to.”

“Karev is in a coma,” Derek said.

Wolff smiled. “Actually, I'm told he woke up this morning.”

“Why do you need my statement?” Derek said, unable to pause on the good news. His heart banged in his ears, and he couldn't make his mind slow down. “I thought Mr. Clark was dead.”

_Son, my name is Detective Williams._

“He is dead, but we still have to fill out all the paperwork.” Detective Wolff shrugged and gave Derek an apologetic frown. “I know this is difficult for you. It's difficult for everyone involved.”

_I know this is very difficult, but I need you to ask you some questions._

“I have an appointment,” Derek said. “With one of my doctors.”

Detective Wolff nodded. “When would be a good time for me to check back?”

“I don't know,” Derek said. He moved toward the door. He had to move. He forced his body to move despite every fiber in his body telling him not to. Telling him that he'd already worn himself out beyond his limits for the day.
“Well, I'll be here for a little bit longer,” said Detective Wolff. “I have to stop by the nurse's station to review some visitor logs. If you get back before I'm gone, will you come see me?”

“I have to go,” Derek said.

He wrapped his fingers around the doorknob and pushed himself out into the hallway, dragging his IV pole along with him. He didn't have shoes or a robe, just dirty no-skid socks and his slept-in pajamas. He looked like an unkempt, horrific shadow of who he used to be. He knew it. The bright fluorescent lights in the hallway jabbed at his pupils and told him to go back inside his room. He didn't listen.

He felt the detective's eyes staring at his back. The hairs on Derek's neck stood on end. Spurred by something nonsensical and panicking, he walked like a healthy person instead of a cripple. His strides ate the hallway. The burst of adrenaline almost made him feel normal. Almost.

“Hey, Dr. Shepherd,” Dr. Nelson said with a bright smile as he walked past, a bundle of charts tucked under his elbow. “It's good to see you out and about.”

“Yeah,” Derek muttered. “Thanks.”

When Derek rounded the corner, he came to a nauseated, shaky stop, and he leaned against the wall. His chest ached and burned from his heavy, forced breathing, and his lower back wanted him to give into gravity and fall so it wouldn't have to hold him up anymore. Bugs crawled down his face and the back of his neck. He swiped a hand at the slow creep across his skin. His fingertips came back wet and salty. Sweat. He'd sweated like he'd been at the gym with Mark. Or having energetic sex with Meredith. But all he'd done was walk fifty feet at a normal pace.

A drop of sweat slithered down the small of his back, guided by the dip of his spine. He tried to catch his breath, except the hallway started to spin. He had no idea how he was going to get back to his room. None at all. He couldn't go back anyway. Detective Wolff would be there. Expecting Derek to talk about the things he'd spent all day trying to excise from his brain.

He let himself rest with his eyes closed, face against the wall as he gripped the railing that ran lengthwise down the hall at hip level. His skin absorbed the cool temperature of the white paint. A headache bloomed behind his eyebrows, throbbing with every heartbeat.

The barren, abandoned field stretched out over the bleak horizon. His trailer sat in the middle. Rusted and falling down in disrepair. “What are you doing?” he said. His boots crunched on the brittle grass.

Meredith slathered mortar across her trowel. Her tiny body shifted, and she slapped another brick into the short line at her feet. She'd dug herself a small ditch next to the rear tire. She panted. “I said we'd fix it. Didn't I?”

Wind whistled across the dead plain. The trailer creaked on its axles.

He glanced at the meager pile of bricks behind her. She had perhaps a dozen that she hadn't already used. “That's not enough bricks,” he said.

She shrugged. “We need to start somewhere. Don't we?”

“I want to go back to the other place, Mere.”

She sat back on her haunches and wiped her sweaty brow. She set her trowel down in the wet bucket of mortar and stood. “I know,” she said.
“He'll find me here.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist and buried herself in the folds of his coat. “That's why you need this wall,” she said. “Will you help me build it?”

She looked up at him, gray stare expectant. Demanding, even. He wanted to help her. He did. He wanted to make it better. He looked at the pile of bricks, her dirty trowel, and the small line she'd made for herself. For him. Roiling dread made him swallow.

“I don't know how,” he said, hopeless.

Derek blinked. Every muscle in his body strained with tension. The back of his throat felt thick and clogged with his tongue, and he swallowed. He flexed his fingers against the railing. This was ridiculous. All of this.

He left the safety of the wall and took a test step. Success. Another step. Success. He would be all right if he moved slowly, he decided. The atrium was only a few hallway lengths away. He could find a lumpy chair to sit in and hide with the old people playing checkers until Detective Wolff left.

He made a game of it. Counting how many steps he could take until he had to stop and rest his shaky limbs, until he had to calm his spinning head. The nausea rolled in and out of his body in waves. Sometimes, he felt fine. Other moments, he spent all his effort on not heaving.

He heard footsteps behind him. The soft squeaks of somebody's sneakers on the tiles slowed and then matched strides with him. He saw a wisp of black hair in the corner of his eye. He halted, and he turned. The room wavered, like someone had placed the world in front of him on the surface of a bowl of water, and then moved the bowl. She stood beside him, blue scrubs, turquoise undershirt, her hair tied back in a messy, curly ponytail.

“Cristina,” he said.

She swiped a loose lock of hair from her eyes. She flipped the page of one of her charts and stared, intent on whatever text she saw. She didn't look up. “McDreamy,” she said.

He bristled at the nickname. At least most people seemed to use it as a compliment. With her, the syllables were aural venom. He gritted his teeth. “What are you doing?”

“I'm reviewing charts,” she said. She looked at him. “What does it look like I'm doing?”

He forced himself to take a step instead of snap at her, venting frustration into his muscles and his desire to move them. She matched him, shambling stride to shambling stride. She stood close enough to make it clear they weren't walking separately. A foot, maybe. Sort of in his space, but not quite. Like she wanted to be able to reach out for him if she needed to do so. She flipped another page and didn't watch him, but she never fell behind or skipped ahead.

“Is Meredith—”

“Zonked out and drooling in your marital bed,” Cristina said. She looked up from her charts and glared. “On your side. In one of your dirty, smelly shirts. It's disgusting.”

“Oh,” he said. “Thank you. For—”

“No problem,” Cristina said. She stared at him. Her eyelids creased as she appraised him. “It took me three hours to get her snoring. We had to watch C-Span.”
He didn't know what to say to that. He kept moving instead. One foot after the other. She matched him, stepping with him in perfect tandem. He kept going, and she kept following, until he had to stop again. His body trembled, and he rested against the wall while she stood there, reading.

“Cristina,” he said. “I really don't need any help. I'm fine.”

Her charts snapped shut, and she finally looked at him. Really looked. He wanted to flinch under the accusatory weight of her glare. “Listen,” she said. “You're five days out from emergency heart surgery. Surgery I performed at gunpoint, all while Meredith was screaming on the floor and Owen was maybe dead. Then I had to shock you twice. I worked my ass off for you to be breathing right now. So, if I see you hobbling in the hallway, and I think you're going to fall on your ass, you can just deal with me being here, okay?” She didn't wait for him to reply. She fanned her charts and warded him away with them like a disgruntled peacock. He backed into the wall on reflex, cornered, but his movement had no thought to it, no conscious decision.

“I'm reading charts,” she said. “Walk already if that's your plan.”

He stared. His breaths fell from his lips in short, stuttering gasps. The air wavered, and Gary Clark stood between them, a ghost with a gun. He wrapped his arm around Derek's neck and pulled him close. The muzzle of the pistol shoved into Derek's temple, and he couldn't get away.

_You're not the man here._

“Please, don't,” Derek whispered.

Cristina frowned. “What now?” she said.

“At gunpoint?” he managed. “Shocked me?”

Her stony expression faltered. Panic. He thought he saw it. Like she knew she'd just accidentally taken the plunge off a high dive without any idea how to swim. She'd thought Meredith had told him. Her lips parted, but she swiped it away behind a calm, surgeon-in-a-box look. A look he knew Cristina had perfected.

“Mr. Clark came back,” she said.

He couldn't breathe. He'd been lying on a table, insides open to the world, and Gary Clark had almost killed him in his helpless oblivion, but it didn't matter anyway, because his heart had stopped by itself. When Meredith had kissed him one last time and said she loved him, and he hadn't been able to say it back, that may have been it. That might have really been the last time, and he wouldn't have even known.

“What...” he said, a lost verbal tic as he fell apart.

He would have died, naked on an operating table, a tube jammed down his throat, and his chest cracked apart like a broken book. He would have been a mess for the coroner to put back together. And then he'd have lain in a box for eternity. Rotting.

“We pulled your EKG lines to make him think you were dead,” Cristina said, her voice distant, like she stood across a gaping chasm instead of a foot away. “He left.”

“Meredith was there?” He pressed his forehead against the wall.

“Yes.”
“Did she...” He breathed. “Did she see you remove...”

*I thought you were dead. And I was screaming and screaming and then... I lost... I'm so sorry.*

“No. She thought you were really gone,” Cristina said. Her palm found his cheek and she patted him lightly, like she thought he might be in the process of fainting and was trying to pull him out of it. Was he? Fainting? Maybe. He lost track of his limbs, and the ground seemed very close to him.

“Hey,” she said. Pat, pat, shake. He blinked. “Listen to me. You're fine. This is some of my best work.”

“You had to use the paddles on me.”

“Yes.”

“After he left. My heart really stopped,” he said. “For no good reason. It just stopped.”

“Yes,” she said. “Well. V-fib. But it was barely anything. We got you back pretty quick.”

He nodded. “Okay,” he said, his voice thick and low as his mind shut down on him. Barely anything. Regardless of v-fib or a true flat line, how could his heart not beating be barely anything? He couldn't think about this. He blinked, and the blur sharpened into fat, salty drops that popped and soaked his eyelashes. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and sniffed, whisking the rebellious tears away from his face. The blur didn't return, but Gary Clark stood behind them, silent, accusing.

The atrium was only one more hallway length away. Derek could see the big bay windows and a dim pool of sunshine in the distance, could hear the faint blare of daytime television and the low tumble of voices, congregating. He could make it. He certainly couldn't turn around.

“What are you doing?” Cristina demanded.

“I'm walking,” he said. “Read your fucking charts.”

Willpower alone made his body move. He dug a well into his last reserves with a shovel and sweat and deep, guttural curses, and he walked. The atrium in the distance stayed in the distance, like he swam against the current. He wanted to stop, but he didn't. He could sit when he got to the atrium.

“Sit down,” Cristina said somewhere behind him.

Blood roared in his ears. “I need to get to the atrium.”

Something rumbled. A mass tapped the backs of his knees. Lightly, as though whatever pushed him knew he would break under too much pressure. He almost lost his footing anyway, and he stopped. Stopped and tried to capture the last vestiges of his equilibrium. He turned, panting, and found Cristina bearing down on him with a wheelchair. He blinked. When had she even left to get one? His thoughts scattered and swirled.

“Sit down,” she said.

“Sit down, Derek,” she said.

“I don't want to go back to my room.”

She crossed her arms. “Sit your ass down before I push you, McDreamy.”

He looked at the chair. Cristina hated him. Sitting down would be a humiliation. Hot, red, snarling blush crept over his face as he stared at the seat. Considering. Actually considering sitting. His
body really wanted him to sit. He pulled a frustrated hand through his tangled, sweaty hair. His muscles trembled with strain.

“I said sit,” she snapped, like he was some sort of misbehaving dog.

He put a hand against the wheelchair’s arm in a slow stretch that made his body not mind the long reach so much. He squeezed the leather armrest, staring blankly at the seat. Something broke. Inside. He shuffled, shuffled, collapsed. The seat sagged under his weight. He leaned his head back and took gulping, upset breaths. The room fuzzed. He watched her take his IV bag from the pole that had supported him through his marathon, and she placed it on the hook above the wheelchair, consigning his fate to be whatever she made it.

She spun the chair and rolled him back the way he'd worked so hard to traverse.

“No,” he said, but the word was lost, halfhearted, and Cristina didn't respond.

White walls and floors and ceilings blurred as they zipped past. He watched another patient shuffling along by the railing in a stained green bathrobe and slippers. Cool air buffeted his skin. He shivered as the sweat evaporated off his skin, and they left the atrium far behind.

The world whipped right as she turned the left. He saw the nurses' station ahead. Detective Wolff leaned against the counter, talking in deep, soothing tones with a nurse as they stared at one of the computer monitors. The door to Derek's room advanced toward him, looming.

“No,” Derek said. “I need to get...” He breathed. Closed his eyes. “Please, no.”

“I'm not taking you back to your room,” she said. “Would you quit whining?”

True to her word, his room flew past. Detective Wolff didn't look up as Cristina pushed him by the nurses' station. He swallowed, nauseated with relief. Stress sloughed away. He closed his eyes and gave up. Gave up caring. His back hurt. His brain hurt. He couldn't keep track of things anymore. Too much effort. She could do what she wanted with him.

Rain spattered on the roof of his trailer. The inside cabin hovered in darkness. Bricks covered the windows halfway to their tops, blocking most of the gray light. Gloppy mortar collected in clumps between the bricks. An amateur job, but done nonetheless.

“She's not all bad, you know,” said Meredith. She slid against him like the crash of a wave on a breaker, naked and soft as she stared down at his body. Her fingers found his hair, and she stroked his temples as she kissed him. The sheets rustled.

“She's your friend, not mine,” he said. He traced the line of her cleavage with his fingers. “She hates me.”

Meredith smiled. “But she knows...” She kissed his lips. “I.” His Adam's apple. “Love.” The dip between his pectorals. She traced a wet line to his bellybutton. “You.” She found his erection, and he gasped when she kissed him there, too.

He arched back against the bed. The window seemed upside down that way, bricks on the ceiling. Anybody could get through. A shadow passed by, and the dark seemed darker. “What if the wall doesn't hold?” he said.

She stopped and stared, resting against his naked hip as she panted. Her hair fanned against the sheets, glittering and golden. “It's enough for now,” she said. “It has to be. You need to rest.”
He laughed. “This is resting?” he said, but she looked at him as though the situation were dire.

Her eyes seemed black in the dark. “Yes, Derek,” she said. She splayed her hands across his ribcage. He breathed as she licked low, lower, lowest. “This is resting.”

The wheelchair came to a stop in front of a large plate plexiglass window the size of his trailer. He stared through lowered eyelashes, not quite awake, not quite functioning. He blinked. Noise snapped into place, and he heard a chorus of discordant, wailing cries. His fingers clenched. His body hollowed out, and he froze in place. Maybe he did care what she did with him. She'd parked him in the maternity wing at the viewing window.

*We really made a baby?*

*We really did.*

“Why did you bring me here?” he said.

Cristina moved to stand beside him. She folded her arms and shrugged. “Before we resorted to C-Span, Meredith told me you're going to try again. I just wanted to show you what you have to look forward to.” She stared at the window as if the sight beyond the plexiglass caused her physical pain. Her eyebrows twitched. A line formed above her nose as she scowled. “Ignore the crying and the drool and the crap. The literal crap.”

He watched. Silent.

“You can have this. If you want it.” She gestured at the babies. “You can have this now because I managed to save your sorry, bony ass.”

He swallowed. “But—”

“Look,” she said. “You've convinced me, somehow, that you're not going to rip her heart out again on purpose. But you have to stop this...” She stared, gesturing haphazardly when she couldn't find the words. “Whatever this mental hangup is that you've got going on. If you break yourself, it's not just you you'll be breaking. She was beside herself when we took out your EKG lines. I've never seen her like that. She usually shuts down when she's upset. This time, she was hysterical. Like the hills are alive with the sound of music, except with screaming and sobbing and ugly bubbles of snot.”

“Why did you let her see?” he said.

“Because she does what she wants, and I had a gun pointed in my face.”

His lip quivered. He looked at the babies, at the wiggling little balls of energy with lungs the size of Texas. A nurse he didn't recognize waved at him from behind the window. She gestured. “Which one?” she mouthed.

Which one is yours, she meant.

He shook his head. The nurse shrugged and resumed fussing with a squalling boy in the back row.

“You didn't nearly die, Derek,” Cristina said. “You survived. And now you get to live what's left. Get it in your head.”

He pushed with his tired legs, and he groaned when they gave him practically nothing in return. He tried to help himself with his arms, too, but that only rewarded him with shooting pains. He hissed,
adjusted, and wobbled to his feet. It took him several minutes to straighten his spine.

Cristina didn't help him. She stood beside the chair, silent. His IV line almost wasn't long enough. When he stepped to the window, she pushed the chair forward so he wouldn't catch himself, and then she settled against the wall beside him, her back to the screaming hoard of what she seemed to regard as simple DNA explosions, and not miracles. She stared into space.

He touched the glass. A baby girl lay in the bassinet closest to him in the front row. Unlike the rest of them, she didn't cry. She stared at the world with big, bright eyes, like she was still trying to figure out what the hell had happened to that spiffy, dark place she'd been enjoying for nine months. Spittle collected on her lips. Her tiny mouth formed a dumbstruck o, and she blew a bubble at him. She was little, and she had a fuzzy head and wrinkled, red skin.

Newborns were so tiny. Tiny and new and untouched by anything wrong in the world.

His eyes watered, and he blinked, but they kept watering this time, and wouldn't stop. A deep sound quivered in his throat, and he rested his forehead against the glass, staring. The little girl yawned.

*Hi, baby,* he imagined himself saying. *It's Dad.* Meredith would be there, panting, exhausted, but she would smile. He would be indebted to her forever for doing all that painful work. And they would have a little person. Part of her. Part of him. Theirs.

He'd given up with Addison. He'd been ready to surrender with Meredith, too, after the ferry crash, if it meant he could keep her with him and breathing. He would have been okay. After eleven years of Addison not being ready, eleven years of her telling him not yet, that she needed more time, he'd gotten used to the idea that the opportunity for fatherhood had slipped him by. He'd been like a frog stuck in a pot on a slow boil. A frog wouldn't jump out of the pot, not realizing its peril, until it was far too late.

He'd figured out the water was boiling on a bleak November morning, the year he'd seen his thirty-fifth birthday come and go. He'd entered a corner coffee shop to grab something hot and steaming for the frigid walk to work. A woman had been waiting in line at the register with a fussy, screaming baby, and she'd been so apologetic for all the noise. Exasperated. Tired. But apologetic.

He'd helped her when she'd spilled hot coffee on the baby's jumper. She'd been beside herself, babbling with worry. The baby had been fine, but he'd looked in the woman's distressed hazel eyes, and he'd known. He'd known that was a sort of look he'd never find on Addison's face. He'd seen Addison with hundreds of babies, and not once had she looked like that.

Since that moment, he'd refused to let himself hope. Even when it'd become clear that Addison wasn't his future anymore. Even when Meredith had stared at him, flustered as she caught him on the way out the door of Seattle Grace's waiting area to prepare the world's cheesiest proposal.

*If you don't want babies, or you don't want babies with me and my crappy DNA, just say so.*

He sighed.

She has your eyes, he'd tell her. His Meredith. Their baby. He'd want to collapse with the weight of how his life had just been changed, but he wouldn't be able to, because their daughter would be in his arms. Her tiny fingers would grasp at his thumb, barely able to wrap all the way around, and he'd smile and laugh through the blur.

He blinked, and his imaginary world slipped behind a wall of water. He rubbed his face, and his
gut twisted. Cristina had gotten her wish to see him cry, but he couldn't even bring himself to be embarrassed. Just exhausted.

“I didn't think she'd ever really want one,” he said, his voice heavy. “I thought I'd always be waiting.”

Cristina rolled her eyes. “I imagine it's your fault.” She glanced at her watch. “Are you done freaking out now? I have other post-ops.”

He took one last look. His fingertips left smudges on the plexiglass. Maybe he would be here for real in a year, and when the nurse would ask him, which one, he would have an answer for her. He let the fantasy roll in his mind like a movie. And then he sat, emotionally and physically bankrupt.

“Thank you,” he said as she rolled him into the elevator. The doors trundled closed.

“If you tell people I stared at babies with you for thirty minutes, I will gut you, Meredith notwithstanding.”

“No, I mean thank you,” he said. “Thank you for saving my life.”

She looked away. “Yeah. Well.” She shrugged. “It was good practice.”

“Glad to help you advance your career,” he said.

“Just don't tell anybody about the babies.”

“Telling people about how you pushed me around in a wheelchair is not very high on my list of conversation topics.”

“Good,” she said.

The elevator dinged, and she pushed him into the hallway. He rested, letting her do the steering and the worrying. Well-wishers dotted the halls, nurses he knew, doctors he'd done consults for, people who relied on him for their livelihood because he wrote their personnel evaluations, even several patients who recognized him. He tried to at least say hello in return, but by the end of the ride, he could barely keep his eyes open.

“We're here,” Cristina said, and he snapped awake, surprised.

He mumbled something that could have been a word, but it clotted somewhere in his throat and came out gibberish. He tried to stand. Three feet to the bed. That was all. The distance seemed like an insurmountable canyon. Not thinking straight, he pushed against the armrests.

Agony split him open, and he grunted, thoroughly rebuked.

“Stop using your arms so much,” Cristina said. “No pushing. No pulling. Didn't the nurses explain anything to you?”

“I know how to treat a post-op heart patient, Dr. Yang,” he snapped.

“But do you know how to be one?”

No.

He breathed through the pain and willed his muscles to stop trembling, but they wouldn't. He tried to get his legs to cooperate, but they wouldn't. She left and returned with a new IV pole, and he was
still trying to convince his body to join forces with his brain and let him out of the chair.

“I hate this,” he said.

“I know.” She moved his IV bag to the new pole.

“I knew you had an ulterior motive for all this,” he grumbled.

She didn't reply. She leaned her hip against the bed, crossed her arms, and watched him, eyebrow raised.

He took a breath. Another. A third. Then he pushed with his legs and feet. His body found vertical. His back shuddered with a painful, twisting spasm that turned vertical into a smashed letter s. He put his hand against his lower back over his hip and hobbled a step. He looked at the bed. He looked at the sofa. Both options seemed awful, but the bed was closer.

He grabbed the bed railing, lips parted as he panted with effort and strain. A small sound cut his throat. A moan. Pain. He couldn't stop it. He sat on the mattress, shoulders hunched. The room wound around his head in lackadaisical, lazy revolutions. He tried to lie down, but it sent fire licking down his spine.

A hand waved in front of his face. “Here,” Cristina said. “I'm upping your dosage. I already wrote it on your chart.” She held pills and a cup of water for him. When had? He blinked.

“Seriously?” he said with a gasp. “I'm already stoned out of my fucking mind.”

“No,” she said. “You were stoned out of your mind with the morphine. Right now, you're just being pathetic.”

He stared at her hand.

She sighed. “Look. Do you want to go home?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Well, you're not going to go home if you're not healing. If you're in pain, you're not sleeping. You need sleep to heal.” She jabbed the pills at him. “Prove to me that you're not an idiot.”

For a long, swirling moment, he could only glare.

He grabbed the Percocet and the glass, tipped his head back, and swallowed. The cold water settled in his stomach and spread. He finished the glass because it felt good against his throat. “Happy?” he said. He shoved the empty cup at her.

“Happy is relative,” she said.

She took the cup and glanced at her watch. His eyelids dipped. She didn't move, and he started to feel rushed. Rushed into being knocked out. Like he was messing up her busy schedule. What the hell?

“You're just going to stare?” he managed to slur. “I'm not a museum exhibit.”

If she replied, he lost it in the tumble.

His eyes closed without his permission. He didn't sleep. Not yet. But he felt her fixing his blankets. She reseated his nasal cannula. His muscles twitched once. The pain in his back became
amorphous, and then diffuse, and then gone.

He made a soft noise. Relief. And then the roar behind his eyes swept him into oblivion.

“Welcome back,” Meredith said, and he smiled.
Chapter 6

The windshield wipers of the hulking Porsche Cayenne skimmed water off the windshield at a pace that made the whole car sway like it sat in the grips of an endless earthquake. Meredith pressed down on the brake, slowing the car's forward momentum to a snail's pace. The engine hummed.

The front left tire rolled over the bump. Meredith tensed as she felt the car rise. The car hit a pinnacle and dipped a centimeter, but then the front right tire hit the bump, too, and the car rose again. Both tires rolled back onto flat pavement with a thump that made the car jiggles. She clenched the steering wheel.

Speed bumps were, quite possibly, the worst thing the modern road could throw at a car's suspension, and whoever had designed the kiss-and-ride lane and the subsequent hourly parking lots at Seattle Grace had been a little bit too in love with them. Bumps rose out of the ground every fifteen to twenty feet, advertised by large yellow signs that said bump in screaming capital letters. A safety measure, no doubt, to prevent maniacs from speeding through the parking lot so close to the hospital entrance where lots of crippled people wandered. Except she wasn't a maniac, and she had her husband in the car with her. Speed bumps were like a big up yours to people in pain. Another twist of an already sharp knife.

Through some trial and error, she'd discovered that if she approached each bump at a diagonal and let each of the SUV's tires peak individually, the ride remained smooth. Well, smoother. Well, at least, not jarring to the point of making her want to vomit. By the time she'd rolled Derek's ridiculous car to a stop by the hospital entrance at the designated curb for quick pickups and drop-offs, she'd decided she'd gotten the hang of it.

Rear left. Rear right. Thump. Accelerator down until the next one.

She breathed and straightened out the vehicle. Next bump. Ten feet ahead. She tilted the wheel to the right and started the agonizing process all over again.

Water splashed against the windshield, blotting out the gray in a giant blur. The wipers slashed at the rain, but the precipitation came down so hard that they didn't make much of a dent. She saw the road and then nothing but splatter in even intervals the length of an eye blink, which gave the world a shuttered feeling, and made the car seem cave-like and claustrophobic.

“Mere, I think I could walk home faster than this,” Derek said.

“Sorry,” she said as they went into the next bump. Brake. Crawl the car up the bump. Thump. “Sorry, I just didn't want to—” Thump. “It doesn't hurt when I go over these?”

“It does a little,” he admitted. The words were stretched. Not quite slurred, but not quite put together, either. “I'll be fine as long as you don't stop on a dime at every light, sign, and stopped car. Really.”

She spared him a glance before returning her eyes to the road and the pouring buckets of rain.

He sat in the seat beside her, his right hand gripping the handle on the ceiling over the window loosely to keep himself stable. His wet, messy hair stuck out in all directions. Dark blotches covered his jeans where rain drops had soaked into the denim. His cross-trainers squeaked on the rubber floor mat as he shifted, and his ratty white t-shirt had become see-through in places from all
the water, not that the threadbare rag needed much help in that regard.

She shivered, sure she didn't look much better. Her hair hung around her head in thick strings, and chilly water made her shirt stick to the small of her back. Her shoe soles slipped on the brake and the accelerator, making horrendous shrieks over every speed bump.

He'd waited for her under the awning, dozing in the wheelchair she'd used to liberate him, but he'd come alive as the familiar purr of the Cayenne's big engine had hit his eardrums. She'd bitten her lip as she'd watched him unfold and stand. He'd been slow and ungraceful and more than a bit uncoordinated as he'd left the wheelchair behind, but he'd managed, and she'd forced herself to sit still and not help. He'd walked into the rain, staring at the car like he had no sense of the universe other than his mode of escape from it.

Car. Car. Get to the car. Must get. To the car.

He'd opened the door, and then he'd tried to get into the vehicle. He'd tried. But the Cayenne, a typical SUV, sat high off the ground, and Derek, as much as he'd improved over the last week, had not healed enough for a solo climbing expedition. His face had crumpled with discomfort, and he'd made a small noise unidentifiable as pain or frustration or simple exertion. He hadn't been able to leverage himself into the seat, and so he'd stood there, dripping in the torrential rain. He'd given her a shaky, pleading smile that spoke more of embarrassment and desperation than of happiness or hope.

_I'd like to go home, now, please_, he'd said.

“I don't stop on dimes,” she said.

He stared out the window. “Yes, you do.”

“I don't stop on dimes, pennies, nickels, or any form of change!”

“You kind of stop on dimes, Meredith,” he said. “You drive like a narcoleptic. Start, stop. Start, stop.”

She eased them over the next speed bump despite his assurances. Thump. She couldn't bring herself to willfully inflict pain, no matter how much he tried to pass it off as negligible. “I do not,” she said as the land boat crested. Thump.

“Do, too.”

“Do not! Well, there was that one time with the kamikaze squirrel, but you can't possibly count that.”

“Do, too,” he said. “And I'm not counting squirrel avoidance maneuvers.”

“Derek, I do not!” she snapped.

A red smear of brake lights bloomed like a glowing flower in front of her, and she slammed her foot down on the brake pedal without thinking. “Crap!” she said. The tires screeched, and her body jerked against the seat belt, cutting her breaths short. In the corner of her eye, she saw Derek's left hand slam against the dashboard. He grunted, a deep, weary sound of pain that made her heart skitter.

A horn behind her blared. Her wet hair fell in a curtain around her face. Licking her lips, she tasted bile, and she couldn't get herself to move for several seconds. He struggled against his seat belt.
The belt carved a deep ravine into his shirt, and it took him several wincing pants to fix himself so that he rested against the seat and not the belt.

Nauseating guilt churned in her stomach. She reached across to help him, but he'd already done most of the work. Her fingertips brushed his shoulder. Through his soft shirt, he trembled. He leaned his head back against the seat cushion, breathing noisily, staring at the rainy world through half-closed eyelids.

“I'm so sorry,” she said, but the words croaked and quashed, and she wasn't sure she'd managed understandable syllables. Her heart thumped, and she couldn't stop herself from touching him. Touching his arm. His wet leg. Running her fingers through the hair over his ear. “Derek, I'm so sorry,” she said. Tears blurred her vision. “Are you okay?”

He didn't speak. The car behind them honked. She grabbed the cushion by his head and twisted around. “Go to hell!” she shrieked and flipped them off, and then she wilted. She'd yelled. Right in his ear. That probably didn't help either.

She turned forward again, panting. “Are you okay? Please, are you okay?” she said. They weren't even out of the parking lot, and she'd already nearly killed him. She wiped her face, clawing tears away, and then clutched the steering wheel. The leather squeaked and warped as she twisted her fingers. She hated this freaking car. She hated speed bumps, and rain, and stop signs, and people, and guns, and everything else. “I'm so sorry, Derek. I'm sorry.”

“I'm okay,” he said as he caught his breath, but he sounded odd. Sounded... bad.

“I'm sorry.”

He blinked. “You know, that was worth it,” he said. His syllables rattled in his chest and sounded more than a bit wheezy, but then he looked at her with a shit-eating grin. “That was worth the pain. The timing couldn't have been more perfect.” By the end of the sentence, he'd recovered his voice.

Her clenching grip against the steering wheel loosened, and her distress melted when she saw his smile. A glassy but bright haze clouded his eyes, and no suffering remained in the lines of his face. His skin crinkled at the corners of his eyes. His irises didn't sparkle like they usually did. In fact, they seemed black and opaque in the gray light, but he was drugged, and a bit not all there. The crinkle was enough. A real smile. A really real smile. She hadn't seen one of those in a while.

Her lip quivered, and she couldn't help but offer a sheepish grin in return. “My amazing husband is right. I stop on dimes. Happy?”

His eyelids dipped. “Hmm,” he rumbled, barely audible over the thunderous rainstorm. He wiped his face with his hands and sighed. His body relaxed. The crinkles disappeared, but his lips spread in a wide, close-mouthed, upward curve that spoke of quiet contentment.

“Do you want a sticker that says 'My name is Derek Shepherd, and I'm right'?”

“That's Chief Shepherd, to you,” he said.

She snorted. “Hah. Hah.”

He rolled his head against the seat cushion until his left ear met leather, and he stopped. His gaze caught her. The content grin on his face bled into something sloppy, and he winked. “I can think of other things I want more than a sticker.”

You know what says thank you like nothing else?
She stared at him, caught like a fly in the sticky trap of his stare. She leaned across the hand rest. Something sharp jabbed her ribs, but she didn't care. She forgot he wasn't well, and the last remnants of her earlier stress dissolved.

“Like this?” she whispered, and she kissed him.

Until her lips brushed his, her convenient amnesia lingered. Strands of his wet hair spilled over his forehead and tickled her skin as she pressed against him. He tasted like Crest toothpaste, and the familiar scent of his aftershave wafted against the back of her throat. Perfect. But memory drifted back into place when he didn't respond like he used to, with a moan or with his fingers tearing through her hair. They touched, but it felt chaste, more friendly than anything else.

His libido had taken a massive hit with his injuries. He joked now and then, but he didn't seem to want much more than that, and she imagined his bravado concerning sex was more about keeping some level of normalcy between them than anything else.

Kissing had become something for touch. Something for closeness. Something to remind them they were alive and together and breathing and someday — but not now — okay.

She sighed against his skin and pressed her forehead into his. The space between them rustled as she stroked his cheek. He would be all right. Eventually. She would be thrilled the day he let her know he wanted something more. Until then, though, she wouldn't be disappointed, and she wouldn't push him. Even if he wasn't really interested, they both needed him to keep joking. And they both needed her to forget from time to time.

“Here's to being right,” he said, his voice soft and sated, as she pulled away.

The car behind them honked again, and she jerked, startled out of the space where only he and she existed. She glanced in the rear view mirror and saw through the sheets of rain that the car behind her had a stack of about fifteen pairs of headlights bearing down behind it. Fifteen cars containing angry, antsy people who probably wanted to be home just as much as Derek did. Just as much as she did.

She pressed the accelerator. “Is this why you always drive?” she said as she pulled up to a four-way stop, the final hurdle before parking lot became open road. Cars churned through the intersection at a glacial pace. She slowed as the car in front of her halted, careful to let the Cayenne slide to a stop instead of screech to one this time. “Because I'm horrible at it, and you didn't want to hurt my feelings or something? Like with the snoring thing?”

“You said you didn't like it,” he said.

“What?”

“Driving. You said you didn't like driving.”

When on earth?

“Derek, that was...” She stretched her memory and arrived at a dark night, only a week or two into their tryst. They'd gone out to eat. She'd been in a wretched mood, but he hadn't known the area at all yet, and so she'd offered to drive. They hadn't made their reservation on time because they'd gotten stuck in traffic. Instead of waiting an hour for a table, they'd gone into some dive next door and had burnt food and crappy service. “That was years ago. The whole freeway was gridlocked. And I was having a really cramp-y, bloat-y period that sucked.”

She'd barely known him then, and he'd barely known her. Their one lousy date. Well, not lousy.
Just not great. The outing had been one of the few times in their history where she'd managed to feel like crap around him without him noticing at least on some level.

She navigated through the intersection and out onto the street. Water sprayed behind the Cayenne in a fan as she accelerated. Exhilaration tugged at her heart. Free of the parking lot. Two blocks, and then the freeway. Five exits, and then home. He tapped his fingers by the door handle in a steady, nervous thrum, and he shifted in his seat.

“You said you didn't like driving, so I drive,” he said as she blew through a probably-should-have-stopped yellow light that shifted red just as her rear tires entered the intersection.

“So, you don't think I'm a bad driver then?” she said. She took the exit onto the highway, forcing herself not to push the SUV too fast. The car lurched anyway, and her body swayed against the door. Stupid, top-heavy SUVs.

“What's a little whiplash between lovers?”

“You're totally avoiding the question,” she said.

“What question?”

She gritted her teeth. “Am I a bad driver, or aren't I?” she said. She cut onto the highway, narrowly avoiding the little Geo chugging along in the middle lane as she pulled in front and then swung into the fast lane. The Geo honked, and she snarled.

He chuckled, the sound of it soft and light and buried by the pounding rain. The laugh ended in a wince and a grunt, and he thumped his head against the window, but he smiled anyway.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing, Mere,” he said. “Nothing at all.”

“Sure,” she said.

The hum of the engine, the roar of the tires as they tore over the concrete pavement, and the heavy downpour drowned everything else out. Five exits left. Four exits. Three. Signs blurred past. Almost home. Almost.

Red. She blinked.

A solid wall of fuzzy red brake lights carpeted the space in front of her, and she slowed the car to a crawl, and then a full stop. Rain pounded on the roof. Horns honked. Nobody moved.

“Damn it,” she said as she pulled up the parking brake and let her feet off the pedals. “Damn it, what is this crap?”

He sighed. “Must be an accident up ahead, I guess.”

“Or just too many idiots,” she said, glaring at the pile of unmoving cars. “This is Seattle. Did you know we made the top ten list for the most congested cities in the country? I mean, when you think of traffic, do you think Seattle? No, you think Los Angeles. And New York. How did Seattle make that list? It's—”

Movement caught the corner of her eye. She turned. Derek's eyes had closed, and he'd leaned back against the headrest at an angle that couldn't have been comfortable. His crooked nose jutted
toward the ceiling, and his Adam's apple poked against the skin of his throat. No longer supported
by conscious thought, his mouth surrendered to gravity and fell open, revealing a pearly line of
teeth. Deep, even breaths made his chest rise and fall. With his windpipe at such a weird angle, his
breaths morphed over the moments into grating, heavy snores.

“Sorry,” she whispered, and she ceased her babble.

With no immediate prospect of home, adrenaline must have abandoned him.

She turned off the engine, and the windshield wipers halted at the end of their last swipe. No
longer held at bay, rain streamed down over the windshield, and the outside world blotted away
behind the flowing curtain. The car stopped shaking, and even with the torrential rain, the cabin
would have seemed quiet in the absence of the constant swish, swish, swish, were it not for the
raucous noises emanating from Derek.

Derek's right hand rested at the door handle, fingers curled around the lever. His left hand splayed
against his thigh. His knees spread in a casual slouch, and he seemed... His lip twitched. He sucked
in a whooping breath. The snores creaked to a halt. He breathed twice, soft and almost silent. Then
the snoring resumed as his eyes began to pace under his eyelids. He dreamed. But she saw no sign
of stress or nightmare.

He seemed at peace, if not peaceful.

Ever since Cristina had fixed the dosages on his pain relievers, he'd been different. Quiet. He'd
slept a lot. A whole lot. He'd rarely stayed awake for more than an hour at a time. And when he'd
been awake, he'd seemed disoriented and clumsy and reticent. He had a lot of trouble following
conversations, and so he tended to space and let the world slide by without his input until he drifted
off again. He'd said goodbye to his sisters yesterday, and it seemed like he hadn't quite understood
what was going on when so many people crashed into his room for a quick round of noisy hugs all
at once. Though, admittedly, she'd been a bit flummoxed by the whole thing, too, particularly when
they'd pulled her into the fray and made a giant Meredith and sister-in-law sandwich.

She touched Derek's face, watching the supple trail left by her thumb on his skin. “Mmm,” he
purred and leaned against her palm. “More bricks.” His head followed her touch, and his chin
tipped into his shoulder, facing her. The snoring stopped, and thick, even breathing resumed. His
dark eyelashes fluttered against his cheeks as his eyes moved underneath them.

Rain splashed against the windows and slammed into the roof. Cars didn't move. She thought
about turning the radio on to find some traffic information, but she didn't want to wake him, and so
she contented herself with ignorance and watched Derek sleep.

The nurse had dragged him awake at 6AM like always, but after he'd finished coughing, the
morning had continued like an endurance test. He hadn't gone back to sleep to recover. Instead,
he'd forced himself out of bed. She'd sat on the toilet seat, just in case, while he'd showered
unassisted for the first time. He'd wrangled his clothes into submission by himself, too, and he'd
shaved and brushed his teeth and flossed.

He hadn't needed her once, though the entire grooming operation had taken, perhaps, an hour and a
half with frequent breaks. She'd read a book while he did things, well, pretended to read a book and
mostly just read the same sentence over and over to try and keep her eyes somewhere not staring at
him. She'd made a very big point of not cheering him on or smiling at him or making him feel self-
conscious about his difficulties while he stumbled through things that used to be easy. She'd aimed
for behaving like oblivious company and not like supervision. He seemed to appreciate it, both her
vicinity and, at the same time, her distance.
He moved like a turtle. His muscles had kidnapped his flexibility and wouldn't let him do a lot of things. Anything more strenuous than a slow walk for about ten minutes left him gasping for breath. Even small interruptions in his stability knocked him off balance, and many of the movements that gave him his fluid, graceful, athletic appearance when he was well caused him harrowing pain.

But even then, even with all that sickness still piled up, he'd gotten so much better.

A siren wailed in the distance, and she turned. The leather seat made a squirming sound as her thigh shifted. Red lights flashed, a sparkling mess of color in the gray and the endless rain, but she couldn't see anything else through the sheets of water. The ambulance barreled down the left shoulder of the highway, and when it passed, the Cayenne swayed on its wheels. The pitch of the siren dropped as it left them behind.

Derek snuffled, and he flinched. His fingers clenched, and he made a thick sound of surprise deep in his throat. His eyelids stopped at half-mast, and he panted.

“Just a siren,” she whispered and stroked his hair. “Go back to sleep.”

His eyelids drifted shut, and his muscles relaxed. His panting slowed and stretched and became deep breaths.

Her watch beeped, and he flopped into half-awake again with a twitch that ran from his fingers to his toes. “Mmm,” he moaned at the second interruption.

She glanced at her watch. 10AM. She'd set the alarm to remind herself to give him his pills. They were supposed to be at home right now. She was supposed to be helping him slide into his own bed to rest in his own space. Except they were stuck in a car in the middle of a freeway, not moving, and not able to move for who knew how long.

She'd stuffed all his pill bottles into a plastic grocery store bag in the back seat. She twisted against her seat. She saw the bag behind her seat back in the dark pit formed by the floor and the rear seat. She saw it, but her arm didn't reach. She unclasped her seat belt and contorted until her belly ached and her shoulder sockets screamed. Her fingers brushed the plastic. She squiggled her hand, but she couldn't get a grip. She panted and tried one more time before she gave up.

“Crap,” she said. Not that it would matter if she could reach his pills, she realized. They were big pills. He couldn't take them dry. “Don't move,” she said to him.

He stared blankly. “What?”

“I'm getting out of the car. I'll be right back. Don't move, okay?”

He didn't quite seem to get it, but he didn't move, either. He stared, dark, glazed eyes half open, his hand dangling limply over gearshift and the parking break. She took a breath, preparing to get soaked again, and then plunged into the cold, wet curtain.

She opened the rear driver side door and dove for the bag. As soon as her fingers found the plastic handles, she yanked, and she used the momentum to dash for the trunk where Derek usually kept water for emergencies. The trunk popped open as she fiddled with the key chain. She wiped rain from her face and blinked. An unopened twenty-four pack of spring water sat behind a first aid kit, an emergency toolbox, and some other junk. Good. She jammed her nails into the unmarred plastic shrink wrap and tore it away. Her wet fingers slipped, but she managed to grab hold of the neck of a water bottle, and she pulled it free from the others. She tossed the bottle in the bag with his pills,
slammed the trunk shut, and dashed back to the front driver side door. Her feet slurred and splorked in big puddles of water, sending spray everywhere. Shocking cold seeped into her socks and shoes.

She lunged back into the car and shut the door behind her as she panted. Water dripped into her eyes. Her hair plastered to her head. She pulled the water bottle from the bag, unscrewed the cap, and stuck it in the cup holder. Then she sorted his pill bottles. Antibiotics. Oxycontin. 1 every 12 hours as needed. Percocet. 1-2 every 4 hours as needed. A veritable drugstore sat in her lap. She grabbed the Percocet bottle, pushed down the cap and turned. She removed a pill — he only took one unless it got bad — and held it out for him. A tiny puddle of white liquid spread across her palm as the pill mixed with rain.

“Here,” she said, jabbing it at him. “It's 10AM. I'm really sorry, Derek. I thought we'd be at home by now.”

At first she thought he might not be sentient enough to take it, but then he shifted. He grabbed the pill and stared.

“Water in the cup holder,” she clarified when he didn't move.

“Oh,” he said.

He took the water bottle, popped the pill into his mouth, and tipped his head back to swallow. He gurgled and swallowed and swallowed again, taking a few more sips. Water dripped out of the sides of his mouth. He took a hearty gulp, and then he put the bottle back in the cup holder. He didn't wipe his chin or the corners of his mouth. He dripped instead.

“Thank you,” he said, and over the course of several minutes, he shut down.

Like a lumbering blob, he shifted into the window and pasted his cheek against the glass. His hands hung limply and at odd angles. His eyelids dropped but didn't close, and he stared at the sheet of water on the glass as his breaths lengthened. Fog chased the glass from his lips, renewing with every exhale.

Car doors thumped, and somebody ran past the window, a blur. “What the fuck is going on? I need to get home,” yelled a distant, feminine voice. Meredith sighed. Good question.

Now that he was awake, she jammed the key in the ignition and gave it a quarter turn to let the radio have some power. She fiddled with the radio dial, but the tuner found nothing for her but hissing static and a mess of half-syllables and stutters of silence between. The half-syllables and stutters may have been words, sentences, and sounds with meaning, but the rain stripped the jabbering mess of it and made it nonsense in a cloud of bad reception. Great. She turned the car all the way off again.

She sighed. Derek communed with the window, silent, unmoving, as though he were fascinated with the way reality hazed beyond the curtain of water. The only sign she could identify that he was actually conscious was that he blinked. Every once in a while.

She reached over his leg and grabbed her purse from the floor by his feet. The strap had gotten wrapped around his ankle, and he sat, passive, while she untangled it. She stuffed the plastic bag with his pills into the depths with her wallet, and then put the purse back on the floor by the ball of his left ankle. He didn't budge or comment.

“Derek,” she said, but he didn't move. “Derek?”
It wasn't until she touched his shoulder that she roused him from his space out session. His deltoid muscle tensed at the unexpected contact, which drove home how out to lunch he was, that she could touch him and he didn't recognize her by the feel of her hand, or even before her skin had brushed against him. He'd always seemed to have sort of a sixth sense about her. But, no, this time, it took him several seconds of firm touch before he relaxed.

“Hmm?” He sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“Where do you go when you space out like that?”

He frowned. “I'm sorry,” he said. “This stuff just makes me feel so out of it.” He blinked like his eyelids had been drenched in tar, and he was trying to overcome it. Then he placed his palms against his face and breathed once, twice, again. When he looked up, he seemed a little more in touch with reality, but still not wide awake. Dazed almost. He had a struck stupid quality to his gaze and a frail air to his presence.

“You don't have to apologize,” she said. “I don't expect you to be the world's greatest conversationalist right now.”

“I feel like an amnesiac guppy or something.”

“Yeah, well, I think I like amnesiac guppy way more than growly bear.”

He smiled, but combined with the distant look in his gaze, his mirth seemed vague and indistinct. “Oh?” he said. “Are you planning to take advantage?”

“Well, you have established that taking advantage is my modus operandi or whatever.”

“Oh, yes.”

He blinked, and she watched his awareness waver. His gaze became glassy and then focused as he found her again in the mire. Odd. It felt so odd, seeing him like this. Derek Shepherd was supposed to be with it. Put together. Cocky. He hadn't been any of those in days.

“Seriously, where do you go?” she said.

“Where do I go when?”

“When you space out,” she said. “Where do you go?”

He shrugged. “Dunno,” he said, the word drawling. “Some place with you, usually.”

“Like what?”

He turned to the window, and she lost him to the glitter of the water. The rain slowed, and the sheet of water became identifiable, meandering streams. He stared. His breaths spaced, and he leaned back against the seat, eyes hooded. He'd been awake for hours that morning, and crashing into sleep earlier seemed to have devastated his capacity for human interaction.

She touched his shoulder. Her palm stuck to his wet sleeve, and when she tried to stroke him, her hand skipped. She slid her hand underneath instead, and rested against warm skin. “Hey,” she said, and she waited until he looked at her. Six seconds. Maybe seven. “Why don't you push the seat back and sleep? It looks like we're going to be here for eternity.”

“I feel better sitting.”
“Is your back still bothering you?”

“A little.”

Leaning against the window the way he was gave her space to slip her hand behind his shoulder blades. She rubbed him, frowning when she felt tense muscles and a peppering of knots under his skin. Sitting in this cramped car for hours wouldn't help him at all.

“Like really a little, or are you being stubborn again?” she said. “You can take another Percocet.”

He sighed. “Really a little, Meredith.”

His body swayed with her touch. She pushed into a knot with her knuckles. He grabbed for the door and made a noise that made her think of pain, but he didn't tell her to stop. He leaned, and she reached lower. Tense muscle fibers rippled under his skin. She chased the curve of his spine to his waistband.

Two more sets of discordant sirens chased down the shoulder as a mini-caravan of ambulances thundered past. Derek flinched at the noise, and his breath caught as the Cayenne swayed in their buffeting wakes.

“Jeez, I wonder what's going on,” she said. The rain had slowed a little, but she still couldn't see more than a few feet. She splayed her hands against him and pushed with all five fingers at once, eliciting a long, low rumble that vibrated against her palm. His muscles relaxed.

“Mmm. No pagers. Can't be that bad,” he said.

She stared at him, but he seemed oblivious. Glazed. Somewhere between half-awake and dreaming, somehow, with his eyes open. She'd taken the two weeks of uncategorized leave the HR department had offered everyone involved in the shootings, and he'd filed for short term disability. Her, the hospital would maybe bother, but him?

They knew full well he wouldn't be performing surgeries, whether it was an emergency or not, for at least another month, maybe two. Maybe more, depending on how fast he recovered once he got home. Derek was healthy, but he wasn't the fountain of youth, either, and it could take some time for him to feel normal again. She had no idea how he paced his recoveries because he'd never had one before. He'd never even been sick. Not even a freaking cold.

“Derek, they're not going to page us today, even if it is bad.”

“Oh,” he said. He blinked. “Right.” He swallowed, stared at the window, and added a softer, whispered, “Right.”

“You really are out of it, aren't you?”

“Really am,” he said. He leaned back, pausing for her to remove her hand before he squashed her, and settled against the seat. He turned to face her. “It's making this waiting a little easier, at least.”

“How?”

“If I stop paying careful attention for more than a nanosecond, I'm off in space somewhere. It feels like my brain is gushing behind my eyeballs.”

“But it doesn't hurt, right? Cristina fixed your pain?”
“Mostly.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Only mostly?”

He stared. “Mostly what?”

“Mostly, it doesn't hurt?”

He shrugged. “Nothing's going to get it all, Meredith, not unless you knock me out. Which this is very nearly doing. I'm okay right now.”

She sighed. She knew that. She did. Nothing short of unconsciousness would take everything away. Nothing. Persistent pain sucked that way. But that knowledge didn't help; it just made her hurt more.

She wanted him to be okay. The idea that he wasn't okay, that he still had discomfort, even after a week, even doped to the point of stupidity, bothered her. She wanted to take it away for him, and there was nothing she could do about it whatsoever. She'd never felt so freaking helpless in her life. Not even after her liver surgery when he'd had to carry her to the bathroom because some mornings it had hurt too much to walk.

She twisted her hands against the steering wheel and stared. The wall of brake lights had long since disappeared as more and more people gave up on ever moving off the freeway and turned their cars off. She'd been an idiot. The universe had proven itself to hate her on more than one occasion, and he'd gotten sucked along for the vengeful ride because of his vicinity to her.

“I'm really sorry, Derek,” she said. “I should have thought to check traffic reports before we left. I'm sorry we're stuck in this stupid car. I know you want to go home.”

She wanted to go home.

He shifted. “Mmm. S'ok, Mere,” he slurred, her internal ranting having been just long enough to let him drift again, apparently. “Just relieved to be out of there.”

“I know,” she said. “But now you're stuck in a car. I nearly killed you in the parking lot, and now you're stuck. It's all my fault.”

He leaned across the parking brake and the hand rest. His body shifted, stuttering as he found his balance. He breathed. Close to her ear. Hot air tickled her skin. And then he touched her, stroked her neck. “S'my fault. I drove this car to work last week. I think. Or...” His words drifted into silence, and he nosed her cheek. Clumsy, but so warm and alive and there. She refused to laugh at his nonsensical reasoning or his coordination, though both were atrocious. He had good intentions.

She turned and found his eyes, dull and opaque, inches from hers. A lazy smile spread across his face, and he scrunched his crow's feet. “I put this shirt on, y'know. I'm better.”

She laughed, unable to stop herself from petting the soft fabric along his clavicle. The thin material had dried, and it rustled against her skin. No design spread across the front. Grease stains and other black streaks marred its age-worn surface. He wore it from time to time when he did housework or stuff with the lawn or things with their cars. She'd watched him change his own oil one day, and he'd come out from underneath the car, covered in new smears.

Why don't you just pay somebody at Jiffy Lube to do that or whatever?

He'd wiped his hands on a grease towel and smiled. Well, this is a great excuse to take a shower,
you know.

I'm not dirty, she'd said.

He'd touched his dirty index finger to her nose, leaving a dark smudge. How about now?

He'd waggled his eyebrows at her, she'd laughed, and then he'd chased her into the bathroom as she shrieked and giggled.

She had no idea what had possessed him to pick that shirt to wear, of all the shirts she'd packed for him. Actually, she had no idea what had possessed her to pack it, either. It must have gotten stuck with his normal daily wear t-shirts in the laundry somehow. But he was, indeed, correct. He'd put on his shirt by himself, and that sort of made the rest of the stuff swirling in her head seem a little less bad.

She grabbed a tent of the fabric and pulled him close, mashing her lips against his.

“I'm really glad you're feeling a little better,” she said against his skin. “I'm so glad. Even if we're stuck in a car when we could be at home, and it's my fault.”

He blinked. The sky burst, and a torrent of new rain splattered against the window over what had slackened momentarily into drizzle. The wall of noise evened into a steady pounding. He breathed against her body, soft and searching. “How are you mine?” he said.

“Well, you asked pretty nicely, I thought,” she whispered in his ear.

I'm not going to get down on one knee. I'm not going to ask a question. I love you, Meredith Grey, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.

“Didn't ask,” he said.

“Told me your intentions in an irresistible way,” she amended.

He sighed. “I proposed in the elevator.”

“Yeah.”

“I forgot we were going to have sex there. I fell asleep.”

She stroked his face. He'd been dressed and ready to go, and she'd wheeled him into the elevator to go home, expecting him, for some reason, despite his stupor, to make a dirty comment about wheelchair sex, but he hadn't. His face had fallen forward. He'd trusted her to take him home, and he'd slept, recuperating resources for the final surge of his escape. She'd reached over his shoulder and rubbed him, and then guided him into the fresh, wet air to freedom.

“It's okay,” she said. “I'll take you up on your rain check offer later.”

“What rain check offer?”

“Something you said a while ago. Don't worry about it.”

His eyelids dipped. “Okay,” he said. He smiled again, and then he let himself drop back against the seat with a sigh. The leather squeaked. He sat, hands resting on his knees, his body spent and relaxed and his brain not worrying about things he couldn't remember, at least, not worrying that she could tell.
She sighed when she realized this was the most he'd talked to her in days. Liberated from his prison, experiencing true privacy with her for the first time in over a week, he seemed a bit more inclined to fight through his impairments and speak. She rubbed his thigh, wondering if it was an embarrassment thing. Like maybe he didn't mind as much being a bit out of sorts with her, but he hated looking foolish in front other people, particularly coworkers. Or maybe he felt better, and that was the bottom line. When Derek felt yucky, he didn't talk. He bottled things up inside until he burst. He'd never been sick before, but he did have his darker moods, full of grief, guilt, anger, or depression, and she knew at least that much about him. Yucky meant silent.

A smile tugged at her lips as she watched him stare blankly at the windshield. “You know,” she said. “This is prime real estate for silly discussions.”

“Like what?”


“First experience?” he said. He looked at her with amorphous glee. “You've had more than one?”

“Well, yes, but I'm not stoned,” she said. “You're the one who's supposed to babble. Not me.”

He snorted. “All the drugs in the world couldn't make me babble as much as you. You're the Queen of Babbonia. Your subjects worship your skill.”

“Hah. Hah,” she said. “I don't know, you're getting pretty chatty. If you want another sticker, you're going to have to work a bit harder to prove yourself.”

But I like to talk with you, said his gaze, and she melted, only to laugh when he drew his index finger and thumb across his lips in the clumsy pantomime of pulling a zipper. He snickered, but his resolution didn't last more than twenty seconds.

“Mark got us thrown in the drunk tank once,” he said out of the blue.

“What? You? Seriously?”

She tried to imagine Derek crammed into a cell with snoring bikers, nonsensical bar patrons, and a clot of noisy, vomiting Manhattan residents and vagabonds. She couldn't do it. The Derek in her brain remained sober, unfairly accused, and broody in the corner as he tried to ignore the stench and the ribbing.

“Yes,” said Derek. “He pissed on the side of a building in Times Square.”

“And what does that have to do with you, exactly?”

He blinked. “What, you don't think I'd pee on a building?”

“You seriously did that?”

“Well, no,” he said. “But I was somewhere around .16 BAC when they caught Mark. I might have mouthed off a bit.”

“A bit?” she prodded.

He nodded. “A bit, yeah.”
Now, that? That, she could see. She snorted, thinking of all the colorful curses that would have streamed from his mouth. He had no reason to love law enforcement. None. And if he'd been drunk to the point of dysphoria... Yeah.

She pushed his shoulder. “Well, what did you say? Come on, you never tell me about this stuff. I want to know the pre-Seattle Derek Shepherd.”

“I don't really remember,” he said. “You'd have to ask Mark.”

“But you said Mark was drunk.”

He stared. “Did I?”

Laughter burbled up from her chest, unstoppable, and she leaned into him as tears erupted. She gasped. “So, what you mean to say is that you landed you and Mark in the drunk tank.”

“Well, he started it,” Derek said. “Public urination and all.”

She laid her head against his shoulder. She hated cars. The position was about as comfortable as sitting on a bed of spikes. Well, maybe not that bad. But she couldn't bring herself to care. He'd been bed-ridden and sleepy and not talkative and hurt for days. The crushing normality of sitting in the car with him, resting on his shoulder, chatting about stupid inanities, made her forget about her twisty, spine-killing position. She flopped against him and stared, looking up at the line of his jaw. Rain thundered against the window beyond.

“When was this, anyway?” she said.

A noise stuttered in his throat. He looked at her. Something churned behind the haze in his stare, like he realized then that he'd stepped into a trap that could have been avoided if he'd been thinking straight. He blinked, and the worry clouding his gaze dispersed as he made a decision. He sighed. “After my bachelor party,” he confessed. “Addison was pissed that she had to bail us both out so that we could make it on time to the rehearsal dinner.”

She grinned lazily, running her index finger in circles against the flat of his stomach over his shirt. “Hmm,” she purred. “And were there strippers at this bachelor party?”

“Maybe one or two.” Blush crept across his skin.

“Derek Shepherd, did you get a lap dance?”

Red swept down his throat and turned his ears a bright shade of pink. “Maybe one or two.”

“Wow,” she said. “You were positively naughty in your twenties.”

“Only a little.”

“I don't know.” she said. “A drunk tank adventure and a lap dance right before your wedding says maybe more than a little.”

She stroked his arm and breathed the warm scent of his threadbare shirt. Addison had been with him for eleven years. If she let herself get jealous when he brought her up, that made for more than one fourth of his life he couldn't talk about, and she didn't want that. She let herself laugh about it, instead.

Derek hadn’t had a bachelor party before their wedding. Not before the one they’d given to Izzie at
the last minute, and not before the day they'd planned to go to City Hall and ended up writing vows on a blue Post-it note instead. He hadn't gotten drunk. He hadn't needed one last night of freedom with trashy strippers and tassels. Actually, his story sort of complimented the hell out of her.

“I still think you have me beat by a mile in the naughty youth category,” he said.

“I probably do, but, like I said.” She kissed his arm. “I'm not stoned.”

He turned. “Don't I get at least one story?”

“If you can remember to ask me in five minutes, sure.”

“So mean,” he said, frowning. “I'm vulnerable and amnesiac. You're taking advantage.”

“I know,” she said. “Which is why I'd rather tell you later.”

He shook his head. “I don't get it.”

“When you'll actually remember the bulk of the conversation, I'll tell you,” she said. “You know. Just to make it fair.”

“Oh.” He blinked and sighed. “Well, I guess that's okay. Do you have a pen?”

“In my purse in the small zipper pouch at the bottom with my tampons,” she said. “Why?” She stared at the windshield. The rain abated into drizzle and stayed drizzle, finally, and in the distance, she could just make out flares and flashing lights. A solid block of several hundred cars sat between her and a giant roadblock. People crawled back and forth like ants.

Having been given permission, he pulled her purse by the strap into his lap and rummaged through it, a perplexed look plastered on his face, as if drugs made it hard for him to fathom how she fit so much crap in there. He attacked the problem like a surgeon. He moved items to the side in a delicate manner, trying to gain visibility. Suction, she could imagine him saying. Except he'd lost his fine motor control, his focus, and just about everything else that made him a surgeon. The operation took a while. He leaned forward, putting his face closer to the mess. Something crinkled.

“Got it,” he said after eons, and he withdrew a green Crayola marker from her purse with a grin of triumph. The grin faded as he got a solid look at the item he'd liberated from her tampon stash. Seconds passed. “This isn't a pen. Did I miss a pen?” He frowned.

“No,” she said. “That's what I have.” She couldn't remember how that had gotten in there. She'd maybe stolen it from Pedes to fill out a chart after her ballpoint pen had wandered off. Desperate times, after all, and it was Pedes. They'd think marker charts were cute. Right? Maybe?

He uncapped the marker and wrote in slipshod print on the back of his hand. “I'm not letting you cheat me out of a story because my short term memory is paste,” he explained while she watched, eyebrows creeping up toward her forehead.

“Derek, would I do that?”

“Yes.”

She crossed her arms and stuck her lip out in a pout. “No faith. You have no faith in me whatsoever.”
“Plenty of faith, but you don't tell stories without tequila or torture,” he said. He returned the marker to her purse. “I'm not passing up this opportunity.”

“Not so much tequila anymore,” she said.

He paused and stared, head cocked. “S'true,” he agreed with a nod, and he blossomed into a sloppy grin. “Whole 'n healed or whatever.”

“You make me sound so articulate, Derek, thank you.”

His eyelids dipped, and he shifted to face her. His shoulder pressed into the seat, and his knee came up. He watched her, silent, hazy gaze unblinking. For a long moment, he said nothing, and she thought she'd lost him to another commune with space, but then he sighed. He touched her face as though it were new to him. She sighed and relaxed as he pushed away a tangled lock of her hair. His warm palm made the air whisper as he stroked her skin.

“You're pretty,” he said, and the bald truth of it struck her dumb. He had no inhibitions. What he said, he meant.

She blinked.

His eyes searched her face. “You know you're my best friend, right?”

“Mark is your best friend,” she said.

“Now, who's got no faith?”

“But Mark—”

“Slept with my wife,” he said. “He's my brother. He's my friend. But he's not a best anything. Not anymore, and never again.”

“Derek...”

“I know you and Cristina have your person thing,” he said. “I'm not fishing. I'm not. I'm just saying.”

“Everywhere. All the time. Saying things,” she murmured.

“Yeah. I do that.” He wiped his hands over his face, blinking. He loosed a growling, deep breath. “I'm sorry. I'm really... really stoned.”

Her heart sank. Not fishing. Sorry. He thought she was upset with him. She pulled his hands away from his face and replaced them with her own. “I love you,” she said.

He relaxed.

“Cristina is my person,” she said.

“I know. I said that, I thought.”

“You did,” she assured him, but his confusion seemed to deepen. She struggled to explain. “It's just... Cristina is my person. You're... You're like a piece of me. I can't call you my best friend or my person. Derek, losing you would be like losing a limb, or...”

He nodded. “She's your person. I'm your arm. Got it.” And then he laughed.
She hit him. Not hard. “Well, soul mate sounds even worse,” she said. “Like I threw up in a blender with Shakespeare and karma.”

“That's a disturbing picture when you're on drugs.”

She growled. “You get what I mean, though, right? You get that you're not competing for me, right? There's no competition. There's none. You win. I think I would die if I didn't have you anymore, and that sounds pathetic and melodramatic, but...”

Her frustration died in an explosive whorl of grief. She blinked, and the world morphed into a glassy impressionist painting as she cried. “I had a few hours where I really thought I might have wasted everything. Where I thought that you wouldn't be there in the mornings to make me coffee, or kiss me good morning with your awful morning breath, or tell me I'm more important to you than I've ever been to anyone. I thought that I'd be alone again. And I couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe, thinking about that. You're it for me. You're so it. Please, you get it, right? You always get it. You have to get it, Derek. Please.”

He stared. “I get it,” he said. “I've been there, too.”

And that said it all. Her lip quivered, and she leaned into his space. “I'm sorry for that,” she said, and she kissed him. His lips, his chin, his throat. “I'm sorry for being insensitive. And for sometimes not being what you need. I'm sorry for everything.”

She traced a line down his neck and placed her palms against his chest, splayed and soft. Resting, not pushing or grabbing. She felt the bandage covering his incision, and she kissed that, too, through his shirt.

He curled around her like a coat, and his hands chased her crying away. “You're what I need, now,” he said. His voice rumbled against her body, soft and low.

“I really do love you,” she said.

“I love you, too.”

They embraced over the parking brake, and in the crawl of moments, everything that had twisted up inside her body unfurled. Stress sloughed away like dead layers of skin. “We're going to traumatize our kid, someday,” she said.

“Oh?” he said.

“Yeah. We seem to have a penchant for nearly dying and raunchy sex. One or the other will send him to therapy before he's five.”

“Him?”

“Or her,” she said. She hugged him, and he laughed. She pulled back and looked at him. “What?”

“Dreaming up new business cards, that's all.”

“For what?”

“Derek C. Shepherd, MD,” he said. “Rock star neurosurgeon, arm, Shakesma in a blender, pending father, and amazing husband.”

She laughed. “You forgot egotistical ass.”
“Well, yes,” he said. His eyelids drooped. “But only sometimes.”

He leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes. She touched his face and ran a palm through his hair. “Only sometimes,” she agreed.

“Mmm,” he groaned. And then his breathing spaced. He fell asleep the way a light turned off from on. With a blink and sudden darkness. She'd worn him out again.

She rubbed his thigh and watched the traffic ahead, which didn't move. The drizzle picked up into a light, steady splatter against the windshield. She sighed and let her mind space as she stared through half-lidded eyes. Maybe Derek was on to something. Spacing. The water dribbled down the windshield. She watched the way it crawled. Nothing happened. It wasn't interesting.

She took a sip of the water she'd brought for him from the trunk and then took another, careful not to take too much. Having to pee on top of all of this would just suck. Her muscles ached. She wanted to stretch, but her clothing and hair had almost dried again, and if she felt bad, Derek must feel worse. She didn't move. She flexed her muscles one by one, starting at her calves and working up to her arms. Isometrics.

She counted sheep and got to somewhere in the thousands. She even tried the radio again, but not a single station came through the mess. This sucked. This really. Really. Sucked.

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the seat. She imagined honking would wake her up if traffic started to move. Irresponsible, yes, but this was just stupid. Waiting here for hours. The black of her eyelids turned red, and she blinked, squinting. The driver in front of her had turned on his car.

She brushed her face with her hands and shifted, trying to see down the road into the gray. An undulating sea of brake lights blinking on and off greeted her through the misty rain. “Oh, thank god, we're moving,” she said, and she turned the key in the ignition. The engine rumbled to life. Derek didn't stir.

The police apparently had decided that it would be a swell thing to collapse three lanes of traffic into a detour on the right shoulder. She merged with the other honking cars, impatience making her head hurt. She tapped the steering wheel with her nails.

Eventually, she passed the wreckage. A single Hyundai rested in two gnarled pieces, one half of it upside down in the left lane, one half of it right side up in the right. A scorched, jack-knifed semi bisected the road through the middle lane. Firemen crawled through the metal and the mess. Lights flashed, blue and red and strobing. Beyond that, a crunched up line of six or seven passenger vehicles, an accordioned pickup truck, broken glass, and a mangled bicycle littered the lanes like a tornado had busted through or something. She bit her lip as a team of paramedics loaded an occupied stretcher into a waiting ambulance.

She glanced back at the destruction, and her lip quivered. There was no way everybody had walked away from that. No way in hell. Somebody had lost her Derek today, or perhaps simply died with him in an eye blink of screaming metal and heat.

Without thinking, she reached for him, and she pulled his hand into her lap. He didn't wake, but the warmth radiating from his skin left her no doubt that his heart still beat and would continue to do so. She inched the car forward and left the tragedy behind.

When she pulled the Cayenne into the driveway, she sighed. “We're home,” she said. She touched his shoulder and squeezed. “Time to wake up. Just for a minute.”
He flinched awake, and a tremor ran through his body. “Huh?”

“Derek, we’re home,” she said, trying to break his mental fog into pieces.

He pulled the door handle like a reflex more than anything else. The distant sound of rain made a crescendo as the door yawned open, but he sat there, blinking. Water plinked and skittered through the gap between the door and the car.

“We’re home,” she said again.

He squinted at her. The way his nose crinkled made him seem vaguely rabbit-like, but she didn’t laugh. “What?” he managed. His breaths rasped.

“Home, Derek,” she said. “We’re home.”

“Oh,” he said. He looked around with a bit more awareness. “Oh,” he said again. He fumbled with his seat belt. The latch clicked as it released, and the belt hit him in the chin before it rolled behind his ear into the space behind the door frame.

She reached over his knee to grab her purse, but he stopped her. “I’ll get it,” he said, his voice thick with sleep.

She tried to guesstimate how heavy her bag was. He wasn't supposed to be picking up anything that weighed more than five pounds. But... Five pounds? Hardly more than a stack of thick dinner plates or a heavy book. Even if the purse weighed closer to eight pounds, since, really, it was more of a tote, she couldn't see the harm, just this once. Carrying her bag would make him feel a bit more like he was contributing.

“Oh,” he said. He turned and slid out of the car into the rain. He didn't have the same difficulties as he'd had getting into the car, but after sitting down for hours, he had balance issues trying to stand. His shoes churned gravel. He pinwheeled, and as he twisted to grab the handle and right himself, she heard him grunt. Pain. He turned back to the car and leaned against it, eyes screwed shut. He let the water drench him and didn't move.

She grabbed his duffel bag from the back seat and came around to his side of the car. She put her hand on his shoulder. Her purse lay forgotten in the front seat. “Are you doing okay, Derek?”

“I'm okay,” he said, but he didn't sound okay. His voice wobbled, like he wasn't sure. She couldn't pinpoint why or what might not be okay, since he didn't look like he was still in pain from his landing, but there was a definite lack of okay. He took a deep breath and swallowed, and then he left the safety of the car, hands spread from his hips in a clear indication that his center of balance had been disturbed. Dizzy, maybe? He'd gotten better about that, but... His feet splurched in the muddy grass and left indentations behind. A cool breeze blew. It smelled earthy and full of ozone.

She grabbed her purse, slung it over her free shoulder, and shut the car door behind her. She put her hand on his shoulder. Her purse lay forgotten in the front seat. “Are you doing okay, Derek?”

“I'm okay,” he said, but he didn't sound okay. His voice wobbled, like he wasn't sure. She couldn't pinpoint why or what might not be okay, since he didn't look like he was still in pain from his landing, but there was a definite lack of okay. He took a deep breath and swallowed, and then he left the safety of the car, hands spread from his hips in a clear indication that his center of balance had been disturbed. Dizzy, maybe? He'd gotten better about that, but... His feet splurched in the muddy grass and left indentations behind. A cool breeze blew. It smelled earthy and full of ozone.

She grabbed her purse, slung it over her free shoulder, and shut the car door behind her. She clicked the lock button on the key chain, and the car chirped. He wasn't moving well. She caught up to him in about three strides and wrapped her arm around his waist. He didn't comment, but her presence seemed to help ground him. He stopped spreading his hands to make a tripod with his body. His left hand gripped her shoulder, and his right arm relaxed by his hip.

“Watch the step,” she said as they approached the door.

He managed, panting, and rested against the door frame while she fumbled for her key. The
familiar brass slid into the lock, she turned it, and pushed open the door. He followed her into the
house. She dropped her duffel bag and her purse on the floor and turned, watching him as his hands
chased up the side of the door. He turned the deadbolt and checked the latch, two things she'd
never seen him do before. Her house tended to be Grand Central Station for interns and other
young residents. Or, at least, it used to be.

He turned and stood in the dark foyer, dripping on the carpet. He seemed pale. Pale and too thin
and disturbed. His body swayed, and he stared at nothing. Rain pattered on the roof and gave the
air a percussive quality.

She bit her lip. This wasn't quite how she'd imagined it would go, though, when she thought about
it, she wasn't sure what she'd imagined either. The trip from the hospital had been enough to wear
him out. She didn't think he was going to skip up the steps with a smile and say goodnight.

“Do you want to go to bed?” she said. He didn't answer, and he didn't give any indication that he'd
heard her. She touched his arm. “Derek?”

He blinked. “What?”

“Do you want to go to bed?”

She peered at the stairway, at the long incline and the railing. He hadn't done steps before.
Everything she knew about home recovery from heart surgery suggested that for at least a few
weeks, stair trips be limited to coming down in the morning and going up at night, because more
than that would be too physically trying for someone who had just had his chest cut open and his
heart jockeyed with by human hands. She turned and tried to gauge his reaction to the prospect of
having to climb all that, but he didn't even glance that way. His face remained expressionless,
maybe a little lost.

“Derek?”

“Not yet,” he said. “I'll just sit.”

For a minute, it seemed like he didn't know which way to go. He looked down the hallway toward
the kitchen, but then he veered left, his eyes blank. She followed him to the couch and watched,
concerned, as he collapsed. He didn't seem to care that he was soaked. Bits of wet, torn grass
littered the soles of his shoes. Water discolored the legs of his jeans about four inches up from the
hemline of the legs, and wet, dark splatters covered the rest of them. His shirt stuck to his skin,
and she could see his bandages through the front of it.

and rubbed his thigh. “Earth to Derek,” she said. “Hey.”

His body shuddered. “I'm sorry,” he said. He squeezed his eyes shut like he was trying to get rid of
a bad sight. She followed the direction of his stare, but nothing remarkable sat in the line of his
gaze. A bookshelf. The wall. “I'm sorry,” he said again. “I feel like I'm wading through molasses.”

“It's fine,” she said. “Do you want a glass of water? You could lie down here if you're tired.”

“I just need a minute,” he said. “That was a long car ride.”

“I'm really sorry about that.”

He shrugged. “It wasn't all bad. You still owe me a story.”
“I don't know,” she said. “You did cheat, after all.”

He gazed at her, eyes dark and clueless. “I cheated?”

The marker had smeared a bit in the rain, leaving streaks of green on his pale skin, but the words were mostly legible. Meredith owes a story. Simple and to the point. She touched his hand. He followed her attention and flinched when he saw his marred skin. “When did...”

She laughed. She couldn't help it. “Oh, that's classic, Derek,” she said. “You remembered about the story, but forgot about the prompt you wrote on your hand so you wouldn't forget it?”

He'd been pretty self-deprecating about the memory thing earlier, but her snicker died when she saw how well he was taking it now. And by well, she meant horribly. A deep sound of worry rumbled in his chest. He wobbled to his feet and took a step, but the impulse halted, and he stared like he didn't know where to go.

“What is it?” she said.

“Your purse. I left it...” He glanced vaguely at the dining room. “I left it somewhere.”

“I got it,” she assured him. “I put it by the door.” She rose to her feet and pulled at his hand. “It's fine. It's really fine, Derek.”

He collapsed back onto the sofa and sighed. His eyes seemed shimmery. Wet. Like he wanted to cry but wasn't letting himself. She rubbed his back, and he blinked.

She didn't know what to do. She'd expected to have him home in fifteen minutes. She'd expected to help him up to bed, where he'd sleep, and that would be the day for him. He'd sleep, and she'd do stuff downstairs, and then the day would wane. She'd go upstairs to join him, and she'd sleep, too. Next to him and in his space for the first time in over a week.

She'd planned to stay with him through the weekend to make sure he could handle taking care of himself in the longer term. That had been the only reason Dr. Altman had been willing to let him go, because of her. If he'd had no one, Seattle Grace would have kept him closer to eleven or twelve days. Maybe more. Derek had improved, but he still wasn't well.

She'd expected most of the three days to involve him sleeping. Nothing was going like she'd imagined, and she felt lost again. But he was the one who'd gotten shot. She could do this. She could be the supportive partner. In the face of that, she had to be. Anything less would be freaking pathetic.

“There's a bright side to this, you know,” she said, at a loss for anything else.

He snorted. His eyes creased as discomfort wound through him, but the pain didn't linger. His gaze evened out, and he stared at her. “There's a bright side to being a helpless guppy?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she said. She shifted to her knees, pressed against his thigh, leaned, and kissed him. She loitered by his lips and spoke against his skin. “It means I have to keep doing this to make sure you remember.” She kissed him again. “Really? I can think of worse fates.” Again. “I'm an excellent kisser.”

Bingo. His tension seemed to drain, which made hers drain as well. He tasted her and ran loose fingers through her tangled hair. His grip was clumsy, and he didn't make it more than an inch before he got stuck in the snarl. Her hair pulled a little, but she didn't care. He looked at her, a hopeful sort of light in his eyes as he pulled his hands loose and settled for petting her instead.
“Does it mean you're going to tell me a story, too?” he said.

“You're just not going to let that go, are you?”

“I'm wounded and vulnerable,” he said. “I figure it's my only shot.” She almost resisted, but then he added a soft, rumble-y, “Please?”

He didn't play fair.

“All right,” she said. She threw herself against the back of the couch with a huff and crossed her arms. “All right, fine. What's your preference? Worst drunk dial, loss of virginity, or police encounter?”

He put his back against the arm of the sofa and turned to her with a hazy look of glee on his face. He pondered his choices. “Oh, definitely first run in with the law.”

“First one?” she said. “Or something subsequent?”

“Well, I did show you mine, discounting speeding tickets,” he said.

She grinned. “I got caught shoplifting.”

“Mrs. Shepherd, do you mean to tell me you used to be a klepto?”

“I swiped some hair dye.”

“Oh?” He peered at her. “What color?”

“Fuscia.”

He must have been expecting platinum, or red, or... something normal. His mouth curled in a surprised grin, and he laughed. “Why on earth did you want pink hair?”

She shrugged. “Just tips, actually. Seemed like a good thing to do at the time. I figured my mother would hate it or whatever.”

“A rebellious klepto then?”

“Better than a narcoleptic,” she said, though she regretted saying it. He didn't seem to remember that, either, and he stared blankly at the reference.

The hole in his memory either didn't bother him, though, or lost traction under the weight of his next thought. He made a low sound in his throat. His stare peeled layers of her clothes away, and she couldn't help but giggle. Whatever thought he had, it was a very, very bad one. “So,” he said, and he waited, expectant as he let the low, rich hum of the word fade into silence.

“So, what?”

“Did you dye the carpet and the drapes?”

“I did not dye down there!” she said. “I was like twelve, Derek.”

He grinned. “Uh huh.”

“I didn't!”
“Then I think you owe me another confession,” he decided.

“What?” she said. “Why?”

“Mine was ten times better,” he said.

“You got what you asked for.”

“But I was misled!”

“How? I even let you pick what story! You can't make me take responsibility for your crappy choices. And you can't play the stoned card, either. I wanted to wait, and I said so.”

“I figured you made it past middle school before you became an outlaw,” he said.

She glared, but it didn't feel very strong, not when her lungs quivered, and she struggled not to burst out laughing.

“Well, if you wanted the good ones from the time of my majority or whatever, you should have either been more specific, or thought to ask me after the liver transplant when I was more stoned than you are now,” she said. So there.

The look on his face became dangerous. He grinned, his lips a sly, sarcastic slant. “How do you know I didn't?” he said in a low, rich tone that slid down her spine like a solid stroke of his hand. Her innards thrummed, and she shifted, restless, as her breaths kicked into higher gear. No, she had to tell herself. No sex.

“No way,” she said, trying not to pant with all the launch messages her body was sending her. How could he do that without even touching her? Without even trying? She shook her head. “No, I would remember.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Would you?”

“You're evil,” she said. “You're an evil bastard, Derek.”

“Wounded evil bastard,” he said. “Let's not forget wounded.”

“Whatever.” She huffed. Her body trembled with the stress of no follow through. “So, what did I say?”

He shifted, inching closer. The cushions bowed to his weight. He rested his chin on his hand, his elbow against the back of the couch, and he stared. “Why don't you tell me another story, and we'll compare notes?” he said.

Touch me, he'd said on many nights with the same shivering, purring tone.

She grabbed a cushion with her fingers, lobbed it so hard it made her arm hurt, and whacked him in the face with it. Sexual tension released from her muscles like something had popped loose. “Ass!” she said, laughing.

The painkillers had stripped him of any sort of reflexes. He didn't even try to catch the pillow. His face swept to the right with the blow. He spluttered. His hair stuck up, wet and stiff and scattered by the whiplash. And then he stared. He didn't respond.

The bottom dropped out from her stomach, and relief twisted into something else. “Crap,” she said, pawing forward. She touched his face. “Did I hurt you? I'm sorry.” It's not like he had any
recourse, assuming she hadn't nearly killed him again. Not being able to push, pull, or lift most certainly applied to hulking sofa cushions.

He blinked. “No,” he said, drawing out the syllable into something long and slow. “I'm not hurt.” And then he grabbed her thigh and pulled her to him with a grunt. No pulling, her brain screamed. Way, way more than five pounds! Bad! But then his hands slipped under her shirt, he squiggled his fingertips against her skin, and she forgot everything.

She shrieked and lost her breath as her muscles twitched all at once under the assault. “Stop!” she said, choking on laughter. “Derek, stop,” she croaked.

Through a blur of tears, she saw him kneeling over her, teeth bared in a sexy, triumphant grimace, but then she lost it as she arched back into the couch and laughed, and laughed, and laughed. “Bad girl,” he said somewhere in the haze.

She flipped onto her stomach, clawing at the cushions, but her desperate retreat only meant he shifted his attention to her back. A spasm wracked her body, and in her delirium, she prayed she wouldn't kick him. He worked her shoes away as she squirmed, and then he tickled the soles of her feet. Her left leg jerked wildly, and she struck him in the arm without meaning to.

He barked with laughter. “You're very flexible!”


When he let her go, she fell off the couch and landed on the floor with a breathless thump. She moaned, laughing, and inhaled the musty scent of the rug before rolling onto her back and staring at the hazy ceiling. She saw stars. Her vision wavered with the black dots of hyperventilation, but the seconds passed, and her breathing slowed. She wiped her face with her hands, spreading tears across her cheek in a salt slick that chilled her as it evaporated.

“That's what you get for belting me with a pillow when I'm vulnerable and wounded,” he said, staring down at her over the edge of the couch as he panted.

“You're evil incarnate,” she said, her voice hoarse. She coughed. “Got it.”

He grinned at her, but it faded. The force of his will and the thrum of adrenaline in his veins had been a powerful, heady, wonderful thing, but they abandoned him, sprinters overwhelmed in an arduous marathon. She watched it happen. The feverish excitement bled out of his face as he stumbled to her knees and crawled back to him, thumping her kneecaps and feet on the hard floor. Pain wavered on his face as his breaths hammered in his chest. He blinked, and he couldn't quite seem to catch his breath. The clock ticked away the moments as she settled next to him.

He grunted as she hugged him.

Sometimes, it shocked her how fragile he was, now, how easily his body broke under stress. She stroked his damp shirt, frowning when she noticed beads of perspiration along his temples, and wet stains that couldn't be rain because they'd collected underneath his armpits.

“Do you want to lie down, now?” she said.

“No,” he said. “I don't want to.”

She bit her lip. Want. A key word. Soon to be supplanted by need. He struggled to keep his eyes open.
His skin shivered under her palms as she rubbed his arm. With a groan, she forced herself to leave him for a moment. She padded to the hall closet. She pulled a thick winter afghan loose from the pile of musty blankets, even though winter had long since passed, and she returned. She wrapped them inside of it, and he sighed against her shoulder. She snuggled closer.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

“Don't be, Derek. Please, don't.”

His eyelids drooped as he lost the battle. His expression went slack, and he watched her through his eyelashes, breathing in the darkness, but he said nothing. His body felt heavy against her shoulder. Heavier. Dead weight. Rain plinked against the windowpanes. She kissed his forehead.

“It's okay,” she assured him.

He pulled the blanket closer and collapsed in a fluid motion, from sitting to sort of a fetal curl on the seat of the couch. She slipped loose from the afghan and, without word, she helped him lay himself flat on his back. She pulled off his wet, dirty shoes and his saturated, cold socks and threw them to the floor under the coffee table.

Minutes passed. And then his eyes closed at last as exhaustion pulled him under without his consent. She rested with her back against the couch, taking a moment to compose herself. The cushion and his soft belly cradled her head, and she looked to the side, up the line of his arm to the underside of his chin. He breathed, even and steady, but she could still detect shivers as the sweat evaporated from his skin.

Biting her lip, she went back to the closet for another blanket, and she put that on top of the afghan. Though she was reluctant to leave him there, wet and maybe-cold in damp clothes, he'd hit some sort of wall, and she doubted rousing him would be any healthier than letting him shiver for a while, and perhaps even worse. She left him sleeping in the living room, resisting the urge to do nothing but watch him.

She took his duffel bag upstairs and unpacked it for him. She hung his shirts back on the rack in the closet, and folded his pajama pants and put them in his drawer with his socks. She dumped all the dirty clothes into the hamper, and left the duffel in the bathroom in case he needed some of his toiletries or something, though she doubted it, since most of them were dupes, and he already had a full set here.

She stripped the bed next, yanking away the soiled, old sheets and mattress pad, and she replaced them. She tried to get it looking nice, but, she sort of sucked at housework. She folded the bedspread under the pillows. It hung off the sides of the bed, lop-sided. She thought about stacking the pillow shams back on the bed, but it seemed like a lot of effort, considering they would both be sleeping there in a few hours anyway.

She gathered up the sheets and the full hamper and waddled down the stairs with them. The answering machine beeped as she stumbled through the kitchen, dropping socks and underwear and other things in her wake. The room smelled like something rotten, and she gagged, almost losing her grip on the hamper, too. Dirty dishes sat in the sink, mold spreading across old food like fuzzy carpeting. Little flying bugs hovered in the air above the trashcan and the pile of dishes. Her eyes watered, and her gag reflex kicked in again.

The answering machine, oblivious to the decaying mess, beeped again. She gasped, trying to breathe through her mouth to stop the smell. “All right, one freaking second,” she said.
She made it to the washing machine and dropped everything in a heap. She stuffed some whites in first, since they were both running out of clean clothes after over eight days away. She turned the start dial, and the machine had just rumbled to life when her watch beeped. 2PM.

She sighed. The kitchen would have to wait a little. She gathered a breath deep into her chest and launched back into the room, unwilling to breathe. She grabbed a glass, filled it under the faucet, and vacated as quickly as possible. She sucked in air as she closed the kitchen door behind her. She grabbed his pills from her purse, and she returned to the couch.

He'd been asleep twenty minutes, at best, and she hated to wake him, but... She touched his shoulder through the blanket, anyway. “Derek,” she whispered.

Nothing.

“Derek, come on. You need to wake up for a minute.”

With a deep sound of pain and frustration, he rolled away from her into the back of the sofa. When he put weight on his arm and his side, he let loose a breathless sort of croak, and he flattened out again. His body shifted under the blankets, and then he wiped muzzily at his face, but he didn't open his eyes.

“Please, I don't want to cough,” he said.

“You don't need to,” she said. “You just need to take this, and you can go back to sleep. Can you sit up?”

He sucked in a breath and didn't move. She felt his muscles tremble underneath her hands. She slid her arm underneath his back, and together, they managed to get him into a slouch. He dropped his bare feet over the edge of the sofa, and he hovered over his knees with the blanket curled around him, breathing like he hurt and he wanted it to stop. He rubbed his eyes, and, finally, he looked at her. Sort of. His stare conveyed no recognition. His hair stuck up all over. Dark circles gave him a raccoonish appearance around the eyes.

He took the pill from her hand like an automaton. He didn't want to take the glass of water no matter what she tried. She ended up tipping the glass to his lips for him. Her stomach churned as he swallowed, water dripping everywhere in a giant, spluttering mess. She rubbed his shoulder. If he were at all awake, he would feel so embarrassed, and she ached for him.

“You can go back to sleep now,” she said. She tried to get him to lie back down, but he wouldn't budge. “Derek?” she whispered.

He blinked, stood, and shuffled toward the hallway. He clutched the blankets, and they trailed after him like a long cape. She followed him, concerned that, in his stupor, he would try the stairs. When the door slammed in her face, she flinched and came back to herself. She stood in the hallway outside the bathroom.

“Let me know if you need anything,” she told the door.

“I'm fine,” she thought she heard him grumble, though she could have imagined it. She didn't let herself dwell on it. He was on a truckload of drugs. He hurt. He'd been woken from a sound, deep sleep, and she'd stuffed a pill down his throat before he'd really regained any sort of thought processes. He was allowed to be a bit grumpy.

She returned to the kitchen. She pushed through the door and gagged, though the urge seemed less, now that she'd started growing accustomed to the horrible smell. She stared at the disaster area.
She didn't know what the hell to do first, and the answering machine wouldn't. Freaking. Shut up.

The answering machine, however, didn't make her want to vomit, so she left it. She grabbed a big black drawstring trash bag from the roll under the sink and attacked the refrigerator. The solidifying, reeking milk was the first to go, followed by the half-and-half, some very ripe orange juice, and a box of leftovers from some restaurant. She threw out liquifying strawberries. A fuzzy collection of unidentifiable items that had become a science experiment. She threw out the yellowing stick of margarine. She tossed vegetables and dip and all sorts of other things that normally, in a house full of four adults, they churned through in a matter of days. Thursday was usually grocery night, too, which meant the day of the shooting would have been when the untouched perishables on their last legs would have been swept clear to make room for replacements.

She closed the fridge door and attacked the counters next. She tossed bread that had become solid mold and mushy, browning apples that left little puddles behind. She fought her reflex to throw up again, and nausea swirled around her head as she approached the trashcan. She tipped it, and dumped everything from that into the giant bag as well. A plume of rotting stench hit her right in the face, and then?

Then, she threw up. Right into the bag. She gagged until her stomach hurt. Little flying creepy crawly things buzzed in her face, and she retched again and again until she was empty and trembling. Her nose ran. She swallowed bile. She twisted the ties on the bag and shut it. Then she wrapped it in a second bag, and shut that. The smell died to a tolerable level, and she heaped the bag by the trashcan.

When Derek wandered into the room, barefoot, blankets draped over his shoulders, and his hair all askew like some sort of windblown refugee, she was still trying to build the courage to clean the dishes in the sink. “Hey,” she said, and then she frowned. She'd been slamming things. Retching. Wrinkling trash bags. “I'm not keeping you up, am I?”

He shook his head. “No.”

The answering machine beeped again, and he moved toward it, his steps slow and deliberate, like he was hurting again. He looked haggard. And tired. And yet he wasn't sleeping. She debated whether to ask him about another Percocet, when he hit the button.

“You have thirteen new messages,” the machine said in its flat, mechanical tone.

Beep.

“Derek, it's Mom,” said Mrs. Shepherd in a wavering, panicked-but-forced-into-calm voice. “I've tried your office, both of your work cells, your personal cell, and now here. Mark's not answering any of his phones either. I didn't have Meredith's cell phone number stored, so I'm hoping you're with her. We saw the news. I know you're probably busy managing the troops, but, please, call, and tell us everyone is okay when you have a moment.”

Beep.

“Derek? Kathy. You need to call. Mom's freaking out.” Kathy's voice hitched. “We're all freaking out.”

Beep.

“Derek, it's Mom again. I'm really hoping this machine is broken.” Meredith bit her lip as she
listened to Carolyn suck in a breath like she was forcing herself not to cry. “Call as soon as you get this.”

Beep.

“Lexie?” said Thatcher. “Meredith?” he added as an afterthought. “Please, call me when you can.”

Beep.

“Derek, this really isn't funny,” a woman snapped. Rachel? “Call somebody, damn it.”

Beep.

“Mom again. Sorry.”

Beep.

“Uh, hi. This is Aaron. I... Never mind.”

Beep.

“Derek, your family is ringing me every five minutes to see if somebody's contacted me, and I have no idea what to tell them,” said Addison. Her voice sounded low and warbling, like she was crying. She sniffed. “I'm watching the news. You can reach me at Sam's... Just call, okay? Or Meredith. Or anybody else who's there in that godforsaken zoo. Call, please.”

Beep.

“I'm sorry,” said a tiny voice. “I shouldn't have called it a godforsaken zoo. Please, call.”

Beep.

“You'd better not be dead,” Nancy snapped, “Or I'll have to strangle you myself. They're estimating casualties.” Then her voice broke. “Please, don't be dead.”

Beep.

“Mom again.”

Beep.

“Hi,” said an unfamiliar, feminine voice. “This is Janine Wilkinson from the Seattle Times. I'm calling Derek Shepherd concerning the recent shootings at Seattle Grace. I'd appreciate it if you would give me a call back. You can reach me at the city desk, extension 9216.”

Beep.

“Dr. Shepherd? Detective Wolff. We spoke on Sunday afternoon. I just wanted to let you know I've sent a packet for you in the mail. It has my business card and the numbers for some hotlines you can call. If you change your mind about making a statement, or just want to talk off the record with somebody who understands, my door is always open. I know this is a very difficult time, and I wanted to express my deepest sympathy to you and your wife.”

Beep.

“You have no new messages,” said the machine.
Derek stared at the machine, and he didn't move. Meredith's gaze dropped to the floor as a lump formed in her throat. “Those must be old,” she said. Anger made her teeth clench. Well, duh, Meredith. Of course they were old. “I... I didn't come in here. When I came home before,” she said. “All I did was sleep. I'm sorry. I should have... I should have gotten rid of them.”

Her throat hurt. Why. Why hadn't she realized and cleared the messages before he'd heard? Why? What had possessed her to think, after a freaking catastrophe so large it had been splashed across national news for days nonstop and still, to this day, was making some headlines, that nobody would have called home to check in? He was in pain, and tired, and he didn't need more reminders of what he'd been through. He had enough already. She'd been an idiot. Again.

Her fingers clenched. Her vision blurred. She walked to him, sneaked under the billowing blankets, and hugged him. His eyes watered, and she watched something horrible flash across his dead gaze. He clutched her, and his breaths sped up into something panicked. His warm body hovered in her space, but Derek Shepherd disappeared. His muscles shook, and his jaw clenched, and he looked like he wanted to explode.

“Are you okay?” she said, which was stupid. Stupid again. If she was crying and not okay, he wasn't okay either. “I'm not okay,” she added. Solidarity might help.

“Everybody called,” he said, his voice a wretched wasteland.

“They did,” she said.

“I guess I should check my voice mail. I've been putting it off, but...” He blinked, and with a sigh, he stumbled to the dinette set table and collapsed. He took a breath, and then his eyes began to space.

She crumpled into the chair next to him and scooted close. She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned against him. “Detective Wolff visited you while I was away?” she said, trying to keep him talking. Anything. “You never said anything.”

He tensed. “I don't want to talk to him.”

“Nobody said you had to,” she said. “I told him to get bent. Well, not in those exact words or anything, but you know what I mean.”

“When?”

“He called me,” she said. She thought, sifting memories. “I guess the same day he spoke to you, but later? It was after I got back to the hospital.”

“Oh.”

“You don't have to talk to him, Derek,” she said. “You don't. Mr. Clark is dead. There's no criminal case. And even if there were, they can't compel you. Not as a——”

“A victim?” he said, speaking the word as though it were something dirty. Shameful. He stared at the table, his lips a flat line. In the gray light, his eyes seemed obsidian. Rain tapped on the roof, and water streamed down the windowpanes.

“I was going to say casualty,” she said. “Derek, are you okay?”

His fingertips wandered along the wood grain in the old oak table. He blinked, and then he stared at her. “Did somebody do something to you?” he said. “Is that one of the stories you won't tell me?
Is that why you hate talking about...” His temples moved as he clenched and unclenched his jaw, again, and again, and he couldn't finish his sentence. His breaths came low and even, but they seemed regulated, somehow. Like fists had grabbed his lungs and squeezed, squeezed, squeezed.

“What?” she said.

“You know a lot,” he said. “About police procedure.”

“Derek,” she said. “Derek, I asked Detective Wolff when he called me. Nothing ever happened to me. I don't like to talk about before because I was an immature idiot. The only person who ever hurt me was me.”

“Oh,” he said.

She touched his shoulder. “Will you talk to me? Please?”

His hands shook, and he petted the table. “I'm really... really stoned,” he said. “I'm...”

“I know.”

He pushed the chair back and stood. “Were you going to wash the dishes?” he said.

“Yeah, but—”

“I'll do them.”

“Okay, but—”

“I'm fine,” he said.

He left the blankets on the chair and walked past the counter top. He stopped at the trash bag, and he bent, reaching for it. She bit her lip, tamping the squall of worry burbling in her throat. That thing had a full milk jug in it and all sorts of other crap. That was definitely not five pounds, but she had a feeling if she opened her mouth, something catastrophic might happen that they would never recover from. And so, when he pulled at the drawstrings and tried to lift the stuffed bag, she said nothing.

She couldn't see his face. He flexed his arm, and the bag didn't even come off the floor. He left it there and moved to the sink without comment. For a moment, he paused, hands clenching the side of the counter. His body hitched, and she heard him choke and sniffle, but she thought it might have more to do with the rancid smells than anything else. He turned away, a look of pain blossoming on his face as his gag reflex stressed his breastbone. His torso jerked, and he screwed his eyes shut.

“Jesus,” he hissed. “Did Lexie leave this here?”

Meredith only knew it hadn't been them. Derek was a bit of a neat freak. He always rinsed his dishes after dinner, and usually hers, too, even if they didn't eat together for some reason, as long as he found the skeletal remains of her dinner piled up somewhere in the house before he went to bed. Alex almost never used plates. That left Lexie.

“I think so,” she said.

He swallowed thickly. She watched him compose himself, stuffing his reactions inside a tiny box of forced self-control. An experienced surgeon, he'd gotten used to dealing with gross things that
instinct told him to get far, far away from instead of touch. He'd gotten used to the smell of bowels and blood and brains and bits over the years. Rotting junk took him a minute, but he managed.

He turned around. He twisted the faucet. Water gushed into the sink, and all the little bugs in the air scattered. He grabbed a sponge and some soap, and he began to work. “Even Mark wasn't this bad,” he said. “Not even during college.”

“Well, it has been over a week,” she said. “It's not like we normally leave things out like this. I don't think anybody planned to be away this long.” She grabbed a paper towel from the roll and wiped down the counter tops, clearing moldy, gritty crumbs away.

He didn't respond.

He used the spray to loosen a carpet of mold from a plate. Powdery bits of fungus kicked up into the air, and he coughed, and then he sobbed, shuddered, and blinked, but he kept going. Her muscles tightened, and she wanted to tell him to stop, she did, but she made herself stay quiet. There was helping, and then there was hovering.

When she finished with the counters, she slid behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. For a long, agonizing moment, tension locked him in place, like he didn't know who'd touched him, and he warred with his fight or flight response. His soft breathing resumed, and his shoulders dropped as his tautness turned lax. She laid her cheek against his shoulder blades. They flexed and moved underneath his skin, and she sighed, resting as she rubbed the soft cotton over his flat stomach.

She spaced and let the world blur. He piled dish after rinsed dish beside the sink, ready for the dishwasher. She should help. She should. Her eyelids dipped, and she pressed her ear against him, listening. With the water and his breaths and all the moving, she didn't hear his heartbeat, but she heard him. Living. And that was enough.

She kissed him through his shirt and let go. He drenched her with the hose when she reached for the pile of plates, and she shrieked, leaping backward. Her spine jarred as she slammed into the opposite counter.

“Gotcha,” he said, his voice soft.

She laughed, wiping water from her eyes. “Ass,” she said.

“You love it,” he countered.

They settled into a sort of rhythm. Him rinsing. Her loading the dishwasher. Dodging each other. Not laughing endlessly or anything. But... Snickering. Hopeful play in the midst of a darker mess of issues. She bumped his hip from time to time, making him slip under the faucet. He got her dead on with the hose at least twice, though she gained skill at sneaking up behind him and making off with a glass or a plate, undetected. They both ended up wet and mussed and out of sorts, but content.

They stopped when Derek had to put a hand on the counter top to hold himself upright. She loaded the dishwasher with detergent and let it go. The machine came to life with a gurgle of water and soapy spit, and then she went to join him at the table. He rested in the chair where he'd draped the afghan.

“Do you want anything?” she said as she sat at the table across from him. Well past 2PM, disgusting job done, her stomach rumbled its discontent. He stared at her, but he didn't see. She
waved a hand at him. “Derek?”

He blinked. “I'm sorry. What?”

“Do you want something to eat?”

His lip twitched. “I don't know. Are you cooking?”

“No,” she said, and she tried not to take offense when he visibly relaxed. “I'm reheating, or maybe pouring. We're totally out of milk and just about anything else perishable.”

That left, basically, crackers, soup, and cereal. None of which sounded appealing after many long hours without food. Derek hadn't eaten since after 7:30AM, and she hadn't eaten since at least 9AM herself. She could kick herself again for not being prepared. She'd been so focused on getting Derek home that she hadn't thought about what living at home again would entail or how, after nine days, many of the various necessities would have fallen by the wayside and need to be resumed.

“I guess we could order in,” she said. “Pizza? Chinese?”

“You hate Chinese.”

“And you hate pizza,” she said. He ate it, from time to time, when he was starving. But he liked to get it without cheese and covered with vegetables, which, frankly, was disgusting. Her stomach roiled at the thought. What was the point of pizza if it had no meat and no cheese?

“How about subs?” she suggested. “There's a place I wanted to try.”

“What place?” he said.

“You know.” She waved her arms, as if that would help him figure it out. “That little place that opened a few blocks over. I pointed to it a few weeks ago.” No recognition in his gaze. “When we were in the car.” Nothing. “On the way to work. That day. Uh. Ricardo's or something.”

He shrugged.

“I think I saved a menu somewhere,” she said. “We got one in the mail.” She stood and went to the paper drawer. She swept through piles and piles menus for pizza places, Chinese places, Thai places, bakeries, sandwich joints, Italian food, carry-out services, and more. She didn't think anybody had cleaned out the drawer since before Izzie had left. She found coupons that had expired over a year ago. Her eyes lit on a garish gold-and-green-colored menu as she churned through the drawer. Ricardo's. “Here it is,” she said.

She flopped back into her chair with the menu. “So, do you want that?”

“Want what?”

“Subs,” she said. “For lunch. The menu?” She pushed it at him.

“Oh,” he said. He fingered the menu. “Sure.”

“What do you want?” she said as he stared at the menu, a blank look on his face.

He fiddled with the corner, bending the already abused paper. She bit her lip. He seemed... Almost lost. She watched him. He read a line, and then his gaze lost focus. He squinted, and then he started at the top again. He couldn't make it more than halfway down the front page, which was
cluttered with about fifty different combination platters, before he lost himself. With a sigh, he gave up, and he pushed the menu away.

“There's a lot here,” he said, his voice soft. “Any recommendations?”

She touched his hand. “It's new. I've wanted to try it for a while. I can just pick something. You know, if you trust me to pick something that could be construed as healthy or whatever.”

A wan smile ghosted his face. “All right.”

She took the menu to the phone and ordered from an crotchety woman who sounded like she was less than a cigarette away from emphysema.

“Okay,” Meredith said as she sat back at the table. “They said fifteen minutes. If they make it, I'll be— crap!”

He peered at her. “You'll be crap?”

“Do you have any cash in your wallet?” she said. “I forgot to hit the ATM on the way back, too.”

He stared at her for a long, silent moment, and then he shifted, reaching for his back pocket. Discomfort creased his expression, but it went away as he pulled out his worn leather billfold and stopped twisting. He opened the wallet. Money fanned loosely from the bill pocket, but he didn't touch that.

He stared at his license, and it seemed almost like he'd gotten caught in the thrall of a cobra or something. He touched his picture with his fingertips. He was one of the few people she knew who remained photogenic, even after he'd waited at the DMV for hours after a long hospital shift. His twin smiled back at him with a sly grin that announced he knew he was hot. Derek brushed the word Seattle, and then he paused over his scrawling signature. The address on the license read 613 Harper Lane. Her address.

“Derek?” she said.

He blinked and looked up at her. “Hmm?”

She held her hand out. “Money? It's $18.72.”

“Oh,” he said. He pulled a wad of bills free, but he didn't split anything out for her. His hand hovered on a fifty dollar bill, and he looked at the pile, perplexed. Normally, Derek was meticulous about tipping, and he calculated fifteen percent in the space of heartbeats. She grabbed a twenty and some ones, and she frowned as she crinkled the money in her hand.

“Oh, seriously,” she said. She put the money on the table and walked to his side. She cupped his shoulders and started massaging. “Scale of 1 to 10, how bad is it?”

“I don't know,” he said. “It just... I thought...”

She paused. “What?”

“I just want it to stop,” he said. “I need it to stop.”

“What do you need to stop, Derek?”

“I don't know,” he said. He blinked, and he started to rock in his chair. “I don't know, Meredith.”
She sighed and collapsed next to him. “Okay,” she said. She stroked his face. “Sorry. I'm just... I'm a little lost.”

“Join the fucking club.”

“I'm trying not to smother you,” she said. “I'm trying so hard, but you're starting to worry me a bit.”

He sighed. She stared at his profile. He swallowed, again and again, like he was forcing down a torrent. His fingers tightened against the edge of the table. “I'd talk if I had any idea what to say. I just...” He stared at his lap. “I don't know.”

She leaned against him. “We suck,” she said.

“We kind of do.”

“We're clueless freaks.”

“We kind of are.”

He kissed her forehead. The corners of his mouth twitched. “So, this club,” he said.

“The clueless freaks club?”

He nodded. “Co-presidents? Or is one of us on top?”

She snorted, and he wrapped his arms around her body. He breathed in her ear, soft and buffeting, and then he burrowed his face against her neck. His body felt warm and solid. He rumbled, not a word, not anything but deep, vibrating noise, and she felt her muscles loosen. “You're what I need,” he said, a breathless whisper. “Meredith.”

She stared, head back against his shoulder. Her vision blurred, almost as though she were drugged, and she rested, nose to his damp hair. She said something, but she had no idea what. Some regurgitated bits of flotsam she'd pulled from her internal reservoir of scattered thoughts. He melted, so it must have been right, must have been good.

She stroked his arm, and she let him hold her as seconds stretched to minutes.

When the doorbell rang, all the careful work she'd done dissolved. His muscles locked, and she sat in his arms, stuck in a tightening vise.

“It's probably the sandwiches,” she said, struggling away from his grip. She flopped against the table and grabbed the money.

“Oh,” he said.

By the time she'd undone the locks on the door, paid the delivery boy, and returned, he seemed less out of sorts. Just a little. She pawed through the warm, fresh-smelling bag. Two wrapped sandwiches sat partially buried in a pile of mustard and mayo packets. Just picking up the first sandwich made her stomach growl.

“Ham and Swiss. No mayo. Wholewheat,” she said as she presented his meal to him.

A breath flared from him, given weight by his diaphragm. Not quite a laugh. Not quite.

“What?” she said. She tore open the packaging of her sandwich. The thing was huge. They'd given her the full twelve inch loaf of bread, and it was stuffed with meat and other goodies. The
sandwich had to be at least four inches thick.

“You make the most amusing face when you're humoring me,” he said.

“I do not.”

“Do, too,” he said. “Your nose crinkles, and you glower. It's just wholewheat, Mere. Thank you for ordering it.”

“Screw the wholewheat,” she said. “How can you survive without mayo? Isn't that really bland?”

He unwrapped his sandwich and took a test bite, leaving a small crescent of empty space in the bun. He seemed happy with it, and he chewed for several seconds. He swallowed. “You only wish your sandwich was as awesome as mine,” he said.

“Mine has bacon,” she said. She sunk her teeth into the warm, soft bun, and died. The tomato burst with flavor and mixed with the melting cheddar cheese, crispy bacon, and juicy turkey. Glorious. “Bacon is the definition of sandwich bliss,” she said around her stuffed mouth. She didn't care how muffled she sounded or how gross it was, because it was good, and her starving stomach demanded more, more, more, like a ravenous, rumbling beast. The second the first bit of bacon hit her esophagus, she couldn't stop shoveling. “Your ham and Swiss is on the losing team, Derek.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes,” she said. “Greasy, crunchy strings of coronary artery disease and heart failure topped with high triglycerides, cholesterol, and a tomato to say it's healthy. It's perfect bliss or whatever.”

He shook his head. “You're going to have a stroke before you're forty, Meredith.”

“So worth it.” She licked her fingers to get the dripping sauce, and then she chomped down on another bite and another and another. “This is really, really good,” she said. “I like this place.”

“Where did you get this?” he said.

“Ricardo's,” she replied. “A few blocks over. You know. By the market and the drug store? It's really close. Their delivery guy was on a bike. A pedal bike. Not a motorcycle.” She reached for another bite, but she had nothing left. Her stomach rumbled its thanks, and she tried to breathe, but she couldn't fill her lungs. She moaned, put her hands over her abdomen, and leaned into him. “Oh, I had no idea I was that hungry.”

“Did you even chew?” he said.

“Maybe.”

“What's the point of eating to kill yourself if you don't even stop to taste it?”

“Oh, I tasted it,” she said. “I did. And it was goooooood.” She flopped like some sort of dead fish and watched him take another bite. He'd taken maybe four, all of them small.

“Really good?” he asked, a tiny ghost of a grin quirking his lips.

She nodded. “Really, really.” She almost collapsed into his lap and simply draped herself across him, except a sharp, icky, rotten smell hit her nose, and she remembered she hadn't taken out the trash yet. “Ugh,” she groaned, and she forced herself to her feet.

“What?”
“The trash is making me nauseated. It stinks,” she said.

She waddled to the big garbage bag like a pregnant woman and grabbed it with a heavy groan. Definitely more than five pounds. “I'll be right back,” she said.

She dragged the bag through the back door, which slapped behind her on its hinges. Luckily, the rain had slowed considerably, and she didn't get drenched in two seconds. She pulled the bag into the little fenced area where they kept the trash cans. She didn't even try to lift it to put it in one of the cans, she just left it by the plastic, county-approved bin. Alex could get it or something.

Or...

She bit her lip against the sudden, nervous well of grief. Not Alex. Lexie could help her get it later if the racoons and possums didn't rip it apart. Or maybe Mark. Mark would visit. She wiped at her face, though she didn't know why. Rain spatter made it impossible to discern tears from water droplets.

She trudged back inside, only to find Derek asleep at the table. He'd picked at his sandwich a little, but more than three quarters of it remained, untouched. He'd contorted a bit in the chair, his ribs resting against the back of the chair, and he used his elbow over the side to keep his balance. His chin touched his chest, and his other hand sat vaguely on top of his sandwich, as if he'd meant to take another bite, shifted to get more comfortable, and passed out instead. The paper wrapper crinkled as she picked it up and put it in the fridge so he could have it later.

“Derek?” she whispered. She touched his shoulders. “You can't sleep here. You'll fall.” He didn't move, and she sighed. She didn't want to have to keep doing this. She wanted to let him sleep. “Derek, come on.” She shook him, trying to be gentle. “Derek.”

“Mmm,” he groaned. He turned his face into her chest, and his hand clutched at her shirt. “Still don't see how this is resting,” he said, his voice low and feather soft against her shirt.

“Derek,” she said, louder.

His eyes stayed shut, but she felt him wake. His breaths became clipped like he'd been shocked, or he realized he hurt again. While his muscles didn't tense, his loose body had a more controlled air to it. “Let me go back,” he said.

“Come on,” she said, prodding him. “Let's go back to the couch. Okay?” But he didn't move. “You can't sleep in the chair, Derek.”

“Chair?” He blinked and swallowed thickly. The lack of comprehension in his eyes disturbed her, but she tried to ignore it.

“The one you're sitting in,” she said. “Can you stand?”

“What time is it?”

She glanced at her watch. “It's almost four.”

“When can I go home?” he said as he leaned over his knees and put his face in his hands.

She froze. “Derek, we are home,” she said. She squeezed his shoulder and felt her nails carve dents into his skin. “We're home. We're in the kitchen at my mother's house.”

He raised his head, and he peered at the room through dark, confused eyes. She watched him as his
gaze wandered and paused at the window. Rain splattered against the smudged, glass panes. He licked his lips, and his assessment drifted to the sink, the counter tops, and the clock on the wall. He found the answering machine last and rested his stare on the phone on the wall for a long, long time.

“Can you stand?” she said. “Come on, Derek. Up.”

A warbling, worrisome sound collected in his throat. He looked at her. He stood, but he moved like he'd disconnected his brain from his limbs. He almost tripped on nothing at all. She bit her lip as she wrapped herself around him.

“I'm sorry,” he said, and the apology cut her to pieces. “I'm...”

“Derek, it's been a long day,” she said. “This is a lot longer than you're used to being active, even with naps. It's okay to be exhausted. It really is. It's only been nine days.”

“I was okay. I was,” he said. “And then you left, and I...” He shuddered. He wilted over her shoulder. His voice dropped low, and he swayed. “I need to lie down, now.”

“The couch is right in the next room,” she said.

She walked with him into the living room. He let her guide him like he slept on his feet and had no conscious idea where he was going. But, dreaming while awake, or not, he saw the couch, and he blinked. His gaze darkened.

“I want to go upstairs,” he said.

“Are you sure?” she said. “The couch is right here. And you wouldn't have to try the stairs when you're ready to pass out.”

“The couch hurts.”

“Are you sure the bed would be better?”

“No,” he said, frustration giving his tired tone sharp, painful barbs. His eyes misted. He looked back at the couch, and something in his expression broke. “I can't. It hurts, Mere. The cushions are too soft. I can do a fucking flight of steps. Not the couch.”

She stared at the stairwell with trepidation. Derek could barely stand. The stairway would kill him, but he didn't give her that much choice. He moved, determined, and, somehow, he found enough steam for four steps before he started to flag. Her throat hurt as she swallowed back tears. She gripped his waist. He leaned against the railing, panting, every breath breaking loose from his chest with a tiny moan.

“Slow down,” she said, rubbing his back. “Catch your breath.”

His momentum tipped him forward, and he stumbled through another three steps. He stopped. “Fuck,” he said, gasping. “Fuck.” He hit the railing with his fist, and the whole thing shook. The thunderous noise of it echoed in the empty house.

“Breathe,” she said, trying to hold herself together. She felt like she'd swallowed a nuclear bomb and it ticked, deep inside. Her lungs burned. Every time she breathed, she pressed down on her diaphragm until it ached. If she did that, she wouldn't sob. “You'll make it. I'm here.”

Another three steps, and then two, and then one. He kept going, nearly tripping, until he was within
sight of his goal. He looked at the long, empty hallway beyond the steps. He rested, two steps to go, and then he dug down and pushed.

He sobbed as he reached the door frame of the master bedroom. His whole body wobbled. His chest rose and fell, over and over and over with every wheeze. He didn't move from the door frame. Ten feet from his goal, and he didn't move. He thunked his forehead against the wood, his eyes squeezed shut, and he spent all his energy on standing and breathing.

She rubbed his arm. “Do you want more Percocet?” she said.

He didn't speak, but he nodded.

“I'll be right back. Don't move.”

She raced down the steps and grabbed his pills from her purse, and she re-filled the water glass she'd used for his last dose in the bathroom sink about a quarter way up the side. She covered the glass with her hand, and she raced back up the steps. He took the glass and the pill without comment, and when he finished, she set the glass on the nightstand on his side.

While he rested, she yanked back the covers on his side of the bed and made the way clear for him to walk without tripping. She returned to him, reached around his waist, and unbuttoned his jeans. The thick, faded denim still hadn't quite dried all the way, particularly at his ankles. She slipped his pants down his trembling legs, where they pooled at his ankles, leaving him in his black boxer briefs and the soft, stained t-shirt. She helped him step out of his pants, but even with her guidance, he almost toppled.

He took the last few steps with his remaining energy, and he collapsed to the bed like a felled tree. He didn't even have the strength to lift his legs off the floor. He lay half on, half off the bed, eyes shut as he breathed, still panting, still struggling. She pulled his legs and lower body into the bed with a groan of effort that raked her vocal cords to shreds.

She stroked his face. “Okay?”

“No,” he said, his voice choked. He stared at her, his eyes red and puffy like he was about ready to burst into tears. “My back. I need to sit up.” He clawed at the sheets.

Her mind worked like lightning as she ran through options, trying not to panic over his desperation. She thought of things that had made her feel better after her own surgery. She thought of things she'd read. She'd actually poked around on some home care forums for heart surgery patients, too, because knowing how to crack a sternum, insert a chest tube, and fix a heart? Not the same as caring for the heart's owner afterward at home.

After spending days in pain at home after her liver surgery, after reading the clinical list of what to expect provided to her by Dr. Bailey, she'd become convinced that surgeons didn't really have any freaking clue what their scalpels did to people in the aftermath. Surgeons were taught to dehumanize from minute one. Sterile drapes took faces away during procedures. All surgeons looked at were mechanics. I'm staring at an aneurysm. How do I fix it? They didn't care that Betty Sue would have a headache for weeks.

Speaking of Betty Sue, Meredith recalled a blurry subject line. Some woman. Post-quadruple bypass surgery. “Can't sleep, back is killing me. Help!” Tom248 had answered...

“Can you roll?” Meredith said. “Just for a minute? I know it's uncomfortable, but I know something we can try.”
With a pained, torn piece of sound that loitered in his throat, Derek rolled away from her. She jabbed her knee into the mattress by the base of his spine, leaned across him, and pulled the pillows loose from her side of the bed. She lined them lengthwise along his shoulders, back, butt, and legs. She splayed her palms against his side. His ribs jammed into her as he panted.

“Mere,” he said, his voice wispy, like he was barely holding on. He shook.

“Okay, roll back,” she said, and she moved her knee.

He let gravity pull him down onto his back. The pillows pushed his right side off the mattress, so that he rested flat, but tipped at an angle. Not enough to make him feel like he was resting on his side, but enough give half of his back a rest.

A groan tumbled from his lips, but it sounded thick and heady and sort of cleansing, as though he were pushing out the badness. She wanted to collapse with the nauseating power of her relief when she saw his face. He swallowed, and his breathing slowed from stabbing agony into something restive. He raised a palm to his face to wipe at his eyes, and then he let it flop onto his stomach. He didn't move.

Rain pattered on the roof. A steady drip, drip, drip echoed from the gutters. Silence hung in the room like a fog.

“Better?” she said, but she knew the answer, just from how the pain had leaked from his expression.

“Better,” he said.

“Like a higher level of hell better, or actually not bad?” Just to make sure.

“Not bad.” His eyelids dipped. She watched her hazy reflection as he looked at her. In a small voice, he said, “Thank you.” And then he shut his eyes.

With the pillows stuck underneath him like that, he didn't have any mobility. She pulled the blankets over his body, and he sighed. “If it starts to hurt again, we can switch the pillows to your other side. Just ask me. Even if I'm asleep. Even if I'm not here. I'm going to put your cell phone on the nightstand in a little bit, so you can call me if I'm downstairs. Okay?”

He breathed softly and didn't answer other than a vague, “Mmm.”

She bit her lip as she started thinking of all sorts of horrible scenarios that involved him trying to fix it himself. He could fall. He could seriously fall and crack his head open on the bed frame or the nightstand. He was certainly stoned enough to fall. She could see him sitting in a messy heap on the floor, blood gushing down his face, and being completely oblivious about it because he couldn't feel pain enough to notice or care.

Or he'd twist something. Or he'd pop his sternum out of whack trying to be more flexible than he was, something he'd already nearly done once, and then she'd have to drag him back to the hospital for scans to make sure he hadn't re-broken anything. She began to wonder if, maybe, she'd gotten herself in over her head with this whole thing.

Derek tried things on his own first. He waited until he failed in a spectacular, cataclysmic way before he said a word about his difficulties, and even then, getting him to seek help was like pulling not just one tooth, but fifty. With a few root canals thrown in for good measure. He bottled things up. He didn't talk.
Objectively speaking, he was the worst kind of patient, and the worst kind of candidate to bring home early, which is probably why Dr. Altman had looked at Meredith like she was insane when she'd offered.

Meredith squeezed his shoulder. “Derek, I mean it. I really mean it. Don't fix it by yourself. Okay?”

He grunted. “Kay.”


“The shades,” he said.

She pulled the shades over the window, turning darkening, rainy gray into fuzzy blackness. Blind, she felt her way back to the edge of the bed. “Anything else?” she said.

He didn't respond. His soft, even breathing filled the room. She turned to leave, thinking he'd fallen asleep, but as she reached the door, he stopped her.

“Would you stay?” he said, his voice deep and slurred with drugs and exhaustion. “Jus' fer a bit?”

Her lip quivered. “Sure,” she said. “In the bed with you, or just in the room?”

“Bed,” he said.

She stumbled on something she'd left on the floor and slammed into the bedpost. Her vision flared with bright, flashing sparks, and she bit down on a moan.

The covers rustled. “Mere?” he said.

He would move. He would freaking move to try and help her, no matter how scrambled he was, no matter how much pain it caused him. She knew it.

“I'm fine,” she warbled. She limped to her side of the bed and pushed the covers back before he got any ideas.

She'd used all her pillows for his back, but she didn't think she'd be staying long, judging from how out of it he sounded. He'd fall asleep in minutes or less. She slid under the sheets and pressed against his body. With the pillows the way they were, he rested tipped toward the center of the bed, and he couldn't shift around on his own. Not well. He had no leverage. She helped him wrap his arm around her, and she settled against his chest. He breathed, and the noise rumbled like thunder in her ear.

“You're sure this doesn't hurt?” she said. Her side of the bed was, inconveniently, also the bullet wound side of his chest. The bandage covering the hole under his nipple sat inches from her chin under his shirt.

“Doesn' hurt now,” he said.

“Are you lying to me?”

“No.”

“Okay,” she said. “But you'd better not be lying.”

He made a wet, deep sound that could have been a chuckle. She bit her lip. She didn't think he was
lying. He'd relaxed. His muscles didn't shiver with any sort of stress. He wasn't making pain sounds. His syllables had lengthened. He was flat, she'd relieved the strain on his back, and he didn't have to make himself move anymore. The second Percocet would be kicking in soon, too. He could give in to sleep, and he could stay that way as long as he wanted or needed.

She splayed her palm against his stomach and listened to his heart and the soft rasps of his breathing. Heat radiated through his shirt, which had dried from the rain over the course of the afternoon.

“Feels like home when you're here,” he murmured. His head tipped, and his chin came to rest on top of her head.

“It didn't before?” she said, but he didn't answer beyond a nonsensical, winding string of syllables that might have been words.

She lay with him for a long time, stroking the bumps of his ribs under the covers. She closed her eyes and let herself drift. She hadn't slept beside him in more than nine nights because she'd stayed at the hospital the night before he'd been shot. Nine nights. Ten days. Eternity collapsed into the now, and it felt like she'd never been away.

She lay in the dark while the rain tapped on the roof, curled up with her breathing husband. Her personal radiator. Her worrying ceased and swept away. She could do this, and she needed him. She needed him home. She needed him in the bed, breathing next to her at night. Like this. He needed to be a solid length against her body. She needed his scent, and the soft rumbles he made when he dreamed. She needed him. She needed.

Sleeping next to him on a cot hadn't been remotely the same as this. This... perfection. Everything felt right, despite the horrific downs in the ups and downs of that day.

“I love you,” she said. The only higher cap would have been if he were awake to say it back to her, but she didn't begrudge him his sleep, either. She smiled and snuggled closer. His arm shifted to compensate for her movements.

When the doorbell rang, she didn't want to move. She didn't want to think. She just wanted to stay there, warm. In the dark. In the silence. With him.

She debated ignoring the world outside the bedroom, but when the doorbell rang again, she forced herself up and off the bed. It could be Lexie. Maybe she'd locked herself out. Or it could be somebody else important. Someone family. She rubbed her eyes against the light and padded down the steps.

“Mrs. Shepherd!” Meredith said, surprised as she opened the door.

Derek's mother frowned. She held a crinkling plastic bag in her hands, and she looked through the open doorway with a sort of nervous but composed curiosity. A pile of suitcases sat at her feet.

“I'm so sorry, sweetheart,” she said. “Did I wake you?”

“No,” Meredith said. She swiped a hand over her head, hoping to smooth any flyaway bed hair. “But Derek's asleep.” She bit her lip. “He's exhausted. I really don't want to wake him up. I'm sorry.”

Carolyn shook her head. “Of course not,” she said. “Leave him be. I'll see him next time.”

Meredith gestured for her to come in. “I thought you'd left already?” she said. “Not that I want you to leave or anything. I just... I thought...”
His mother glanced at the long flight of stairs as she stepped into the foyer. She wiped her feet on the welcome mat. “I didn’t take the same flight as his sisters,” she said, her voice dropping into a considerate, low whisper. “The airline delayed mine to the point of cancellation. I booked a new trip this morning, but it doesn’t leave until the late evening. It’s a red-eye."

“Oh,” Meredith said. “Yeah. That’s Sea-Tac for you. May I take your coat?”

Carolyn shook her head. “Oh, no, dear, I wasn’t planning to stay long, but thank you for the hospitality. This house is just lovely, Meredith."

“Thanks,” Meredith said. “It was my mother’s.” She would have been content to stop there. Would have been. But Carolyn didn’t say a word, and for some reason, Meredith needed to fill the silence. Nerves jingled in her belly. “It’s not really me. Well. The decorating, I mean. But it’s home. My half-sister Lexie and my friend Alex live here, too, but he was shot. They’re still at the hospital. She’s staying with him. He’s her boyfriend. Sort of.”

“Isn’t Lexie the young woman who was seeing Mark?” said Carolyn.

Meredith looked at the floor. Her throat croaked before she managed to get a sentence going. “Yes. It didn’t work out.”

Carolyn nodded. “That happens sometimes.” Her gaze paused on the disheveled couch. The cushion Meredith had decked Derek with still lay on the ground. Carolyn didn’t comment.

“I’d offer you coffee or something,” Meredith said, “But we have no milk or half-and-half. Everything went rotten while we were away, and I haven’t been to the store. I’m sorry.”

The bag in Carolyn’s hand crinkled. “It’s fine, Meredith. I just wanted to say goodbye if he was awake. And I wanted to give you this before I forgot again. It’s been stuffed in my suitcase for days, and I kept forgetting to take it out.” She pushed the bag at Meredith.

“Oh,” said Meredith. She took the bag. Something lumpy and soft rested in a big clump at the bottom of the bag. “Thank you, Mrs. Shepherd.”

“Please, call me Carolyn,” Derek’s mother said.

The word felt strange on Meredith’s tongue. “Carolyn,” she corrected. She peered into the bag. A fuzzy, stoplight red pile of wool lay at the bottom. She touched the soft knit and pulled it free of the bag. A long, thin line about four inches thick unfurled. “A scarf?” she said, her eyebrows raised.

Carolyn nodded. “I knit when I worry. I made it on the plane on the way here.”

Meredith’s lip quivered. “You knit.”

“Yes. I didn’t have a plan, but I needed to do something with my hands, and that’s what I made. I wanted you to have it. Red would look lovely with your skin tone, and Derek said you had a white coat that it would go with.”

“I do. Thank you. My toggle coat. I wear it in the fall.” Meredith clenched her fingers. The scarf squashed in her hands, and she resisted the urge to tear at it as nervous energy thrummed through her muscles. “I knit, too,” she said. “Sometimes. Badly. I knit badly.”

Carolyn chuckled. “It helps with surgical dexterity. Even Derek knows how.”
“No way,” Meredith said. “Derek knits?” She couldn't stop the burble of laughter when Carolyn nodded.

*When's the knitting start?*

“I taught him when he was, oh, about eight, I think,” his mother said. “I don't think he does it anymore, but he knows how. Don't let him tell you differently.”


Carolyn smiled. “You're welcome.” She glanced at her watch. “I need to go. The bus will be at the stop soon.”

“Let me give you a ride to the airport,” Meredith said.

“No, no,” Carolyn said. “You stay with my son. I'll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive,” she said. “Thank you for offering.”

As Meredith turned to open the door, she found herself trapped in a strong, warm embrace, the scarf mashed between her body and Carolyn's. Derek's mother smelled like a fresh flower. A rose or something. Her low, soft breathing made Meredith relax before she knew what was happening. Apparently, the talent ran in the family.

“Carolyn,” she said, sort of a verbal tic more than anything else. She didn't have anything to follow it up with. No words. Nothing.

His mother stroked her back. “You'll be fine. Both of you. Thank you for saving my son.”

Meredith had no idea what to say, but it didn't seem to matter. Derek's mother smiled, waved goodbye, and close the door behind herself with a quiet, considerate thud. Meredith heard the rumble of rolling suitcases. She glanced through the window. His mother turned left, oblivious to the rain, and wandered toward the bus stop down the street.
Gray water lapped at the dock supports. Quiet. Sloshing. A heron glided low over the water, flapped its wings, and set itself down in the reeds by the shore. The water spread out like a glass pane, undisturbed save for intermittent pings at the surface that sent ripples spreading outward in lazy rings.

He closed his eyes, leaning back in the lawn chair, and let the muted sun beat down on his face. Pleasant heat soothed his naked skin. He shifted, and the nylons of his wet swim trunks rasped. He scrunched his bare toes, and then he relaxed.


“This isn't really an efficient use of bricks,” Meredith said next to him. “There are more important places.” She lay on her back, sprawled on a black towel in half of a cherry-colored string bikini. The top piece lay in a tiny heap by her hip. She'd baked into a light, soft gold, even all across.

“Red suits you,” he said. Muted sun turned the dark behind his eyelids pink.

“You're ignoring me,” she said.

“Mmm,” he rumbled. “Trying to.”

“You shouldn't ignore me.”

He grinned and turned to her. “Isn't that my line?”

“Well, this is your head, you know.”

“You're right,” he said. “It's mine. And I'll put the bricks where I want.”

“Still...” She sat up. “Why here?”

He sighed and opened his eyes. A thick, high wall surrounded them. It cut a semicircle into the water and wrapped around behind him into the grass, a winding mortar-and-stone serpent. The water wasn't gray. The sun wasn't muted. The wall blocked the light and made it dark.

“You're ruining it, Mere.”

“I'm sorry.”

“I need this.”

“Why?”

“Because,” he said.

He stood, took a running, thumping start, and leaped when his toes dug into the last plank of the dock. His outstretched arms split the water in front of his face. Shocking cold sucked him down into a deep, dark embrace. He torpedoed to the lake floor. His fingers touched the slippery, rippled dirt at the bottom. He tangled with weeds and mud. He came to a rest, pushed his feet against the packed floor, and jetted up, up, up. He broke the surface, spitting water and breathing noisily. He
tread water, just a moment, and then closed his eyes and stillled. His body sank into the lake up to
his ears, and he floated, listening to the muted sounds of the world.

*He floated. Weightless.*

*Meredith rolled onto her stomach and watched him, chin resting on her palm. She grinned. “Since
when are you Mr. Athletic?”*

*He pushed up with his arms and kicked his feet. His body came out of the lake to his shoulders as
he tread water. “I can do whatever I want in here.”*

“You can’t out there?”

“I can’t do anything out there.”

“We skinny-dipped. That’s something.”

*He swam back to the dock and pulled himself up against the soft, worn wood. She smiled at him,
eyes glittering. “Yes,” he said. “I remember. That was a long time ago.”*

“But you could do it again. I’m pretty sure I’d say yes if you asked, and I’m me, so I’d know.”

*He snorted. “I can’t even take a bath for another four weeks. Maybe five.”*

*She stroked his face. “But you can do things, Derek. You can.”*

“I can’t,” he said. “I can’t do anything.”

*He let the water pull him under, and then he dove. Cold gripped his skin. He slipped along through
the clear, glacial water like an otter. He grinned when he saw Meredith ahead of him. She’d joined
him after all. He kicked with his feet and sped to join her. She stared at him, concerned, standing
on the lake floor in her pajama pants and a rumpled t-shirt.*

“Derek,” she said, her voice perfectly clear despite being underwater. “Earth to Derek...”

*He blinked, and things like chairs and tables and a television appeared in the water. He blinked
again, and the water was gone. For a minute, he had no idea where he was or how he'd gotten there,
but after a cleansing breath, the world made a bit more sense.*

*His lake had become the living room in Meredith's house. He sat in a hulking armchair. A pillow
propped up his back, pushing into his lower spine. He'd stuffed pillows between his hips and the
arms of the chair. And he'd wrapped a comforter around himself while he'd sat in the dim morning
light and waited for the pain to stop.*

*Meredith squinted at him. Her hair kinked and swept to the side in odd, tangled bits, and she
seemed pale and tired and not quite awake.*

*He swallowed and squeezed his fists. The blankets tightened. “Meredith,” he said as he let his
eyelids dip. A fuzzy clot of exhaustion stuffed his head behind his eyes. His chest hurt. His back
throbbed. Every muscle twinged, and every bone radiated discomfort. But he felt more clear than
he had in days or weeks. He rubbed his nose with his index finger.*

*The clock said 7:30 AM. She'd slept in, and he knew that. He knew that because he saw the clock
and cared what time it said instead of just saw. He noticed pictures on the mantle and knickknacks
on the tables. Birds chirped, greeting the gray morning outside the windows. The distant hum of a*
lawnmower intervened in the silence. All things that, in his endless fog, he'd barely noticed.

She sighed and stroked his cheek. “It happened again?”

Her palm felt warm, and he leaned against it. He thought of the hours he'd endured. He'd needed to sit up, but the flimsy chair in their room had only made it worse, made him need to move, discomfort nipping close at his heels. He'd gone in search of something more comfortable, only to discover, once he'd gotten downstairs, that nothing helped. He'd alternated between sitting and moving, stumbling laps around the house, kitchen to dining room to living room to foyer to kitchen. He hadn't been able to get more than thirty minutes ahead of the pain. He'd worn himself down to the point that stumbling didn't even help, and so he'd collapsed, but before then, he'd been productive. Sort of.

“I made coffee,” he said.

“I saw. Thank you,” she said. But she didn't sound happy.

She pulled at the pillow by his left hip, and it popped loose. What had been pinging pebbles of discomfort on a precarious mountainside slope rolled into a raging avalanche of pain. He clenched his jaw, withholding a grunt. She nudged him, and she stuffed her tiny body into the space where the pillow had been, but the support came too late to stop the landslide. He shifted, ending in an awkward, hooked pose against the arm of the chair, but it didn't help. His muscles trembled.

He didn't think he could stand, but he needed to stand. Or do something. Anything.

“We need to move a chair upstairs,” Meredith said. “One that you like. We'll trade it with the one I have up there now by the window in our room until you're better.”

“Meredith—” he said, breathless.

“Mark's coming over today,” she babbled, ignoring him. “I'll make him help me. He's big. We could move a chair for you.”

“Meredith—”

“No,” she snapped at him. “No. You shouldn't have to come down here in the middle of the night because you have no freaking chair. It's ridiculous. It's freaking ridiculous, Derek. We'll move a chair.”

He clenched the arm of the chair so hard his hand shook. Nausea rolled in as somebody stabbed him with a burning rod, and a line of hot pain ran him through from his nipple to his spine. “Mere, I—” His voice choked off into a low bark of suffering, and then he couldn't speak. The stitched line down his chest flared with brilliant, technicolor sparks. Every breath made it worse, but every throbbing pulse made him breathe.

She gripped his arm and clenched until her nails dug into his skin, but the discomfort she caused was immaterial mixed in with all the rest. “You haven't taken your pills yet?” she said, her voice low and tense.

“No.” He gasped. “They're upstairs.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. She looked at him. Really, really looked at him. “Okay,” she said. “Okay, hold on. I'll get them, you sit.” He had to move, but she clenched his shoulder and pushed him down. “Sit, Derek. I'll get them. I'm getting them. Don't move; you'll just make it worse.”
Her palm swiped at her face, she made a wet, snot-filled sound as she inhaled, and she darted out of the chair and the room. She flew up the steps, her panic giving her strides a weight that vibrated the whole house and made him feel worse. Worse for not being well enough that this wasn't an issue.

He was a grown man. He should be able to come downstairs at night and not have it be the end of the world. She was grumpy and tired because of him. Because she woke herself up at all hours to care for him and for his needs while she ignored her own. He wanted to tell her it wasn't her fault. She'd missed her alarm by two hours on her day off. Hardly a crime after he'd woken her up at midnight and again at one-thirty.

He tried to go back to the lake while he waited for her to rescue him again, but everything seemed too sharp. Too distinct. Barbed, painful pants ran through his lungs. He couldn't sit still. He stood, dragging the comforter with him. Everything hurt, and he wandered with aimless, shuffling steps as he tried to flee. Years passed. When her hands touched his shoulder, he caught the vague sight of her crying, and he knew it was his fucking fault.

“Sit, Derek,” she said. “This isn't helping.” She corralled him back into the chair he'd been resting in, and she pushed a cold, sloshing glass of water into his hand. “You should have called upstairs. I have my cell phone. Or you could have yelled. I know yelling hurts, but come on. Anything, Derek. I can't believe I slept through my alarm. I can't believe you let me.” Her lip quivered as she plied him with pill after pill after pill, until he wasn't sure he could make himself swallow anymore. The last one stuck in his throat and made him want to choke.

Three Percocet, one Oxycontin, and his antibiotics, all at once. That was a lot. They settled in his stomach with the cold, spreading chill of the water. “Gonna overdose,” he said when he found a thought. He tried to swallow the last dregs of water, but most of it dribbled down his chin.

“You're not going to overdose.” She sniffled. “You lapsed everything. You freaking let everything lapse, and now we need to start over.”

She took the glass from his slack hands. This was going to hit him hard, but he didn't think he cared. Not when breathing hurt this much. She settled back into the chair beside him. Her palms rasped against the comforter as she stroked his shoulder. He pulled the blanket tight.

“Meredith, this isn't your fault,” he said. Barely. Not being able to inhale gave him no air to work with, and his voice sounded miles away.

“No, it's yours, you stubborn... stupid...” Her face reddened, and she clenched her tiny fists as she searched for an appropriately derogatory noun.

“Ass?” he said. He tried to smile.

“Shut up.” Her gaze flared bright with fury. “Just shut up, or I'll yell at you, which would, in this moment, put me on the same level as Satan in terms of evil.” She ground her teeth, and her lip quivered. She stroked his arm, and she wept instead of yelled. “I'm sorry it hurts so much. I'm sorry.”

He watched her face and counted every soft freckle. He could still do that. For a minute. The knives dulled a fraction, enough to make him think maybe he would ease his way back into this. But then the narcotics hit him like a runaway Buick. He blinked, but his eyelids stuck, and he could barely open them again. The faucet behind his eyes dripped once, twice, and then the flow became a rushing roar. His body didn't seem attached anymore. The pain left him, replaced by pleasant, spreading numb.
He rolled his lips together. “Are you gone...” he managed. She looked at him strangly. His tongue felt thick in his mouth. He couldn't work it right. Tired. He swallowed. “Are you gonnna yell when I wake up?” he slurred. But he didn't hear the answer.

A great wave of disorientation tugged him down into its undertow, and the black crush swept him away.

He woke up to muzzy, black stillness, not sure what had startled him out of slumber. Soft, thick blankets and cotton sheets held him in a warm cocoon. His eyelids dipped. He didn't want to be awake. Not now. He rolled over and burrowed, but then he heard it again. A soft, clipped sob through the wall.

He sighed, groaned, and pushed back the blankets. Cold air made him shiver as he forced himself to his feet. Muffled, blurry shapes formed a forest around him, but he knew their locations by heart. His dresser. His desk. The bed. He didn't stumble as he padded to his door.

All the doors in the hallway remained shut. A tiny, soft nightlight glowed from a plug in by the floor molding, lighting the way for anybody who needed to use the bathroom at the end of the hall. Shadows crept along the wall as he moved. His bare feet scrunched against the carpet runner.

Amelia sobbed again.

He knocked on the door, squinting, trying to wake up. “Amy,” he whispered.

“Go away,” she said.

He turned the knob and walked into her room. She sat in her bed, huddled under her comforter in the dark. Her eyes sparkled with tears.

“What's wrong?” he said as he settled next to her on the mattress. He rubbed her back, and she cried as she curled up against his body.

“There's something in my closet.”

He sighed. “Amy, there's nothing in your closet.”

“There is,” she said. “It made a noise.”

She shivered in his grasp. He hugged her. “There's no such thing as monsters, Amy. Your closet is safe. I promise.”

“Daddy scared them away,” she said. “But now they're back, and nobody believes me. I want Daddy.”

His throat closed up, and he froze. For a minute, he couldn't do anything but sit there, hollowed out and dead inside. She whimpered, gathering up pieces of his flannel pants in her fingers. She sniffed and sobbed, and he rubbed her back. His breaths hitched. He disentangled from her warm body, and he stood. He let himself sniff once. Twice. And then he wiped his face and turned to face her.

“Well, you're in luck,” Derek said, surprised his voice didn't sound weak or wavering. “Dad taught me all his secrets.” He inched toward Amy's closet, faux-cautious, and pulled the door open while she watched. He waved his foot over the floor of the closet, and he ruffled all her clothes, making deep, concerned noises as he inspected everything. “I don't see anything, Amy.”
She bit her lip. “What about the shoe rack?”

He thumped through every pair of shoes, careful to check the cavity of each one with his fingers. “Monster free,” he assured her. She didn't look convinced. He tried to think of what Dad might have done. Maybe a theatrical production full of tricks and slights, but Derek didn't know anything like that. He walked to her desk and rifled through the top drawer. Scotch tape. He pulled a piece free and kissed the non-sticky side.

“This is special,” he said. “If something happens, it will hold the door. I'm right in the next room, Amy. Nothing's going to get you.” He taped the door to the frame and patted it. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she said.

“Go to sleep,” he told her. He pulled up her covers, and she snuggled under the blankets with her bear.

He shut her door and returned to his room. His chest quivered. He crawled back into bed, feeling tired and wasted. He stuck his face against the pillow, and he cried. Not loud and sobbing like his mom or like Amelia. His eyes leaked. That was it. His family wouldn't ever know.

His mouth felt dry and gummy, and his eyes didn't want to open. He'd mashed his cheek against something soft and familiar. Breaths rasped in his chest, thick and long and even. A noise stuck on his vocal cords, and his hand flopped at his side with some useless impulse his brain had sent. Solid warmth wrapped his body. For a long time, he didn't move. The comforter rustled. He pushed his face against the soft, familiar thing.

The dull murmur of voices hit his eardrums. People. Talking. People there. His hand flopped again, and he groaned. A vague sense of unease spread through his body like creeping moss. The voices got louder. Yelling. Fighting. His leg twitched. He should move. Get up. Something might... Someone might...

The warmth around his body constricted, and a thick thing rolled over his back. Soothing. “Shh,” said a voice. “Sleep it off some more.”

“What,” he said, but he couldn't finish the thought. He lost himself in the murmur, in the warmth. The voice kept saying quiet words that made him feel safe despite the noise. He didn't know how long he lay there, curled against the soft thing, not moving, not thinking, just safe.

His eyes creaked open to daylight and a pale, cream-colored blur. He closed his eyes and rested from that effort. A big, rumbling sigh tore through his body. Ache twinged, which chipped away at his stupor.

When he opened his eyes again, he forced them to stay open. Focus followed after a long stretch of warmth and cream-colored blur and nothingness. Meredith's neck. The soft thing. She still sat in the chair beside him, exactly where she'd been when he'd passed out. In sleep, he'd curled against her. The bulky comforter made him large and unwieldy in her arms, but she'd managed. Mostly.

“Meredith,” he murmured. His tongue felt wrong. Heavy.

She looked at him. “Welcome back,” she said. She rubbed his back through the comforter. He felt like a sloth. He couldn't bring himself to move or speak or do anything but exist. “Sort of welcome back,” she amended.

Her fingers toiled with the hair at the nape of his neck. She stared at something far beyond the chair. The twitter of voices hit his ears again. He twitched from head to toe. His muscles didn't
want to give him much. Lethargy cowed him into stillness, but the voices made him feel like he should be attempting to look and act human. To be aware and ready to defend himself.

“Who's here?” he said, the words stretched and chewy like a Starburst in his mouth. He let his jaw hang open. His tongue lolled. His mouth and throat felt dry. Dry like Death Valley in August.

“Just you, me, and Jerry Springer,” Meredith said. A silver thing waved in his face, too close to his eyes, and he couldn't process it before she took it away.


She snorted. “Well, I would hope not, though I suppose our lives might fit with some of his themes. Born into an adulterous marriage, and loved only by my fake parents? Slutty home-wreckers and the adulterous men who love them? My ex-wife cheated on me with my brother, and now she wants me back?”

He blinked. “Huh?”

“The television, Derek. Jerry Springer is a talk show. There's nothing but trash on right now because morning programming sucks.”

“Oh.” He breathed thickly while she stroked him, and then his awareness faded. He dozed, not quite sleeping, not awake either, for an indeterminate time that could have been hours or days or minutes. Lazy shapes floated in his head, not any assembled thoughts.

Necessities pulled him out of it. One by one, until he had a stack of them piled high enough that they outweighed his lethargy. He needed water. He needed food. And he really, really needed to pee. He stood up before he understood anything other than those three things.

The room whirled around his head, and he swallowed. “Whoa,” he said as black waterfalls robbed the color from his vision. The floor tilted. Something gripped him around the waist. He didn't fall.

When he came to himself, he stood in the center of Meredith's living room, clutched in Meredith's arms. She stared at him, concern creasing her gaze. Something else, too. Anger. “Would you stop doing that?” she snapped. “You nearly fall, every freaking time.”

He blinked. “Meredith,” he said, too dumbstruck to say much else. “What?”

“Stop standing up like it's a freaking race!” she said.

His face heated at her tone, as if she thought he would willfully make a fucking fool of himself. As if she thought he liked being helpless and held upright by his wife. “I need to use the bathroom,” he said. “I'm sorry if my fucking bladder got hold of my brain before I did.”

She bit her lip. “I'm sorry,” she said. “I'm sorry, it's just that...” Her voice trailed away. She wouldn't meet his eyes.

“Just what?” he snapped.

“I guess I could call in sick tomorrow,” she said to his feet.

Since you obviously can't be by yourself for more than two minutes. Her unspoken words banged around inside his skull, repeating. His fingers clenched, and the backs of his eyes stabbed at him. “Let go of me,” he said in a low voice.
She backed off and looked away. For a minute, he had to think. Clots in his reasoning made the process slow. His brain reviewed the layout of the house at the speed of a snail. Bathroom. Right.

He didn't have to sit to urinate anymore at least, though trying to aim while he was so fucking impaired almost made him want to. A sneering Gary Clark hovered in the mirror as Derek washed his hands. Derek's face reddened, and his shoulders hunched. He panted with disquiet, and Mr. Clark seemed to smile wider every time Derek took a stabbing breath. “Stop,” Derek whispered. When he blinked, the apparition disappeared, leaving Derek staring at a gaunt, haunted, stubbly disaster case with glassy, unfocused eyes. When his stomach growled, he sighed and looked away.

Water. Food. Kitchen next. When he got there, Meredith had already sat down at the table. She'd put out a bowl and a spoon and a glass of OJ for him. A carton of milk sat on the table next to a box of Muesli. She sat opposite to the place she'd set for him, munching on her breakfast. She ate cereal as well, but he couldn't make out the writing on her box from the entryway, and by the time he'd gotten close enough to read, the momentary spark of curiosity had died.

“If you want something else, you can fix it yourself,” she said, tone neutral.

He sat and slumped in his chair. “This is fine, thank you.”

They ate in stony silence. She inhaled three bowls of cereal doused in milk to the brim of the bowl. He consumed maybe three-quarters of a bowl before he lost interest. The Muesli tasted like sawdust, and when his stomach stopped growling, he couldn't bring himself to care about it anymore.

He stared at his lap, tired, angry, with a side of roiling, consuming upset that made him feel like he was on the verge of tears. She was pissed at him, and he didn't like it, and that made his anger even worse, because he felt like it was something he couldn't help. Everything was something he couldn't help.

“Are you still hurting?” Meredith said. Her spoon tinkled as she set it against her empty bowl. The spoon spun around the lip before settling.

“No.”

“Good,” she said. Her eyes twitched. Like she wanted to say more. Was dying to say more, but she was holding herself back. Except the strong, dissonant waves of anger radiating from her made him feel chastised all the same. She saved him nothing, and on top of that, he felt worse, because she felt he was bad off enough that she needed to censor herself.

He put his elbows on the table and rubbed his forehead, wishing it would all just stop. Everything. He swallowed against the lump in his throat. His shoulders hunched. “I didn't mean to upset you,” he told his bowl of mushy cereal because he didn't want to see her glaring at him anymore.

“Why didn't you wake me when this started?”

“Because I already woke you!” he said. Blush broke out all over his face, and he pulled bunches of the tablecloth into his hands. His teeth clenched. “I woke you twice! You needed sleep, and by then it was a lost cause for me. I can get down the stairs by myself. I'm fine.”

“You're not fine,” she said. “You're high as a freaking kite, it's dark at night, and you might fall. As it is, you got trapped down here while I freaking overslept, and then you had to behave like a damned superhero and not call me when it was time to take your pills.”

“I lost track of time,” he said. “I didn't mean to do it.”
“Fine,” Meredith said. “Fine, we can call this an accident, but—”

“It was an accident,” he roared. He pushed back from the table and stood. “I came downstairs because it hurts me to lie flat for more than a few hours, and then I got stuck down here. I went to the lake and lost track of the fucking time. That's all. Maybe I'm stubborn, but I'm not a masochist.”

“The lake?”

He blinked, brought up short. “The lake?”

“You said you went to the lake.”

“Nothing,” he said. “A daydream.”

“You still should have woke me,” she said. “Before.”

“I can get down the steps by myself, Meredith.”

She stomped her foot. Her chair squealed as she rose to meet him eye-to-eye. “And just because you can doesn't mean you should!”

He clenched his jaw. He tried to count to three. He made it to one, and then he exploded. “I tell you when I need to go upstairs, and I tell you when I need my pillows moved, and I tell you when I can't reach something on the top shelf of the fucking closet because it hurts, and I tell you all the other things I can't do. I'm a fucking invalid already, and now you want me to wake you up from a sound sleep to help me with one of the few things I can manage on my own? Jesus Christ, Meredith. I'm trying, but I can't...” He panted, and his sight blanketed with tears. The back of his throat hurt. He didn't want to cry, but his body betrayed him. He wiped his face with shaky palms. They came away wet and sticky, and his torso shivered with emotional stress. “Do you have any idea how humiliating this is for me? I'm not even allowed to pick up a full jug of milk.”

She sighed. Through the blur, he watched her wipe at her face. In the intense, disturbing racket of his own misery, he'd missed her crying while he'd roared. Her soft, distressed sobs hit his ears now like deep, rending tears in his soul. Guilt plunged deep into his gut, and his body quivered. He hadn't meant to yell. He hadn't meant any of this. Tired, cottony exhaustion spun webs behind his eyes, and he closed his eyes. In the blackness, he felt the room revolve around his body in slow, disorienting circles.

She moved. Her arms wrapped around him. “Derek. Derek, I know that you're physically able to walk down the steps. I do. I really do. I've watched you. And I swear I'm not trying to take that away,” she said, her voice soft against his body. Her fingers wound through his hair. “I'm just really worried you'll fall because of all the stuff you're on, and I won't find out until the morning when I step on the broken heap that was my husband. Please. Please, I already saw you in a broken heap once. I don't want to do it again. Please, Derek.”

He leaned into her embrace and set his palms against her hips. “I'm sorry, Meredith. I'm really sorry.”

“I'm sorry, too,” she said. “I'm tired, and I've got no freaking right to take it out on you. I just hate to see you in so much pain.”

“I woke you up.”

Her fingers clenched, and his shirt tightened as she scrunched it in her grip. “Actually, Derek, I slept like crap, and you had very little to do with it. I'm a resident at one of the nation's top
hospitals. Do you honestly think your two five-minute interruptions made a dent in my night? Not hardly.”

“Oh.”

“Seriously,” she grumbled against his chest. “Inflated ego much?”

A woeful shard of laughter shivered in his chest. Ache slipped into his sternum. Tears leaked, despite the momentary mirth. “I'm sorry,” he repeated.

“It's okay,” she said. She kissed his throat, and then she kissed his chest. “But will you please wake me up for downstairs trips from now on? Please? For my own peace of mind?”

“Yeah,” he said. His muscles trembled, and he added with soft defeat, “I need to sit.”

“Okay,” she said.

He heard the refrigerator door open and close as he plodded into the living room like a tranquilized, clumsy elephant. She put the milk away or something. Dishes clanked. Water ran. He sank into the chair he’d occupied that morning. The pillows settled under his weight. He relaxed and pulled the comforter around himself, curling up in the warmth. She joined him minutes later, slipping under the blankets with him. Her tiny body lined up with his hip and shoulder. She lay her head against the unmarred side of his chest, spread her right arm against his stomach, and curled against him like a small cat.

At least that didn't hurt anymore. He could be thankful for that.

“I arranged with Richard to do 12 hour shifts on the weekends and on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and 10 hour shifts on Tuesdays and Thursdays,” she said. “Nothing over night. I'll be home every night and in the mornings, at least, and I'll still be putting in hours up to the cap.”

“You won't have any breaks,” he said. His lip quivered.

She rubbed her palm idly against the flat of his stomach. “I can manage for a few weeks,” she said.

He thought of her trying to manage that schedule by herself, no breaks, not a single day off, and when she got home, she would be helping him with all the I-can't-do-it-by-myselfs he'd stacked up in a figurative pile for the day. She would be helping him, not relaxing or doing things for her own enjoyment. Even for just a few weeks. That would be awful for her. Exhausting. Stressful.

He swallowed as the tears renewed, and he looked away from her, into the side of the chair. Hot, awful blush spread over his face and down his neck. Her palms captured his face in a prison. She pulled him back to face her eye-to-eye. “Hey,” she said. “You'd do it for me. You have done it for me. When I had my surgery. We take care of each other. Remember? That's what the Post-it says.”

“I remember what it says,” he said.

“You're not an invalid, Derek.”

“I feel like one.”

“You're healing,” she said. She stroked his cheek with her palm. “It hasn't even been two weeks. It sucks. I know it does, but... Don't sell yourself short. You're the strongest person I know. You are, Derek.”
You're not the man, here. I'm the man.

Derek looked away. “Stop saying that.”

“Stop saying what?”

“Stop saying I'm strong like I had something to do with this. I was going to die. I'm still alive because the fucking universe thought it would be funny.”

“Derek...”

“You told me when you drowned that you had an experience. You had a choice. You chose to fight.”

She nodded. “I did.”

“It wasn't like that for me,” he said. Something upsetting and terrifying coiled in his gut. He clutched her and rested his forehead against her temple. “It wasn't... He shot me. He shot me, Meredith, and I couldn't do anything. I couldn't get away. Something distracted him, and he left me there. He left me.”

You're not the man here.

“But I found you,” she soothed. “It's over, now. It's over. He's dead. And you're alive. Just like you promised.”

“But I lied. My promise was a lie. I thought...”

“You were attacked and shot in the chest at close range. You were in shock. You were in pain. Thinking you're going to die in a situation like that? Not the biggest stretch in the universe. But you're alive, Derek. You're alive. That's not a lie to me,” she said. She placed a finger against his lips. “You breathing? Not a lie.” A palm against his heart. “Your heart beating? Not a lie.” A kiss against his shoulder. “Whether you thought you meant your promise or not, you lived, and no one will ever convince me that's not at least a little bit on you.”

He swallowed. The room spun away from him, and he watched the ceiling flicker bright with wide open grayness as he fell onto his back. April said words, but he couldn't understand. He couldn't breathe, and then Gary Clark aimed the gun at him. Derek blinked. The image made a ghost imprint in his mind's eye. A gun. Pointed. Ready to kill.

“Everybody saved me but me,” Derek said.

She stared at him, eyes determined, glittering. “We work at a hospital,” she said. “We see death every day. We both know that people who want to die usually find a way. Their bodies shut down, or they off themselves, or... whatever. Metaphysics or physics, they find a way. A man attacked you and left you with a penetrating chest trauma that came a hair's width from severing your aorta. You were suffocating in your own blood. Gary Clark pushed you through the door, Derek. You had your foot in, your leg, maybe even your hip. You could have easily died if you'd let yourself go, and you lived anyway.” She kissed him. “To me? That's not strong,” she said against his lips. “That's Herculean.”

He swallowed. “My heart stopped.”

“I know, but it's beating, now,” she said. As if to emphasize her point, she pushed her ear against his chest. Not over his heart, not pressing. Gentle. Careful to avoid the incision on his sternum. She
listened for a long moment. He let her. A lazy smile spread over her lips. “It's beating now, Derek,” she said. “And that's what counts. You won't ever convince me you're not strong. So, stop trying.”

He didn't understand her determination. He collapsed under the weight of it, unwilling to argue anymore. “I'm just so tired,” he said. “I need it to stop.”

Her palm rasped against his shirt. “I know,” she said. “I'll have Mark help me with this chair when he gets here. You won't need to do stairs in the middle of the freaking night. This chair is good, right?”

He sighed. “I'm sorry for making this hard.”

“It's not your fault, Derek. It's not. Gary Clark did this. Not you. You need to stop apologizing for that.”

“I know you had to bargain with Dr. Altman to get me released early,” he said. “I know you took it upon yourself to be my caregiver. I hate it. I hate needing help with everything, but I'm trying, Mere. I'm trying.”

“I know,” she said, her voice soft. “I know you are. I thought it was going to be a nightmare getting you to wake me up for things.”

He gave her a weak smile. “Do I get a sticker?”

“I guess that's worth at least a few.”

“Gold stars?”

She yawned, and she snuggled closer. The blanket rustled, and she made a low, pleasant noise in her throat. “If you want.”

“I think I do,” he said. “I'm a gold star kind of guy.”

She lifted her head. “I'd give you thousands if I had them,” she said.

“Now, who's getting cheesy?”

She smiled, and she settled back against him without answering. Her hand rubbed his stomach, idle, almost absent, and she stared across the plane of his torso. He stroked her back, wishing he could move just a bit to pull her into an embrace, but she'd pretty much pinned him.

“Mere?” he said. “Mere, are you okay?”

“I'm fine.”

“Really fine? Or lying fine?”

“Right now?” She looked at him with a relaxed, dreamy smile. Her eyes seemed glazed, but with sleep and nothing else. “I'm snuggling with my amazing, alive, gold star husband. I'm pretty fine. Why?”

“Just...” He inhaled. “You never say anything about... I mean. You were hurt, too. He didn't shoot you, but he took something from you. From us. And you saw me get shot. That's not the sort of imagery that goes away with time.”

Shit! Take his watch, and let's go.
“I'm really okay, Derek.”

“No nightmares?” he pressed. “Nothing? Why couldn't you sleep last night?”

“I do have nightmares,” she admitted. “I think about it a lot. You nearly dying. The baby, sometimes. I don't remember dreaming last night. Maybe it was that. I don't know.”

“But?”

She shrugged. “I told you. I decided I'm fine,” she said. “And if I'm ever not fine, all I have to do is look at you breathing, and it's okay again. I really meant it, Derek. The rest of it is meaningless if I don't have you. You're alive, and you're healing, and we can make another baby whenever you're ready. In light of that? I'm fine. I'm more than fine.”

“I didn't think it would last when you explained it before,” he said.

“You're alive,” she said. “You kept your promise, lie or not. The fine will last until you're 110.”

He blinked. “110?”

“Remember?” She grinned. “You told me you wanted to live to 110 and die in my arms.”

He stretched his memory through the fog. So much had happened. He'd said a lot of things. “Oh, yes. I did say that, didn't I? That was one of my finer gold star moments, I think. Very waxed poetic.” What if, while I'm waiting, I meet someone who is ready to give me what I want from you? His heart sank when he thought of the rest of it. “Well…”

“What?”

“Until I threatened you at the end. About finding somebody else. That wasn't so amazing of me.”

She snorted. “I prefer to think of it as a much needed jump. My capacity-for-relationships battery was sort of dead.”

He looked at his lap. “It was still wrong to say.”

“It was, but it's what you used to do with me. I didn't get it before. I do, now. I do, and it's okay.”

“What do you mean?”

Her eyes searched his face. A ghost crossed her gaze. “When you were shot, you were barely lucid for a lot of it. I kept having to hit you. Over and over, and I hated it. I hated it, but I needed to get a response out of you. I needed to keep you with me. So, I did it anyway. I hit you,” she said. “It's the same concept, really, with your crappy ultimatums. I was in emotional shock. You just wanted me to react, so you hit me. You weren't trying to drive me away, and I get that now. You were trying to get me to pull closer.”

His lips flattened into a line, and he clenched his fists. “You can't compare those.”

“Why not?” she said.

“Because me playing Russian roulette with your insecurities as a fucking bullet is not the same as you saving my life. Not even remotely.”

“Let's compare your games to me using you for sex, then,” she said, blunt and matter-of-fact. “I knew you wanted more than I could give you. I knew it, and I had sex with you anyway, because it
made me feel safe. Safe, Derek. I treated you like a doormat so I could feel safe for a few minutes out of the day. I used you.”

His body stilled. He listened to her take a long, slow breath. Quiet. He let his eyes drift shut, and he thought of all the times she’d done that. All the times they’d had sex in the space of minutes, quickies, and yet she’d always stopped for that pause before she left. The pause in the end, where he wrapped his arms around her, and they panted in soft, tired unison. That pause had always given him a false, leaping sense of hope that she would stay for longer than minutes. That she would stay forever. But she’d always dragged herself away with a look that told him, despite her hangups, despite all of it, she wanted what he wanted, even if she didn't think she could give it to him.

“You never told me that,” he said.

And then you pulled me from the water...

“Told you what?”

“Why,” he said.

“Oh. The safe thing.” Her lashes dipped low over her eyes, and she smiled. “You always make me feel safe. But I really needed it then. I needed it so much.”

“I let it happen, Meredith. I could have said no.”

“But you didn't,” she said. She toiled with a lock of his hair. “Because you loved me. And I used that. I used it, and I shouldn't have. It wasn't fair to you.” She swallowed, and her voice cracked. “But I needed it.”

“Mere...”

She wiped her eyes. “Look. My point is, we both did bad things. We both did. I'm the one who wasted time, though. I should have said it sooner.”

“Said what?”

She kissed him, lips to lips, and he moaned as her tongue stroked him. Their noses mashed, and she lingered, breathing in his space. “I should have said that I love you.”

Her body against his intoxicated him. Where the drugs made him hazy, she made him hot and alive and shaky. A fool, but in a different way. He inhaled the scent of her hair, lavender, and he kissed her temple.

Your choice? It's simple. Her or me.

“You did say it sooner, Meredith,” he murmured. “And then I chose Addison and wrecked it.”

Her body trembled in his arms. She made a small, wheezing, gasping noise that made him think she might be choking. He flopped against the chair, discombobulated with sudden panic stomped under the weight of a ton of narcotics. “Meredith,” he said, and she shivered against him. “Meredith, what is it?”

Tremors became giggles became rolling guffaws. He sat there, dumbfounded, blinking, and feeling very much the fool when he still couldn't figure out what was going on, even after he knew she was laughing. Had he tripped on his tongue and said something stupid? He couldn't remember saying something funny.
She panted against him, recovering, and then she looked at him, her eyes red but sparkling with happy, streaking tears. She wiped at her eyes, and then she laughed again. “How did we go from gold stars and pep talks to an argument about who sucks more?”

His lip twitched. “I have no idea.”

She kissed him. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he replied.

“Nobody sucks more,” she said. “We're equally suck-y. Let's be even, now. No more baggage crap. Okay?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I thought that's what the Post-it was for?”

“It was, but we never really had it out, I guess. Never really...” She searched for words. “I'm not sure I even understood any of it before. I guess I have a bit of perspective now, or whatever.”

He smiled. “Not an intern anymore?”

“I guess I finally graduated.”

He closed his eyes. “Hmm,” he agreed, and when she didn't reply, he drifted, tired.

“Derek?” she said after a long pause.

“Yeah?”

“You haven't said anything about it either.”

He swallowed, trying to remember. It. What was it? He blinked, and he thought, and he came up with nothing but the vague sense that he'd forgotten a large chunk of the conversation again, which made him feel bad. His brain felt like a cloud. Thick but not solid. Retaining nothing.

“About what?” he said.

She rubbed his arm. “The miscarriage,” she said. “Are you okay?”

He turned to her and stared through a half-lidded gaze at her outline. Gray light fell in through the windows, and he sighed. The miscarriage. That it. He settled against her and listened to her blood rush under her skin. The warmth of her skin seeped through her shirt into his skin.

“Derek?”

He blinked, torn from mental wandering. “I'm sorry.”

She scrunched her face in disgust. “Stop saying that. Seriously.”

“I don't know,” he said.

She placed her palms against his and gripped his hand. “You don't know if you're okay?”

“No.”

“About the miscarriage?” she prodded.

“I don't know. About anything.” He turned his face against her neck, and he sighed. “I'm tired,” he
said. “All the time. I don't know.”

“Scale of 1 to 10?” she said.

He thought. For a long time. She waited, stroking his hand.

He wrapped his thumb and index finger around her wrist. His fingers met easily. Overlapped, even. She was such a petite woman. Tiny. He could never get used to it. He wasn't a large man. At 5'10", he was a hair taller than the national average, but he had a small frame. Not like Mark, who bulked into the size of a truck when he really spent time working on it. Despite that, Derek dwarfed her in all but spirit. His thumb brushed the vein in her wrist. A strong pulse fluttered under his touch. He slipped his palm under her shirt. Her skin shivered. His hand almost spanned her stomach. Her abdomen, flat as a board despite her horrible diet, gave a little under the pressure of his touch. She breathed against his ear, relaxed, and he closed his eyes.

He thought of a baby growing there, thought of how she would swell. He imagined listening to the heartbeat for the first time. Thought about arguing over names. Envisioned the moment when she would tug at his sleeve in the middle of the night and tell him she was in labor, and he would fall out of bed and trip all over himself trying to get her and her suitcase and himself out to the car in one piece.

Gary Clark had taken that from him. From them. Derek had made love to Meredith, made another life, and that was all gone. In an eye blink. In a whorl of agony. And he hadn't even been awake to help her through it. She hadn't even had a chance to tell him she was pregnant before Mr. Clark had robbed them all blind.

All of it was gone. His health. His baby. His peace of mind. People had died. People with kids. People with loved ones. Others had gotten hurt. Karev. Him. Meredith had abandonment issues, and he'd almost died on her. She didn't need more dark and twisty in her life. She'd lived through plenty.

“All,” he said softly.

She didn't reply, didn't say a word. She wrapped him in her arms, and she sat with him. Quiet. Tiredness gripped his body. He pressed his nose into her neck and breathed. Lavender. Some unidentifiable spice from her lotion. The cotton behind his eyes made it hard to think, and so he didn't. He rested, almost dozing, but not quite, while she held him.

He didn't know how much time passed, but it seemed like hours.

A horrible, raucous growl hit his ears, and he jumped. He hunched over the arm of the chair, panting, and for an interminable moment, he hovered, lost somewhere in the unmapped back roads of panic. Dulled senses and reflexes and hurting muscles trapped him. His mouth fell open. Fear pushed into his legs, and he flopped in the chair, stuck in the grips of drug and sleep-induced disorientation. Get up. His body twitched. Get up. Get up. Meredith squeezed his shoulder and blurted a startled, “What?”

The cushion shifted as she turned toward the noise. A low hiss followed the growl, and familiarity sunk in. Air brakes. Big vehicle. He looked through the window in the direction of the sound and saw a hulking garbage truck rolling down the street. His body shivered as he tried to get himself to calm down.

“It's just a garbage truck,” Meredith said.
“I know what it is,” he snapped.

He gave into the repeated impulses and stood. She stood with him, and for a minute, all he could do was tremble. He knew what the noise was, but it was loud, and it hovered in the air, full forte and grating. He made himself breathe, made himself walk off the stress.

“Stairs?” she said as he came to an awkward stop at the foot of the stairs.

“Yeah,” he decided. “I want to take a shower.”

He'd learned over the past few days to take the steps as single entities and not as a greater whole. If he knew he would want to go upstairs at some point, he had to give himself a thirty minute lead. Maybe more. He couldn't cut his transition time any closer than that, or the steps morphed from something difficult into something torturous. If he needed to sleep, if he needed it right now, he'd already passed the point of attempting such an arduous journey. With those rules, he'd managed to avoid another painful disaster like the one he'd had the day he'd come home.

He gripped the railing, forced himself to breathe, and fought gravity one step at a time. Just one. He waited after every step. If one step went well, he let himself take another. If it didn't, he rested. Thirty seconds. Sometimes a minute. Meredith echoed his movements, her hand on the small of his back to give him some support. She never spoke to him while he did this, not unless he showed signs of collapse or unless he spoke first.

Somewhere between halfway and two-thirds to his goal, he needed to rest for longer than a minute. Closer to five. Meredith waited by his side. Patient. Silent. As much as he loved her, he tried to imagine her not there. He didn't like needing help with this. He didn't like being stared at while he struggled. He didn't like needing to plan and prepare for stairs like they were long car trips. When he caught his breath, and his heart slowed, he continued.

By the time he made it to the top, he didn't feel like he was dying. That was progress, he supposed, though he had to rest again. He leaned his back against the wall and panted. He held her shoulder for balance with a weak grip, and he sucked down air again, again, and again. Breathing hurt.

“Derek,” she said, breaking her silence. “That was a huge improvement. That was really, really great.”

He looked at her. “Yeah,” he said, panting. “Twelve minutes for a flight of steps. Really, really great.”

The skin around her eyes twitched like he'd struck her, and his sarcastic armor deflated.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I'm sorry, Meredith.”

“It's okay,” she said.

“It's not okay. I'm being a giant ass.”

She kissed him. “I get it, Derek. I do. You get mad at yourself. You want to run it off and hit things, but you can't, and so you yell. It's okay. And I know it doesn't feel like it, but, Derek, really. You're doing great. More than great.”

“Gold star?” he said.

She laughed. “At least three.”
After he caught his breath, he moved. Slowly.

When he reached the bathroom, he shucked his socks, pajamas, and shirt, and he tried not to feel self conscious. Meredith had removed the bandages last night before they'd gone to bed, and she hadn't replaced them. Nothing covered his wounds from sight but stitches and wretched scabs. At least she didn't stare or smirk or make a comment while she stood there, clothed, and he stood there, naked and covered in gnarly scars.

Actually, her gaze didn't stray below his face at all, which felt... even more weird. She always used to sneak a peek whenever he changed in front of her. Sometimes she'd act coy. Sometimes, she'd meet the grin he flashed at her with a brazen lick of her lips and a sparkly, come hither stare that made it hard for him to dress in the mornings sometimes. Hard for him to leave and go to work.

He lined himself up with the cool porcelain of the tub, and he slid back the shower door. She helped him step over the lip of the tub. Another thing he couldn't do by himself, he'd discovered. He didn't have the balance, and the tub had nothing to grasp, or at least nothing that he could reach without stretching to the point of searing pain.

“Okay?” she said.

“Yeah,” he replied as he turned on the water.

“Okay,” she said. The bathroom door closed, and she left him alone for a while.

For a long moment, he blanked, staring at the shower knobs and the plastic rack under the shower head where Meredith kept her razor and lotion and other things. The air hazed and steamed, and a lightheaded, faraway feeling spun webs in his skull. He placed a palm against the wall for balance as his thoughts drifted, almost out-of-body. Water tumbled onto his body, soaking him, but at least two minutes passed before he realized he should be doing something. Something... What? His hand drifted to the bar of soap, but the action didn't feel right until after he'd clenched his fingers around it. Right. Soap. Shower.

He shook his head, trying to clear some of the fuzziness away. Unsuccessful, his breaths stretched and depressed, and his eyelids dipped. He pressed his skin into the cold tiles against the wall. That woke him up. A bit. With a modicum of analytical thought, he managed to turn the shower knobs. He tamped the temperature to something lukewarm, almost cold, and with the slight discomfort pelting him, he almost felt human.

He stared down at himself as streams of clear water flowed over his body. Examined himself for the first time since the shooting. He'd never seen himself without bandages. When they'd been off in the past, he hadn't looked. He hadn't wanted to.

A long rough line cut him in half. His chest had swollen with a grotesque lump at the tip of the incision near his clavicles, which was normal, and would fade. In months. But... He grimaced. The line? That would be there forever without plastic surgery. That and the pockmark made by the bullet. The bullet wound sat dark red and crusted under his left nipple like a freakish birthmark. He touched it. A little spear jabbed him through the torso from his finger to his spine, and he gasped.

Ugly. It was all... Just... ugly.

You're not the man here.

He couldn't hold his own weight with his arms, which meant she'd be on top. He imagined trying to have an orgasm while looking down at the battlefield on his skin. No wonder she didn't look. His
chest constricted, and his sight blurred.

He washed himself. Like an automaton. The shower deadened the sounds of his sniveling with thundering, echoing water. He still couldn't really get his back, but he could do the rest. Barely. With breaks.

The door opened, and every muscle tensed to the point of pain. His arm slammed into the wall as he fought for balance, and his heart throbbed. A torn, frightened choke fell from his lips. Shampoo came down into his eyes. His toes clenched, trying to grab purchase on the smooth tub floor, but really, could fleeing get any more pointless, when he couldn't even step into and out of the tub without help? Hopeless fear tunneled into his body and loitered, spreading shivers everywhere. He cowered in the corner by the spigot. Vulnerable. You're vulnerable and helpless and alone and anybody could—

“It's me,” Meredith said. “Just putting clean clothes on the back of the toilet.”

“Okay,” he managed. He stared at the tiles. His teeth chattered as stress made his muscles move in waves. He breathed, and he counted water droplets as they dribbled down the cold walls. One. Two. He stopped around fifteen.

His body slowed down. He pressed his forehead against the tiles. Water dripped into his eyes. Why? Why couldn't he feel safe? Why did every noise and unexpected thing do this. Vague nausea coiled in his stomach as the adrenaline burst withdrew.

She sat down with a thump next to the bathtub. Through the marbled glass, he saw the shadow of her body. His breaths quivered.

“Remember that trip to wine country?” she said.

He blinked. He was pretty sure they'd never been to wine country. They'd never really been anywhere. They didn't do vacations. He stared at the wall, a vague sense of lost memory tugging at him, but he couldn't break the fog. Blank. He felt blank.

He resumed his scrubbing. “What trip?” he said. He dunked his head under the spray and let the water wash the shampoo away.

“The weekend,” she said. “You wanted me to go with you for forty-eight hours of uninterrupted sex. But we didn't. You called it off, and you made your dreamy-capped-with-threatening-ultimatum 110 speech.”

“I remember,” he said.

“Why didn't we ever do that, Derek? Since we got couple-y again, why didn't we?”

“I thought you said we didn't do that. Go away together.”

“Well, I was a clueless relationship intern back then. Not now. It occurred to me earlier. When we were stumbling all over each other to admit fault or whatever. You almost died, and we've never even left Seattle together. We've never left, Derek. We haven't done anything, and we should.”

He swallowed. “For sex?”

“For anything,” she said. “I want to spend time with my husband. I think I might settle for watching paint dry or counting ceiling tiles. Though, if you wanted nothing but sex, I think I'd be okay with that. It would certainly help with the whole baby-making initiative.” Her voice dropped low. “And
I miss you.”

“Meredith, I—”

“It's okay,” she said, interrupting him. He relaxed under the spray, letting the water wash everything away. “I'm not trying to pressure you,” she continued. “I'm not. You don't have to do anything before you're ready. You're steering this truck, and if you ever feel like you're not steering, you need to tell me, and I'll back off. I just... I miss you, Derek. I miss you all the time, even though you're right here, and it has nothing to do with making another baby, though that would be nice.”

A lump formed in his throat. He missed her, too. The flat of his palm roamed to his thigh and then his cock. He rubbed without thinking, and a deep, low moan rumbled through him and got lost in the thunderous echo of the water. He closed his eyes, pressing himself under the lukewarm spray. Water came down over his ears, cloaking the world around him through the low, rushing curtain of his deep breathing.

He missed her body as he cleaved it, the look on her face as he brought her. He missed the way her shivery breaths buffeted his skin. He missed her touch, and the way her hair fell against him in the dark. He missed the way she stared at him, sex-glazed and hooded, like she was in a dream, like he was a dream for her.

Since the shooting, she touched him all the time. All the time, she ran her palms against his body, hugged him, sat in his space and breathed his air and kissed him. But he almost always felt constrained by his injuries, or in pain, or cloudy with drugs. Always felt imprisoned by things out of his control.

He missed it. Missed her touch when nothing else mattered. And he wanted to feel himself sheathed within her, while he forgot about everything else.

His eyes half opened, and the picture of her soft body shattered as a knife of pain slid under his ribs. He panted. Desire made him pant, and panting hurt. A lot. And then he looked down, and saw through the blur what she would have to look at if he did somehow manage. Ugly scars and scabs and cut skin. An emaciated torso ravaged by recent weight loss and trauma. He leaned against the wall, shaky, as all his dreams melted, and reality slammed into him with every heartbeat.

He managed to catch his breath, and he rested against the wall, chastised and sullen. The water thundered down. He glanced at her. She'd leaned back against the marbled glass, soft hair pressed flat. He couldn't see a book or notebook or anything. She sat, unmoving, as if she really didn't care about anything else than spending time with him for the sake of spending time.

His lip quivered. He loved Meredith, and he'd been happy to let her go at her own pace, happy to love her and let her express herself back at him the only ways she knew how, which, typically were very muted unless they were having sex. Except now she kissed him and touched him and told him she loved him all the time, and she sat there with him just to sit there, and she wanted to go away with him on trips. The realization made his chest ache and his throat hurt. He blinked, and he wavered on his feet. A deep, empty emotional void he'd been harboring no longer felt empty, and the sheer force of noticing that fullness made his knees turn to jelly.

“I want to,” he said, his voice quiet. “I mean I want to want to.”

“You do? I thought... I mean you seemed pretty much not interested.”

“I do want to,” he said. “I just... I don't know.”
A long silence spread between them. Water thundered down around his ears. “Please, will you talk with me?” she said, begged.

“I don’t know what to say,” he said.

Silence stretched. “Are you embarrassed, Derek?” she said.

“I don’t know.” He said. Something snapped in his chest, and the dam broke. His torso jerked, and it hurt. He breathed, and it hurt. Everything hurt as he punished himself, and he stood under the shower head, dripping and naked and ugly. He sniffed, trying to make it stop. She was finally acting like he’d always dreamed about, but had forced himself not to ask for as a sacrifice to keep her, and now he couldn't even—

Meredith’s silhouette moved. “Derek, may I come in?” she said. “Please?”

He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t even breathe hard without hurting, and she wanted to come in for shower sex? His shoulders hunched, and he turned his back to her, but he couldn’t say no. He couldn’t say a word. She would figure it out anyway. When he couldn’t get it up because of... everything.

Water sloshed as she stepped into the tub. “Wow,” she said. “It’s a bit cold in here.”

He didn’t respond. He closed his eyes, and he let the blackness shiver in his head. For moments, he floated.

The space between them closed to inches. Her palms touched his shoulders. “Please, Derek,” she told his neck. Her lips brushed the skin along his spine. “I love you. Please, don’t be embarrassed.” Her fingers slid under his armpits, and she touched him, down the swell of his ribcage, down his hips. “You're healing. I know we're not going to be breaking headboards or hanging from the chandeliers for a while. And that's okay. It really is. I'm okay with that. I just want you in whatever capacity you can manage.”

Which only made him feel worse. Deep, coiling shame gripped him. If he could have curled into the wall and melted away, he would have. “I can't,” he said. “I can't do this right now. I want to, but I can't.”

Her roaming touch paused. “Can't what?”

“Have sex.”

“I didn't come in here for sex,” she said.

He scowled. “Then what did you come in here for?”

“You're upset.”

He clenched his teeth. “I'm not upset!”

She sighed. She rubbed his back, and he swayed. “Derek...”

The lump in his throat grew. He swallowed. “I don't want to have sex when all I can do is lie there,” he said. His fingers clenchend.

“Ohkay,” she said. She pressed her body against his. Her perky nipples touched his back. “Then we won't.” He closed his eyes as she kissed each shoulder blade. One. Two. “I'll wait until you're
“Meredith,” he whispered. “Please.”

“Please, what?”

“I want to get out.”

She stepped away. “Okay. I'm sorry.”

He turned off the faucet and slid past her, dripping, skin burning. He had to wait. Had to wait for her to help him over the lip of the tub. His stomach churned. He felt sick. He stepped onto the bath mat with her help and reached for the towel. He didn't dry himself off, didn't do anything. He wrapped the terrycloth around his body and he sat, shivering, on the toilet seat.

“Seriously, what's wrong?” Meredith said.

“Nothing. I don't know,” he said.

She stood there. Naked. Breasts perky and round like freshly picked apples. Her wet hair slicked against her head. Water dripped down the swells of her hips and meandered in trails to her bellybutton. She didn't cover anything, and for a moment, he couldn't help but stare. He imagined her big and swollen with their baby. They could get started on that. They could. His lips parted, and he felt his body thrum, deep in his groin, despite everything, despite how upset and wrong he felt. They could, except they couldn't. Discomfort followed the thrum as he inhaled.

He drew the towel closer, and he shivered as arousal faded under the assault of cold, sharp spears of fear. He didn't want to be with her and hurt. It would hurt. It would really hurt. And it wasn't like he was pleasing on the eye.

“The scars are bad,” he said, looking at his lap.

She frowned. “I've seen them, Derek.” She knelt in front of him and put her hands on his knees over the towel. He shivered at the touch. “Is that what this is about?” she said. “The scars?”

“No,” he said. “Yes. I don't...”

Her lip twitched, and she blinked. Confused. He'd confused her, and he closed his eyes. He'd confused himself. He couldn't watch her anymore. Heat clawed at his face. He couldn't think straight. He could barely think at all.

Her hands squeezed his knees. “You're sexy to me,” she said. “You're always sexy to me. Will you look at me?”

He forced himself to open his eyes.

“I just saw you in the shower,” she said. “Do I look like I'm not ready to go, just from looking?”

He swallowed. Blush reddened her skin. Not embarrassment. Not hardly. The way she stared, the way her glassy eyes took in the sight of him with heady, gulping dregs, told him that much.

“Will you drop the towel?” she said. She licked her lips.

His hands shook. He couldn't bring himself to drop it, but he stopped clutching so hard, and it gave way a little. The terrycloth pooled around his upper arms. The thick, long line of his sternal incision poked out at the top, and the awful, swollen bump at the top stood in sharp relief against...
his pale skin.

She rose up on her knees and peeled the towel away from his upper body, leaving it covering his lap and his legs. Cold air hit his wet skin, and he shivered. She stared into his eyes. Her breathing slowed, and then she swept her gaze to his chest. She hovered, eye level with the worst of it, with the bullet wound and everything else. She leaned. Her wet, soft lips touched him at the crease between his pectorals where the stitches formed a long, ugly line, and she licked beside the cut, upper abdomen to clavicles. She kissed next to the bump, and then she roamed higher.

Her lips pressed into his. Her tongue slid into his mouth, and he moaned, leaning back on the seat as she plundered. She looked at him as she pulled away, lips swollen with desire, panting.

“Do I look any less ready to go?” she asked, her voice low and quivering.

She stood, and she took his hand, guided his fingers against her inner thigh. Slick, wet heat touched his skin as she pushed him against the folds of her sex. “I feel pretty ready to go,” she said. “Don't you think?”

“Meredith,” he said, his voice shaky.

“I don't expect anything, Derek,” she assured him. “I'm just trying to show you who I see.”

“Who do you see?”

“I see the man I married. Scars or not. And he's a very, very sexy man.”

He blinked. His vision shimmered. His lip quivered, and he managed a watery, unsure smile. She winked, and he got lost in the sparkling gray of her soft, peerless eyes. He watched the ghosts of his face reflected in her pupils. She didn't blink. Her creamy, naked skin and her perk nipples stole his attention, and he swallowed. Instinct turned his vague smile into a slanted smirk. He touched her, hands splayed against her breasts, and she placed her palms over top his. Her warm skin soothed his soul. With a quiet, long breath, he stroked her to her navel.

She had scars, too. He touched the puckered, pink, jagged line on her side from where Dr. Bailey had extracted a piece of her liver for Thatcher. Remnants of her laparoscopic appendix removal, she had three faded marks carving dimples in her skin. One over her belly button, one just above her pubic hair, and one over the roll of her ribs on her right side, forming an triangle.

“We make a pretty banged up team,” she said, lip quivering.

“Yeah,” he said.

He pulled her against his body, trying not to feel uncoordinated and sluggish. He kissed the space between her cleavage, and warmth radiated against his face. He groaned, soft and low. She felt so nice, and she tasted so delicate. She giggled as he licked her. The sound relaxed him, and he hovered there. Her fingers wound through his hair.

“You're a very conniving woman,” he said he said with a sigh.

“What?” she said, her voice lost and low and dumb with desire.

He stroked her inner thigh and cupped her. She was hot. And she was wet. And she was ready. She moaned as he put pressure against her pubic bone.

“You know I can't leave you like this,” he said. “It's not in my genetic code.”
Her fingers scrunched in his hair as he stroked again. “Derek, I'm serious. If you don't want to do anything, we don't have to do anything.” She panted, and she moaned, and her muscles quivered. “I mean... I...” Another moan, and he grinned, watching her struggle with coherency.

“You were saying?” he said.

She grunted. “I'll live with a little frustration. I'm fine. I am. This was for you. This wasn't to make you feel obligated to—”

“Sit down,” he commanded.

She didn't look at him with doubt. She didn't ask him if he thought this was a good idea, or if he knew he could manage without hurting himself. He said sit down, and she did.

He let himself collapse to his knees in front of the toilet. His breaths caught in his chest, and he forced himself to slow down before he started hurting. He didn't want to hurt when he did this. He didn't want to hurt at all. Ever. But he would settle for a few minutes, pain free. Please. The room fuzzed with the sudden exertion of moving to the floor. He waited. She waited. When it cleared, he shifted forward, inching close to her, closer. The towel fell away from his groin, but he forgot all about it in the overwhelming need to get to her. To please her. To lose himself and forget why he had a list a mile long of things he didn't want to do because they hurt and not because he didn't want them.

A stronger Derek lunged forward in his mind's eye. He crawled on his hands and his knees, and he pushed her flat against the floor and speared her. He laughed and rumbled and sheathed himself with her wet heat while she quivered and screamed his name. He drove against her, needy, ready, whole, thrusting until he spilled, and she raked her fingers down his back.

In a blink, his mind's eye shattered. He shivered with unresolved tension, but he breathed, long and slow, and let it slough away. He knelt gingerly before her on the floor.

She sat against the back wall, loose and supple and naked, knees bent, legs spread, relaxed. For a long moment, he felt like a painter with an untouched canvas. He stared, blank, but instinct helped him when analysis failed. He touched her inner thigh, and she spread her legs wide for him, giving him a full, glorious view. He felt clumsy, almost laughable as he petted her. Despite his less than masterful attempt, she gasped as he slipped his finger inside her body. He formed a hook, and he pulled back against her personal g-spot, a place he'd spent many long, arduous hours searching for.

“Derek,” she managed, voice trembling. The sheer abandon and need in her voice relaxed his self-consciousness. Derek. His name. Said with the sharp, whining edge of begging. Begging for him. He'd done something right despite the fog.

She pressed against him, panting. “Derek,” she repeated. “Please.”

He swallowed, and he couldn't stop his own, throaty groan as he watched her body twitch. Spread wide and senseless all for him. He stroked her inner thigh with the palm of his free hand. Her hot skin felt slick against his hand. She didn't need much help. She'd already plowed up the hill, already edged to the cusp. She'd made herself good and frustrated in her earlier appraisal of his body.

His lip curled with satisfaction.

He pressed his thumb against her clit, and he pulled with the index finger he held inside her. Her muscles clenched around him, and a sizzling, twisting groan wound from her body and wrapped
around him like a feather boa. She bared her teeth at him, and her eyes scrunched in a telltale grimace that screamed pain at him, the pain of the precipice. He had her with barely any effort. Her thighs shook, and her whole body tensed. She had a good grip. He almost couldn't move his finger, but he managed. He stroked her on the inside. Nonsensical moaning tore her throat. She pawed at nothing with her hands. Her breasts quivered as she breathed and breathed and breathed for him.

“Please,” she said, senseless, and the word stroked him like a balm.

He circled her clit. “You sure worked yourself into a mess,” he said. He laughed. Ache broke his chest, but he didn't care. “What would you have done if I hadn't taken the bait?”

She wailed at him as he pulled her from the inside. “Finish me,” she begged. “Finish me, finish me.”

“That wouldn't be very fun,” he said. “I've only had you here for, what, a minute?”

Her nails scrabbled against the floor. He watched, delighted, as she couldn't breathe and couldn't think and couldn't do anything but writhe and grimace and gasp. He kept her there. Stroked her. Not often enough to release, but often enough to hold her dangling on the edge. He slipped his middle finger in beside his index finger and rubbed. Inside. She gripped him. Her muscles contracted.

She couldn't find any purchase with the floor, so her arms stretched up, and she grabbed the towel rack. Her nipples perked, and her breasts heaved, swollen with arousal. For him. She sobbed. Begging him. He liked it.

“Derek, damn it,” she said. Her fingers flexed. The towel rack squeaked.

“What's the magic word?” he said.

“I said please already, you egotistical ass!” she yelled.

He clucked at her. “You're very grumpy today, you know.”

“Shut up and finish me, you evil, evil bastard,” she said.

“Yes, dear,” he said, a bare, velvet whisper.

He clenched his fingers, and he let her go with a single stroke. She slammed against the back wall. Her breathing stopped, and she stiffened as her body contracted all her muscles. She choked. A little. And then a discordant, raking moan bounced into the space between them. Her legs jerked over and over as muscle spasms ran down her body. Her insides squeezed his fingers again and again in rapid, fluttering spasms. Then everything relaxed into jelly, and she sighed as she flopped onto the floor like a pile of muscle and flesh and nothing else.

Her hand found his naked thigh. For a moment, all she did was breathe. “You don't want to...” she managed after an eternity. She gestured at him.

He looked down at himself, surprised to find a partial erection staring back. He swallowed. Just watching her had turned him on, but...

Yes. “No,” he said.

“Kay,” she said. She didn't ask him why. Didn't prod him for an explanation or pressure him or do anything that made him feel embarrassed that he was kneeling on the bathroom floor, naked,
scarred, sort of aroused, but unwilling. She smiled at him, instead, lazy and hazy and pleased.
“That was really good. That... Mmm. Fifty gold stars, at least.”

“Thank you,” he said.

He sat with her on the floor, both of them naked, for minutes after minutes. She relaxed and sort of dozed, eyes half-closed, in a pleasant, post-orgasm cloud. He watched her. His wife.

Until his back pinched his nerves, and he had to move. Had to shift. Had to do something other than just sit there. With trembling, tired muscles, he stood, and he reached for his clothes. He'd dripped all over them when he'd leaned back against the toilet, but they were dry enough to wear.

He managed to pull on his pants while she stumbled to her feet and grabbed her own clothes from their strewn, haphazard pile by the tub. She tripped and leaned against the shower door. “Mmm,” she purred as she pulled up her pants. “I think. I think you might have broke me or something.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “The bathroom floor was new.”

She grinned. “It was. I'm glad I cleaned yesterday. Dirty sex would take on a slightly new meaning if I hadn't, I think, and not a really pleasant one.”

He snickered as he pulled on his shirt. His chest twinged, and he winced, but nothing snapped at him, nothing told him to stop. He moved to the door frame and let himself rest, let the room fuzz up and his mind drift without worrying so much about it. The sheer effort involved in remaining coherent and focused took so much from him. He breathed and spaced.

She slid next to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Your back again?”

He swallowed, opening his eyes. Reality sharpened. His breath hitched. “Yeah.”

“I'm sorry,” she said. She squeezed him. “I'm sorry this sucks so much for you. I hate that I can't do anything.”

“You're here,” he said. “That's something. A lot, actually.”

The trip down the steps didn't take nearly as long as the trip up the steps had. He didn't have to rest as much when gravity helped him instead of fought him tooth and claw. She helped him settle in his favorite chair. She brought him water and a single Percocet.

“Already?” he said as he swallowed the pill. He glanced around for a clock and surprised himself to find it was already noon.

“Yep,” she said. “You slept for a long time after the last batch knocked you out. We're on an 8 12 4 schedule now instead of 6 10 2, which, actually might help you at night, since your Oxycontin won't be fading very early morning when you're still trying to sleep.”

“That would be nice,” he said.

She rubbed his back. “It'll get better,” she said. “Two weeks. You'll wonder why on Earth you were ever so grouchy. Mark my words.”

“Do I need to get you a marker?”

She laughed. “Want anything for lunch? I'm gonna go heat up a hot pocket.”

He scrunched his nose. “Meredith, those things are horrible for you. They're solid blocks of fat and
She shrugged. “Well, I'm not making you one. I assumed you'd want something like... a salad. Or... Whatever. I bought a few of those lettuce pack thingies and some fresh tomatoes. I can make lettuce pack thingies. You just cut the bag open and you have a nice, professional, crispy salad. Or so I'm told.”

“Not right now,” he said. “I'm just going to rest my eyes for a bit.”

“Okay,” she said.

He watched her as she padded into the kitchen. He listened as she rummaged through the freezer. He heard the vague hum of the microwave. She made odd thumping noises, as if she'd decided to pass the time by skipping around the center island in the kitchen while her hot pocket cooked. His eyelids lowered, heavy. The sound of her voice coiled in his head as she started to sing, off-key, to some ridiculous pop song she liked.

“You can stand under my umbrella,” she wailed. “Ella, ella, ey, ey, ey.”

The microwave beeped, and he lost track after that.

Gary Clark stared at him, the space between them separated by a sleek, black gun.

Words. Derek said words. He tried.

Adrenaline made his body quiver. Fight or flight? His body chose flight, but fear and logic made strange bedfellows, and they paralyzed him in a shivery, trembling pile. He swallowed. Flight just meant he'd get shot in the back.

His legs turned to jelly. Sweat dripped down the curve of his spine. His voice wavered, and he tried not to take a submissive stance. Tried. But he'd seen what guns did. Killed people. Killed his dad. He tried to convince the jabbering fear to shut up, but his thoughts kept coming back to that. To soft, wheezy, final words. To, “Derek, listen to me. This is very important.”

His hands moved in front of him. Please, they said for him when real words failed in his throat. Please, don't.

Given dominance, Gary Clark advanced. Anger burbled in his tone. “No talking!” he said.

Derek's legs drew him back one step. Two.

He tried. He tried to talk. He tried to break through and reach the man behind Gary Clark's hating gaze, but fear burbled in Derek's gut. He couldn't even keep track of what he said. Couldn't make it sound strong and commanding at all. The man who cheerfully announced that it was a beautiful day to save lives became submissive. Shivery. He couldn't keep his breaths steady. He knew he looked terrified, and he knew that was probably a mistake. He radiated easy pickings like a tripping, sick gazelle for a lion.

Gary Clark's gun shook. He stared at Derek with sharp, furious, hating eyes.

Derek tried to talk. The gun wavered, until it pointed at Derek's feet. He made the mistake of thinking he'd made progress.

He didn't remember the impact of the bullet. He didn't remember falling. He stared at the ceiling, breaths twisting in his torso while April panicked somewhere behind him. Sucking down air sent
knives into his gut, but he needed air. He needed. The struggle became a war. Needing air versus not wanting it. Eternity stretched into something longer and more torturous.

April abandoned him. Gary Clark pointed the gun, and Derek waited to die. “No, Mr. Clark,” Derek managed in a feeble attempt at... what? To save his own life? To flee?

Something drew Gary Clark's attention to his right. Derek looked, too, but he didn't see anything. Didn't see anything but a blur, and then he was alone, cast away like a cheap, expendable thing. He lay on his back, confused, unable to breathe or move or think. He didn't know why Mr. Clark had disappeared, or when he would come back.

Somebody was in the room with him. Somebody not Meredith. He knew it before he opened his eyes. The steps as the body moved were too heavy. The breaths as the body breathed were too low and rasping. The general presence was too large. A man.

Derek's eyelids pushed up, and through blurry eyelashes he saw the outline of a large, looming person. Big. Male. Leaning near Derek's chair. Close. Closer.

No talking!

The impulse to flee grabbed his muscles and squeezed. His breaths sped into panting, and he lurched to his feet faster than he should have. Faster than his injured body could handle. A weird, twisting noise caught in his throat. “No,” he croaked. Fire snapped under his sternum. Things that had been healing stretched and twanged and broke inside.

The man dropped his gun to the floor where it shattered and made a wet splash. Something cold soaked into Derek's socks. Gasping, Derek tried to move. He did. One shaky step. More of a stumble, really. The Percocet didn't make him dizzy all the time anymore, but it still made elevation changes an invitation to faint if they weren't approached with enough caution.

The room blotted out at the edges and tilted.

Gary Clark pulled Derek into a tight bear hug before he fell. Pressure constricted Derek's chest. Pain. Trapped. Derek's heart plunged, every throbbing beat squeezing like a fist. His body shook. He made a whining, inhuman, keening sound as his lungs pushed and pulled, frantic for air. Something hot and wet seeped down his legs. He couldn't speak, and terror sucked him down into a black hole of panic.

“Jesus,” said Gary Clark as he adjusted his grip. The pain lessened, but didn't abate. “What's... Jesus Christ.”

Derek gulped for air, trembling. Run, run, run, run, run. Indomitable, his brain said run. His legs twitched with the need to obey. He clawed at Gary Clark's shirt, desperate, violent, but his murderer wouldn't let go.

“Stop it,” Mr. Clark said. “Stop it, Derek, you'll fucking hurt yourself. It's Mark. It's Mark. Stop!”

Heavy footsteps. “What the hell happened?” Meredith said.

“Please,” Derek said. The single desperate word of entreaty was all he could manage.

“I don't fucking know what happened,” Mr. Clark said. “Don't move, Derek. Jesus. There's glass on the floor by your feet.”

“Mark,” said Derek as spoken word began to register. The name skipped on his tongue and came
out broken. He couldn't breathe, couldn't get his body to relax. The room spun. Mark, he thought. But Gary Clark wouldn't let go, and so Derek shivered, heart hammering like a gong, over and over. “Mark.”

Derek heard the whoosh of a broom scraping pieces of glass from the floor.

“The chair is two steps back,” Mark said, his voice low and cautious. “It's clear of glass.”

Mark let him go, and Derek fled in the opposite direction Mark had instructed him to go. He fled all the way to the foyer before he could make himself stop and assess. Unmitigated panic slowed into something less frenetic, less all-consuming, when he realized nobody chased him. Nobody yelled. Meredith was there, and she wasn't screaming or crying or distressed about a madman in their house. Daylight streamed in through the glass pane of the front door. He swallowed, looking back over his shoulder.

The scraping stopped. Meredith pushed shimmery, sparkling, broken bits into a dustpan and stood with a groan. Gary Clark? No. Mark. And the gun had been a glass. A fucking glass of water.

“Are you okay?” Meredith said.

“I'm fine,” Derek snapped. He moved deeper into the foyer, out of sight. One wobbling step. Two. “I'm fine.”

He hadn't just survived a murder attempt. Mark had been putting down a glass of water for him on the side table by the chair. Heat flamed across his face and his throat and his ears. He clawed at his neck, trying to hide it. He felt them staring at him through the wall as he moved, felt their eyes on him.

He shuffled into the windowless downstairs bathroom. Gunfire flared in the mirror, white and flashing and hot. He gasped, shut the door, turned off the lights, and collapsed to the floor against the wall. The soft bath mat muffled the jolt. His heart throbbed under his breastbone. He put his face into his knees, and he breathed. A familiar, vague tickle of ammonia crept into his nostrils, and he gagged and slammed his head back against the wall. Pain flared in his chest.

His pajama pants were drenched from the crotch to the calves. He'd wet himself. He'd fucking pissed in his pants. They'd seen it. They must have. Both of them. Nausea coiled. His skin bloomed hot and bright with a fresh flush.

Voices murmured in the other room. Talking about him, probably.

He couldn't stop trembling, and his heart wouldn't slow.

*Water lapped in the distance.* “Hi,” his mirror Meredith said. “Please, don't be scared.” Her arms wrapped around him.

A knock on the door tore him from his desperate reverie.

“Derek?” Meredith said, her voice soft and muffled through the wood. A dark shadow shifted under the threshold. The doorknob moved a millimeter and then jammed as she tested it. He'd locked it. When had that happened?

“Can you at least tell me you're okay?” she said.

He reached. His cold, sweaty, shaking fingers slipped, but he managed to flip the latch. Eventually. And then he curled against his wet knees, letting the slant of his thighs support his body. As long
as he didn't press, his sternum didn't hurt, though his ribs felt strange, and the bullet wound pulled like somebody poked him with a finger. He didn't care. He didn't speak. He pressed his forehead into the wet dip between his knees and sighed. He wanted it to stop. Why wouldn't it stop?

“Derek? I'm coming in, okay?”

A long, interminable stretch followed as she gave him a chance to say no, but words clotted in his throat. What the hell was he supposed to say? My friend who I've known since childhood came at me with a glass of water, and I thought I was going to die?

A shaft of daylight fell into the bathroom at a slant. He squinted, but couldn't see more than her willowy shadow. “Hey,” she said. She didn't turn on the light, but she left the door open a crack. She fumbled in the dark and stepped over his legs. If she found anything odd about him sitting on the floor in the dark in the bathroom, she said nothing about it. She sat on the toilet seat, and she touched his shoulder.

Her breath caught, and her hand froze. “Derek, you're shaking,” she said. Her palm moved against his deltoid. She shifted. With a thump, she slid into the small space between him and the toilet, and she hugged him while he sat there, glassy-eyed and scared and wondering why his brain was doing these things to him. Making him think things that weren't real.

“I didn't know Mark was visiting,” he said. He sounded wispy in the small space. Like he couldn't get his lungs to work. Meredith's grip tightened.

She sighed. “I should have mentioned it again. It's my fault. He's been wanting to stop by since I took you home. He's been calling so much, I swear, it's like I already thought the world knew his day off was today, and that he wanted to stop by. I'm really sorry he startled you. I told him to bring you a glass of water since he was headed into the living room anyway. I... I didn't think. Wasn't thinking.”

She babbled. He didn't hear much of it, but the low rush of words grounded him. Made him feel... Better. The fear that had lit him up like a firecracker sparked and flickered and died, until all that it left in its wake was a shaky, weak, tired feeling that told him he'd stressed himself far beyond his capability to be stressed. He swallowed, sitting in his soiled pants. He needed to clean up and change, but he couldn't... He thought of all the steps between him and his clean clothes, and his eyes watered. His throat constricted.

A shadow loomed by the door. “It's just me,” said Mark, enunciating loudly and firmly as though he thought he approached a jumper on a roof. “It's Mark.” His arm came through the crack in the door, and the slant of light yawned a bit wider. He held a dark, fuzzy blob in his grip, which Meredith stood up to take from him.

“Thanks,” she said.

Mark's arm slipped back out of the room, and the shadow disappeared. Meredith pushed the door closed with a thud, leaving them with no light but what the small blue plug-in nightlight provided.

She handed Derek the soft bundle. His fingers clenched the soft, dry, clean flannel. Hot flush swept over him. Again. A low, grating moan tore through him, and he wept in the dark. She squeezed back into the space between the toilet and his body, and she embraced him.

“It's okay,” she said.

Fat, hot tears rolled down his face. “I thought I was going to die.”
“I know.”

“I don't want to die.”

She rubbed his back with long, soothing strokes. “I know.”

He rolled his face into her shoulder, and a deep choking sob racked his body. And then another and another. He clutched her shirt, and he cried, stirring up agony in his chest, but he couldn't stop. He cried until exhaustion pulled him into a sniffling, throbbing silence. His chest ached, his throat felt raw, and muzzy cotton clogged his brain. He felt sick.

She sat with him. Until his eyes drifted shut. Sleep plowed into him like a muscle car in a drag race, but she shook him gently, enough to jolt him back into half awake. “Why don't you change, and you can sleep in the living room?” she suggested.

Beyond sentience, he listened to her tone of voice more than anything else. She convinced him to stand up. She pulled down his dirty pants. Water whooshed in the sink. She dabbed the hand towel under the faucet. She turned, but he stopped her.

“I can do it,” he said, his voice hoarse and unrecognizable. Defeated. She handed him the towel, and he wiped the drying urine off his bare legs while she stared in the mirror, or at the wall, or anywhere but at him. Water evaporated. His skin chilled and shivered. His muscles ached, and by the time he finished and dropped the urine-soaked towel... somewhere, he'd lost his breath, the room seemed to waver in and out, and he really thought he might fall, not from dizziness or doing something he shouldn't, but because he had nothing left.

Nothing.

And so he stood there, naked from the waist down except for his socks, his weight slumped against the wall. Meredith waited. She waited, until he swallowed, trembling. Fresh tears and blooming embarrassment broke loose. He clung to the towel rack because if he didn't he would collapse.

“I can't,” he said. “I can't, I can't.”

“It's okay,” she said. “It's okay. Derek, it's okay.”

She hugged him, and he started crying again. Not the deep, guttural, rending sobs from before. Just quiet, wet sniveling that made him sick inside. The harder he tried to stop, the worse the urge to weep. As she helped him step into the clean pants Mark had brought for him from upstairs, he gave up. He just gave up and cried.

She threw his old, soiled pajamas into the bowl of the sink.

“Can you walk if I help?” she said.

Shaking with effort, he transferred his grip from the towel rack to her shoulders. He took a test step. He nearly buckled. Her arm slipped around his waist. Another step, and he had to rest, panting. They made it into the hallway. And then the foyer. He couldn't go more than a foot without resting. He shambled, mindless. He wanted to sleep. He wanted to disappear to someplace else. A place that wasn't here, where he'd wet himself in terror in front of his wife and his friend. A place that wasn't here, where he couldn't have sex or walk up steps. A place that wasn't here, where he hurt.

He hurt here.
Mark stood in the center of the living room like a lost, lonely island. “Hey, man,” he said, and then he fell silent, and an odd, crumpled look shattered his usual, confident demeanor. Like he had no idea what to say that would be right or reasonable.

Derek wiped at his eyes, even as another flush spread over his skin, rendering any sort of appearance doctoring useless. He’d cried himself into exhaustion, and he’d wet himself, and he’d been shot. Three immutable facts. He couldn’t even spare the energy anymore to speak.

He glanced around the room, unable to process anything else, and his gaze fell on the chair. The safe chair. Covered in supportive pillows and rumpled blankets. His back liked that chair.

“Don't sit there,” Meredith said. “We're moving this one, remember?”

No.

He blinked. She nudged him toward the couch. He hobbled and tripped as more and more parts of his body shut down and demanded rest. He tried not to think about Mark. Staring. Silent. Unsure.

Meredith transferred pillows while he clung to the armrest. She put a big, fluffy one next to the arm of the sofa, and another where his back would go. She wrapped a warm blanket around his body. He collapsed, and the faucet behind his eyes began to rush, fast, faster, until he lost track of everything.

A cold glass of water brushed his palm. Reflex made him clutch it, but it was too heavy. She helped him lift it to his lips, and he took weak swallow after weak swallow. The liquid hit his parched throat too fast, and he spluttered and spat with the shock. Water dribbled everywhere. He pushed the glass away, and she took it and set it nearby on the coffee table. She draped a thick, warm comforter over his legs. His eyes closed, and he stopped. Just stopped. His trembling, tired muscles loosened.

She kissed him. “I love you,” she said.

He floated in the dark.

“God, I'm so sorry,” Mark said. “I've never seen him like that. Not ever. I didn't want to let go because I thought he'd fall, but—”

“Does it make me a bad person?” Meredith said. “To hate a dead man so much I wish I could add some kerosene to whatever hell he's burning in?”


Meredith sucked in a wet breath and sniffed. “Let's just move this chair.”

“Okay,” said Mark, though he sounded unsure. “This is the chair you want moved?”

“Yeah.”

“I think... Yeah. You grab that end.”

The last noises Derek heard were of his friend and his wife, huffing and groaning while they lugged a huge chair up the stairs for him. He should be helping, he thought. He could help. He swallowed. Sometime between one thought and the next, he didn't hear anything anymore. His body wasn't sleeping on a couch. He was dying, instead.
“I love you,” Meredith said as they put the mask over his face, and Dr. Avery told him to breathe deeply.

Two knife stabs, and the pain lessened. Three, and relief washed over his nerve endings. His eyelids drooped. He watched Meredith watching him. He didn't want to leave, and then he couldn't not leave. His eyes shut. Voices disappeared through a long, echoing tunnel. His sense of the world faded like someone removed puzzle pieces in fast succession. Holes here. Holes there. Blotting out.

Black.

His eyes didn't open. He didn't exactly wake up. But he felt the roll of the lights overhead. Felt the rumble under his body. Heard voices. And then nothing.

A team of six or seven nurses counted to three. The sheets pinched his hips and his shoulders and the sides of his body, and they lifted him. The sheets relaxed. His body settled on something flat and soft. People touched him. Pulled at his hospital gown and did something with his mouth. Air hit his skin. Hands. All over him, touching places only Meredith should touch. A bag crinkled. The flinch that came with modesty lost itself in the mire. He sent the message, but his nerves didn't receive. Somebody picked up his hand and clipped something to his finger. Monitors bleeped in his ears. And then nothing.

When he managed to push his eyelids up the first time, even the dark hurt his eyes, and he closed them again for a moment. He tried again. Cristina stood there with a chart, and she talked with a woman. He didn't understand the words. Mostly, he saw ceiling. On the horizon, he saw his toes. Cristina stared at him, touched something on his chest. And then nothing.

The woman from before, the one he didn't know, unfurled a blanket over his body. He saw the edges of it fan into his view of the ceiling as she let the air fluff it up. Light flickered as the blanket eclipsed all else, and then returned as the blanket settled on top of his body, thin and not warm enough against the glaciers sliding underneath his skin. At least they'd covered him.

He couldn't move. Nausea swirled in the back of his throat, and his limbs froze with chill, but the tingly, weightless, not-really-there-yet feeling that made his head cotton overruled his ability to do more than lie there. He tried to swallow and couldn't. He had something in his mouth. His teeth couldn't meet, and his tongue sat mashed under the heavy weight. Thick straps gripped his face. He knew he had something stuck down his throat, but beyond that, numbness.

The woman looked at him, and a bright, wide smile curved her lips and crinkled at her eyes. “Dr. Shepherd,” she said, her tone low and whisper soft. “I'm told your surgery went just fine. It's about 3:30PM. You're on a ventilator right now, and you're in the cardiac intensive care unit at Seattle Grace. I just added more morphine to your drip. Can you nod for me if you're in any pain?”

The ventilator whirred and pushed air into his lungs. He felt like he breathed through a straw. Nothing made any sense. He couldn't move. How could he nod even if he wanted to? A blood pressure cuff constricted around his arm, tight, tighter. He blinked. His body shook. He didn't like it here. He wanted to go home.

The woman picked up his hand. He saw an intravenous line stuck in his wrist. A name tag encircled him. He couldn't read the tag. Couldn't feel it against his skin. He watched his hand in the woman's. He felt the touch. But he couldn't move. Like his body wasn't his. Just a prison.

“I know this is very scary, Dr. Shepherd. You've been given a lot of muscle relaxants and sedatives to keep you from moving around while you're waking up. There's a lot of tubes and wires, and we don't want you to dislodge anything by accident. But you're safe, and you're out of surgery. I'm told
everything went just fine. Do you want to see Dr. Grey?"

Cold bleached his bones. He blinked.

“Meredith Grey,” said the woman. “Do you want to see Meredith, Dr. Shepherd?”

He stared. Desperation drove a sword into his nerves. He tried to squeeze his fingers, but they
wouldn't move. He twitched. His head. Maybe not a nod, but a twitch. Please.

Please, give me Meredith.


Mark's voice penetrated the fog before Derek even realized he'd woken up. He swallowed and
squinted, trying to force the cobwebs of sleep away, but they didn't want to leave. He wiped at his
eyes. His cheeks hurt, rubbed raw with evaporated tears and leftover salt. His eyes burned. His
body throbbed, and his chest ached, and he knew he wouldn't be getting up anytime soon. He didn't
even try.

“Do you need anything?” Mark said. “Meredith's doing some laundry, but I can get her.”

A vague sound caught in Derek's throat. He stared at Mark through half-lidded eyelids and half-
awake eyes. “Mark,” he said. His voice sounded broken and weak and sick. His throat felt raw.
Dry. Torn. Thoughts didn't work, and so he just stared.

“Yeah,” said Mark. “Go back to sleep if you want.”

Derek closed his eyes, trying, through the mire, to think of a way to ask for water that wouldn't
sound pathetic. He swallowed and worked his salivary glands. Nothing helped. The pasty, gummy
dryness in his mouth and throat lingered. He put his elbow over his eyes and breathed, fighting
sentience for all he was worth, but something had decided he would wake up now, and he was
stuck. Awake. Tired, but not tired enough to drift back into dreams without serious effort.

“I'd like some water,” he said. He couldn't bring himself to do add a please. To beg. Not after the
morning he'd had. His voice grated, and so he sat there, eyes shut, and he rested his throat.

I'm coming into the room.”

Tired and spent and pushed beyond embarrassment into dejected indifference, Derek listened to
Mark as he reported his positions in the room like a fucking sonar. Ping. Ping. Ping. I'm here! On a
base level, Derek appreciated it. Just a little. Anything that helped him not become the terrified,
nonsensical animal that wet himself. On an intelligent level, it annoyed him that Mark felt he
needed to provide this sort of service. This coddling. And it frustrated Derek that Mark was
probably right.

Mark handed him the glass of water, and Derek drank with slow, disinterested sips. When the glass
emptied, Derek rubbed the cool crystal against his forehead. The chill broke some of the fog, but

“No problem,” Mark said.

Meredith came into the room. She smiled when she saw Derek, blinking and sort of awake, but she
didn't draw attention to him. She'd changed. She wore some old, faded jeans, flip-flops, and his
favorite ratty Dartmouth shirt. She'd drawn her hair into a loose, scraggly ponytail that looped
under on itself sort of like a bun but not really.

“I'm going to run some errands,” she said. “I'll be back in a few hours, okay?”

“Sure,” Mark said.

Derek stared.

“Do you want anything from the store?” she said. “Derek?”

“What?”

She smiled. “I'm going out. Do you want me to get you anything?”

“No.”

“Okay.” She kissed his cheek. She put on dark, stylish sunglasses, grabbed her purse, and she left. The resounding slam of the door rumbled through the house, and Derek flinched.

He fucking flinched. He wiped his eyes again. The blankets and comforter rustled as he leaned over his knees, trying to wake up his muscles and his body and his mind. Mark sat in front of the television, messing with cables and wires. He made clanks and thumps as he pushed the DVD player aside.

“What are you doing?” Derek said.

“I'm setting up my PS3 for you.”

“How do you even have enough time for a PS3?”

Mark shrugged. “I lead a vegetative, indoor life outside the hospital, unlike you, Mr. Fishing-Is-Fun.”

“Fishing is fun,” Derek said.

“It's like watching paint dry, Derek. No. It's like watching invisible paint dry, which is even worse, because there's nothing to fucking watch. Anyway, I figured this would help stave off some boredom when Meredith goes back to work. Plus, if I'm not mistaken, you owe me a stoned rematch.”

“What?”

“Remember when I got my wisdom teeth out?” Mark said. He grinned like a five-year-old in a candy store full of chocolate and gummy bears. “Space Invaders on the Atari? You beat my pants off every time because I was high on meds.”

“You say it was because you were high on meds,” Derek said.

“Right, well. Now's your chance to prove you're just better than me. Tables are turned.”

Derek blinked. “PS3 has Space Invaders?”

“You know, I read something about a remake a while ago, I think, but I don't have it,” Mark said. He lay flat on his belly on the rug and thumped around under the television. He grunted. Another thump. “There, got it.” He eased onto his haunches. When he hit the power on the television, the screen came alive with a flare of color. The rumble of a revving engine filled the room. Derek
watched the screen, a bit disoriented with all the movement and flashing, and also helplessly engrossed because he didn't have the mental capacity for dividing his attention between multiple things.

Mark scooted across the floor. He pushed the coffee table away and sat down on the rug, his back resting against the sofa to the left of Derek. “Here,” Mark said, and he handed a controller over his shoulder for Derek to grab.

“What?” Derek forced his gaze away from the screen.

Mark glanced over his shoulder, an evil gleam in his eye. “Want to race?”

Derek stared at the controller. It had lots of buttons. Lots. It was way more complicated than the Atari joystick he could recall from the indistinct edges of his memory. “Mark, I haven't played a game since Space Invaders.”

“It's good for dexterity, you know,” Mark said. “Hand-eye coordination.”

“Right,” Derek said. “You do it for professional development.”

“Of course, I do,” Mark replied. “I didn't get to be this awesome just from my own excessive talent.”

Derek tilted the controller in his hands. He felt clumsy. Already. And he hadn't done anything yet. He stared at the screen and blinked. A flashy car sped past, and he could barely keep track of it. His head felt like cotton. He had no reflexes. The painkillers destroyed his normal ability for precision. His competitive spirit died a wheezing death because he knew he would lose. “Mark, I'm a bit more stoned than you were with your wisdom teeth.”

“It's okay,” Mark said. “I have a plan. And if you really hate it, there's always Netflix.”

“A plan?”

“Yes,” Mark said. He put his controller on the coffee table and crawled to the liquor cabinet. He peered into the space. Bottles clinked. “Do you mind if I finish off some of your scotch? Tequila is rank. I really don't get how Meredith drinks it straight.”

When Derek only stared, Mark took that as free license. Derek watched his good bottle of St. Magdalene single malt scotch turn up in the air. The scotch sloshed, and Mark chugged straight from the bottle. Chugged. He downed at least five shots worth of alcohol before he gagged. He rested with his mouth hanging open as his eyes watered. And then he took another long gulp.

“Give me a few minutes,” Mark said. “I haven't eaten in a while. We'll be on pretty even footing in no time.”

“Mark, it's not even dinner time.”

“So, what?” He took another swig and settled back against the couch. “I already asked Meredith if she minds a house guest, and I surrendered my keys. I don't have to work until tomorrow night. What's the big deal?” Another swig, and then he swayed. “Whoa,” he said.

“Mark...”

“Press,” Mark said. He stumbled on his tongue. “Press the shtart. The button.”
Derek rolled his eyes. “You are such an idiot.”

Mark poked Derek's knee. His face had turned a light cherry color. He took another swig. “Shhhut up, and race me, you pompous jerk.” He put the St. Magdalene on the coffee table, and he fumbled with his controller.


Derek couldn't help the smile that took over his face. He laughed. Not hard, but he laughed. And it felt liberating. Just a little. “No, do tell, Mark,” he said. “I think I'll like this version.”

“Jus press buttons,” Mark said. “First one to the... fffinish line...”

“Will be a miracle?”

“Yep,” Mark said, and they played. Somehow.
“Who’s got schizophrenia?” said a loud voice against her ear.

Meredith jumped and sent a stack of books tumbling to the floor. She almost fell out of her chair. Her heart thudded, and she clawed agitated hands through her tangled hair as she panted.

Cristina’s thin body crashed into the chair next to Meredith’s. She huffed, blowing black strands of her loose hair into the air. They sat in the back corner of the large research library. Meredith had picked the computer farthest from the door, facing all the rows of bookshelves, where nobody could look over her shoulder without some effort and some epic contortionist skills, or blatant nosiness. The sharp smell of new paper had mingled with the musty smell of old books as she’d started to pull up article after article after article.

“You shouldn’t sneak up on people like that,” Meredith snapped. Breath by breath, she calmed down. She’d let herself become too engrossed.

“I didn’t,” said Cristina. “I came in from the front. I said hi. I stood behind you for like three minutes. My pager even went off.”

“Oh,” said Meredith.

“So, how’d you dig up a patient with schizophrenia?” Cristina said. “The hospital is dead. I’ve been trolling the ER for hours. Did you get a surgery with shadow-Shepherd or something? Tell me you get to do a surgery. Something. Anything interesting.”

“Nobody’s got schizophrenia,” Meredith said. Derek? Not schizophrenic. You didn’t get schizophrenia from gunshot wounds. That was ridiculous. Right? Ridiculous. “That article was open already when I got here, and I didn’t want to lose somebody’s place. I was looking up other stuff.” She minimized the browser window that framed an article about anti-psychotic medications and their effects on patients diagnosed with schizophrenia. Behind it hovered mazes of other articles. Articles she had opened.

“Why do you want to know about post-traumatic stress?” Cristina said. “Is Derek acting weird?”

Meredith had started with easy research. Post-operative care for heart surgery patients. Stretching exercises to alleviate lower back pain. But nigglng suspicion had caused her to stray. She’d pulled up one article on post-traumatic stress disorder. And then she’d pulled up another. And another. Article upon terrifying article that regurgitated Derek’s symptoms to the letter all over the screen. She’d gotten lost in a nightmare, clicking link after related link, until her browser had about fifty articles open, and she had no idea which article said what anymore. Derek had post-traumatic stress disorder. She knew it. She knew it, and it made her insides twist and jumble, until she felt nauseated and cold and terrified inside. She thought of Owen. And the red marks she’d seen on Cristina’s neck the night he’d nearly strangled her. Derek… God.

No. Absolutely not.

She refused to let herself believe that Derek would sink that far. Hurting her or somebody else. He couldn’t. Derek didn’t hurt people. Not ever. She’d seen him snap and snarl and yell. If he got frustrated enough, he hit things. Inanimate things. Books. Papers. Door frames. Whatever. Not people. Never people. Well, Mark. He’d hit Mark. More than once. She wrung her hands together. No. Those times had been different. Unusual nexuses of bad, provoking events all piled onto one
another. Derek did not hurt people.

But he didn't wet himself either. He didn't hide in dark bathrooms and shake like a freaking leaf with terror. He didn't startle over garbage trucks and tense when she touched him unexpectedly.

“Meredith,” Cristina said, her voice loud and piercing.

“Cristina...” Meredith said. But she couldn't find any words.

Cristina read the articles over Meredith's shoulder quietly. “Derek wasn't in combat for months,” she said. Simple. To the point. “He got shot by a maniac, and it was over in minutes. Seriously, Meredith. Think about it. Think hard. I mean, he might be a little messed up about it, but what's going on that makes you think he's actually got PTSD?”

“I...” Meredith said. She stared at the screen, and her vision blurred. White pages and black text turned mushy and spread into senseless gobs of gray. Maybe Cristina was right. But she didn't know about Derek's dad. And she didn't know the way Derek had been acting the last few days. Cristina didn't really know Derek at all, even on his normal days.

“More stuff you're not allowed to tell me?” Cristina said. She folded her arms across her chest.

“No,” Meredith said. “I just can't tell you. I won't. I won't talk about this with you. I want to. I want to gush until I'm gushed out because I think I might explode if I don't, but I can't, because he's my person, too, Cristina, and if I told you, I'd be stomping all over that.” She sighed. “I love you. You're my person. I'll always be grateful that you saved his life, and I'd do anything in my power to repay that, but I can't talk to you about this. Please, don't be mad at me. I can't take having somebody mad at me right now, especially not you.”

Cristina watched her. Seconds passed. She took a deep breath and settled her shoulders. “Do you need me to be supportive? I can be supportive. You don't have to get specific.”

“Are you still scared of Owen sometimes?” Meredith said.

“Sometimes,” Cristina said. “He's gotten a lot better since he started therapy with Dr. Wyatt. And he's never touched me again. Not once.” She frowned. “Did Derek hurt you?”

“No,” Meredith said. “It's not like that. Or, I don't think it's like that. Or, I'm trying to convince myself it's not like that, and I'm failing dismally at it. Or, I'm—”

“Stop,” Cristina demanded. “PTSD develops from fear. People do one of two things when they're scared. They fight, or they run. They're aggressive, or they cower. Owen fights. Which one did Derek pick?”

Meredith shivered as her brain took out a broom and a dust pail and recollected her shattered resolve. She took a deep, cleansing breath, and she blew it out, sending wisps of hair flying. Guilt roiled in her gut as she realized where the train she'd gotten on had been heading. Derek wouldn't hurt her. He wouldn't hurt anyone. Gary Clark had set a monster free, but Derek wasn't a vehicle. He was a victim. Plain and simple.

Cristina nodded. “I thought so. I mean, people might not respond the same way every time, but if he's established a pretty good pattern of flight over fight...”

Meredith scraped tear tracks away. “I can't decide if I should be insulted or relieved that you think he's a coward.”
Cristina’s lips pressed into a line. “Running away from a man with a gun doesn’t make you a coward, Meredith. It makes you smart. The aggressive ones are the idiots.”

Meredith snorted. “We stayed and fought,” she said, her voice soft. “Are you saying we’re idiots?”

“Yes, but I don’t regret it.”

“How’s Owen?”

Cristina snorted. “Macho and fine. Or he says he is. If his hands start to twitch while he’s recuperating, though, I swear I’m telling the Chief with a bullhorn and a neon sign.”

“No more bank robberies?” Meredith said.

Cristina grunted and didn’t answer. She glanced at her watch. “If you're done panicking,” she said, “I need to get back to the ER. It’ll be just my luck if I missed something. I can’t afford to miss something. I'm the most awesome resident we have. I need to maintain my hardcore rep.”

Meredith grinned. “I don't think you're in danger of losing that anytime soon. Did you take a single day off?”

“No.” Cristina shrugged. “Are you okay, now?”

Something dark and scary and shivery welled up in Meredith’s chest. She swallowed against the huge, awful lump that formed in her throat. She nodded, and she closed all the browser windows. She couldn’t look at this crap anymore. Reading articles about post-traumatic stress made her paranoid and upset and more worried than she’d been when she’d started, and she had no better idea how to help Derek than before. She’d wasted her time. Wasted Derek's.

She was a stupid, stupid idiot. You couldn’t research this crap like some kind of paint-by-numbers surgery to perform.

“I need help,” Meredith said.

Cristina rolled her eyes. “Clearly.”

“You shut up,” Meredith said. “But thank you. I mean it.”

“As long as we don't hug.”

“Never that,” Meredith said. “I'm good, now.”

When Cristina turned to leave, Meredith called after her. Cristina turned. “What now?”

“Can you do me a favor?”

“Does it involve giving you surgeries?”

“No, just—” Meredith sighed. “When you stop by the house to visit, don’t barge in. Just... Knock and wait at the front door or something? Please.”

Cristina’s stare peeled away layers from Meredith’s body, to the point that Meredith felt like an onion, labeled and bared on a plate. Maybe she didn't have to tell Cristina anything at all. Maybe she'd figured it all out on her own.

“I can do that,” Cristina said, her voice soft, and then she left.
“I think I've got PTSD or something,” Meredith blurted. “How do I fix it?”

She gripped the doorknob so hard it made her hand ache. The fish tank at the far end of the room burbled. Silence stretched. Dr. Wyatt looked up from her book and schooled her eyes on Meredith, who hadn't knocked, scheduled an appointment, or done anything to otherwise hint to Dr. Wyatt that she might be stopping by that day. Meredith swallowed as she felt heat lick across her face.

She probably should have knocked. At least that. But she'd sort of... blanked. Just blanked. She'd let Cristina talk her off the ledge after hours in the research library, but then she'd started drifting into dark and twisty mazes of worry and fear again on the long walk to Dr. Wyatt's office. Derek wouldn't hurt anyone. But that didn't make him okay. He was far, far from okay. And she had no idea how to fix it. No idea how to help. When she'd felt lost before, that had been nothing compared to how she felt now. She wasn't even sure she was on the planet Earth anymore.

Dr. Wyatt put her book to the side by her hip, crossed her legs, and folder her hands in her lap.

“I'm sorry,” Meredith said. “I'm sorry. I should have made an appointment. You're probably busy with all the very traumatized people, and I'm not particularly traumatized. I mean, I am. I have PTSD. But it can wait. It's not like it'll just go away. And, I don't want to bother you with—”

“Meredith,” said Dr. Wyatt. “Seattle Grace is a ghost town. The only people who are overworked in this hospital right now are the specialized trauma counselors they brought in.”

“So, you're not busy.”

“Free as a bird.”

“Oh.”

“What makes you think you have post-traumatic stress disorder?”

Meredith stared, and the blankness returned. “Well, I...” This was it. “I mean...” This was where Dr. Wyatt would tell her that everything was not fine. “Since the shooting...” Not fine at all. “Since...” That Derek would need help. “It's just been wrong...” The kind of help that involved being committed in a straight jacket, or doped into catatonia, or something else awful. “I don't know myself anymore...” Or...

She snapped awake to the sound of his disturbed muttering. Nonsensical syllables that probably made words, wherever he was in his head, but they made garbage in the real world. Darkness hovered in the air, so thick and opaque she almost felt like she could reach out and touch it. She'd drawn the shades when she'd brought him home, and she'd left them down, so he could sleep in their bedroom whenever he wanted, daylight or not. The thick shades made the days dark, and the nights black as pitch. She rolled into him and splayed a hand against his twitching body. She rubbed, and she whispered. Warmth radiated from his skin, and she pressed her cheek against him.

“It's okay,” she said. “It's over. You're okay.”

She repeated herself until the muscles in his body tightened all at once, and then relaxed. A soft, sighing breath filled the space between them. He lay still. With the pillows propped under his side the way they were, he had next to zero ability to move on his own, not without clawing at the mattress for leverage and pulling with his arms, something he wasn't allowed to do, and probably had no desire to do either, given how painful it would be trying to drag his body weight across a resisting surface.

“Derek?” she whispered.
Silence stretched. She wondered if he’d fallen asleep, or if he’d never woken up. She pressed her nose into his shoulder and curled up, careful to avoid jarring him. He said it didn't hurt. He'd said so multiple times, but...

He kissed her forehead.

“Hey,” she said.

He didn't speak. She found his hand in the darkness and gripped it. He squeezed her palm. A rumbling breath hit her skin. The sheets rustled. With effort, he shifted. She helped, wincing when she heard his breaths tighten. Pain. His hand gripped her hip, like he wished he could pull her against him and spoon with her. He liked to do that, but he couldn't sleep on his side anymore, couldn't tip his larger frame over her smaller body. She settled against him as close as she could manage. She ran her foot down his leg in a long, reassuring stroke. His skin twitched. Her big toe brushed the ball of his ankle. She squiggled her toes against the soft hairs on his skin.

His breaths stretched as he made precarious inroads back to sleep.

“Meredith? Hello?”

“I have nightmares,” Meredith said, and then her brain kicked into gear and examples and purpose plowed over her rambling. “And I space out. I mean, I know I’m on lots of painkillers, but I’ve seen tons of people on painkillers, and they don’t usually make people act like reality sieves. My temper is on a really short fuse. And I’m scared. All the time. Noises make me jumpy. Strangers and unexpected guests terrify me to the point that I can't function. I'm not eating. I cry all the time, too.”

“Derek doesn't have PTSD,” Dr. Wyatt said.

“How did you—”

“Maybe have a seat?” Dr. Wyatt said. “Close the door?”

Meredith shook her head. “Right. Right, sorry.” The door whispered closed. She skittered across the room, and collapsed into Dr. Wyatt's squishy, comfy, overly-relaxing couch, but she sat like a steel rod, straight and tense.

“We all saw the casualty lists,” Dr. Wyatt said. “I know he was seriously hurt. And most people suffering after a trauma aren't able to give me handy laundry lists of symptoms like that.”

“Well, if it's not PTSD...” Meredith clenched her fingers. “Are you sure it's not PTSD? I mean really, really sure?”

“100% certain.”

“How?” Meredith asked. “You haven’t even seen him. He matches all the articles. All of them. And I read bunches and bunches.”

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “Post-traumatic stress disorder is a condition that appears well after a traumatic episode. Months. Sometimes even years. Have you heard of acute stress disorder?”

Meredith frowned. “No, but it sounds just as bad.”

“Well, it's acute, which is somewhat better. It's very common for people who have experienced a serious traumatic event to exhibit PTSD-like symptoms in the days and weeks following the event.
Everyone copes differently and at different paces. I would be more concerned if he wasn't upset at all. Dissociation can be a dangerous animal.”

Meredith stared. Her jaw clenched to the point that her teeth hurt. Overwhelming, gut-wrenching hope tore her innards to shreds. She grabbed at the hemline of her scrubs and scrunched and wrinkled and fiddled because her hands needed something to do, and she didn't think Dr. Wyatt would like it much if she grabbed one of the periodicals lying on the coffee table and started ripping it to shreds. Her scrubs didn't fare so well. A thread at the hem worked loose. She—

Dr. Wyatt cleared her throat. Meredith followed her pointed glance. With a blush, Meredith dropped her abused hemline and grabbed one of the squishy stress balls from the pile in the wicker basket by the couch on the floor.

“So, it's actually good that he's a freaking basket case with anger management issues?” Meredith said as she mashed the stress ball into more of a stress pancake, or a stress jellybean, or a stress... something not round.

“It's not good, Meredith,” Dr. Wyatt said. “But it's perfectly normal. Really, it is.”

“Acute means it will be over soon?” Meredith said.

“That's entirely dependent on him,” Dr. Wyatt said.

Meredith bit her lip. She felt a little bad, heaping his short temper into the long list of symptoms she'd spouted. He hurt. All the time. He got very little sound sleep. Whether pain or nightmares woke him up, he didn't get much more than two or three hours of rest at a time. He couldn't sleep on his stomach, which she knew bothered him, not only because of the painful stress it put on his abused back, but because he liked sleeping on his stomach. He was one of those people who started on his back, usually, but in the course of the night, moved onto his side or his stomach, often waking up that way in the morning, buried under blankets, flat, warm, and eye-level with the mattress or stuck with his nose in the crook of her neck. But that had been taken from him. He couldn't even roll without being shocked awake with a flare of agony. Even without Gary Clark in the mix, if she'd been working under the same weeks-long list of annoyances, she would be spitting and snarling over every little thing as well.

But she didn't count simple instances of exhaustion. She didn't count the snapping because he couldn't make it up the steps without breaking a sweat, or because he couldn't carry milk to the table for his breakfast and had to ask her, or because he couldn't get into the shower by himself, or because he hurt and needed to shift to his other side in the middle of the night. Well, she tried not to, though they didn't help skew her perception in a positive direction.

No. He had a dark, dangerous quality to him at times, unrelated to simple negativity. The day Amelia had arrived, he'd been a seething, coiled mess of unexpressed fury. After he'd heard the answering machine messages, he'd been ready to explode into a thousand Derek pieces. In those moments, something twisty and bad said quite clearly that something was not right with him. Not right at all.

“How do I help him?” Meredith said. “Please, I want to help him.”

“Offer him love and support,” Dr. Wyatt said.

Meredith tossed her stress ball back into the basket. “That's it? That's your freaking expert advice?” The aquarium burbled. She watched two thumb-sized, shiny cylinders swim back and forth near the floor, ignored by the larger colorful fish. Guppies? Who knew? I feel like an amnesiac guppy or
Dr. Wyatt shrugged. “He'll talk if he wants to, but don't pressure him if he doesn't. He experienced something he found terrifying, something that engendered feelings of helplessness and horror. His mind is trying to figure out how to cope with that. You have to let him heal at his own pace, but you can't let him wallow, either.”

“That's seriously it? Love and support? That's it?” Meredith said. “I worried all day to the point of possibly vomiting. He's sick and stressed and it scares the hell out of me because it scares the hell out of him. You haven't seen him. He—” I thought I was going to die. I don't want to die. “You don't think he should be in therapy or something? Dr. Hunt is in therapy for his stress stuff.”

Dr. Wyatt stared at her for a long time, and Meredith wondered, for a moment, if she'd said something wrong, but she couldn't tell for sure. If there's one thing Meredith had learned over the weeks she'd come here, it's that Dr. Wyatt had a freaking excellent poker face. Royal flush, full house, a pair of twos, or diddly squat, the face Dr. Wyatt showed was always the same. Calm. Receptive.

“I'm happy to book an appointment for Derek if he wants one,” Dr. Wyatt said, “But it's not something I'd say is absolutely necessary at this juncture, as long as he's talking to someone, unless you think he's a danger to himself or to others. Do you think he might intentionally inflict harm on himself or on somebody else?”

Cold spears slipped down her throat. She clenched the arm of the chair. “You think Derek would hurt himself? Like secret cutting or...”

“That's what I'm asking you, Meredith. I don't think anything about this.”

“But that's the sort of question you have to ask for this. That's how freaking bad this is. I knew it.” Meredith stood, and she paced. She paced until the cheerful, bright, bubbly colors made her dizzy and ready to hurl. Her vision blurred. “Derek wouldn't...”

“Meredith,” said Dr. Wyatt, her voice soft and low. “What you and Derek are going through can be something very scary at times. But it's a normal process after a traumatic event like a shooting. I'm asking these questions because I want to make sure what you're going through isn't abnormal. That's all.”

“He wouldn't hurt anyone. And he wouldn't hurt himself. Not on purpose. Never.”

“If you're so sure,” Dr. Wyatt said, “Then why are you getting upset?”

“I'm not upset,” Meredith said.

“The trough in my carpet indicates otherwise.”

Meredith halted by the fish tank. Bright blue and orange fish fluttered by in the water, and then the guppy things came out from behind the fake weeds. She took a deep breath and forced herself back onto the ugly orange couch. She petted the edge of the upholstery.

“Derek is the sweetest man I've ever met,” Meredith said. Go home, Meredith. “Usually. Usually, he's the sweetest man I've ever met. But he has a really nasty mean streak that pops out when he's stressed or hurting, and he does stupid, hateful stuff he doesn't mean like batting beer cans and engagement rings into the woods, or almost calling me a whore, or making stupid threats about never wanting to see me again. I don't want him to be like Owen. I don't. And I keep convincing myself he wouldn't be, but then I remember the way the baseball bat cracked when he beat my ring
into the woods. He called me a lemon, and he yelled. He yelled really loud, and he—"

“So, when he's under stress, you're saying Derek tends to vent in a manner that seems atypical to his usual demeanor?”

“Yes,” Meredith said, and then she fell apart. Her breaths became chaotic and painful as she sobbed, and tears blurred everything away into a mess of bright and fun colors that mocked her with cheer she couldn't feel. “Gary Clark nearly killed my husband, and we lost a baby, and Alex is in the ICU still eating almost exclusively Jell-O. Isn't that enough? Isn't it enough that Mr. Clark did all that? He can't take what makes Derek Derek. He can't do that. It isn't fair. It isn't freaking fair.”

Exhaustion made her flop flat onto the couch, panting, and she cried. “Derek needs to be Derek. I need it. He nearly died, and I need him to be him. I can deal with him needing help and being tired and in pain, but what if he—”

“All right,” said Dr. Wyatt. “All right. Let's stop and assess for a minute.”

“Assess?” Meredith growled, sitting up. She wiped tears away, but unruly tear ducts replaced them in seconds. “Assess what? What's there to assess about me not wanting my husband to strangle me?”

Dr. Wyatt leaned forward on her knees. “Meredith, I know that you've been through something horrifying, something that I wouldn't ever wish on another human being. I know how difficult and exhausting it is at home when you're trying to take care of a loved one who's been physically disabled in some way. I know that you love Cristina like a sister, and I also know that it's very tempting to use her life as a frame of reference for your own. But let's take a step back and calm down for a moment. Can you breathe for me?”

“I'm not making this about Cristina,” Meredith said. “This is about Derek being sick. He's sick, and I need to know how to fix it so this crap doesn't happen!”

Dr. Wyatt glanced at her watch. “I know. I know you want to help him. So, why don't you just relax. Five minutes. Just sit and breathe.”

“How is that helping Derek?”

“Meredith...”

Meredith nodded, though it felt more like a shiver, or a muscle spasm. “Sorry,” she said. “I'm sorry. I was fine until—”

“Meredith,” said Dr. Wyatt. She held her hand in the air, fingers splayed. “Five minutes.”

In other words, shut the hell up.

Meredith grabbed another stress ball and squeezed until her knuckles hurt. She breathed, deep and long, forcing her lungs to empty to the point of ache. Her diaphragm clenched. The seconds crept past. She kneaded the stress ball. *Don't die. Please, you don't get to die.* She closed her eyes and tried not to see him there, lying on the floor in a spreading puddle of his own blood. She'd been fine. He'd been getting better, and she'd been fine. Except the way she made herself feel better, by looking at him, wasn't going to work when he was stuck at home, injured, and she was at the hospital. She forced herself to think of something else. Something Derek, but not Derek on the ground in an expanding lake of blood.
When she came home in the early evening from running errands, the house was absent voices and movement and other sure signs of life. The steady rumble of speeding cars fill the silence, but as she put her purse down in the foyer and headed into the living room, the deep sounds of snoring split away from the general ruckus.

Both Mark and Derek had passed out, Mark on the floor in a gangly, loose heap, and Derek in his usual spot, sitting on the left side of the couch, propped up by mountains of pillows and wrapped up in heaps of blankets. Actually, he didn't look like he'd moved an inch since she'd settled him before she'd left, though he must have, unless she were to believe he'd gone six hours without using the bathroom or shifting a single muscle.

She glanced at her watch, and a spike of worry hit, but then she noticed all of Derek's pill bottles lined up in an uneven row on the coffee table next to an open bottle of Derek's scotch and two empty glasses. When she'd left, Derek's pill bottles had been upstairs on his nightstand, which meant Mark or Derek had moved them. She hoped Mark had been sober enough to bring Derek some water to take his pills with and not given Derek a glass of freaking scotch, though she doubted Derek would have drank scotch if Mark had offered it, even as out of it as he was. You couldn't drink more than a sip of that stuff without setting your esophagus on fire. Derek probably would have noticed his esophagus on fire. She stopped worrying about it as she watched him sleep, undisturbed despite Mark's endless racket.

The television flickered against Derek's face, giving his pale skin a haunting glow. Dark, fleshy circles hung under his eyes, and he looked exhausted despite his slumber, but the redness around his eyelids had faded, and his skin didn't look irritated from tears anymore. Absent a constant stream of fresh, punishing blush, he looked better. Just a little.

She tiptoed to the couch, bent over the arm, and she kissed him on the lips. When she pulled back, his eyes opened, and she stared into dark, blue-black depths. “Hey,” she said, “Did I wake you? I'm sorry.”

He made a noise. Not a yes or a no. She wasn't sure what. She grabbed the remote and turned off the television, dumping them into darkness and silence save for the brutal assault of Mark's snoring. “Do you want some water or anything?”

The comforter rustled, and Derek nodded. She went to the kitchen, careful to step around the lump that was Mark, and filled a glass of water for Derek. When she returned, she flipped on the lamp beside the sofa. He turned away, blinking.

“Sorry,” she said as she sat next to him. She held out the glass for him.

When his eyes had adjusted, he took the glass. He sipped until the water disappeared, and he set the glass down on the coffee table with a soft thud next to the other empty glasses. He leaned against her shoulder and rested, eyelids hovering half-shut. She pulled her fingers through his hair, but he just sat there, passive, not speaking.

“More water?” she said.

“No, thanks,” he replied. He sounded a bit hoarse, but better.

“Alex is improving,” she said. “I stopped by Seattle Presbyterian before I did my shopping. He's talking a lot. A whole lot. They're trying to get him back on solid foods, and Dr. Weston said he wants to move Alex out of ICU in another day or two if he keeps improving.”

“Who's Dr. Weston?”
“Alex's doctor at Seattle Presbyterian. They're pretty nice over there. Seattle Presbyterian
definitely has less of a budget than we do, but the people are qualified, and Alex is getting better in
leaps, so...”

“Hmm.”

A smile curled at her lips. “Did you win your game thing?” she said. “Mark looks pretty freaking
sloshed.”

“I have no idea,” Derek said. “I'm not sure if he passed out before or after I fell asleep, and I'm
not sure whether that preceded or succeeded us finishing a lap. We crashed a lot.” His words
croaked at the end, like he'd strained his vocal cords a bit too much. She kissed his throat. He
yawned, and he blinked. His eyes watered, and he yawned again.

“Why don't you go back to sleep?” she suggested. “I really didn't mean to wake you up.” She
gestured at Mark's body on the floor as he snored. “I figured if you could sleep through that, you
could sleep through a little kiss.”

The blankets rustled. He liberated his other arm from underneath, and he squinted at his watch in
the dim light. 8:30PM. Not late. But not early. He scrunched his nose and peered blearily toward
the foyer.

“Would you help me with the stairs?” he said.

She blinked. Not once, not a single time in the last twelve days, had she heard him ask for help that
bluntly. In fact, she didn't think he'd ever said the word help. Not ever. He might tell her he
couldn't do something, but he always forced her to infer that he needed assistance. Always.

“Are you sure?” she said. “You look pretty wiped. You could sleep down here tonight.”

“I'll go slow,” he said, his voice soft. “I just want to lie down in my own bed. Please.”

“Okay,” she said. She bit her lip, trying to decide if his request was good or bad. He sounded
beaten. Like he'd had enough of trying to fight with the inevitable for the day.

Her eyes watered before she could stop them as she remembered his steady stream of embarrassed
I-can'ts when he couldn't put on his pants. And from there, she remembered how he'd been shaking
and so tired and defeated and stripped of his pride that he'd almost fallen asleep in his wet
pajamas. She clenched her teeth and forced the imagery away from her mind's eye. No. No, he
didn't need this. He didn't need to see her upset when he clearly had enough upset for the both of
them, though Mark had, at least, seemed to keep Derek from drowning in it.

Derek stood with effort that leached the remaining color from his face. His spine ratcheted
straight as he slowly unfurled, vertebrae by vertebrae, in a way that looked almost painful. He
rested against her, collecting his breaths into something composed as he clutched her shoulders.
And then he moved.

She wrapped an arm around his waist, and true to his word, he didn't rush or push himself. He
moved like a rickety old man with arthritis. His disheveled hair, five-o'-clock shadow, and ratty
pajamas framed him with fragile effect. He made a small distressed sound as the pads of his feet
spread on the first step, but he forced himself onward.

He leaned on her instead of just letting her trail behind him for support. He took five minute
breaks at a third and two-thirds of the way up, and again when he got to the top. The dark circles
under his eyes seemed darker, and he held his body in a way that spoke of undeniable exhaustion.
The flight of steps that had taken him twelve minutes in the morning took him twenty-two long, difficult minutes that time.

He scaled the wall as he moved down the hall, resting every few steps, eyes glazed and dead as he stared at the door to their room. She tried to ignore how much his hands trembled. Fatigue? Pain? She couldn't tell.

When he finally reached the bed, he pulled back the covers on his side, and he lay down flat with his eyes shut. After seconds of preparation, he sucked in a breath, and he rolled to his right, shivering as he held the painful position for her. She jammed the pillows underneath him and had him on his back again in less than ten seconds. She'd gotten good.

“Okay?” she said as he flattened out and relaxed.

“Yeah,” he said. “More water?”

“Sure,” she said, smiling, despite the worried gnats buzzing in her gut. This wasn't normal, this beaten, given-up Derek. “I'll be right back.”

He stared at the ceiling as she brought a full glass of water to him. She helped him tilt up so he could drink without choking, and when he'd finished, she pulled the blankets over his body. His breaths evened out, but he didn't sleep. He gazed at nothing in particular, eyes blank.

He didn't ask her to stay, but she didn't care. She slipped off her flip flops, and she crawled under the covers next to him. She reached across his body and turned off the lamp at his bedside. The angle he tilted at, facing the bedroom floor instead of the center of the mattress, with a wall of pillows between them, made him impossible to spoon, but she could get close. Sort of. She draped an arm over the flat of his stomach, and she rested with her face against the nape of his neck. His warm skin radiated against her. She kissed him.

“Better?” she said.

“Hmm.”

She stroked his stomach and let her eyelids dip. “I'll get better, Derek,” she murmured. “Two weeks. I promise. You'll feel better.”

He didn't answer. He slept.

“Okay,” said Dr. Wyatt, and the clear picture of Derek lying flat in Meredith's arms evaporated. “Now,” said Dr. Wyatt, “Let's discard what you know about Dr. Hunt. All right? Dr. Hunt isn't married to you. He doesn't live with you. He's not the issue, here. Derek is.”

“Okay,” said Meredith.

“You mentioned Derek's done some mean things.”

“He has.”

“You mentioned he got pretty agitated once. That he was hitting things with a baseball bat?”

“He was.”

“Did you ever feel physically threatened when he did this?”

She didn't even have to think about it. “Of course not. He was hitting cans. And my ring.”
“But he was wielding a blunt weapon. He was angry and hitting things.”

“I wasn't scared,” Meredith said. “He yelled, but he didn't touch me. He didn't crowd me.”

“So,” Dr. Wyatt said. “You've seen him when he's actively expressed fury in a violent manner, but you felt safe.”

“Yes.”

“All right,” said Dr. Wyatt. “So, let's fast forward a bit. What has Derek done, specifically, that got you so upset that you came to my office?”

“I already told you.”

“You gave me a list of things that aren't right. But what did Derek do that upset you so badly that you came here? Something specific must have triggered this heightened concern.”

Meredith jammed her thumbs into the stress ball. She closed her eyes.

“Mark brought Derek a glass of water while he was sleeping,” she said. Tears welled up in her eyes as the sound of his terrified wail echoed in her head, over and over. For a long time, she hadn't even realized the awful noise had emanated from Derek, but she'd pieced it together as he'd retreated from the room, wet streaks marring the front of his pants. “Derek woke up. I guess he'd been having a nightmare or something. I don't know. I didn't see it happen. But he freaked out and tried to get away. Like really freaked out. He wet his pants. He was so terrified, he lost control of his bladder, and I...” Her voice cracked. “I don't...” A sob broke loose. “I want to know what to do. Please. Please, tell me what to do that will make it better.”

She wiped her face with her hands and stared at her feet.

“Hyper-vigilance and an overactive startle response are very typical of assault victims, Meredith,” Dr. Wyatt said. “But I know it's deeply disturbing to see a loved one so upset.”

“It's really not unusual?” Meredith said. She forced herself to look at Dr. Wyatt. Really look. “What about the space out sessions? Because those seem pretty freaking weird.”

“Dissociation. When he's not paying attention to the world, he's not hurt or frightened. He's created a safety zone for himself.”

“But you said dissociation was a dangerous animal! Are we talking about, like, the killer rabbit from Monty Python dangerous, or what exactly?”

“Anything is dangerous when you do it too much, Meredith,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Dissociation is a mental defense mechanism. A sort of... self-hypnosis. It allows us to separate ourselves from reality. It helps us avoid processing negative emotions before we're ready.”

“When I brought him home, for a while, it was like the house wasn't even real to him,” Meredith said.

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “A perfect example, then. Normal people experience an extremely mild, less immersive form of dissociation all the time.”

“Like what?”

“Daydreaming. Haven't you ever pictured yourself lying on a beach somewhere to save yourself
from some stress or boredom?”

“Well, yeah. I guess.”

“Derek is emotionally stressed. He's giving his mind a temporary respite. As long as he's still addressing his feelings in a gradual manner, and as long as he becomes responsive when you stimulate him, I don't see a reason to worry.”

*When you space out, where do you go?*

*Dunno. Some place with you, usually.*

Dr. Wyatt licked her lips. She pressed her hands into her thighs, and she stood. She went to her desk and pulled loose a sheet of paper from a thick, uniform pile several inches high. She crossed the room, and as she proffered the paper to Meredith, she sat down on the couch. The cushion next to Meredith sank with Dr. Wyatt's weight.

“What is this?” Meredith said. She clutched the paper with one hand, stress ball quashed in the fist of the same palm. She stared, but tears made it hard to read. Hard to turn blur into words. She scrubbed at her face.

“It's a pamphlet on assault victimization that the Seattle PD provided the hospital,” Dr. Wyatt said. “I'm surprised they didn't send Derek one in the mail.”

“Derek got a big packet, but he threw it out without opening it,” Meredith said. She closed her eyes and watched him in her mind's eye as she smashed the stress ball and reshaped it. The mail from Detective Wolff had been stuffed in their mailbox – a thick, beat up, contorted manilla envelope with a red tie and Meredith's address written with a fat black marker. Derek had seen the return address. His lip had curled like he'd sniffed something rotting, and he'd tossed the envelope into the trashcan. Meredith saw the white plastic top of the trashcan swing back and forth with the disturbance. She heard the thud as the heavy packet hit the bottom. She'd let him do it. She hadn't gone through the trash later to fish it out. She'd been an idiot.

When she opened her eyes, she saw words. And diagrams and illustrations. Her frantic desperation to find answers made her skim past the section she already knew. What is assault? She freaking knew that. She stopped at the survivor section.

Her eyes darted back and forth. Victims may feel irrational guilt over being attacked. *I'm sorry.* Humiliation. *I couldn't get away.* Shock. *A man shot me, Mere, and I...* They may ask why this happened to to them. *Why?* Or they may express anger over being victimized. Victims may be fearful of a repeat incident, however unlikely. *I don't want to die.* Survivors often experience nightmares and flashbacks. They may be easier to startle. *I know what it is.* They may appear to be or feel like they're living in a daze, and they may have trouble concentrating. *When can I go home?*

“He...” she said, but her words died as she read to the last paragraph and got stuck like a squirming bug in a web on the very last sentence. Survivors of aggravated assault are often disturbed by new feelings of vulnerability and a loss of control. *I was going to die. I'm still alive because the fucking universe thought it would be funny.* “Oh, god,” she whispered, her voice wrecked in her throat. “This is...”

*I need it to stop.*

“Familiar?” Dr. Wyatt said.

Meredith's hands shook, and the paper fluttered. “Yes. Yes, it is.”
“Okay,” said Dr. Wyatt. “So, now, you have an appropriate frame of reference to make sense of what you've been seeing. I'll ask again. Do you think he might intentionally inflict harm on himself or on somebody else?”

Meredith swallowed. “No. No, he wouldn't. He wouldn't hurt anybody,” she said. And she realized, this time, that she meant it. He'd been nothing but gentle with her. He'd never once pushed her away, even when he'd tensed up in her arms, and she'd clearly startled him. When Mark had kept Derek captive in his arms, Derek had been violent, then, but as soon as he'd been released, all he'd done was get away. He just wanted to get away. He didn't want to fight. Come to think of it, he'd done the same thing when he'd been batting beer cans. He'd slammed the trailer door on her. Retreated. Told her to leave.

She didn't know what had happened in the past with Mark that made him okay to hit, but she suspected, upon thinking on it, that angry pugilism had become ingrained behavior through years and years of repetition. They'd grown up together, and somewhere in that long path, they'd established that fighting and violence was how they worked out their differences. It made a twisted sort of sense.

Relief made her shake, even as she sniffled again with guilt. He'd been living with this. All of this. She'd thought he'd been getting worse, but he hadn't. Not really. She'd just been catching different pieces of it, and the worst piece just happened to be the incident most recent in her memory. This was like an iceberg or whatever. She saw the tip. She saw different jags of it, depending what angle she looked at him from. The rest of the badness loitered in his head, under the water, huge and cold and dark, dangerous enough to sink ships, but invisible to the naked eye.

“He's scared,” she said. “He's just scared. And the whole reason he's flipping out is because he doesn't want to die. He wouldn't hurt himself.”

“He's told you this?”

“That he doesn't want to die? Word for word, emphatically yes.”

“So, he's talking to you, then,” Dr. Wyatt said.

“A little.” Meredith shrugged. “Derek doesn't really like to talk about his feelings or whatever.”

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “That's very typical. American culture has sort of dictated that men are supposed to be strong, and that's a hard mentality to shake when there's such overwhelming societal pressure to adhere.” She stood and returned to her chair, and the clinical distance between them reverted into something a mile wide. “The point is, though,” Dr. Wyatt said, “That he's chosen you as his confidant for the times he does talk, and that he is talking when he really needs to. Yes?”

“I guess so.”

“You guess?”

“Yes,” Meredith said. “Yes, I mean. He might be talking to Mark, too... I don't know for sure. But he talks. To me. When he can figure out the words, he talks.”

“All right,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Has he spoken to you about how he felt when he was shot?”

“Not much, but some.”

Dr. Wyatt leaned forward, and she clenched her fists together. “It's vital that he has support, Meredith. I can't stress that enough. But as long as he's talking with somebody he's comfortable
with, I don't think there's any urgent need for him to be in therapy. Not yet, anyway.”

“So, that's really it?” Meredith said. “Just talk if he wants to talk, and leave him alone if he
doesn't?”

“Spend time with him,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Just being in the same room can help, even if you're not
really doing anything together. Don't let him isolate himself, but don't smother him, either. Let him
make decisions wherever feasible. Help emphasize to him what he can control, rather than what he
can't.”

All the websites and home care packets said no more than a single trip up and down the steps per
day, but she didn't protest whenever he went up and down twice or three times or however many
times he wanted, as long as he waited for her to be there so he wouldn't fall. She didn't make him
stop when he wanted to be productive despite her misgivings, despite how much she thought he
should be resting. He'd cleaned the house a bit. He couldn't push or pull a vacuum cleaner, but he
hadn't even tried. He'd just dusted with a rag and a spritzer, and he'd picked up clutter. He'd folded
laundry. He'd made dinner once, too, and he'd made coffee in the mornings. He'd even spent some
time sorting things in his office, and she'd left him alone. She'd made a varsity sport out of forcing
herself not to mother hen him death. She let him choose all the time.

“But I'm already doing all that,” Meredith said. “I think. Unless I think he's going to kill himself
through sheer stupidity.”

“Then you're doing fine.”

“You don't need to prescribe anything? Or...”

“I could, and I do in some cases,” Dr. Wyatt said. “But I prefer not to use chemicals as a first
method of attack. Society today is all about now, now, now, and pills are fast and easy. But
medication won't address any of the underlying issues that caused the problem in the first place
unless it's a genuine disease. And, as much as I'd like to make a political commentary on violence
in the world today, the mental refuse that results from a failed murder attempt is not a disease. It's
an open wound.”

“I've been so afraid for him,” Meredith said. Her eyes ached. “I thought...”

“PTSD is still a danger, eventually, if he doesn't learn to process his experience in a healthy way,”
Dr. Wyatt said. “And some of the symptoms you mentioned to start with sound a little more like
depression than PTSD. You should keep an eye on those.”

“Like what?”

“Not eating. Crying a lot. How is he, physically?”

*I'm tired. All the time.*

“He's better, but he's still in pain, and he can't do a lot of things,” Meredith said. “He sleeps for a
lot of the day. You do give stuff for depression, right? Anti-depressants? Should he be on those?”

“It's only been two weeks since his injury,” said Dr. Wyatt. “He might start feeling better on his
own, once he's healed more physically. Give him some time. Let's not treat a few cracks in the
foundation with a wrecking ball just yet.”

“How much time?”
“There's no certain answer to that.”

“That's not very freaking helpful,” Meredith said.

“You're living with him,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Use your best judgment. If his health steadily improves, but his state-of-mind doesn't, that might be an indication that he needs more help than you can reasonably provide.”

“But what if I'm wrong?”

“Then you're wrong, and we'll work from there,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Psychiatry and counseling aren't exact sciences.”

“I just want him to be okay,” Meredith said. “I'd do anything or trade anything. And now you've told me I'm just supposed to sit there and be supportive and hope he heals or whatever.”

Dr. Wyatt stared at her for a long moment that made Meredith's face heat. The woman's eyes scrunched as she thought about... something. She stood, and she went to her desk. She pulled out a thick leather-bound day planner, a steno pad, and a fat, shiny pen from the top drawer. The drawer made a soft scraping sound as Dr. Wyatt pushed it shut. “I want you to schedule appointments with me once a week every week for the next few months,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Do Thursdays still work for you? I have an empty block in the afternoons.”


Dr. Wyatt returned to her chair with the day planner clasped under her elbow. She clicked the pen open as she sat down. Meredith frowned. The pen and the steno pad meant she was being therapied. She hadn't come here to get therapied. She'd come here to get help for Derek.

“Are you familiar with a condition known as compassion fatigue?” Dr. Wyatt said.

“No.”

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “It's exhausting, watching a loved one suffer. Isn't it?”

“Wait,” Meredith said. “Wait just a freaking minute.” She clenched her knees, but that hurt. It hurt, so she grabbed the stress ball she'd dropped on the couch by her hip. “So, Derek gets acute stress whatever with a heaping side of post-operative depression, and he can stay home, but I frown because my husband is hurt, and you want me in therapy again? How does that even work?”

Dr. Wyatt pursed her lips and took a breath. “Derek needs to feel safe and comfortable talking to you. How does it make you feel when he tells you things about his experience?”

“I don't know.” Meredith shrugged. “Happy? That he talks?”

Dr. Wyatt leaned forward. “Think about it, Meredith. He experienced an extreme reaction to being woken up unexpectedly. He was frightened. His fight-or-flight response took over his body, and he urinated on himself. Surgeons tend to be very control-oriented people, and he lost control of something very basic. I imagine this caused him severe emotional distress.” Meredith nodded. “Did he talk to you afterward?” Meredith nodded again. “And how did that make you feel?”

When she handed him the clean pajama pants, he lost it. The low, deep, monotone moan of sheer anguish made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. He blinked, his mouth open in a grimace of suffering. In the pale blue glow of the nightlight, she saw the shimmer of tears against his skin. And then the discordant, endless, miserable hum vibrating from his chest broke into
painful, sucking sobs that wrenched his entire body.

She froze as her stomach dropped out from her body and her muscles shivered with stress. She'd never seen this. She didn't know what... She... Derek didn't. He just didn't.

Without thinking, she collapsed next to him, squeezing into the tiny space between him and the toilet seat. The cold porcelain dug into her thigh, but she didn't care. She wrapped her arms around him, and she whispered in his ear. “It's okay,” she said, even though she knew it wasn't. In the crushing weight of uncertainty and uncharted territory, those two words were the only things she could think of to say, though all they did was make that stupid Fleetwood Mac song play over and over in her head, because she was suddenly its poster child. Telling lies, telling sweet little lies. This? This was not okay.

“I thought I was going to die,” he said.

“I know.”

“I don't want to die.”

She ran her palm against his back and squeezed him as tightly as she dared. “I know,” she said.

In that moment, she hated Gary Clark, and she didn't even try to stop herself. A deep black hole of festering rage clenched in her stomach and sucked everything into it. Gary Clark had done this. Her body shook. Derek curled against her, and he sobbed. He sobbed, unrestrained, stuck in the pit of abject misery Gary Clark had dug for him. And, worse, every time Derek sobbed, his muscles tensed. His grip on her shirt squeezed harder, and his body radiated physical agony as well. Every sob shot him through with a bullet all over again. Gary Clark had returned from the grave, and she hated him to the point of seeing red, sparkly things in the dark of her vision. She knew she would pay any price, up to and beyond her own life, to fix things for Derek.

She also knew of no cashier who would accept her spiritual credit card.

“Heartsick,” Meredith said as she clutched the stress ball. “Angry that somebody did this to him. To us.” She sniffed. “Helpless, because I can't fix it no matter how much I want to.”

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “So, you feel sad, angry, and helpless,” she said. “That sounds familiar to me.”

Meredith wiped her face. “It does?”

“Maybe a little like Derek?” Dr. Wyatt said, her voice soft. She scribbled notes on her steno pad.

Meredith looked at her knees. She smashed the stress ball, but it didn't seem to be doing much good anymore. Her lungs shivered with stress, and she really, really needed to hit something. Anything. “Well, I guess. Yeah.”

The scribbling continued. “So, Derek had this horrible experience, and he's talking to you about it. Listening makes you feel sad, angry, and helpless. What are you going to do when you get overwhelmed?”

“Well, I...” Meredith deflated. “I mean I hadn't... I mean.”

“You can't talk to Derek, because then you'll feed all his negativity right back to him,” Dr. Wyatt said. “And he's not in a mental position to be able to deal with it appropriately.”

“Maybe I could talk to Cristina,” Meredith said. Maybe she could. Maybe, without getting specific,
like Cristina had said. Cristina could be supportive, and Meredith wouldn't have to confess anything private. Cristina could be discreet... Meredith dropped the stress ball back in the basket and sighed. Momentary insanity. She could talk to Cristina. About Derek. Because that would go so freaking well. Right.

“You don't sound very sure,” said Dr. Wyatt.

Meredith shrugged. “It's just... I mean...”

“Yes?”

*I'm a little disturbed that Cristina found out my sperm worked before I did.*

“I don't think he'd ever forgive me if he found out I was talking to her about him. Not about this. He's pretty good-humored about it, usually, like with girl stuff. Sex talk. Standard gripes when he does some stupid man thing. You know. But this... this is his private thing or whatever. And he's trusting me with it.”

*I don't want to think about what I can and can't say, and who I can and can't say it to.*

“So, you feel that talking to Cristina about Derek's emotional problems would create an unduly antagonistic environment for him?” Dr. Wyatt said.

“They tolerate each other,” Meredith said. “For me. And I've already broken his confidence once. I can't do it again. I just can't.”

“Who else can you talk to then?” Dr. Wyatt said.

“Alex? But...”

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “Alex was also hurt.”

“Lexie?”

“Don't ask me, Meredith. What do you think?”

“I don't know,” Meredith said. “Okay? I don't freaking know. My list of available friends and family is woefully short because Izzie is gone, George went and died, and Alex and Derek both got shot.”

“This is why I want you to schedule appointments,” Dr. Wyatt said. “If you let all that sadness, anger, and hopelessness fester, it'll get to the point where Derek will want to talk to you, and you'll want to run the other way. He'll pick up on that, whether you say anything or not. He'll stop talking. And then you'll both land in my office, because he really will develop PTSD, and you'll want marriage counseling to save you from hating his guts.”

A lump formed in Meredith's throat. She swallowed, and she shook. “Oh,” she said.

Dr. Wyatt stood, and she shifted back to the couch. She sat down next to Meredith. Close. And she touched Meredith's shoulder. She dropped her steno pad on the table, and Meredith looked at the scribbles. She couldn't read the messy writing. But she saw a picture with arrows between her name and Derek's, and it was labeled negative feedback or something like that.

“Meredith,” Dr. Wyatt said, her voice a low, soothing murmur. “What Derek is going through is very common. It is. But it doesn't mean the situation is any less precarious. You be there for him.
I'll be there for you. We'll make this work. You don't have to do this by yourself.”

Meredith wiped her face with her hands. Dr. Wyatt handed her a tissue from the box on the coffee table. The room hung in silence for a long march of moments. “I can still talk with him about my problems, right?” Meredith said. Her voice sounded far away. “I mean I have already. I didn’t make it worse, did I? Please, don’t tell me I made it worse.”

“As long as they’re your problems, and you're not just regurgitating his,” Dr. Wyatt assured her. “If he feels like he's helping you, that's probably good for him because it gives him a sense of control. If he feels like he's overburdening you, though, that's probably not so good, because it creates a sense of helplessness.”

“I hate this,” Meredith said. She blew her nose, and then she twisted the tissue into a tight screw-tie of snot and plush paper. “And I hate Gary Clark. I hate him.”

Dr. Wyatt rubbed her back. “That's normal.”

“Well, normal freaking sucks!” Meredith said.

“I know.”

“How do you deal with the compassion fatigue thing?” Meredith said. “You listen to people whine all day.”

“I take a three month sabbatical every three years,” Dr. Wyatt said. “I always take a full week off at Christmas, in July, and over Thanksgiving. And I have a very understanding husband who lets me vent.”

“Well, how does he deal with it?” Meredith said.

“Friends, I guess.”

“And them?”

“I don't know.”

“No wonder the world sucks,” Meredith grumbled.

“That's about the gist of it, sometimes,” Dr. Wyatt replied.

Meredith stood. She swallowed. “Thursday afternoons are fine,” she said. When she reached the door, she dropped her wrinkled tissue into the small trashcan by the light switch. She turned. “Thank you,” she said.

Dr. Wyatt smiled. “You'll get through this. And so will he. Just remember that this is all normal so far, and that healing takes time.”

Meredith nodded. “Time,” she echoed, but it didn't stop her from wanting Derek to feel better now. He deserved to feel better now. She sighed as she closed the door behind her and stared at the long, white, immaculate halls.

“Time sucks,” she said to nobody in particular.
Chapter 9

When Meredith walked up to the house, the sky had darkened a little from its afternoon azure brilliance into early evening hues. She leaned back her head, inhaling the temperate breeze. The sun had been out all day, only half-obsured by a sky pocked with dark, heavy clouds that spoke of rain. Not a single drop of rain had fallen. No drizzle mist had hovered in the air. Sometime soon, the rain would come. It always did in Seattle. But not today.

It figured that would be the day she had to return to work instead of spending it with Derek.

The dim foyer greeted her with silence. She didn't call out as she put her purse down by the door. A line of white illumination framed the underside of the kitchen door.

No lights glowed in the dreary living room. The couch had been torn apart. The cushions against the back of the sofa had been avulsed and lay strewn on the floor. Derek lay along the length of the couch, pillows heaped up under his torso and against one side. She could see the curly mop of his dark hair, piles of fluffy blankets, and the frills of her favorite pillowcases sticking out, but that was it. An empty glass sat on the coffee table. No plates or food. She frowned, wondering why he hadn't gone upstairs if he'd wanted to lie down. Surely, Mark would have helped him.

*You'll get through this. And so will he.*

Something twinged in her heart, and an unseen force pulled her toward the room. She thought about sitting down and watching him for a while. At the last second before the living room, she veered. He slept. He lay still, breaths inaudible. The sound of the door unlocking hadn't woken him up. He clearly needed the sleep, and she didn't want to chance rousing him like she'd done the day before with that stupid kiss.

She went into the kitchen. Mark sat at the dinette table, a sprawl of papers and notes fanned out in a semi-circle around him. He wore a beat up pair of jeans, fluffy white socks, and an old, scruffy, black t-shirt. He scribbled something against a yellow pad, and then flipped the page. Brightly colored MRI scans shimmered under the glare of the overhead light.

“Hey,” she said.

Mark looked up from his work. “Grey. How was your first day back?”

“Fine,” she said. “How is everything?”

Mark glanced behind him, in the direction of the living room and Derek, as though he could see through walls. “He's slept almost all day. Every once in a while, he asks for water.” He glanced at his watch. “I made sure he took his pills at 8, 12, and 4, just like you said.”

She flopped down into the seat across from Mark. He stacked his notes and pushed them to the side. She sighed. “He didn't take a walk or anything?” she said.

“Nothing,” Mark said. His eyes creased with concern. “I think yesterday really fucked him up.”

“He needs to start walking, soon,” Meredith said. “Real walks. Not laps in the house...” Her voice trailed away when she thought more about it.

She closed her eyes and tried to remember, tried to picture him in her mind's eye. He spent anywhere from half to three-quarters or more of his day sitting around, either sleeping or
vegetating, and he'd never gone outside to sit on the porch swing. All his physical activities had been limited to things he could do indoors. Stairs. Laps. Small chores. He'd never even looked out the window wistfully that she'd seen.

Wrong. It all seemed wrong. Derek loved being outside. He loved nature and woodsy things and sitting in the fresh air. He loved wide open space. He loved rain and mud almost as much as sunshine. The Seattle weather had never once been a source of melancholy for him, not like with a lot of the new transplants from other areas of the United States that weren't so freaking rain-happy. But now that she thought about it, really thought about it, he hadn't been outside, excluding the car trip home, since before he'd been shot. He'd spent nine mornings in the hospital and another four at home, and he'd never said a word about being cooped up.

“I don't think he's been outside, Mark. At all.”

“I noticed that, too,” Mark said. “I thought about suggesting it today sometime, but...” He shrugged helplessly.

“Yeah, I know,” Meredith said. “Thank you. For staying with him.”

Mark gave her a small smile. “Sure,” he said. The chair squawked as he pushed it back. “Have you eaten yet?”

“No.”

He raised his eyebrow. “Hungry?”

“Completely famished, actually,” Meredith said. “I haven't eaten since... I haven't... Um. I think I had breakfast.”

“Didn't you leave when it was still dark out?”

“Well, fine,” she said. “I had coffee. Coffee is breakfast sometimes.”

Mark shook his head and went to the refrigerator. The appliance hummed as he opened it. She twisted around, trying to see. He pulled an ugly green Tupperware bowl off the top shelf and removed plastic wrap covered with thick condensation. Water droplets fell to the floor as he carried the bowl to the kitchen and tossed the plastic wrap in the trash.

“Listen,” he said as he put down two plates and scooped... something reddish and goop-y. His shoulders shifted, but his wide body blocked her view. “I know that you're in a bad spot. You don't have any sick leave left. You used up all your un-categorized leave already—”

“I saved one day for emergencies,” she said.

“Right,” he said. He put the first plate in the microwave. The machine beeped as he tapped the cook time onto the key pad. She finally got a full glance at the cold plate. Spaghetti. Her stomach growled. Mark must have made it sometime that day, because she couldn't recall seeing any pasta in the fridge yesterday when she'd rummaged for dinner prospects. “But my point is,” Mark continued, “You don't really have leave, and you can't afford to take off anyway, or it'll set you back even further.”

The microwave hummed, and the pasta inside popped as heat zapped it into submission. “I've taken off a lot of time,” she said. Bombs, appendicitis, a liver transplant, and dying once had not been good to her. Meredith remained in a constant state of amazement that nobody had held her back a year on her pay scale. Yet.
“Right,” he said, nodding. “And Derek told me about the crappy schedule you’re trying to shoulder.”

“It can’t be helped,” Meredith said. “He needs somebody here in the evenings and stuff. I can’t just leave him alone for thirty-six hour shifts when he can’t get into the shower or go up steps or pick up anything heavy by himself. And I—”

“How about you go back to your regular schedule, so you can have days off during the week, and I'll take my un-categorized leave now, and stay home with him?” Mark said. “I haven't used any of mine yet. I've been helping Seattle Presbyterian with its overflow.”

“Mark,” she began, but the microwave dinged and cut her off.

He pulled a fork from the drawer for her and placed the steaming plate in front of her. “Parmesan?” he said.

She nodded, staring down at the reheated pasta. The noodles looked a little desiccated, but he'd made food. And she needed food. He put down the cheese container next to her and returned to put his plate in the microwave next. He turned toward her as the microwave hummed. She dumped a heaping pile of grated cheese on her plate and ensnared a clot of noodles with her fork.

“I have a lot of leave banked, too,” Mark continued as she stuffed herself. “I can stay longer if it's needed. I don't mind. I'll clear out on your days off and when Lexie's here, if she wants.”

“But—” she muttered around a mouthful of spaghetti. The sauce was some sort of mushroom concoction. She couldn't taste any meat. Mark had probably made it with Derek's healthy sensibilities in mind. But after hours and hours of not eating, she'd take anything. A small, pleased moan displaced her voice, and she chewed and chewed and then shoveled another bite.

“Look,” Mark continued, “I know I'm probably not your first choice for mature and responsible, but he needs someone here, Meredith.” The microwave dinged, and he pulled out his plate. He sat across from her. “He shouldn't be alone, whether he needs help with anything or not. I've never seen him like this. Not even after Mr. Shepherd died.”

*The men who shot my dad got away.*

Her stomach churned, and she put her fork down. “I talked with Dr. Wyatt today,” she said, and she looked at her lap.

Mark took a bite of spaghetti. “The shrink?”

“Yeah.”

“About Derek?”

“Yeah.”

He swallowed. With no precursor, no lead up, nothing, he stared at her, took a slow, deep breath, and said, “How bad is it?”

She bit her lip when she realized Mark had been as worried, if not more so, than she had been.

“She said he's got acute stress whatever,” Meredith said. “It's like the precursor to post-traumatic stress disorder, but it won't necessarily develop that far. We're supposed to let him talk if he wants, but not push him if he doesn't. Don't let him isolate himself or wallow. Spend time in the same
room even if we're not doing anything with him. Um...” What else? “Offer love and support. Encourage him to make choices. And...” She bit her lip, trying to remember it all, but it got tangled in her head, somewhere between the thought, Derek is hurting and sick, and her mouth. Dr. Wyatt had said so many things. Meredith's lip quivered, and she wiped at her face. “Let me just get the packet that explains it all,” she said. Her voice cracked and died.

She pushed away from the table and retreated to the foyer before Mark could say anything. She glanced into the living room. Derek hadn't moved. He remained a quiet lump under heaps of blankets. This far away, she couldn't hear him breathe, and with that many things resting on top of him, she couldn't see his chest rise and fall either. The quiet stillness unsettled her, and a small voice in her head whispered dead. Dead. He's dead. The inexplicable force pulled at her again, but she denied it. He needed rest. She refused to wake him up, accidentally or not, for her own peace of mind. She wasn't clingy. She wasn't five. It wasn't like somebody had taken her special bear away. She could function. She could.

Her fists clenched. She forced herself back to her objective, and she retrieved the pamphlet from her battered purse. Assault Victimization, the paper said in big bold letters, and there was a tacky picture of a gun, a knife that looked more like a giant sword than anything else, and a baseball bat on the front. The words inside were what mattered, though. The words that spoke regretfully of Derek with every syllable. Her thumb brushed the soft paper. She stood, unmoving, staring. The paper crinkled as her fist squeezed.

Victims may be fearful of a repeat incident, however unlikely.

That's what the pamphlet said, somewhere in the spill of warnings about all the other awful feelings that might surface as the result of nearly being killed. She bit her lip and opened the pamphlet. She scanned the page, and she found that sentence, stuck in the middle of the rest. The words blurred. Before, she'd lost that warning under the riptide force of the rest of all the badness. It'd seemed innocuous compared to the other scary things. Sort of a duh.

But Derek didn't go outside.

Her fingers tightened, and her breaths shortened into stabbing pants of grief. He locked doors. Loud things and strangers scared him. He didn't go outside. Puzzle pieces snapped into place. She sniffed. The wet sound of fluid in her nose crackled in the silence. She forced herself to plod back into the kitchen where Mark sat, waiting for her. He'd finished his spaghetti.

“Here,” she said, her voice rough and weary. She foisted the paper at him, hands shaking.

She watched Mark's eyes zip back and forth as he read. After a few minutes, he came to a stop. He hunkered low in his chair, and a dark, foreboding hint of violence crossed his face. He jammed his fist against the table in a repeated, frustrated venting of energy. The wood rumbled softly. “Fuck,” he said. “I wish...” he began, but his voice trailed away.

“Somebody tried to murder him, Mark,” she said. She collapsed back into her seat and sighed. Murder. The word made it sound so much more... More. Don't let him isolate himself. “You should stay,” she said. “It would be good for you to stay.”

Mark put the pamphlet down. “Thank you,” he said.

She finished her spaghetti in silence, throat raw. Mark made no mention of her sniffing. She never used to cry so much. Now, her tear ducts felt like infinite buckets of rebelliousness. Like, once she'd gotten past internalizing everything bad that happened to her, now she couldn't stop letting it all explode out of her face.
“This sucks,” she said as she put her fork down. She sighed. “This really, really sucks. We were supposed to be okay, now. He's alive. I thought that was all I wanted. It is all I wanted. Just... I don't know.”

“Yeah,” said Mark.

She stood and took her plate to the sink to wash it off. The sound of rushing water filled the empty space in the air. She took a glass and filled it. It almost slipped from her wet hands when the kitchen door swung on its hinges, and Derek lumbered into the room.

“Hey, man,” said Mark. “There's some spaghetti in the Tupperware thing on the counter if you want some. Your favorite sauce and whole wheat noodles.”

Derek looked awful. Dark, fleshy circles hugged his eyes. He'd lost weight, maybe fifteen pounds or so since he'd been shot, evident by the angular, gaunt appearance of his face, and the way his t-shirt hung loosely against his torso. The hair on his head stuck up every which way. Thick stubble carved a dark swath against his too-pale face. His glazed stare didn't really see much. He didn't say a word in response to Mark. He headed for the sink where she stood, pale lips parted like a man staring at an oasis in a drought. She held out the glass she'd filled for herself. He took it, grunted some sort of word at her, maybe thanks, maybe hi, maybe just urgh. He eyed the bowl of leftover spaghetti on the counter, but didn't move to serve himself any. He went to the table and sat down diagonally from Mark, and then he nursed his water like it was a glass of scotch or something.

She dished him a plate and heated the spaghetti. She didn't care if he wanted it or not, didn't care whether he'd chosen not to eat, or instead just existed on a distant plane so far removed from earth that he'd seen the food, but hadn't really seen it. She would try. She would try to get him to consume something. She watched as he blinked, disheveled and half-awake, over the table. She filled a new glass of water for herself and sipped, waiting for the microwave to finish.

“You alive?” Mark said. He laughed, but the awkward attempt at levity fell flat in the silence.

“Define alive,” Derek said.

“I'd say if you need a definition, you're probably alive enough to count,” Mark said.

“Hmm.”

The microwave beeped, and Meredith brought the plate and a fork to Derek. “You should really at least try to eat something,” she said as she set the plate down and pushed his water glass aside. “Please.”

She sat down next to Mark, across from Derek, and bit her lip. She didn't want to sound mother henish. She didn't. She also didn't want Derek to starve himself to death while she smiled and tried to ignore the fact that he wasn't eating enough.

At first, when she'd brought him home, she'd thought when he hadn't finished the sub she'd ordered, it'd been a fluke born out of the fact that he'd been near collapse with exhaustion. But then she hadn't seen him finish anything the rest of the weekend, and that was assuming he ate something at all. He skipped meals, sometimes even breakfast, which felt weird, considering what a poster child he was for breakfast being the most important meal of the day.

Derek looked at the plate. He didn't protest. He didn't say he wasn't hungry. He took two tiny bites and chewed, the expression on his face dead of any interest or enjoyment. Like she'd reminded him to comb his hair or something instead of keep himself fed.
“How was work?” he said.

“Um,” she said. Didn't do anything productive. Looked up articles about PTSD. Had a rather long chat with a shrink about you. Said chat disturbed me so much I lost track of the rest of the day. Figured out you developed agoraphobia or whatever in the space of days because Gary Clark decided to murder you instead of deal with his freaking grief appropriately. “Fine.”

He took a third bite. “Fine?” he said.

“Being back was weird,” she amended. Damn that word. Fine. She couldn't use it anymore. “The place is just dead. And quiet. No elective surgeries, just emergencies. And since people aren't coming to our ER voluntarily, we're limited to what the paramedics bring in, which isn't all that much, well, not much surgical. Mostly jerks who called 911 for stubbed toes and runny noses or whatever.”

“Oh,” he said. “Doesn't surprise me.”

At least she didn't feel particularly bad about wasting her day on non-work things. There hadn't been any real work to do. Her fingers clenched as she watched him take a fourth bite. He seemed to be perking up a little. Maybe he'd just been groggy from sleep. Or maybe she was just hopeful.

He glanced at Mark, and his gaze dropped to the pamphlet on the table. She held her breath. Derek didn't ask about it, didn't even seem to notice the stupid pictures of weapons on the front. For the first time, she wanted to cheer at how catastrophically the painkillers had screwed up his detail orientation. Though, she wondered, if maybe it would be good for him to read it. To help him make sense of himself, so he'd know he wasn't alone. That other people went through this often enough that law enforcement had tacky but informative pamphlets.

Fifth bite. He'd cleared a fourth of the plate. But his spree ended, then. He put his fork down and gulped the remains from his glass of water. When he finished, he stared at her. His lip curved into a small, hesitant smile. “Hi, by the way,” he said, and she melted.

“Hi,” she said. She grinned back. “More alive, now?”

“Yeah. You're home early.”

“I left early,” she said. “Twelve hour shift today. I wanted to get home at a reasonable time.”

He'd been in the chair in their room when she'd left. Her shrill alarm had jarred her from a sound sleep so early that the morning had still seemed like night. The new chair had worked well to save him from midnight jaunts, it seemed, though, it had been odd to wake up with him to the left of her, sitting, instead of to the right, lying down, or gone. At first, in her not-sentient-yet confusion, she'd seen the blurry outline his knee in the corner of her eye and jumped. Nearly fallen off the bed. He'd blinked at her, all bleary and groggy, and then he'd drifted off while she'd forced herself into the shower.

“I know you left early,” Derek said. “I was sad.”

“Sad?”

He gestured at Mark. “Being helped into the shower is much more fun when the help is sexy.”

“Hey, I'm sexy,” Mark said. “I can't help it that you're blind to my hotness.”

“I'm stoned, not drunk. I'm perfectly capable of discerning ugly.”
“That hurts, man,” said Mark. He patted his chest over his heart. “I’m hurt.”

Derek snorted. A wince creased his features, but the expression of pain faded in seconds. “I think I win in the hurt department. Don’t even try me there.”

“Fine,” Mark said. “But you blow at racing cars.”

“Racing fake cars,” said Derek.

“Whatever. You still suck.”

“I’m surprised you can even remember who won.”

“I did,” said Mark. “That’s my story, and your memory is too shitty to say otherwise.”

“So,” Derek said. “What you’re saying is that I won.”

“Nobody is saying that,” said Mark. “Least of all me.”

Derek smirked and didn't reply. The little energy he'd managed to conjure bled out of him over the course of silent minutes. He slumped forward and put his face in his hands, yawning. A small sliver of worry jabbed her heart. He'd been awake for thirty minutes. He'd slept all day. Even taking his surgery into account, he shouldn't be that exhausted after doing such a great impression of a slug all day.

“Mark and I talked a little,” Meredith said. She swallowed. Derek would take this badly. She knew it. But... “I'm going to go back to my regular schedule, and Mark's going to stay here for a week or two.” Let him make decisions wherever feasible. “Is that okay with you?”

Derek raised his head. His dark, hopeless eyes stared at her. In the wan daylight, his irises seemed almost black. “Okay,” he said.

“Really?” The word popped out before she could stop it, and she resisted the urge to cover her mouth with her hands.

“You want me to argue?” Derek said. “What good would it do?”

Silence stretched between them. Derek pushed back his chair and eased into a crooked standing position. “Are you going back to sleep already?” Meredith said.

He clenched the back of his chair, and his knuckles turned sickly white. “I'm tired,” he snapped.

Mark rumbled as he cleared his throat, stood, and gathered up all his papers and notes. “I'm going to go home and start packing some things so you two can talk, and then I'll head into Grace for my shift,” he said. “I'll be back in the morning before you leave for work, Grey.”

Derek watched him go, silent, brooding. When the front door slammed shut, Derek sighed.

“I really think he should stay,” Meredith said, “But if you're categorically against it, say something. You have a say, Derek. Your opinion matters. I don't want you to feel like it doesn't.”

He stared at his hands. “Maybe I can't get into the tub or carry things or drive or...” His voice fell away, and he swallowed. He drew in a wet breath. “I can take care of myself for a few hours. I can be left alone. I'm not some delinquent puppy.”

“I know,” she said. “Getting Mark to stay with you all day has nothing to do with that. If it were
that, he could stop by over lunch and be done in an hour, and I would stay on my twelve hour days so you'd have somebody here every night.”

He looked up. His desolate stare made her chest tighten. “Then why?” he said.

“Because I love you, and I don't want you to be alone right now,” she said. “That's all.”

She watched him, watched the edges of his expression soften. “Oh,” he said. He swallowed, and she kept watching as he tried to compose himself again. He failed. His eyes rimmed with red, and he looked away.

She leaned across the table, face resting on her palms. “Derek, do you want to be alone?”

That question seemed to catch him off guard. He blinked. She bit her lip. He wasn't crying, but he was close, and all she really wanted was to close the space between them and wrap herself around him. “No,” he said. He ran his fingers along the edge of the table, following the wood grain. “I don't know. I want...” His voice trailed away, and he closed his eyes. “I don't know.”

She frowned. “What were you going to say?”

“If I told you the entire list of what I want, I'd just be whining, and I...” His fingers clenched. He scraped at his face with his hands, sniffed, and his skin reddened. He pushed away from the table, and he took his plate to the sink, where he scrubbed the uneaten spaghetti into the garbage disposal with an old, dirty sponge as he blinked furiously against tears he didn't seem to want. He flipped the switch, and the disposal growled to life. He sponged off the remains of the spaghetti sauce with all the violence he could manage, and then he loaded all the plates into the dishwasher. The dishes clanked.

When he finished, he stood at the sink, staring. She went to him and wrapped her arms around his waist from behind. “Top of the list,” she whispered. “What do you want?”

“I can't even narrow that down,” he said darkly.

She cupped her hands over his trapezius muscles and squeezed, obliterating tense coils of stress. He leaned into it. She rose to her tiptoes, and she kissed the side of his neck as she punched fingers deep into the knots in his back. She'd looked up a list of stretching exercises to help him, but most of them assumed the person doing the stretching had full use of his chest muscles and arms for support, and Derek didn't. There had been a couple, though, that had looked promising. One he could do by himself. Two he would need help with.

She kissed him, and then she went back to the dinette table. She pulled out his chair for him well away from the table. “Sit,” she said. “I want to try something. It might make you feel better.”

He didn't ask her why or what. He sat.

“Spread your legs,” she said.

A small chuff of air fell from his lips. “Are we doing something naughty?”

“You wish,” she said. “Seriously, just spread your legs.”

He did as she asked, a curious look on his face. “Okay,” she said. “Now drop your arms between your knees. Don't hold onto anything, just let your arms hang.” He did. She touched his stomach with one hand and the small of his back with the other. Warmth soaked her palms through his shirt. He inhaled. His skin twitched at her light touch. “Curl over my hand, don't bend at the waist, and
He didn't have much flexibility anymore. He didn't make it very far. His breaths sped up as he pushed her hand forward with his stomach. His abs tightened. She rubbed his back. She felt him tremble under her palm. “Does it hurt?” she said.

“No,” he said. “No, it's...” A soft sigh fell from his lips. “It's good. It feels good.”

He did that same stretch four more times. Each time, he dropped lower. “Okay,” she said. “Now, lie on the floor on your back.”

“Here?”

She shrugged. “It's clean, and it's hard. It'll work.”

“This really sounds like something naughty,” he muttered.

“Because you have a dirty, dirty mind,” she said, grinning.

Lying flat proved difficult for him with no support on a hard floor that would hurt if he let himself collapse to it via gravity. After he sat down, awkward and stiff and moving poorly, she held his shoulders, and he tipped backward, surrendering his weight to her hands. She slowed his descent. When he lay flat, resting in the space between the counter and the table, he looked at her, eyes glazed with painkillers, and something sharp stabbed her heart. The kitchen floor flashed immaculate white, and her fingers slicked with blood.

*You don't get to die.*

She flinched, and she focused on his chest. He wore a dark gray shirt with a high collar that hid his incision and the bullet wound from view. No hole in the shirt. No blood. He didn't pant with agony.

“Are you okay?” he said.

“Fine,” she said.

She splayed her palm against his breastbone, brushing the soft cotton of his shirt. Her fingers roamed across his damaged pectoral. The scab from the bullet wound made what had once been marble smooth dented and imperfect. Marred. Reflex almost made her ask if it hurt, but he moved, a whisper in the silence, and put his palm over hers in an echo of what he'd done when he'd been shot, and she'd been trying to stop the relentless tide of his blood. But there was no blood. His skin wasn't cold or shivery or slick with sweat. He felt warm. Warm and dry and living.

“It doesn't hurt unless I'm breathing hard, you press down, or I stretch my left arm weird,” he said. “I'm okay.”

She stroked his shirt as he breathed, relaxed, not clipped with pain.

“I see things sometimes, too,” he said when she didn't speak.

A lump formed in her throat. “Like what?” she said, but he looked away and wouldn't answer. She didn't press the issue. The refrigerator hummed. Birds chirped outside. He lay on the floor, breathing, not hurting, not bleeding, and she soaked in all the things that told her Derek wasn't dying. He'd been shot, but the pain he experienced now was just an echo of then. A memory. Something long past and gone. Real, but not real now.
He rubbed her arm with his thumb, and then he relaxed against the floor, resting his hands at his sides. “Have your way with me,” he said, his voice soft and tired, but she heard a spark. A spark of the Derek she knew. Her Derek. Just waiting to ignite. His eyelids lowered, and he watched her through his eyelashes. The corners of his mouth twitched with the hints of a smile.

She snorted, and forced herself to the present. “Put your knees up.” He did as she asked. With this exercise, he was supposed to pull his legs toward his chest with his arms wrapped under his knees. He wouldn't be able to do that, so she would be his arms, she decided. “I'm going to pick up your legs. Relax. And tell me right away if it hurts, okay? It's not supposed to hurt.”

“Hmm,” he said. He closed his eyes. She knelt at his shoulders, her kneecaps pushing into his trapezius muscles to the left and the right of his head. She rose as high onto her knees as she could go, and she leaned forward.

He laughed. Really, clearly laughed. Like a bell. His body tensed as he winced with the backlash, but the look in his eyes made her quiver. No sparkles. Stupid painkillers. But the skin around his eyes crinkled, and she couldn't see a single hint of sadness or anger or anything bad anymore. He was looking at her, and he was happy. “In what universe is this not naughty?” he said, staring at her crotch.

“Shut up,” she said. “I'm helping you.”

“Oh, I agree. This is definitely helping.”

She laughed as she reached under his thighs. She looped her arms. At first, he didn't budge when she tried to pull back his legs. “Relax,” she said.

“I'm stuck, helpless as a lamb, in your game of dirty twister, and you want me to relax?”

“Well, close your eyes and pretend I'm Mark or something.”

He made a disgusted sound. “Please, don't say that when my face is inches from your—”

“Relax, damn it,” she commanded. She pulled, and his weight came with her. She eased his knees toward his chest, and she lowered herself to the floor behind his head as his muscles extended as far as they would go. He inhaled, and a soft moan fell from his lips as she held his knees for him. She watched as the tears he'd held back earlier overflowed. “Does it hurt?” she asked, and she bit her lip.

“No,” he said, his voice wet and thick. “No, it doesn't hurt.”

After twenty seconds, she rose up and lowered his legs to the floor with care. He rested for thirty seconds, and she repeated. He didn't make any more jokes. He lay with his eyes closed, his expression sublime, even as tears leaked down his face. She repeated that stretch eight more times.

“Okay,” she said. “Same thing, sort of, but we're going to the side. Stay flat on your back.”

She scooted across the floor away from his shoulders to his legs. She touched his knees and pushed him to the left. He didn't need encouraging this time. He tilted his legs to the side. His right hip came off the floor. She stopped when his breaths jerked to a halt, and he made a small sound of discomfort. “Too much?” she said. “Keep your upper back flat. Only your hips should be moving.”

“A little too much,” he said, his voice clipped and tight. She eased up, and he rested, sort of tilted, sort of stretched. Tension bled away from him. “Better,” he said.
She kept forgetting that his flexibility was crap right now. He hadn't done much physical activity in weeks. His muscles had gotten used to stiffness and pain and overuse in the same position for hours and hours. She wished she'd thought of this earlier. Stretching exercises for his back. He couldn't run or lift weights or do any of the usual things he did in the gym with Mark, but he could at least do this. Natural instinct after a serious injury was to curl up and hibernate forever. But studies had shown that movement and exercise after a trauma was what sped healing. Dr. Altman had given him a list of stretching exercises that would help his arms and chest, which he did, but none for his back. She'd also enrolled him in physical therapy, but that didn't start for another two weeks. They'd wanted to give his sternum a chance to heal more before putting him through anything overly strenuous.

Meredith repeated that stretch to the left, going a little further each time for four more times. Then she switched to his right for another five.

When she finished, she watched him. He relaxed his knees and lay flat. Eyes closed, he didn't move. He'd cried steadily since that second set of stretches, but somewhere in the course of the third set of stretches, the tears had petered and then stopped. Wet tracks glistened against his temples, and small patches of his hair above his ears had gotten soaked. She licked her lips. “There are a few more we can try, but that seems like a good start. I think. Do you think?” When he didn't respond, she leaned forward. “Did you fall asleep?” she whispered, peering at his relaxed face. She stroked the skin above his eyebrows and teased her fingers through the hair over his forehead.

A lazy smile curled at his lips. “No,” he said, his voice thick and low. “This is just the first time I've been on my back in two weeks, and it's been a modicum of comfortable.”

“Oh,” she said. She eased herself onto her side next to him and picked up his hand, worrying at the joints. “Well, do you want to stay here a while?”

He looked at her. “I just want my wife.”

“Is that the top of your list, then?” She winked.

“Definitely,” he said. “Thank you for helping me narrow it down.”

She grinned. “Well, you have me, now. And with this new plan with Mark, I get days off here and there, and I can stay the day with you every once in a while instead of just being here for a few hours before you crash for the night.”

“That's true,” he said. He smiled as he tilted his head to look at her. “I'm glad you'll get days off. You need days off. You shouldn't have to work every day just to take care of me.”

“See?” She returned his grin. “It's all about me, me, me. It has nothing to do with you. I want my breaks. I need my freaking beauty rest or whatever.”

He laughed. Even despite the clipped ending that sounded more moaning than laughing, the noise of it hit her eardrums like balm. “But I'm very important,” he said. “How could it not have anything to do with me?”

“You're right,” she said. “My mistake. It must be all about you.”

His eyebrows rose. “You're admitting I'm right?”

She shrugged. “I guess so.”

“I can't decide whether to file that under the benefits of being high and hallucinating, or under the
benefits of being wounded and vulnerable.”

“Maybe both?”

“Hmm,” he rumbled. “It could be both. You might be banking on me forgetting this conversation ever happened while at the same time suffering from hopeless sympathy for me and my not-so-hidden pain.”

She winked. “I guess you'll never know.”

“That's mean, you know,” he said. “Leaving me wondering.”

“Doesn't the mystique add to my sex appeal? I thought men liked a little mystery.”

“I prefer open books,” he said, and then his gaze shifted into gleeful realization that he'd been given an opening. He leaned into her body. “How about a story?” he said, his eyes inches from hers.

“This again?” she said.

“Well, you can't hardly expect me to believe you were born, stole hair dye, and then came to Seattle Grace, where you fell head-over-heels for the sexiest neurosurgeon on the planet.”

She laughed. “I don't know. Can't I?”

“Remind me not to ever let you play connect the dots,” he grumbled. “The sheer weight of your failure at it might cause you to implode, and then I'd miss you.”

He flopped against the hard floor. “Any suggestions on how to get up?” he said, his voice wry. “You seem to be an expert at naughty twister.”

She moved back behind his shoulders. “Do a sit up. I'll push you. Don't pull with your arms.”

“Hmm,” he said. “So very bossy.”

But he did what she said to do. Under his own steam, he rose to a 45 degree angle. She shoved him up the rest of the way with a grunt. Once he'd gotten into a sitting position, he managed the rest on his own, albeit slowly. The stretching might have made his back feel better, but he still wasn't moving all that well. As he stuttered to his feet, he groaned, and it took him a while to straighten out.

She watched as he shuffled to retrieve his empty glass, and then he refilled it under the rushing faucet. He gulped until the water disappeared. The corners of his mouth dripped, and he wiped them off with a paper towel. She glanced at the window. Daylight had waned considerably into dusk since she'd come into the house, and the overhead light in the kitchen did much more to illuminate the room now than it had when she'd entered. Slivers of pink and deep hues of blue stretched across the sky outside the window, highlighted with the deep greens and spruce colors of the treetops.

“Let's take a walk,” she said. “It's really nice out today.”

His fingers squeaked as he clenched his glass. The apprehension slathered all across his face made her ache. “Since when do you walk for fun?” he said.

“I walked with you,” she said. “We've walked. With Doc. I thought that was fun.”
“Meredith...”

You have to let him heal at his own pace, but you can't let him wallow, either.

“If you take a walk with me, I'll tell you a story,” she said. “A short walk. We'll go slow.”

“But I'm in my pajamas,” he said.

His meaning was clear. A trip up and down the steps would wear him out. He thought he'd found an out. She considered offering to bring down some clothes for him, but decided against it. Help emphasize to him what he can control, rather than what he can't.

“There are some clean jeans in the dryer.” She pointed toward the utility room. “You can grab those if you want.”

“But...”

She shrugged. “No walk, no story. But it's your choice. We could watch a movie or whatever. You pick.”

“It's getting dark,” he said.

“It is,” she agreed. “But it's not like I live in the middle of nowhere. The streets are lit.”

He peered at her, suspicion carving his expression. “How good is this story?”

“You'll have to come along to find out.”

He shifted on the balls of his feet, agitated. She wanted to tell him nothing would happen. That he'd be fine. But she thought letting him know she'd figured out his fears might make his anxiety about them worse. It would embarrass him that she'd noticed. He put his empty glass in the sink and sighed.

“Fine,” he said, and he shuffled out of the room, muttering, “But this had better be a damned good story,” as he went.

She grabbed a water bottle from the fridge while she waited. She didn't expect them to go far or to walk for long, maybe twenty minutes at best. He was at the point in his recovery where he should be managing about two fifteen-minute walks per day. He tired in the space of strides. He would probably sweat a lot, even if they went slow. She pocketed his Percocet bottle and her cell phone, not wanting to risk anything, and waited by the door as the clock ticked the evening minutes away. The pinks in the sky turned deep, fiery purple, and what had been blue before sank into a vivid blue-violet. Dark indigo. His favorite. Stars twinkled in the eastern-most part of the sky.

“I'm ready,” he said, startling her from her reverie.

His soft, stonewashed jeans barely hung onto his hips without slipping down, emphasizing his unhealthy slimness. He'd put on his black cross-trainers, and he wore the same t-shirt he'd worn with his pajama pants – the dark gray one with the high collar.

She pushed open the storm door and stepped onto the porch. Her keys jingled as she fumbled to cram them into her pocket without spilling his pills everywhere. Cool air kissed her skin. The disappearance of the sun had chilled the earth considerably, but she wasn't cold. Just uncomfortable. And she imagined she'd warm up in a bit once they started moving.
He didn't pause on the threshold, and he didn't seem overly concerned about standing on the deck. His feet thumped as he shuffled around her. She didn't lock the door, but she did make sure it closed, and then she turned to follow him down the step and down the walk to the sidewalk that ran along their side of the street.

She wondered if maybe she'd gotten it wrong. Maybe his extreme indoor dwelling had just been coincidence. Maybe he'd really just felt so awful that he didn't want to waste effort going outside. Maybe. Except he gave his game away as she watched him. His nostrils flared, and his eyes had a wide, alert look to them that defied all the drugs in his system. He hunkered down, hands crammed in his front pockets, and he watched everything around him as though it were something dangerous, or something dangerous might be lurking behind it.

“Which way do you want to go?” he said when they reached the sidewalk.

She shrugged. “You pick.”

He looked both ways down the long sprawl of uneven sidewalk. Either direction took a long time to reach a corner. He turned left. He moved, exaggerated and slow, his lips pressed into a firm line. She kept pace with him, careful not to let her strides escape her careful control. She didn't want to get ahead of him or make him feel like he held her back. She strolled, peering at the trees and the parked cars and staring at all the houses dotting the streets of her quaint little neighborhood, just enjoying being with him. A breeze ruffled her hair.

“I was fourteen,” she said as they ambled along in the dim light.

“Another story from your tame beginnings?” He sighed. “When do I get the good stuff?”

“I wasn't tame.”

“You were too tame to dye your—”

“Shut up, or I won't tell you anything,” she said.

“I think you'll tell me regardless.”

“Oh?” she said. “And what makes you Mr. Entitlement?”

He stopped and peered at her with an irresistible expression of innocence. She melted against him. He slipped his left hand loose from his pocket, and he wrapped his warm arm over her shoulder.

“Because I'm wounded and vulnerable?” he said.

She laughed.

A man passed by them on the walk, and Derek stiffened to the point that his tension looked painful. He yanked his arm away from her and bolted to the side of the walk. “Excuse me,” said the man. He wore a briefcase and hat and a snappy suit, and his heels clicked on the sidewalk as he tore past them at a good clip. His tie flapped, and he had crisp, white hair that made him look sort of like Colonel Sanders or something. Derek huddled at the side of the walk, breaths frozen in his chest.

Meredith waited while he collected himself. Red blush sprawled across his face in the twilight. She rubbed his arm. His skin trembled with disquiet under her palm. He closed his eyes. A car rumbled past, and he froze again as the sharp headlights illuminated him with piercing brilliance. His lips peeled back from his teeth, and he grimaced, distress pouring from his frame. Worry squeezed her heart. Maybe this had been a mistake. Maybe she'd pushed too hard.
“Derek,” she said, her voice low and soft. She glanced backward. They'd made it all of two house-lengths, but some was better than nothing, and she didn't want him to upset himself needlessly. “We can go back inside. I'll finish the story. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pushed.”

“I'm fine,” he snapped. “I'm...” He took a deep, forceful breath that made him wince, and he plodded forward, slow and steady. “I'm fine.” A hedge that hadn't been trimmed clawed at his shirt, and he shoved past it, his breaths picking up as he forced some momentum into his pace. Dry leaves and debris dirtied his shirt. He swept his hands across his torso, and the leaves sloughed away in a fluttering, crackling cloud.

She bit her lip and matched his strides. Doubt chipped away at her like a tiny icepick, but she forced herself to ignore it. Let him pick, she told herself. If he wanted to keep going, they would keep going.

“You know, it's been nearly two weeks,” she said, continuing their conversation. “You can't keep using the wounded and vulnerable thing forever.”

He glanced at her. “Well, I'm using it now.”

“So, when's the cutoff between wounded and vulnerable and only slightly busted?”

His breaths buffeted the air. Small, glistening dots of sweat collected at his brow. “I think I'm entitled to a wide array of adjectives before I get from wounded and vulnerable to only slightly busted.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I'm working on throbbing and enervated right now,” he said. “I'm sure there's more, but—”

A woman passed by on the opposite side of the street. He didn't halt his forward motion, though his gaze chased her progress until she'd disappeared from sight, and he didn't speak. The sky darkened to the nighttime purple that spoke of light pollution. Meredith slipped into perfect tandem with him and wrapped her arm around his waist, relishing the feel of his body against hers, moving, pushing, working.

“I really love you,” she said, her words cutting through the silence. “Thank you for walking with me.”

“Hmm,” he rumbled. He moved with singular, focused purpose. Walking forward. He swept his hands back into his hair. His hair slicked back, shiny and damp, and he panted. She glanced backward. They hadn't gone that far.

“Are you okay?” she said.

He stopped at a thick tree and leaned, hands scrabbling over the damp bark. “I think your mother bought a house on a hill on purpose,” he said, his voice shaky.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “She was planning to sabotage your convalescence before you'd even met Addison.”

She glanced backward. The incline was hardly worth mentioning. The street rested on one of those pernicious hills that didn't feel at all like a hill until you'd gone a mile, looked back to try and figure out why you'd started sweating buckets, and finally noticed the shallow-but-steady gradient behind you. They hadn't gone a mile yet, but he wasn't fit.
Derek resumed, his pace slower than before. “Well, she did hate me, and I'm very likeable,” he said between pants. “There must be more to it. Was she psychic? Maybe she saw me coming.”

“I don't think my mother was psychic,” she said. “You're that likeable, huh?”

“Yes, very.”

She pushed the water bottle at him, and he took a sip and then a gulp, and she felt his body loosening up in her grip. Another car passed, and it didn't seem to faze him beyond a small twitch that ran down his frame.

“I don't think anybody is likeable enough to chip through the Ellis Grey wall,” she said.

“You know, if I hadn't passed out from resecting that woman's bowel later that day, I bet I could have,” he said.

She snorted. “Really.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Well, she started it,” he said. “That's mature.”

“What?” he said. “She's very grouchy. A normal person would have fallen to my expert and likeable wiles. It must be her fault.”

“You're very confident about that.”

“What can I say?” he said. “I'm a likeable guy.”

“And an ass.”

He grinned at her. In the darkness, the street lights made his eyes glitter. “But a likeable ass,” he said.

“I do like your ass.”
She slipped her hand into his back pocket to warm up her knuckles. His muscles flexed as he walked, and she squeezed him. They kept moving as a smirk slanted across his face. She rested her head against his shoulder. They plodded, interlocked.

“My first real walk after a gunshot wound, and you're feeling me up,” he said. “You're a very naughty woman.”

“What's naughty about it? I like feeling you up. And I'm allowed.”

“Oh? Not that I'm complaining. I like the touching. More touching, I say. But I don't think I ever got that memo.”

“Post-it provision. I can feel you up whenever I want now because we're married. It's totally kosher or whatever.”

“Is that how that works?” he said. “Hmm.” He took another sip of water. “So, I'm here. I'm walking. And I'm letting you feel me up in public. When do I get the rest of my story?”

“I was going to wait until we were finished walking,” she said.

“Oh, no,” he said. He stopped. “No escaping later when I'm too tired to care. Story, now, or I'm not moving another step.”

With his momentum lost, his body swayed, and he swallowed. He stumbled to a no parking sign and wrapped his arms around the post. He made a sick noise deep in his throat as he tried to catch his breath.

She touched his back. His shirt had soaked through, and his muscles shook. “Derek...”

“I'm going around the block. I can make it. I just need a minute.”

“Derek, please don't kill yourself for this,” she said. “This was great for a first expedition.”

“I'm okay,” he said. He tilted back his head and took a swig of water. She watched his Adam's apple roll down his throat. A drop of sweat meandered down his skin, broken into tiny, shimmering pieces by his stubble. “Please, just tell me the story,” he said. “You were five, and what happened?”

“Fourteen, Derek,” she said. “I was fourteen.”

“Right,” he said. “And?” He left the safety of the signpost and moved like somebody had recorded him in freeze frame and was stepping the video forward bit by bit with the remote. She glanced ahead. They'd almost made it to the top of the hill. If they could hit that corner and turn left, they'd be going down, and he would get relief. The water bottle crinkled as he squeezed it. He didn't take a sip. He dumped a bit of it over his forehead and spluttered. He slicked the moisture back with his hands, leaving his face glistening, and his eyelashes thick and damp with a latticework of water between each hair.

“During homecoming, my first year at high school,” she said. She patted his back and held his waist to give him support. “Some seniors held a bash. I went. There was beer there. And some other stuff.”

“Other stuff?” he said. His mouth hung open as he sucked in air. “Like what? Apple juice and cookies?” He smirked at her despite the weariness gripping his features.
She laughed. “Stop interrupting, or I'll never finish.” She closed her eyes and sighed with relief as they rounded the corner and gravity helped instead of hindered. He stopped struggling with every step and breath, and his pace picked up. Just a bit.

“Sorry,” he said. “Please, continue. Though, I'm going to lodge a complaint later if this turns out to be a bad story. You made me take a walk for this. I was expecting drunken girl-on-girl with Sadie or something.”

She snorted. “What is with that, anyway?”

He sipped the water and held out the bottle for her. She took a sip as well. Heat radiated from his skin in a wavering aura around his body. All she had to do was hover next to him, and she felt warm.

“What's with what?” he said.

“Why do guys always pant over lesbian sex?” she asked. “You'd think it would be kind of a duh that lesbian sex means no male participation. It's the biggest cock block in the history of vanilla porn, isn't it?”

He stopped, and he looked at her as though she'd asked him to explain why 2+2 equaled 4, or she'd questioned some sort of universal law like gravity or something. “But it's hot,” he said.

“Thanks for articulating to me the meaning of testosterone,” she replied. “Able to leap tall piles of logic in a single bound.”

He grinned. “Well, it is.”

“Hot?”

“Yes, very,” he said. He walked. “So, did you?”

She followed. “Did I what?”

“Have girl-on-girl with Sadie?”

She snorted. “I refuse to answer that.”

He laughed. “So, you did?”

“You're really kind of incorrigible, you know.”

“I'll take that as a yes,” he said.

“Damn it! You, shut up,” she said. “Just shut up, so I can finish!”

He raised an eyebrow. His gaze roamed from her head to her toes in a lascivious appraisal. He stopped at her breasts and inhaled, an appreciative, quirky grin pulling at his features, and then his gaze dipped lower. “Finish what, exactly?”

“Damn it!” she growled.

He leered. “I have a good mental picture to carry me through this, at least,” he said as they rounded the third corner. Steep downhill morphed into a downward slope that seemed almost flat in comparison, and Derek had to work again to move.
“I was fourteen.”

“You said that already,” he said. “You were describing this supposed other stuff.”

“Right,” she said. “Weed, okay? And I think I had too much. Or maybe it was the alcohol.”

“Oh?” He grinned. “Why’s that?”

“Because I woke up naked with a dirty condom on my thigh, and I don’t remember it, but I mean, I…” her voice trailed away. His grin faded, and he came to a wobbly stop by an overhanging mailbox with a little red flag. He leaned against it, frowning. He took several breaths before he found his voice.

“You said nobody ever did anything to you,” he said, his voice low and dangerous.

She quirked an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t count date rape as something?”

“It wasn’t rape,” she assured him. “I remember starting. I didn’t say no, and I could have. I just… The rest is gone.”

“I shouldn’t have teased,” he said in a soft voice. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “I had a sucky lead-in. You couldn’t have known where I was going with it. That was my first time.”

He pulled her against his body, and he kissed her ear, and then her temple. “I love you,” he whispered against her ear. His panting slowed as he rested, palms splayed against her back, and she couldn’t help but close her eyes and relish the warmth and the solid safety of his arms.

His sweat dripped all over her, but she didn't care. She didn't care at all. Her fingers scrunched his damp shirt, and she nosed into his shoulder, breathing. A strong musky odor wafted from his skin from all the exertion, but he didn’t stink. He smelled masculine and safe and sweet and hers. This was a more heady version of the scent he left on pillows and sheets and things that he wore, and the familiarity of it made her muscles relax and give way. She swayed on her feet, and he held her. His muscles trembled, too, and she tried to stand up, tried to take her weight off him. She wanted to collapse, though. She wanted him to pick her up in his arms and not let go. In his arms, people like Gary Clark didn’t exist. She'd be happy forever. And nothing seemed scary or bad.

Derek was her drug.

The night around them hovered in silence, save for an undulating chorus of crickets and other creep-crawly things. The birds had gone to sleep. The brief burst of people on the sidewalks and cars in the streets seemed to have calmed as everyone arrived home for dinner. Lights from windows glowed, leaving squares of bright illumination against black, amorphous lawns.

He kissed her again, full on the lips, and she lost the world as his tongue stroked hers. The dark, green, dimly-lit neighborhood bled away into nothing but a sense of flesh and heartbeats. Her cheek rustled against his shirt, and she listened to the air as he drew it into his chest, long and slow.

“I hate that you grew up so fast,” he said. “Even if it wasn't rape, you didn't deserve that.”

“Yeah,” she said as they disentangled. “But learning to have casual, drunken sex paved the way to meeting you, so I can't entirely regret it.” They headed for the last corner. Almost home. He moved
sluggishly, and he lost his breath again in the space of strides.

“We still would have met,” he said. “And I would have noticed you without the one night stand.”

“You think so?”

“You're noticeable, Mere, and I really needed somebody. I was...” His voice trailed away, and he didn't finish his thought. He blinked, and he wiped his hands against his forehead, brushing back more sweat. His chest heaved, and he tripped a little. Pain leaked into his gaze, and he made a small sound. She handed him the water bottle, and he took a long swig that emptied the bottle. The plastic crinkled in his hand.

“Almost back home,” she said.

He made no indication that he'd heard her. He pushed forward, lips set in a line of concentration.

“I was fifteen when my dad died,” he said as they passed the second-to-last house on that street. “I was there.”

He'd said it like he'd been reciting what kind of sandwich he'd ordered for lunch. No inflection whatsoever colored his syllables, but the tone sounded rehearsed and perfected through countless repetition. I was there. It wasn't a big deal, and I'm not upset. I was there. She halted, and he didn't notice until her palm didn't move forward with his. Their arms stretched, but she didn't let go, and he shambled to a stop when his elbow locked. He looked at her. When she didn't budge, he backed up with wobbly steps.

A lump formed in her throat, and the dark smudged as she blinked. You never told me that, she wanted to say. Not once even hinted. Anger squeezed her breaths tightly in her chest. She'd been such a freaking moron. Maybe he would have told her if she hadn't blown him off for her own problems that night. Idiot. Freak. Emotionally-stunted dumb ass.

She swallowed, and she wiped at her eyes. “I hate that you grew up so fast, too,” she said. “I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, well...” he said. He blinked and sniffed and looked away.

“Do you think about him a lot?” she asked. She wrapped her arms around his waist and stood in his space. She rubbed her palms up and down the curve of his spine. His soaked shirt stuck to her palms, but she managed.

“More lately.”

“Was he a doctor, too?”

“No,” Derek said. “He owned a hardware store.”

She blinked and reddened. He'd told her his dad owned a store when he'd first told her about the murder. And what doctors owned stores? Who had the freaking time? “I'm sorry, that was a really dumb question. I'm being a mor—”

He put his thumb against her lip. “S'okay,” he said. He breathed against her, and she felt his weight drag on her shoulders more and more as the seconds passed.

“Are you doing all right?” she said, which seemed to snap him back into himself. He pulled away like he'd been stung and started moving, his expression unseeing as he shuffled. His cross-trainers
scuffed the sidewalk. He'd stopped picking up his feet more than a centimeter or so, and the soles dragged against the pavement.

When they rounded the last corner, they were back on her street, back on that evil sort-of hill. He lasted about three meters before he veered, suffering. He stopped against a chain-link fence and closed his eyes, recuperating by a bright neon-and-black beware of dog sign that seemed to be a lie at the moment. The windows in the house behind the fence remained pitch-black, and no barking pierced the nighttime silence.

She stroked his chest while he tried to recover some wind, feeling particularly useless as he glanced in the direction of their house. She watched his dark gaze follow the line of sidewalk between them and their driveway, and his expression caved into hopelessness. She thought about telling him to sit down while she brought the car, but she imagined getting into and out of his big SUV or her Jeep would take just as much out of him as walking the remaining house-lengths.

He leaned his head back. His Adam's apple poked out as he swallowed, and his mouth lolled open. A thin, shining column of spittle stretched from his lower lip to his upper. He licked his teeth and cleared it away, and he clutched her shoulders with shaky hands while he struggled to breathe.

“God, I'm tired,” he said.

She squeezed him. “We're almost there,” she whispered. “A few more houses. You can make it.”

They covered the rest of the distance in silence. He walked like he couldn't convince his legs to work without devoting all his attention to them.

They made it. She held her hand against his waist. He leaned more and more against her body until she felt like a doorjamb holding back a storm door on a tight, squealing, pressurized hinge that wanted to close. He pressed her against the door frame, his body trapping her. She fumbled with the door, trying to keep from falling victim to his gasping, then dying, then deadweight, and they stumbled inside. His feet clipped the threshold with jarring whacks. He stopped, inches inside the house. She wrestled with him to get him out of the path of the door so she could get it closed. She slammed shut the door, panting, and he sat down in a boneless heap on the floor, his back sliding down the frame as she flipped on the hallway light.

Sweat plastered his hair to his head, and his complexion turned sallow. He brought the back of his hand to his mouth, and he gagged against his skin. His torso jerked with the spasms, and his face creased with agony as he tried to hold down bile and the little he'd managed to eat.

She ran for the kitchen without pausing to ask him if he was okay or what was wrong. One look, and she knew what was freaking wrong. He was undernourished, overheated, and exhausted, and she'd let him do it. She'd just let him because he'd hugged her and teased her and acted tired-but-fine, god, damn that man.

She grabbed a box of Wheat Thins from the cabinet over the sink, a bottle of water from the fridge, the hand towel from the dishwasher, and a trash bag from the roll under the sink. She returned in under a minute, and she skidded to her butt beside him on the welcome mat. She jammed her hand into the cracker box and pulled a handful loose. She shoved them at him. Cracker bits spilled all over the floor and over his sweat-soaked jeans.

“Put something in your stomach,” she said.

After he'd eaten five or six Wheat Thins, she pushed the fresh water bottle at him, and he drank gulp after gulp. He put the bottle down by his left hip after he'd swallowed his way through over half of it, and he leaned into her shoulder, breathing noisily, almost desperately.
“Better?” she said. She wanted to yell at him. Wanted to hit him. Why did he do this to himself?

“Yeah,” he croaked. He inhaled with a wet, sick-sounding snuffle.

“Do you want some Percocet?”

He nodded. She liberated a pill from the bottle in her pocket, and she gave it to him. He chucked the pill into his mouth, picked up the nearly empty water bottle, tipped his head back, and swallowed. He blinked as he brought his head down. She gave him the hand-towel, but his hands rested in his lap, and he didn't lift it to wipe his face or anything. He rested, silent, eyes closed. The sweat dried over the passing minutes, and shivers tore up and down his body. At least he hadn't needed the trash bag.

She didn't have the heart to say a word or scold him despite her fury. He was a grown man. He didn't need a mom right now. He'd worked himself to the point of throwing up. He'd collapsed in their foyer by the door on the hard floor, as though his options had been to sit down or fall down, and he'd been given no other choice. She doubted very much that his body wasn't already doing all the yelling for her, and she didn't want him to feel embarrassed or guilty or inadequate. She just didn't want him to kill himself trying to prove to her or Gary Clark's ghost, or whoever he seemed to need to prove himself to that he'd healed.

She rubbed his shoulder. “I'll be right back, okay?” she said.

He didn't answer.

She stood, and she left him, only intending to be gone a moment. He needed a towel at the very least, but as she wandered to the utility room, inspiration hit. She grabbed two full-sized bath towels. Then she went to the fridge and pulled out some of the fresh peaches and strawberries she'd bought when she'd run errands the day before. She washed the fruits under the faucet and piled them all in a big bowl. She scooped the remaining leftover spaghetti from the Tupperware container on the counter top to a fresh plate, and she heated it. She rummaged for napkins and a fork. When the microwave beeped, she powdered the pasta with a dusting of Parmesan. She stuck her tongue through her lips as she tried to remember exactly how he liked it. They didn't eat spaghetti much. She thought she'd managed a good approximation. Arms laden with towels and dishes, she walked back through the hallway to the front door.

He didn't look at her, eyes dull, as she waddled toward him with her bounty. He didn't ask questions, didn't indicate that he'd noticed her presence. She put the pile down by the far wall and brought towel number one with her as she sat down by his side. “Can you get your shirt off?” she said.

When he didn't budge, her eyes pricked, and she wiped at her face.

When he's not paying attention to the world, he's not hurt or frightened, Dr. Wyatt had said. He's created a safety zone for himself.

And he'd needed to go there. Again.

She touched his face, palm against his skin. Damp stubble and skin rasped against her fingertips. “Derek,” she whispered as she stroked him. “It's okay. I know it hurts and you're tired and it sucks. I do. But you have to be here and not there. Please.”

He looked at her, toward the noise, but his stare tore straight through her body to some distant point beyond. “Huh,” he said, monotone and distant. He blinked, eyes glassy and soulless. She watched herself reflected in his unblinking pupils, a pair of itty bitty Merediths who both looked like they were well on their way from sadness to worry. As long as he becomes responsive when you stimulate him, I don't see a reason to worry.
She pushed his shoulder, digging her nails into his skin through his shirt. “Snap out of it, Derek. Seriously.”

He blinked and blinked again, and she sighed with relief as she watched focus return to his gaze. “What?” he said. He swallowed, and he glanced at their surroundings with an odd expression of disorientation. A full sweep, ending with the floor under his legs, and the cloudy fog quality of his stare sank into depression. He looked away, and he sighed. He'd tried to be human again, tried to take a walk and not be afraid and enjoy some time with her, and he'd been slapped down for his trouble. She read his thoughts sprawled all over his face.

“I know,” she said. Her eyes stung. “It's okay.”

He didn't reply. He shivered. “Take your shirt off, Derek,” she said.

The crushed quality of his forlorn gaze lessened. He didn't smile, but amusement made his lip twitch. “Naughty wife,” he said, his voice soft with weariness.

“Derek, you're exhausted and soaked,” she said with a snort. “This is hardly about sex.”

“You say that now,” he said. He leaned back against the door and closed his eyes. With a rush of effort, he swung his torso forward with a force that made him grunt, and he pulled at the shirt from behind his head. The shirt came up over his head. Gravity pulled him back into the door, and he rested, unmoving, shirt stuck around his arms and upper torso, as though his reserves had been spent.

She pulled off the shirt the rest of the way for him, and she wrapped him in the thick, fluffy towel. She tossed the shirt, and it landed in a sopping pile further into the foyer.

“That's bad for the floor,” he said.

“I don't care about the stupid floor,” she said. “I care about you.”

She dragged her pile of stuff closer. She put the second towel beside his hip, and she put down the plate of spaghetti and the bowl of fruit and the fresh bottle of water.

“What's all this?” he said.

“Hallway picnic. You need to eat more. I tried to leave you alone. I swear I did. But you're shucking weight like yesterday's socks or whatever.”

He stared at his lap. “And fainting.”

“Well,” she said, “To be fair, that seemed more like enforced sitting than fainting, and it was after doing way more exercise than you should have ever attempted. But you need to eat, whether you're hungry or not. Maybe set an alarm for yourself. Or don't let yourself have a pill without a snack. Something. Anything. Anything, Derek.”

He swallowed, and his eyes watered and rimmed with red.

“Derek, you're hurt. You're depressed. I get that it's hard to remember to eat sometimes.” She sighed as darker twists of memories clung to her consciousness. “I've been there, and I understand. You can't really pull any dark-and-twisty on me that I haven't done myself, or thought about doing, so I get it. Just...”

He clutched the towel. “He took from me, and I never...”
She stroked his body through the towel. “I know,” she murmured. “I know.”

A deep-cherry blush cut a swath across his face and his throat. His eyes creased, and his lips pressed into a thin, colorless line. His temples fluttered under his skin. Anger forced his breaths into tight funnels of air. “I want to have sex with my wife,” he said. “I want to walk up steps and take showers and lift things without you fucking helping me. I want to sleep in my own bed for the whole night. I want to not hurt. I want to be able to walk on the street without wondering if the stranger walking across the way has a fucking gun. I want to stop seeing him over my shoulder and in the mirror and when I wake up and in my dreams and everywhere. And I want to be able to get through an hour of my life without feeling like this.”

“I know,” she said.

“I hate him, Meredith,” he said, his voice low and scratchy and clawing against the deepest, darkest point of his vocal registers. “I hate him for doing this to me. I'm not me. My body isn't mine anymore. He stole that. He stole everything from me. I want him to die, except he's dead, and I can't...” His body shuddered. “I can't make this stop. It won't stop, and I need it to stop.”

She swallowed against tears. “He didn't steal me, Derek. I'm here. I'll always be here.”

He looked at her, panting, fury leaking from every pore. The towel made a stiff tent around his body as he pulled it as hard as his arms would let him pull. A whorl of ugly, black emotions swirled around him like a storm cloud. Lightning strikes of pain smashed into her in the grips of that horrible, ugly gaze, but she forced herself to look him in the eye and say it again.

“I'm here,” she repeated.

He looked at her, and the expression on his face crumpled. He blinked, and tears streaked down his blush-blotched, mottled skin. “I know,” he said. “I'm sorry. I know. I didn't mean to—” He thunked his head back against the door and stared, hopeless, at the overhead chandelier. The fight and grief bled out of him, leaving beaten, tormented remains behind.

“I know what you meant,” she said. “It's okay.” She pulled her arms around his shoulders and tilted him against her. He didn't protest. She stroked his wet, sweat-soaked hair, and he rested in her arms.

“Why did he do this to me?” he said.

She didn't answer. She closed her eyes, and she lay her cheek against his head. “Life sucks sometimes.”

A wry laugh choked off in his throat. “Understatement.”

“Life sucks a lot sometimes?”

“Hmm,” he said. “Better.”

“Life is the suck by which we measure all other suckiness?”

“Such a poet,” he said. “Thank you.”

“For what? Being the thesaurus of suck?”

“No,” he said. “Just... Being you. Being here. I'm sure I'm fantastic company.”
“Derek,” she said. “I can honestly say there's nowhere I'd rather be right now. Fantastic company or not.”

“I don't know,” he said. “I hear the Bahamas are quite nice this time of year.”

“I'm sure they are. But I'd rather be here.”

He sighed and pushed himself up with a wince. He settled the towel over his shoulders and let go with his hands. He took the plate of spaghetti and started picking at it. He made a face, disgust curling back his lips.

“Cold and yucky?” she said.

He nodded.

“You need to start liking cold food,” she said. “It's what real doctors do.”

“I think it's only what you do, Mere,” he said. “I'm quite certain we neurosurgeons prefer heated items.”

She chuckled and took the plate back to the kitchen to reheat it for him. When she returned to his camping spot in the foyer, she found him tearing apart a peach. He stared blankly down the hall, toward her, but not at her. The fruit splurched as he sunk in his teeth, and wet dribbles coursed down his stubbly chin. She put the warm plate on his lap and sat back down, squeezing his knee for balance. She glanced in the fruit bowl and saw a tiny pile of strawberry leaves next to untouched fruit. He'd eaten a couple while she'd been gone. A couple, but not many.

“I stopped at Pike Place for those,” she said. “Are they good?”

“They're great,” he said, his voice muffled around the peach, but flat. Unenthusiastic. He sucked on the fleshy part of the fruit, and then he rested, eyes shut, holding the peach in his hand over the plate in his lap. Peach juice dripped onto the pasta, leaving wet pockmarks in the Parmesan. Minutes passed, and he didn't move.

“Your spaghetti is going to get cold again,” she prodded. “And very peach-flavored”

He looked at the plate in his lap and sighed. He took another bite of the peach, and he chewed and chewed and chewed. When he swallowed, he stared at the remains of the fruit like he'd just climbed Mount Everest and had been asked to climb it again.

“They're not good, are they?” she said.

“Nothing tastes good to me,” he said. “I'm just not hungry.”

Despite his words, he kept working on the peach, taking bite after disinterested bite. When he finished, he dropped the wrinkled brown pit back into the bowl with the other fruit skeletons. She grabbed a strawberry, and he started to work on the spaghetti plate. The strawberry burst in her mouth, little flecks of seeds and juice and grainy bits crushing under the force of her jaw, and she moaned as the sugary sweetness swept over her taste buds. When her eyes opened, she found him staring at her, an amused, ghost of a grin tipping the corners of his lips upward. His fork hung midair, a swirl of noodles clinging to the tines.

“Thief,” he murmured. “What if I was saving that one?”

“I'll show you a thief,” she said. She reached across his lap and nabbed his water bottle. She took a
long, gulping sip.

He grinned, but he didn't try to take back the bottle, and she deflated a little. Not playing. He usually played. She frowned as she watched how much he economized his movements. How tired he looked after every swallow of the spaghetti. She put the water bottle by his hip in case he wanted it, because she didn't think he would ask if he did.

He finished off the entire plate, wiped his face with the towel, and sighed. He leaned against the door and looked at her, his eyelashes low over his eyes. The dark circles under his eyes seemed fleshy and bad and he looked... Wasted. Thrashed. Done. His breaths rose and fell in his chest, soft and even and slow. He looked full, at least. Stuffed, actually. For the first time in weeks. His stomach curved under the towel.

“Do you want to go upstairs and sleep?” she said.

He didn't move. “I'll just sit here for a while,” he said, his voice soft, but the desolate look in his eyes told her what he didn't want to say. He wasn't sitting there because he wanted to do so.

She kissed him. “That's fine. We'll stay here then. You owe me a story, you know,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because I told you one.”

“But I walked around the block for that one, and it wasn't even about lesbian sex,” he said. “I'd say we're even.”

“Well, I'll tell you another after you tell me something,” she said. “It's only fair that this be an even exchange. Maturity-challenged Meredith for Manhattan Derek. I want to hear the stories, too.”

He closed his eyes. “Rain check?” he said, his voice distant and faint.

“Sure,” she said. “I like just sitting here with you.”

“Hmm.”

His head tilted forward, gradual at first, gaining momentum, but he picked himself up at the last moment before his chin collapsed against his chest, and he blinked, recovering, eyes bleary. He scrunched the damp towel against his naked skin. She stood and went into the living room to retrieve a pillow and the winter afghan for him.

She returned just in time to see him snap his neck back and blink as he tried to stay awake. “Here,” she whispered, holding out the pillow and the blanket for him. He muttered something, and he didn't reach for them. She didn't understand the words.

She kicked away the picnic towel and the fruit bowl and all the refuse, and she put the pillow on the floor beside him. She unfurled the afghan, and she tried to take his wet towel away, but he clutched it. “M'cold,” he mumbled.

“Derek,” she said. “Derek, wake up just a bit for a second.”

He blinked. “M'awake,” he assured her.

She felt a wispy grin crack her frown in half. “Sure, you are.”

She pulled at his towel, and he let her take it this time, his grip slack. She wrapped the afghan
around his naked, shivery torso. She settled on the ground, her back against the door, and propped the soft pillow against her thigh. She wrapped her arms around him, and she pulled him to the floor. He made a noise of surprise, but then he settled on his back, padded by the pillow, his wet head cradled in the crook of her thigh and her abdomen.

“But we're on the floor in the foyer,” he said as his eyelids drooped lower and lower, and he didn't pick them up again to blink. The glassy crescents of his eyes disappeared. His arms fell to his sides.

“It doesn't matter, Derek,” she said. “Just sleep. We'll move in a little while when you feel better.”

She lifted up her shirt a few inches so he could soak up some of her body heat. She stroked his sweaty hair as his muscles went slack. His bent knees flattened as his cross-trainers skidded across the floor boards with a slow chuck-chuck-chuck into final collapse. His feet hit her purse and shoved aside a small side-table, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

“Can' tell me this isn' naughty,” he slurred, half asleep. Conscious support left his neck, and his face tilted into her jeans and bare stomach. His nose pressed into her abdomen. He took a deep, sighing breath against her skin.

“Only in your twisted male mind,” she said.

“Takin advan...” he mumbled, but the syllables fell away. His mouth loll ed open. Hot, even breaths buffeted her skin, and he slept, safe and solid against her.
Chapter 10

The Cayenne rumbled as Meredith navigated one-handed through the almost-sunshine, a peculiar dichotomy of gloomy and brilliant that Derek had long ago dubbed Seattle-sunshine. The clouds had dispersed somewhat, leaving solid, bright rays cascading to the earth in haphazard clumps. Thick patches of light cast moving shadows through the tree branches, and the car cabin vacillated between dim and dark.

She rested her right hand on his knit gray warmups over his left thigh. She'd told him flip-flops and shorts would be okay if he wanted, but he chilled easily since his surgery, and he'd declined, incurious, in his misery, about the strange statement. The air conditioner vents whispered cool, soothing, freon-laced air across his skin, but he felt far from soothed.

The car cabin vibrated with atonal bedlam. The tinny tinkle of the piano riffs from Carry On Wayward Son emanated from the speakers. “Once I rose above the noise and confusion, just to get a glimpse beyond this illusion,” Meredith sang, her tone several notes off of the actual score. He closed his eyes, clutching the pillow she'd given him against his chest. His head throbbed in time with the clash of cymbals.

Meredith hated his taste in music. He disliked hers, though he wouldn't label the feeling as any sort of rabid aversion. There wasn't much music he refused to listen to aside from rap and twangy, woe-to-the-world country. Regardless, they'd found a compromise with one of Seattle's classic rock stations, something they could both enjoy in equal measure. The problem, though, was that she liked to sing along with songs she knew when she was in a good mood, and she was in a good mood today.

Since they'd reunited for the final time, their lives had settled into blissful routine. They'd started commuting together when their shifts matched up. He'd heard her butcher everything from I Fought The Law to Poker Face. He usually didn't protest. Their commute was short, and even if the noises emerging from her mouth were a wretched cacophony, he still found her cute to watch. Her eyes and nose scrunched when she sang notes that were far too soprano for her, and she hunkered down in her seat and bobbed her head like some sort of turkey fowl when she tried to approach the bass registers that had been denied to her by evolution.

He usually didn't protest, except he usually didn't feel like shit, either. Time crept forward second by eternal second. He watched the road through heavy, gummy eyelashes, breathing through parted lips. A trickle of fluid drained down his throat as he leaned back. Everything swam around his head.

Derek sniffed, pulling air through his clogged nasal passages. He clutched the pillow as she tapped the steering wheel and tried to follow Brad Delp into the stratosphere of More Than A Feeling. Her hand on his thigh patted out a rhythm that may have fit with the percussion four songs ago, but seemed more like beatless flailing, now.

“I closed my eyes, and she slipped awaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay,” Meredith sang, her syllables cracking with the strain, and she made her scrunch-face. She babied the Cayenne through a right turn, but despite her measure of care, the car seesawed on its axles, and he couldn't help the twisted gasp that skipped from his lips as pain drove deep. The noise lost itself in the tidal waves of rock and roil, and Meredith didn't look over or seem to notice.

He tried to give himself support with the pillow, but he already held it with so much force that his arms had started to ache on top of everything else. Discomfort made him pant. He couldn't escape.
On top of the constant hurt, his chest felt full and wet and sore when he breathed. He'd been fighting the urge to cough for what seemed like eternity.

Are you okay for a longish drive? she'd asked that morning.

Derek glanced into the side view mirror. The gun pointed at his face, and his tormenter grinned. “Yes, Dr. Shepherd,” said Gary Clark. “Are you okay for a longish drive?”

Derek pressed his forehead against the cool glass and let his eyes drift shut. The constant jarring had started out tolerable, but now even the lulls between jostles left him stuck in a solid vise of ache. Her shrill wailing jammed icepicks into his eardrums. He swallowed against a roll of nausea.

Are you okay for a longish drive? she'd asked within moments of him waking. His eyelashes had stuck together like they'd been glued. He'd wiped away grit, swallowed, and peered at her groggily from his contorted position over the arm of the chair in their bedroom. When he'd shrugged, he hadn't really had a good concept of Meredith's idea of longish. He'd been thinking maybe a half hour. Not this. Not eternity.

He'd stumbled into the shower that morning, and he'd stayed there an extra fifteen minutes because the steamy air had let him breathe. Finally. Air. But then the heat had made him lightheaded and dizzy, and his choice had been to faint or be finished. He'd eaten two bowls of flavorless Raisin Bran for breakfast, and then she'd stuffed him into his car, all bright and bubbly and bouncing. He hadn't seen her this animated or happy in weeks. Since before he'd been shot. And he'd let himself get swept up in her excitement.

My first day off, she'd said as she'd helped him climb into the front seat, grunting with the effort of supporting his weight. And I have a surprise for you.

Much more fun to listen to than the discouraging messages his body parts had been sending him. Stop. Derek, stop it. We're getting sick. We're getting sick, and we really don't want to be in a car for a long time. Please? Be nice? Maybe just sleep today? Haven't you abused us enough lately?

His eyes watered and pricked with tears as his wits approached their ends.

He peeled his eyelids back, only to see Gary Clark grinning at him, as if to say, “Look at what I did! Look at all the havoc I've wrought. Poor, depressed, stressed-out Derek let his immune system go belly-up.”

“Stop it,” Derek croaked. To her. To Gary Clark. To himself. He didn't know. “Please, stop,” he repeated, unable to take it anymore. He sniffed. Snot bubbled in his nose, and he couldn't breathe. Air crackled in his lungs, impeded by fluid. He wouldn't fucking cough. He would not.

One more, Dr. Shepherd. Just one more.

Meredith's singing ceased, and her supernova of excitement collapsed. Guilt pressed against his consciousness, even as he shuddered with the sheer relief of silence. His body swayed to the left, toward Meredith, as she pulled off the road onto the right shoulder. She turned off the car's engine, and he stared, helpless, scratchy eyes watering, at the cracked pavement to the left and rocks and bushes and overhanging trees to the right.

“Hey, what's wrong?” she said. She squeezed his thigh.
“Nothing's wrong,” he said.

“Liar, liar, pants on fire,” said Gary Clark as he sneered in the mirror.

The silence stretched as Meredith stared at Derek, undeterred. He heard himself wheezing as he watched his foggy breaths claw along the glass window. His nose ran. Snot crawled down the skin of his upper lip, creeping and slow, and there was no surreptitious way to fix himself. He inhaled. The increase in pressure made his head feel like it was splitting open, and the frothing sound of his breath, bubbling deep in his nasal cavity, embossed everything on an embarrassing neon sign for her.

Derek. Sick. See the lump in the passenger seat for details.

She brushed his forehead with the back of her palm. He didn't push her away or move or do much of anything. “You're hot,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “So are you.”

Her lip curled with a hint of amusement, but then worry doused her expression with a frown. “I think you have a slight fever,” she clarified. She petted his face, her fingers twisting through a wayward curl. Her lip quivered, and her gaze seemed watery.

“I'm not sick.”

“You sound awful, Derek.”

“Thank you for finally noticing,” he snapped. He hugged the pillow and curled against the door, away from her. The air conditioner rushed.

“I thought...” She sniffled. “I thought you were doing the mopey thing this morning. You've been gloomy and monosyllabic all week. I didn't know you were getting sick. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, Derek.”

He couldn't look at her as she wiped away tears. He hadn't meant to be nasty, he just...

She sighed. “I never should have taken you on such a long trip this early. This was stupid. It was a stupid, stupid plan.” Her fingers squeezed his pant leg, and then flattened out into soft, reassuring strokes, and he closed his eyes against the torrential desire to yell or hit something or do anything but sit in this car and feel like he was dying. She shouldn't be sobbing because she'd taken him on a fucking car trip. Would this ever end?

“I'm not sick,” he said. “I'll be okay.”

“You have a slight fever,” she said. “This could be pneumon—”

“I'm not fucking sick!” he said, but his voice chose that moment to give out, and the last word came out a hoarse, breathy squeak.

“Okay,” Meredith said, her voice soft. She stroked his thigh. “Okay, I'm sorry.”

A car drove past them, and the Cayenne swayed as the air disturbed by the passing vehicle buffeted it. Derek let his lips part, and he panted, more wheezing than anything else, but he needed air, and his nose was fast becoming a dead end for oxygen. Gary Clark smiled at him from the mirror, almost gleeful. Frustration bolstered by exhaustion and pain coiled in Derek's gut. He tried to breathe. Congestion thickened in his chest, and the effort of being angry didn't seem very
attractive after about three or four seconds. He funneled what was left into determination. This
could not be happening to him.

“So,” Derek said. He sniffed, and he blinked, and he tried to make a show of looking ready to go
again. He fumbled with his seat belt, and he resettled the pillow. “What's this surprise?”

He glanced at her and frowned. He'd apparently said something very wrong. She bit her lip, and her
concerned gaze deepened into outright, unmitigated worry, like he'd just inadvertently admitted he
had the plague or something.

“You mean you haven't guessed it yet?” she said. She stared, her gaze piercing.

“I don't...” he stuttered, and then he looked. Outside. He stared out the windshield down the long,
winding road. A double yellow line bisected two lanes. Tall trees surrounded them on both sides,
low, weeping boughs hanging over the road to form a makeshift, verdant cavern. His hand
tightened against the door handle as recognition overcame confusion. In a few miles, there would
be a break in the trees that housed a small gravel lot with a market place and a drugstore and a gas
station. Beyond that, after several more miles, the road would turn off into obscurity. The elevation
would rise. The road would climb out of the solid clot of trees, higher, higher, and then, “My land.”

“I figured it would be good for you,” she said. “You can stretch out on the dock and snooze in the
sort-of sunshine. And the contractors—"

“My land,” he repeated.

“Yeah.”

“Keep going.”

She sighed. “Derek, the last road isn't paved. That's why I brought the pillow for you. And you
look really, really—"

“Please,” he said. “Please, Meredith. Please, I want to see my lake. Please.”

Embarrassment made him shake, but he couldn't stop begging. His land.

He realized, if she wanted to, there wasn't much he could do to stop her from taking him home. He
couldn't drive. Through exhausting repetition, he'd built his stamina back up to the point where he
could manage two twenty-minute walks a day, or once around Meredith's hilly block without
throwing up in the foyer at the end. He could climb the stairs in their house in about five minutes.
And he'd discovered two days ago that he could sleep on his side for very short periods of time. His
list of can-dos had grown, but was still woefully short. He had no doubt she could manhandle him
against his will if she felt she needed to. She'd already demonstrated time and time again that her
physical strength far exceeded his own at the moment.

But he thought of the water as it crashed around his body. The way Meredith lay on the dock in her
small red bikini, sunning. The perfection of the soft earth and the tall grass and the way the wind
blew across the reeds with a low, soothing whistle. The ducks that churned the choppy water with
their tiny feet as they swum by in a flock of feathers and happy chatter.

Reflective water spread out like rippled glass before his eyes.

His land.

*I can do whatever I want in here.*
He hadn't seen it in weeks.

“Please,” he said.

The tormented look on her face crumpled. “Okay,” she said. “Okay, I'm... Will you let me take a look at you first?”

“Why?”

“Because if you're dying of influenza or pneumonia, I'd at least like to know, even if you don't care.”

“But I'm fine,” he said. “I'm not sick. I can't be sick.”

“Liar, liar, liar,” Mr. Clark taunted.

Derek's chest tightened as he tried to pull in air. His diaphragm pushed into his lungs, and he forced out a slow, wheezy exhalation against the upswing of force, trying not to let go. In, out. In, out. He held his pillow against his body, and he breathed. Shivery urges to cough tortured him for a tense minute before he couldn't stop himself anymore.

A deep, wet, spuming cough pasted him against the back of the seat. The pillow barely did a thing to stop the knife that plunged into his sternum and sawed along the slowly healing line of bone. His eyes watered, and an uncontrolled shout of pain flew from his lips.

Meredith's seat-belt clicked. She popped the trunk and slipped out of the car. The space around his head spun. He grimaced and sniffed and panted as misery crushed him in its jagged embrace, and he didn't pay much attention to her at all until his door opened. She reached across his body and un-clipped his seat belt. Something crumpled and rustled as she leaned, and it hit his knee. He watched, almost as though he were watching a movie, unable to act, as she put his small blue Nike duffel bag on the floor by his feet. He kept his things in that bag. His doctor things. Just in case. In the trunk. She'd—

Her arms wrapped around his body, and she pulled him forward. The pillow quashed between their bodies. She held him prisoner against her shoulder. She fumbled with his shirt at the hemline, and something cold pressed against his back. His skin twitched.

“Breathe deeply,” she said.

_Breathe deeply, Dr. Shepherd._

The gelid clutches of anxiety pulled at his body. He rested his forehead against her clavicle.

She listened, placing the stethoscope against the skin over each lung, upper and lower, front and back. He tried not to wheeze or cough or snuffle or sound horrible, but his efforts didn't seem to make a difference. Her grip around his body grew tighter and tighter, and he knew she was panicking. His fault. His fucking fault. And then his nose ran, and he had to suck in breath after breath to keep from ruining her shirt.

When she'd finished, she sighed, a shivery, panty thing that sounded dangerously close to Meredith-in-tears. He didn't want her to cry. He couldn't stand it. She ripped his black stethoscope away from her face and let it fall against the duffel bag to the floor by his feet. She wiped her eyes with her fists, and then she hugged him, not speaking. Her palms ran up and down his back, soothing.
He coughed again, as horrible as the first. Tears welled in his eyes as pain sliced his body open at the seams. He moaned into her shirt, and her grip tightened. He didn't want to do this. He couldn't do this again. He'd been finished when they'd sent him home.

This would set him back to the beginning. If they took him back to the hospital and he was laid up for days on end, he'd be back to barely being able to walk down the hall. If they needed to put him back on the ventilator, they'd put the urinary catheter and the IV back in, and he wouldn't be able to speak. He vaguely remembered the feeling of breathing through a straw, only able to watch while Meredith babbled at him, and he'd hated it.

“Derek, your lungs sound really bad,” she said.

“Please, I want to see my lake,” he said.

“How long have you felt congested?”

He swallowed. “Since yesterday.”

She sighed. “Your head, your chest, or both?”

“Both,” he said.

“You haven't been coughing.”

“It hurts,” he confessed, and her grip tightened more. “Please. I don't want to spend the night in the hospital. It's not pneumonia. It's not.”

She held him in her arms. Another car sped past. He stared over her shoulder through the bug-splattered windshield. Tunnels of green and shadow flashed white. White walls. White halls. White sheets. The rhythmic pulsing of his heart monitor echoed in his ears.

_You're not the man._

“I'm not sick,” he said, helpless.

She wound her fingers through his hair, and she kissed his temple. “I'm going to stop at the drug store and get you some Mucinex or something for the upper respiratory stuff, and you're going to take it,” she said.

“Okay.”

“And if this doesn't get any better by tonight, I'm taking you to the hospital, Derek,” she said. “You just had heart surgery three weeks ago, your lungs sound like there's a small ocean of crap stuck in them, and you have a slight fever. We shouldn't even be having this discussion. I should be driving you to the ER. You know it just as much as I do.”

“It's not post-op pneumonia,” he said.

“Derek, if you were your patient, what the hell would you call this then?”

He couldn't stop another hacking, wet cough. He shivered against her, the pain making him dizzy. He hugged the pillow. “I don't know,” he said, his voice weak and distant. He swallowed, and Gary Clark laughed in his ears as Meredith returned to her side and started up the car.

He rested against the door as his Cayenne began to move. She jammed her hand on the gearshift and tried to pull out into traffic. As she drove the car off the shoulder, a horn blared, and she had to
slam on the brakes to keep from being t-boned. Momentum pushed him into the seat belt, and he
couldn't stop a tortured bark of pain. The pillow made it less catastrophic than it would have been.
He fought for breath against hurt and barely won.

“Damn it,” she cursed, and she slammed her hands against the steering wheel as she panted and her
face turned bright red. “I hate this car. I hate it, Derek! The blind spots are bigger than trucks.”

The black spots in his vision flickered into normal sight. “Then why did you drive it?” he said,
trying to peel the suffering grimace off his face. He sniffled.

“Because the suspension is smoother than the one on my Jeep,” she said, and then she sighed.

He closed his eyes as the Cayenne started to move. She hit the accelerator, and the engine
hummed. “Oh,” he said. She'd driven it for him, then. Great. So, she'd planned a surprise. She'd
thought of everything from a pillow for his chest, to the smoother suspension of his vehicle over
hers, to help make him more comfortable. And all he'd done was moan in pain and yell at her.

Another bubbly cough shattered his frame, and this time when his eyes watered, they spilled over
for several blinks before he got a grip on himself. He didn't want to cough, god, damn it. Except
letting the first one loose seemed to have given a whole torrent of them permission to lay waste to
his fragile sternum. Panting as he tried to recuperate, he leaned his head back against the seat. His
chest hurt. It really, really hurt. At least, at the hospital, when they'd bugged him to cough a few
times in the morning, they'd left alone long enough afterward to recover before asking him to do it
again.

Gravel churned under the tires as she pulled into the small parking lot in front of the drug store and
the market. The car handled the gravel well, but he couldn't help gripping the pillow tighter,
waiting for something awful to punish him. Nothing did. When she stopped and put the car in park,
she looked at him.

“I'll be right back,” she said. She grabbed her purse and exited, leaving him alone in misery.

He closed his eyes, and let his thoughts drift away.

“Derek,” Meredith said as she looked up. She sat in the dim light at the small dining table across
from his kitchenette. She wore one of his t-shirts and nothing else. The paper crumpled as she
folded her issue of Cosmo shut and sighed.

“What?” he said, grinning. “Are you not happy to see me?” He dropped off his grocery sack on
the counter top. He planned to grill steaks tonight, ply her with a sixty dollar bottle of wine, and
lay with her naked under the carpet of stars on a picnic cloth.

She shrugged. “I'm always happy to see you. I love you.”

_He sat across from her. The cushion on the chair squeaked. He frowned. He reached across the_
_table to brush her lower lip with his finger, relishing the soft rippled surface of her skin. Her_
_favorite lip gloss made his thumb slip. She licked the tip of his nail, but then she pulled away and_
_looked down at the table._

“Well, what's wrong?” he said.

_She fiddled with her hands. “I think you come here too much,” she said._

_He shrugged. “Because I need it.”_
“I know you think you do.”

He peered at her. Her hair tumbled down, loose and tangled with sleep, and she wore no makeup. Her skin glowed anyway. Ruddy imperfections marred her face and neck, a small peppering of flaws, but they did nothing to detract, nothing to make her less his or less beautiful. Need devoured him as he stared at her. His wife.

“I've wanted to do this all week,” he said. He stood and moved to her side of the bench. He kissed her and let his eyes close as the heady scent of her skin swept against him. She twisted backward, a small moan skipping from her lips. His shirt on her body rustled as he fiddled with the hem. She tasted him, and then she pulled away.

“You have done this all week,” she replied.

“What can I say?” he rumbled against her skin. “You're irresistible.”

She wiped her wrist against her lips as if to erase the taste of him, splayed her palm against his chest, and pushed him backward. He caught himself on the edge of the bench before he fell to the floor. He panted, flummoxed, as she stared at him. Her skin had flushed. He'd turned her on, and yet... “You're ignoring me again,” she said.

“Please, Meredith.”

She shook her head. “This isn't a good idea anymore.”

“But I need it!”

She looked at him like he'd sucker-punched her. Her lower lip quivered. Tears welled up. She looked at the trailer and he followed her gaze, past the bricked windows and the grocery bag and the mussed sheets on the bed.

Her soft, gray stare met his gaze.

“I'm not really Meredith,” she said. “You get that, right?”

“Derek,” Meredith whispered against his ear. She rattled his shoulder. “Derek, come on. Wake up.”

He coughed. The deep, bubbling sound of fluid caught in his chest, and he coughed again and again, until he felt bell-rung and half-dead and dizzy with agony. His trailer morphed into the small beige cabin of his Cayenne. Sunshine slammed into his eyeballs through the windshield. The tennis ball in his head had been exchanged for a basketball. He couldn't breathe or think or move.

She held him while he panted and wheezed, trying to catch his breath. Her feet churned gravel as she shifted to compensate for his weight. She rummaged through something she held behind his spine. The familiar jingle of a pill bottle intervened in the silence. Her shoulders shifted as she snap-twisted the child-proof cap. She pushed a cold water bottle against his palm. He grasped it by reflex. She gave him something. A small, solid dollop. A pill. Some decongestant or something. He didn't know what kind. He wasn't sure he cared. He took the pill and a swig of water and closed his eyes while she embraced him, rubbing his back and whispering.

“Please,” he said. “I need to see my land. It's only a few miles. Don't take me to the hospital.”

Her palm pressed against his forehead. Her fingers felt cold, but she'd been holding a water bottle.
“Do you feel cold, like you might be getting a fever?” she said. “Don't you dare lie to me.”

“No,” he said. She rummaged through his doctor duffel. Plastic crinkled. Before he knew it, he had a thermometer jammed in his mouth while she glared. “M'not lying,” he said around the small device. His tongue rubbed against the sterile plastic sleeve as he spoke. A lump formed in his throat.

After a minute, she took it out and stared, holding it up to the gray and blue sky framed in a square by the trees at the edges of the parking lot. “100.2,” she said, squinting.

“It's low-grade,” he said. “I'm fine.”

“Scale of 1 to 10, how bad is it?” she said. She leaned into him, her eyes inches from his. Her frosty, slate gaze pierced him as she gripped his shoulder. “Don't. Lie. This is your life, and it's very freaking important to me, even if you seem to be an uncaring idiot about it.”

Red blush crept over his face. “I'm not an idiot. I care.”

Her fingernails dug into his skin as her fingers clenched. “Scale?”

“7,” he said. “10 when I cough, but only because it fucking hurts.”

She stared at him for a long march of moments, a vicious battle of should she or shouldn't she sprawled across her face. She reached across his lap into the back seat. A bag crinkled. His pain pills. She made sure they carried them everywhere the few times they'd been out. She pulled his Percocet bottle loose from the pile of other bottles. “Will you take one more Percocet before we try the road to your land?”

“I already took two.”

“I know, but you look really miserable already, and I couldn't bear—”

He stared at the pill resting on her palm and, without further argument, swept it into his hand. He tilted back his head, and he took it with another swig of water. The pill caught in his esophagus, and he swallowed again and again, finally forcing it down. The cabin spun around his head. He blinked. She watched him as he re-settled, wordless, and then she slammed the car door in his face. He flinched.

When his heartbeat calmed, he stared at his lap, eyes watering. She was angry again. She was fucking angry at him, and he didn't know why or what the hell to do about it anymore. He didn't want to make her angry. Helpless frustration heated his breaths.

The car wobbled on its frame as she tore open the door on her side and settled herself with a huff. She jammed the key in the ignition like she wielded a knife for stabbing. Her knuckles turned white as clutched the key and turned it in the ignition. The car rumbled to life. She fought with her seat belt. In her agitation, she missed grabbing it and twisted again, spitting and hissing curses.

She pointed at the water bottle in the cup holder without looking at him. “Drink the rest of that.”

A cough and a moan pasted him to his seat, and he trembled, barely able to breathe, miserable. “I'm sorry,” he said, feeling useless. He wasn't even sure what he was apologizing for, but he could do that. Say sorry. He'd made a fucking Olympic event out of expressing remorse. It was one of his only skills that getting shot hadn't fucking robbed from him. “Meredith, I'm sorry.”

She flipped down her sunglasses over her face and backed the car out of its parking spot. Gravel
churned. “I hate you, sometimes, Derek,” she said through gritted teeth. “I really freaking do.”

He swallowed. “Why?”

“Because you're leaving this up to me! You're sick. You're really sick. You won't admit it because you're scared witless, which isn't allowed, because you're the mighty Derek Shepherd, a man who is completely incapable of admitting fear unless the confession is drawn-and-quartered out of him, and now I'm stuck making what could be a life-or-death decision. I don't want to take you to your land, because as a doctor, I know that's probably the biggest mistake ever. But I don't want to take you to the hospital, because as your wife, I know that's probably the biggest mistake ever. And I hate you, Derek. I fucking hate you.”

He blinked as he stared at the windshield. His head started to whirl with the new introduction of painkillers. He couldn't breathe. His nose ran. He sniffled, and his torso shook as embarrassing, uncontrollable tears leaked. They crawled down his face, collected at the edges of his cheeks, and fell with wet splats onto his warmups, leaving darkened, round scars on the cotton.

“Hmm,” Gary Clark said from the mirror. “Wrecking your marriage now, too? Making you cry like a gutless coward in front of your wife? You're almost making me glad I missed your heart.”

Derek's hands shook as he wiped his face. Spit collected between his lips and teeth as he sniveled. Every fucking orifice on his face was leaking some sort of fluid. He felt disgusting. And shameful. And the licking heat of self-conscious distress wouldn't stop flushing across his face and his neck and his throat and... Hot. Now, he did feel hot. And awful. A deep, wet grunt of discomfiture tore through him. Pain.

And he couldn't stop crying.

She took one look at Derek and growled. “God,” she huffed. “This is turning into the crappiest surprise I've ever—”

“It's okay,” he said. Spasms of grief shook him. He watched the scenery pass by the window. Endless trees and bracken and moss. The cave of forest and fauna made the car dark. He gripped the door handle and the pillow.

“It's not okay,” she snapped. “There's nothing about this that's okay.”

“It's my fault.”

“It's not,” she said. “I've been trying so hard to be more sensitive or whatever, and I think this has pretty much proven that I'm a giant freaking failure when it comes to you. You're dying of pneumonia, and I didn't even notice because I'm so stuck on me, me, me. And now you're upset, and I don't want you to be upset, but I can't stop yelling at you because I hate you. I hate this. I hate Gary Fucking Clark. I just want things to be better.”

“I'm sorry,” he said. His tongue lost connection with his sentience. He blinked as the solid rush hit him. His grip on the door loosened. “Uh.”

“Stop it,” she snapped. “Stop saying that when you have nothing to be sorry for. If you say you're sorry one more time I think I might scream. You drive me crazy!”

“Ditto,” he managed. He rested his head against the door and inhaled with a deep, wet, bubbly breath.

“I... Okay.” She sighed. “You may have a point.”
Tense, awful silence separated them, and for the first time since she'd married him, he felt alone despite the mere feet of space between them. Alone like he'd felt in the hotel, days after he'd discovered Addison with Mark. Alone and drunk and nauseated and not sure whether he would ever get out of bed again. He clutched the pillow, unable to stop crying.

Exhaustion gripped him. He hurt without dignity, and no matter how much he tried, he couldn't pull himself together.

“Don't take me to Seattle Grace,” he said.

“What?”

“I don't want to go back there. Please. Maybe Seattle Pres?”

She bit her lip. Her palm came to rest on his shoulder as she accepted his shaky olive branch. She rubbed his arm, and he let the soothing tide pull him into the ocean. Disorientation made his sense of the passing scenery feel more like a drive-by in an impressionistic painting gallery. Greens and browns and earthy tones melded into muddy, featureless nothing. He swallowed as invisible cotton balls sucked the moisture out of his mouth.

“I still love you,” she said in the quiet roar. “Even though I hate you.”

His eyelids dipped shut. He didn't reply. She turned onto the unpaved portion of the road. The rear axle had barely touched the dirt, and he was already glad she'd suggested the third Percocet. He accepted the torture in silence, willing himself with the last of his reserves not to cry out after every pot hole, pock mark, ruffle, and dent in the muddy road. He'd asked for this. His land. For a few hours before she took him to the hospital. He strained against the pillow, trying to hang on to something, anything. His mind snapped out of conscious thought like a rubber band flung from a slingshot.

“Derek,” Meredith said as she looked up. She sat in the dim light at the small dining table across from his kitchenette. She wore one of his t-shirts and nothing else. The paper crumpled as she folded her issue of Cosmo shut and sighed.

“What?” he said, grinning. “Are you not happy to see me?” He dropped off his grocery sack on the counter top. He planned to grill steaks tonight, ply her with a sixty dollar bottle of wine, and lay with her naked under the carpet of stars on a picnic cloth.

She grinned. “I'm always happy to see you. I love you.”

He sat across from her. The cushion on the chair squeaked. He reached across the table to brush her lower lip with his finger, relishing the soft rippled surface of her skin. Her favorite lip gloss made his thumb slip. She licked the tip of his nail and moaned.

He peered at her. Her hair tumbled down, loose and tangled with sleep, and she wore no makeup. Her skin glowed anyway. Ruddy imperfections marred her face and neck, a small peppering of flaws, but they did nothing to detract, nothing to make her less his or less beautiful. Need devoured him as he stared at her. His wife.

“I've wanted to do this all week,” he said. He stood and moved to her side of the bench. He kissed her and let his eyes close as the heady scent of her skin swept against him. She twisted backward, a small moan skipping from her lips. His shirt on her body rustled as he fiddled with the hem. She tasted him, and then she pulled away and laughed.

“You have done this all week,” she replied.
“What can I say?” he rumbled against her skin. “You're irresistible.”

She wiped her wrist against her lips as if to postpone the taste of him, splayed her palm against his chest, and pushed him backward. “Bed,” she said as she tangled with his shirt. “Now.”

They shuffled toward the back of the trailer. He shucked his shoes and his shirt, and she grappled with the buttons on his fly, and then he was falling. Falling backward. His body slammed into the bed. He huffed as he flattened and bounced back. She collapsed on top of him in a giggling tangle of angular limbs and silky skin.

“I love you,” she said, and she kissed him on his lips, on his throat, on his chest. She trailed to his bellybutton, and he laughed, deep and rumbling and loose.

“It's my turn today,” he said. He flipped her on her back, and she shrieked with delight. “Why is my shirt still on your body?” he said.

“Because you didn't take it off yet,” she replied, eyes alight.

“This is a dilemma,” he said.

“The bigger dilemma would be that you're still wearing your pants.”

“Hmm. Very true.”

Her tiny hands curled over his waistband. Her knuckles dug into his skin. She rolled his jeans down his hips and paused. Her eyebrows shot up. “Commando?”

“Why would I care about my underwear in this place?”

“You always put me in mine.”

He grinned. “That's because I like to take it off you.” He kissed her on the throat, and he delighted with the vibrations underneath her skin as she laughed. “Piece.” He kissed her in the dip where her clavicles met her sternum. “By.” Her body rolled back in a wave as he yanked up his soft indigo shirt and peeled it from her body. He took a nipple in his mouth and sucked. Her fingers spider-walked against his naked back. “Piece.”

“Derek,” she moaned. Her knees imprisoned his hips as she opened for him. “Please.”

“Are you wet already?”

“Make me,” she replied. “Are you hard already?”

He leered. “Make me.”

He slithered out of his jeans and pushed against her. Heat radiated against his groin. He kissed her as she slipped her hand between their bodies and touched him, stroked him base to tip. “Oh,” he groaned, panting. A slave to the building pressure she wrought, he pressed against her hand. Friction built, and another groan tumbled out of him. “Stop,” he managed.

“Stop?”

He laughed. “It's my turn, remember?”

He captured her lips before she could answer, tasting the salt and sweetness of her skin. Arms shaking, he pushed himself down, down until he fell over the tip of the bed into a kneeling position.
He grabbed her thighs and yanked her against his body with a growl. Her knees hooked over his shoulders, and he buried himself in her warmth. He curled his tongue against soft skin between her thighs, and she screamed, and he moaned, and then everything tumbled out of focus as he brought her to a trembling halt on a ledge below the pinnacle.

Her body shuddered as he licked her inner thigh. Exquisite heat. “I want you,” she panted. She rose up and clutched his shoulders. “I want to see you. Now, Derek. Now.”

He climbed back into bed with a playful growl. She cupped him as she kissed everywhere she could reach. “Mmm. Hard, now,” she murmured.

“Wet, now,” he replied. He let her taste herself on his lips, and she loosed a warbling moan that made his muscles shiver and his groin tighten with need.

“Fuck me,” she said. “Fuck me, now.”

He propped himself on his elbows, flat above her body. She wrapped her legs around him. Her body heaved as he peered into her glassy, lust-drugged eyes. With a grunt, he found home, and he closed his eyes to keep from spilling as hot and wet and slick and tight overwhelmed all other sensation. His breaths shivered, and her internal muscles clenched.


She grimaced and squirmed. Her breasts heaved as she struggled for air. “Anything, Derek. Fuck me. Please.”

“How about slow?” he said. “I can do slow.” He pulled out and pushed in by inches, and he rumbled as tension locked his body and the buzzing sensation became a constant wail. He rested his lips by her ear, and he told her softly, “I can do incredibly slow.”

Out and in again, and she moaned. “I love you,” she said.

“Hmm. I love you, too.”

She clawed his back and he stroked her insides once, twice, again. Slow. He let the harrying rhythm pull him toward mental frenzy. The wail became a tormenting siren. Move. Move, faster. He denied it as long as he could, delighting in her moans and sighs and soft breaths against his body. Home. Her body was home, and he’d found it, and he never wanted to leave. He just wanted to come in. Again and again and again.

Her fingers twisted against his shoulder blades. She squeezed her legs around his body, until every time he met her with his hilt in a slow grind, she screamed and she squeezed and he felt like he was in the grips of a boa constrictor. Sweat meandered down his spine and dotted her brow as he tortured her. Tortured himself.

“I need this,” he said. “I need you. I need to be me.”

“I know,” she said as he speared her again. Again.

“I want you.”

“You have me. Take me.”

He couldn’t hold it in anymore. His lower body tightened like a screw and then snapped. The world
split apart. He yelled as his body shuddered and twitched and he moved within her, lost to everything. Bright light flashed in his eyes. He arched his head back.

Heaven exploded into exquisite hell. Sunlight pierced the small crescents of space between his eyelids. He moaned as a dark, blurry shadow crossed his vision.

“We're here,” Meredith's soft voice said.

Reality crushed him, and he leaned into her arms, silent, feeble and unable. His sinuses felt a little more clear. Not a lot. His nose didn't leak between every inhalation. But he still couldn't breathe, and the horrible car ride had crushed his normal pain tolerance into tiny bits while he'd been absent. His sternum hurt. It didn't ache. It hurt. Like he'd been pried open with a sternal retractor, and then the surgeon had forgotten to staple him back together. Pain-born nausea coiled at the back of his throat, threatening to make him lose his breakfast in a wet splatter all over Meredith's shirt.

She leaned through the car door and held him. Something clicked. He felt his seat belt loosen. “How are you doing?” she asked, her voice soft and low.

His troubled, strained gasp answered for him.

“How are you doing?” she said.

He forced his feet over the floor panel into air, and he let gravity pull him into a wobbly standing position. His weight rested against Meredith. She swayed under the assault, but she shuffled back one step and then two, found her balance, and braced herself for him. His cross-trainers squished in the soft, wet dirt and spongy grass. Through a nauseated blur, he saw his trailer resting on the earth twenty feet away.

Bird calls, insects buzzing, and the soft whistle of the breeze soothed his ears. His heart pounded, and his breaths quickened as adrenaline contributed to the chemical mess in his bloodstream. “M'land,” he slurred. He took a step, only to stumble.

“You're totally stoned, Derek. Be careful.”

The distant chatter of ducks and geese and other water fowl drew his gaze to the right. He couldn't see the water or the dock from the trailer. Elevation changes and tall reeds interrupted the view. But he could feel the wet breeze against his face.

“M'lake.”

“I think you should lie down for a few minutes first before we try that hike,” Meredith said. “Okay?”

“M'lake's over there,” he told her.

Her grip tightened around his waist. “I know. And you can stretch out there in a bit. But why don't you lie down first?” she said.

Another step, and the tidal wave of adrenaline receded. He breathed and clutched her body. With a weak, shaky nod, he let her lead him to the trailer. Wrong. A vague sense of wrongness invaded his body as his feet hit the deck. A tarp covered the grill, but he knew he'd pulled it off that morning because he'd planned to grill steaks. And, despite the breeze and the birds and all the perfect things, he felt horrible. He wasn't supposed to feel horrible here. He was supposed to feel better.

His body shivered as she fumbled with her keys and unlocked the door. Light slanted into the small
cabin through the windows. They shuffled inside, and sound muffled into almost silence. Too bright. No bricks over the windows. Meredith guided him to the bench at the table. “Let me put out clean sheets, okay?” she said. She left him without waiting for an answer.

Her issue of Cosmo had disappeared. And his groceries didn’t sit on the counter by the sink. The light made his eyes water, and he blinked. There were supposed to be bricks. Where were the bricks? The room swirled, and he put his head down on the table. Wrong. All of this was fucking wrong. He coughed, wet and wheezy against the place mat. A sob of pain popped loose from his lips, and he rested there in abject misery.

Arms gripped him around the waist. “Okay,” said Meredith. “All set. Are you doing okay?”

No. But he didn’t answer.

She helped him stand up and shamble down the short hallway to the bed. He lay on his back. She propped him up with piles of soft pillows, and she tucked all the blankets around him after she pulled off his shoes. She kissed his cheek, and then she settled next to him, warm and breathing and alive. The mattress sank with her small weight. The flat of her palm rested under his shirt against his bellybutton.

He stared at the ceiling, hazy and drugged. He couldn’t move. Miles of clothes and blankets separated them. His breaths struggled in his chest, and though he felt less congested above the neck, below remained a haven for discomfort. He sniffed, and he coughed, and his eyes scratched with latent sickness. Pain radiated through his torso. And he did feel hot. Now. Uncomfortably so. Mindless, he pushed back the comforter. She snuffled in her sleep and resettled. The very idea of sex nauseated him.

All wrong. All fucking wrong.

His eyes drifted shut after a suffering forty-five minutes, and he didn’t know how long after that it took him to fall asleep.

“Did you irrigate the ears to induce an ocular response?” said the defense attorney.

“No, that was not necessary,” Derek said.

“Why?”

“The patient had a pupillary response.”

“So, you saw life in her eyes?” said the attorney.

Derek paused. Gary Clark glared at him, his eyes bloodshot and brimming with grief and anger. Derek bit back the urge to apologize. He’d dealt with plenty of unjustified malpractice suits before. Distraught loved ones could, at times, be difficult to deal with, but understandably so. He thought of how he would act if it were Meredith who’d died. Or even Addison. And he understood. He did. But that didn’t stop the headache beginning to bloom in his skull, or the dull slivers of upset that jabbed behind his eyes like toothpicks. Jab, jab. “There was a pupillary response,” he said.

“Yet, you declared her dead,” the attorney said.

Jab.

“No, you misunderstand—” Derek said.
“Absence of a pupillary response is one of the signs of brain death, yet, you declared her brain dead.”

“I never declared her brain dead. She had normal brain activity,” Derek said. His gaze wandered to Gary Clark. Mr. Clark didn’t move, but unmitigated hate clamped unseen hands around Derek’s neck. Derek blinked. “I’m sorry,” he said to Mr. Clark. Jab, jab. “I tried to explain to you that there was absolutely nothing—”

“So, she was alive, until you withdrew care, until you pulled the plug,” the attorney said, undeterred.

The headache flared like a brilliant sun. “I’m sorry I’m not being clear,” Derek said. “Um.” He inhaled, trying to vent the frustration away with oxygen. He’d made the right decision to unplug Mr. Clark’s wife. He knew it. But the attorney’s relentless questioning and Mr. Clark’s unwavering, hateful gaze made him want to crumple. He tried to keep his cool. “According to the letter of her advanced directive, there was a level of brain activity that I judged—”

“You judged, you decided,” the attorney needled.

“It was my opinion, to—”

Mr. Clark burst into tears, and Derek couldn’t take it anymore. His headache shrieked in his ears, and his heart burst as it beat and beat and beat. The room around them disappeared in a red-tinged blur, and he launched across the table with the athletic grace of a big cat. He skidded on his knees. “She was a fucking vegetable, and she didn’t want to be,” he shouted as he wrapped his hands around Mr. Clark’s throat. “I didn’t kill her. Why don’t you understand? What do I have to say to make you fucking understand?”

Mr. Clark choked and sputtered, and his face turned a bright beet color. The chair squeaked under Mr. Clark’s body as he struggled, trying to free himself. Derek felt Mr. Clark’s flesh slip under his palms as sweat intervened like an oil slick.

“How does it feel, now?” Derek growled as he grappled for better leverage. He pushed his feet to the floor, and he stood. “I’m going to snap your fucking neck.”

Gary Clark wrapped his arms over Derek’s and yanked. Pain splintered Derek’s elbows, and his choke-hold skittered loose as he hissed with the unexpected jolt. The chair overturned. Mr. Clark’s wretched gasping filled the room as he stumbled backward, free. “Dr. Shepherd,” said Mr. Clark. “Please.”

“Nice try,” said Derek. He jammed a fist into Mr. Clark’s solar plexus, and Mr. Clark tumbled to the ground in a breathless heap. The conference room flashed soulless, clean white, and the small, enclosed space spread wide and open. The greenery of Seattle fanned out to the left like a verdant carpet. Drizzle fell against the huge side windows in the empty center of what should have been a bustling hospital.

“Please,” said Mr. Clark, and the word echoed in the open space like a thousand whispers.

“Shut up,” Derek said. “No talking. You’re not the man here.”

Derek flexed his fingers. Something cold and solid filled his grip, and he looked at the black semi-automatic cradled in his hand. The headache faded, and a calm, reassuring sense of power spread through his body. His joints loosened as pleasant adrenaline charged through his veins. His heart pumped, strong and sure. He inhaled, and all the pain and frustration and embarrassment and
churning guilt he'd ever felt as a result of this man drew into a pinpoint of pressure on the trigger, channeled through his index finger. The trigger gave a millimeter.

“I'm the man,” Derek said, and he pointed the gun.

He stood, omnipotent. He watched with cold satisfaction as Mr. Clark begged and pleaded with nonsensical gibberish born from terror. A globule of drool formed on Gary Clark's lips, and then he lost control of his bladder. A wet stain spread across the front of his pants.

Derek laughed. A sense of peace unfurled like a blooming rose. And then he pulled the trigger.

He woke up yelling and frenzied and caught, and he couldn't get away. Blankets twisted around his body. Sweat plastered his clothes to his skin. He didn't know which way was forward or backward or left or right. He didn't know where he was. All he saw was blood. All over his hands. On the floor. Everywhere. And he'd caused it.

“Derek!” said a voice.

He discovered the floor with a resounding slam that tore through his joints and his bones and his muscles and knocked him into a pained stupor. He lay there on his side, tangled and sandwiched between the bed and the too-close walls. Claustrophobia squeezed. He shook, staring at a floor he didn't recognize as his heartbeat slammed under his sternum. Every throb brought agony. Nausea roiled in his gut. He couldn't move as he watched Gary Clark die on his back in a spreading lake of blood. White turned red, and the light left Mr. Clark's eyes. Again, again, again.

Primum non nocere, Derek had been taught in medical school. First, do no harm.

A hand brushed his shoulder. “Get off me,” he snarled, and he closed his eyes as he shivered with stress and grief. He'd killed a man. He'd killed a man, and he'd enjoyed it. The hand drew away.

“It's just me, Derek. It's Meredith. It was just a bad nightmare. It's okay. You're okay. I'm here.”

He blinked. A nightmare. But he could smell the blood and bits and the burning gunpowder. And he could see the dull, glassy eyes of his victim. He could hear the words he'd spoken, stolen from the man who'd shot him three weeks before. And he could feel the laughter burble in his chest as he pulled the trigger.

The room blurred as he pulled the wrinkled, tangled blanket to his mouth to muffle his sob. Pain split him open. Derek Shepherd was a doctor. He wasn't a murderer. He wasn't like Gary Clark. He wasn't like the men who'd killed his dad. He was Derek Shepherd, and he helped people. He saved lives. He...

“I'm going to touch you,” she said, her voice hesitant. “Okay?” He stared, blank and empty, at the carpet as tears leaked down his face, and when he didn't protest, he felt her warm hands slide across his shoulder. “You're all tangled,” she explained, soft and soothing. The blanket moved. She pulled it from his torso and teased it through his legs and away from his ankle.

Freed, he curled into a fetal position. His ribs protested. His bullet wound wailed at him. The sternal incision flared. Pain fueled his tears, and he trembled with discomfort and exhaustion and sickness as he wrapped his arms around his knees and pulled into a ball. He coughed against his knees, and he coughed again, and once more before he could make himself stop.

“It's okay,” she said. Her palm stroked his side. Fingers stroked his hair. He felt the crawling pull along his scalp as her nails teased through each strand. His eyes slipped shut as he listened to her soothing. “Do you want to talk about it?” she said.
He couldn't bring himself to speak, and so he listened while she talked. She started with gentle platitudes. It's okay. It's all right. Everything is fine. Please, don't be scared anymore. She devolved into babbling about anything that came to her mind. She talked about the weather as she rubbed his body. She talked about a funny noise her Jeep had been making lately, and mentioned that she wanted him to look at it when he felt better. She talked about the errands she'd run the night before. She talked about Alex, and how excited she was that he would be coming home soon. And about Mark. About the latest book she'd read other than *The Sun Also Rises*, and why she was thinking about switching shampoos again. About her most recent cooking snafu. She even confessed that she'd messed up a load of his dress shirts by mixing lights with a dark red sweatshirt by accident, but that she would buy him new ones as soon as she could. Her monologue ran for minutes and minutes and minutes, until he lost all track of time, just listening to her voice.

“Do you want some water?” she asked after a long, long time. “You should drink some water.”

She left him for a moment. The faucet rushed. She put a full glass on the floor by his head, and she resettled. “Please, will you say something?” she said. “You don't have to talk about it.”

He sniffed, and it sounded wet and bubbly. She felt his forehead. “You feel really hot. Worse than before.”

“I don't have pneumonia,” he said.

She didn't speak as she rubbed him. For a long time, his wheezing and her soft breathing mingled in the muffled silence. Birds chirped. Sunlight crashed down. Nothing was right here, nothing. And lying on the floor with no support was tightening the pressure in his head and his chest. His back hurt. A vague chill swept through his muscles, followed by trembling he couldn't stop. He winced as he tried to get purchase enough with the carpet to sit up. She helped, which only made him feel worse. More ineffectual.

The room spun as he panted, and his brain tried to catch up with the fact that he'd changed perspectives. She supported him. He reached for the water she'd brought, and he could barely lift the glass. She had to help with that, too.

“I want to go home,” he croaked after several weak swallows.

“Can you stand up?” she said.

The embarrassing prospect of her calling an ambulance drove him to his feet. His muscles shivered with the stress of holding his weight. She put his shoes on, and she tied the laces while he braced himself in the doorway, trying not to fall down.

The twenty-foot walk back to the car seemed interminable. He collapsed into the seat. He blinked, lost track of her in the effort to stay conscious, and then from the nondescript abyss she jammed the thermometer into his mouth again. She watched him. He swallowed and closed his eyes. A niggling request for a blanket hovered in the back of his mind. Visible shakes surged up and down his limbs.

Not too hot, he willed his body. Please, no fever, god, damn it. God, damn everything.

She pulled the thermometer away, and she sighed. “103.2,” she said. “That's not low-grade anymore, Derek. Not even close.”

“Fuck,” he snapped. “God, damn it, I am not sick!”

A cough ripped through his body. His sternum and his left lung burned. He put a hand over the
bullet wound and closed his eyes, panting. He rested against her shoulder, breathing through his mouth because his nose had long since closed up solid. His muscles shivered, and he swallowed. Shivering meant his temperature was likely still rising, too. Damn it. God, damn it. Fucking...

She pushed the car door shut beside him. He watched through bleary, half-lidded eyes, at the space beyond the windshield while she walked around to her side of the car. All wrong. All of this was wrong. All of—

He stopped, and he blinked, and he stared. She sat in the drivers' side seat, and she started up the car. His fingers clasped his seat belt and released it. He flung himself from the car. He nearly collapsed as his feet hit the ground. He wheezed, and he couldn't stop staring.

“Derek!” Meredith called after him, but he didn't listen.

He forced himself forward. He made himself move. Not that far. He didn't have to make it that far. Half a mile. Mostly flat. A cinch. He pushed himself. His chest burned.

“What the hell are you doing?” Meredith said as she jogged beside him. She grabbed his arm and tried to make him stop, but he shook her off. “Derek, you're sick. Stop it.” She started to sob. “Stop it, please. You're going to give yourself heatstroke.”

Adrenaline poured into his body, and he kept going. He slogged through the small clot of trees and then through the disturbed mud and dirt and mire. Wide open space swept out beyond for miles and miles. Flocks of birds spiraled in the air in endless, lazy circles as they chased the wind with their wings extended. He collapsed on the front step, heart pounding in his chest. A big black curtain threatened to swallow him whole.

“What the hell!” Meredith said. “You're going to freaking kill yourself!” She shoved a water bottle at him. “Drink this before you die or something."

He took several moments to find his voice, and when he did, he sounded shaky, weak, and ill, but he spoke. “We have a house,” he said. He rested on the stoop, sipping water.

She glared. “Of plywood, yes. I would have driven the freaking car there if you'd asked instead of shot off like a marathoner.”

With another Herculean effort, he forced himself up the temporary slabs that would be brick-and-mortar steps in a few months, through the empty space that would be a door, and into the wooden maze of the lower floor. His feet thumped on the floor as he plodded into the wide open area that would be their living room. The smell of cut wood brushed his nose. He closed his eyes, and he pictured the house around him finished, with fresh paint and clean, sleek lines. Furniture. Lamps. A television. His framed diplomas on the wall. Hers. Pictures of his family and her friends on their mantle. A fire burning in the fireplace. The soothing scent of woodsmoke.

“This is our living room,” he said, barely able to find his breath.

She thumped after him. “What are you talking about?” she said.

He came to rest against the wall. A big bay window spread across almost the entire width of the room. He stuck his hand out into open space, and then he stared, breathless, at the open valley beyond. A balmy breeze whispered through the air. He shivered.

“We have a view,” he said.

She stared at him, her lips a flat line. Her eyes didn't sparkle. “I have a view,” she said. She crossed
her arms and stared at him, not through the windowless window.

He swallowed. “Was this the surprise?”

“The house of plywood?” she said. He nodded.

She sighed. “It was supposed to be.”

“We need to tell the contractors to put in a fence,” he said.

Her solid mask of fury cracked around the edges. She glanced at the window. “What?” she said. Her body shifted closer to him. “Why?”

“So our kids won't fall off the cliff.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, there is that. Not falling would be...”

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his nose against her neck, searching. His legs felt wobbly and strange, and his head swam. He found the pulse at her throat, and he kissed her.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Making kids?”

She stiffened in his arms, and she drew in a wet, shaky breath. She hugged him, one arm pressed against his back, like she was trying to keep him from bolting again, and the other cupping the back of his head. Her fingers scrunched, and his hair pulled as her grip tightened. “I think you're maybe delirious, Derek.”

A cough almost sent him to his knees, but she dug in, and she held him up. “Meredith...” he whispered, trying to breathe. His legs turned to jelly. He wanted to sit. Cristina had opened him up, and he could feel the knife. Cutting.

“You're burning up,” she said. “I need to take you to a hospital. Now, Derek.”

He clutched her with shaky palms. “Please, Meredith. I need it to stop.”

“I know, but—”

Tears spilled. “Please, make it stop.”

“Derek, you're really, really sick. You're not thinking straight.”

He breathed against her skin, and he blinked, and the house around them faded away. He stood maybe thirty feet from the car, ready to collapse. His body shivered, and he couldn't breathe. He saw the plywood construct in the distance, on the cliff, just like they'd planned. And he couldn't get there. He coughed, and his legs threatened to give out.

She pushed him toward the car and corralled him like some sort of fucking lost lamb.

“We can see the house later, Derek,” she said. He collapsed into the seat, sort of in the car, sort of out. She picked up his feet and dropped them on the floor mat, and then he couldn't move anymore. He coughed, and the invisible knife cut him into ribbons of pain. The back of her hand brushed his forehead. She took his temperature again, and whatever number she saw made her expression
collapse into a solid sheen of tears.

His teeth chattered as a frigid chill swept through him. His muscles twitched. Temperature going up, up, up and away. He lost track of her, lost track of everything. He wanted a blanket. Something to curl up in.

The car wobbled, and the engine started.

“Hang on,” she said.

His teeth clacked in the silence. Her hand rested on his thigh over his warmups.

“Meredith,” he said, but his voice fell away. Breaths bubbled in his chest.

“I'm here,” she said.

The Cayenne began to move, and he closed his eyes against the onslaught of pain. The ride down the hill seemed even worse than the ride up the hill. She took his hand, and she held it while he shivered.
Chapter 11

Derek didn't wake up so much as become self-aware.

One moment he'd been stuck in a strange, snarly place full of colors and horrible sounds and painful stimulation. Gary Clark hid behind every corner, echoed in every thought, and growled his words of discouragement with every breath. You're not the man. You're not the man. You're not the man. The next moment, the menace died, and Gary Clark's endless tormenting died with it, leaving Derek somewhere much more peaceful, though he didn't know where. The moment after, when he started to wonder about where that more peaceful place might be, that was when Derek Shepherd retook possession of his brain.

His body boiled, and he lay drenched and almost naked on a narrow bed in a strange place he didn't recognize. A hospital, but not Seattle Grace. A thin privacy curtain separated him from the rest of the bustle. Nothing else. A huge, clear, plastic mask cupped his nose and mouth, blocking his lower field of vision, but as a weak cough tore through him and puffed against the cover, he realized it was simply an oxygen mask, not a ventilator mask. Pain split his chest open. All he could do was lie there while it ravaged him. He panted, each breath laced with ache and discomfort. He couldn't breathe. But he tried.

Alone.

A sliver of fear cut deep, and it had no outlet. He didn't have the mental fortitude to shove it away. He tried to take stock of his situation. The heat made it hard to think. Hard to process anything. Hard to care. For a while, he lay there, listening and unfocused, hot. The glare of the lights gave everything an odd, wavering halo, and sounds seemed to stretch and lower in pitch like someone was playing life back to him on a cassette player running out of batteries.

A heart monitor droned in his ears in time with the throbbing pain, and it took him a very long time to realize that it was his. His heart monitor. His heart beating.

Salty sweat dripped into his eyes and burned, blurring the odd halos. He blinked against the swelter, and the excess water slipped loose from his eyes, crawling down the sides of his face like tears. He could sort of see.

The privacy curtain rustled. He stared through half-lidded eyes as a woman he didn't know slipped through the curtain carrying a bundle of things he was too hot, too tired, and too miserable to identify. “Hello, Dr. Shepherd,” she said brightly as she entered, but she didn't meet his gaze, and her words stretched into oblivion when his brain began the sluggish process of interpretation. Her intent focus lay centered on the objects she carried, and not on him, as if she were used to him staring at her without saying anything. Staring and being unaware.

She wore a uniform and a name tag. A tight ponytail held her black, frizzy hair away from her face. Calming, business-like vibes filled her presence. A doctor. Or maybe a nurse. She was there to work and nothing more.

She walked to the side of the bed, and he couldn't see what she was doing. Turning his head seemed... Effort. Too much. He lay there, staring and passive and limp, because he didn't know how to convince his body to do anything else. She picked up his arm and felt his wrist for his pulse. “Good.” Something beeped in his ear. Tympanic temperature. “Better,” she said. Pressure on his bicep meant blood pressure. “Good.” She checked his intravenous line for infection, and she checked the drip. All familiar things he'd done so many times himself to patients that he knew them
even in a fever dream. He couldn't bring himself to care about them.

“Well, Dr. Shepherd,” she said as she continued her cheerful dialog, “I think you're doing a lot better. Do you think you'll wake up soon? We'd really like to see you, if you don't mind stopping in. Your wife is pretty worried. But it's okay if you want to hang out for a while. No rush if you're having a good dream.”

She scribbled something on paper. She turned, and she picked up something she'd left... somewhere. Her body moved as something crackled loudly in the small space. “I'd like to get your temp down a little more before noon if I can. Maybe get you all the way out of the danger zone. Sound good?”

She lifted his left arm again. He didn't know what she was doing, but it didn't feel good. She moved around the bed and did it again with his right arm. When she was done, both of his armpits were burning points of gelid pain, and he didn't know why. What had she done? Cold against hot. What... He tried to move his arm, but he didn't get more than a twitch out of it. His limbs felt shaky and weak, like oatmeal or Jell-O, and he gave up, spent and hot and losing focus.

Lights seemed to bleed into each other. Fuzzy.

She moved something across his lower body. Air hit his skin. She snapped on a new pair of gloves, and then she touched him. His penis. His scrotum. His leg. High against the inside of his thigh. The unexpected invasion drove him out of his detached haze.

“Stop,” he said, but he had no voice. Nothing. His vocal cords cracked with the strain. A breathy hiss hit the mask, he lost the letter o in silence, and the p never arrived. She touched him again, and the area between his legs became a burning, freezing, solid well of discomfort that made him want to squirm away and curl into a fetal ball, except he couldn't. He couldn't move.

What had she done to him?

A cough speared him, and his eyes watered. Tears mixed with sweat. Stop, he tried again, but the results were inaudible under the quiet hiss of the oxygen flow and the bustle outside his private slice of the room, even to him. His vocal cords had dried out from disuse, and they hurt from all his coughing, and they wouldn't follow his frantic, frustrated commands. The woman he didn't know finished torturing him. She laid something soft over his hips. The open air sensation lessened.

“I'll be back in twenty-five minutes to remove those,” she informed him as she looked at a clipboard.

And then she left him suffering and confused.

Alone.


He knew he was sick. And he knew he'd been put in a place meant to fix that. But he didn't know anything else. How was he sick? Why? Was he getting better? Was he dying? He felt a little like he was dying. But nobody he knew was there to tell him anything. He lay helpless on a bed in a place he didn't know with nothing but a curtain to separate him from strangers. He couldn't speak, and
he couldn't move, and where was Meredith?

Or anyone?

He couldn't remember anything.

The sliver of fear that had nestled in his body before split into thousands of jagged pieces. Heat flared as he breathed. He moved his hand. It flopped against the bed railing. The intravenous line snaking into the back of his palm swayed in the air. The cool surface of the bed rail soothed his hot skin. He wrapped his fingers around the top, and for a moment, he rested, panting. Maybe. Maybe, if he could get up, he could... A wet cough drove him flat against the bed, and he suffered.

Alone.

Tears re-collected in his eyes. In that moment, heat and fear and sickness broke him.

Derek Shepherd.

Broken.

“Help,” he said to no one in particular, but the word was nothing except air. He blinked. “Please.”

Please. He whispered into the mask one last time, and then he gave up and lay there, trying not to let the conflagration sweep him into oblivion before he had a chance to see her again. Meredith. Fire crushed his body, like he'd dried out and been stuck in a flower press in an oven. Hot. Too hot. Definitely dying. No human could live this hot. His eyelids dipped, and his lips parted as he tried to let the roaring fire inside escape, but the flames only grew. His body had become the center of the sun.

When the curtain rustled, he swallowed, and he stared. In the distance of his perception, beyond the relentless heat, his groin and his armpits still felt wrong. Very wrong. What other punishment would the woman devise? He almost didn't care if it meant she would come back.

“Help,” he told the curtain. The mask fogged. No sound.

The person on the other side of the curtain wasn’t his tormenter. He recognized Meredith before she’d done more than grip the seam in the curtain, just from the way her index finger curled. He knew her every curve, every joint, every freckle, and he knew that index finger. Relief made him pant, and he tried again to speak.

“Meredith,” he said. “Help.”

A silent, wordless scream.

She didn’t hear him. He wasn’t dying. He’d already died. And this was hell.

He listened to her voice. She sounded agitated and aggressive on the other side of the curtain as she spoke with another person. A male. His voice seemed deeper and more rumbling, but unfamiliar. Derek couldn’t understand what they were talking about, though he heard the words. Heated. Like his body. What would make Meredith so upset?

He wrapped his fingers around the bed rail and solidified his feeble grip. He would get up. He would get up, and he would get help. He coughed. Pain split him down the middle, but he pressed through it, and he sat up. The room spun around his head like he’d been tied to the middle of a
gyroscope. Hot. He panted. His limbs shook. He pushed against the rail and slid down the bed. The blanket underneath his body was soaked and stuck to his skin. The oxygen mask cut into his face, and he drew a trembling hand against his cheeks to pull it back over his head. As he moved, the cold pain in his groin moved with him, but two loud thwacks chased behind him, and the balls of suffering in his armpits faded to a quiet whisper that throbbed in time with his heart.

The thing on his hips fell by the wayside. Air hit his overheated body. Something tugged on his leg by his ankle as he tried to push his legs over the side of the thin gurney, and he stared down at himself, almost drunk with the desire to move. To get help. What. He pulled the cold plastic thing away from his groin, and the gelid pain that had followed him down the bed went away, but he was catheterized. His penis had a tube trailing from the tip. A support wrapped around his thigh, where the tube pushed through a plastic loop, and then the tube chased down his leg, taped at his knee and his calf and his ankle. Delirium almost drove him to yank on it, to pull it out, to get rid of it and be free, but somewhere in his brain, he heard a loud, “No!” He couldn’t think of why pulling out the catheter would be a bad idea, but he listened to himself, and he didn’t touch it.

He inched forward, and his hand didn’t quite come with him. Pulse oximeter.

He could stand. Then he would figure out what to do. He could... Try to put weight on his bare feet. A frustrated moan turned squeak by his ravaged throat fell from his lips as he pushed away from the mattress. The force of gravity grew by a thousand times, and he almost toppled. His finger jerked. Out of slack, the pulse oximeter popped loose, and his heart monitor shrieked with alarms. He pinwheeled, and he tried to grab the bed railing, but it slipped against his sweaty hands. In a blink, he watched the ceiling wobble as his body tilted into collapse.

“Oh, my god!” Meredith said. Blurry, lightning movement splashed in front of his face, and open air became the fuzzy apparition of Meredith. He panted as he fell against her willowy body, but she caught him. She caught him, and he didn’t fall.

His first successful attempt at speech wasn’t even a whisper, instead, more of an exhale given shape. “M’h...” He got stuck on the letter h, and he had to try again after a weak swallow. “M’hot,” he said against her neck as he swayed with fatigue. He could barely hear himself. “Hot,” he tried again, only to croak. He pawed at her shoulders, desperate for her to fix it. For anyone to fix it.

Her fingers clutched his sweat-slicked body, and she held him. “I know,” she said. She stroked his spine. “I know, I know. I know it’s hot.” She sniffed in his ear, and her voice wavered.

“Help,” he said, a whispered whisper.

Her grip tightened, and she whimpered. She shouldn’t cry. He hated when Meredith cried.

“You need to lie back down,” she said. “Please, Derek. You’re really, really sick.”

She pushed against his body. Weakness infected his limbs like rot. His muscles trembled. He couldn’t withstand the tide of her dominion. His willpower collapsed into death throes. She pushed against his body, and he stepped backward. Once. Twice. The backs of his knees hit the wet mattress and bent, and then he sat, dumbfounded and hot on the gurney.

Her palm remained against his chest as if to hold him steady or still while she separated from him, leaned, and reached. She grunted. A loud thunk resounded in the small space as she pushed down the bed railing that had seemed so heavy to him moments before.

The curtain rustled, and his tormenter returned. She gaped. “What happened?” she said as she
rushed to the bed, and the both of them crowded him while he struggled to understand what was going on.

“I don’t know,” said Meredith. “He was standing up when I came in.” She leaned across the bed and pulled things away from the mattress. He couldn’t identify them. Nothing made sense. He started to shake as the strange woman bent to help Meredith. They were helping each other. Why were they doing this to him?

Hell.

A cough boiled in his lungs, and he closed his eyes against the sparks.

Tormenter grasped his shoulders. “Dr. Shepherd,” she said in a loud, piercing voice. “Are you awake?”

He stared at her blankly. Why would she need to ask that when he was looking right at her?

“Look,” grumbled Meredith. “I can handle this.”

“I need to get the restraints,” said Tormenter. “He’s clearly still delirious.”

Meredith pushed her away and eclipsed the space around him. “Would you just give me a second?” she said. “He’s awake. He’s just confused.”

Tormenter frowned. “Dr. Grey, I know you’re very worried, but—”

“He’s sick,” Meredith snapped. “You try waking up sick and alone in a strange place after an overnight, 105 degree mind bender. This is why I wanted to be in here, but you all have your rules and regulations, and he almost hurt himself.”

“My supervisor authorizes floor visits outside of visiting hours, Dr. Grey,” Tormenter said. “If it were up to me, I’d let you sit here as long as you want.”

Meredith sighed. “I know. I know, Tammy, I’m sorry.”

He watched her through the fever-blur. Her leg. The curve of her hip. Her shoulder. He imagined her glowing, smiling face, and the way she laughed when he told a joke, but his imagination crashed into pieces when the swirly haze in his vision resolved into sharp relief. Meredith. She looked awful. Pale. Her hair hung in limp, clumpy strings. She wore no makeup. Dark circles puffed under her red eyes, like she’d been sobbing not ten minutes ago, and hadn’t gotten any sleep on top of that. She wore the same faded jeans and ratty purple t-shirt he’d last seen her in...

Memory faltered. He didn’t know when he’d last seen her. Or where. He didn’t know anything.

Her wary gaze grew hopeful. “Derek, do you recognize me?” she said. She picked up his hand and squeezed it.

Nerves clamored in his gut. Why would she need to ask that? He tried to tell her yes, of course, he’d know her anywhere. He’d known her from the sight of her finger. The whisper of her voice.

“Meredith,” he said, but his throat made no sound. Why would nothing fucking work?

She touched his lower lip with her fingertip. She smiled, and a sob of relief fell from her lips. She wrapped her arms around him, and she hugged him.

“Do you remember what happened?” she said.
He stared.

Tears slipped from her eyes, and he wanted to touch her, but when he tried to lift his arms they felt like fifty ton bricks. She wiped her face, and she sniffed, and her voice caught in her throat, but she continued in a soothing, slow rush that he made himself interpret and understand.

“You're in the ICU at Seattle Presbyterian. It's 10:30AM. You've been here for twenty hours or so. They diagnosed you with a common cold coupled with pneumonia. You're on new antibiotics for the pneumonia and Tylenol for the fever. Your temp hit 104.9. It's coming down, now, but it's still really, really high. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you woke up. I'm sorry. I've been fighting with the head nurse to let me stay despite visiting hour regulations, and I've been on and off the phone with your mom and Mark and SGH, and I...” Her voice cracked. She looked at him, and the panic in her expression softened. “Never mind.” She brushed her fingers through his sweaty hair, and then she stroked his slick chest. “I need you to lie down,” she said. “Okay? You're very, very sick, Derek.”

“M'H...” He breathed and winced. “Hot.” No sound but the sound of his exhale.

“I know,” she said. “I know you're hot. But it will get better in a little while if you lie down. I promise.”

He stared at her. His limbs shook with fatigue. She met his gaze, pleading and crying, and he couldn't say no to her. He struggled to slide backward on the sweat-soaked bed. Tormenter moved to the other side of the bed. Meredith grabbed his left arm, and Tormenter grabbed his right thigh under his knee, and the both of them helped him, pushed him, pulled him. When he'd slid back far enough, Tormenter let go. She adjusted the bed, and the mattress met his back. He lay back against the new support, trembling and exhausted.

He listened to the dull hiss of oxygen. His eyelids drooped. In his panicked bid for self-preservation, adrenaline had helped him push through the heat and function despite the stress on his body. Now, every piece of him began a slow shutdown. He coughed, deep and rough and bubbly, and the knife of pain drilled him back against the bed. Shivery weakness sank into his limbs, his muscles, his bones. Every sinew. The awful heat took his body, and it squeezed, and squeezed, and squeezed, until he could barely breathe through it, and every shallow pant scorched him from the inside out.

He wasn't sure he could ever get up again.

Or move.

Sitting up and sedated by his own state of broiling, he finally had a chance to take stock of himself. Of his body. The privacy curtain split apart and hung open over a foot, probably left that way by accident as either Meredith or Tormenter had dashed for him. He could see out into the bright ICU bay, and everybody could see in, other patients, visitors, hospital staff, anyone. Nurses walked back and forth. A woman in a sharp brown business suit passed within three feet of his cubicle, heels clicking on the floor. The woman didn't look at him, but the seven-year-old girl she dragged with her hand did.

“Mommy,” said the girl, and she pointed, wide-eyed, before her mother swept her away.

Embarrassment coiled as his state of undress, his lack of privacy, and his inability to fix either one of them all hit him at once. His hands flopped uselessly as he tried to cover himself, and a harrowed noise gurgled in his throat, but the fever and a wet, deep cough drove him back into submission. He lay on top of a soaked, quilted cooling blanket, buck naked except for all the tubes and monitors. Tormenter replaced his oxygen mask and his pulse oximeter, and then she covered
his genitals with a hospital gown, barely. The gown started just below the line of dark curls where his pubic hair began, and coming to a stop high on his bare thighs. She didn’t tie the gown, and it lay in a loose, thin pile across his hips as a simple way to protect his modesty without trapping too much heat. His chest and abdomen were bare, all his healing wounds uncovered to the world.

“I’m going to get fresh ice packs,” Tormenter said, and she smiled. “Nice to see you awake, Dr. Shepherd. I’ll be back.” He blinked and watched her go. At least she shut the curtain, but the raw, abraded, less-than-human feeling wouldn’t loosen from the back of his mind.

Meredith sighed. She reached over his body, and she pulled the hospital gown up against his lower abdomen, covering the line of hair that Tormenter had left peeking out. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here.” she said. Something squawked as her lower body disappeared behind the bed railing. “I can see if they’ll set up a fan for you, or maybe I can arrange a lukewarm bath. It might make you feel better.”

He didn’t want a fan. Or a bath.

She leaned across the railing, and he felt her fingers weave through his sweaty hair. He turned his head. An inch. The best he could manage. He stared at her through dull eyes, trying to see through the halos and haze and heat. She took his right hand and clutched it. He couldn’t clutch it back. She rubbed his fingers, and he let his eyelids droop. He had Meredith, now. The confusion and the fire and the pain didn’t seem so scary anymore, and he didn’t want to be awake for the rest of it, didn’t want to feel. The rapid beat of the heart monitor in his ears slowed as his body recovered from at least the physical stress.

She leaned over the bed and kissed his forehead. He blinked, and when he didn’t speak, she kept talking. “You’ve been really out of it. Since I drove into the ambulance bay, and they pulled you out of the car, pretty much. They put you on a stretcher. You don’t remember any of it?”

He managed to shake his head. A millimeter either way, but she seemed to understand.

She sat with him in silence for minute upon minute. Her palm touched his naked chest, and her finger teased his right nipple. A lump formed in his throat as her caresses brought nausea. His skin twitched as new sweat dribbled from every pore. He blinked.

“Stop,” he said against the mask.

Disquiet squeezed him tight when nothing but a squeak fell from his lips, and she frowned with incomprehension. Her fingers tightened against his hand. She leaned into his space, her ear a millimeter from his oxygen mask, and he fought the upset twist in his stomach at her closeness as her palm pressed against his pectoral muscle. His space. His.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Can you say it again?”

Despite the pain, he pulled air deep into his lungs, as much as he could inhale, and then he pushed it out in an effort to be heard. “Stop,” he repeated. His eyes burned when all he heard was air, and an invisible razor sliced down his throat.

But she must have read his lips or something. She froze, and she pulled away. The hand at his nipple stopped moving. The hand clutched around his palm loosened. “Stop?” she said. “You want me to leave?”

He blinked, trying to hold back tears as she pulled the hand at his chest away. She pushed the chair an inch. He didn’t want her to leave. That hadn’t been what he’d meant. He just... When she tried to
extricate her hand from his, he drove whatever energy into his grip that he could muster, and he clutched her. His sweaty palm slipped, but she halted her retreat when she met his weak resistance.

“I'm sorry, I...” She faltered, staring at his hand. Her lip quivered. Utter confusion made her eyes seem doe-ish. She pointed to her hand. “This is okay?”

He stared, drinking the lines of her body, unable to do anything else.

A tear slipped down her cheek, and she swallowed. “But I...” she stuttered. Her stool squeaked as she resettled. She reached across the railing, and she placed her palm where it had been before. Against his chest, near the incision, and he swallowed.

“Stop,” he mouthed. He didn't even try to speak, but she saw his lips move, and she pulled back her hand.

“But that's not okay?” she said, and he watched confusion hover on her face. Confusion he couldn't fix, because he couldn't explain. She bit her lip. She shook her head. Her eyes reddened and spilled.

He squeezed her hand.

She swallowed, and she hovered her palm by his temple and cheek. “Is this okay?” she said. He met her eyes, and he didn't blink, and after a hesitant wait, she touched him, skin to skin. She splayed her fingers, and she pushed them through his soaked, sweat-grimy hair. The tickle of her nails against his scalp soothed him. “I'm sorry,” she said as she combed the wet strands with her fingers. “They've been keeping me away, and I just...” Bewilderment clouded her expression. “I won't touch you there, I'm sorry.”

Her body trembled.

“I love you,” she said softly, and her grip on his hand became painful, but he didn't complain. “I love you so much.”

“I'm sorry,” he tried to say, but the words got lost in his wrecked, dry throat. Tears pinched loose from his eyelids. Real tears. Mingled with sweat.

“No apologies, okay?” she said, her voice choked. “You can tell me later.” She stroked his hair.

His gut twisted as he watched her push her own feelings away. A cough ripped him apart. The fuzzy halos in the room turned bright and sparkled, and black dots came down over everything in a giant waterfall. His sternum felt like a fault line in an earthquake, shuddering with the force. He lay panting, trying to breathe, as he stared into the space she occupied. The black dots faded one by one.

“Your throat must feel awful,” she said. “Let me get you some water. I'll be right back.”

He didn't want her to leave. He didn't want her to move. He watched helplessly as she departed through the curtain and his empty hand fell slack against his side. He coughed, and he let his eyes fall shut as pain squeezed his weakened lungs in a tight vise. They'd given him something for his clogged sinuses and his runny nose. Something that had worked. His head didn't feel so full anymore. His chest remained a problem. His sternum ached, and breathing hurt, and, overall, he felt sort of like he'd suffered through serving as the floor for an elephant taking tap dance lessons.

She returned in minutes with a capped Styrofoam cup equipped with a folding straw. She pulled down the oxygen mask against his neck and held the cup to his lips. The straw hovered millimeters
from his skin. His eyelids drooped. She wiggled the straw. “Take a sip,” she prodded.

He took the straw with his lips and tried to pull water against gravity. The barest trickle hit his mouth, cool and soothing and wet. He sighed, and he tried again, and then he was drinking. Cool tendrils spread into his esophagus. The water felt divine against his obliterated vocal cords, but it took so much fucking effort to drink. He couldn't finish more than several swallows before he'd exhausted himself.

“Done?” she said. He didn't answer. She took the cup away after several seconds of silence.

The water helped his words, but not much. “M'h...” He got stuck on the fucking h again. He rested, gathering energy. “Hot.” His vocal cords kicked in for the letter o and faded just after, leaving him sounding croaky and horrid.

Her lip quivered. She stroked his face. “I know. I know it feels awful. You just started responding to the Tylenol a few hours ago, so your temperature's still very high, but it's dropping. You feel hot because you're getting better. It's okay. You're okay.”

He coughed weakly.

Upset made the corners of her eyes twitch. “It's been a horrible night,” she said. “They wouldn't let me see you for more than ten minutes at a time every other hour.” When she blinked, tears rolled down her face, and her small body shook. She caressed his hand, and then she sniffed and shook her turmoil away. “I want to tar and feather your hypothalamus, Derek.”

“M'Sorry,” he managed, and he closed his eyes. Everything took too much effort.

“Stop apologizing, you stupid, stupid man,” she said. “This wasn't your fault. Though, maybe, next time...” She ran her fingers through his hair, and she kissed him. “Stay in the bed?”

His lip curled. He tried to smile at her, but wasn't sure if he managed very well. “Sorry,” he repeated. She hit him. Lightly. And she laughed. Perfect. He tried to raise his arm. He wanted to touch her. Desperately. His hand moved a few inches.

Tormenter returned through the curtains carrying a new bundle of blue things and little white fluffy blobs. He watched as she set the bundle on the tray table. The white things relaxed and unfolded. Towels. Tormenter picked up one of the blue things. It crackled as she kneaded it with her hands. Understanding broke the mental fog as he watched her beat it against the bed rail and crunch it in her hands. An ice pack. She'd said she was going to get ice packs. He'd gotten hot enough that they'd started trying to cool him down with ice packs. Groin and armpits. An emergency procedure when more aggressive cooling was needed than simple antipyretics. Emergency. 104.9, Meredith had said.

The reality of how dire his state had been hadn't sunk in before when Meredith had said how high his temperature had gotten. He swallowed as it sank in, now. Tormenter wrapped the icepack in one of the white towels.


Tormenter smiled. “104.1 right now. Much better than it was last night.” The ice pack crinkled in her hand. “We need to leave these on for about twenty or thirty minutes,” Tormenter said. “If we can get you below 104, we'll stop with these. I know they're uncomfortable.”

He didn't protest despite the pain as she lifted his arm and re-settled the icepack in the crook of his
armpit. She repeated the process with his left armpit. He stared at Meredith while Tormenter shoved aside his hospital gown. He blinked, and he tried to let himself fall away, into a place that wasn't there, but then Tormenter touched him. The shivery, nauseating feeling of violation returned, and he couldn't think of anything else. He blinked and inhaled and closed his eyes as she settled the frozen ball of discomfort against his groin. She replaced the gown against his lower body, leaving him tearing and uncomfortable, and then she left.

Meredith sighed. Her chair squawked, and she leaned forward to fix the gown. She covered the pubic hair Tormenter had again left visible. A lump formed in his throat as he watched her.

The ice pack would help, he told himself. The ice pack was close to his femoral artery and his body's core and would help drive down his core temperature. He rocked, his torso pitching back and forth by millimeters, as he tried to force himself to endure. Already painful, his breaths tightened into wrenching gasps, and then he burst, powerless under the weight of the deluge.

He coughed, and tears of pain sliced down his face. Everything hurt. His groin. His armpits. Breathing. His chest. Whether it meant good things or not, he felt like a briquette on a smoking barbecue. She leaned against the bed railing and wiped the wet salt away for him.

“H...” he said. He couldn't deal with the vocal cord gymnastics of converting that letter into real speech. His lower lip quivered. He blinked. The world blurred through his tears. “Ho...” He rested with his eyes shut.

“I know it's hot,” she said, misunderstanding him. “I know. You'll feel better when your temp stabilizes. You will. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

She squeezed his hand, and the look on her face made him want to shrivel up and submit to the fire. She hurt. For him. She physically hurt for him. She wanted to fix things so he didn't hurt, and she couldn't, but he was alive. Relief fought with the pain and made her feel sick. The warring pieces of emotions carried spears, and they made her face even easier for him to read than usual. He knew the feeling because he'd felt it when she'd drowned and then woken up. It was horrible. And nauseating. And painful. And he'd never, ever wanted her to experience it.

He swallowed, and he gathered his will, and he made himself speak. “H...” His throat screamed, but he said his word. Finally. “Home?”

She wiped the corners of his eyes with her thumb. “A few days, Derek. At least. You're really sick. They want to get your lung infection and your fever under control before they let you out of here again. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I had to bring you here. And I'm sorry I wasn't there. I'm sorry.”

He drifted as the char-broiled flood in his veins overwhelmed him. A wave of fresh sweat made him dizzy as his body worked in tandem with the ice packs to drive his fever down into something helpful and healthy, something in the 99-101 range, rather than something life-threatening. She kissed his lips. She stroked his sweaty hair and replaced the oxygen mask over his nose and mouth.

“Do you want to lie down?” she said.

He stared, trying to process the words, but he couldn't do it anymore, couldn't make any meaningful response. The hypnotic hiss of the oxygen mask and exhaustion made his eyelids drift half-closed. He lay on the bed, panting, sweating, and coughing, too sick to do much else.

She lowered the bed for him when he didn't answer. Lying flat allowed sleep to sink in its claws. He lasted seconds before surrender.
“Please, stop nearly dying,” she whispered as she stroked his hair.

“Yeah,” said Mr. Clark. “Stop nearly dying!”

Derek lost his grip on sentience, and tormenting, fevered dreams overtook him.

“Why does this keep happening to me?” wailed a slightly overweight woman. Her dark roots stopped after an inch and shifted into stringy, bottled, platinum blond, pulled back in a sloppy ponytail. Thick, dark eyeliner hugged her bloodshot eyes. She wore a tiny strip of fabric around her breasts, a micro-mini skirt, and itty-bitty heeled sandals, and she sobbed into hands manicured with a hot pink finish.

“Don't you think that maybe you deserve it a little?” said Jerry.

Derek pressed the remote, and the picture blinked to something new.

“0% APR. Stop by your nearest Honda dealer tod—”

Blink.

“I think he's really hurt,” whined a frantic Calista Flockhart as she practically climbed through the car window into the arms of some buzzed-cut, stammering guy.

Blink.

“Help me, Obi-wan Kenobi. You're my only h—”

Blink.

“Police say they don't know what caused William Trammel, 42, to shoot and kill his family of seven, but—”

Blink.

Derek pulled the blanket against his body. He sat propped up on the living room couch by a small mountain of pillows. He stared at the television, but he didn't watch it as he hit the channel change over, and over, and over, until he'd looped back around to Jerry Springer. He made another lap. All garbage. Talk shows. Commercials. Re-runs. Awful movies. News he didn't want to hear about.

Blink.

“Robert,” said whoever Calista was supposed to be. Blood covered supposedly-Robert's face. “Stay with me.”

Blink.

Mark cleared his throat and looked up from his laptop at the opposite side of the couch. The white glare from his LCD screen tinged his skin sickly white. “Do you think you could pick a channel or something? You're giving my ears whiplash, and I can't keep track of what the hell I'm typing for this report.”

Derek's lip twitched, and his hand froze on the remote. His fingers twisted, and squeezed, and squeezed. Heat funneled down his throat as his breaths halted. For a moment, he stared at Mark, who wore jeans and a t-shirt and cross-trainers, and could get up anytime he wanted, drive his fucking midlife crisis car, and leave for wherever. Derek's teeth clenched, and the remote left his hands with fury-born wings.
The remote hit Mark in the shoulder, and the television snapped off as the power button hit unwavering muscle and bone. “Fuck,” Mark hissed, and he rubbed his arm with his other hand, an affronted, snarly look on his face. The remote fell onto the couch and settled in the crack between the middle and left cushions.

“You pick a fucking channel,” Derek said as he struggled to stand up. His words popped loose from his lips like some sort of honking goose. Hoarse and barely recovered, he could speak, but he couldn't produce any sort of tone variation. Even then, his voice dropped into squeaks and pops and cracks at random.

When he stood, his leg muscles shivered with a vague weakness. The blanket, which clung to him, slowly lost its grip and sank to the floor as he retreated. He moved into the kitchen, not waiting to see Mark's reaction. Alex stood at the stove, flipping bacon in a frying pan, wearing nothing but a pair of black boxers. His skin had tanned during all his walks out with Lexie, who came home every lunch and dinner break because, unlike Meredith, she could still afford to lose some time. The scabbed-over bullet wound puckered the skin on the front of his torso, displayed like a badge instead of hidden behind a shirt. The bacon sizzled, and the nauseating smell of too much grease filled the air.

Alex turned as Derek entered, and he pointed his dripping spatula. “Dude, I'm not done in here. Meredith said you'd be sleeping until at least noon.”

“Well, I'm not sleeping, and it's before noon, so I guess she was wrong,” said Derek.

“You know you're not supposed to be in here with me,” Alex said. “Get out. I don't want to go back.”

“You will anyway if you keep eating that shit,” Derek said. Ignoring Alex, he shuffled to the cupboard, removed a glass, and filled it in the sink. He took a sip, letting the clear water soothe his scratchy throat. “I just wanted water.”

He emptied the glass, slammed it on the counter, sneered at Alex's hostile expression, and shuffled to his office, where he collapsed, wheezing against his executive desk.

His eyes pricked as he tried to catch his breath. His lungs made him sound like he was gasping his last death rattle when he breathed hard, but at least the fucking cough was mostly gone, and at least it didn't hurt anymore to inhale. At least. A pitiful celebration. Tears popped loose as his throat thickened with misery-born ache.

“Wow,” said Mr. Clark. “You're turning into a rather spectacular pansy, aren't you?”

Which just made him cry harder. After he'd come home from the hospital, he'd spent three days bedridden upstairs, and when he'd felt well enough to emerge and move around a bit, his forays downstairs had been nothing but constant traffic jams with Alex, who was a lot more healthy and capable of defending his claimed territory, and also a fuck load more assertive. Worse, whenever Derek found a spot alone somewhere, Mark would find a reason to be there as well.

“You're not alone now, either,” Gary Clark hissed in his ears, and Derek collapsed his face into his hands.

Folders full of clinical research projects long ago discarded when he'd lost the time to work on them sat under his elbows. He'd tried to organize them two weeks ago, but he'd gotten tired before he'd finished. Tired. Organizing folders. For twenty minutes.
He closed his eyes, denying the disarray sprawled under his arms, and he took a deep breath. He let his brain wander, but no matter how hard he tried to make himself relax, he couldn't lose his sense of the room. Of the house. Of the distant smell of bacon, or the noises Alex made as he moved in the kitchen, or the paranoid feeling that Mark was lurking, somewhere, trying to find an excuse to hang out in Derek's office, too.

“Or me,” Mr. Clark said. “I'm your very own cockroach.”

Someone tapped against the door, and Derek looked up. He wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands, trying to push away the obvious signs of his distress. “What?” he said. He almost couldn't stop a manic, frustrated, croaky laugh as he watched Mark enter the room.

Mark's footsteps muted against the area carpet. He came to a stop in front of Derek's desk, his arms folded across his chest. He cleared his throat.

“I'm going to get the grocery shopping done,” Mark said. Since this seems like an excellent time to vacate. His unspoken words hovered in his wary expression. “Do you want anything that's not on the list?”

Derek clenched the sides of the desk, and he swallowed. He hadn't seen the list. Hadn't even been aware that anyone had made a list. But it didn't matter.

“No,” Derek said, his voice cracking as he looked at his lap. “I don't want anything.”

“All right,” Mark said. “I should be back in an hour or so. I'll—”

“I want to come along.”

Mark frowned. “Are you sure you're—”

“I think I can survive a fucking grocery store trip,” Derek snapped.

“I think the real question is why the fuck would I want to bring you?”

Silence stretched as Mark glared at him, his face blushing a deep, furious red. Derek balled his fists as he struggled not to let himself snap and snarl some more. What the fuck had happened to him, that all he could do was yell or cry? He'd thrown a fucking remote. At his friend. He'd intentionally walked up to Alex despite knowing that he shouldn't. He'd killed Mr. Clark in his dreams.

“Do it,” said Mr. Clark. “Throw something else. Show me you're angry.”

Derek's elbows thumped against the desk as he pressed his face into his hands. He tried to breathe.

“Well,” Mark said. “Are you coming?”

“But—”

“Now, you want to argue about it?”

Derek pushed himself to stand, blinking against tears when his arms and legs shook with fatigue with just that small movement. “I need to change,” he said, swallowing against the lump in his throat.

“Fine,” Mark said, and he stood still as Derek forced himself to walk past. “I'll wait out by the car,” Mark called after him.
When Derek reached the steps, he took three breaths to bolster himself. He didn't need supervision anymore, at least, but the steps were still a mountain, still something that he needed to plan his schedule around. He gripped the railing, and pushed himself up the first step and the next and the next. By midway, he panted, and he had to sit because his leg muscles turned to the consistency of soup, and he couldn't go anymore. He couldn't make it. Except Mark was waiting on him. Mark was waiting, and he would leave, and—

“Pathetic,” said Mr. Clark.

Derek willed himself to stand, and he kept going, kept pushing. When he stood at the top, he had to rest for a moment to calm the quailing nausea in his gut, and then he pushed onward.

He grabbed a clean pair of jeans from his dresser, and a clean shirt, and he shucked his soiled, thin pajama pants and his old shirt. They landed on the floor with a rustle. Pulling the new shirt over his head didn't hurt his incision anymore, which was nice. He sat on the bed and leaned over his knees to lace his shoes. Lowering his head made his brain hurt, courtesy of his remnant cold.

When he finished dressing himself, he stared at his side of the bed. Empty. He'd tossed back the sheets and blankets when he'd struggled out of bed several hours ago, leaving it unmade and unkempt. The pillow looked inviting. He thought about lying down. Lying on his side and letting himself take a quick nap. Pushing himself up the steps and changing his clothes was a lot. A lot of work... His eyelids drooped. A cat nap.

“Poor baby,” Mr. Clark said.

Tension wound into every muscle, and Derek straightened. He pushed himself to his feet again, and he left the idea of a much-needed, blissful recuperation period behind. Walking down the steps didn't tax him as much as going up had, at least, and Derek forced himself off the landing, through the foyer, and out the door into the dreary, wet, gray air.

Grass and mud sucked at the soles of his shoes, but he pushed, and he pushed, and he pushed, across the lawn, until he arrived at the passenger side of Mark's cherry-colored Mustang in the driveway. He draped himself against the cool, wet metal of the car, wheezing. A dry, unproductive remnant cough barked from his lips, and his chest tightened with hurt. Beads of sweat tumbled down his forehead. Little ones that spoke of minor exertion, not imminent collapse.

He wasn't sure how he would be able to do this. Get into the car. He hadn't been thinking when Mark had said he would be going to get groceries. The Mustang sat low to the ground, and the car cabin was awkward to get into even by a physically able person. Dropping into the bucket seat was a process that usually involved grabbing the frame of the car and drop-twisting into it. Derek was still under lifting restrictions. Five pounds. In two more weeks, the restriction would be raised to forty, but that was still a far cry from being able to support his own weight.

He looked up the driveway with longing at his big black Cayenne, but, really, that thing was also a painful nightmare to get into. All cars were. They required twisting and shifting and pushing and pulling, and all the fucking engineers who designed automobiles assumed that a passenger could use his fucking arms.

Fuck.

He pressed against the car frame. His biceps shook as frustration overwhelmed him, and he inhaled the wet air to try and cleanse it.

Derek pulled open the wide door of the Mustang after resting a moment, and he stared at the black
floor mat. So far away. Mark leaned over the parking brake and looked up. “Do you need help?” he asked, unblinking, no tone, like he expected to get his head bitten off for speaking the forbidden word. Help.

“No,” Derek said. His eyes pricked as he thought of how badly this would hurt if he went the stubborn route. This was Mark, not Alex. Mark had already helped him into the shower more than once. He'd seen Derek in tears and unable to walk after Derek had peed all over himself. He'd seen Derek naked in the ICU while the nursing staff had tried to manage Derek's rampant fever. He'd known Derek as long as Derek could remember, and he'd seen everything. Derek's breaths shook in his chest as his limping pride broke down in the slow lane. He offered a soft, “Maybe.”

“Try squatting,” Mark suggested. “When I strained my shoulder a few months ago, that worked.”

Derek dropped low to the ground. He held the door frame, but only for balance. With some shifting, he waddled backward. His ass hit the seat, and he shoved with his quads. Mark caught his shoulders. Derek twisted one leg into the car cabin, and then the next, and then he rested, panting.

“I'm sure that looked ridiculous,” Derek muttered.

“I'm sure I don't care,” Mark replied. Silence stretched. “Look, Derek,” he said. “We're all doctors here. We know you're hurt, and that you were recently very sick. I might not be the poster boy for sensitivity, but come on. I don't laugh at people who are injured or ill. Especially not family. And if anybody else does, I'll cave in his fucking face without offering to fix it afterward.”

Derek swallowed, and he stared through the windshield as his breaths calmed. With a sniff, he leaned, reaching for the door handle. He overextended. A slice of pain ran down his arm, and his sternum protested. Just a little. He could... Maybe... He wrapped his hand around the door handle, and he tried to pull it closed, but it was too much. Too heavy. Too far away. The agony that vibrated through his bones made him pull back with a hiss, and he huddled in the car.

Mark undid his seat belt without word and got out. The car rocked as Mark pushed off of it with his weight. He walked around to Derek's side, and he pushed the door closed. The car rocked again as Mark resettled in his seat. He twisted, and he yanked a pillow from the back seat and handed it to Derek.

“Here,” Mark said, and then he twisted his key in the ignition as Derek took the pillow.

The car rumbled to life, its big, powerful V8 engine purring excitedly. Mark grinned, just like he always did whenever he turned the key. He pushed the radio dial, and AC/DC from his iPod filled the car cabin. He rolled down the windows and let the damp breeze blow through. He released the parking brake, pushed the gearshift into reverse, and crawled the car backward out of the driveway as Derek struggled to get his seat belt on without re-breaking his sternum.

_I have to get this_, Mark had said as they'd stood in the rainy Seattle car lot.

Shortly after they'd started going out for drinks again, in the wake of Addison's departure, Mark had asked Derek to come along to the Ford dealership near the hospital. The salesmen had left them alone to deliberate. Mark had argued and bargained the price into the ground. The dealership wouldn't be making much profit off the purchase. But, as Derek had stared at the lot, which was devoid of people, he decided that perhaps the dealership wanted whatever it could get.

_You realize this is a midlife crisis purchase, right?_ Derek had said as Mark walked around the car, staring at every line and sleek curve. Globules of drool had practically fallen from his lips.
You moved to Seattle and live in a trailer, Mark had replied. You can't knock midlife crises.

He'd chosen a convertible, not that he would ever be able to use the thing with the top down in Seattle. Derek did have to admit the newly remodeled Mustangs looked attractive, though.

Except the love of my life only wants me for sex, Derek had said, and my trailer's luggage compartment is home to a pissed off raccoon. I think I can knock midlife crises.

Mark had sat in the car and almost cackled with glee as he wrapped his hands around the leather steering wheel. Well, you can't knock this midlife crisis.

Trading one redhead for another. It's pathetic, Mark.

Shut up, man. And get in the fucking car.

Derek had complied, and the salesman had returned while they sat in the front seats, bickering over which feature was the best. Would you and your partner like to take another test drive? the slick salesman had said to Mark, his shiny suit rain spattered and his quaffed hair dripping.

Mark had glowered. Only if you take off another $500 for calling me gay. Why does everyone think we're gay?

In the end, Mark had driven off the lot with the red, rumbling car, leaving behind a flummoxed salesman who no doubt thought he'd been robbed. The car bounced as Mark coaxed it onto the street, and Derek hugged the pillow, his eyes shut against the pain. He waited for the whiplash. Mark always jammed on the accelerator. Except not this time. As the car stabilized, the sharp discomfort disappeared, and Mark babied it up to a reasonable speed instead of gunned it.

Derek swallowed as upset welled in his gut. “I'm sorry,” he croaked. “For the remote. I'm...”

Mark shrugged. “Whatever, man,” he said, and that was the end of it.

Derek clutched the pillow against his chest. His eyelids drooped as the rumble and the air and the thrum of the bass swept over him. His legs felt shaky. And his arms. And he hadn't let himself take a nap, and now... He coughed. He hugged the pillow. The gun that had destroyed his life flashed in the mirror. And he slept.

Derek didn't want an entourage as Meredith pushed him in the wheelchair to freedom, but he had one. Meredith stroked his hair while he sat in quiet misery, staring at his lap, curled in a thick, thermal blanket. They'd forced his fever down over days, and now his sense of hot and cold felt like a fucking busted yo-yo. He hovered around normal, but his body still waged war with armies of bacteria. Sometimes he spiked a little too hot, and the constant shifts between shivering when his fever rose, and sweating when it fell again wrung him out and exhausted him.

People chattered like a cloud of angry bees around him. Mark. Lexie. Alex. Cristina. The elevator dinged, and Meredith pushed Derek inside, followed shortly by the swarm. If he'd been a little more out of it, he might have thought he were in Seattle Grace. They hadn't really planned this, Alex and Derek being released at the same time. It'd just sort of happened, and they'd figured it out despite all the confusion and chaos of the morning when they'd collided on the way to the elevator.

Derek sighed, and he looked at the floor, too miserable to do much else. If he looked up, they would expect him to talk or be part of the conversation, when all he really wanted was home. Just home. Before he closed his eyes, he saw Alex's right leg and one wheel tumble into view as Lexie pushed him closer. The elevator hummed, and Derek felt his weight lighten.
“Lexie,” said Meredith. “You can't bring Alex home in our car.”

“Why not?” said Lexie. “It would save gas and money. I was going to call a taxi because—”

Mark cleared his throat. “Derek is recovering from drug-resistant, post-op pneumonia, Lexie.”

“Yeah,” said Cristina. “He's sort of a mutant germ closet right now.”

The hospital had kept Derek for about ninety hours. Long enough for the new antibiotics to work some of their magic. Long enough for the antipyretics to force his fever to drop. Not long enough for him to feel any semblance of healthy. His voice was gone. When he tried to speak, he received cracks and croaks and partial sounds for his trouble, but nothing more. Nothing understandable. Though decongestants had worked wonders for his cold, nothing could fix the general malaise that wrapped around him like a cloak and sunk into every pore. His limbs felt shivery and weak. He could breathe again without pain, but after days of coughing, he felt whipped and beaten and broken.

Derek coughed against the blanket, and Meredith rubbed his upper back, soft and soothing. He clutched at her hand as the shock wave tore through him. He wanted to be home. Not in the middle of this circus show.

“Dude,” said Alex. “How contagious is he? I'm just getting out of here. I don't want to go back.”

“Crap,” Lexie said. “I... Should they even be in the same house?”

“We'll just have to deal with it,” Meredith said.

“How?” Lexie said. She pulled Alex's wheelchair to the far end of the elevator. “Cristina said he's a mutant germ closet!”

Meredith growled. “We'll keep them separate or whatever! It's not rocket science. I'm sure plenty of families deal with this all the time.”

“But he looks horrible...”

“You really suck at tact,” Cristina said.

“You're one to talk,” Lexie grumbled.

“I'm sitting right here,” Derek tried to say, but nothing would come out but a strained, wordless whisper, and the pitiful noise got lost in the bedlam.

He longed for home to the point that it had become a physical ache loitering in every joint and every muscle. He wanted to be somewhere quiet and familiar. But despite the unquenchable desire, the prospect of going home didn't excite him. He felt more desperate than anything else. As though reaching home would reset him to his minimal requirements for comfort and privacy. Not make everything right again. He didn't feel like anything would ever be right anymore.

When the elevator dinged, Meredith pushed him onto the main floor. Lexie and Alex followed. Mark and Cristina loitered beside. They formed a big fucking oddball family parade. Derek wasn't even certain why Cristina had chosen to attend his release from prison. Or maybe she'd been there for Alex. But she'd shown up that morning while Meredith had been signing up and down all over his release forms, and she hadn't left yet. Cristina walked beside him, crunching on chips from a small, metallic bag.
“Okay,” said Mark as they made it to the front curb. “Who all has a car?” He raised his hand. Meredith raised hers. Nobody else did.

“I came on my bike,” said Cristina. She munched on a chip. “I’m pretty sure that rules me out as chauffeur.”

“I said I was going to call for a taxi!” Lexie said, bright red blush creeping all across her face. “My car is in the shop.”

“When exactly is your car not broken, anyway?” Alex said.

“Fine,” Mark said. He sighed. “I’ll bring my car around for Karev.” He tossed keys at Cristina. “And you’re chauffeur whether you like it or not. You can pick up your bike later.”

“But,” Cristina said. She looked at the Porsche insignia on the key fob. “You mean I get to crash Derek’s pretentious SUV?”

“Preferably not crash,” Meredith said.

“It’s not pretentious,” Derek whispered. He managed a few consonants. Nothing else.

“Perfect,” Cristina replied, ignoring his garbled croaking, and she wandered toward the parking lot while she tapped the panic button. Derek’s car wailed in the distance, and she jogged off in that direction. She crumpled up her chip bag and tossed it into a trash bin as she went past.

Meredith stroked his face. “Are you doing okay?” she whispered against his ear as she leaned over the back of the wheelchair.

“Tired,” he said, but the word cracked. Inaudible. He hadn’t been able to speak clearly for days. He couldn’t answer questions, or say what he wanted or didn’t want, or anything. He leaned against her arm, and he sighed before another painful cough jerked his frame.

Mark returned to the kiss-and-ride lane with his car, the telltale purr of his V8 preceding him by moments. He slowed his Mustang and then stopped at the curb beside Alex. He popped open the passenger door as Lexie approached.

“You really expect us to get into this thing?” Lexie said.

Mark shook his head. “I expect Karev to get in, and you can ride with Derek.”

Derek watched as Alex stood up. The effort made Alex pant, but he got out of the chair on his own. He took the two steps toward the car unassisted, and then he angled himself against the seat. Mustangs were not little or cramped. Not like most sports cars. The interior was spacious and wide. But they sat inches from the ground and were hard to get into and out of. Alex grabbed the door frame and lowered himself with the help of a bulging, shaking bicep. He granted, and he twisted to find his seat belt without needing assistance. He clipped the belt, and he settled in the car. He looked a bit worse for wear, and he panted, his face a shade paler than when he’d started. But he’d done it by himself. All Lexie did was pull away the empty wheelchair.

Derek swallowed, envious. They hadn’t cracked Karev in half. They hadn’t broken bones to fix him. He had full use of his arm on the side where he hadn’t been shot. He’d been stuck in the hospital for so long because of an infection and a badly healing wound, nothing more. They’d been able to leave the bullet in his torso and let his body heal around it instead of fishing it out over hours of the most invasive, painful surgery medically available. He’d had just over three-and-a-half weeks to heal, and he hadn’t gotten sick again, and it showed.
“Hey,” Alex said as he swung the door shut without help. Just a wince. “It's not eleven yet. Can we stop at McDonald's?”

“What's at eleven?” Lexie asked through the open window.

“The breakfast menu ends at eleven,” said Alex. “I want to get a sausage biscuit and some crappy coffee because I can.”

Mark replied. Derek didn't hear the words. The engine revved, and then the car rumbled away with an explosion of force. Lexie drifted back to the group.

A lump formed in his throat as he watched Cristina drive his black Cayenne up to the curb. He tried to stand. Tried to walk under his own power while Cristina watched him from the driver seat with unblinking, brown eyes. He couldn't do it. His arms shook, and his chest hurt, and his muscles were too worn out to take his weight without collapsing. A cough that snaked lightning down his abused throat drove him back into the chair, and he tried to catch his breath.

Meredith squeezed his shoulder. “It's okay,” she said. She clamped the wheel brakes on the chair. She folded the foot rests. She bent into him, wrapped her arms around his waist, hugged, and whispered, “I'm here,” in his ear.

With her assistance, he stood, leaning against her shoulders. She let him take his time without prodding him or pushing him or making him feel like he was wasting her time. He tried not to think about Cristina. Staring. Or Lexie, who mewed behind him with a burning, nurturing need to help him or something. Meredith must have glared at her while he focused on moving his feet, because, while the noises didn't stop, Lexie didn't touch him.

His body shook, and his legs felt shivery, like they would give out any moment. He took a wobbly step and then another, and then let his weight fall against the side of the car with relief. He coughed, and he sniffed.

Meredith crawled into the back seat and helped pull him inside. When he settled, panting and strained and trembling, Meredith wrapped her arms around him and the fuzzy blanket. He shivered as she held him against the door, her fingers tangling with his hair. She rubbed his back. Tears of exhaustion and pain pricked his eyes, and he had no fortitude to stop them. They stumbled down his cheeks. He tried not to think about Cristina and Lexie, both witnesses to his embarrassing broken resolve.

Lexie climbed into the front seat and closed the door. Outside sounds dimmed in the insulated cabin, leaving only his sniveling intervening in the silence. No one spoke. Like somebody had fucking died in the car or something. At least Cristina didn't tease him. He buried his face in Meredith's shoulder, and she held him, whispering soothing, quiet words.

He really had been set back to the beginning. And he'd never catch up to Alex. Not for months at this rate.

The gun cocked. “Welcome home, Dr. Shepherd,” said Gary Clark as the Cayenne began to move.

Mark's car door slammed, and Derek snapped awake. “What.” The hoarse croak squeezed in his throat. His whole body twitched, and his hand scrabbled at the door. He fought for purchase, blinking and bleary, shivering with the unexpected stress. His heartbeat slowed as he listened to the relative silence. The car ticked as it settled. The distant chatter of voices fluttered in his ears.

He rubbed his eyes. Mark stood by the car door, stretching. Derek swallowed and wiped his mouth
with his hand. His tongue tasted like paste, and his eyelids stuck. He squinted at his watch. Two hours has passed. Two hours? Of driving? For groceries? He looked around. This was not the market six blocks away that Meredith liked to use. This was not Queen Anne Hill.

The car sat in a wide, endless parking lot ringed by dozens of stores and shops. A Safeway, a Best Buy, a Wal-Mart and countless other smaller businesses interspersed throughout the larger chains. He didn't recognize this area at all, and he frowned as he un-clipped his seat belt.

Derek pulled on the door handle and then pushed the door. He winced and grunted as pain shot down his chest, and he yanked his hand away. Stupid. Stupid and half asleep and... He sighed, and he forced the door open with his leg instead. He twisted, pressed his shoulder into the seat, and pushed his feet out of the car onto the pavement. He breathed, wheezing once, twice, and then he jammed down with his quads. Forcing his body to a standing position from such a low crouch without help from his upper body was something he maybe could have pulled off two decades ago. Not now. Not injured. He couldn't overcome gravity.

He panted, staring at the pavement and the thick white line that marked the edge of Mark's parking space. White cross-trainers appeared in his view, and Mark crouched by the door. “I was just going to let you sleep,” he said.

“I slept for two hours already,” Derek said. “Where are we, anyway?”

“I went south on the 5 for a bit,” Mark replied.

“Oh. Why?”

Mark shrugged. “Nice day for a drive.”

Derek frowned. Gray. Everywhere gray. And wet. And damp. “It's a horrible day for a drive.”

“The temperature is nice,” Mark said. “Ready?”

“Not that nice. You won't be able to get any milk or frozen things,” Derek said. “They'll go bad or melt in the trunk on the way home.”

“I'll worry about that later,” Mark said. He wrapped his arms around Derek's waist. “Push up on three,” he said, and he counted. Derek grasped Mark's shoulders. When Mark hit three, Derek jammed into the pavement with his quads and calves. He didn't have his upper body to assist him, but Mark supported his lower back and pulled, which gave Derek enough leverage to get up the rest of the way. When he'd achieved upright, he flailed for the door frame, and he rested from the exertion.

“You okay?” Mark said.

“I'm fine,” Derek croaked, and Mark let go. Derek coughed. “I just need a minute.”

“Take your time.” Mark folded his arms and leaned back against the car with a sigh. Gray clouds hovered overhead, but the drizzle had stopped hours ago, and a muted, post-rain grayness turned everything damp and gloomy.

Derek stared at the surrounding lot as he caught his breath. Mark had said they'd taken the 5. For a bit. Two hours was hardly a bit. He closed the car door and turned to Mark. “Are we even still in Washington?”

Mark snorted. “The state border is like 170 miles from Seattle.”
“Yeah,” Derek said. “And you could make a bouquet with all your speeding tickets.”

“We're still in Washington,” said Mark.

“But...” Derek said. And then he swallowed. Mark had driven the car like a normal car. He hadn’t accelerated it like a roller coaster or a rocket. He hadn't driven on the highway at his usual cruising speed of 85 mph or more. And he kept a pillow in his back seat. Since when did Mark keep a fucking pillow next to his gym bag? The sneaking, crawling suspicion that Mark had made all those concessions specifically to compensate for Derek's fragility made his stomach twist, and he wasn't sure whether to be grateful, embarrassed, depressed, or all three. Had Mark seen Derek fall asleep, and just kept driving out of some nurturing sense that Derek needed the rest?

“He fucked your wife, too,” Gary Clark said. “Clearly, he exists to make you a eunuch.”

“For me,” Derek muttered, trying to focus. “You...”

Mark shrugged, but Derek knew from his guarded expression that he'd pegged it. “I just wanted to drive,” said Mark. “That's all.”

“Right,” said Derek.

Mark grunted noncommittally, and he walked down the long, wide row of cars. The car chirped and the lights flashed as he held the key fob over his shoulder and armed the alarm. Derek shuffled after him and caught up after a few strides. Mark walked slowly, his steps compacted to half their normal length. Even then, halfway down the row, Derek's legs felt like spaghetti. Fatigue rolled over him. He wobbled on his feet, and he had no idea how he was going to walk all the aisles in a grocery store, or how he would be able to stand watching Mark walk the speed of a snail just so Derek could keep up, on an outing Derek had foisted himself on instead of being invited. His face reddened.

A vague, gnarling tension gripped Derek's muscles as a woman rolled by with her cart toward her car. He stared at her, watching her hands and her thin, graceful fingers as she gripped the cart handle. His gaze darted to her purse. She had a baggy shirt. She could easily hide something in her front pocket, something gun-sized.

“Derek,” Mark said.

Derek blinked, and he realized he'd stopped. He'd frozen like some sort of bird trying to outwit a snake by hiding in plain sight. All to assess the risk of walking near a five-foot-three woman rolling a cart full of grocery sacks back to her car. He swallowed.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

Mark shrugged.

Sweat rolled down his spine, and Derek forced himself to breathe. He made himself walk, but the closer he got to the store, the more and more people he saw. Not just one or two. Crawling hoards of them. The checkout lines beyond the sliding doors in the store were a writhing mass of life. Every step forward became a war with his body. His brain began threatening him in an endless litany. Do not go in there. Do not go in there. Do. Not. Go in.

“Derek,” Mark said again as he grabbed a cart from the stacked line of them beside the building. “Are you all right?”

“Y...” Derek said, his voice dying into a choked whisper. “Yes.” He made himself walk into the
store beside Mark's cart. Made himself not jump as people bumped and jostled him. He was a doctor. He needed to be able to function around lots of people. Lots of strangers. This was ridiculous. He wouldn't get shot in a grocery store. Or anywhere. And he'd been able to calm himself down when he'd walked with Meredith. He could calm down, now.

“Are you sure about that?” Mr. Clark said.

Derek made it through the produce section. Mark picked up strawberries for Meredith. Bananas for everybody's cereal. Salad packs. Potatoes to go with steaks. But Derek hung in an over-sensitized daze. His gaze darted to the island stacked with a pyramid of ripe nectarines and peaches, and he didn't look at the fruit. He looked by the ground to see if somebody was hiding behind the stack. When a lady behind him crinkled a plastic bag, his body twitched.

By the time Mark pushed the cart into the deli department, Derek couldn't focus. His limbs shook. The deli had an open view into their meat freezer, but Derek didn't see hanging flanks of beef. He saw blood, and the shadow of a firearm flashed in the glass. Gary Clark sneered.

Near the back of the store, when a clerk dropped a crate of chili cans on the ground, the loud slam almost pushed Derek into a panicking, gibbering mess. He swallowed. His mouth felt cottony, and dry, and every noise was a gunshot, no matter what it sounded like to begin with. Too many people everywhere left him drowning in the constant task of threat assessment.

“I think I'm going to sit in the car,” Derek said, trying to sound confident and clear, but mostly he just heard hoarse, breathy failure. “May I have the keys?”

“You okay, man?” Mark said as he fished into his pocket for his key fob. The keys jingled as he withdrew them.

“I'm a little tired,” Derek said.

“Okay,” said Mark. “I'll try to finish fast.”

“Take your time,” Derek said, and he wandered toward the entranced without looking back, stuck in a dazed, shock-y place where everything seemed too loud, too bright, and too scary. His palms sweated, and he gripped the keys until the sharp edges of metal hurt.

The doors slid apart and guided him to freedom and safety. Derek couldn't stop the distressed whine that caught in his throat as a man bustled past with two grocery bags clutched in his hands and knocked right into him. The force of the collision and Derek's own momentum drove Derek to the side, shuffling one step, two.

“Watch where you're going,” the man snarled as he caught a falling cumquat, and his bags crinkled. Derek looked at the man's pockets and assessed the rest of him. Baggy. Not safe. Could have a weapon. And then Derek froze, caught, unable to look away. The man had short, gray hair with a high hairline, dark blue eyes, and a mustache. That was where the similarities ended, but it didn't matter. None of it mattered, because Derek couldn't breathe.

The man's grocery bags disappeared, and all Derek saw was the end of a gun, pointed at him. A roar hit his eardrums, and then he was falling backward. Dr. Kepner stood behind him, screaming and babbling, but he didn't understand the words. He couldn't remember the impact. Just the endless gray sky over head as he lay there, bleeding out and dying and unable to breathe.

The world snapped back to him like a rubber band. The man with the grocery bags who'd run into him snorted with disdain, and he left Derek behind. Derek trembled in the middle of the exit.
“Excuse me,” said a woman as she tried to push past with a loaded cart. Derek swallowed. Traffic jam. He was causing a traffic jam, and he couldn't...

He made his legs function despite the shivery, panicky, weak feeling in his quads and his calves. His hands shook. Everything trembled like a fucking leaf. Dots of sweat formed on his brow. The parking lot spread out like an endless sea. He didn't know where to go, where the car had been parked, couldn't recall anything in the midst of dizzying panic. People. Everywhere. He stumbled down the walk toward a bench. If he could get to the bench, he could sit, and he could make himself calm down and think rationally and—

He blinked when he saw it in the distance. A little business tucked between a Verizon store and the grocery store. He walked, every breath a small sob that he couldn't stop. Tears pinched in his eyes. He swallowed, and he kept going.

The bell rang as he entered the store, and then a hush spread around him, like he'd entered a library, or a funeral parlor, or... Derek wiped his eyes and blinked. His feet sank into the plush welcome mat. The store was narrow, but deep. A lighted, glass display case ran the length of the room. Stacks and stacks of boxes ran up the walls. An eagle poster slathered with the NRA logo in bright, bloody bursts of color had been taped to the cash register.

“Hello, sir,” said a thin, black-haired man as he came in from the back room. He smiled, showing pearly white, straight teeth, and no fillings. He wore a yellow shirt, a white apron, and jeans. Not prim, but not sloppy, either. Casual. At ease. “How can I help you?”

Derek didn't trust his throat to make words as he walked into the gun shop. His eyes darted to the boxes of ammunition on the wall. “9MM 2 for 1!” said a small placard, and his stomach roiled.

He shuffled to the first glass case by the door and looked down. Guns. Different colors. Shapes. Sizes. His breaths shortened as his gaze found a familiar black pistol, resting quiet and deadly in a red velveteen case. Derek gripped the display case, leaving smudged prints on the glass by the corners.

“That's a Beretta 9mm,” said the clerk as he came to a stop across from Derek and looked down. “It's very popular with law enforcement.”

Derek pursed his lips. “Why?”

The clerk shrugged. “They don't want to shoot through walls or people. They want to hit their targets and have the bullets stop.”

“Oh,” Derek said. He stared at the gun in the case, and then he closed his eyes. The barrel of a gun pointed at him. In slow motion, he watched the flash of the muzzle. The way the gun flinched in Gary Clark's hand as force kicked it back. Derek didn't remember the impact. Just the searing pain in his breast as he hit the ground, and his head smacked into the floor. Dr. Kepner wouldn't shut up.

He didn't know if that gun in the case was the type of gun Gary Clark had used. But it looked fucking similar. His gaze shifted manically to another black pistol labeled Glock–17, which didn't have the same sort of muzzle as the one Mr. Clark had used, and then some sort of Smith & Wesson. Derek only had a vague recollection of popular brands. He didn't understand any of the lingo, or the labels, or anything. He just knew a man could pick up any one of these, load it with bullets, and kill someone. Many someones. A hospital full of people. Him. His breaths shortened, and he put a hand to his side as a phantom hot poker smacked through his body and stopped by his spine.
“First time around firearms?” said the clerk.

Derek swallowed. “No.”

“Huh,” said the clerk. “Well, color me surprised, then. I can usually peg newbies a mile away.” He pulled out a ring of keys and opened the case. He pulled the Beretta from its tomb, and before Derek realized it, Derek had a fucking gun sitting in his hands. “See if you like it,” the clerk said.

The grip felt solid. The gun was surprisingly light. A few pounds. It definitely didn't break the barrier of Derek's five pound weight limit.

Derek's hand shook as he slid his index finger up against the trigger, and he lifted the gun in an imitation of what Gary Clark had done when he'd wielded one. A one-handed, extended-from-the-body grip with his right hand. He narrowed his gaze, and he pretended his murderer stood there, pleading and groveling, and then he yanked on the trigger.

The gun clicked, and Derek's stomach curdled. He put the unloaded gun on the counter top and stepped away.

“Not for you?” the clerk said.

Derek swallowed. His head pounded. “If I w... wanted this. Wh... What would I need to do?” His voice cracked, and he stuttered, and he couldn't look the clerk in the eye.

“Well, there's a form you'll have to fill out,” said the clerk. “There's a five day hold on all handguns. The state will run a background check. As long as nothing comes up, you'll be good to go by the end of the week.”

“The end of the week,” Derek echoed. “That's it?”

“Well,” the clerk said, and then he frowned. “The form is a bit cumbersome. But yes.”

Derek closed his eyes. He put his elbows on the counter, and he leaned into his hands. “S... so,” he said, struggling to speak against nausea. “If I wanted to... I... I could. Fff. Five days. That's all.”

“Assuming your background check is clean, yes.”

“Okay,” Derek said. He panted as the room seemed to waver in and out like a desert mirage in a blast of heat. “Okay.”

“Sir, are you all right?” said the clerk from very far away.

Derek stumbled to his feet, pushing away from the display case, and he blinked, trying to keep his brain in the room with him. He stood in a store full of death. Guns sat on display like museum exhibits. Handled like artwork. There was ammunition on sale. Like a great deal on printer ink at Staples. The store had a friendly clerk. And Derek or Gary Clark or anyone could buy a gun and kill somebody in five days. Some smiling, juvenile clerk had watched Gary Clark fill out his fucking form with a fucking ballpoint pen, sanctioned a bloody rampage, and had probably given him discount ammunition.

Who fucking gave discounts on murder?

Derek looked at the case where the Beretta rested. It sat on top of the glass, now, on a felt pad. He'd touched it. He'd picked it up, and he'd pretended. His body shook. Gary Clark laughed and taunted and jeered in his ears.
Derek didn't answer the clerk. He bolted. As fast as his body would let him flee. A sharply painful jog that jounced and tortured his healing upper body. But a jog. Something he hadn't done successfully in weeks. When he got back to the car, he was sweaty and shaky and upset and crying. He couldn't breathe. Or think.

“Fucking eunuch,” said Gary Clark. “Or, I guess a eunuch wouldn't be fucking. Would you?”

Derek vomited. By the side of the car. Bile and breakfast spilled onto the pavement, and his incision line flared with brief agony as his abdominal muscles jerked with spasms. He wiped his mouth, and then he crawled into the car, no special squat and shuffle required because he didn't fucking care if he got in knees first or contorted. He reached into the back seat. If Mark had the foresight to bring a fucking pillow, he would have the foresight to— Yes. Derek reached for his pills. He unscrewed the cap. They'd reduced him to 1 every 6-8 hours as needed. He spilled 3 into his hand, and he swallowed them dry, choking and gasping and forcing them down. He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to think. He didn't want to hold a fucking gun, real or pretend.

“That's right,” said Mr. Clark. “Run away. Coward.”

Derek had just thrown up. His stomach was empty. He didn't have to wait long before his head began to rush, and his muscles loosened, and his breathing slowed. He blinked, long and protracted, once, twice, and then it seemed better to just let his eyelids rest against his face. The pill bottle slid from his hands and fell to the floor mat by his feet. The jingle of spilling pills filled the cabin.

“Help,” he croaked, and his thoughts spread apart and loosened like warm taffy.

A hand slipped against his trembling body and pushed him back against the seat. “It's okay, now,” Meredith said in the silence. She wrapped her arms around him, and he forgot the rest as she soothed him. “You're safe.”
Chapter 12

Meredith had made a horrible mistake.

She petted the thick stack of towels and linens on the tray table next to a lukewarm water basin, wishing she hadn’t volunteered for this. Derek had made it clear that he didn’t want her to touch him, and now she’d inserted herself into a situation where she would have to touch him everywhere. But she’d seen the look on his face, torn between desire and humiliation, when Tammy, Derek’s assigned nurse, had entered the cubicle with the warm water basin. He didn’t want to lie in filth. But he didn’t want to be bathed like an invalid, either. Except he was an invalid. Temporarily. Since that initial burst of energy when he’d somehow stood up, he couldn’t lift his head off the pillow.

“I’ll do it,” Meredith had said without thinking when she’d seen that look. Tammy, exhausted after hours and hours on shift, had been happy to accept Meredith’s offer. The nurse had set down the basin, washcloths, towels, clean sheets, and soap, and she’d left.

Now, Meredith hovered in tense, silent debate. Was it better to let him endure humiliation with a stranger who he would likely never see again? Or was it better to do this herself, despite a clear unresolved issue between them that might be exacerbated by forced intimacy? Maybe she should go get Tammy after all.

Meredith didn’t know. She didn’t know anything. And now she’d wasted so much time Derek had checked out of the room to commune with whatever. Though he didn’t sleep, he stared at no place in particular, his eyelids drooping. Like he felt too hot to sleep and too sick to be awake, and so he hovered halfway between the two.

Meredith took several towels off the top of the stack, and she approached the bed where he lay, baking in a lake of his sweat. She reached over the railing and touched his face. Even now, hours after they’d pushed his fever under 104, his skin burned against her palm. Sweat poured from every exposed drop of skin. He didn’t move except for the shallow rise and fall of his bare chest. A cloud of fog against the oxygen mask cupping his face contracted and expanded in time with his breaths, and it hurt. It hurt to watch him struggle so hard for so little in return. His blood-oxygen levels were very low.

“Derek,” Meredith whispered, trying not to intervene into his space too harshly.

Sometimes, you were so sick you didn’t want to listen to anything, no matter what the subject, no matter who was speaking, You just wanted quiet. And dark. She suspected he was there. He’d refused his iPod several times when she’d offered it, and when she spoke to him, he tended to drift. She couldn’t give him dark, but she could give him quiet, at least. Beyond the conversation when he’d first come out of his fevered delirium, she usually didn’t speak unless he talked first, or, well, tried to talk. At least the head nurse had given in when she’d seen Meredith wasn’t going to interfere with his ability to rest and recuperate, and had given Meredith permission to stay for much longer intervals than before.

“Derek,” she said again, a little louder.

He blinked once, and his gaze shifted toward her voice, but he didn’t move his head or speak. Not that she expected him to, or even wanted him to. Hearing him try to speak hurt her almost as much as watching him try to breathe. She wished the antibiotics would start working, soon. Really working. Instead of just keeping him from getting worse.
“Hey,” she said, forcing herself to smile as his fever-glazed gaze found hers. “Do you need anything? Water, or...?”

He stared at her, sort of. His gaze went right through her face and focused on some point beyond. Not on purpose, she thought. Not like he tried to ignore her. More like he didn't quite have a firm handle on reality.

“I'm going to put some towels underneath you.” Nerves quivered in her gut. “Unless you don't want me to. I could... We could... Skip...” She swallowed. What was she saying? Skip a bath? He was soaked. And he lay on soaked blankets and sheets. A lukewarm bath would not only clean him up; it would help lower his temperature, and probably make him feel about six busloads more comfortable. But he didn't want her to touch him, and what if pressuring him, even for something he needed, made things worse? What if—

His right hand flopped against his hip once before he managed to move it across his torso. The intravenous line chased after his hand. He gripped the opposite railing, the barest flex of his fingers indicating he had a hold on it. In an swell of insecure paranoia, she thought he was trying to get away from her, but then sanity intervened. Derek knew how this was done. He would try to help.

With hesitation, she splayed one hand against his shoulder blade and one hand against his hip, and she rested for a moment, skin to skin with him, to give him a moment to get used to it. His muscles didn't tense. She gritted her teeth as her eyes watered. She didn't understand what made some things okay and some things not. She wished she knew why he hadn't wanted her to touch him, wished she had any clue at all. Was he just being moody? Or had she done something? She didn't know. And he couldn't tell her.

She forced away her doubts, and she helped him roll onto his side. He used his hand on the opposite railing as a weak support. He wheezed as the bullet wound neared the mattress and his weight pressed on his damaged side. He coughed into the mask, and his entire body jerked with the force of it, and then he coughed again, and again, and again, and again, like the movement from his back to his side had kicked up buckets of dust or something. His hips and legs jerked. The hospital gown covering his groin fell to the mattress. He reached for it, a hoarse, panicked sound crackling in his ruined throat. She rushed to help him, nerves whipping her arms across the bed.

“It's okay, Derek. I've got it,” she said.

Her hand brushed his grasping, sweaty palm. She fixed the limp gown so it covered both front and back, and his breaths slowed, and his hand relaxed. She glanced at the curtains. They were closed. And Tammy knew what they were doing. “Nobody will come in,” she assured him, heartbroken, wary, hoping his uncharacteristic self-consciousness wasn't because of her presence, though what else could it be when they were alone together? She wracked her brain, trying to think of what she possibly could have done to make him so skittish, but she couldn't think of anything.

She flattened out towels next to his torso, his legs, and his neck and head, leaving the excess rolled up near his sweaty body. She helped him shift onto the clean section by rolling him over the bump and onto his right side. She unfurled the towels the rest of the way, until the entire bed's grimy, sweat-soaked surface had been covered with soft, clean terrycloth. Then she helped him resettle on his back. She laid a fresh towel across his groin and removed the dirty gown he'd been using as a cover.

She pulled the basin close and then dipped a sponge into the lukewarm water. When she drew the sponge away, she squeezed, and she closed her eyes, listening as the water drained back into the basin. The bustle and shuffle of the hospital around them fell silent as she tuned it out. Only the
sounds of Derek's struggled breathing remained. She opened her eyes, and she glanced at him. He hovered in a vague, half-lidded stupor. The deep blue of his eyes seemed opaque and black in the dim fluorescent lighting, and he stared at nothing in particular. She left him alone to rest.

After the sponge drained, she touched his chest with it. A thin film of water spread across his pale body as she pressed. His skin twitched, and she paused, giving him a chance to accustom himself to the temperature of the water and the feel of the sponge. He was very, very hot. Lukewarm would feel cool or cold to him.

“This should make you feel a little better,” she said as she rubbed his left pectoral. The sponge made a rasping sound as she dragged it across his skin. The incision line down the center of his chest shifted with the movement of his skin, but he didn't flinch or otherwise appear to be in pain.

He'd been shaved prior to his heart surgery. Short wisps of raven hair had grown back into place in a tapering triangle. She watched his nipple pucker as she brushed him with the sponge. She tried not to apply too much pressure as she neared the center of his sternum. A lump formed in her throat when she reached the bullet hole, still an ugly, pocked, crusty scab in dark relief against alabaster. She skirted around it.

Once she'd finished with his chest, she paused. The caffeinated butterflies in her stomach multiplied. Though he hadn't been watching her before, he watched her now through thick, dark eyelashes. He didn't speak, and he lay there immobile and naked except for the towel she'd draped over his hips. Despite the fact that this was Derek, her husband, the man she'd seen, touched, and tasted every corner and crevice of, this... This felt more personal and more intimate than anything she'd ever done to or with him.

Now, in this moment, he'd become dependent on her. Dependent for his health and well-being. Derek Shepherd was a human being who housed an immense well of pride, but also a vast well of insecurities, hidden deep underneath an arrogant facade. The pressure not to mess up, not to damage his pride or inflate his niggling doubts, seemed staggering, now that she'd hurled herself into this position. She watched his Adam's apple carve a line along his throat, and she looked away to dip the sponge as her face reddened.

She'd lingered on his chest. And she'd stared. He didn't want her to touch him. He clearly felt self-conscious. And she'd stared. At his nipple. As it puckered. This wasn't sexual. This wasn't for sex. He couldn't move much or advocate for himself. And she'd stared at an involuntary tactile response like it was some sign he still wanted her. Stupid. Lame. Idiot. She swallowed, and she squeezed the sponge as she pulled it out of the tub.

“Is this okay?” she said, and she stopped to look at him, at his face, for any signs of distress or embarrassment or anything negative. Something to tell her she'd irreparably screwed up. That this had been a mistake.

He blinked. The hazy, not-quite-lucid appearance of his gaze didn't dissipate, but she saw his lips move. The mask over his face fogged. He closed his eyes, and he nodded.

She stroked his abdomen, chasing the rise and fall of his breaths. She tried to aim for something more methodical, rather than intimate touching, but she failed when she encountered the ripples of his ribs sliding underneath his skin. He coughed, weak and tired, and she watched his diaphragm twitch and his abs strain.

Since she'd gotten on his case about food, he'd been eating, and, though he was still way too thin, he'd put on a pound or two in the week since his first real walk. This pneumonia would rip all his progress away again and would maybe set him back even further. He hadn't eaten since breakfast
the day before. He'd been too sick to eat. He'd improved enough to eat since then, but his already meager appetite had been obliterated. He'd refused the lunch tray they'd brought him.

Tears burned. She blinked against them and forced herself to move onward. She dipped the sponge into his bellybutton, and rubbed down to the edge of the towel where the coiling fuzz of his pubic hair began. Swift strokes. Not lingering in any one place. Clinical, she told herself. Clinical, clinical. She could do clinical.

She rubbed his shoulder with the sponge. Dribbles of lukewarm water spread over his skin and pocked the towel below. She wanted to touch him, her palms to sweaty, wet flesh, and she wanted to whisper soothing, soft words, but she clamped down on her impulses. Keep him comfortable despite the precarious situation. Make him feel better. Don't embarrass him. Those were her goals. Nothing else.

She sponged his arms while he lay passive. She wiped hours of sweat away with soap and lukewarm water. The soft tufts of dark, soaked hair in his armpits reeked, and she scrubbed and scrubbed. The excess water caught on the towels. Small droplets remained on his skin after her attention, and she worked his upper body dry in sections before moving on.

She managed to keep with her clinical goals until she roamed to the puckered, nickel-sized scar in the meat of his left thigh near his hip, and she couldn't help but pause. She stared, caught in the glaze of hypnosis as she watched soapy, filmy bubbles slip and slide across his pale, cratered skin. She knew he had a mirror scar on the back of his leg, high on his hamstring, almost where the muscle dipped into the curve of his ass. From his motorcycle crash, he'd said, but he'd never said more, and she hadn't wanted to press it. She suspected, from the layout of the two scars, that he'd been impaled by something. Rebar, maybe, based on the round-but-jagged shape, or... Well. She really didn't know. A tree branch or a signpost? When she came back to herself, she realized she was stroking the dip of the front scar with her thumb, and he watched her.

“I'm sorry,” she said, and she pulled away. He didn't seem upset, but maybe she was just being hopeful. “I really sorry. It's hard not to daydream.” She belatedly realized she'd made it sound even worse. Like she was ogling him or something. Her stomach roiled at the thought of him assuming she was taking advantage. Really taking advantage. “I mean, I... Spacing. I mean. Sorry.”

Articulate. Wonderful. She opted to shut up instead of making it worse.

She dipped the sponge again, and she finished his thighs and his calves and feet while he watched, still silent. When she'd finished with his front, well, most of his front, she splayed her hand against his hip. “I'm going to wash your back,” she said. She held his shoulder and his hip. He gave her a feeble amount of help, but mostly she did the work of moving him herself. “I'll try to be quick,” she added, knowing that, while he could lie on his side for brief periods, he still found it uncomfortable after a while.

Except when she stared at him, she couldn't help wanting to go slow. If she spent more time on his back, that was less time trying to figure out how to deal with... other places. She pressed the sponge against his shoulder blade and watched the waterfall against his skin. He made a deep, croaky sound under the oxygen mask, and she bit her lip. He had no intonation. No words. It was impossible to tell if he was enjoying something or distressed or...

“Are you okay?” she said.

He didn't speak, but she watched over his shoulder at his expression. Watched the way his eyelids dipped as he exhaled. She stood behind him. He couldn't really watch her without serious
contortions. Instead, he let his lashes fall low over his cheeks, and he rested with his eyes closed. Not just okay, then, she decided. Enjoying it. Or at least not disliking it.

Which made no sense in light of his earlier balking, and now she had no idea what to think. She watched his wet head tilt into the towel covering pillow, and his supporting grip on the bed railing faltered. Maybe he was too exhausted to care anymore, whether he liked it or not.

She stroked his back, and she chased the sponge down the ripples of his vertebrae. One, by one, by one. All the way to his coccyx where his body cleaved apart. His hand fell from the railing. She splayed her bare palm against his side to steady him. He didn't twitch, or struggle, or seem in any way disturbed. She shoved into the sponge and pushed down the diagonals of his lattisimus dorsi, laving attention on every freckle, all the way down to the final toned dip before the swell, and then she scrubbed his gluteals. The mirror scar on his hamstring shone in uneven relief.

She felt his muscles start to tremble. His eyes opened into slits, and he stared at the bed railing, silent. His fingers clenched, gathering a tent of terrycloth. His side hurt from resting on it too long, she guessed. He coughed. She wiped him down with a towel, made sure he was dry, and helped him settle onto his back again. She bit her lip. She'd finished everything but his face and his groin.

She put down the sponge and picked up a fresh washcloth from the stack. She dipped it in the water, wrung it out, and went back to the bed. She leaned over the bed rail, and she pulled the oxygen mask away. No longer muted, his noisy breaths hit the air like drumbeats. He lay passive, eyes closed. She couldn't tell if he slept or not. She ran her fingers through his sweaty hair with one hand as she wiped his face with the other. The filmy sheen of sweat across his skin shattered as she broke it with the washcloth. She dabbed his neck and behind his ears and everywhere his mop of mussed hair didn't touch, and then she replaced his oxygen mask. His lungs needed the help.

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“I need to pull this away now,” she said, her fingertips brushing soft terrycloth over his hips.

He didn't respond, and he didn't look at her. Very bad signs, unless he really was asleep, but she somehow doubted it.

She pulled the towel loose. As part of her recent grunt work as an intern, she'd done this countless times to people she didn't know. But this was different. A lump formed in her throat. She hoped this wasn't a mistake. She couldn't bear it if she made things worse.

She hated to leave him exposed when it clearly bothered him, but she'd just washed him. All over. Her hands had touched new sweat and old sweat and germs and dirt and dead skin cells, and now that the towel was out of the way, she had to re-sterilize. She washed her hands thoroughly while he lay in the bed, naked, uncovered. Nerves clamored in her gut, made her body shake. She wanted to be finished. She wanted to be finished, so he could be comfortable, and she wouldn't have to worry anymore.

She grabbed another sterile washcloth, dipped it, wrung it out, and approached.

“Derek,” she whispered.

His eyes remained closed.
“Derek,” she repeated. “I’m going to touch you.”

His eyelids fluttered. The deep pools of his pupils seemed glassy. He made a noise, and she watched his throat bobble as he swallowed. A cough rumbled through him, and he shut his eyes again. That was that. She had no idea what he’d tried to tell her, or if he was talking to another one of his fever hallucinations, or if he’d just been clearing his wrecked throat... Her brain hurt. She hated this. A no would have been more vehement, right? Maybe he’d just been telling her to get the hell on with it. Or... Something. Stop, he’d said earlier, when he’d meant it. Whatever this had been, it hadn’t been the word stop.

She forced herself to relax. “Okay,” she said.

She touched his feather-soft, veined skin, gently retracted his prepuce, and she cleaned around the area where the catheter entered him. He inhaled, and she froze. “Does this hurt?” she said, her voice tense, hoping she hadn't accidentally yanked on the balloon inflated inside his bladder. She didn't think she had. When he didn’t respond, didn’t open his eyes, she kept going, working down to his pubic bone and his balls as quickly and clinically as she could. She cleaned the entire area, she patted it dry, and then she backed off. As fast as she could.

After washing her hands again, she piled her used towels and washcloths to the side near the basin, and she unfolded a clean, fresh hospital gown. At last read, his temperature had been 103.6. High, but no longer a life threatening emergency unless it persisted for days, and the Tylenol was still forcing it down. The bath had probably lowered his fever a bit a bit as well. The hospital gown was very thin. Physically, wearing the full gown might be a little uncomfortable for him. Mentally, though...

“Do you want to wear this?” she said, gesturing at the gown, wanting to make it his choice instead of hers.

His eyes opened halfway. Fever glazed his dark irises, and for a moment, she wondered if he had any idea where he was. Maybe he really had fallen asleep.

She leaned against the railing and moved the gown into his direct line of sight. “Derek,” she said. “Do you want to wear this gown?”

He panted as he stared at her. His lips parted. The fog on the mask blocked her view of his lips, and she had no idea what he’d said, but it became pretty clear what he meant when he tried to sit up, scrabbling at the bed rails for leverage. She rushed to him, and he collapsed against her body, gasping, coughing. His shaky arms wrapped around her body for support, and she heard him then, when the oxygen mask pressed against her.

“Please,” he said, a croak.

She swallowed as the room blurred, and she helped him stick his arms through the holes. She tied the gown along the side, trying to hurry. The longer he sat up, the more his body shook with strain, and she didn’t want him to overheat all over again. When he collapsed against the mattress, she helped him raise his hips, and she pulled the gown down to his thighs, under his buttocks.

“The last thing she did was change his sheets to fresh, soft, clean ones. She placed a new cooling blanket on top of the fitted sheet. She didn't bother with the cover sheet. He wouldn't want it, not as hot as he felt. And then she helped him roll back onto the clean cooling blanket.

This was the first time in hours she hadn't seen him soaked. His hair was still wet, but he looked better, even as new dots of sweat formed across his body. He panted into the mask. He stared at
her for a long, interminable moment, and then he closed his eyes. Whether he slept or not, she couldn't tell.

Finished, she collapsed into the chair by the bed. She would clean up all the supplies later. She reached across the bed railing, and she grabbed his hand. “I’m sorry,” she told him. “I’m sorry if I made it worse.”

He didn’t open his eyes or try to reassure her. She hoped he slept.

“I need to have sex with Derek,” Meredith said as she paced. The fish tank burbled, and the air smelled like fresh cut flowers or something. Relaxing. Nice. Except Meredith didn't feel relaxed or nice. She clasped her hands, clenching and un-clenching because she needed to hit something. Or squeeze. Or just... Anything to supplant the horrible desperation gnawing at her core. Her loafers caught on the soft carpet and dragged.

Dr. Wyatt let her pace. “Why do you need to have sex with him?” she said.

Meredith stopped and looked at her. “What do you mean, why?” she said. “He's my husband, and I love him.”

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “And that constitutes want,” she said. She shifted on her chair and recrossed her legs. “Why do you feel that you need to have sex?”

“I don’t know. I...” Meredith sighed as the fight bled out of her. She dropped onto the couch on her back and let herself sink into the too-comfortable cushions. She watched Dr. Wyatt's pen scribble across her steno pad, and then she let her gaze space. One pen became two. “We used to have sex almost daily, if not more.”

“And when did you last have sex?” Dr. Wyatt asked.

“More than five weeks ago,” Meredith said. “Six, really. It was a really busy week before he got shot, and I...” Her voice trailed away as she thought of the last time.

He'd been busy. She'd been busy. She'd paged him to an exam room, knowing the route he'd take from his office by heart because she'd seen him walk it more than once for other pages. She'd grabbed his lab coat as he'd passed, and she'd pulled him into the dark supply closet.

Meredith, I have a page, he'd said.

I know. She'd wrapped her arms around his neck and pushed him against the door to close it. Help me, Chief Shepherd. It's an emergency.

He'd snorted. You?

Guilty, she'd whispered. She'd inhaled against his neck, and the sharp, spicy scent of familiar cologne had made her dizzy with desire. Do you think my boss will mind?

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “So, things don't feel normal, and you miss the pattern?”

“It's not like that,” Meredith said.

“Tell me what it's like,” Dr. Wyatt said.

Meredith closed her eyes and sighed as his phantom hands slid under her waistband. Mmm, he'd purred in her ear as he'd pressed her against the metal rack. A bin full of gauze rolls had
crashed to the floor. I'm going to do this again tonight, but much. His nose had nudge the underside of her chin, and she'd tilted backward. Much. He kissed her jugular. Slower.

I'm not going to be home tonight, she'd replied.

That's a shame, Derek had said, his voice a low, virile growl, but his pager had beeped for real, and he hadn't argued more than that. They'd finished, and he'd rushed off, still fiddling with his tie.

“The last time we met in a supply closet,” Meredith said. “It was... maybe ten minutes. A quickie. You know?”

“I'm familiar with the term,” Dr. Wyatt said, a wry smile creasing her features.

“Sorry, I just...”

“Go ahead.”

“I never thought it might be the last time, or I would have...” Meredith blinked. Would have what, exactly? “I mean he almost died. And then he almost died again. And I...”

Dr. Wyatt leaned forward and raised her eyebrows. “You...?”

Tears blurred her vision as Meredith thought of Derek, but she held them at bay.

Derek put more than just his body and mind into sex. He approached lovemaking with gusto. In the moments when he kissed her, when he touched her, when he filled her, he made every cell in her body hum. He loved her. And he made sure she knew it.

She was used to touching him. She was used to looking into his eyes and seeing into his soul. He gave, but he also let her take, just as she did with him. In return for her vulnerability, for her opening to him, he showed her his own weaknesses. A metaphorical statement. Here's my soft underbelly. If you exploit it, I'd hurt. He gave her that. All of him.

Even when the inevitable occurred, and reality struck to inform them that the human body was a complex, unpredictable, sometimes-misbehaving construct. When she couldn't stop thinking about a horrible case at work, and he couldn't excite her no matter what the hell trick he tried, or when something at work stressed him to the point of nausea, and she couldn't get him up, or keep him up, or... whatever. She never felt like the act of sex had been failure, even when one or both of them crashed and burned on the way to the big o, because the rest of it was fantastic anyway, the simple act of being together and loved instead of alone.

She'd never had that before. Not with any other guy she'd met, and she'd met plenty. Derek made her feel safe, and reassured, and whole, and, really?

Addicted to the whole freaking process from start to whatever the finish.

“I just need it,” Meredith said, and she rolled into a sitting position. She draped herself over her knees and stared at the neutral, soft carpet.

“It's normal to want to reconnect after a traumatic event,” Dr. Wyatt replied, her voice soft.

“But he doesn't!” Meredith said. She wiped her face with her hands. Her eyes burned. Her throat hurt. She felt raw. Did he feel that way with her? Safe. Reassured. Whole. She'd always hoped he did, that he felt even half of what she felt for him during intimate moments, but, if he did, then why was she here, talking to Dr. Wyatt. Why would he not want her to touch him? Why had it been six
weeks since they'd made love? “He doesn't want to reconnect, or we would have already. I'm all over the reconnecting thing. I wouldn't say no at this point, even if I wasn't in the mood.”

“Are you saying he doesn't want to have sex?”

“Yes,” Meredith said. “That's what I'm saying.”

“Are you sure this isn't a case of can't instead of won't?” Dr Wyatt said.

“Well, I...” Meredith paused. Derek was on a lot of different drugs. Two types of narcotic painkillers among them, one time-release, and one fast-acting. He'd been very sick. And in pain. And depressed. And hurt. And just... Erectile dysfunction would make a lot of sense. Irrational hope swelled in her chest that this whole mess was a simple thing like that. Long term mechanical failure brought on by immense trauma that Derek, being Derek, wouldn't want to admit to, so it manifested in a snarly case of don't-touch-me and sexual avoidance. But her hope died as soon as logic caught up with her. “I've seen him get erections while he's sleeping,” she said with a sigh. “And he usually has one in the morning when he wakes up.”

“So, why do you think he doesn't want to have sex?”

“I did something wrong,” Meredith said.

“Why do you think that?”

“He used to talk about wanting sex,” Meredith said, recalling his litany in the foyer after he'd collapsed. *I want to have sex with my wife*, he'd yelled, helpless. “Within two weeks, he was...”

“But he doesn't now?”

“Not since the second hospital stay.”

“What happened during the second hospital stay?”

“I don't know,” Meredith said, shaking her head. “When he woke up, he didn't want me to touch him below the neck, but it hurt him to talk, and he was so sick, he couldn't tell me why.”

*You can tell me later,* she'd said. Except he'd lost his voice for a whole freaking week. He'd been sick and unhappy. Later had never arrived.

She and Mark had had to carry Derek from the car and up the steps. Unlike his first homecoming, there had been no detours to the sofa, no dish washing, no teasing over subs or tickling. Derek hadn't stood defiant in the face of physical weakness. He hadn't been able to stand at all, defiant or not.

She'd helped Derek change his clothes and get into bed, and then sleep had yanked him under before she'd even pulled the covers over his body. He'd slept. For three freaking days. He'd woken for water. He'd woken to pee. He'd woken for some gentle-on-the-stomach soup and to take his pills. All three he'd needed help with, at first.

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “So, he balked at physical contact with you, and now he's not discussing sex anymore?”

“He's barely discussing anything,” Meredith said. She looked at the floor. “He's withdrawn and completely not chatty. Pod Derek or whatever. I don't even know how to talk to him anymore. He bites my head off for every little thing, and he's worse with Mark.”
She’d found Mark in the backyard one evening a few days before, scarlet-faced as he kicked the community-provided trashcan all over in the shredded grass and mud. *Fuck you,* he’d growled as his foot had slammed into the can. *Fuck guns and your fucking vegetable wife.* He’d grabbed a trash bag full of garbage, and he’d do-si-do-ed into a tree with it. The bag had split open. *Fuck!* he’d shouted as refuse had rained around him.

Derek had been asleep against his desk in his office. He tended to retreat there after he finished the latest snap and snarl routine. She wondered what he’d said or done this time to upset Mark so badly.

Dr. Wyatt scribbled notes. “Have you asked him why?”

“You said not to pressure him,” Meredith said.

“I didn’t say not to talk at all, and I did say not to let him wallow,” Dr. Wyatt said. “If he’s initiated some sort of intimacy gap, that needs to be addressed.”

“I’m afraid to even bring it up. Every little thing sets him off.”

Since he’d kicked the pneumonia, Derek had moped. When she talked about work, he prickled, like she was rubbing it in his face that she could be productive all day while he rotted at the house. When she asked about his day, he prickled, like he felt she was patronizing him, because, really, what the fuck would he do all day? His words, not hers. If she tried to see if he wanted anything, he prickled, like he thought she was insulting his ability to take care of himself. Offering to drive him somewhere, or get him a glass of water, or even asking if he’d taken his pills had become a lesson in masochism. Overall, he’d become a prickly person. Prickly and nasty and just... Like Derek with all the good things about his personality stripped away.

Dr. Wyatt shrugged. “Maybe he’s afraid to bring it up, too.”

“He’s Derek,” Meredith said. “Why the hell would he be afraid of sex? He knows he's a freaking god at it.”

But he wouldn't be, now, a tiny voice said. And he knows it. His stamina is shot. He can't lift, push, or pull. He can't bend or twist. Sharp movements still hurt him. She swallowed.

*Are you embarrassed, Derek?* she'd said.

*I don't know,* he'd replied in a dark voice that spoke of shame.

Definitely not the cocksure Derek she'd grown to love. She also knew that when Derek experienced an orgasm, he breathed with heavy, sternum-straining pants for... maybe twenty seconds, just before. The moment of, he filled his lungs to the brim and froze. Sometimes he would yell or say her name with the air he'd gathered. Sometimes he would experience his ecstasy in silence, and would only exhale with the final spurt when he let his body collapse into the afterglow. Did he think it would hurt? She kneaded the leg of her pants. She hadn't really thought about that, and now she felt like a selfish idiot on top of everything else. She didn't want him to hurt.

“Why did you two wait back when he said he wanted it?” Dr. Wyatt said. “Is there some restriction on sexual activity after heart surgery?”

“No,” Meredith replied. “You can have sex as soon as you're home after heart surgery, not that you'd necessarily want to.”

“Why wouldn't you want to?”
Meredith, he'd said, his voice cut to the bone with pain. She'd opened her eyes in the dark. His hand had rested on her hip, and his breaths hit her skin in rapid blasts of warmth. Her digital clock had glowed sharp red against her tired eyes. 3:00AM. She'd just helped him flip sides an hour ago, and he usually went at least two hours before he needed to change sides again.

Mmm, what is it? she'd muttered, full of sleep, not registering his discomfort.

He'd rubbed her abdomen, his touch soft and warm, and she'd been tempted to collapse back into sleep. The blankets had wrapped her up in a toasty cocoon, and he lay tipped toward the center of the mattress. Her favorite, because she could lie against his body. But then the mattress had shifted as he tried again to move on his own. A low, hitching noise had popped loose from his lips, and his soft, harrowed moan had brought her out of dreaming.

I can't get up, he'd said, his voice soft between pants, as if he hadn't wanted to wake her despite his discomfort.

She'd helped him over the mountain of pillows, and she'd waited for him under warm blankets while he'd stumbled away to relieve himself in the dark.

“He's been cut in half,” Meredith said. She drew her index finger in a line between her cleavage. “All the muscles he would use to do a push up, or to pull, or lift, or anything. He can't use them. Well, he can. But it hurts. He can't support his body weight. For a while, even breathing hurt, but he says it doesn't anymore.”

“And that's why you didn't have sex?” Dr. Wyatt said.

“No,” Meredith said. “He didn't really say much about pain. He said he didn't want to have sex when all he could do was lie there.”

“So, his idea of sex involves him having to carry his weight,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Him being over top of you.”

“He's not a raging He-Man or whatever,” Meredith protested. “He was never picky before.”

“But it seems to matter to him, now.”

“I guess it does, yeah.”

Dr. Wyatt's pen stopped on the page. She looked up from her notes, and she stared at Meredith with an intent, serious gaze. The fish swam in lazy circles in their watery prison. “Do you remember the symptoms that the packet on assault I gave you listed?” Dr. Wyatt said.

“Hyper-vigilant? Easy to startle?”

“But one in particular resonated with you, and we've since talked about it in other sessions.”

“The loss of control thing,” Meredith said.

“Right.”

“And that extends to sex, now?”

“It extends to anything, Meredith. It's important to remember that he's been victimized. He needs to feel like his life isn't at the mercy of others. This is why I encouraged you to help him make decisions.”
Meredith bit her lip and stared at the floor, tears blurring her vision, but again, she refused them. *I don't want to have sex when all I can do is lie there,* he'd said, his voice choked and tight with misery. He'd pleasured her on the bathroom floor, and he'd made sure she had a fantastic experience, but it'd been like assisted masturbating. He'd delighted in making her beg and whine, maybe because he needed to hear someone pleading with him, needed to see somebody at his mercy, and then he hadn't wanted her to love him in return. His reluctance to participate hadn't bothered her at the time. She'd assumed he was just too tired and hurting.

Now, in light of all this new knowledge, his behavior felt wrong, and it made her want to hit something again. Hit Gary Clark. Mr. Clark had affected her husband's psyche so deeply that Derek couldn't even bring himself to accept love. From her. He had to give it, or he didn't want to do anything.

The Derek she knew wasn't like that.

“So, he needs to be on top because it's empowering or whatever?” she said, wiping her face. Her diaphragm quivered as it threatened her with the possibility of making her explode into sobs. She tamped it with all her might, and she took a shaky breath. She could work with this. And then maybe her Derek would come back.

“That's my guess, but, really, I'm only guessing,” said Dr. Wyatt.

“Educated guessing,” Meredith countered.

“True.”

Meredith leaned back against the couch and closed her eyes. “But I still don't get why me touching him would suddenly bother him,” she mused aloud. “He's like Mr. Touchy Feel-y.”

“So, he likes touching you?”

“Yes,” Meredith said. A ghost of a smile creased her features as she remembered all the times he'd held her, or touched her face, or sniffed her hair, or stood in her space, his warm body interlocked with hers. When they lay in bed for hours, he would stroke her.

*You're looking all thoughtful,* she'd said.

*I was just thinking how pretty you are, and also how pretty our children would be.*

“Are you certain that he likes you touching him? That the desire is reciprocal?”

“Of course, I'm sure,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because of the way he reacts when I do it. Or, well, the way he used to react.”

“Which was?” Dr. Wyatt prodded.

“Well, he'd always lean into it,” Meredith said. “And he'd sigh, like he was relaxed, you know? And sometimes, he'd kiss me.”

“And he doesn't do that anymore?”

“Not in the hospital.”
“But what about at home?”

“I haven't really tried since then,” Meredith said. “I got the back off message pretty freaking clearly.”

“And you haven’t spoken to him about it since then?”

“No, I told you,” Meredith said. “I'm not sure how. He's a freaking cactus, and I don't want to mess this up even more. I don't want to make it worse for him than it already is. It's already at the point that I...” Her voice trailed away.

He wasn't being Derek. Not the full palette, anyway. She needed her Derek back. The one who smiled and told her he loved her and said nice things. The one who cracked jokes and chatted about his day, good or bad. The one who made love with her, not to her. The one who snapped and snarled and had a mean streak the size of Texas, but he only let it show once in a while. Not every minute of every hour.

Maybe that's what this quivery, awful feeling was that wouldn't go away. She grieved. He hadn't died, but every day it seemed like more and more of him slipped away from her.

Where's my Derek? That's what she wanted to ask. That's what she wished Dr. Wyatt could tell her. She blinked, and Dr. Wyatt spread into a giant, fuzzy blob, vaguely blonde on top from her hair, and black on bottom from her suit. Wet knives tore down Meredith's cheeks, and she put her face into her hands as everything she'd tried to keep bottled up exploded.

The fish tank burbled, and the clock ticked, and Dr. Wyatt let her sob.

“Please,” Meredith said. She looked up, her gaze watery. She kneaded her hands together. “Tell me how to fix it?”

Dr. Wyatt sighed, and she put her pen and notepad away. “Meredith, you're assuming he doesn't want sex,” she said. “You're assuming he doesn't want you to touch him anymore. You're assuming you did something wrong. That's a lot of assuming.”

“But what else could it be?” Meredith said.

Dr. Wyatt shrugged. “I have some ideas,” she said. “And we could speculate all day.”

Meredith stared at her feet. “I hate you when you're making a damning point or whatever.”

“I'm not saying hold him at gunpoint for an answer, if you'll pardon the heartless pun,” Dr. Wyatt replied. “What I've said in the past still applies. He needs to feel safe and secure talking to you. If he flat refuses to discuss things, it's probably best to let him be. But... Just ask him. Sensitively.”

“Great,” Meredith grumbled. “Because I'm awesome at that.”

Dr. Wyatt smiled. “You're probably a lot better at it than you think.” When Dr. Wyatt's watch beeped, Meredith sighed. How had an hour passed so quickly? It's not like she enjoyed therapy. Somehow, she'd lost track of the clock anyway.

“I'd let you stay,” said Dr. Wyatt, “But I have another appointment scheduled after this.”

Dr. Wyatt confirmed their appointment next week. Meredith gathered her purse and left. She didn't have to stop by the locker room. She'd already changed from her scrubs into her street clothes, khakis, loafers, and a cute lilac-colored blouse she'd bought on sale at Macy's a few weeks before
Gary Clark had decided mass murder was a great way to fix things.

She wandered into the cool, gray air and breathed. The air smelled earthy and fresh. It wasn't raining. Not like most people thought of rain. For Seattle residents, though, drizzly mist and occasional fat drop was nothing weird. Shafts of intermittent sunlight struck the pavement, rolling as the thick clouds overhead moved and morphed in the breeze. The approaching midsummer had made the days longer, but the light was already beginning its afternoon fade.

She pulled open her car door. Water droplets sprayed everywhere. She slid into the seat, and she turned on the engine and the headlights. The old jeep rumbled.

“How the hell am I supposed to discuss sex sensitively?” she asked her steering wheel.

Her steering wheel didn't answer, and she sighed as she put the car in reverse and crept out of her parking spot. This was going to suck. She and Derek always had sex, and on the rare occasions where they went a streak without it, it'd been her fault. Wanting to go slow. Her liver being piecemeal. Whatever. Derek had made a joke out of asking for sex for the former. For the latter, he'd been patient, and hesitant, and he'd never pressured her. Not once.

*Can we, uh?* Derek had said, in an uncharacteristic verbal stumble. *Are you okay to...?

That had been the extent of it, and it wasn't really a model for how to approach this conversation. If she said, “Can we, uh?” to Derek, he wouldn't get it, because she wouldn't be on top of him, kissing him at the time. He'd say, “Uh, what?” assuming he didn't find some random reason to be insulted already and snap at her. And then she'd have to get specific, and it would get ugly, and...

She clenched the steering wheel. The radio DJ droned, mostly beyond her awareness. Rain tapped on the roof with intermittent drumbeats. If she phrased the sex thing as something she wanted, she would feel like a jerk for whining. If she asked him why he didn't want sex, she would feel like a nag, because she'd told him she'd wait until he was ready. There was no easy solution.

Somebody honked, and she flipped him off. “My lane!” she shrieked.

She could mention she'd gotten her period that morning. But that felt wrong. Using the fact that her reproductive system was functioning at a full clip again to hint sex at him. This wasn't about babies. This was about him. And her. And babies would be a welcome side-effect, but...

The Jeep bounced and jostled as she pulled it into the driveway, which, for once, was empty except for Derek's Cayenne. Lexie and Alex had gone out for dinner or something. Meredith couldn't remember the details. She'd sort of spaced while Lexie had been babbling at her. Mark had gone to work because Lexie had had the day off, and he would be on shift for another twenty-four hours, most likely. Which meant Meredith would be alone. With Derek. Just him and her.

If there was ever a time to talk about sex, this would be it, but... Nerves clenched in her stomach.

Meredith grabbed her things and approached the house. Where would she find him, she wondered. Asleep? A monosyllabic, haggard lump on the couch? Sulking in his office? As she pushed through the door, the warm smell of something cooking made her stop. Inhale. The tension winding through her muscles relaxed instinctively. She dropped her purse, kicked off her shoes, and followed the vague sound of rushing water to the kitchen.

He stood at the counter by the sink, barefoot in a black t-shirt and frayed jeans. The water ran, and for a moment, she couldn't help but stand in the doorway and watch the way his shoulders moved as he scrubbed. He had great shoulders. And biceps. She loved his arms. Very sleek and toned.
Muscular, but not bulky like a bodybuilder or something. He'd lost a bit of mass since his surgery, but the sight of him in a snug-fitting shirt still made her lower body tighten.

The stove light was on. The vague white blob of her mother's old casserole dish glowed in the oven window. He'd fixed dinner, which made her smile. Fixing dinner was better than moping. By far. She sniffed the air, but all she could discern was that it smelled good. Her heart swelled. Maybe, he felt better, and he wouldn't treat her with boiling anger. Maybe. Finally.

“What did you make?” she asked as she entered the room, but he didn't turn. She walked across the floor, and something niggled. Something tiny. Something seemed wrong, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

She slid behind him, pushed her arms through his, and wrapped around his waist. Water sprayed everywhere. Glass crashed and broke. He backed into her, and she leaped backward, surprised at the sudden movement. Her back slammed into the opposite counter. The impact knocked the breath from her. He yelled. Loud enough to make her hair bristle and her body flinch. And then he darted away like his toes were on fire. She blinked as cold water dripped into her eyes. The faucet rushed.

He crouched defensively by the refrigerator, one white-knuckled hand wrapped around the handle, the other arm arched in front of his body like a shield. He panted, and he looked at her with wild, frenzied eyes that looked but didn't see. He swallowed, and a torn sound fell from his lips. Like on the catwalk when he'd been shot. A thin, white cord dangled from two white ear buds resting in his ears. The gold-colored connector flashed as it swayed in the air. His iPod lay on the ground, spinning. The glowing, white display caught her eyes, and she stared, hypnotized.

“I'm sorry,” she said when time resumed. The sound of her voice seemed to pull him out of it.

He lowered his arm and leaned into the counter next to the fridge in a seamless motion. He pulled the ear buds loose and dropped his face into his hands. The ear buds slipped to the floor by his feet. His torso rose and fell as his breaths filled his lungs and then emptied. “Meredith,” he said, his voice soft against his palms.

“It's me. I'm sorry.” She didn't know what to say. What could she say? She pushed away from the counter. He balked at the movement. She stillled, trying to calm the sound of her heartbeat throbbing in her ears into something less deafening. “I didn't mean to startle you,” she said over the sound of the rushing water and her heart. She didn't dare move to turn off the water. “I thought you could hear me when I walked in. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” he said, but he didn't sound okay. His voice seemed thready. Whisper-y. Like he couldn't keep enough air in his lungs to speak properly. And he wouldn't look at her, wouldn't lift his head from his hands. In the waning daylight, she couldn't see as well, but she saw his dark hair contrast against the cupboards. The edges of it blurred.

Shaking. He was shaking. She'd scared him that badly. With slow, protracted movements, she pushed away from the counter. She reached across the sink, and she turned off the water. The loud rush stopped, leaving only silence. She moved toward where he stood.

“Derek,” she said, and she tried to touch him. To squeeze his shoulder. To offer security. Anything.

When her palm brushed his shirt, he flipped around to face her like he expected some sort of attack from behind. “It's okay,” she said. “It's just me. It's just me, Derek.” Dilated with terror, his eyes had become paper-thin, indigo halos wrapped around the solid black of his pupils. “Meredith,” she said. “It's Meredith.”
He looked at her. “I'm...” he began, but the rest of his sentence got lost and never arrived. He looked around the kitchen as though it were new to him. Like he didn't know where he was. That vague, distant look she'd seen on his face the first time she'd brought him home.

“I'm sorry,” she repeated. “Derek, I'm so sorry.”

She watched his gaze as he peered at the sink, and then the opposite counter where he'd pushed her by accident. “Did I hurt you?” he said.

“What?” Meredith said. “No, I was just surprised.”

He laughed, but the sound fell on her ears like a razor cutting into glass. “Surprised,” he said. He pulled a hand through his hair. “I need to lie down,” he said. When he took a step, he stumbled and bumped into the fridge, and she watched, frozen as he retreated into the living room.

For minutes, all she could do was stare. She twitched toward the oven, and then the sink, and then the refrigerator, and then the kitchen door. Indecision nauseated her. She grunted, annoyed, and then she went to the sink.

He'd broken a drinking glass. The sharp, jagged pieces of it all collected in the sink with a scrub brush underneath the dirty pot he'd been working on. He must have dropped the pot on top. She shook her head. She took the pot to the trashcan, turned it over, and let the loose shards fall out. Then she used the scrub brush to sweep away the remaining pieces to throw away. She filled the pot with water and left it to soak for a minute.

She picked up his iPod and his headphones next, and she put them on the counter by the fridge. She sighed when she saw the song title. Police and Thieves. A Clash song. Apropos. She hit the skip button and left it sitting on Lightning Strikes (Not Once But Twice).

She made it to putting fresh plates on the dinette set table before she couldn't see anymore. She sniffed, and she stopped to wipe her face. She'd scared Derek. She'd really, really scared him. She'd gotten used to him tensing up if she touched him unexpectedly, particularly when she came behind him, and he didn't see it. That had been happening since almost day one. But she'd never wanted to... Now, she understood how Mark had felt when it'd happened to him. Awful. Gut-twisted. And her heart felt like somebody had made a fist around it and wrenched.

She'd been an idiot. She should have made sure he knew she was approaching before she'd done something as stupid as wrapping her arms around his waist, particularly when she'd just finished a session with Dr. Wyatt concerning his desire for her to touch him at all. Ingrained reflex cultured over months was going to be hard to overwrite, and this was...

She collapsed into the dinette chair and cried. This was freaking crap. That's what this was. All the careful plans she'd made in the car to bring up the sex situation died as she wept into her hands. How could she expect him to want sex after she'd scared him witless? Lexie, Alex, and Mark were all gone. He'd been making dinner for her and her alone, and she'd wrecked it.

Over the last week-and-a-half since his release from the hospital, he'd dug out a 5000 piece puzzle. From where, she had no idea. The puzzle was a picture of the sunrise by the Bass Harbor Lighthouse in Maine. He worked on that at the dining room table, or he flipped channels for hours without watching anything, or he slept. She'd once found him staring blankly at the television screen while Mark's car game flashed in fascinating color before his dead eyes. He didn't fix dinner, or make coffee, or clean, or do any of the things he'd done when he'd first gotten home after his heart surgery.
She stared at the oven. He'd been trying not to mope for the first time since his pneumonia, and she'd wrecked it. She'd wrecked everything. She glanced at the timer on the oven. She had no idea what he'd thrown together. The temperature said 350. The timer said thirty minutes to go. She thought about opening the oven to check on it, but she didn't want to ruin anything.

Derek didn't cook very often, but he could, unlike her. He wouldn't ever be a professional chef or anything. He didn't like to experiment with ingredients or make the recipes his own or whatever, but he could grab any cookbook and make anything in it, and it tasted good, great, or excellent.

*Follow directions. I know it's difficult, sometimes,* he'd said with a wink when she'd asked him once how he did it.

*I do follow directions,* Meredith had said. *It rarely results in anything other than kitchen fires.*

*Just don't tell your patients,* he'd replied. *They wouldn't want you fixing their innards when you can't even fix a baked potato.*

Ass, she'd said.

The sound of Derek's laughter laved her ears, and she smiled at the memory. She wiped her eyes, and she stood. She walked through the dining room into the living room. His puzzle lay half-finished on the dining room table. He'd constructed the lighthouse and some of the craggy rocks underneath. The harder portion of the puzzle, all the blue water and pastels of the sunrise, he'd started on, but hadn't finished.

He'd collapsed on the couch on his side, arms wrapped around his midsection like he felt sick to his stomach. His back faced the room, and he faced the cushions, as though even in sleep he tried to protect his fragile innards from harm. His Percocet bottle sat on the coffee table, the white cap resting next to it. A lump formed in her throat. She hoped he hadn't hurt himself when he'd jumped away from her.

She pushed the coffee table away, and she settled herself by the couch. By his feet, not his face. She didn't want him to roll over, wake up, and have a person inches from his eyeballs. She didn't want to frighten him. That was the last thing she wanted. She leaned back her head, and she rested, eyes half-lidded, listening to him breathe.

*Meredith, you can't keep taking time off like this,* Chief Webber had said.

She'd gripped her cell phone so tightly her hands hurt. *I know. But he's sick. He's really sick, and I can't come to work right now. I don't care if it's unpaid leave. I'll be back as soon as he's out of the hospital, but not now.*

*There's not much more I can do for you. I've already pulled all the strings I have. There will be consequences.*

*I know,* she'd said. *I don't care.*

The oven alarm went off after an eternity. He didn't budge at first. She whispered, “Derek,” and he made a deep, resentful noise, but didn't move. Five more minutes, she imagined him begging. “Derek, your thing is done,” she said. She wanted to touch his leg, to give him some tactile stimulus to wake up, but she wasn't sure what was safe anymore, wasn't sure about anything at all. “Derek,” she said.

When he rolled over and sat up, a muzzy look on his face, she smiled. “Hey,” she said.
Her smile faded when he looked at her. “Hey,” he said, his voice thick with sleep, and his eyes glazed and spacey. He didn't smile in return. She wondered how many pills he'd taken. He stood, and he left her sitting on the floor without further comment.

She followed. “Derek, are you okay?” she said as she watched him take the steaming casserole from the oven. His biceps bunched, and his hands scrunched the potholders.

“I'm fine,” he said.

“You're not hurting?”

“I said I'm fine,” he snapped.

“Okay,” she said, not wanting to argue with him.

They ate in silence. He'd made some sort of tuna thing with noodles and crunchy bits, and it probably would have tasted great if she'd been in any sort of mood to eat. Instead, she just felt sick. He stared at his plate, and he didn't talk, and the oppressive silence choked her. She debated throwing a dish on the floor or something. Just to get him to react or... something. Anything.

“What's the crunchy stuff?” she asked, desperate.

“Potato chips.”

“You made something with potato chips?”

“Apparently,” he said.

“But...”

“I thought you'd like it,” he said.

Which made her feel like a jerk on top of everything else. She hadn't even said thank you when he'd dished her some. “I do,” she said. “I do like it. Thank you.” And then she couldn't take it anymore. “Derek, would you please talk to me?”

His fork tinkled as he rested it on his plate. “About what?”

“Anything. Please. Anything you want. Tell me another story. Or, you could tell me about lint. I just...”

He swallowed, and he picked at the edge of the table with his nails. He sniffed, and his breaths sped up like he wanted to burst into tears, but then she watched him swallow them back, and he sat there. In the chair. Eyes red and watery. His whole demeanor wounded. He didn't speak about his past, lint, or anything else.

“I'm sorry,” he said to his lap. He looked like he wanted to throw up.

She didn't know him. She didn't know this man sitting across the table from her. She didn't know anything about him, and all her resolve to be sensitive splintered and snapped like a pencil in the grip of an angry grade student with too much homework.

“Sorry isn't a freaking subject,” she said. “I can't take this anymore. Derek, I'm... I want...”

He gripped the table, and he looked at her. “What's wrong?” he said, his tone desperate, pleading. Like he wanted anything to latch onto. Anything to fix that wasn't his own problem.
You're wrong, she wanted to say. Everything's wrong. Sensitively, Dr. Wyatt had said. This wasn't sensitive. This was a freaking two-by-four to the face. She needed to regroup and try again later. She couldn't... “Nothing's wrong,” she grumbled. She took a deep breath.

“Something's wrong, Meredith.”

She crossed her arms. “You pick the most annoying times to be a freaking mind reader.”

“You'd rather I be obtuse?”

_I'd rather you be you_, she wanted to say. She clenched her teeth. “I don't think this is a good time to talk about this. In fact, I think it's a very bad time.”

“Talk about what? What are we talking about?”

“We're not talking about anything, because it's not a good time!”

His gaze darkened. “I'm not four, Meredith. You can take off the fucking kid gloves.”

Fury clenched in her stomach. It coiled into a tight, cold ball and spun in her abdomen like a black hole, sucking everything into it. How had he managed to flip this around on her? Whether he meant to or not, he'd gotten used to people not fighting back with him, and he'd started using that as a weapon and a suit of armor wrapped into one. How dare he make her reticence into an attack on him, when she had tried so hard to... The world flashed red. The backs of her knees hit her chair. She stood, and the chair toppled behind her. She slammed her hand on the table. Everything rattled. He flinched at the noise and the sudden movement, and his bald look of fear made her gut twist, half with satisfaction, and half with horror.

“This is about sex,” she snapped. “I want it.” Now, now, now. What was she? Two? Her fingers clenched.

“Oh,” he said.

“Yeah, oh,” she said, mocking his stupefied tone. She couldn't stop herself. Relentless, she pressed onward. “You used to talk about wanting sex. And I thought you were working yourself up to it. But then you got sick, and you didn't want me to touch you, and you haven't said a word about sex since then, and I don't know what that means. I need to know what that means, Derek.”

“Oh.”

“Derek, I love you,” she said, which sounded so utterly wrong to her ears when she was yelling and spitting at him. “And now I've almost lost you twice, and it's been more than five weeks since we've had sex, and I need you. I don't want to pressure you, but I need you really badly, and if you're not interested because I've done something wrong, I want to know. I want to know, now. Tell me.”

She panted as the wind left her sails. She swallowed, and she brushed flyaway hair from from her eyes. Her skin felt searing hot. Burning. He sat in his chair, his head in his hands. He'd stopped looking at her about midway through her rant. He'd gotten quiet. And he didn't fight back or hiss or snarl. Nausea quailed in her gut. This wasn't right. Nothing was right.

He drew a hand through his hair. “I'm sorry,” he said.

“Don't tell me you're sorry, damn it,” she said. “Tell me why you don't want sex. Tell me what I did wrong.”
“I do want sex.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “With me.”

His face reddened, and he looked up from his hands. “No, I'd rather fuck Addison.”

A knife twisted in her gut, and tears popped loose. She backed away. “You're an asshole,” she said.

He stood. His eyes had rimmed with red, and when he blinked, his expression mirrored her own. Loose, glittery tears ran in busy tracks down his cheeks. He stared at her, a dark, tortured expression quivering on his face. He looked down at his barely touched plate, and then at the pot still full of casserole. He swallowed. And then he left the room.

Running away from confrontation. Just like he always freaking did. Where did he get off, calling her a lemon and broken when he did the same freaking thing for different reasons? Hypocrite. Ass. She swallowed around the grapefruit taking residence in her throat. She wiped her face. She took a deep breath. And then she chased after him. Not this time. She was not letting him end their fight by slamming a figurative door in her face.

Panic burbled in her gut when she saw him with his hand outstretched, reaching for the front door. He was going to leave. He was—

“Don't you dare!” she said, and he froze. She closed the distance between them, and she slipped between him and the door. “You're not leaving. We're not done.”

He breathed in her space. His warm skin, inches from hers, called like a siren. She wanted to wrap her arms around him. She wanted to lean into his heat and his strength and let him make it better. He always did that. When he was healthy and fine, he always did that. She knew he wouldn't, this time. She trembled, blocking the door. She reached behind her back and turned the deadbolt. It clicked in the heavy silence.

“I was just going to sit on the swing,” he said.

“You were going to leave,” she said.

He leaned against the door, resting his forehead against the cool wood. He laughed, more like a sob than anything else. “Where would I go, Meredith?”

“I don't know.”

“I can't drive. I can walk two blocks. Maybe three. I...” He blinked. He pressed against her body, and he breathed. Breathed her in. She felt his nose at her hair, and when she closed her eyes, she could pretend that everything was back to the way it had been.

You're hovering.

No. I'm breathing you in.

“I do want to have sex with you,” he said.

“Well, you have a screwy way of showing it.”

He sighed. “I told you I wanted to wait until—”

“But you're walking a lot,” she protested, interrupting him. “You're in physical therapy, now. Your pain is much better. You kicked the pneumonia. You wouldn't just be lying there, Derek. You're
much better.” She thought of his open pill bottle on the coffee table. “Your pain is much better, right?”

“Yes, but, Mere, I...” His voice trailed away, and she hated to watch him. Lost. Broken. He slammed the flat of his palm into the door, which rocked on its hinges, and then he moved away. Toward the living room. He collapsed onto the couch with a sigh, and she bit her lip. She wanted to finish this. Badly. But if he needed to rest...

She shook her head. If he needed to rest, he could sit like he was, and he would be fine. An honest discussion wouldn't freaking kill him. She chased after him. He sat on the left corner. She sat on the middle cushion. She wouldn't give him space. She felt obnoxious, and mean, and all sorts of pushy, but they needed this.

If he said no, she would stop needling him, she promised herself. If he ever said no. Silence wasn't no. Looking mopey and sad wasn't no. Walking away wasn't no. He had to say it. N. O. No.


He blinked. He put his face in his hands against his knees. “I can't use my arms,” he said. “I try every morning in the shower, but—”

“Every morning?”

“Yes, every morning!” he snapped. “I want to have sex with my wife. But I can't take my weight without it hurting, and I—”

“So freaking what?” she said.

He glared at her, like she'd just lambasted his love of ferryboats, or told him that his trailer made her laugh. His voice dropped low. “What do you mean, so what?”

“We don't have to make love in a bed,” she said. “There are plenty of ways we can have sex without you being prone. We've done them before.”

He looked at her. “But it's not the same.”

“What's not the same?”

“You can't compare lying in bed together for hours with a quickie on the kitchen counter,” he said.

She sighed as the ghost of his soft laughter hit her ears. He'd pushed a stack of cereal boxes out of the way, lifted her like her weight competed with a grain of sand, and pushed her onto the counter. So, this is wedded bliss or whatever, she'd said.

No, he'd said. She'd gasped as he'd sheathed himself with her body. This is wedded bliss.

They hadn't spent more than fifteen minutes there, but she'd loved every moment of it. How the hell could she get him to understand she didn't expect a marathon out of the gate? How the hell could she get him to stop expecting himself to perform a marathon out of the gate, regardless of her desires?

“We can figure something out,” she said. “If we actually try.”

“But I don't want to have to try,” he said.

“Well, you're being a stubborn idiot, then,” she said.
His fingers clenched against his jeans. He looked away. A wet sound filled the air, and his shoulders shook as he tried to shield his misery from her.

She bit her lip. Nausea rolled in her stomach. Why did he have to make this feel like she was kicking a freaking puppy? She touched his shoulder. When he didn't tense, she leaned against his back, and she wrapped her arms around his body. The sound of her skin as she touched his shirt rasped in the silence. She rested against him, and he leaned backward. Into it. Into her embrace. A thrill of hope spiraled into her.

“Look, I get that this is something you need right now. Being able to contribute to the act instead of just receiving,” she said. She kissed the nape of his neck. “But you don't have to wait until things are perfect again. I know right now wouldn't be perfect. It might not even be good or great. But I need you.” She pulled loose fingers through his hair. “I need you. I care about you, and you almost died, and just being with you would be perfect. Five minutes or an hour or whatever. I don't care. But I need it, Derek. Please.”

“Five minutes would be embarrassing,” he said.

“It shouldn't be.”

He pulled away, and she let him go.

“I'm...” He swallowed, and the bitter, dark look on his face made her hurt. “I'm really not in the mood right now.”

“Well, I didn't mean right this second,” she said.

“But you would do it, if I was in the mood,” he countered.

“Of course I would.” She touched his shoulder again. He didn't tense. “Are you even listening to a word I'm saying? I need you. The rest doesn't matter to me.”

“I'm listening,” he said. He heaved a weary, shaky breath, wrapped his arms around his stomach, and then he dropped over his knees to stare at the floor.

She bit her lip. A car with a half-busted muffler drove past, and the windows rattled. The world outside had darkened. She hadn't even noticed they were arguing in the dark. She flipped on the lamp on the other side of the couch and resettled. The clock she'd put on the mantle ticked. She stared into space.

The warm scent of tuna and cheese and potato chips had saturated the house, and she swallowed as the grapefruit returned to her throat. Cheese and potato chips were like dietary hara-kiri. Maybe he knew he didn't have much to lose, given how underweight he was. It didn't matter. The fact that he'd made it for her...

“What did I do wrong?” she said. “In the hospital. I want to know.”

He looked away. “It didn't feel good.”

“What didn't? When?”

“When you touched me.”

She turned. “But you let me touch you on the face...”
He sighed. His lips parted. The sound was an empty syllable, like he'd lost his voice again. He took a deep breath. “I can't explain.”

She put her palm on his thigh. He didn't flinch. She rubbed from the crease where his leg turned into hip, all the way to his knee. The gesture didn't seem to bother him. She settled into what she hoped was a reassuring, comforting rhythm. Thigh to knee. Thigh to knee. “Please, try, Derek,” she said. “Please.”

He put his elbow on the arm of the couch and rested against it. He stared, his expression blank, at the far wall. “The curtain came open,” he said.

“What curtain?”

“The one around the bed,” he said. He blink, blink, blinked, but that didn't stop the sudden renewal of tears on his face. “And I was naked.”

She remembered the moment in fine detail, like it'd been flash frozen in her brain.

Pneumonia was one of the leading causes of death in the United States. If Derek had been healthy to begin with, she wouldn't have worried, but his immune system had been totaled by stress and depression, he'd had surgery that interfered with his ability to cough, and his fever had gotten wildly out of control. Generally speaking, anything over 105 was considered potentially life-threatening. 106 meant likely brain damage. When he'd hit 104.4 and kept going up, the doctors had gotten concerned. He'd been hallucinating and lethargic, and his blood-oxygen levels had gotten so low they'd discussed putting him on a ventilator. She'd spent most of the night crying all over Mark, and the few minutes she'd spent with Derek, he'd either been staring blankly into space or croaking at Gary Clark to leave him alone.

She'd come up early after a nurse had come to the waiting room to tell her his respiration and temperature had improved instead of gotten worse, for once. She'd wanted to see him. Wanted to reassure herself. An orderly had stopped her outside of Derek's cubicle. It's not visiting hours yet, he'd said, and she'd fought him tooth and claw.

She couldn't even remember what she'd said to get past him at this point. When Derek's heart monitor had shrieked about a flat line, her stomach had dropped out of her body. She'd opened the curtain. Derek had been standing naked by his bed, his eyes glassy and unfocused, and she'd run for him without thinking about anything other than the fact that he would fall, and his catheter could rip out, or he'd tear the vein in his wrist when his IV ran out of slack, or he'd smack into the bed platform and give himself a bloody concussion. She'd run, and all she'd been thinking about was keeping him off the floor. She hadn't thought about the curtain.

“When I ran to catch you, I left it open,” she said, swallowing. It wasn't something she could regret, sacrificing his modesty to save him from physical harm. But...

“Yes,” he said. “And I...”

“You what?” she pressed. “Derek, you what?”

He grunted against his hand. Tears slicked his face. He didn't try to wipe them away, but he wouldn't look at her. “I was so sick, I couldn't even cover myself, and I...”

She leaned into him. “You?”

“When you touched me, and that nurse touched me, and I couldn't say no, I just...”
He pulled in a breath. Once. Twice. He scrunched his hands in his hair and yanked. And then he burst. “It was the last straw,” he said. “I need to have a say about my life, and I didn't have...” A sob skipped loose, and he moaned. “Anything. I haven't had anything since he shot me, and I can't do it anymore. I can't.”

He looked at her, and she wanted to melt into the crevices between the cushions. His hair stuck up all over. He had a dark rash of stubble over his face and down his throat, which contrasted sickly with his bloodless face. Bloodshot blue eyes rimmed with red peered at her. He looked exhausted. Like he hadn't slept well in days. He probably hadn't. And he looked starved. His angular face, all sharp points and bones, didn't have a single ounce of extra anymore.

She'd been so freaking wrapped up in being annoyed with how awful he'd been lately to her and to Mark that she hadn't considered him beyond how he was making her life miserable. Hadn't considered him as a person who had bone-deep issues regarding control. She'd let it get this way with her hands-off approach. This was her fault.

He rocked back and forth, stuck in the grips of gut-wrenching sobs. She shifted, and she pulled him against her. He was jelly in her arms. Unresisting. Pliant. She rubbed his back, and she sat there, quivering with nauseating disquiet. She didn't know this man, this stranger with Derek's face. Gary Clark had damaged much more than simple flesh. She closed her eyes and pictured Derek's soul. Mr. Clark had shot a gaping, jagged hole through it.

“I'm sorry,” she said. She kissed his shoulder through his shirt. “I didn't mean to make you feel like that.”

He scrunched a tent of her shirt. “He took my dignity, Meredith. I don't have anything.”

I have no dignity left at all, he'd said.

He stole everything from me, he'd said.

Disconnected pieces of the puzzle formed a straight edge with a solid picture.

“You have me,” Meredith said. “I'm not going anywhere.”

“But I don't own anything. Nothing is...” His voice trailed away. He pulled away from her, and he stared at his arm. His wrist had an old scar on it. A dot on his flesh that told her where the intravenous line after his surgery had been placed. The back of his hand had a fresher mark from when he'd been admitted for pneumonia. “Since he shot me,” Derek said, “I've been bathed by other people. And shaved. And dressed. And fed. Dozens of people have seen me naked.” He took a jagged breath and exhaled. “I've had my penis handled by employees who I have to interact with on a daily basis, employees who make monetary bets about how McDreamy I am in bed.” He looked at her. “I can't stop crying. I've peed on myself, Meredith. I'm a grown man, and I can't even hold my bladder.”

“You were scared, Derek,” she said. “That's a natural response to—”

“But I'm always scared,” he confessed. “And I can't make it stop.”

I want to stop seeing him over my shoulder and in the mirror and when I wake up and in my dreams and everywhere, he'd said.

She rested her hand on his thigh. His muscle twitched. “Scared of what?” she said. “Of being
killed?”

“Of everything,” he said. “I can't even relax in my own home. I'm...” He swallowed. “I don't enjoy anything anymore. I just want to get to the next minute.”

*I want to be able to get through an hour of my life without feeling like this,* he'd said.

She swallowed. “Do you think maybe an alarm system or something would help?”

He shrugged. “I don't know.”

“Well, it couldn't hurt, could it?”

“I guess not,” he said, but he sounded like he'd already doomed the idea to failure. He pushed his hands against his thighs and stood with a wince. He wouldn't look at her again. He turned and wandered through the dining room toward the kitchen.

But he hadn't said no. Hadn't said stop. She stood, and she followed him. After weeks of not talking, not really saying anything, he'd finally started opening up a bit. Getting him to speak was like poking an insect with a toothpick, over and over and over, and it made her feel like crap. But he spoke. She'd learned more in the past hour than she had in the entire month since he'd been shot.

He picked up the casserole dish and covered it with plastic wrap. She rinsed the dishes. “I'm sorry,” she said as she turned off the water. The faucet dripped. He closed the refrigerator door and stared at her. She took a breath. “I shouldn't have pressured you. I'm being selfish, and not sensitive, and I—”

“You're my wife,” he said. “It shouldn't be taboo for you to ask for sex. It shouldn't be taboo for you to talk to me about anything.”

“It's not,” she replied. “This is sort of a special circumstance.”

He slammed his hand against the refrigerator door. Four magnets went flying. A menu fell to the ground, followed by a ream of pizza coupons. “I don't want this to be a special circumstance,” he said. He hit the fridge again, and it shook. “I want it to be like it was.” Again. “I want me to be like I was.” His lip quivered. He looked at his palm like his need for violence disgusted him. “I don't know what's wrong with me.”

When he dropped his gaze to the floor and didn't move, she settled next to him. The refrigerator skidded under their weight and stopped. Derek flinched, and the way his eyes jerked to assess the situation made her heart squeeze. She didn't know Derek anymore, but she didn't love him any less. She kissed his shoulder through his shirt as he shook in her arms. She rubbed his back, and he leaned against her, into her space, reluctant at first, and then he settled. His breathing hitched, and she realized, again, what a freaking idiot she'd been.

She hadn't touched him all week except during times of necessity, not even when he'd been sick and hurting and unable to get up on his own. He hadn't said anything, but he had to have noticed and internalized the inadvertent message she'd been sending. She kept whining that she didn't know him anymore. That Derek had become a stranger. But he seemed more bewildered by it, more unhappy about it, than she did.

She closed her eyes, and she inhaled his warm, musky scent. Her nose rubbed his shirt. She petted his arms, and she thought about the packet she'd left folded in her purse. The one about assault victims.
“You can't just be fine after something like this,” she told him. “Nobody is.”

“Alex is,” he said. “You are. Everybody is but me.”

“Alex is a freaking iceberg, Derek. Ninety-nine percent of what's going on in his head, you'll never see. I sincerely doubt he's fine, and I imagine his whole life-is-great Broadway musical routine will crash and burn just like mine did after I drowned. It's fake.”

She gasped when he shifted, and his warm body enveloped hers. He kissed her hairline, and then he rested his chin against her forehead. She blinked at the unexpected, silent support. The room blurred. She tilted her head into his chest and cried against his shirt. His soft, unhindered breaths thundered in her ears. No pops or crackles or fluid sounds filled his lungs. His heart beat. His warm skin reassured her. Warm, but not fever hot. And he had such great arms. His body shifted to accommodate her as she moved. He said nothing, but he held her. For minutes and minutes and minutes. A deep chorus of crickets filtered through the closed windows. Beyond that, the world hovered in silence.

“I'm not fine,” she admitted after she'd gathered her resolve. “And I'm a liar. I lied to you.”

“It's okay,” he said. “I'm sorry I haven't been there for you. I don't know—”

“I'm seeing Dr. Wyatt,” she clarified.

“Dr. Wyatt,” he echoed. He kept stroking her, kept holding her. “Isn't she a therapist at Seattle—”

His hands stopped moving. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“About the miscarriage?” he said.

She squeezed her eyes shut as she pictured the puzzle pieces assembling in his head. She didn't want to do this, but she had to. It wasn't fair to him not to know. And if he knew, she could give him the pamphlet. And that might... It might help.

“Sort of,” she said.

He stepped backward and looked her in the eyes. The confusion slathered on his face made her want to run. Run before the earthquake. “How do you sort of see a therapist about a miscarriage?” he said.

“It's...” Her voice cracked. “It's more to do with you.”

He frowned. “Me.”

“I was really worried,” she said. “I'm still really worried.”

“About me.”

“Yes, about you.”

He dropped his hands. Her eyes watered. She wiped her face, bereft. “You need to see a therapist because of me,” he said. His voice had dropped in pitch. His gaze darkened.

“Derek, it's not like that.”

“Well, what's it like?” he said. “Because it's sounding like—”
“I'm seeing a therapist because of me,” she corrected him. “I love you, and I want to help you, and I don't know how. It's not like there's a manual on this sort of thing.” Just a damned pamphlet.

His lips parted. He made a hollow, lost sound, and he backed up another step. “Do you talk to her?” he asked. “About what I've said?”

“I sort of have to, so she can help me,” Meredith said. He nodded, and his wary expression flattened into something dead. Just like that. Like a light switch had been thrown. No love, no anger. Just dead. She had a ludicrous, wild image in her head of the play Julius Caesar. She stood there in a toga holding a jagged knife.

*Et tu, Brute?*

She shook her head. “Please, say something,” she said. “I'm sorry. I'm—”

He shrugged. “It's fine.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “It is?”

“Sure,” he said. His eyes creased, and the awful flatness became a glare and a nasty, wounded snarl. “What's one more episode of the Naked Derek Show for the employees of Seattle Grace?”

He turned on his heels. She chased after him as he stalked down the hall. He flipped on the hallway lights. His feet hit the stairs.

“Derek, it's not like that,” she said.

He stopped and wheeled to face her. She nearly plowed into him. He grimaced, and his eyes flashed with fury. “Did you talk to her about sex, too? Sex with me?” he snapped. “Is that why this is such a big deal to you today?” His hot breaths hit her face. He continued up the steps, his legs growing more wobbly as he went. She had to slow down to stay behind him, and he roared with frustration when he had to lean against the banister.

“I talked to her about sex, but it's a big deal because I love you, not because I talked to her,” she insisted. She wanted to assure him she hadn't given any details, but her stomach roiled. She'd told Dr. Wyatt about his nighttime erections. He'd probably consider that a big freaking detail.

Derek reached the top of the steps, and he stopped, panting. His squeezed his eyes shut, and he drew a shaky hand through his hair. His knees buckled, and he looked like he needed to collapse from the exertion, but he fell against the wall and caught his weight with his shoulder instead. “Does she know I pissed myself, too?” he said.

She couldn't meet his eyes. “Yes.”

“God, damn it, Meredith!” he said. He thudded down the hall, and he slammed the bedroom door in her face. Paintings in the hallway crashed to the ground. A dog barked somewhere outside. The crickets remained a constant, undulating wave of sound. He hadn't said no, she told herself. She hadn't once heard the word no or stop.

She took a breath, grabbed the knob, and followed him into the lion's den. He stood by his drawer. “Get out,” he hissed.

“No,” she said.

He pulled a pair of pajamas loose and slammed the drawer shut. He stomped across the room and
bore down on her. She backed into the door with a thud. He leaned into her space, close, menacing. “Get out!” he yelled in her face. His pearly teeth flashed centimeters away. His skin had turned a deep shade of red.

*I said leave! Meredith! Leave!*

“Shut up,” she spat back at him. “Just shut up.” She took a breath. He wasn't giving her any space. He hovered against her, eyes blazing, fever-bright with anger. She took his rage. She funneled it into herself. And then she gave it back to him. “You're not allowed to be angry about this,” she said. “I've worked my ass off trying to keep your confidence. You want to know why I'm talking to Dr. Wyatt? You really want to know why?”


“Because I knew I couldn't talk to Cristina, or you'd react just like this, and I haven't, Derek. I haven't said a word to Cristina because I knew it would be important to you,” Meredith said. “I know Dr. Wyatt from before. She doesn't gossip. And she helped me. She really helped me, and I —”

“What do you mean, you know her from before?”

She slid away from the door. He didn't stop her. “How the hell do you think I got all whole and healed for you, Derek? Do you think I just flipped a freaking switch?”

He blinked. “You saw a therapist?”

“Yes, I saw a therapist. I saw Dr. Wyatt,” she said. Her eyes burned. “I wanted to be with you, but you wanted things that I didn't know how to give, and she helped me.”

He sat on his side of the bed with a heavy thud. The pajamas he'd liberated from the chest-of-drawers lay against his lap, and he stared at them, soft in his hands. “Oh,” he said.

She sat next to him. Her throat tightened at his upset expression. The unadulterated anger had mixed and twisted and swirled with other black emotions. She couldn't decide if what she saw now was better or worse. She touched his back. His muscles tensed under her hand like a tripwire, ready to set off an explosion, and he didn't look at her. She swallowed.

“I swear, Derek,” she said. “I wouldn't be talking to her if I didn't think she was discreet and a hundred percent professional. I didn't want this. I didn't want you to be angry. I just needed help.”

A deep sound rumbled in his throat. He glowered. “I don't want you to need help.”

“I don't either, but this happened, Derek. You were shot, and we have to deal with this. We have to deal with this. It's not just about you. It hasn't been since day one.”

He collapsed onto his side with a heaving breath. His pajama pants fell to the floor. He grabbed a pillow, and he squeezed it against him. “He did take everything,” Derek said. The emotional barometer in the room shifted. His lower lip quivered. He broke like he'd stepped on a minefield. Dark and twisty rage became a flash flood. He blinked, and tears glittered in the dim light. “He took everything from me,” he said. He rolled his face into the pillow and breathed shivery, jagged breaths.

She put her hand on his side. Her fingers found the ripples of his ribs, and she stroked him armpit to hip. She shifted. The mattress sank under her knee, and she climbed over his body. She pushed pillows and blankets and sheets away. She settled behind him, and wrapped her arms around his
waist. “He'll never take me, Derek. I'm here. And I always will be.”

“Dr. Wyatt helped you with that, too?” he said, his voice low and raw and muffled by the pillow.

She stared at his back, and she kissed the space between his shoulder blades. “She did,” she said. “She really did.”

His body shifted. The pillow rustled. He sniffed. “Remind me to send her a thank you note,” he said, and then he didn't speak anymore. She rested along his length, quiet. He shook, and he said nothing. Not a word.

“It's okay,” she said. “Derek, it'll be okay. Maybe not tomorrow. Or next week. But it will be. If I can be here, wrapped around you, not running and not wanting to run after all this, we can be okay. Eventually. It just won't be a surgical fix.”

She couldn't tell if he was even listening. He sighed, deep and long and low. His torso filled her arms, and then he deflated. His breaths stretched evenly. At least he'd stopped crying.

The door slammed downstairs. She winced as she heard Alex and Lexie tromp through the door, their footsteps heavy in the foyer below. Derek flinched, and she squeezed his hip. Alex said something in a deep timbre, and Lexie laughed in response. The television snapped on.

“What do you want a beer?” Alex called.

“Yeah, bring me one,” replied Lexie.

The channels hopped and skipped until the loud, rushing, rumble of a crowd filled the house. A sports announcer reported a home run. Beer bottles clinked.

Meredith pulled her fingers through Derek's hair. She knew he hated roommates. He hated everything about her house situation with its constant revolving door of inhabitants, but he stayed there, and he didn't pressure her to fix it. He was sick and hurt. He liked privacy. He liked his space. He still hadn't complained. Not once.

He'd made her an unhealthy dinner on a whim, just as a treat to her. When she'd needed to be held, before she'd dropped the nuclear therapy bomb on him, he'd held her despite his own emotional wasteland. She inhaled. He had the same deep, male scent she'd always loved. Intoxicating and comforting at the same time.

He'd yelled and screamed and spat at her, but she'd done the same to him, and she'd never felt physically threatened. Even when he'd crowded her by the door. He'd been trying to scare her. Trying to drive her off. Puffed himself up like big peacock or a scared cat or something. But she'd known on a deep level he had no follow through, and his scare tactics hadn't worked.

He did want her to touch him. The setting, not the act, was what had been inappropriate. And she should have realized that. Should have thought. Should have... considered. Just for a second. Her husband was a private person. Very private. He didn't like the gossip or the silly nicknames. He touched and kissed her at Seattle Grace, but rarely when they had an audience. He'd been lain out on display, helpless and unclothed, and she should have thought about how he would feel about being intimately touched in that setting.

And he did want sex.

You know what says thank you like nothing else?
She kissed him once. Again. Maybe not such a stranger after all. Her Derek. He'd just gotten lost. And she'd been a freaking idiot.

“I'm really sorry about what I did,” she said. “In the hospital. I never wanted you to feel...” She swallowed. Something sharp stabbed her esophagus, bisected her to the stomach, and her throat felt like it was closing up. She swallowed again. She'd touched him, not intending to be sexual about it, but, really, how the hell was he supposed to interpret her playing with his nipple? “I never wanted you to feel violated. I never wanted that. Not ever. I'm very sorry. And I'm sorry about the sponge bath. I thought it would help. Being from me instead of a stranger, I thought... I'm sorry.”

Silence. She wished she could see his face. Anything.

“I know you didn't mean to do it,” he said after a long time. His shoulders hitched. “The bath felt good.”

She blinked against tears. “It did?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought...”

He sighed. “I didn't like needing it.”

The sheets and pillows rustled. He moved. Clumsily. His jeans stuck on the sheets. She backed away from him to let him roll, and she bit her lip when she saw him wince. He settled on his left side, his damaged side. His eyes creased with discomfort, but his expression evened after several moments. She lay next to him, inches from his face, her body flush with his.

“Receiving it from you was nice, though,” he said.

“Really?”

His gaze shifted away, and his face tinged red. She didn't press it. She didn't want him to be embarrassed about needing help. She rubbed his stomach as she tried to think back, tried to recall when he'd attempted speech, and when he hadn't spoken and... He'd been sick. He'd been so sick, he couldn't bathe himself or eat or stand. She'd been a paranoid freak about him not responding to every question with abundant reassurance. He had said it was okay early on. That should have been enough for her.

“I'm sorry about tonight, too,” she said. “About everything. The last thing I wanted was to upset you. Thank you for dinner.”

“I shouldn't have yelled at you,” he said. “You need somebody to talk to.”

The sick look in his eyes made her sniffle, and she resisted the urge to justify why she hadn't chosen him to be that somebody. “I should have told you sooner,” she said.

He grunted, and he didn't disagree, but he didn't condemn her either. He blinked. She stared into his eyes, deep, endless depths of blue. His pupils had long since corrected themselves from terror to correspond with the light level, and he seemed, well, almost normal. Flecks of dark, royal blue interspersed with lighter, ice shades. Darkish almost-black rimmed his irises. His pupils reflected her face. She stared, and his irises tightened. His gaze didn't seem glassy anymore. Her Derek. Hers. The man who'd told her with an delighted, relaxed smile that he'd been in love with her forever.
She pushed her nose against his, and a small smile tipped his lips upward as their foreheads bumped. She pushed her socked toe against his bare foot and slipped under his pant leg. His eyes crinkled.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Beats me,” she said. She pressed her lips against his, and he inhaled. His hand gripped her waist and squeezed. She kissed him again and again and again, until she lost the sound of the rumbling television and the voices below them. His stubble scratched at her face, and it hurt, but she didn't care. He tasted a bit like tuna, but she didn't care. She stroked his lip with her tongue. When the room began to fuzz, she finally had to pull away to catch her breath.

He winced, and he rolled off his wounded side and onto his back. His hands came to rest on his abdomen as he panted. She pushed against his shoulder. He shifted, and his arm wrapped around her body. She rested the flat of her cheek against the soft space where his pectoral muscle melded into the fibers of his deltoid. His heart thrummed underneath his sternum, and she listened as she rubbed his stomach. Her palm rustled against his shirt.

“What did you have in mind when you said not a bed?” he said.

She kissed his throat. “No,” she said.

“No?”

“I'm not letting you have sex with me right now.”

He turned his chin against her. “You're not?” he said. His voice rumbled against her ear through his chest, and she smiled. She liked that sound. His lilting tenor tones humming through bone and flesh.

“No,” she said. “I pressured you. We had a bad fight, and you're still a little upset. It really wouldn't be perfect if we did it right now.”

He didn't respond right away, didn't disagree, and she knew she'd hit the mark. She raised her head to peer at him. He pondered the ceiling. She kissed his jawline, and a vague smile tugged at his lips. “How about a week from tonight?” he said.

She put her head back down. “Why a week?” she asked as she stared across the plane of his soft black shirt.

“My weight restriction will be lifted to forty pounds, and that will make two weeks of physical therapy,” he said. His lips pressed against her forehead, and he kissed her.

“I like that plan,” she said. “How was PT today, anyway?”

A bark of deprecating laughter stuttered in his chest. “It hurt, Mere.”

She sighed. “The sternum is one of the worst bones to break.”

“It's getting a little better,” he said.

She ran an index finger down his center. He had a swollen, rough bump at the top near his neck,
and the long, raised scar felt jagged under her fingertip. She didn't press. His muscles didn't tense. She did it once more, memorizing every piece of his first wound. Then she shifted to the bullet wound. She didn't touch that. He'd said once that it hurt when he pressed or poked, and she didn't want to risk it. She flattened her palm and rested over his heart. His nipple puckered through his shirt, and she touched him, rubbed him, trying to erase the bad feelings she'd instilled there in the hospital.

He drew a deep, relaxed breath.

“I got my period, by the way,” she said. “This morning.”

“Is that what brought this on?”

“No,” she said. “I want a baby, but I need you, Derek. I need you.”

“I need you, too,” he said. “I always need you.”

She stroked his abdomen with her palm. She wandered lower, past his bellybutton. His skin quivered under his shirt. She slipped under the hemline and touched the line of soft fuzz that trailed from his navel, down and down.

“May I touch you?” she said.

“Mmm,” he purred. “Yes.”

She fiddled with the first button on his jeans. It popped loose, and she worked her way down the line. She slipped her palm beneath the waistband of his boxer briefs and sighed as her palm met warm, solid, soft skin. If she'd had any doubts about his ability to have sex, they would have been doused now. She moved her hand lower. Lower. Her body shifted. She cupped him, and he loosed a beautiful, low moan.

“I'm really not that upset anymore,” he said. His breaths shivered in his chest.

“I can feel that,” she replied. She withdrew her hand, not wanting to tease him when he was already that aroused. “But we should wait. I want to wait. We're always stupid, and we never wait when we should.”

“Okay,” he said.

She splayed her palm and crept along his skin. She settled against his body with a long, low sigh, and stroked his chest and abs underneath his shirt, staring out over the floor by his side of the bed. Her eyelids dipped. So warm.

“Mmm,” he rumbled, and she felt all the remaining tension in his muscles slip away. “Feels good,” he said, his voice spreading at the seams into slurs as she relaxed him. He inhaled and exhaled in a long, deep sigh. A soft, low sound, not a word or a moan or a groan settled in his chest on the coattails of a breath. She hadn't heard that in so long, that familiar utterance of tired contentment. They hadn't done this in so long. Just... lain together. Touching with no destination in mind.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too,” he replied.

The minutes passed, and they lay interlocked.
“Are you allowed to take a bath yet?” she murmured. She couldn't remember how long—

“Mmm. Not for four to six weeks,” he said, eyes closed. “It's been five.”

She squeezed him. She sat up, crawled across him, and slid off the bed. Her feet thumped on the floor. She scrunched her toes against the soft carpet. She sighed, unable to stop the lazy grin that infected her face when she thought of relaxing in warm, bubbly water, naked skin to naked, slippery skin. He didn't move.

“Let's do that,” she said. “We haven't done that in a while.”

He watched her through half-lidded eyes. A tired smile rolled across his face. “Okay,” he said.

She leaned over the bed and kissed him. “You relax. I'll get it started. My treat for a lousy night,” she said. She went to start the tap and find the matches for the candles before he could reply.
Chapter 13

[After]

It'd begun to rain. Drops pattered on the roof to no particular rhythm. Derek lay on the bed, naked and curled in a fetal position. His eyes were closed, but he didn't sleep. He wouldn't look at her, wouldn't speak. He hadn't done either since he'd handed her a towel and stalked away while she'd cleaned up the mess.

“Derek,” she said as she sat next to him on the bed. The mattress springs moaned. Her hip touched his spine. Warmth spread into her skin. “It's really okay.” Her lower body ached with dissatisfaction. She ignored it. Her lower body could stuff it. She touched his shoulder, and she stroked his back. “I shouldn't have teased you,” she said. “That was a stupid thing to do right now.”

When he still didn't respond, she climbed over his body and collapsed next to him. The mattress jounced. The cool sheets soothed her hot, sensitized skin. She lined up with his body on her side, and she stared. A wet car swished past on the street below.

As if he sensed her looking at him, he opened his eyes. Flinty halos of blue peered at her in the dim lamplight. His eyes dilated a hair's width as his gaze caught her.

“Hey,” she said. Her heart tore at his sick expression, at the creeping bloom of scarlet that mottled his skin. A loose lock of damp, brown-black hair fell over his forehead.

He swallowed. “That wasn't supposed to happen,” he said.

She touched his cheek. “I know. It’s okay.”

He rolled his face into the pillow and inhaled against the cotton.

“Are you okay?” she said.

“No,” he replied, his voice muffled. “I feel sick.” She splayed her palm against his shoulder and rubbed. The remnant sheen of sweat slicked her path, and she couldn't help the twinge of desire deep within her core. The aching sense of incompleteness wouldn't leave her be, and she bit her lip. His fingers clenched. “Fuck,” he grunted at his pillow. His body twitched as he funneled hot fury into his grip on the sheets.

“It's okay,” she assured him. “Stop it. Please, don't be embarrassed.”

“That was pathetic.”

“We'll go again when you're ready,” she said.

He looked at her darkly.

“Seriously, Derek,” she said. “It happens. We'll go again, and you'll please the ever-loving hell out of me. I promise.”

A grudging grunt that could have been a chuckle rolled through him. “Ever-loving hell?” he said. His lips twitched, and a smile threatened to crack his anger open wide. “You make it sound so pleasant.”
She smiled and scooted closer. She kissed his lips, and he sighed as his body relaxed. “Ever-loving 
hell is very pleasant,” she said. “I swear.”

“Is that your expert opinion?”

“Yes,” she said. “I've had ample experience with most available flavors of hell, and the ever-loving 
variety is definitely pleasant.”

A soft chuckle rasped in his chest. “Meredith,” he said, as though he simply needed to hear her 
name fall across his lips.

“Derek,” she said, echoing his tone.

His gaze softened, and the anger and embarrassment that had collected there died in the wake of 
affection. His body shifted. The sheets whispered. He cupped the cleft between her thighs. His skin 
wasn't warm, but at least the chill of nerves had left him, replaced by something lukewarm. 
Something living. She gasped as he touched her.

“I love you,” he said.

A shiver made her legs twitch. She pulled close against his body as he petted her. She flailed for 
something to hold onto. Her grip splayed against his slender hips. They mashed against each other. 
He kissed her. Soft bleats of desire road on the coattails of her breaths.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

“You don't have to say that. You shouldn't.”

He shrugged. “I'm sorry anyway.”

His fingertips wove a tapestry of lust. Her discarded arousal roared back into her awareness, and he 
wove her full of shuddering cries. She pressed her face into his chest. She bit his nipple. Not hard. 
A nip. He tasted good. He tasted like hers. He tasted like forever. She swallowed, and she let him 
weave another line of desire and another.

He tortured her until she arched into his body, desperate. Her muscles tensed. She clutched his 
shoulders. He would hold her while she fell. That was the part she loved the most. One stroke of 
his hand sent her lower body into fluttering spasms, and the bed disappeared underneath her as she 
flew. She cried out in the deluge of sensation. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. 
She never wanted him to let go. Not ever. A safe, warm bubble enveloped her as the mattress came 
back, and she knew every molecule of her body was loved and cherished. Her personal Derek 
blanket. His arms tightened as she snuggled closer.

He lay with her, stroking her back and her face until the fuzzy, delicious haze wore off. She 
blinked, her body loose. Sleep tugged at her. She'd been up for hours. But she wouldn't let it. They 
weren't done. She licked his lips and smiled as she watched him through long, mascara-slathered 
eyelashes.

“Feel better, now?” she said.

“Mmm,” he muttered. The sound stirred vibrations in his sternum. The low murmur of it tickled 
her cheek. She kissed his drying skin.

The sheets rustled. His fingers touched her hair. Long, sweat-clumped strands cascaded into free-
fall as he gently loosed her ponytail holders. “I like it down,” he said. “No more naughty pigtails.” She settled as it fanned against her damp back.

He met her eyes with endless, sad blue. “I love you,” he said. “I wish I could have shown you just now.”

“You did,” she assured him. “And we'll go for an encore, soon. You can show me all over again.”

[Before]

Derek sat facing her on the bed, his knees bent, legs spread in a v. She mirrored him, scooted forward, and wrapped her legs over his thighs. Their lower bodies mashed together like interlocking puzzle pieces. She squeezed her knees against his ribcage, and he inhaled. “What do you think?” she said.

“I can't really do much like this,” he said.

“It's supposed to give you depth, not thrust,” Meredith said.

The dusky daylight slanting through the window had long since surrendered to nightfall, and the dim bedside lamp gave the room an intimate, yellow glow. They'd been on or near the bed for an hour, trying to find a position that gave him the dominant role, or at least put him on equal footing with her, and was also comfortable for him. Over the years, they'd tried some pretty wacky things, but a lot were categorically ruled out because they required lifting power or mobility that Derek simply didn't have anymore, or her to be on top. So, they'd started testing the simple stuff first. They'd cycled through all the missionary variations they'd ever tried in the past. All of that was out. He still couldn't hold his weight, though he'd tried.

Derek put his hands behind his torso and leaned. He seemed all right, and she hoped that they'd found something doable. When he tried to push against her body in a test thrust, he strangled a grunt of pain, and he fell back flat against the mattress, panting. He drew his hands against his face.

“I can't,” he said through his palms.

“Well, how are you on your side? We could...” Her voice trailed away when he didn't bring his hands down from his face. She frowned and put her hand on his leg. His body heat burned through the soft cotton of his pajama pants.

She disentangled, and she collapsed next to him. She kissed his shoulder. He'd been quiet the whole time they'd been testing things out, though he'd humored her as she went through her mental catalog of positions, and he responded to questions when she prodded him. He never offered encouragement. Never smiled. Never joked. Never had a gleam in his eye that told her he was looking forward to stripping off her clothes piece by piece in a languorous precursor to their long-awaited reunion.

Her innards quivered with how wrong this felt. She'd never once seen him so soft spoken about sex, never once felt like she was forcing him. When he looked at her, he watched her as a person, someone he loved, but he didn't make her feel like a sexual being. He had always made her feel that way before.

“What's wrong?” she said.

He dropped his hands, and he looked at her. His eyes had a filmy, watery later, and unshed tears made them glisten. “This is so embarrassing,” he said, his voice raw.
“Please, don't be embarrassed. You shouldn't be embarrassed.”

She pulled his hand into hers and interlocked her fingers with his. She withheld a gasp as he responded to her grip, and his fingers fell against her palm. In sharp contrast to his legs, his hands were freezing. She massaged his knuckles, trying to renew his circulation.

“I feel ridiculous,” he said. “Rehearsing for this is ridiculous.”

“Would you rather try to figure this out during?”

“No,” he said. “No, I...” He inhaled and blew a breath out through his lips. “I'm trying to think of it like I do brussells sprouts.”

“Brussells sprouts?”

He gave her a weak smile. “Necessary to eat before I can have the good stuff,” he said, but his voice had no gusto, no humor, and his gaze ticked away from her. He closed his eyes.

She frowned. She slid her palm up his arm, over the crest of his shoulder, and chased it down his torso. His muscles seemed tense. Unyielding. His body didn't give to her, didn't sway with the pressure she applied. She stroked his thigh, over the hill of his knee, and down the slope of his calf to his foot. His toes flexed, and he sighed. Even through his socks, chill hit her fingertips.

Sharp memories of him lying helpless and cold in the cardiac intensive care unit, mere hours after his surgery, struck her in a flash. She sat Indian-style and pulled his foot into her lap. She rubbed, trying to push warmth through the fluffy cotton into his digits.

“Are you nervous?” she said. She pressed her thumb into the arch of his foot and massaged his tendons.

When Derek didn't answer, a lump formed in her throat. She swallowed, trying to drive the grief away, but her thoughts slingshot to the sight of Derek cut open, nothing but a pale, still face and a body buried under a sea of blue surgical drapes. Gary Clark stood next to Cristina, his gun the length of a penny from her temple. “Step away from the table,” he snarled. Meredith blinked, and the memory shattered.

Anger tore her body to shreds, and she wished that he would go away. That man didn't deserve to be in their bedroom, wrecking something that should be sacred. Loving. Reaffirming. But when he'd shot Derek, he'd left a piece of himself behind, and Gary Clark was stuck there. With them. Like a cancer.

“Derek, I'll be satisfied,” she said. “No matter what we do, just the fact that we're doing it satisfies me. I love you, and I want you. The rest of it doesn't matter to me.”

“It matters to me.”

“Why?”

“I don't know,” he said.

The door slammed below them and the murmur of voices spread through the floorboards. Derek flinched, and he closed his eyes. Meredith sighed. She'd tried to subtly hint at Lexie that she should take Alex out or something. Maybe she'd been too subtle. At least Mark was gone.

Finally, Mark had said. Maybe he'll stop acting like a jackass.
“You're putting a mountain of pressure on yourself,” Meredith said. In a whisper of movement, she slid over his waist. Sheets rustled. The mattress shifted, and she straddled his hips. She splayed her palms against his stomach, pushed up, and flattened against his torso like a crashing wave, something she'd done so many times she couldn't count them all, but this time was different. His hands lay by his sides. He didn't reach to support her or caress her, and though he watched her and didn't protest being pinned, his gaze didn't brighten with desire or heat. She kissed his lips. “We could try this…” she murmured against his skin.

“No,” he said.

She frowned. “Is letting me drive really that bad?”

“It's not that,” he said, and he looked away. “I'm...”

“Well, what is it?”

“I need to...”

She rolled off of him onto her side. Her head settled by his neck. She reached across his body, cupped his ear and temple, and pulled his gaze to her. “Need to what?” she said.

He swallowed. “It's not...”

“What?” she prodded.

“He took from me, Meredith. Everything I had. I... I want...”

“What do you want?” she said. She pulled her fingers through his hair.

“I just want to be able to give... something. Because it was my choice. I need that.” He stared at her, his gaze pleading, like he needed her to understand because he couldn't put the coiled mess of feelings in his head into words. But she didn't. She didn't understand at all, and she hated it. They'd made a professional sport about understanding each other without words, and his injuries, both mental and physical, had ripped that all away like a stuck band-aid in a flash of pain.

She frowned. “You don't feel like letting me be on top is giving something?”

He shook his head. “I don't know. I...”

“He took from me, Meredith. Everything I had. I... I want...”

“What do you want?” she said. She pulled her fingers through his hair.

“I just want to be able to give... something. Because it was my choice. I need that.” He stared at her, his gaze pleading, like he needed her to understand because he couldn't put the coiled mess of feelings in his head into words. But she didn't. She didn't understand at all, and she hated it. They'd made a professional sport about understanding each other without words, and his injuries, both mental and physical, had ripped that all away like a stuck band-aid in a flash of pain.

She frowned. “You don't feel like letting me be on top is giving something?”

He shook his head. “I don't know. I...”

“Please, tell me.”

“I said don't know,” he snapped. The nasty words vibrated in the air. Her eyes pricked, and she watched through the blur as he swallowed. A look of nausea crossed his face, replacing the flashing anger, and he made a sick sound deep in his throat. “I'm sorry,” he blurted. He blinked, and the tears that had been loitering pinched loose from his eyes. He sniffed and wiped his face. “I'm sorry. I keep trying not to yell at people, and I just...”

She kissed him, inching as close to his body as she could manage. “It's okay,” she assured him.

“It's not okay,” he said. “I'm treating you like shit. I'm treating Mark like shit. I'm treating everybody like shit. It makes me feel sick inside when I do it, but I can't make myself stop. I'm...”

“It's okay,” she repeated.

“Damn it, Meredith, it's not okay,” he said. He clenched the coverlet with a white knuckled hand and yanked like he was trying to vent the furious need to pummel something. The tendons of his
neck and arms stood in sharp relief, and his temples fluttered as he clenched his jaw. In several breaths, the ire drained away, leaving only upset behind. “I'm so angry,” he said, and he sighed as he rolled away. “All the time.”

She inhaled and closed her eyes. She followed him into a spoon. “Maybe,” she told the back of his neck. She kissed him. “You just need to get laid.”

Her attempt to brighten his mood met silence. She didn't know how to deal with any of this. Maybe her joke had been in poor taste, she realized on second review, but she felt like a dunce when it came to this, no matter how much Dr. Wyatt tried to help her. Insensitive. Horrible. She lay against his body and listened to his breathing. He didn't speak. She stroked him, trying to give him closeness, or support, or... something. Anything.

She knew yelling at people was not okay, and it did hurt when he did it to her. But he had no other outlet. None. He couldn't burn himself off with sweaty exercise. He couldn't go with Mark to the gym and beat the crap out of a punching bag. He had no closure with Gary Clark because Gary Clark was dead. His only way to vent had become words, and denying him that outlet seemed like it would be an unhealthy recipe to break him the rest of the way. She could accept his fury for a while if it meant he would get better.

“In my head, I can see myself laughing at that,” he said after a long time. A heaving sigh tore through his body, and he laughed. A tiny chuff of air. But the noise had no humor to it, only displeasure. “I'd kiss your ear. And maybe I'd say let's find out. I can see it. In my head. I know that's what I would have done before, but I...” His voice fell away.

She didn't really know what to say, and again she found herself lost. She'd never had to goad Derek into sex. And, now, I'm getting in your bed naked. Well. One time. One time, she'd goaded him.

He'd been upset after she'd drowned. He'd hovered. She'd told him to stop, and she'd turned his desire for communication into a freaking joke.

You're mocking me, he'd said.

I'm apologizing to you, she'd replied as she stroked his hair.

You're making light of things.

These past six weeks, she'd found herself begging him to talk again and again and again because he had the tendency to bottle everything up and let things fester. Sometimes, he said things. Sometimes, he didn't. But he'd never once told her what he'd eaten for lunch. She probably would have smacked him. She'd been such a juvenile idiot, back then. Her belated empathy, now, made her feel idiotic. And inadequate.

The floor slicked with oozing red blood. He stared at the ceiling while she hovered by his body. He panted. “Derek, it's me,” she said. “You're going to be fine.” The wound made a squishy sound as she pressed her palm into it.

She blinked, and the gore-filled image faded. Derek lay in her arms, silent, but alive and working on whole and healthy. Her throat closed up, and she tightened her grip against his body. He melded with her, and she never wanted to let go. Not ever. The very last thing she ever wanted to do was force him to do something before he was ready. She'd gotten used to him needing a little bit of a push. This felt like more than pushing, though.

“Derek, if you really don't want... I mean I don't want to force you. We can just lie here. I'll be
happy. I promise.”

“But we made a date,” he said.

Somebody came up the steps. Heavy footfalls hit the runner. Their bedroom door rattled as a door slammed shut down the hall. The low thrum of bass rumbled through the walls as a stereo came on. Derek bristled in her arms.

“The date doesn't matter if you don't want to do this,” she said.

“I want to.” He sighed. “I just...”

“Stop thinking about what we used to do,” she said. “Stop comparing. Even if you weren't hurt, it wouldn't be the same anymore. We lived through... It just wouldn't be the same.”

“Please, don't tell Dr. Wyatt,” he said in a soft voice. “Or Cristina. Or...”

She kissed him. “Not a word. It's just us tonight.”

“Okay,” he said. He let his legs fall over the edge of the bed, and he sat up with a wince, only to fold over his knees. “I'm sorry.”

“Why?” she said. She shifted to sit by his side.

“For making this hard on you,” he said.

“You know,” she said. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and winked. “That's the sort of thing you don't apologize for during sex.”

He blinked, and a small laugh fell from his lips. A real one. Her body loosened at the sound. The corner of his lip twitched, like a smile wanted to unfurl and couldn't quite find traction. He seemed bewildered that he'd laughed, that she'd managed to make him forget for a moment how miserable he was.

“I guess I've still got it,” she said.

His expression changed and deepened into something familiar. Something she hadn't seen in weeks. Want. Need. Take. He tipped into her, and he kissed her. She gasped, surprised, and her heart sped up as he leaned into it. He tasted fresh, and sweet, and he pressed against her. His hand gripped her arm and squeezed. She splayed a hand against his heart as he breathed, but she forgot about it. Forgot everything.

“I really love you,” he said, his voice a low murmur against her skin. “I really...” His words faded into a deep, hot breath that blew against her hair. He nuzzled her, and he inhaled.

The room swirled. She blinked, senseless. “Derek...” she managed, a throaty whisper. Her fingers clenched, and she pulled a tent of his soft shirt into her fist.

With a sigh, he stood. His shirt came loose from her grip, and she goggled for a moment, trying to regain her senses. She flexed her bereft fingers. Her lips felt alive and swollen. She wanted that again. She wanted to taste him. He hadn't kissed her like that in... She couldn't even remember. She couldn't remember the last time he'd kissed her like that.

Yeah, I like to say hello to my wife every forty-eight hours.

Her nails dug into her palm, and her jaw clenched. He'd kissed her then. Short. A habit. Just a soft
hello. Not since before then. Six weeks. More. She wiped her lips with her hand and stood.

“What's wrong?” she said, trying to quell her frustration at his sudden withdrawal.

He stood by the bureau by the wall at the foot of the bed. She watched him in the mirror. “I think this would work,” he said. He pushed aside refuse. Her makeup. A pile of magazines. Some other junk that she hadn't cleaned up since before he'd been shot. “It's the right height.”

She swallowed. A vague sob of relief tore through her. She sniffled, and she blinked, and she walked to where he stood. She wiped her face. “Sorry, I...”

He wrapped his warm body around hers, and he breathed against her ear. “I do want to do this, Meredith, I just...” He shook his head and cleared his throat. He stared over her shoulder at the space he'd unburdened of clutter, not at her.

She kissed him. He watched the surface of the bureau, unblinking, as she backed up, clenched the wood with her fingers, and heaved herself onto it. His careful stack cascaded to the floor toward the bedroom door and left a trail of paper refuse and rolling makeup bottles. Something plinked on the floor, followed by another plink, and one more.

For a moment, his lost stare remained, like he didn't even realize she'd intervened her body between him and the object of his gaze, as if he hadn't heard or seen the chaotic landslide. She spread her bent legs. He stepped toward her, and then she pressed her knees against his hips. His legs thunked against the upper drawer. Their lower bodies didn't quite meet, and she had to scoot forward inch by inch, until she hung off the bureau with the entirety of her thighs. She gripped his body, and that was all that kept her from falling on her ass, but they fit. They fit perfectly.

“You'll be okay holding my knees?” she said. Her back began to twinge. “I can't sit like this forever without some help.”

He swallowed. His grip wandered across her thighs. His arms flexed, and she sighed as his fingers slid underneath her knees. Chill seeped into her sinews, but the effort to stay balanced decreased, and her back stopped complaining. She could live with his cold hands if it meant they could do this.

“It doesn't hurt,” he said. He didn't smile.

“Not good, though?”

He shrugged. “My choices are a bit limited.”

“We could find something else,” she said. “There's still a ton of things we haven't tried.”

“I know, but...” His voice petered into silence, and he dropped her legs. She scooted back to keep from falling. He pushed against her body. A soft, willowy breath brushed her ear, and he hugged her, still, quiet.

She stroked his hair with one hand while the other roamed. His back muscles felt like rods of steel. His shallow breathing cut her to the quick, and she closed her eyes as a swell of upset made her body quiver. Nervous. He was really, really nervous. Rip the band-aid, he was saying without words. No more rehearsing. Because he was Derek, and Derek wouldn't ever say that he was apprehensive about sex.

“So, when we're ready, we'll move here?” she said.
His grip tightened. “Okay,” he said.

[After]

Dim illumination from the outside street lights fell through the window and lit the edges of the room with silver-edged shadows. They lay naked, nose-to-nose. She watched his eyes in the soft lamplight, and he watched hers.

She'd turned her back to her clock. She knew from experience he'd be able to go again in about thirty to forty minutes. Maybe longer, since he wasn't exactly in tiptop shape. She had no idea how many of those minutes had passed. She didn't care. She didn't think she'd care if all they did was lie there for the rest of the night, close, touching. Going again was, really, more for him than her. This was what she'd missed. This intimacy.

She had work in the morning. Her alarm was set so early she'd get fewer hours of sleep than she possessed fingers on her hand, even if she were to shut her eyes and dream in that very moment. But she couldn't bring herself to worry about it. About anything.

Seattle disappeared. Her roommates disappeared. Her house didn't exist.

Just him. Just her.

His breaths fell against the pillow, soft and slow. She reached across the void and touched her palm to his chest. She hoped he was in a sharing mood. He hadn't spoken about himself since he'd begged her for a rain check way back before he'd gotten sick. It felt like eons ago.

“Tell me something I don't know about you,” she said.

“Like what?” he said.

She licked her lips and pondered the possibilities. She stroked him chest to thigh, and her finger stopped at the deep groove in the meat of his thigh near his left hip. The scar had almost been obscured by the tilt of his body against the sheets and the tent of his flaccid privates. “What happened here?” she said.

“That's from my crash.”

“I know,” she said. “But what happened?”

Rain pattered on the roof in the soft stillness. His pupils changed as he remembered. He blinked. She watched him for any sign of discomfort or distress. She possibly hadn't picked the best topic for pillow talk, but... She wanted to know. She wanted to know all of him. Why did he hate motorcycles so much? Why did he like indigo? Why did his taste in music suck? Why had he picked neurosurgery? Why anything?

“I lost control of my bike in the rain near a construction site at night,” he said. “I flipped over the handlebars and woke up stuck to some concrete in a junk heap.”

“Stuck to concrete?” she said.

“Like a bug,” he said. His voice cracked. “There was a bunch of bent, rusty rebar sticking out.” He swallowed, and his fingers clenched. “I landed right on it.”

She flinched as she thought of his younger self, flying through the air in an out-of-control descent. He would have been tumbling at least twenty-five miles an hour, probably more, depending on
whether the construction site had been in a residential area or on a highway. She didn't know. She couldn't ask. Not when he looked so disturbed. Maybe later, she would muster the courage to prod him for elaboration.

“I thought it might be rebar,” she said. She touched the groove, and he heaved a shaky sigh. His muscles tightened, and the look of disquiet on his face spoke of crushing bad memories. She wondered how much he hadn't told her.

“Pondering my rare imperfections?” he said. He smiled, and the ghosts of his past dispersed.

“Pondering your anatomy in general,” she replied, echoing his grin. “I like it. It's fun to study.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“For instance, I like your shoulders,” she said. She touched his right deltoid. Lean, toned muscle gave under her fingertips, but not far. Bone pressed into her hand. Two weeks of physical therapy had helped him build up again. Not much, but some. He'd gained back a few pounds since the pneumonia, too, enough that he didn't look so jagged in the face, and his ribs didn't stick out unless he stretched. Her hand rasped against his skin as she stroked his bicep. “And your arms. You have sexy arms.”

“Mmm,” he purred. His eyelids dipped. His body shifted as he relaxed under her scrutiny. Muscles loosened. He rolled onto his back with a vague wince and sighed.

She could recall any number of times when they'd lain in bed, and he'd doted over his favorites of her attributes, or simply watched her with an awe-filled is-she-mine look that made her quiver. She couldn't recall a time when she'd done the same for him. She'd lived in his safety bubble, warmed by his adoration, and she'd been content to bask. Another regret.

Her perusal continued. She slipped her fingertips down the line of his incision. The cut had become a paper-thin, jagged line of scabbed red, hugged by a thicker section of marbled pink flesh. She stopped midway down the line, at his center point in the dip between his pectorals. Wisps of hair buried the pinking scar.

“I like how soft you are here,” she said.

He put his palm over hers. “It's almost all grown back.”

“It is,” she agreed.

He followed her with his hand as she caressed the flat of his stomach and paused just below his navel. “I like the way your hair twists into a whorl.” She rubbed her index finger in a circle over the wiry, curly hairs. “Just here.”

She left his hand behind as she wandered lower and cupped him. She wrapped her fingers around the base of his scrotum and pulled away from his body. Slowly. Gently. Not far. Just enough to give him the sensation of it stretching. One of his favorite things. “I like this part, too,” she said.

He inhaled and blew out a long, slow breath. “I like that you like that part,” he said, his voice shaky.

She settled against his shoulder. She kissed him at his pulse, and then licked along his jawline.

“And I've always wondered,” she said.
“About?”

“You're intact.”

He looked down at himself with a frown. “Is that bad?”

“Just different,” she said with a shrug. “Most men born in the sixties aren't.”

He watched the ceiling, eyelids dipping. “My dad had this thing about it,” he said. “He demanded that it be my choice. After giving him a trio of daughters, my mom decided to humor him, I guess.”

“And you chose this,” she said.

He looked at her. “By the time I was old enough to care about it, I was old enough to not want a knife down there, locker room embarrassment notwithstanding.”

She inhaled, and his deep scent wafted into her nose. She kissed him. He made a delightful, rumbling sound that sparked deep-seated need. Her lower body tightened. He rolled into her, having given his side a rest. His eyes twinkled in the dim light, and the smile he gave her made everything in her body contract with a twitch of desire. She wished they could stay here forever and never go back to the real world, where Gary Clark existed, and Derek's peace-of-mind remained an ephemeral idea that only coalesced in times like this.

“Does it feel different?” he said.

“What?”

He met her with a straight gaze. “Me. In you.”

She touched him. Soft, feathery skin shifted and slid, and he sighed into the pillow. Another one of his favorite things. Immediately after he finished, over-sensitized, blood humming, he didn't like to be touched there. She licked her lips at the feel of him as he pushed against her hand and groaned for her. Pleasure smoothed his gaze into glass, and her heart sped with anticipation at the clear sign that he would be ready again. Soon.

“More glide-y,” she decided.

“Glide-y,” he said. “That's a word?”

She grinned. “It's my word.”

“I like your words,” he said. “They make my life interesting.”

She drew her hand away and roamed along his hip and up. “I don't know,” she said as she explored his ribs, less defined than they'd been weeks before. “I don't need as much prep time with you.” She shrugged. “Hence, more glide-y.”

“Really,” he said, his voice a low, sexy rumble. He looked pleased, like some sort of preening peacock.

“Yeah, really,” she said. “What?”

“So,” he said with a smirk. “You're telling me I'm a smooth ride.”

She laughed, pressed her nose against his chest, and kissed him. “Mmm,” she agreed as the faint taste of salt brushed her tongue. “Vroom vroom. If your ego wasn't already the size of China, I'd
call you my Ferrari or whatever.”

He snickered. “Cheesy.”

“Maybe just Derek, then,” she said. She teased the tufts of his armpit hair and moved up. His eyelids dipped, and he watched her. She traced his lip with her thumb. He kissed it, and he leaned into her touch when she stroked his face. Her index finger paused on the crooked bump of his nasal septum.

“Fight with Mark,” he said before she asked.

“Mark is the one who broke your nose?”

“Yes,” he said. “He stole my comic book. I tried to get it back.”

“Who won?”

“Tossup. I broke his hand.”

“Compound fracture or simple?” she said.

“Um,” he said. His gaze turned up as he stretched for the memory. “Compound.”

She blinked. “On purpose?” she said.

“Well, he sort of broke it on my face. So, no, not on purpose,” he said. His gaze clouded with the memory, and his hand wandered to his nose in absent remembrance. Stubble rasped against his palm. She wondered as she watched him if it had been Mark, then, that had started the trend of hit first, ask later between them. “Served him right, anyway,” Derek continued. “I have to live with this face, you know.”

She snickered. “But I like your face. It's one of the many bits of your anatomy that I'm an immense fan of. What comic?”

“Batman,” he said. “You like it even though it's crooked?”

“I think your nose gives you a rugged look. Batman?”

“I liked the nifty gadgets,” he said. “Is rugged good?”

She kissed him. “Rugged is good,” she confirmed. She touched his face. His eyes crinkled. “You really don't have any idea how sexy you are, do you?”

From the way he stared, she realized, no, he didn't have a clue. She kissed him and lingered, breathing him in. A deep, wordless mumble collected in his throat. She tasted it, drank it down, and that's when it clicked. Derek Shepherd, summarized.

She made fun of his ego time and time again, but, really? He thrived on reassurance. On people accepting him and looking up to him. The arrogant front worked for him. He faked people into thinking he knew what he wanted, how he wanted it, and why he wanted it at all times. It was his thing. Acting like he knew all the time. He needed that deception to function, needed it so that others would see him as strong and capable and not someone worth questioning. He wore his cocksure attitude like a suit of armor, and Gary Clark had stripped him.

Derek didn't know how to fake anymore. He couldn't be cocksure. His perilous house of cards had toppled, leaving only the insecure man underneath, naked for the wolves.
She turned the knob of the bathroom door and poked her head out into the bedroom. She blinked as her eyes adjusted from the sharp light of the bathroom to the dimness of the bedside lamp. Derek sat in the small wood chair she'd brought up from the kitchen and put by his side of the bed, facing the bathroom door. His legs spread in a relaxed v, and he'd folded his arms over his chest, a typical guy-in-repose stance. Still in his pajamas, his eyes had closed, his chin had tipped into his chest, and his breaths fell into the room in an even, rasping rhythm.

She frowned. He'd fallen asleep. She hadn't been in the bathroom that long, had she? Her gaze ticked to the digital clock on her nightstand. Red numbers declared the time to be close to eleven. She'd been preparing for twenty minutes or so, then. Twenty minutes, and that had been with her rushing. She'd pulled her hair into pigtails, changed her clothes from the duffel bag she'd hid behind the tub, and slathered on her makeup in record time, because she knew he was waiting, knew he resided in the sharp clutches of his nerves.

She'd wanted to break the ice, not thicken it.

But she hadn't gotten home from work until close to eight, and they'd taken a long time beforehand with dinner and then prep. Since his heart surgery, Derek rarely stayed up past nine or ten. She hadn't realized it'd gotten so late. Her brain pinwheeled through all the positions they'd tried, a lot of which had caused him momentary pain, and guilt plunged deep. He hadn't said a word about needing a break or being tired.

Another strike in the column of weird and wrong. She'd never seen Derek fall asleep with the prospect of sex hanging in the air unless he was still recovering from the last round. He tended to do the guy thing where he'd rock her world into orbit, and then he'd sleep with his arms wrapped around her while she floated back to earth.

Why do men do that? she'd asked him once as he'd blinked awake.

Wha? he'd mumbled.

Go comatose after sex. Why?

He'd given her a lazy smile as he'd rolled on top of her. So we can do it again, he'd replied, and then he'd kissed away all her arguments.

She took a deep breath as she stared at his sleeping profile. This was not the most encouraging start to sex, him being asleep. A helix of self-conscious energy churned in her stomach. Among her friends, she was known as a bit of a sexual deviant. She'd tried plenty of things, some more unusual than others. Despite her adventurous side, despite her security in her own skin, anxiety could still shake her moorings. Putting herself out there as a vulnerable object for judgment was... nerve-wracking, to say the least.

She wasn't entirely sure of the reception she'd get for this endeavor she'd planned since it was something she'd never tried with him. If there was a top ten list of ways to make oneself look like a flaming idiot, this would at least be in the top five somewhere. But she'd wanted to do something special. Something just for him. Something that would tell him she was willing to risk horrific embarrassment for him because she understood that, for him, though she wished it wouldn't, this would feel like a similar endeavor. Him risking embarrassment for her. She didn't do flowers and hearts and all that crap, but she could do this.

She gripped the molding around the door and swallowed. “Derek?” she said.
His eyes opened. He blinked, and he inhaled as he ran a hand through his hair. He sat up, his back sliding up the chair. “Sorry,” he said, his voice muzzy with sleep. “You were in there a while.”

“I know,” she said. “It's okay. We could do this tomorrow, if you want. We found a spot. That's a good start.”

“No, I'm okay,” he said. “Just a cat...” He stopped talking as she stepped forward, away from the shelter of the door. “Nap,” he added, almost as an afterthought. He leaned forward in his seat. His lips parted, and he watched her with an unblinking blue stare. She smiled at the feel of his intense scrutiny, and the deep pit of nerves in her gut loosened.

When she'd gone into the bathroom, his careful attention hadn't been there. *Sit here,* she'd said. *I have a surprise planned.* He'd made no lecherous comments, and he'd displayed only mild interest with no real smile, though he'd tried to fake her out with a grin that didn't reach his eyes. She'd had to remind herself that his muted reaction to the prospect of her doing something special had probably been manufactured by nerves. By the fact that he wasn't feeling one hundred percent. That his lack of obvious excitement didn't reflect on her.

He watched her, now, and she resisted the urge to chuckle when his anticipating look dissolved into confusion as he assessed her silly hairstyle and attire. “Why are you wearing a trench coat?” he said. He didn't mention the pigtails. He'd probably been expecting sexy lingerie, which was a surprise she treated him with often enough that it wasn't really surprising when she did it.

“Because that's how this works,” she replied.

“Sex works with you in a trench coat?” he said.

She walked toward his nightstand. She made a show of swinging her hips with a runway model walk, though it did little more than make the trench coat sway. Her legs shivered with nerves, and she remained secure only in the fact that he couldn't see anything yet. Her stilettos clonked on the floorboards once before she stepped onto the thin area carpet. She'd hooked up his iPod to a little pair of speakers when she'd had a moment free of his scrutiny earlier. He hadn't noticed at all. Or, if he had, he'd said nothing.

Her heart pounded, and she swallowed as she funneled her resolve into energy she could use. She turned to face him, his little iPod caught in her shaky grip. She'd searched online for hours for good songs. With Google and iTunes and Amazon and YouTube, she'd narrowed her choices to two, and then she'd picked, opting for something more classic instead of grind-y and ultra-slutty. She hoped he couldn't see her hands trembling. And she hoped she wouldn't crush his iPod. And she hoped...

She closed her eyes, steeling her shoulders, took a short breath, and then stared at him. She grinned, and she forced her voice to come out of her mouth on an even keel. “The rules are no touching,” she told him. A bemused expression crept across his face. “Well, that will make sex pretty difficult, Mere,” he said, but he settled in his chair as though he sensed her need for his undivided attention. “What exactly did you have in mind?” he said, as if to tell her indirectly, “Okay. I'll play. I trust you.”

She put her index finger to her lips and shushed him. He stilled. “No laughing either if I suck at this,” she said. “I haven't done it in a while.”

He frowned. “Suck at—” She kicked up the volume. She hit the play button, and the loping rhythm of drums interrupted him. She took her starting pose. “What?” he finished.
She rocked on her heels with the rhythm and backed toward the wall. Billy Squier began to sing, and then the guitars kicked in. Derek's look of confusion melded into one of recognition as she looped her hands underneath the belt of her coat. His lips twitched and became a wide, pleased grin as her coat slipped to the floor. She wore a thin white blouse, a black tie, and pleated red-plaid mini skirt underneath.

He leered. “Catholic school girl?”

“Yes,” she replied. She pursed her lips. She splayed her hands against her breasts over her blouse and roamed languorously toward her knees as she swayed to the beat. She stopped, and she made sure he had a great view of her cleavage. “But I'm bad, Derek.”

He leaned forward. “Are you?”

“Very bad,” she assured him with a pout.

“How did I not know you had this skill?”

She laughed. “I wouldn't really call it a skill.”

“Oh, it's a skill,” he said, his voice strained.

She turned around, spread her legs, dropped her palm flat against the rug and pulled back up in a slow, sensuous trip. Her spine unfurled, and she flicked her hips to the right in time with a slam of the drums. She peered sidelong over her shoulder at him as she stretched her arms. He stared like he wanted to take the blouse she wore and rip it off, and the last of her nerves melted in a dizzying column of fire as she imagined him doing just that.

“Keep your contributions by your side and stroke me,” sang Billy Squier.

She ripped off her tie and approached his chair where he sat, spellbound. Her tongue curled. She showed him her teeth as she tilted her head to the side in a hidden inspection of his body. He sat rigid. His hands rested by his sides, gripping the chair. His grip seemed stress-y at a glance, but a good type of stress-y. A holy-shit-must-stay-seated stress-y. She liked that kind.

She straddled his lap and rose to her knees, putting her breasts eye level with him. His right hand moved, and the soft touch of his fingertips on her thigh made her muscles twitch. She slapped him away, using the tie as a whip.

“Bad man,” she scolded. “No touching.”

She wrapped the tie around his neck and pulled him forward inch by inch until his face hovered millimeters from her cleavage. Derek had always been a visual-oriented creature. Touch and sight. Those were the keys to rev his engine. This was about showing skin. This was about letting both his rabid imagination and touch deprivation drive him to frenzy. She held him with the tie and watched with delight as his breaths shortened, and his pupils widened with bald desire.

“Meredith,” he said, and he swallowed.

She whipped the tie away, stood, and flicked his shoulder with it before letting it fly across the room. It fluttered to a stop, half resting on the bed, half dangling off. She stood, leaving him alone on the chair, a frustrated, longing island. He took a deep breath and exhaled. She ground her body down to the floor, gyrating with the beat, and rose again. He didn't blink. Didn't speak. Didn't move. She had him riveted.
She popped the first button on her blouse, and then the second and the third. The dark lace of her bra showed in the gap. She rotated away after giving him a look, and drew a palm up her thigh. The skirt lifted. His gaze gravitated to her legs as she touched herself. She imagined it was his hands rubbing her, and her breaths tightened. Her body throbbed, and she began to move because she needed to do something with all that thrumming sexual energy.

“Are you wearing the itty bitty lace underwear?” he said.

She popped another button on her blouse. She twirled. “What?”

“Before my surgery,” he said. “You said things about itty bitty lace underwear. And whipped cream.”

“You remember?”

He blinked. “Yes.”

“No whipped cream, sorry.”

“But itty bitty lace?” The hopeful pleading tone in his voice soothed her worries like a balm. He wanted this. He wanted her. He wanted. This hadn't been a mistake, and he was ready.

“You'll see,” she said, and she grinned at his predatory look. She popped the last button and let the blouse slip down her arms. She caught it and held it over her bra and shoulder blades like a shawl as she turned for him. His gaze traced the lines of her body like he'd never seen it before, like he'd discovered the eighth world wonder. Just watching him watch her made her lower body tighten, and a deep, aching emptiness spread its hooks into her groin. She needed him to fill... She needed...

She gathered her own frustration and threw it into her dance.

“First you try to bed me,” sang Billy. “You make my backbone slide.”

She flicked the blouse away, and it landed by his feet. The zipper on her miniskirt was next. The zipper teeth made a sawing sound as she lowered it bit by aching bit. She danced near the chair, tantalizing him with all angles, pausing only long enough to fire his imagination before she moved to show him something new. The heat of blush spread across her skin. She leaned, and she rested her lips by his ear, her body hovering inches from him, touchable, but not.

A gruff, throaty sound rumbled into the space between them. He shifted in the chair. His right hand moved.

“No touching,” she reminded him. She blew on his ear, and his whole body flinched. “A little birdie told me you like stripteases,” she said.

“A little birdie?”

“Mmm, yes,” she purred. “In the car when I drove you home from the hospital. I asked you about strippers. Do you remember that?”

His lips parted, but he made no sound. She kicked off her heels. One. By one. They thunked on the floor somewhere behind her. One. By one.

“Do you like stripteases, Derek?”

“Yes,” he whispered.
She turned and gave him a view of the zipper as she pulled it down the rest of the way. The skirt slipped to the floor. She caught her toe on the pleated fabric, and her exit from its clutches wasn't quite as graceful as she wanted it to be, but he didn't seem to notice or care. She licked her lips at the sight of his short breaths and lusting stare.

His gaze dipped. “Those are pretty itty bitty,” he said.

She hooked her thumbs under the spaghetti strings and pulled them away from her hips. The rough flower print of the lace scratched her hands. She hadn't washed them enough for them soften, but their discomfort didn't matter for her short term drive-Derek-insane plans. “And lace,” she agreed as she let the straps snap back into place.

“God, Mere, I—”

“Shh,” she said, and he shushed.

“Don'tcha take no chances,” Billy sang.

“Keep your eye on top,” Meredith said, echoing the lyrics. She undid the clasp of her small teal-colored bra and let it slip away. She draped it over his lap, and it caught on a pronounced tent in the fabric. He stared at her like she was edible, and he'd been starving.

She touched her naked breasts. Her nipples perked, and she moaned as she dragged her hands against her skin. She leaned forward. Cleavage gathered. “I want you so badly,” she told him, and his chair rocked as he scooted forward an inch. “Do you want me, Derek?”

Rigid tension locked his frame. “I do.”

Her underwear was the last to go. Discarding panties in a sexy fashion was a dilemma she'd had to practice in front of a mirror. She hooked her thumbs under the straps and worked them down her legs in a painstaking process meant to show off her legs. Not tripping as she stepped out of them was her major victory. She'd done it right, based on the look slathered across his face. The one that said sex. Sex, please. Sex, now. Now, now, now.

She gyrated for him, pausing at every angle to give him a good, long look. Warmth thrummed through her body. She imagined how it would feel when they finally did this. The ravenous stare he laved her with told her he wanted her. He burned for her. He wouldn't go slow. Her body flushed as she thought of him naked and ready, and when the last drumbeat fell into the room and silence followed, she stopped.

She slid her hand against naked skin, nothing but his rapid breathing filling the silence. She moaned. Her inner thighs ignited with anticipation. She felt empty. Not whole. Her insides fluttered with need. Almost seven weeks. They'd been apart too long.

The chair creaked. He skidded forward another inch before he stopped himself. “Meredith,” he said, his voice shaky, thready, almost gone.

She smiled. “Touch me, Derek,” she said.

He rose from the chair, closed the distance between them, and kissed her. His breaths were a storm buffeting her body. They waltzed into the bathroom door, and he pressed her flat. “I don't know what you were worried about,” he said as he nuzzled her throat. “That looked professional to me.”

She laughed. “You've watched strippers enough to judge?”
“That's not what I meant,” he said. A low, aroused moan rumbled through his body. “God, you're sexy.”

“Mmm,” she said. “And completely yours.”

[After]

He pressed his torso against her and pulled her tight as he kissed her neck, her cleavage, and down, down, down. He grunted with discomfort as instinct dragged his conscious thought away, and he rolled too far onto his stomach. The glazed, lusty look in his eyes sharpened with pain, and he barked with agony as he tried to push himself off of her with his arms. She helped him right himself, and his pained expression relaxed into neutrality.

“Fuck,” he grumbled.

“Do you want to get up?” she said. She glanced at the bureau. A scrunched-up, frilly pillow still sat folded over, leaning against the mirror. The dim bedroom reflected in the mirror. Two naked bodies against frothy, white sheets.

“No,” he said. “Can you flip around?”

“But then I can't see you,” she said.

“Please,” he said. “I need...” He panted, and she lost eye-contact with him as he gazed at the ceiling, a frustrated look on his face. “I want to do this on the bed, not there,” he said. “I need it. I want to love you in our bed.”

She kissed him, and his upset look dissolved into hunger. He stroked her lower body. Her wet, slick heat trapped his hand. Her muscles tightened as he curled his index finger, and she gasped. She tried to think straight. He made it freaking difficult. If she flipped around, he would be spooning her, and he'd push into her from behind. They'd done it before in the early predawn hours, when both of them were still filled with sleep and dreams. It was an easy, lazy position, meant for languid lovemaking and languid pleasure at his direction. He would wrap his arms around her, and she would be enveloped. The position would be easier on him, too. It required little to no upper body usage, and it would be easier for him to maintain a rhythm without exhausting himself.

On any other day, she would have loved it, lying in his arms and letting him do what he wanted, but she needed to see him, this time. She needed it.

“Will you let me on top for just a minute?” she said. “Please.”

“Why?” he said.

“We can do a different version of what you're thinking if you let me set it up. Please, Derek. I want to see you.”

He met her eyes. She gripped his shoulder and pushed. Out of protests, he rolled onto his back, meek against the tide of her will. She straddled him. His erection bobbed against her body. His lips parted, and his gaze turned glassy with desire.

“Ready?” she said.

“Mmm. Yes.”

She lifted off his hips and gripped him. She guided his tip against her lower body. Her muscles
twitched as she pushed him through bundles of delicious nerve clusters to sit just inside. A pleasant spasm ripped through her, and she stopped to gasp and catch her breath. Sparks lit her vision.

“God, Meredith,” he said. He arched back into the bed, his hands clawing at the sheets. A flare of pain creased his expression. He grunted, and he flattened out on the sheets.

“How are you okay?”

“Mmm.” He nodded, panting. “Stretched too far, that's all. Please. God, just...”

She dropped her weight, and he glided inside to the hilt. A soft, desperate moan fell from her lips as he filled her empty void. They fit. They'd always fit, but she'd forgotten how well. Her muscles squeezed around his girth, and she sighed as she rested, adjusting. Seven weeks. Done. All done. She never wanted to go this long without him again. She brushed sweaty hair from her eyes.

“Derek,” she whispered. She splayed her hands against his abdomen, swallowing as tears pricked her eyes. She blinked. She wasn't going to cry on him. Only pathetic people cried during sex, and this? This felt anything but pathetic. Even if they didn't finish, and neither one ever moved again, she didn't think it would matter. “Derek,” she repeated, but she couldn't hold enough air hostage to tell him how not pathetic she felt.

Her body trembled as the world sloughed away in a blur, and there was only him. His body. His voice. His spirit. Sweat dotted her brow. She wasn't empty anymore. She'd been a destitute bucket of needy space, and he'd filled her to the brim. She almost didn't want to move. God, it felt good. He felt good. Everything felt good.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too,” he said. His breaths had tightened, and he looked up at her, panting. “You're pretty tight,” he said. “Am I okay?”

“Seven weeks will do that,” she said. “I'm fine. I'm more than fine. Just give me a second.”

He agreed with a grunt and rested. His Adam's apple rolled down his throat as he swallowed, and his eyelids fluttered. “You're really wet,” he said. She twirled her index finger at his navel. The muscles of his abdomen shivered as she toiled. “I forgot how nice...” His breath shuddered. “You feel nice, Meredith.”

She licked her lips. “Only nice?”

“I'm not exactly a thesaurus when I'm inside you,” he said. He flashed a wry grin at her.

She flattened against his body, careful not to rest her weight on him, and gripped his shoulders. “Roll on three,” she instructed as she met his gaze. His eyes crinkled, and he blinked his assent. She counted backward, and they moved together with twin grunts. He stayed inside her as her weight pressed through her side into the mattress. He lay on his damaged side. They faced each other. She hoped it didn't hurt, but he'd been on that side a lot that night, and he seemed okay if he took breaks.

“Good?” she said as he settled.

“Up a little?” he said.

She shifted. The angle of his penetration changed, and she gasped as desire corkscrewed like a roller coaster. Her lower body clenched. His chest heaved, and she kissed him again and again
wherever she could reach. Her lips pressed against the very top of his scar, and she licked the swollen bump. A soft rumble rolled up through his sternum.

“This was a good idea,” he said. He wrapped his arms around her body and pulled her close. His lower body shifted, and he moved within her.

She mewled. This position didn't mean merely looking at him. The safe zone she loved wrapped her in a solid, warm cloak. His musky scent enveloped her. His eyelids dipped as he gathered his energy. It wouldn't be athletic, or bouncy, or bed break-y, or shout-y, but she would be in his arms, and that was all she really cared about.

“Take me for a ride, Derek,” she said.

“Yes, dear,” he murmured, and with a smirk, he followed her command.

[Before]

Frigid chill washed the heat of her body with sensory overload, and she gasped as her back hit the mirror. The whole bureau shook. “Cold!” she hissed. She hadn't thought about that when they'd tested this place. She hadn't been naked.

He grunted, and he left her bereft, just for a moment. He put a pillow behind her back, and she relaxed, only to realize he'd frozen, his gaze caught in the silver grip of the mirror. “What is it?” she said.

He blinked. She turned around, trying to see what he saw, but all she saw was him and her, both naked and ready. The soft, dark hairs peppering his chest had flattened with sweat. His hair had spiked all over from the times she'd run her fingers through it, over and over, unable to get enough. Strong shoulders tapered into lean hips and legs. A swimmer's build. Sleek and toned. His breaths heaved in his torso, and he swallowed. His hand wandered to his chest, and he rubbed his left pectoral near the bullet wound.

“Are you hurting?” she said. Her insides throbbed with agony at the prospect, but she gathered her resolve and said, “We can stop,” despite the wailing no, no, no in the back of her mind.

“It does hurt a little, but...” His voice trailed away.

“What is it?”

“I forgot how ugly it all is.”

She wrapped her legs around his hips, pulled him close, and mashed against his body. His erection caught between them, full and weeping pre-ejaculate, and he groaned into her shoulder. “None of it matters to me,” she told him. “I'm so turned on right now I think I might burst. I'm not freaking kidding, Derek.”

“Hmm,” he said. He kissed her collarbone. Heat coiled between them, and sweat gathered where their skin slipped together with lust-filled friction. They forgot about his scars. He groped her breasts. His thumbs caressed a gasp from her as he drew lazy circles around her nipples.

Soft breaths filled the silence. Every touch spread fire. She hadn't had him in so long. She'd missed this. Missed it so much. Her insides ached with the need to pull him closer. She reached between them and cupped him. “I need you,” she said.

His whole body twitched, and he grunted. “If you do that, I'm not going to make it,” he said,
She bit her lip and smiled. “Really?” she said. She dragged the nail of her index finger along the underside of his erection and delighted in his ragged gasp. This was a game they always played. A sexual Russian roulette.

“Mere, I’m—” he said, but his breath skipped in his chest, and he said nothing else.

“No condom, and no birth control,” she purred against his ear. “We’ve never done this with nothing at all. Just you and me.”

He closed his eyes. He didn't speak. His breaths rasped in his throat. He slammed his hand against the mirror and rested it flat for support.

She stroked his corona with her thumb. He jerked. A whimper crushed in his throat, and he collapsed against her, heavy and unfettered.

“Does that feel good?” she said.

A low, twisty grunt told her yes. Yes, it did.

She looped his corona again and then shifted her attentions lower. She rubbed his frenulum. His jaw clenched. His knees slammed against the dresser. His whole body shuddered. His breaths screwed tight in his chest, deep and straining. His muscles locked, and his grip on her shoulder squeezed to the point of pain.

“Mere, please, I—” he said, his voice nothing more than wisps of syllables connected by the barest thread

“Please, what?” she murmured. She gripped him with his tip against her palm and wrenched her hand like she was trying to unscrew the cap off a jar. He choked and scrabbled against her body like he flailed for a cliff to keep from falling. He sucked in frantic gulps of air.

She watched, fascinated, as he tripped over the point of no return and lost himself in the space beyond. His expression flattened with glassy-eyed, peaceful bliss that made her envious. His lips parted, but no sound came out. His nostrils flared. His biceps flexed as he leaned into her. She cupped his ass to support him.

For a moment, on that pinnacle, he didn't move, didn't breathe, didn't speak, and then he snapped into motion. His lower body jerked in a series of rapid contractions. He spurted warm fluid against her abdomen, and she pulled him tightly into her arms a the seconds ticked past. She counted to twelve as she ran her fingers through his hair. His exhalation in the aftermath pounded against her body, and he didn't lift his head as even breathing resumed.

“Fuck,” he said against her shoulder.

“It's okay,” she said. “My fault.”

He didn't move and wouldn't look at her, and guilt ran her through like a sword. He'd told her he was close, and she'd teased him. Normally, that would have been fine. But they normally didn't go seven weeks without sex. She normally didn't torment him with a striptease beforehand. And, normally, he wasn't so nervous that his body refused to send heat to his extremities.

With a growl of frustration and a dark, upset look that made her insides quiver with regret, he pushed away from the mirror and went to get her a towel.
She panted as she lay with him. Her vocal cords had been reduced from producing coherency to only bleating moans. She pressed her mouth against his shoulder. Her teeth rested against his skin, not really a kiss or a bite or... anything. Just something to let him know that he was doing it right for her. Doing everything right.

She pulled her lips closed, and the taste of salt and male wound down her throat, but she could barely swallow before it all started again. Short, tight breaths. She needed them. Needed air. She pressed her nose into the crook of his neck and breathed and breathed and breathed. He filled her. Their position didn't permit athletic in-and-out like a piston or anything, but he moved enough that she couldn't ever forget he was there. Inside. Building friction and heat and stroking all the right things every time he pushed into her. Her fingertips tightened against the soaked hair at the nape of his neck, and she mashed into him with a helpless, winding, begging moan.

Please. Please. Please, finish.

She didn't want it to ever end, but hovering this close, her abdomen winding tighter and tighter without release, was a form of delicious torture. Living in pleasure that was like pain, knowing she could be weightless if she would just. Freaking. Finish.

He'd taken them up the slope at an indolent pace. They'd stayed ahead of the fire for minutes and minutes, and then it'd slowly consumed them. She rubbed his shoulders, his back. Squeezed. She needed to do something with her arms, needed to move. Needed...

The mattress squeaked, and she pushed down as much as he thrusted up. She couldn't help it. She couldn't help anything. Her legs shivered with the need to offset the coiling, tense energy. She traced a toe along the curly hair dusting his right calf, and his whole body flinched.

A deep, wobbly sound erupted from his lips, though it didn't make any sense. She blinked and watched his eyes, which were clouded with lust and near-completion. His lips had parted, showing pearly teeth as he struggled to breathe on an even keel. Soft, deep grunts peppered his exhalations as he failed and failed again. She squeezed with her lower-body, and she could see it everywhere in the way he reacted. The way a soft groan would bubble in his throat. The way his warm embrace would tense, and his body shivered. The way he looked at her. In love and loving. Helpless but indomitable at the same time.

They'd kissed. For a long time. Talked. Until the dizzying conflagration had swept them up, and now it was a struggle just to think straight, let alone speak or do anything else with a planned purpose. His arms tightened around her body. Warmth to warmth. Sweat slicked their bodies from the slide of skin on skin. Friction. Heat.

“Close?” he said, only to wrench into a moan.

“Please,” was all she could manage.

“Mmm,” he replied. Though she had no idea which flavor of mmm, it was. He had quite a few.

He shifted his weight. His angle changed. His depth became shallow, but he rubbed into all the external nerve bundles that were dying for attention. She moaned like she hurt. Her muscles quivered. He did it again, and she moaned. And moaned. And moaned. Her lips peeled back from her teeth. Her eyes shut. She pressed against his heaving body as he fanned the flames and fanned.

It took him only seconds to turn her to ash. She arched against him, and her body shivered. The
tense, climbing feeling she'd endured for the past eternity split open into bliss. A loud, unfettered noise pealed from her throat. He shifted, deepening his position. His arms wrapped around her and squeezed. Her head tilted back, and she stared at him. He stared back, riveted, in the dim light. She struggled to breathe as wave after wave of it rolled through her body in what seemed like an endless ocean. Euphoria. Every muscle in her abdomen came alive, twitching.

When her first spasm hit, he groaned. His breaths sped up. He inhaled. As the pleasure of her own explosion died into a dull hum, she watched him tip over his boat into the swirling chaos of abandon. A languid, loved, bedazzled thrum pulled at her body like a drug, but she pushed it away, just long enough to watch him. Feel him.

He moved inside her, rhythmic pumping motions beyond his control. Wet warmth spread inside her. His fingers twitched, and he groaned as he stilled. His breaths resumed, and a lazy smile slathered his expression.

“Oh,” he said, as though the secret to life, the universe, and everything had been revealed to him.

“Yeah,” she agreed.

Spent, he slipped out of her and rolled onto his back. She settled against his body, moving only enough to reach across him for the lamp switch. Darkness bathed the room. He wrapped his left arm around her body. Safe. Warm. She smiled as she laid her cheek against his chest. His grip relaxed in less than ten seconds. His head tilted against her, his chin to her forehead.

He slept. She'd never seen him collapse that fast except the time he'd stayed up two days to remove an impossible spinal tumor. She supposed she couldn't really complain. Her eyelids dipped. Every muscle in her body tingled. The room blurred, and she hovered in a cloudy, pleased, safe place. She lost the world beyond his arm and dreamed.

[Now]

The alarm shrilled in her ear, and she flinched awake at the awful, bone-vibrating, evil noise. Her brain felt like goo, and a headache split open behind her eyes as she rolled to turn off the offending appliance. She slapped blindly, hoping to hit the right button. A deep, annoyed moan rumbled beside her. On the third try, the noise ceased. Her ears rang. She squinted. 4AM, the clock proclaimed in the blurry darkness. She breathed, and she rolled back against his naked body.

Five more minutes. Just five.

He grunted, and her fleshy pillow moved. “No,” she whined. “Five minutes.” She reached for him, trying to keep him there. Her grasping hands found his arm. She felt the soft carpet of hairs on his skin slip underneath her fingertips, but he didn't stop. He left her bereft. Alone. She moaned.

A warm palm splayed against her back. He rubbed her. “You'll be late,” he said, but his voice sounded wrong. Tight. The mattress shifted. He panted in the dark.

She didn't want to get up. This would be one of those mornings where she fell asleep in the shower, her toothbrush dangling from her hands. She would need Starbucks. Lots. She knew the day would suck when she was already fantasizing about a nap in the on-call room despite not having even sat up yet. And—

When she heard Derek's pill bottle jingle, she snapped out of her sleepy haze and forced herself up. “Are you okay?” she said.

He didn't answer right away. He sat on the edge of the bed by his nightstand, his posture hunched.
He put a hand out against the nightstand. Things cascaded to the floor. Books. His watch and several cellular phones. A wet splatter and crash told her he'd knocked over his water bottle, too. He cursed. Under his breath. If she hadn't been so focused on him, she wouldn't have heard it.

“Derek?” she prodded.

The mattress shifted as he thought about standing up. He groaned, and he sank back down. “Would you get me a glass of water?” he said, his voice low and miserable. “Please?”

She stumbled to her feet. The room revolved. Exhaustion destroyed her perception for a good twenty seconds, and nerves didn't help. He hadn't let her get anything for him in weeks. Not since he'd been up and walking again after his pneumonia. He always said he was fine. Fine. I'm fine.

“Sure,” she said, swallowing as she blindly clawed the area rug for clothing. She remembered after a long, frantic minute, that the only things that would be strewn on the floor were the skanky remnants of her striptease, one of his dirty t-shirts, and some threadbare pajama pants.

She heard his tightened, pained breaths, and she gave up on the idea of clothes for the moment. She stumbled into the master bathroom and grabbed a Dixie cup from the sink. When she turned on the the bathroom light, pain seared into her skull. She blinked. Her pupils adjusted, but not fast enough.

She filled the cup and went back into the bedroom. A triangle of sharp light from the bathroom lit the bedroom. He sat, hunched and grimacing, naked, eyes shut. She handed him the cup, and watched him down his OxyContin and a Percocet. She swallowed. She didn't think they'd been rough last night. He'd jarred himself a couple times, but...

“Are you okay?” she said.

He gave her a small, apologetic smile creased with pain. “I'm bad at remembering to take pills when you're dancing naked in my face. I'll be fine in a minute.”

“Oh,” she said, and she exhaled with relief. She sat on the mattress next to him. She kissed his shoulder and hoped he would feel better soon.

“You'll be late if you don't start getting ready,” he said.

She shrugged. “I don't think I care.” She closed her eyes. She ached. All over. But it was a pleasant sort of ache. Now past her initial panic that Derek had somehow hurt himself the night before, she couldn't bring herself to be anything but relaxed. Loose. Pleased. She giggled, and she kissed him. “When are we doing that again?”

“Dancing naked in my face?” he said. “You can dance naked anytime. I won't complain.”

She bumped her elbow against him. “Baby-making, you over-sexed lummox,” she corrected.

“Over-sexed lummox,” he replied with a grin. “That's a new one. I'll file it next to Ferrari.”

She chuckled. “Derek,” she said. “Seriously.”

“Seriously,” he echoed. He kissed her. “I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too,” she said. “When?”

“Who are we saying is over-sexed here again?” he said.
She laughed. “Touche or whatever. When?”

He sighed, and he leaned against her body. Pain had worked its way out of his gaze, replaced by a glazed look of opiates and tiredness. “Maybe tomorrow?” he said.

She stroked his shoulder and tried to force her pleased lower-body to remember he was still healing. Forgetting to take painkillers wasn't the catastrophe it'd been a month ago, but he still needed them. He still hurt. “No pressure,” she said. “I don't mean to come off like I'm starved for attention or demanding or whatever. I just... I missed you. I missed you so much. Last night was...”

“It's okay. I missed you, too,” he said, his voice soft. He nuzzled her hair, and he kissed her temple, and she relished the warm, secure feel of him. Naked. Comforting. Hers. “Hmm,” he said. Tired. The sheets rustled as he shifted. His grip slackened. He kissed her once more, and then he lay flat. His eyelids dipped as she pulled the sheets over his supine body.

“You're making me freaking jealous, you know,” she said as she watched him stretch and prepare for sleep like a big, happy cat. “But just think. In two weeks, that alarm will be for you, too.”

She didn't know how she'd expected him to respond to that. A smile. A wink. A teasing remark. Something. She sat against the mattress by his hip and rubbed the sheet over his leg when he said nothing. At first, she thought he might already be asleep, but the sharp triangle of light from the bathroom betrayed him. She saw the vague shine his eyeballs as he peered at the ceiling.

“What is it?” she said.

He didn't reply. Not right away. She would have pressured him to talk. She'd gotten used to pressuring him. If he said he didn't want to talk, she backed off. A lot of times, though, she'd found he just needed a bit of a push. Something to make himself expend effort on translation from twisty-Derek-jumble to English. But she saw his expression. He blinked. His Adam's apple rolled as he swallowed. He was trying. Trying to think of something to say, and so she remained by his side, waiting, watching. Silent. She stroked his chest.

“I don't want to go back,” he said.

She blinked, trying to force her body to be awake. Surprise made her head spin. He'd never said anything about going back to work. Not once. She realized it only now that he'd brought it up. Work. She wondered if he didn't want to return to the place he'd been shot. Or if it was something else. Or both.

“What?” she said.

He rolled onto his side. “I don't know.”

She didn't know what to say. “Is it because you were shot there?” she said.

“I think I hate being Chief,” he replied. “And I don't...” He sighed. “People scare me.”

A lump formed in her throat. She hadn't thought about that before, either. He had a difficult time with sudden movements. Loud noises. A hospital was full of sudden movements and loud noises. Neurological patients, in particular, had the tendency to shift from calm to hysterical, still to twitching, in the blink of an eye. The emergency room dealt with all kinds of injuries. From a simple oops to intentional harm. The results of gang fights showed up on their doorstep all the time. Though security worked diligently, unsecured guns were something he would probably see from time to time if he ventured there. Knives. Other weapons. Every day would remind him that what had happened to him happened to other people all the time. That he wasn't safe. That it could
happen again.

She had no idea what they could do about that.

“You should talk to Richard,” she said. She stroked his hair. “About the Chief thing. Tell him to stay on as interim Chief while you get your feet wet with just surgeries again.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe.”

Silence stretched. Her mind churned through ideas. He tended to stay at home. He went out for walks. If somebody ran errands, he sometimes went, just to keep from going stir crazy. But those instances were few and far between in comparison to his relative solitude. Maybe he just needed practice. A chance to return his mind to status quo.

“Let’s go to Pike Place,” she said. “Tomorrow after my shift. I’ll go in really early so I can get out mid-afternoon.”

“Why?”

“We can walk around,” she said. “Maybe go to that restaurant where Sleepless in Seattle was filmed and people watch. It might help you get used to people again.”

“Maybe,” he said.

“And then we can have sex afterward,” she added. “Maybe I’ll be a french maid.”

His body twitched, and she felt weight slough from her shoulders as he laughed. A happy, genuine chuckle that relaxed her just by the sound of it. “Mere, you’re really late,” he said. His sleepy gaze twinkled in the dim light.

She leaned against his body and kissed him. “Do we have a date?”

“Yes,” he said. “Get ready already so I don’t have to fire you when I go back.”

She laughed and grabbed her robe from the bathroom door. Light yawned wider into the room, and then blinked off as she flipped the switch. The red robe settled around her body. She tripped on the pile of junk they’d spilled by the bureau the evening before, but he didn’t comment. When she glazed back, she realized he’d already fallen back into dreaming.
The bullet slammed into his chest and knocked his breath away. He couldn't scream. The white, endless ceiling cartwheeled over his field of vision. He fell to the floor, and his eyes snapped open to darkness, but the muzzle of the gun hovered in the blur as Gary Clark aimed for a second shot. Derek lay there, panting. He couldn't speak or move. He waited to die.

Except he didn't die, and over minutes, he lost sight of the gun. He lay in bed on his back next to Meredith, staring at the ceiling in their bedroom, and he didn't die. Panic receded like a wave, leaving him in a muddy pit of doubt, not relief. His body shook. His eyes watered. The bullet wound plagued him with a persistent, painful ache, and he pawed at his chest with his shaky hand. His palm met the rough, pocked place where the bullet had broken him. No blood. Warm skin.

Breathing hurt, but he couldn't catch his breath to make it slow. He rolled to his side. Resistant sheets and blankets clung to his sweaty, naked skin and then released. He thumped to the floor. His toes scrunched the area carpet in the darkness, and he would have gotten up. Would have. A wave of weakness tugged him to the floor, and he curled inward on himself, grabbing his knees.

He rested, his back against the mattress, his side against his nightstand. Hot tears fell against his knees. Nausea swirled, and he thought he might throw up on himself. The taste of bile crashed into the back of his throat, and his tongue pulled back from his teeth in the precursor to vomit. His body jerked. Nothing came up, and he swallowed. Saliva stuck to the inside of his mouth. His mouth felt pasty and gummy.

His chest hurt. An aching, twinging, sting punched a line through his body. In time with his heart, it throbbed in horrible waves. Pa-pain. Pa-pain. Pa-pain. Not agony. Not like it had been. But enough, after seven weeks, that even mild as it was, it made him want to claw his body to pieces just to make it stop. His pain tolerance had been decimated after seven weeks of whittling away and whittling away. After seven weeks of fear, no sleep, and weakness.

The muzzle of the gun pressed against his forehead, and his body tensed. “I'll kill you,” Gary Clark said. “I'll pull the trigger. You'll splatter like a ripe tomato.”

Derek glanced at his nightstand where his pill bottles rested next to a water bottle. Three. Three pills would make this go away. Everything. The pain. Gary Clark. Reality would stretch, and he would be anywhere he wanted if he thought about it long enough. Four, and he wouldn't dream at all. There would just be empty, fuzzy black, and time would pass, but he wouldn't care or notice. He'd get through the night. He could.

Derek cradled his head against his knees as his murderer smiled at him in the blur. He swallowed. Three pills. Three. Or four? He reached for the bottle. His fingertips brushed the cool plastic. A low-pitched, frightened moan made him freeze, and Gary Clark's apparition faded.

“Meredith?” he whispered, and he set the pill bottle down, unopened.

She made another noise. Trembling, he stood despite a collection of shooting pains, and he crawled back into bed. The sheets slipped over his body. He slid across the smooth cotton until he met the warmth of her naked skin. She twitched. The dim street lamps laved her body with a silver glow in the darkness.

“No,” she murmured. Her head moved, and her eyelids flickered as her eyeballs chased the sights in her dream. “Derek, no,” she said, and his heart squeezed at her disturbed tone.
Dr. Shepherd, Dr. Kepner had said. Thank god, you're back.

The gun roared. He didn't remember the impact; he just remembered staring up at the ceiling. He couldn't breathe. Dr. Kepner screamed and started talking, but he couldn't understand the words.

Somewhere in that morass, he knew Meredith had been watching. Screaming. “Meredith,” he said. His gut quivered, and he closed his eyes. The gun fired. Again and again. He found his voice somewhere in the rumbling thunder, but it sounded weak and beaten and scared. “You're dreaming,” he said, to him, to her. “Stop. It's okay.”

When I saw you get shot right in front of me, she'd said, I was thirty-two, and I'm going to be seeing it in my head for the rest of my life.

“Meredith,” he said.

Her body stilled and relaxed as she woke. She took a long, deep breath and then sighed. He settled along her length and wrapped his arm over her hip. “Hey,” she murmured. She didn't open her eyes, but she clutched his palm and squeezed.

“I'm here,” he managed. “Go back to sleep.”

“Mmm,” she said. Her hands tightened around his, and he couldn't move without disturbing her. She took her comfort in his presence. Her breaths evened, and she fell into more pleasant dreams in moments. He could tell by the way her tension drained, and by the soft, happy noises she made before she began to rumble with familiar, raucous snores.

The shaky, nauseous feeling wouldn't leave him be so he could join her. His chest hurt. His muscles trembled. He breathed against her hair. Soft. Lavender. A hint of sweat and sex.

He closed his eyes, and he tried to relax. Noises in the old house made him tense. Old creaks and sighs of it settling between Meredith's snores. He imagined footsteps. His murderer lurked while his chest throbbed. Sleep took him by force after what felt like hours of lying helpless, waiting to die with her in his arms.

The dark house enveloped him as he stamped his muddy boots on the welcome mat. Rain came down outside, pounding, endless. His head ached. He'd ridden the subway home and walked the last few blocks, leaving him drenched and shivering and feeling sort of sick. His waterlogged jeans, sweater, and coat felt like they weighed an extra forty pounds.

He'd been at the library until 2AM, researching for a paper in his neurology class while Mark had jabbered and joked and threw crunched up balls of notebook paper around like miniature basketballs, much to Derek's annoyance. Derek needed to get a good grade. He would fail the class if he didn't.

A brief flutter of panic overwhelmed him. Fail. Fail. You'll fail, a voice said in his head. He stood in the doorway for a long, achy moment, panting, listening to the disembodied berating. His eyes wouldn't quite focus. He'd strained them that much, reading article after article with big words and small print. He pinched the bridge of his nose and breathed.

A small noise on the couch drew him out of his spiraling worry.

He squinted. A blurry lump made the couch seem bulbous and blob-like. He flipped the light switch, and spears of yellow radiance stabbed his eyes. He blinked. Amy hissed at him. Her hair spiraled from her scalp in twisty coils as though she were Medusa's daughter.
“Trn-off-th’light,” his little sister said, her voice slurred and low-pitched with sleep.

He glared and let the lamp light spear her as her familiar tone registered. She wasn't just slurred from sleep, he realized. “Amy, what are you doing?” he said. He tried to sound calm. Not accusing. Not anything.

She licked her lips and rolled off the couch to her feet with sloppy, flailing limbs. He caught her before she fell and broke her neck. “Jus' needed a pickmeup,” she said. A burble of laughter fell from her lips. The stench of alcohol wafted into the air as she breathed, open-mouthed and heavy, against his wet shirt.

She stumbled in his grasp and backed up a step. An open bottle of his best Scotch rolled off the couch and spilled. A wet, reeking stain spread on the carpet as the liquid made a glug-glug-glug noise and then stopped when it reached equilibrium. An unmarked pill bottle lay open and tipped on the side table. White powder spread on the tabletop where she'd crushed whatever she'd taken. One pill remained whole in the orange bottle, but he couldn't identify it on sight.

His gut tightened. She'd started mixing. She would kill herself.

“What did you take?” he demanded.

“What did you take, Amy?” He shook her. Her body was pliant like the corpses in his anatomy lab. Like a dead thing. In his arms. Dead. “How much?”

“How much?” he roared in her face.

She didn't answer. His teeth clenched as her gaze fell on him. Her bloodshot, blue eyes were cloudy and unfocused. Her pupils had dilated to the size of saucers. She had no coordination in her limbs. She tried to pull away, or rather fall over. He squeezed her wrists and held her close. Rain dripped off his dark coat and down his face. It dripped off his chin to the floor. He shivered as a dark, raging thing coiled in his stomach.

“Amy,” he said. “You need to stop doing this. You told me—”

“This-is-th’last-time,” she slurred. “I swear.”

He swallowed as her voice echoed in his head across dozens of old memories like a repeating cassette player. The last time. She always said that. He'd gotten tired of trying to believe her. “Do you have any idea what this is doing to Mom?” he said. To me? To everyone? “You need to stop doing this.”

A horn honked outside, and a smile oozed across her face as though he'd said nothing. “M'ride,” she said, and she tried to loose his hands from her biceps.

“No,” he said. “You’re not going out like this. Sober up, first.”

She struggled. “Fuck you. You're not my dad.”

“Dad is dead,” he snapped. Agony pinched her face as though he'd slapped her. “He's dead, Amy, whether you're stoned or not.” A lump formed in his throat as he pictured the marbled head stone on the plot where Michael Shepherd had been buried. Derek's eyes hurt. Rain crashed against the
roof of the old house. “I'm not Dad,” he said, “But I'm all there is anymore.”

“Well, you're doing a bang-up job,” she said. She sniffed and looked away. “Really. Thanks.” Her tone belied her words.

“Do you really want to see him again that badly?” he said, his voice soft. His headache beat like a drum behind his skull.

She looked at him, blinking. Watery film spread across her eyes, and her pained gaze caught him in its net. For a moment, he thought he’d gotten through to her. Just a moment. But then she laughed, and she pushed him. He stumbled at her unexpected movement, but he held onto her.

“I don't care,” she said.

Her words splashed his face like the cold rainwater coming down in buckets outside, and he blinked. She tried to shake away his hands. He didn't budge. “Go to your room, and sleep this off,” he said. “Now, Amelia.” He would watch her and make sure she hadn't overdosed or something. He’d done it so many times he couldn't count anymore.

She moved faster than he thought her capable. Something wet hit the skin of his hand, but he didn’t have time to think about it. Pain sliced his palm as she bit him. Hard. He yelled and let go.

“Fuck!” he cursed as she stumbled toward the door. She'd broken skin. Teeth marks formed a bruised, red crescent in the web of skin between his thumb and index finger, and his nerve endings shot agony up to his elbow.

He reached for her, but she pushed the door against him. He thumped against the wall, bell rung by the impact. He tried to catch his breath as she glared. “You’re not my dad, and you're not my doctor,” she hissed. Her fury brought clarity to her words. “Stay the fuck away from me. You don’t understand anything, Derek.”

The door rattled as she slammed it in his face. He shook his hand, breathing, trying to recover his wits. Blood wept from his skin.

“Derek?” called his mother down the stairs, her voice still slurred with the cobwebs of dreaming. “Are you all right? Was that Amy? It’s three in the morning.” Her feet thudded on the steps, and he couldn’t look at her. Couldn’t look at her standing there in her ratty bathrobe, her hair a wild mess from sleep.

He fled outside just in time to see Amy and her stoner friends weave off into the rain and darkness in a beat-up blue Firebird he didn't recognize. The rain and his fury blurred the license plate. The Firebird turned the corner and was gone before he'd come up with any functional thoughts about what to do.

Failed, said the voice. Just like always.

“Fuck,” Derek said. He kicked the grass, and wet, dirty slop almost made him slip and crack his head on the sidewalk. Water sprayed. The rain thundered down against the pavement. “Fuck!” he yelled. Lights came on. Dogs barked. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Everything turned red and blurred as he let go of everything that toiled inside him. Wet tears slipped down his cheeks and mixed with rain. He heard the door behind him open.

“Derek,” said his mom, and he moved. Toward his bike. He'd parked it on the curb that morning. He ripped the tarp away and straddled the seat. He gunned the engine. The Harley throbbed. He jerked the handle and revved it. The seat vibrated with pent energy. More lights turned on. All the
dogs in the neighborhood had woken up. He didn't care.

“Derek!” his mother called.

He didn't answer her as he throttled into the rain.

Blaring car horns became the rhythmic, throbbing scream of an alarm clock in his ears. Daylight slammed into his eyeballs as he chanced a look at the room. The black pavement sliding into a rainy horizon became soft, cotton sheets as his gaze took a snapshot of the room. He squeezed his eyes shut. He turned his head away from the noise and pulled the pillow over his head. He let the alarm ring and ring and ring. It would turn off after a few minutes.

His throat felt sore. His eyes hurt. His head hurt. The room swerved back and forth as consciousness lost its grip. Tired. He hadn't slept this little since he was an intern, not even when Meredith had kicked him out after sex, what seemed like eons ago. At least then, he'd been fucking healthy.

The alarm stopped. Silence crushed him. The sheets rustled. “Derek,” Meredith said, as if to announce her presence, that it was her, and that she approached. She'd been doing that for weeks, now, ever since she'd sneaked up on him in the kitchen the night they'd fought.

He grunted, unable to come up with anything intelligent to say. He just wanted to lie there and not think and not sleep. If he slept, he dreamed, and he always remembered something bad, like his unconscious thought was taking cue cards from his waking stress. It probably was. That's how dreams worked, wasn't it?

Her warm hand slid up his spine and stopped where the pillow covered his neck. She laughed. “Did I wear you out last night?” she said, her voice muffled through his fluffy shield. She kissed his back. “I'm sorry.”

“Mmm,” he said. The echo of her tongue on his skin made him twitch. He couldn't help the ghost of a smile that curled his lips as he thought of her opened wide for him. “No, that was good,” he said, but his voice came out strained and croaky from sleep loss. Her grip clenched.

“It's 6:30,” she said. He didn't budge. Maybe she would leave him be. “Are you going to get up for your appointment?” She shook him, and he groaned as her earthquake rumbled through his body. 

Stay awake, damn it, she'd said while he'd been bleeding.

He had a followup at Seattle Grace today. The last check before he resumed limited work. Dread coiled in his gut. He swallowed against a cold spear of anxiety. He'd avoided going back to Seattle Grace. His physical therapy had been a few blocks away from Meredith's house so he could walk to it if he wanted, and the cardio-thoracic surgeon on staff at Seattle Presbyterian had looked him over when he'd been in with pneumonia.

He wondered if they'd manged to clean his blood off the floor tiles on the catwalk, or if there was a stain where he would have died. Blood left a dark memory in grout that was hard to scrub away, even with bleach. After years working in hospitals, he knew that. Nausea rolled into him, and he inhaled the warm scent of the sheets, but it didn't help.

Gary Clark laughed in his ears as the white ceiling tumbled over Derek's face. Dr. Kepner babbled, but Derek didn't understand the words. He couldn't breathe, and the bullet wound sharpened like a blade in his torso. Dr. Kepner abandoned him. The gun still echoed in his ears. He lay supine, waiting to die. Derek begged, and he waited as Gary Clark aimed again.
“Derek?” Meredith prodded.

“I don't feel well,” he said against the mattress as the memory oozed away, leaving only ache behind as the bullet wound twinged.

“Are you getting sick again?” she said. “You sound hoarse.”

“No.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Not really, I'm...” He took a breath and shoved the pillow away. The room seemed to quiver. She sat beside him, and he stared at her out of the corner of his left eye. She was already dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, her hair gathered up in a messy ponytail. Her face seemed pale, her hair lanky. She wore concealer, but he could still see the circles under her eyes. Worry clouded her gaze. “Did I wear you out?” he said.

“I didn't sleep well,” she said. “Thank you.”

“For what?”


He closed his eyes. “Love you, too,” he said, and he let the room drift away as he stared at him, stroking his back. His world-spinning headache didn't seem so awful when he closed his eyes. He listened to her breathing, and he let it soothe him.

“So, why don't you feel well?” she said. “Nightmares again?”

I almost died fifty times in my sleep, he could say. Instead, he didn't reply. He pulled the pillow over his head, burrowing. The mattress shifted as she stood with a sigh. She'd be late if she lingered much longer. His senses dulled by the pillow, he lost track of her as she moved away. Silence. But she didn't say goodbye. The space behind his eyes rushed and separated in the blackness. Even if he didn't want it, sleep would take him back, soon. He'd be dying again, or dead.

The blankets ripped away from him, and he grabbed at the mattress. His heart thumped, and he yelled in surprise as cool air hit his skin. He didn't know what was happening. Fear exploded through his body, but he couldn't convince his muscles to do anything other than shake. His breath skipped away. The death he'd waited for all night had finally arrived.

The fitted sheet underneath him jerked. He slid an inch. Two. She grunted. Exhaustion and panic prevented him from understanding anything but the fact that he was being dragged somewhere against his will.

“Get up, Derek,” Meredith snapped, but all he heard was Mr. Clark. “You'll be late,” turned into, “You're not the man.”

“No,” Derek said as the last bit of air punched free from his lungs. The sheet stopped moving that instant.

Gary Clark yanked the pillow away from him. “Seriously,” he said.

Light slammed into Derek's eyeballs as his canopy tore away. He grabbed for the pillow reflexively, but he'd been blinded. His grasping fingers brushed the pillowcase, but he missed. The shadow of his murderer's body eclipsed all else. Derek raised his arm to protect himself. He bent at
the waist and whipped into a fetal position. Mr. Clark threw the pillow behind him, and it landed on the floor with a thump. Tears welled in Derek's eyes.

“No,” he said. “Please.”

Gary Clark froze. The world caught up with Derek, and he realized there was no Gary Clark. Only her. Only Meredith. He should have known that. He should have. He grunted in frustration as the live wires twitching his muscles stopped sparking. His panting eased into slow, calmed breaths. He closed his eyes and made a sick sound deep in his throat. He relaxed.

“Meredith,” he said, exhaustion and embarrassment grating his tone. Why? Why had she done that to him?

A stricken look carved her sleep-longing face. She sat on the bed beside his body and stroked his side. “I'm sorry,” she said. “I thought you knew it was me. I've been within four feet of you this whole time.”

“I had a bad night,” he said.

She sighed. “Every night's a bad night, Derek. Every day's a bad day.”

“Don't you think I'm sick of it, too?” he snapped. “I fucking hate this.”

“You'll always be scared if you don't even try not to be,” she said. “So, get up.”

He clenched his fingers. “I can't go there today. I'm not ready. Please.”

“No,” she said. “It won't work this time. You do that all the freaking time. I'm very sorry I scared you, but I'm not backing down. Stop 'please'-ing me to get what you want.”

Silence stretched. His stomach clenched. He tried not to chuckle. He did. His face turned red with the effort, and finally a small snort popped loose. “Meredith...”

Her eyes twinkled. “That came out wrong, didn't it?”

“A bit,” he said.

“Look. Just try. Okay?” she said. “I want you to go at your own pace. I do. But don't just stop. Stopping isn't a pace. It's stopping. The more you stop, the harder it is to get going again. I know from experience.”

“I'm sorry, Meredith,” he said. “I'm...”

“Don't be sorry, Derek,” she replied. “Just get up, and go to your freaking appointment.”

He sighed. He glanced at the digital alarm clock. Red numbers glared at him. “You're late again,” he said to her as the time registered through the fog of exhaustion.

“It doesn't matter,” she said. “I'm going on maternity leave soon, anyway.”

“Mmm,” he replied. “Confidence. I like it.” His breaths halted when he assembled the possible meanings of her sentence in his head. His gaze shifted to her nightstand. An open pregnancy test box sat behind the alarm clock in the expanding pool of morning sunlight. She'd bought a huge stack of them, and she'd put them in her drawer as he'd watched. “Unless...”

He swallowed. It'd been less than fourteen days since they'd started trying again. They'd only had
sex about four times. Or... His mind raced as he tried to remember the specific times, but they blurred into a long, passionate moan in his brain. A lick of salt on her skin. The drips of her sweat. The wet, tight heat of her body sheathing him as he drove himself home to her center. Four times. He was pretty sure. Five? No. Four. Bed, bed, dresser, and bed. They couldn't possibly get that lucky. Could they? She'd gotten her first period after the miscarriage two-and-a-half weeks ago. Ovulation was feasible, but... There was no way the test would pick up a new life blooming from just last night. Was there?

“Are you pregnant already?” he blurted.


“It's okay,” he said. “Did you take a test while I was sleeping?”

“No,” she said. “I just wanted to read the instructions. I forgot to put the box away.” She kissed him. “I'd warn you if I was taking one this time. No more bombshells.”

“I appreciate it,” he said.

She shrugged. “You asked. I love you,” she said, as though it were a simple math equation. Two plus two is four. A no brain-er. Her eyelashes lowered over her pretty gray eyes as she stared at him. He watched her gaze trace the lines of his naked body, unabashed, unhidden, and an unimpeachable sense of security overwhelmed him. She loved him. She said it all the time, now. She never pent anything up anymore. She touched him, stroked him, kissed him. All the time. Unsolicited. Despite how horribly he'd treated her. Despite everything. He knew he'd become high maintenance since the shooting. Something less than he'd been. He knew it, and he hated it, but she hadn't once shown any doubts. She'd never not been there. A lump thickened in his throat, for the first time in weeks not wrought by something upsetting. He swallowed.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice rough and low. The world blurred as he blinked.

She stared at him. “For what?”

“I don't know,” he said. “Everything, I guess.”

She smiled. “Are you going to get dressed, now?”

“You don't like me naked anymore?”

She slapped his ass, and he smirked. “I love you naked, but get dressed,” she said. “Seriously. You're even later than me.”

He rolled onto his stomach and took a deep, cleansing breath. His ribs pressed in, and the bullet wound tightened. His sternum thrummed with vague discomfort. Don't keep this up, it said. But I'll let you go for now. The soft scent of the sheets caressed him, and he needed it. He'd slept there, yes, but they smelled like her. Like home. The last trill of upset left behind by his terror-filled awakening slipped away.

“I'm on my stomach,” he said. He breathed, and he couldn't help the smile that overwhelmed him, or the pang of excitement. He realized he'd been staring at the mattress when he'd woken to the alarm clock. The sheets had been his pale horizon. “I was on my stomach when I woke up this morning.”

“I noticed,” she said. “How does it feel?”
“Weird.”

“Weird like ouch?”

“Not ouch,” he said. “But not entirely pleasant. I'm—” He grunted as he pushed himself onto his side and tried to sit up. He used his arms to push up. That hurt. He groaned and bit his lip as a wince creased his face, but he managed to find upright before the pain skidded him to a halt. “I'm getting so fucking tired of this.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Getting?”

“I guess I passed that point a while ago.”

“Maybe a bit,” she said. She wrapped her arms around him, and he sighed in her embrace. “You're so much better, though, Derek. Really.” She kissed his ear. “When you first woke up from surgery, you couldn't walk. You couldn't sit up. You couldn't even breathe on your own.”

“I know,” he said, and he looked at the floor.

He sighed, and he wobbled to his feet, using her shoulder as a support. Getting out of bed was, really, the hardest part of the day. His sternum made pushing himself up from lying flat to standing a chore, though at least he didn't get stuck anymore. He couldn't count the times he'd had to ask somebody to help him in the past months. Mostly Mark and Meredith, but once only Lexie had been around.

He straightened up by himself. He walked. By himself. He grabbed a towel from the rack in the master bathroom and wrapped it around his waist, just in case there were people still in the house. He hated that. Having to grab a towel to walk four feet across the main hallway to the shower, but he wouldn't have to deal with that much longer.

They had a house. Of plywood.

“I'll wait downstairs,” Meredith said. She gave him a small smile, and he smiled back.

He took a quick shower and pulled boxer briefs, an old pair of jeans, and a folded t-shirt from the dresser. He didn't shave. Too much effort. He wouldn't wear a suit or tie. He wasn't the Chief today. His nerves re-collected in her absence as he yanked his gray Bowdoin t-shirt over his head. He brushed his fingertips along the soft hemline.

*I need to wear that*, he'd said as she'd twisted his shirt into a wrinkled mess with her nervous hands. The last time he'd worn this shirt, he'd been helpless. She'd helped him put it on when he hadn't been able to lift his own arms.

He'd been at Seattle Grace for days after his surgery, but he'd stayed in his hospital room, for the most part. He'd been drugged out of his mind. Exhausted. He hadn't gone to his office, or to the catwalk, or visited the operating room where he'd lain on a gurney, unable to breathe while Meredith talked about dirty sex with him.

As a critical care patient, he hadn't been accessible to most of the hospital staff. Only the employees assigned directly to him had been allowed anywhere near him. No rubber-neckers permitted. No gawkers. No accusers. None of the friends and family of the people he'd gotten killed had spoken to him.

He brushed his teeth. He flossed. He slicked cold, sticky gel through his hair so he wouldn't end up with a horrific, frizzy mess when it dried, but he didn't bother with the hairdryer. He put on and
laced his cross-trainers. All by himself.

She waved a toasted, plain bagel at him on the way out the door, but his stomach twisted, and he shook his head. She didn't press him as he forced himself down the front walk. She armed the new house alarm they'd had installed and shut the door behind her.

The air was wet, but the sky was clear, and the sun shone down, unobstructed. The scent of green, cut grass and moist earth touched his nose, and he inhaled. The air was pleasant, and a breeze blew through. Not warm or hot. Not cool or cold. Idyllic. Bird calls boomeranged between the trees, from jays to little finches. A lawnmower whirred in the distant background.

She wrapped her arms around his waist as he paused. “It's nice out today.”

“Mmm,” he agreed, but his brief respite faded when he glanced at his Cayenne, sitting in the driveway behind Meredith's Jeep. One look at the shiny, black paint, and his mouth went dry.

Fifteen minutes. Thirty in traffic, maybe. And then they would be there.

“I can't do this,” he wanted to say.

“Derek,” said the One. Beautiful face. “Please. Focus. Focus for me. It's me. It's Meredith. And I need you to-” Off. But he saw the word finish on her lips.

Move. He could do that. Could he? Yes.

He forced himself into the passenger seat of his Cayenne. He pulled his seat belt over his torso and lap. The engine rumbled as she turned the key. She babbled at him about schedules. Mark would take him home after his appointment, she said. She had a thirty-six hour shift this time, so she wouldn't be home until the day after, she said. She said, she said, she said, until it became a drone he heard but didn't process. He didn't mean to ignore her, but he couldn't listen.

The car jounced as she rolled it backward out of the driveway. He clutched the handle over the window. It didn't hurt very much. Just a twist down his center that faded. He winced, but that was all. He leaned against his knees, and his breaths screwed in his chest. Tight. Tighter. He gripped the bridge of his nose as he felt the car accelerate.

They'd made it to the highway. He blinked, and he stared at the concrete road. Watching the white lines blur made him sicker. Meredith darted and weaved between cars as though she were hired for Nascar. He watched a shiny red Prius slide backward past his window, and then he peeled his gaze from the road entirely. He settled on her.

“You had a nightmare last night, too,” he said, trying to push away the churning in his empty gut.

“Yeah.”

“About?” he said. Derek, no, she'd said. Like he'd been dying. He closed his eyes and gripped the seat as he waited for her to reply.

She shrugged. “Never getting pregnant.”

“You're worried about getting pregnant?”

“I didn't think I was, but last night I was chased by a box of Night Light condoms and an overzealous, stomp-y can of spermicide.”
He choked on a breath. The engine roared, and his body lurched forward as she braked and switched to the middle lane to get around an idiot gabbing on his cell phone in the fast lane. He clenched his fingers. “That's...” he managed before he had to stop talking, or he would burst. Bursting into gales of amusement would not be supportive.

“It was more scary and less funny when I was sleeping,” Meredith said. “I swear.”

He watched her. Flush spread between her freckles. She bit her lip. Her body quivered. Pressure built. They laughed at the same time, and he relaxed in the shared moment. He loved her laugh. The way she forgot the world. He brushed her face with his palm as she sniffled, recovering. He wondered how she would look, glowing and pregnant, and his nerves slid away.

*I look like I tried to eat a freaking beach ball,* she would say.

*It's our beach ball, though,* he'd assure her. *You look beautiful.*

*Liar,* she'd say. But she'd smile. He'd kiss her, and she'd laugh her perfect laugh.

“It was a really big box,” Meredith said as she wiped her face and blinked as she focused on the road.

“I miss those condoms,” he said. “Those were fun.”

“They glowed, Derek. In the dark. They made sex look like a freaking UFO encounter.”

He smirked at her as he stroked her hair. She turned her face, relinquishing her attention from the road for a moment to kiss his hand. She made a soft, pleasant noise that turned into a growl when a car blocked her path, and she swerved. His gut quivered, but he ignored it.

“We've only been having sex again for a week-and-a-half,” he said.

He expected to be waiting six months for a positive pregnancy test. Maybe a year. He pictured a tiny, squirming bundle of nothing but lungs. She'd cry, and he'd wonder again how something so loud could come from someone so very tiny. Seven pounds, maybe eight. Part him. Part Meredith. Theirs. Made by them during an expression of love.

He swallowed as he watched Meredith, tried to picture her face as a baby, but he couldn't. She had piercing cat eyes, a long, slender nose, and a huge, glowing smile that didn't make sense on features only a few inches wide. She rarely showed him pictures from her childhood. He didn't think she had that many.

She sighed. “I know it won't happen right away. Well, it could. But I'm not expecting... I'm trying not to expect...”

“We'll get there,” Derek said. “I got through birth control.”

She snorted. “Does this mean I get to call them Supersperm?”

“Well, they're pretty super, I'd say, knocking you up through almost guaranteed failure;” he said.

“I know we could be waiting months,” she said. “It's normal to take months. I just...”

“You know it will take months, but you want it to be now,” he said. “I know the feeling.”

He brushed the seat belt with his palm. His bullet wound rested just underneath. He didn't need a pillow for support in the car anymore, at least. The little jostles and bumps didn't bother him much.
He leaned back into his seat and watched the road blur through his eyelashes. The bay spread out beside them under a blue sky. All blue. All sharp. All brilliant. All real. He inhaled, and the soft scent of her conditioner swirled with the freon emitting from the car's air vents.

“Do you still have the other nightmare a lot?” he said.

“Huh?”

She maneuvered the car onto the exit ramp, and his body tensed. Minutes. They were minutes away.

“The one about me dying,” he said as the car rolled through the curve of the exit. He leaned into it. She gunned onto the main street and cut across two lanes. The car straightened out, but his stomach didn't.

“Not since we started having sex again,” she said.

“I'm glad,” he said. “I'm sorry...”

They stopped at a glowing red light. She turned. “Sorry for what?”

Derek watched as a bustling crowd wandered into the crosswalk. Several people wore scrubs, some brown, some periwinkle, some navy. Close. They were close. Mere blocks away. He clenched the door handle, and he swallowed.

“I wish you hadn't seen it,” he said. He closed his eyes. Nausea swirled as he watched the white ceiling tilt over his head. He fell. The gun roared in his ears, and Dr. Kepner babbled uselessly.

Meredith touched his shoulder, ripping him away from yet another replay. “I'm glad I saw it, Derek,” she said. “It was horrible, but I'll never regret it, because it means we're here, talking about babies and sex and my silly nightmares about your favorite condoms.”

Her eyes watered. He blinked. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know anything.

“I really want to have a baby with you,” she said. “I can't even describe how much anymore.”

“We'll get there,” he said, his voice low and thick with... Something. He leaned against the window and breathed. His breath clawed along the window in a spreading triangle of fog.

“You will, too,” she said. She squeezed his knee. A horn honked. The light had turned green. She drove.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Meredith, I'm...” He couldn't finish his sentence.

“Do you want to talk about your nightmares yet?” she said.

She turned into the Seattle Grace parking lot. His body swayed, and the horizon line of cars and building and clouds tilted to the side. He clutched the door handle until it hurt. He tried to find his voice to say, “No,” but he opened his mouth, and his throat went cottony and dry. He couldn't say that word or any other.

She parked, and his legs shivered with stress. His hands. He'd been shot. Dying. He hadn't seen the outside of the hospital during the massacre. He only knew what the zoo of flashing lights outside had looked like through inadvertently glancing at newspapers and seeing photographs. Flipping channels and finding news specials. The front door had been barricaded. Sirens had flashed. An
endless line of police cars had encircled the building. He'd been lying on the floor on his back, bleeding, when a few hundred feet away, a line of law enforcement had stood, oblivious to his life draining out of him.

He remembered the ceiling in the operating room. Or, not really the ceiling. The lights overhead. Bright. Like the front of a train. When they'd put a mask over his face and pumped him full of anesthesia, he remembered hurting as he breathed. Once. Twice. And then the lights of the train had barreled toward him. The pain had faded. The feel of Meredith's hand had slipped out of his awareness. He'd heard noises. Then he'd seen nothing but black and heard nothing but silence.

He'd woken several times in the hours following his surgery. Every moment, Meredith had been there, sitting by the bed railing. She'd climbed into bed with him, and he hadn't been able to move to wrap his arms around her. He'd wanted to. But he'd felt sick, and he'd hurt, and then the lights had gone out again.

He'd woken once more as the clock wound around to... He hadn't had a concept of the time. His eyes had slipped open, and nausea had pressed against his body. The throbbing, endless pain, lung to spine in a jagged line, had started as the anesthesia from surgery had worn off, leaving his abused nerves on fire. He'd opened his eyes to nothing more than slits. He hadn't wanted to move as misery had crushed him. His mouth had been pasty and dry. His limbs had felt like frozen lead, and his throat like someone had pushed a rake down his esophagus in a hunt for fall leaves. She'd noticed him with his eyes open, and in moments, she'd been hovering by the bed. Her fingers had slipped through his hair as she'd whispered soothing things that hadn't helped, but he'd appreciated them anyway.

*Hey,* she'd said. *Do you need anything? Ice chips?*

He hadn't even been able to speak. He'd made a noise of some sort. He couldn't remember what. She'd pulled her chair close, and she'd sat with him while he'd hovered somewhere more than half awake but desperately wishing he weren't, until he'd found the blackness again.

He'd suffered pain and brutal nightmares for weeks. He didn't know how he would feel from one moment to the next.

Gary Clark had done that. In minutes. With one bullet and no regrets.

“Derek?” Meredith said, and he blinked.

Gary Clark's pistol pressed into Derek's temple. He rested his head against the cool window glass and breathed. The noise of gunfire ricocheted between his ears. A touch on his shoulder made him jump. He slammed his body against the door. His heart throbbed. Noise pushed through his lips, and he shuddered.

When the world came back to him, Meredith had her hand outstretched, but away from his body, and she bit her lip, stricken. The car had stopped. She'd removed the key from the ignition, and the engine settled. The clacking footsteps of a pedestrian in dress shoes passed by the car. A noisy breeze cut a swath through the parking lot and made the car rock on its axles.

When he looked at her, she moved, slowly at first. When he didn't balk, she closed the last few inches of the gap between them in a blink, and she touched him again. First with just a fingertip. Then her palm splayed. Her hand slid from his left shoulder to his right in a slow, wandering, whisper of support, and then she leaned over the parking brake and embraced him. Warmth spread against his skin as she radiated. He took a jagged breath and breathed against her hair. A loose strand flew out behind her ear. He pressed his nose against her.
“I can't,” he said.

“Yes, you can,” she said. Her arms squeezed tighter.

“Meredith,” he said. His voice quivered in his ears. He inhaled, but his body pushed the air out again before he could use it. The soft scent of her fell against him, but it slipped away like wind through his fingers. He blinked, and the space beyond her hair blurred. “I can't breathe,” he said.

“You can,” she said. Her hand chased his spine. “Just slow down.”

He looked at the archway. Seattle Grace Mercy West Hospital. The parking lot beyond the car turned white, and he fell backward as the gun roared in his ears. The bullet lodged inside his body, and breaths became a serrated blade, sawing his ribs and his lungs. His throat closed.

“I can't,” he croaked, and he coughed. His sternum flared with pain. He pawed at the collar of his shirt, desperate.

“Stop it,” she said. She pulled his gaze to her, and her eyes became gray, endless tunnels jagged with flecks of green. He lost himself there, pupil to pupil with her. She blinked, and her eyes dilated less than a fraction. “Look at me, and breathe. You can breathe. You're alive. You're okay. He's dead. You're not. We're making a family, and it's okay.”

He took her shirt into his hands. The soft weave ran under his fingertips. He lowered his gaze to the dark space between them. Two seat belt clips, the parking brake, and a small storage compartment separated their hips. She'd leaned into him. Her cleavage interrupted his view.

“Are you looking at me?” she said. “Look at me.”

Her fingertips dug into the sides of his face. He blinked, and she caught his eyes again. “It was a good distraction,” he said between a short breath and another.

“Stop it,” she repeated. “No distractions. Just breathe.”

He tried to laugh, though it ended up a vague, breathy splutter. He watched her eyes. She didn't look frightened or disturbed. She pressed her forehead against his, warm skin to cold. Their noses bumped. Her calm, even breathing rolled over him like waves on a shore in the intimate space. He followed the crash of the surf, and as the wave pulled back, he inhaled. He exhaled in time with her. Waves mingled. The spots in his vision evened into the sharp, focused colors of her face. Soft peach skin, cinnamon-brown freckles, rose-y lips.

Her eyes narrowed with quiet pleasure. She smiled. He breathed in and out again if only to see her smile widen. For once, Gary Clark had nothing to say. No post-mortem taunts. No observations. Nothing. The inner silence soothed him.

“You're very bossy,” he said.

“And you're very stubborn,” she said.

He smirked. “I'm breathing, now.”

“You are,” she agreed. She traced the dent on his forehead with her thumb, and then her hand wandered over his scalp. “I'm sorry I don't have a paper bag.”

“A what?”
Her lip quivered. She kissed him. “You helped me before. Remember?”

*I don't want my mother to die alone.*

She'd hidden in the dark closet, and he'd followed. She'd collapsed against him in tears. They'd shared a minute. In a dark closet. All he'd wanted in that minute was to make her happy again. When he'd first come into the room, she'd only been hyperventilating. As he'd sat down, she'd squeaked, and his heart had broken as she'd fallen apart.

*Slow down,* he'd said. *Slow down. Just slow down. Shh.*

“Mmm,” he said in a low voice as the memory solidified. “I remember.”

*Thank you,* she'd said.

He'd looked into her eyes. *You're welcome.*

“We have good memories here, too,” she said. She splayed a palm against his shirt over the bullet scar. “Think of those instead of this.” She circled the old wound and stroked his ribs.

“You were crying in a closet after a patient died,” he said as she roamed back to his shoulder, “And I was still married to Addison.”

She blinked. “Maybe not that one.”

“Not that one,” he agreed.

“But we kissed in an elevator,” she said. “You proposed to me there. And you were with me the first time I scrubbed in to a surgery.”

“That's a pretty helter-skelter list.”

“So is our life,” she said. “I didn't say it made any sense.”

“It really doesn't,” he said. He sighed. He turned his gaze away from her and stared at the archway, and nothing happened. Seattle Grace Mercy West. His eyelids lowered, and he leaned back into the seat, departing from her embrace. The leather moaned under his weight. The letters blurred and split into duplicates. Words crossed into an alphabet mush.

She echoed his movements and let her stare follow his. She took his hand in her lap across the brake and held his palm in hers. “Healing from what's happened to you is a giant hill or something,” she said. Her fingers clenched. “You're pedaling to the top right now. If you get through those front doors, it has to get better.”

“You're sure of that,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “It has to get better.”

He leaned, and he kissed her ear. “When did you get to be so sure?”

She laughed, and the sound lifted him. She had such a beautiful laugh. “I'm in love with you. I'm married to you. We're going to have a family, and I'm happy about it. I can say all these things to you. That I love you, and that I'm happy or whatever. If I can get better, you can get better. It has to get better.”

“I like you happy,” he said. “It suits you.”
She kissed him. “I wish you were happy, too.”

His stomach quailed, and he shut his eyes as a familiar, unsettling wave splashed against him. He let out a shaky breath and massaged the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger. “Meredith, I really...” His gaze blurred. “What if this never goes away?”

“It will.”

“How long will you wait?”

“Forever,” she said. “But it won't be that long. I know it won't.”

“It feels forever.”

She stared at him for a long moment, but he had no idea what she could be thinking. “Get out of the car, Derek,” she said. She released his hand, and she grabbed her door handle.

He watched as she slid her tiny body out of the seat and plopped onto the ground. Her reflection flashed in the side view mirror as she opened and shut the door, leaving him staring at an empty seat and the cloudy sky beyond. He sighed. Overwhelming lethargy sank into his bones.

The thunk of his door opening startled him, and he twitched. “Appointment, now,” she said. She leaned over his lap and unclasped his seat-belt. The soft scent of lavender wafted into his nose as he breathed. Rain-kissed air rushed through the open space and hugged his skin. “You're late,” she said. “You're beyond late. Get up.”

“And you're very bossy,” he said.

“You keep saying that.”

He gave a tired sigh, though he tried to smile. “Because you keep being bossy.”

He grabbed the handle over the door, and she backed away to give him space. He slid off the seat. His feet hit the hard pavement and stopped. He looked at the archway, Seattle Grace Mercy West, and his legs threatened to stop supporting him as his remnant nerves coiled in a tight ball and took away his muscle control. He scrabbled for the side of the door. The roads had been wet despite the clear sky. Rain-spattered paint slipped past his grasping fingertips. He leaned against the side of the door and let the breeze ruffle his hair as he closed his eyes.

The car chirped as Meredith armed the alarm. “Derek,” she said. A now familiar announcement indicating she was there. And then she wrapped around him. Her hip bumped his. “Come on. Let's walk.”

“Meredith...”

“Breathe and walk,” she said. “Up the hill.”

A nervous laugh burbled in his throat. “Are you sure you don't want to go home and make babies?”

“I thought you wanted me to be on time,” she said.

“Yes, but you're already tardy to the point of no return. You should at least make it worthwhile.”

She rubbed his back. “This is worthwhile.”

He took a step and stumbled as the jelly in his legs turned his stride to mush. Heat spread across
his cheeks, and his throat felt full. “I'm a bit shaky,” he said.

“You're fine,” she said.

Wind tumbled against them as they stepped away from the car. Slowly. He felt like a wobbling old man. He glanced around, wild, trying to see if anyone was looking at him, but nothing stuck out. People walked to and fro, in and out. People in scrubs, suits, jeans, sweatpants. People on their own feet, in wheelchairs, or struggling with walkers and canes. But nobody seemed to care that Derek Shepherd was returning to Seattle Grace for his followup appointment, held upright by his petite wife. Unshaven, in jeans and a shirt, he probably didn't look like anybody worth watching. Just a sick man in a place meant for sick people.

As he approached the doorway, his world became a funnel, narrowing and narrowing, until the sliding doors spread apart and a whoosh of cool, antiseptic air hit his face. He knew that smell. The familiar odor that told him he was in a hospital. The adrenaline pouring through him made his body feel weak and willowy and ready to topple.

“Excuse me,” a man said as he pushed past, and Derek shuddered as he was bumped by a quick-striding, solid-but-thin man the height of an NBA center.

“Yes?” Meredith said to Derek.

He didn't reply as the welcome mat left them behind. He walked underneath the promenade, and the catwalk came into view. His muscles clenched, and something in his body told him to turn around and leave. Just leave. The impulse became a need that sank into the depths of his bone marrow. Tremors ran through him. The jelly in his legs wasn't a hindrance. It meant his muscles were ready. Brimming with pent up energy. He would be able to go. Sprint. Fast. And he wouldn't stop until his lungs burst. He felt sick because he needed to run, not walk toward something that made every inch of his conscious thought quiver with an intense, thrumming, almost-panic that could easily explode.

Meredith pulled on his arm. “Come on,” she said. “Just worry about your appointment today.”

He wanted to tell her he didn't feel well, but his throat closed, and he couldn't speak. She dragged him down the hallway toward the admitting desk, her hand gripping his like she expected him to bolt. He remembered walking there, less than an hour before he'd gotten shot. There had been a body on the floor. Blood spatter in a gruesome fan around the wound. Bits and pieces of obliterated flesh, no longer identifiable as organs or skin or anything. He'd checked the body by reflex, but he'd found no pulse at the wrist. He wouldn't have. Dead eyes had stared not at him but past him as he'd approached. A huge chunk of the man's neck had been missing. No amount of scientific miracles would fix that.

People started to recognize him. He heard whispers. The receptionist behind the desk, a blond, plump woman he knew he should know, brightened into a wide smile. “Dr. Shepherd!” she said, her voice burbling with cheer. “Good morning! It's so nice to see you back. Seattle Grace just hasn't been the same without you.”

He couldn't think of her name. All he could think of was Paul Wandell, the security guard who'd been stationed there by the desk. He must have wandered during the emergency. Derek hadn't found his body. He'd just seen the name on the death list.

*Morning, Dr. Shepherd,* Paul had said as Derek had walked past.

Derek had smiled. *Paul. How are the girls?*
Doing great, the balding, thin man had said. Leticia is taking them to their dance recital tonight. I'm headed there after work.

Ballet?

No, Paul had said, and then he'd laughed. A deep, gruff laugh that had probably been his last. Some crazy modern expression thing. I don't really understand it, but they love it.

Wish them luck for me, Derek had said.

Will do.

“Hello,” Derek said to the receptionist, his voice shaky. His smile lasted for less than half a second.

He'd failed his attempt at normal and happy by the look on the woman's face. Her smile faltered, and he saw what he didn't want. Pity. Worry over the fact that a very not normal Dr. Shepherd had just returned to Seattle Grace. Normal Dr. Shepherd would have remembered her name. He would have smiled. He would have said hello and asked about her family and complimented her hair or... something. Anything but the bald hello he'd barely managed.

Meredith squeezed his arm, and he swallowed. “I have a followup appointment with Dr. Altman,” he said.

The receptionist nodded. He lost himself in the sound of her fingers as the keyboard clacked. She frowned as she stared at the computer screen. “I'm sorry,” she said. She glanced at the small typed sign at the desk that stated anyone more than fifteen minutes late would not be seen, but she shook her head and forced a smile back onto her face. “You might have to wait a little,” she said. “But we'll get you in.”

“Thank you,” he said.

The receptionist printed out an update patient form, handed him a clipboard, a pen, the form, and a sheath of stickers for his charts that stated his name, patient ID number, and various other bits and pieces of information that would explain his physical woes in a nutshell to anyone who wanted to know. Meredith followed as he walked to a nearby chair and collapsed with the form and the pen. Nausea roiled. He couldn't get his legs to solidify. He leaned over his knees, head in his hands.

Meredith took the clipboard from him, and he listened to the scribble of the pen as she filled everything out for him. His name, address, current medications, allergies, and complaints. He didn't bother to check it. She knew all of it by heart anyway.

“I found a body by the desk,” he said against his hands, his shaky voice barely audible. He touched his jugular. “The bullet went here.”

The receptionist chattered in low tones against the phone receiver. The keyboard clacked. Nearby, waiting patients conversed. Meredith set the clipboard aside. She didn't speak. She hugged him instead.

“I don't even know who he was,” he said.

She kissed his shoulder. “Stop it,” she said. “Seriously, you need to stop. Just worry about your appointment. That's a great start. Get through that. That's all. Then go home. Mark will take you back to the house; you just have to page him.”
“I really don't feel well,” he said.

She took his palms and rubbed his freezing hands. “I know,” she said. “Life sucks. But you'll never
feel well again if you don't push yourself through this. You can't let yourself wallow.”

“Is that what Dr. Wyatt says?” he snapped.

A deep pink blush spread across her face, and she bit her lip. She didn't speak.

He deflated, and embarrassing tears popped loose. “I'm sorry. I'm...” He bent his head down and
looked at the floor as he sniffed. Not here. Please, not here. Anywhere but here. He choked on air.
The floor tiles blurred.

“Pathetic,” said Mr. Clark, and Derek cringed.

“No,” he said, though it was more of a gasp. He became vaguely aware of Meredith standing over
him, a shield between him and prying eyes. She spread his legs with a nudge from her knees,
stepped against him, and pulled his head against her body. Her fingers twisted through the hair at
the nape of his neck. The soft feel of her shirt was interrupted by the bump at the waistline of her
jeans. A belt loop mashed underneath him. He rested his ear to her belly and closed his eyes. Her
stomach gurgled. She breathed.

He stuffed the swell of tears back inside his body. Jumbled thoughts churned in his head. His
stomach wouldn't settle. But he wouldn't cry in his own fucking hospital. Not for everybody to see.
Though he was sure it was too late, anyway. The receptionist had probably already phoned into the
gossip hotline to report the latest and greatest Dr. McDreamy news header.

Derek cries! News at eleven.

He wiped his face and cleared his throat. “I'm sorry,” he said again.

“Shut up,” Meredith replied.

A miserable smile flickered on his face. “Bossy,” he told her.

She grinned and sank into the seat beside him. She waited with him in supporting silence until the
admitting nurse called his name. “Almost done,” Meredith said as he stood and convinced his body
to move. She kissed him. “See you at dinner tomorrow?”

“Yes,” he replied. She squeezed his shoulder, and he wobbled to the waiting nurse. He tried not to
think about how far away dinner tomorrow seemed. The admitting nurse led him through a door
into a busy, bustling hallway, and he left a waving Meredith behind.

“Hi, Dr. Shepherd,” the nurse said. Another woman he knew he should know, but didn't. Amanda?
Anna? He couldn't see her name tag to read it, so he gave her a watery smile that lasted less time
than the one he'd given the receptionist. He couldn't manage a hello.

She led him to an immaculate exam room the size of a large closet. A white ceiling, white walls,
and a white floor framed a navy-blue exam bench. A stainless-steel hand sink and a narrow counter
top lined the side of the room, and a small chair with a low back rested next to the counter in the
corner by the door with a coat rack. The sink dripped with no seeming pattern.

He sat on the exam table. The paper lining gripping the cushion crinkled, and he shifted. He tried
not to think about anything as the nurse took his blood pressure, temperature, and pulse. “Are you
experiencing any pain today?” said the nurse.
Derek clenched his fingers. He croaked at first, and he cleared his throat. “Some.”

“How would you describe the pain?”

Derek frowned. “It's not bad right now,” he said. “Three or four.”

“And have you taken anything for pain today?” she said.

“No.”

The nurse wrote everything on his chart and smiled. She showed him his chart, and he saw Meredith's neat handwriting listing all his prescriptions. “The medications you've listed are current?” she said.

“Yes.”

“All right,” she said. “Remove all your clothes except for your underwear, and put this on.” She placed a hospital gown on the exam table by his hip. “Your doctor will be with you shortly.” She stopped at the door on the way out. “Good to see you,” she said. “You've been missed.”

“Thank you,” he managed.

She departed, and the door closed quietly behind her.

He stripped in silence, his lips set in a grim line. He folded his shirt after he took it off, trying to ignore the creeping ants sensation of self-consciousness that tickled his skin. He felt like somebody watched him. He put his shirt and his jeans and socks on the small chair by the sink. The cold air of the exam room wrapped around his body. He shivered and looked down at himself. The scar meandering down his chest made him cringe, even under the wisps of hair that had grown back. Ugly. Red and twisted. He touched the incision, and his vision blurred as his sensitive fingertips roamed over rough skin that had once been smooth.

*Hang on; I'm coming!*

The room flared white, and he blinked. He'd been alone and dying in a sea of white and red. A shadow had crossed his vision, and then she'd been there. Meredith. He'd hurt, and he'd lain there, helpless. She'd touched him. Pain had rumbled through his body when she'd put pressure on the wound, and he hadn't understood much at the time other than a consuming, mindless fear. Mr. Clark would come back. He would come back and finish what he'd started, and he'd get Meredith, too. He'd tried to push her away, and then...

Nothing but colors and pain and panic. For a long while.

*Please, don't die. Please, Derek. You can't leave me.*

Derek blinked and swallowed as the memory faded. He shuddered. This would never go away. The scars. Seeing the disfigurement every time he looked at himself served as an instant replay. He tried to catch his breath as he pulled on the exam gown and covered himself. Nausea coiled in the back of his throat, and he sat on the exam table and hunched over his knees. His toes turned an unhealthy red as his nervous body withdrew circulation.

Derek squeezed his eyes shut. “Stop it,” he said to nothing but air. He breathed once and twice and again, and he listened to the faucet drip to no particular rhythm. He didn't want to be here in this place, stuck in an endless crush of bad memories.
I pick you. I choose you. You don't get to die on me.

A knock on the door made his heart skip and his body lurch. Sweat made the paper on the exam table stick to the backs of his naked thighs and knees. The paper ripped as he launched to the side. He caught the edge of the table with his hand as the door opened, and somebody stepped in. Ragged, uneven breaths drilled through his body, and it took him several seconds to stop his brain from racing away with his senses.

He looked up as he caught his breath. “Cristina?” he said, incredulous. Blush cut a swath across his skin. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Where was Dr. Altman?

Cristina stood there in pale blue scrubs, a stony gaze on her face. “You're late,” she said. “Dr. Altman is in surgery.” And I got stuck with this lousy assignment, Cristina's expression said, though she didn't speak. She clenched his chart in her fingers.

“Oh,” he said. He wondered how much of his descent into panic she'd seen. The paper on the exam table looked like a tornado had run through. Shivers he couldn't help raced along his skin, and the blush wouldn't go away. Hot. His face. His chest. Everything felt hot. He didn't need to see himself to know he'd turned a telltale shade of red. Damn it.

He knew on a fundamental level that she'd seen everything. *Everything.* The nurses and doctors of Seattle Grace did their best to preserve everybody's modesty, but the simple fact was that in order to keep a sterile field, not a lot in the way of clothing was allowed into surgery. Just a gown. Pressure stockings. Nothing else. After he'd been anesthetized, they'd shaved his chest and catheterized him. Hell, she'd been the one who'd cut and cracked him open. He knew. If he had it, she'd seen it. More than once.

But at least he hadn't been awake, then. He hadn't been awake to know that Meredith's best friend, who hated him, and often made snide jokes at his expense, had seen him at his most vulnerable. She had the bedside manner of a robot, and she clearly didn't want to be there. Stress stiffened his muscles into thick lines of iron sinews.

He stared at the chart in her hands, not at her. The yellow sheet of paper had the hollow silhouette of a person drawn in the top left corner. The mid-line down the silhouette's chest and a small spot on the left breast had been circled in red marker. Shepherd, Derek C. was written across the top. She didn't say anything as she set his chart on the counter top and unwound her stethoscope from her neck. She didn't rub her hands or warn him that it would be cold. She touched the small of his back just over the waistband of his boxer briefs. “Sit up straight,” she told him, and he forced his spine to uncurl.

She slipped the stethoscope under his gown, and a freezing spear jabbed his back.

“Breathe,” she said with a soft voice. He closed his eyes, and he breathed, deep and long and low. She moved the stethoscope. “Again,” she said. “Again. Again.” Satisfied, she pulled the gelid instrument away and wrapped it around her neck. “How are your energy levels?” she said.

Derek sighed. Clinical. Make this clinical, he thought. He could manage this if he pretended she was somebody else. Maybe his personal physician, who he saw yearly. Dr. Worthington. He owned a private practice in a small office complex in Queen Anne Hill.

“You could pretend she's me,” said Mr. Clark, and Derek stiffened.

“I get tired easily,” he said.
She nodded. “How easily?”

“I can walk about two miles. Maybe three.”

“Can you jog?”

He set his lips in a thin line. He'd jogged. Across parking lots. Maybe a few house-lengths on Meredith's street. The jouncing and the extra exertion made him feel sick, more often than not, though he tried every other day at the recommendation of his physical therapist. “Not really,” he said.

“How are steps?”

“Fine as long as I don't do them over and over,” he said.

She gripped his shoulders. “Lie back,” she said.

He swallowed, and he forced himself flat onto the table. He tried to keep his breaths steady. He listened to the dripping sink as she undid the gown's ties and pulled his only shield away from him. She touched his chest, and he bit his lip. Her fingers slipped along her handy work. Her eyes sparked with satisfaction, a sort of glow in her dark eyes. A job well done. Nothing else. He felt like a slab of meat.

“How do you need to take naps during the day?” she said as she inspected the remains of the sternal incision.

“Sometimes.”

“But not always?”

“No,” he said. “Usually, I'm okay if I sit down for a while.”

Her inspection roamed to his abdomen. She kneaded the space over his intestines, and he fought to keep from wincing. It didn't hurt, but it was uncomfortable. He didn't like her touching him anywhere, let alone when he barely had any clothes on. He grunted as she drilled into his side like she was trying to reach the exam table underneath him. He gazed at the ceiling, blinking.

“How's your pain?” she asked.

“I still use painkillers,” he said.

“How much?”

“Good question,” said Mr. Clark.

Derek's stomach turned. Nausea coiled around his body, and the first sound he made wasn't a word. Just... Something. He couldn't look at her or anywhere.

“I don't know,” he said. “I'm...” What did you take this time, Amy? How much? “Not always. I don't always need them.”

Silence stretched except for the drip, drip, drip of the faucet. Cristina stared at him, her eyes narrowing, and he resisted the urge to try to explain things. He clenched his hands, and what was left of the paper underneath him crinkled.

“So, it flares up at times, but it's not constant?” Cristina said.
“The constant part is tolerable,” he said. “Just…” He wilted under her stare. “Yes, it flares.”

She touched his bullet wound and probed it, and he couldn't stop the gasp of pain, more from surprise than hurt, though the discomfort made his innards quiver. “GSWs are nasty,” she said. “You could have chronic pain here for a while.”

He raised a shaky hand to his face and wiped away damp remnants of nervous sweat. She'd surprised him. He hadn't been able to steel himself for any sort of invasion. He clenched his teeth.

“I think you're fine for light work,” she said. “Paperwork. No surgeries. And don't drive if you take pills, obviously, but otherwise you can get behind the wheel again if you want. I'll renew your Percocet prescription with the pharmacy here.”

He didn't know what he'd expected or hoped for. You're in terrible shape; stay home another month. We don't need you back here yet, anyway.

“Are you sure?” he said.

“Yes,” she said as he sat up. “Why? Do you think you're not ready to come back?”

He pulled up his gown but didn't bother with the ties. They would be done soon, and she would leave so he could change. Soon.

“I'm fine,” he said while his mind screamed no. No, no, no. Just say no.

She picked up his chart and made notations. He rested on the table, eyes closed, and he wanted her to leave so he could put on his clothes and get away. She'd gone down the veritable list for followup checks. As soon as she finished writing, they were done. Her pen scribbled on the paper, and the faucet dripped. She took forever. He blinked and watched the white walls. White. All white.

The bullet wound throbbed where Cristina had poked him. He rested a palm against his breast. His hands felt cold and clammy. He remembered blood, a glistening stain on his skin, as he'd held his hand to the sky. The gun cracked, and he'd fallen backward. You're not god, Mr. Clark had said.

“How are you doing, mentally?” Cristina said.

His waking dream dissolved, and he blinked. “Why would you ask that?” he said.

She shrugged. “Because I'm not a moron.”

“I'm fine,” he said.

“So, you've been peachy keen since I showed you screaming babies?”

_I thought you were dead_, Meredith had said. _And I was screaming and screaming and then... I lost... I'm so sorry._ As if she'd had something to apologize for. He hadn't known how to react, hadn't known anything. He'd been a potential dad for a nanosecond. _I was pregnant_, she'd said, and it'd taken him a blink to realize that the word 'was' meant past tense. Pregnant before, but not then.

“I'm...” His voice fell away.

“I thought so,” she said.

He slid off the exam table and let his weight onto his feet. He scrunched his toes against the cold floor. The loose hospital gown threatened to fall, and he clutched it to his chest. He shivered, naked
back exposed, and she watched him, relentless. He felt as though a thousand eyes watched and judged and found him very lacking.

He met her gaze, glaring. Her tone seemed haughty in a told-you-so sense. She didn't look away, didn't back down, despite the sharp, metaphorical scalpels he tossed her way. She held his chart at her hip, and her hair hung in a frazzled ponytail with loose, flyaway curls.

He hadn't seen Cristina since he'd been released from Seattle Presbyterian. She visited Meredith, sometimes, but Cristina had started knocking, which gave him time to retreat. Usually, when she stopped by, Derek went to bed, and Meredith let him have the bedroom with no barging in. No kicking him out. If he went to lie down, Meredith never disturbed him, and other than a bleary, vague recollection of getting himself a glass of water from the kitchen in the midst of an exhausted painkiller haze while Cristina had been rummaging in their fridge, he hadn't laid eyes on her in a month.

He sighed. “Meredith—”

“Hasn't told me a damned thing,” Cristina said. “Don't yell at her.”

Meredith had promised him that she wasn't talking to Cristina, and he believed her, but he knew she couldn't realistically be expected not to say a single word. They were married. He was bound to come up in conversation, and they'd had a fight. Surely, the fight, if nothing else, would have been mentioned, even if the specifics had been glossed over. Meredith. Where else could Cristina be getting her information? Or, maybe she was fishing, but she sounded so sure.

“Or maybe you're just a big crybaby,” Mr. Clark said. “It doesn't take a rocket scientist to tell that I've twisted you into a gooey pile of tear-filled knots.”

Derek took a deep breath and stared at his hands. They shook. “I'm not going to yell at her,” he said.

Cristina rolled her eyes and snorted. “Right.”

“I'm not going to yell at her!” he snapped.

“You're okay with yelling at me, though?”

“I'm...” He squeezed his eyes shut and leaned into the exam table. The soft leather bowed under the weight of his thighs and body. He clenched his teeth. “Fine.”

She sighed. “At least tell me if you're more fine than you were before,” she said.

“Can we wrap this up?” he said. Home. The word repeated in his head like machine gun fire. He wanted to go home.

She set his chart down on the counter and approached. She stood next to him, not close enough to be considered a breach of personal space, but he bristled anyway. He wanted to go home. Now. Why wouldn't she leave him alone? His vision blurred, and the white walls smeared.

_No, Mr. Clark_, he'd gurgled, unable to catch his breath. Dr. Kepner had abandoned him, and now he would die. He would die on the floor of his hospital because he was helpless. He couldn't breathe. He had a bullet in his body. He raised a hand in front of his body, begging. _Mr. Clark_...

A hand touched his shoulder, and he flinched away. “No,” he said. A verbal tic. A reflex. The word spilled from his lips as though his lungs had punted it. He clenched his hands. Cristina let go
with a fluid, slow motion, like she backed away from a rabid dog that might bite. He sniffed.

“Post-operative depression is almost a given after cardiac surgery,” Cristina said. “You've been crying a lot.”

“I'm not crying,” he snapped. He wiped at his face with a shaky palm. Wet smears came away from him. Why wouldn't she leave?

She snorted. “Is this sweating from your eyes, then?”

He said nothing.

“And I suppose you got hit with a lawn sprinkler when we looked at the babies?”

“Stop it.”

“What about in the car on the way home from Seattle Pres?”

He grabbed the ruined paper on the examination table and yanked. The sudden motion sliced him through with pain. The paper came away, and he slammed it onto the table, crumpling it into a wrinkled mass the size of a basketball, or maybe a watermelon, or... “I said I'm fine, Cristina.”

“If this doesn't go away soon, within another month or so, you might want to think about anti-depressants.”

“I don't need those,” he said. “I don't need drugs.”

“Oh, that's rich,” said Mr. Clark. “Really.”

A long silence followed. She slipped her index finger against her temple and swiped away a free falling lock of hair from her face. She stared at him. He wiped his eyes again. Why wouldn't any of this stop?

“Because you're weak,” Gary Clark said.

Pathetic.

Cristina picked up his chart and put the pen in the pocket of her lab coat. The pen's clip slid over the lip of her coat pocket. She smoothed the pocket and looked at him with an icy glare. “Any questions for me then?” she said.

“No,” he said. “Are we done, now?”

“Yeah,” she said. “We're done.”

She turned toward the door and took four steps. As her fingertips brushed the handle of the door, she turned. “She's worried about you,” Cristina said. “And I don't think she's being paranoid.”

He blinked. His eyes burned. 

*But you have to stop this... Whatever this mental hangup is that you've got going on. If you break yourself, it's not just you you'll be breaking.*

“I can't win with you,” Derek said. “No matter what.”

“No, but at least I've figured out you're not a jackass on purpose,” she said. And then she left as
abruptly as she'd arrived. The door shut like a whisper behind her.

His stomach churned. He shoved aside his clothes and sat in his underwear on the chair beside the counter for a long time, shaking. He stared at the floor over his knees. He couldn't move. He pulled his hands through his hair. Really pulled. Until his scalp hurt. His teeth clenched. Something black and ugly coiled in the back of his mind.

“Fuck you,” he said to no one. To her. “I'm trying.”

“This is what you call trying?” Mr. Clark said.

*Just get through your appointment,* Meredith had said. He rocked in his seat. He'd done that. He'd gotten through his appointment. How the hell was he supposed to get out?

Somebody knocked on the door, and he stiffened. “I'm still in here,” he said. His vocal cords seared with the strain of sounding normal despite falling apart.

Footsteps padded away from the door.

He stared down at his socks and his jeans and his shirt. He started with the socks. He could do socks. He pulled one onto his left foot, and then the other onto his right. His yanked up his jeans and buttoned them up to his waist. They sagged and slid down his skinny hips an inch. He still needed to gain back more weight. He pulled his shirt over his body last. His sternum didn't twinge at the movement. Not once. The only things left that strained him were coughing, breathing deeply, and pulling or pushing too much weight. The sternum wasn't considered fully knitted until sixth months had passed, and it'd only been two. It would be a long time before he felt no pain at all. At least it wasn't constant anymore.

He sniffed as he laced his shoes. The soles squeaked against the floor as he shifted. The sink dripped. This room was small. Nobody stared at him in here. He stared at the door, tense with anguish. He couldn't bring himself to move from the chair into the sea of watching eyes and sharp memories.

He fumbled at his pocket for his cell phone and dialed Mark. Mark answered on the third ring. “Hey, man,” Mark said. “Ready to go? I need a few more minutes here.”

Derek swallowed as he squeezed the receiver with a white-knuckled grip. He took a deep, wet breath. He couldn't bring himself to say hello. He watched the door, and all he could ask was, “How long?”

A brief silence stretched, and Derek heard papers shuffling. “Twenty minutes, I think,” Mark said. “Can you wait at the front door?”

No. “I'll wait,” Derek managed. He breathed as his torso quivered with pent grief. He wiped his eyes. They were dry, but sticky with salt.

“Oh, I——” said Mark. A low, male voice said something, and Mark spoke. Not to the phone. Papers shuffled. “Look, I'll meet you there,” Mark said, his voice distracted. “I have to run; my patient is having some issues.”

Derek's phone beeped, signaling a disconnected call, and Derek sighed. He put the phone back in his pocket. He stared at the door and rocked in his seat as he hugged his stomach. Twenty minutes. He didn't think he could stay in this place another second, let alone twenty minutes.

*Hold on, okay?* Meredith had said. *Hold on. I love you. Please, don't die.*
“Scared?” said Mr. Clark.

Somebody knocked, and Derek squeezed his eyes shut. “I'm still in here!” he said.

Whoever stood behind the door paused, but didn't walk away. The staff probably needed the room for the next patient, and he knew he wouldn't be left alone much longer. “Dr. Shepherd,” said a muffled, feminine voice through the door. “Do you need any help?”

“No,” Derek said. “I'm...” He swallowed. “I'm fine.”

*Please, don't die. Please, Derek.*

His body waved warning flag after warning flag. When he stood, he felt like a fault line under stress. His joints creaked. His muscles stretched. We're losing equilibrium, everything told him. Treat us with caution. Eventually, the fault would slip, and there would be an earthquake. His throat constricted, and he held back tears. Barely.

He looked at the door. He grasped the handle. Get out, get out, something whined in his head, but the thought of all the people beyond the door broke everything into a pile of indecision. Get out. He squeezed his hand. The cool metal jabbed into his palm to the point of pain. He twisted the knob and pushed.

*I really can't breathe, Mere.*

“Dr. Shepherd,” said a wide-eyed nurse as he stepped outside. She stood in the hallway by the door, a pen grasped loosely in her hand. She'd stopped mid-note on an overflowing clipboard. Her voice sounded clear with the door removed. Deep and rich. Earthy. Her burden buried her name tag behind reams of paper, and he stared at her, lost.

*Derek, please. Focus. Focus for me.*

“Are you sure you're all right?” the nurse said when he said nothing. He looked over her shoulder. The hallway wasn't wide, perhaps five feet at best. The space behind her would dump him out closer to the main hospital entrance, but he'd have to push past her to escape. And he'd also have to pass the already suspicious receptionist.

“Dr. Shepherd?” the nurse said when he didn't answer.

“I'm fine,” he snapped. He wiped his face again. He felt quivery. Unsure. And he probably looked like a red-eyed disaster victim. He turned away from the nurse and walked in the opposite direction, down the shiny white hallway that went on forever. Into the hospital's heart. Not toward the entrance. He felt the nurse staring at him, felt her eyes piercing holes into his back. His skin crawled like thousands of spiders had made his body a highway.

He remembered this hallway. After he'd found the bloody body with the ruined neck, he'd walked this way. The pharmacy would be on the left after the turn. Everything seemed to flicker, and his past immersed him.

He'd walked in tense silence. Most floors of the hospital had been emptied, and everything had been quiet and still, save for the eerie echoes of his footsteps on the immaculate tiles. He'd stopped midway down the hall to inspect a long smear of drying, sticky blood along the wall. Rather than one thick line, the smear was five thin lines close together, as though someone had dipped his fingers in red paint and stroked the white wall with an artistic flare.

*You're not god.*
The world flashed white, and he stared overhead as he held his bloody hand aloft. He'd been shot, and he had blood on his hands. He couldn't breathe. Every inhalation stabbed him with knives. He couldn't think. The knives made it difficult. Dr. Kepner babbled somewhere behind him. He didn't understand the words.

“Are you all right?”

He blinked, and the death and dying disappeared with a pop, leaving him panting and hollow.

“Fine,” Derek said to the passing nurse who'd asked.

He shuddered, and he moved onward, away from the new batch of scrutiny. He turned left out of the narrow hallway into a wider, more heavily trafficked area. A patient bumped into him. An orderly darted past, his sneakers squeaking as he bolted for some emergency. The PA system crackled to life and called Dr. Weller to conference room seven. The lights seemed too bright. His skin crawled. He wanted to be alone and not there. He caught himself veering toward the wall, his shoulders hunching protectively, and he forced himself back into traffic flow with a deep, shaky breath. Normal. Look normal. Except he couldn't walk more than five feet without somebody recognizing him and asking how he was.

His soul was splitting apart at the seams.

“Dr. Shepherd!” called a deep male voice. “Wait!”

Derek froze. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He turned toward the voice. The hallway where he stood spread wide like an ocean. Two small windows with counter tops at chest level opened into the abyss. One window was labeled drop-off, and the other was labeled pick-up. Between the windows, chairs lined the hallway. Placards about flu shots, accepted insurance, and all sorts of drug advertisements decorated the wall above the chairs. The man at the pick-up counter looked out at him. Gregory Wallace, Seattle Grace's head pharmacist, a weathered, wrinkled, snowy-haired man who'd been there for at least fifteen years, stared over the counter with his eyebrows raised. He held up a white paper bag emblazoned with Seattle Grace's logo in his meaty hand.

“You forgot your prescription,” Greg said.

Derek saw the familiar bag, and the tug of war began. Run or stay. Run or stay. He wanted to run to a dark corner and collapse away from prying eyes. The bag held his gaze captive, though, and conflict nauseated him. He stepped forward once and swallowed.

“Right,” he said. He had to clear his throat. “Sorry.”

“You just need to sign here,” Greg said. He pointed at the sign-out sheet.

“Thanks,” Derek said.

He closed the gap between him and the counter and picked up the pen by the register. He pressed the ball point into the paper. The pen tip left no ink, only an illegible indentation in the paper. He clenched his fingers.

Mr. Wallace frowned and rummaged for a new pen in the desk behind the counter. “I haven't seen you in several weeks,” commented Mr. Wallace. He found a new pen and deposited it on the counter.

Derek picked up the pen and began to sign his name next to the prescription sticker that would
indicate he'd received his prescription and knew how to use it.

“How have you been?” Mr. Wallace asked.

Derek paused, and the letter d in Shepherd, already messy, faded into a tense squiggle. The pen almost snapped in his grip. He'd been nearly dead seven weeks ago. Why did everybody ask him how he was? He'd been shot and nearly killed and he couldn't sleep or breathe or function or— “I'm fine,” he said. Derek snatched the paper bag and continued down the hall without saying goodbye. His breaths tightened in his chest. The bag crinkled in his hand as he squeezed and squeezed. He felt the cylindrical orange bottle sheathed within. His Percocet.

Take some, now, a voice said. Take some, and you won't feel any of this.

His jaw tightened.

“Oh, yes,” said Mr. Clark. “Take it here. In front of everyone.”

The bag crinkled as Derek's grip crushed the top of the bag. “Stop it,” he said.

“Stop what?” said a bug-eyed intern as he halted.

“Nothing,” Derek said. The intern frowned and continued on his way.

Derek tried to get to the front of the hospital. He tried. But everywhere he went, his progress was dictated by another person asking if he was okay. He'd say he was fine, and he'd move in the opposite direction like terrified livestock being corralled with cattle prods. People. Everywhere. All of them seeing him in the process of having some sort of nervous breakdown. His heart throbbed. Sweat trickled down the small of his back. His muscles shivered with stress. Noise scraped his eardrums like nails on glass.

Help is coming. Don't die.

He moved into a dark stairwell because it was the only place without people. Nobody used the damned stairs. Not this close to the elevators. He climbed for a bit and then collapsed onto the step under the first landing. He curled into a ball over his knees. His body shivered. He couldn't breathe, and he couldn't stop himself from crying. He blinked once. Twice. Tears cut his face like sharp glass, and tiny blusters of vocalization hit the air and echoed in the bad acoustics.

“Please, stop,” he begged.

How are you doing? Meredith had asked while they'd watched the water over the Elliot Bay. She'd leaned across the table, close to him, and her eyes had sparkled like the sunset outside.

He'd crammed himself as close to the window as possible. I'm fine, he'd said after a long pause, and he'd taken another forkful of oyster omelet to chew.

I'm sorry you're not feeling great, she'd said. She'd mirrored his forkful with her own.

The world had been a bit of a dizzy haze. He'd barely flinched as a pile of dishes crashed, and the waitress who'd carried them had turned red and bustled to pick them up. By the time the noise had made any sort of sense to him, the terror impulse had long since faded. He'd blinked, and he'd turned his attention back to the table, only to find Meredith scrutinizing him.

He'd forced himself to smile at her. A real smile. Easy with the undercurrent of false euphoria running through him like an untapped well. She'd smiled back, her gaze hopeful.
You're safe, his imaginary Meredith whispered in his ear as he watched the real one eat her fluffy omelet with gusto. Don't be scared.

M'okay, he'd said at last, a little slurred, but mostly put together. A sleepy yawn had cracked his jaw, and he'd stuffed another bite of omelet in his mouth. Real Meredith hadn't commented at his lethargy. Before they'd left, he'd taken painkillers for pain he hadn't really been having right in front of her.

It'd been easy.

He blinked against tears. The blurry stairwell resided beyond the wall of grief in his eyes. He glanced at his watch and couldn't tell the time. The numbers were mush. How long until Mark would be able to take Derek home? He wiped his face. A door slammed several floors above, and he cowered, but the shuffle of footsteps exited above him, out of sight. He forgot about checking his watch.

“Admit it,” Mr. Clark said. “You can't do this. You can't do anything.”

Derek put his forehead against the cold metal railing and breathed. His body shivered as Mr. Clark stood over him, gun pointed, a leer on his face. Derek's shoulders curled. He hunched away from the apparition of his murderer, but Mr. Clark wouldn't disappear. Tension rung in Derek's joints like big, loud bells. Low, vibrating, painful. His cross trainers squeaked on the step.

The bag in his hands crinkled. He tore at the staple holding the paper bag closed, and he dumped out the orange prescription bottle within. The childproof cap would have confounded his shaking hands, but he forced himself to stop. Just for a moment. He needed what was inside. He needed it for this to stop. He could keep his hands still for a moment if doing so would make everything stop. He breathed. His exhalations echoed in the silence.

He fished out one Percocet and took it dry. The lump rolled down his throat painfully. He gagged and swallowed again, forcing it down. He took a second pill with the same ritual. He grappled for a third...

The stairwell door in his line of sight opened with a loud clank. He flinched against the railing in surprise, and the third pill he'd pried loose skipped from his hands onto the floor. The pill pinged as it bounced down the steps and came to a stop by Dr. Kepner's feet, where it spun until it settled. He scrambled off the stairs into a standing position. Dr. Kepner stood in the doorway, her eyes wide and showing white all around the diameter of her irises. Her mouth formed a tiny o.

The room flashed, and he stared at her covered head to toe in wet blood. He backed up a step, almost stumbling as the stairwell became his office, and he sat behind his desk. She pushed through the door, a jumble of limbs and panic.

I grew up on a farm, so, you know blood... blood doesn't... doesn't bother me, I... she'd said.

He looked up, and his stomach sank into his shoes.

“Dr. Shepherd,” Dr. Kepner said. The stairwell flashed back into place, but the blood on her body stayed like a garish coat of wet paint.

“I'm fine,” he said. He scraped a palm against his face. He turned, and he pushed himself up the steps. Away from her. Away from people. Away. “I'm fine.”

“Dr. Shepherd, wait,” she said. “You dropped your pill...”
Her feet echoed on the stairs, and he pushed to get away from her. From everyone. He made it to the next floor. He opened the door, and it dumped him into bustling crowds. Nurses. Orderlies. Custodial staff. Administrative workers. A breathing, murmuring, flotilla of busy people. The whispers around him kicked into a rumble. Eyes turned. Heat burned his face, but he didn't have time to be embarrassed. The spiders crawled.

The crush of life constricted around him. He dissolved out of sentience into pure flight, no fight. The world around him blurred not just from tears but confusion as over-sensitivity drove him into a deep, ugly pit of panic.

“Run,” said Mr. Clark. “Cowards run.”

The gun roared in his ears. He fell flat on his back with the impact and stared at the ceiling. His blood seeped out of his body, and he couldn't breathe. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't fucking breathe or think or anything. Light flashed. Or was it the ceiling? White. Endless.

A noise shrieked in his ears. He didn't know what. People touched him, and he couldn't get away. He couldn't. A shadow crossed over the world. “Hey!” a woman yelled, the letter ‘e’ stretched into eternity, and the horrific rumble of voices died to whispers.

“Back up,” said the woman. “Give the man some damned space. Shoo!”

He blinked. His grip hurt, he clenched so hard, and the color had drained from his fingers and palms. He couldn't stop crying, but the blur beyond the sheen of salty water looked sort of like a...

He blinked again. A long fucking drop spread out below him. Disorientation made him sway. A sea of wide-eyed faces looked up at him from below. He saw the entrance to the hospital. The place he desperately wished to be. He'd mashed himself against the glass barrier on the catwalk. He had nowhere left to go. People were everywhere behind him, staring. He didn't know how he'd gotten there.

His chest hurt. His legs weren't working. He would fall on his ass if he let go of the railing. Only his precarious balance against the railing held him upright. He couldn't breathe. Lights flickered in and out, and he heard his heart and the rush of blood in his ears more than anything else.

“Back up,” shouted the woman behind him, but he heard her voice through what seemed like fifty feet of water.

The spiders skittered. Whispers died into silence.

His grip wasn't enough anymore. He buckled into a sitting position, crunched up against the glass and the railing. His hands slipped loose from the railing and fell into his lap. He shivered as a deep, numbing chill set into his bones, and his head thunked against the glass. He put his head against his knees and hid away in the dark.

A shadow loomed. Somebody touched his shoulder, and he flinched, so overwhelmed with terror that he couldn't even cry out, but whoever it was didn't let go.

“Derek,” said a woman. “Derek, look up.” She shook his shoulder. “Look at me,” she said. “Derek.” The hand on his shoulder shifted to his head. She pushed. His muscles had become spaghetti. His neck tilted, and bleary colors replaced solid black as the warmth of his knees left his face, and cool air stroked his skin.

She nodded. “That's right,” she said. “Can you stand?”

What little he'd recovered of his breaths dropped way, and the room spun. He couldn't run anymore. He couldn't hide. There was nowhere to go. He needed to be not there, but he couldn't be anywhere else. His innards sank into the floor.

He couldn't breathe.

He was going to die.


He tried. He did. His heart pounded in his ears, and her voice faded into a dull murmur of which he only caught bits and pieces. It's fine, she said. You're fine, she said. Everything is fine, she said. Fine. Except he wasn't fine, and nothing would stop. The gun roared in his head, and he fell back. The ceiling tumbled over his head. White. Endless white. Like Bailey's lab coat. The blur stretched. He didn't know how much time passed.

“—ok at me,” she said. “Look at me, Derek.” She patted his cheek. The repetitive motion hit his nerves like drumbeats. “Look. You're fine.”

Under her constant, calming assault, fear receded like a slow tide, by inches and inches over eternity, until he didn't feel scared anymore. Just tired. Nauseated. Embarrassed. Unsettled. Stressed. The exited murmurs around him made his face heat. He knew without looking that his fantastic episode of being fine had attracted attention like a Rolling Stones concert.

He rolled his gaze to the left. Thick, navy pant legs blocked almost everything from view. He looked up and blinked. Mark stood beside him like a human shield, blocking Derek from the crush of bodies. Mark's back faced the crowd, but he wasn't looking at Derek either. Mark's lips formed a thin line, and he swallowed against red eyes. The skin underneath his temples leaped as he mashed his jaw again and again.

“Okay?” Bailey said.

Derek couldn't bring himself to speak. Bailey looked up. “Sloan,” she said. “Help him up.”

Mark turned and frowned. “Dr. Bailey—”

“No,” Derek said, more a moan than a word.

Bailey glared. “Did it sound like I was asking for opinions from the peanut gallery?” She pointed to Derek. “You, get up.” She pointed to Mark. “You, help.”

Before Mark could move, Derek grabbed the railing. He pushed down with his legs and pulled up with his shaking arms. His sternum screamed in protest. Too heavy. But he didn't care. He bit back on a moan of pain, and he pulled himself upright without Mark's help in front of... Eyes. Everywhere. The room swam and boggled out, and Mark grabbed Derek before he fell to the floor again. Derek gasped. The fuzzy blackness resolved after a long, sickening moment that made his stomach churn. The Percocet. He'd forgotten...

Bailey stood in front of them. She waved her arms like an airplane conductor. “This way,” she said. She gestured them both away from the Chief's office.

Derek blinked. There must have been two dozen people crammed on the catwalk around him, all
with concerned, sad eyes and piteous looks that made his coiling stomach want to heave. Heat flamed across his cheeks. He tried to take a step. His legs were like deadweights. Mark's grip tightened. Derek's arm squashed against his torso and his ribs constricted as Mark crushed him. At least Derek didn't fall, but Mark's grip hurt.

Derek thought about how similar this was to the last time he'd fallen on the catwalk. Last time. Like this would become an annual ritual or something. Mark had caved in Derek's face, and Meredith had walked a hurting Derek off through the crowd. He'd been broken. He'd wanted to die. A laugh twisted from his mouth, and the whispers started again.

He hurt. His body shivered. He swallowed. “Mark,” he said, his voice soft and shaking. “Ow.”

Mark's grip loosened. “Sorry,” he said gruffly.

Derek stared at his feet as they baby-stepped off the catwalk because it meant he didn't have to look at the well-wishers and gawking masses. As he passed the place he'd nearly died, he saw the light grout between the tiles become dark with an ominous stain, and his stomach twisted. Him. He'd bled out his life into the floor, and it'd stuck despite bleach and other things. Forever. He pressed his face into Mark's shoulder and breathed as he moaned, deep and low. The whispers roared in his ears.

“Why aren't any of you working?” Bailey snapped as she pedaled backward, staring at the crowd behind them. “This is a hospital. Don't tell me there's no work to do, because it'll make you a giant pack of liars.”

Her piercing voice seemed to set the crowd into motion. They dispersed around him as he and Mark walked. Away. Bailey turned and swiped a small object from the one of the last people left in what had been a mob. She flipped open the phone and started hitting buttons. Derek watched. His stomach twisted again. Somebody had been taking photos? Or...

“Hey, I need that phone,” said an offended, scrappy orderly. He was a thin, wiry creature, with the wispy dusting of a beard covering his pale face. His eyes widened as Bailey glared.

“I know you're not playing paparazzi in a hospital,” Bailey said.

The orderly's mouth opened. And then shut. And opened. “I was just texting my girlfriend about dinner—”

Bailey held up her hand. “Do I look like I care? Do it elsewhere!”

“But—”

Her eyes narrowed. “Zzt!”

Blush crept across the orderly's face. Bailey pocketed the phone, and she shooed him away. He took her direction to heart, and he rushed off in the opposite direction.

With no crowd left to fend off, Bailey scurried to the place on the railing where Derek had fallen. She picked up the crumpled white bag containing his Percocet. She took the spot on his left side, and the three of them walked down the hallway opposite the Chief's office. Or, rather, Mark and Bailey walked. Derek limped. An eternity passed before they found an empty but open office in the long line down the hall.

The dark, ten-by-ten, matchbox room was full of sprawled papers and open books and other neurosurgery research. The desk plate identified the unkempt office as Dr. Weller's. Derek knew
from experience Dr. Weller didn't spend more than about thirty minutes a day in the small closet Seattle Grace had provided him. They shuffled three feet inside the door before Bailey launched for the desk and pulled the wheeling executive chair around for Derek.

“I'm...” Derek managed between pants.

Bailey squeezed the back of the chair. The leather made a squishy noise. “Sit before you fall,” she said. The bag containing his pill bottle jingled as she handed it back to him. He clutched it.

A pager bleeped, and Mark groaned as he looked at it. Derek collapsed into the chair, which rolled two inches before the stained carpet caught the wheels like mud. “Fuck,” Mark said. “I told them not to page me unless it was a life or death emergency.” His gaze shifted back and forth between Bailey and Derek.

Bailey shooed him away. “Go, then.”

“But—” Mark said.

Bailey glared. “You're not ignoring an emergency page.” She jabbed her thumb in Derek's direction. “He's not dying.”

“I'm sorry. I'll be right back,” Mark said, and he fled the room at a run, whether to get to the page faster, or to return from the page faster, Derek didn't know.

The door slammed shut, and muffled silence spread into the room like a soft blanket. Dr. Bailey breathed. He breathed. The blood rushed in his ears. His heart beat. But nobody spoke, and he needed that. He settled in his chair and inhaled the musty scent of paper.

“You heard that, right?” Dr. Bailey said.

“What?” he said.

She touched his shoulder and squeezed. “You're not dying.”

His stomach quivered, and everything fell out of him. Everything he'd been trying to hold inside. His lungs heaved. He sobbed once, but the rest was quiet grief. Quiet weeping. His breathing stuttered, and his eyes leaked, but he didn't make any noises.

Bailey stood in front of the chair and wrapped her arms around him. She said nothing, but she made soft shushing noises until the tears dried. He didn't have much left. The entire episode lasted two minutes, at best.

He closed his eyes and put his face against his hands as she pulled away. His elbows jammed into his knees as he pressed his weight into himself. His pill bottle rested in his lap. “I'm fine,” he said into his palms. His voice came out croaky and wretched.

“I know you're not trying to tell me this is fine,” she said in a soft voice. She went to the miniature water cooler by the desk, pulled off a Dixie cup from the stack, and filled it. He raised his head and watched her.

“Miranda...”

She turned. “Shut your fool mouth,” she said. She jabbed the cup at him. Water sloshed. “Drink this. Small sips,” she said.
He took the cup from her hands. The idea of putting something in his stomach, even water, nauseated him. He took a tiny sip and swirled it in his mouth. The cool feel of the water relaxed him. He swallowed. The water felt good against his hurting throat, and his stomach untied a few knots when the fluid collected there.

“Okay?” Dr. Bailey said.

“Okay,” said Derek. He rolled the paper cup against his forehead. The dry, cool paper soothed him. He sighed and took another sip. Another.

“I can't go into the room where Dr. Percy was shot,” Dr. Bailey said. “I hid under the bed when Mr. Clark came. He found me, and he yanked me out by my ankles.”

“I'm sorry.”

Her gaze hardened. “Do I look like I need a pity party?” she snapped.

He blinked. “No.”

“Well, don't be a hypocrite and start one then.”

Blush bloomed across his features. He didn't have a good reply for that. She sighed, and she squeezed his shoulder.

“They haven't been through this,” she said. “They don't know. You just take your time, one day at a time, and you don't worry about them.” She pulled the visitor chair away from the desk, rolled it next to his, and sat.

He put his head down against his knees as Mr. Clark laughed in his ears.


“I can't be here,” he said. “I need to go home.” He reached for his pill bottle and unscrewed the cap. He felt like a uncoordinated blob as he tried to pull a pill loose from the pile.

She grabbed the bottle from him. “How many do you usually take?” she said.

He closed his eyes. “Two. I take... When it's bad.”

“You're getting sneaky,” Mr. Clark said. “Really.”

She dumped out two pills onto her palm. “Why didn't you say anything? Did you wrench yourself when you fell?”

“Sorry,” he said as she handed him two pills and screwed the cap shut. While she muttered about idiot male doctors and their pathetic pain management skills, he popped one pill into his mouth and tipped back his water cup. Water sloshed into his mouth and swept the pill down his throat as he swallowed. He took the second pill as well. The room spun as they both settled in his stomach.

“Is somebody supposed to give you a ride?” Dr. Bailey said.

He blinked. The room began slow revolutions as he absorbed more and more of the Percocet from his otherwise empty stomach. A wall of tiredness chased him, threatening to run him down.

“Mark,” he said.

“Well, Mark just got—” Dr. Bailey's beeper went off, a shrill, sharp sound in the quiet. He flinched
at the interruption, and he hated himself for it when he saw her eyes widen at his discomfiture over such a small thing. “Paged,” she said as she un-clipped her pager from her belt and squinted at it.

He wobbled to his feet. The room blotted out, and he caught himself against the armrests of the chair. “I need to go home,” he said. “I need to—” But he couldn't. If he left the dark office, he would fall apart again. He knew it. He was trapped, and— His vision blurred. Maybe it didn't matter.

Small hands grabbed him and guided him back to the chair. “Did I tell you to stop breathing?” Bailey said.

“Y’asked me a question,” he said.

“Well, stop answering, and breathe,” she said.

He gestured to her pager. The flick of his wrist felt sloppy. Disjointed. “Wusthat 'n emergency?”

She glared, and he made a show of forcing himself to take long, even breaths. It wasn't difficult. He felt like he was turning to mush. The air turned to molasses. Muffled voices wandered past the closed office door, and he swallowed. The noise took so long to process it didn't really bother him. His muscles loosened. Peace laid a blanket over everything.

“I have to take this page,” she said. “I'll find Dr. Sloan for you. Don't move from this spot.”

“Kay.”

“Did I tell you to talk?” she said. She backed into the door, but didn't take her eyes off him. “Breathe.”

“I am,” he said.

“No,” she said. “You're talking.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but she held up her hand, and he stopped himself. He took a deep breath that inflated him from his belly to his shoulders and blew it out. She seemed satisfied. She nodded. “Don't move,” she repeated. He breathed in and out once more, and she left him alone.

He blinked once. Twice. His eyelids seemed kind of stuck. Kind of heavy. He leaned back in the chair and let his head tilt into the head rest. His body slowed down as he breathed. His tension loosened. He stared at the ceiling. There was a brownish, liquid stain near the light fixture shaped sort of like an amoeba.

He heard noises outside the room. People walking. Voices. A fog descended around his body, and though he heard, he didn't process. He breathed, slower. Slower. His heart rate depressed. His eyes closed, and he didn't care anymore. He didn't care about anything. The soft buzz of contentment spread through his veins.

_I know you're not playing paparazzi in a hospital_, Dr. Bailey had said.

The orderly had said he'd been texting about dinner, but the idea was ludicrous. To be texting about dinner while somebody was having a panic attack fifteen feet away. No, he'd been texting about Dr. Derek Shepherd on his knees. Doctor... Shep. Shh. Derek lost his train of thought. The memory of the phone and the beak-y orderly broke apart. Fear became a distant memory. He could think of the gun. He could think of Gary Clark. He didn't feel a thing when he did except peace.
A vague sigh of relief swept through him.

His lips parted as he lost his conscious willpower. Air swept through his cottony mouth. He breathed, and he heard the rasps in the silent space, but he didn't care. The room spun, but it didn't matter because he wasn't walking. Blackness swirled around him. With his eyes shut, the carousel wouldn't stop. He smiled sloppily. After several revolutions, he became less aware. The carousel continued, but far away. Wispy black became solid black, and then he slept, dreamless.


“Derek,” Meredith said. The noise pierced his abyss. She sounded concerned. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, and she shook him. Earthquake. “Derek, wake up. Derek.”

“Mmm,” he said. He turned his head into the chair and pushed at her. He wanted to be in the black place. But she wouldn't back off.

“Derek, wake up,” she said again. “Derek!”

He squinted at the sharp, smeary colors beyond his eyeballs. He swallowed. “M'dith,” he said.

The fleshy blur in the middle of the mess resolved into her face. Meredith. She wore her baby blue scrubs. A smear of dried blood crusted the sleeve. He leaned forward. “Bleedin','” he said. He reached for the stain.

She frowned until she followed his hand. She brushed him away. “It's from a patient. Don't touch it. I need to change. Are you okay?”

He blinked. “M'fine.” He stood up to demonstrate, but the room turned fuzzy and black, and the floor disappeared.

Arms wrapped around him. When he caught his breath, he still stood.

“Oops,” he said.


“What...” he said. He took a wobbly step away from the chair. The floor felt like an obstacle course despite being flat and unobstructed. He gripped her shoulder when the room see-sawed.

“Mark's busy. His patient needed emergency surgery.”

“Butyer busy, too,” he said.

She bit her lip. “That doesn't matter.” She hugged him. “You matter.”

“Goin' home?” he said. He waded toward the door. The air in the room seemed like liquid. He swam.

She blinked. “Yeah,” she said. “Home.”

He opened the door. Bright lights slammed into his eyeballs. He blinked, and he held the door frame. His hand slid, and his resolution to stay upright faltered. She held his waist. “Derek, I'm sorry I made you do this,” she said. “I pushed too hard, and now you're hurt, and I—”

“M'okay,” he said.
She babbled. He couldn't keep track of anything. Words gathered and collided on his tongue, until a gnarled, twisty pile of unspoken syllables rested there, waiting to be said. He lost track of them, too. Lost track of everything. People stared at him in the hallway, and hushed whispers curled around him, but he didn't know why it was important to care. He could barely keep track of his limbs.

He did remember one thing.

“Home,” he said. “Please.”

She rubbed his back. “We're going,” she said. She kept pace with him as he shuffled mindlessly toward the elevator.
Chapter 15

Derek sat on the leather loveseat in his old ten-by-ten office, staring at nothing. After he'd left his position as head of neurosurgery, the position had been filled by Dr. Weller. Dr. Weller already had an office at Seattle Grace the same shoebox size as Derek's former haunt. Neither office had windows. Neither had any particular locational advantage. There hadn't been much point in having Dr. Weller move his things. On top of that, the shooting had caused attrition, not growth. With no new doctors needing offices, Derek's old office had been left in skeletal limbo.

Meredith sat behind the dinged, scratched desk that had been his, watching him. His eyes were open, but his eyelids drooped. Just a fraction. Enough to take away the normal wakefulness from what should have been a bright-eyed gaze.

His dull gaze faced where he'd hung his various diplomas, now a blank, white-washed wall. His old bookshelves lined the room behind the desk. Empty. A pale, dusty film had collected on the shelves. His desk, once stacked a foot high with ongoing casework and research, was nothing but an old oak husk with empty drawers. She stroked the smooth wood grain with her fingertips. Condensation formed on the wood in her wake and then slipped away in an instant.

The whisper of the air conditioner spread a hush into the room.

"Derek," she prodded.

He blinked. He sighed, and he raised his hands to wipe his face, not in a graceful motion like it should have been. More lax. Like an ounce of care had been removed from the impulses sent by his brain to his muscles, leaving him looking like something... not. Not quite there. Not quite whole.

"I'm sorry," he said, and he turned to her. "What?"

"I said, best vacation?"

"I said, best vacation?"

She tried to ignore the fact that he'd lost track of the conversation right in the middle of it. They'd come to Seattle Grace two hours before, and they'd sat outside on the bench for a while. Just talking. People watching. Trying to get him used to things. They'd been doing it all week.

He'd been all right that morning. Not great. But all right. But then he'd excused himself to use the restroom. Ever since he'd returned, he'd been acting like he'd detached himself from reality. Weird. Spacey. Exhausted. Like he'd been when she'd brought him home from the hospital the first time.

Dissociation, Dr. Wyatt had said. When he's not paying attention to the world, he's not hurt or frightened. He's created a safety zone for himself.

A tremor of disquiet hovered underneath her skin. He was pushing himself. Pushing himself to be there when he wasn't okay with it yet. She tightened her grip against the arms of his beat up executive chair. Let him choose, she told herself, despite the whine in her head repeating to her that this was a mistake. Let him choose when he's done. He'll choose.

"Best vacation?" he parroted, as if the words he'd just heard weren't in English.

She spun the old executive chair half clockwise and then half counterclockwise. The chair squeaked. Tension drove her to move. She clutched the lip of the desk as she stood. Her fingers slipped over the empty surface, and a brief flash of what had been there months before illuminated
in the back of her brain. She remembered a plastic poster stuck by double-sided mounting tape to
the surface of the desk. The poster had delineated the different sections of the human brain and
what purpose they each served. Frontal lobe for emotions, reasoning, movement, problem solving.
Parietal lobe for the senses like touch and taste. Occipital lobe for vision and object recognition.
Temporal lobe for memories. Which brought her gaze to him. Behind him, he'd hung dozens of
posters, now, all gone. An illustration of a human spine. Nerve cluster maps. Framed copies of his
headlining research articles, at least a dozen.

She left the desk behind her and sank onto the loveseat next to him. The cushions squeaked.
Without comment, almost as if it were a reflex, he wrapped his arm over her shoulder. She sank
against his body. The strong, soothing scent of his cologne caressed her.

He wore a sharp black suit and a black tie. She'd caught him that morning, standing lost and silent
by the closet. His fingers had brushed the striped blue tie she'd always told him she liked, and he'd
sighed. *It doesn't feel appropriate for this*, he'd said. And he'd passed it over. His tie rack had
moaned as he'd spun it around, looking for an even more subdued alternative. She'd sat on the bed
and watched, torn between apprehension and voyeurism as he'd primped and prepared. She loved
the way he looked in a crisp, well-fitting suit.

“Yes, best vacation,” she said. “You're acting really spacey.”

He sighed. “Memories, I guess.”

She stroked the arm of his sport coat. “Good ones or bad ones?”

“When Richard showed me this office, I thought I might have made a mistake,” he said.

“Not what you were used to?”

A tired smile pulled at his lips. She followed his gaze as he looked at his former desk, the
bookcase, three chairs, and the loveseat, all crammed into the room like interlocking puzzle pieces
that wouldn't fit anymore with the slightest disruption to their alignment.

“I had a bathroom attached to my old office in Manhattan,” he said. “The bathroom had a closet.
The closet was bigger than this.”

She tried to imagine the look on his face as Chief Webber had ushered him into this room. Derek's
eyes would have widened, but he would have recovered with a panicky smile. The Chief wouldn't
have noticed the panicky bit, just the smile. He would have blathered on about how Seattle Grace
was the best of the best, and how Derek was a welcome addition to the team. Blah, blah. She could
hear him in her head.

“Private practice is a bit more lucrative,” she said. “Life's a bit different down in the trenches.”

“More lucrative, yes,” he said. “But more empty. It only took me a few days to get over myself.”

*I think I hate being Chief*, he'd said.

She touched his thigh. His suit felt coarse to the touch. She'd gotten used to the soft, worn feel of
beat up jeans. Pajama pants. Things he'd worn during his recovery. She kissed him.

“Hmm,” he said as he stared into the nothing where his coat rack had been. He used to hang his lab
coon there with his stethoscope coiled in the pocket. “Egypt.”

“What?” she said.
“Now, who's spacing?” he said, a ghost of smirk on his face. “Best vacation. Egypt.”

She looked up at him. “You've been to Egypt?”

“A long time ago, yes,” he said. “Before I came to Seattle.”

“Did you go with Addison?”

“No, actually,” he said. “I went for a medical conference on neurosurgery and neuroscience in Cairo.”

“Derek, that's not a vacation. That's work. If you count work, I'm sure you've been everywhere.”

“I stayed an extra day. I saw the pyramids.”

She snorted. “A whole day, wow.”

“You're mocking me,” he said.

“I'm not mocking.”

“You are.” He kissed her, and she giggled. “The pyramids were sort of disappointing, by the way. They're not actually in the middle of the desert.”

“They're not?”

“No. And there's a Pizza Hut next to them. Or, there was. I don't know about now.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded. “I went. I saw. I even dared to sample the pizza. And you mock me.”

“It's just...” She stared at him, at his weathered laugh lines. She loved when his eyes lit up with extra wattage from his smile, and the skin around his eyes crinkled. She saw that look so rarely these days that it made her heart ache just to think about it. Today, he just seemed tired. A bit listless. He smiled, sometimes. But the expression never reached his eyes. “You seriously sampled the pizza?”

“Yes,” he said. “I was curious if it was as bad there as it is here.” His nose scrunched as though he'd scented something displeasing. “It is.”

“Did you get it without meat or cheese like usual?”

He shook his head. “See? You're mocking me.”

In her thirty-two years, she'd been to most of the states in the U.S. except Alaska, a few provinces in Canada, Mexico a few times, and a lot of Western Europe. “But...” She shifted, and he squeezed her shoulder as she resettled against him. “You've lived over four decades,” she said. “A one day vacation where you consumed faux-healthy pizza is the best one you've taken?”

He shrugged. “I'm a reformed workaholic, Meredith,” he said, and he gave her a lop-sided grin that made her heart twist. Almost. Almost perfect. Maybe he was snapping out of his funk. Maybe. “When would I have taken a vacation?”

“You didn't even take a nice honeymoon?”
He considered her for a moment. “Addison and I went to Niagara Falls for a long weekend because it was close, ate bad seafood, and spent most of it sick.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, what about when you were a kid?”

“My dad died,” he said, and the kindling twinkle in his eyes waned. She swallowed as alarm bells rang in her head. Stupid. Stupid topic, given the setting. They were trying to re-acclimate him. Stupid.

She clutched his knee and squeezed.

He stared at the far wall where his diplomas had hung, and she wondered if he even registered anymore what he looked at. He'd gone to Columbia University for both his bachelor's degree and his medical degree. That had been a surprise to her when she'd found out.

*Then why do you wear Bowdoin shirts so often?* she'd asked.

He'd shrugged. *I went there my Freshman year. I transferred out after.*

*Why?*

*To be closer to home,* he'd said. She'd never asked why he'd wanted that. Now, she knew his dad had died only a few years before, his mother had been alone, and Meredith wished she'd asked, then. Asked more. Known more.

“Before that?” she said, trying to steer him away from that black pit. “Nothing?”

He said nothing. After a long, stretched moment, her nerves shivered back into existence. Fragile. The fragility of conversations with him made her dizzy. Topics that seemed safe on the surface swam like the shark from *Jaws* underneath, all chomping teeth and black, predatory eyes, ready and waiting to swallow him whole, or rip off a leg or something.

The air conditioning whirred. Quiet blanketed his office like the earth after fresh fallen snow. That's why she'd ushered him this way, though she hadn't told him outright that she thought it'd be easier for him away from the constant drone of the intercom. Away from the bustle and excitement of those arriving and leaving through the main entryway. Doctors, patients, other staff. People who'd recognized him often tried to chitchat, which hadn't helped, either. He'd gotten edgier as time had gone on. When he'd returned from the bathroom, he'd been spacey and weird, and she'd tried to get him away without making him feel self-conscious.

*Have you been back to your old office?* she'd said. *I think it's still empty.*

*I don't know,* he'd said.

*Let's find out.*

“Derek?” she prodded.

“Sandy Hook, I guess,” he said.

“Sandy what?”

“Hook,” he repeated. “It's a barrier spit in Jersey with some public beaches on it. We used to go there every summer for a long weekend. I take it you never went there?”

“Why would I have?”
He peered at her. “Boston is sort of close.”

“Why would I go to a sort of close beach when Boston has really close beaches?”

“True.”

“Plus, I lived with my mother, who didn't believe in vacations. Like Manhattan you.”

His gaze creased with displeasure. “That's just...”

“Sad and tragic, I know,” she said. “So, what made Sandy Hook a good vacation?”

“I don't know.” He shrugged. “My whole family would go.”

She pinched a line of fabric from his pant leg and ran her fingertips along the crease. The solid press of his quadriceps underneath her hand gave her reassurance. Her hand rasped against his leg, and she let her eyelids dip as she imagined. His mother had shown her a picture from her wallet when Derek had been sleeping in the hospital. Just one picture.

Derek had been small. Wiry. With a cherubic, smooth face and a big mess of untamed, almost-black hair. The picture had been taken before he'd broken his nose, and he'd been absent the ruggedness that his asymmetry brought him. She imagined the littler, younger version of him crowded in the back seat of a car with his four pushy sisters amidst a chorus of are-we-there-yets and stop-touching-mes.

“Did your family have a hippie van?” she said.

“Uh, no,” he said. “Why?”

“No reason,” she said. “Did you play car games with your sisters?”

“Car games?”

“Punch buggies. Or the alphabet game. Or I spy?”

He looked at her with a small, tired smile that made her melt inside. He found her amusing, and he loved her, and when he looked at her, she rarely forgot it. That was another thing she had missed since the shooting. All his looks had become wounded and dark. He still loved her. Obviously. But the amusement had died. Even this barest hint of him bouncing back made her body lift.

“I don't remember,” he said.

“Well, what did you do at the beach?”

“I don't know.” he said. He shrugged. “Beach things. Played in the waves. Made sand castles. I remember...” His gaze spaced as his conscious thought fell away from the room. He made a soft noise in his throat. A hmmm, sort of, but not a full-fledged vocalization. Something low and guttural and barely there, and it made her lower body tighten. The pink of his tongue appeared as he wet his lower lip. His mouth opened the smallest fraction. His pupils dilated a hair as he stared at the memory in his head.

“What?” she said.

“I remember standing in the water, up to my knees,” he said, his voice flat as he lived in the past. “I'd scrunch the sand between my toes, look out at all the open space over the water, listen to the surf, and—” He blinked and looked at her. She couldn't keep the grin from her face. “What?” he
“Maybe Seattle Derek isn't so different from Manhattan Derek, after all.”

“I guess I've always liked space.”

She stroked his arm. “And quiet.”

“Mmm. And quiet,” he agreed. He kissed her forehead. “It's funny.”

“What?”

“I haven't thought about that in years,” he said. “Sandy Hook has always been about my watering can.”

“Your watering can?”

He nodded. “When I was four, I got caught in an undertow as I was filling up my watering can,” he explained. He held out his palm and made a fist. “I remember, the can pulled on my hand, and I didn't want to let go. I fell into the current, but then I was in the air, and the can slipped away in the waves. My mom had picked me up, and I was so angry. That was my favorite watering can, and she just let it go.”

She kissed him. “Well, I'm glad she rescued the more important thing.”

He grunted, and his composure shattered. What had been peaceful became disquieted and dissonant. She tensed. “I apparently have a penchant for near death dating back to childhood,” he said.

“Derek...”

He shook his head. “It's okay.” He swallowed, and he blinked. He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed, and then he seemed all right again. “My dad bought me ice cream to make up for the can.”

She stared. “You? Ate ice cream? Voluntarily?”

“Hey,” he said, glowering. “I eat ice cream. I've eaten ice cream!”

“Once,” she countered.

She remembered the moment with clarity because she'd never seen him so indulgent. He'd taken her out for dinner the week after they'd first started talking about babies, and she'd said she'd think about having one. They hadn't dressed up, but he'd worn his nice red shirt. The one she'd met him in. He'd ordered a steak, which hadn't surprised her. What had surprised her was when he hadn't gotten a substitution for his mashed potatoes, and he hadn't skirted around them either. He'd cleaned his plate.

*The restaurant glowed. A candle flickered in the middle of a glass bowl the size of a teacup on their table, giving the dessert plate, tablecloth, and him a warm, soft tone. Beyond their horizon, the room seemed to blur, and candles dotted the tables in the distance like fireflies. Derek pulled the fork to his mouth and slipped another bite — the last bite — of hot brownie sundae between his lips while she watched.*

*Her eyebrows raised as his Adam's apple rolled. A wide smile curled his lips as he set his fork*
Only brown crumbs trapped in a thin sheen of melted vanilla ice cream and fudge remained. The fork tinkled as he set it down in the bowl. He relaxed against his chair, which moaned when he shifted his weight. What had been a complete sundae had disappeared, not just into her stomach, but into his. The few times they'd gone out in the past, they'd always ordered dessert, but he rarely had more than a bite or two, and her portion ranged anywhere from seven-eighths to the whole damned thing minus some crumbs. This was...

“Hungry?” she said.

He shrugged. “I'm in a good mood.”

“Not that I'm complaining,” she said, “But, why?”

He gave her a small, vague smile, and he didn't answer. He wiped his lips, and he set his napkin down in his lap. His gaze didn't leave her face.

“Seriously, why?” she said.

“I love you,” he said.

“And that's why you're eating ice cream and brownies?”

He shook his head, and he didn't stop smiling.

“What?” she said. Blush crept across her face.

“You know you're beautiful when you're perplexed?”

Her chest tightened when she recalled his appetite then, a few weeks before the shooting, and his appetite now, when she had to remind him just to eat at all. He still skipped meals. He said he didn't mean to, and she believed him. Whenever she prodded him, he ate without protest, but the simple act of replenishing himself no longer came to him as a natural activity. He was still a bit too thin, but she'd been watching his weight, and he'd been gaining, so she left him alone about it.

“Who do you think eats your strawberry ice cream, Meredith? Kitchen gnomes?”

Meredith frowned. “You mean that wasn't Lexie?” she said.

“I happen to like strawberry ice cream.”

“We've been married over a year,” she said. She grunted as she sat up to face him eye-to-eye. She would wrinkle her clothes, but she didn't care. She turned her hip into the back of the couch and brought her knee up on the seat. His hand shifted from her shoulder to her calf. He rubbed her idly through her black dress pants. The heel of her right shoe popped loose and fell to the floor with a clunk. “How did I not know you like strawberry ice cream?” she said.

He shrugged. “Have you ever asked?”

“Well, I...” She looked at her lap. “Well, no.”

His thumb brushed her chin, and he tipped her gaze to meet his. “I indulge once in a while, you know.”

She couldn't count the number of times she'd come home to her long-awaited pint of ice cream, only to find it nibbled on more than she could remember nibbling on it. Always an extra spoonful. One or two. Here or there. Not enough to annoy her or make her curious. She didn't put her name
on the carton. She'd never told anybody to keep off. It wasn't like ice cream was a dwindling world resource or something. She'd just... assumed it had been her half-sister for some reason. Alex scarfed down all sorts of unhealthy food, but he was more of a fat and grease freak than a sweet tooth. And the idea of Derek being the culprit hadn't even occurred to her.

“Besides,” he continued, “I was four. I didn't know the evils of high blood glucose back then.”

“Still,” she said. “I don't know. I always pictured you as a tofu toddler.”

“Tofu toddler,” he said with a frown. “I'm not even a tofu adult.” His affronted expression made her grin despite her guilt for not knowing about the ice cream. “I choose to eat a high protein, nutritious breakfast every morning, and—”

“Whole grains instead of processed when there's an option.”

“Well, yes,” he said. “That's just common sense, isn't it?”

“Vegetables, all the time. Low-fat yogurt. No mayonnaise. No cheese or meat on your pizza.”

“What's wrong with that? It's a quick way to cut calories.”

“That's not pizza. And, what can I say?” She leaned into him and kissed him. She lingered at his lips. “You're sort of a dietary saint compared to me.”

“That's just sad,” he murmured against her. He nuzzled her ear, and he breathed in her space.

“What's sad?” she said.

“That my sainthood has somehow wedged me into the tofu category. Really, Meredith? Have you ever seen me eat soy?”

“It's called health nut stereotyping,” she said. “Get over it.”

“I will not,” he said. “I maintain my manly figure through blood, sweat, and tears. Not tofu.”

She laughed. Really laughed. The noise burbled out of her like a running brook, and she leaned against him. Her hair fell into her face, and the flowery scent of her hairspray overwhelmed his cologne in a dizzy dance of scent. He wrapped his arms around her, and he embraced her. He said nothing. As she flipped her hair away from her face, she saw him grinning at her, again not quite perfect, but she lost herself in that moment of levity.

This was her Derek. Almost. The Derek she'd missed for weeks. The one who teased her and smiled and seemed happy with his life. The one who made her laugh and feel safe, beautiful, and doubtless. He made rare appearances. Every once in a while. And when he did, her world seemed to align with everything. Dissonant chords became harmony. And the longing, lonely ache in her chest eased.

“What?” he said with a grin. “You don't think my figure is manly?” He patted his flat stomach for emphasis, and she laughed at him again. He murmured her name like a prayer and held her. His suit mashed with her blouse in a war of wool and silk.

She peered into the stark blue of his eyes. The twinkle and soul she hoped to find were there, but muted behind a telltale cloud, one she hadn't seen earlier when he'd been spacey and dour, and the contrast hadn't been so high. Her happiness crashed into the rocks, and she bit her lip as she stared at him.
“What’s wrong?” he said as his smile faded, and seriousness crept in.

She stroked his chest. His thick shirt hid the scar, but she could feel it through the fabric. The long, bumpy line down his sternum and the swollen knob just underneath his shirt collar where his tie formed a trapezoidal knot. He inhaled as she touched him.

“You didn't tell me you were hurting this morning,” she said. “Again?”

The last bit of his almost-perfect smile bled out of him. He swallowed, and he looked away. “Yeah.”

“I don't understand why Cristina would discontinue your Oxycontin when you're still aching so much. If you're in pain all the time, Oxy makes way more sense than Percocet.”

“I don't know,” he said.

“You should talk to her.”

“I'm fine with this,” he said.

“But it makes you tired and spacey—”

“I said I'm fine, Meredith.”

The abruptness of his tongue-lashing made her flinch. Her heart thudded. He took a slow breath, filled his lungs, and exhaled. “I'm sorry,” he said, his tone much more moderated. He swallowed, and he pinched the bridge over his nose. “That was...”

She took a deep breath to mirror his, and she blew it out. She closed her eyes. Nerves recovered from their ebb and flowed back into her. He was pushing himself too hard. That much was clear, or he wouldn't be on such a short fuse.

“What flavor?” she said, trying to steer the topic away from the conversational sharks.

He blinked. “What?”

“The ice cream,” she said. “What flavor did your dad buy you?”

“I...” he began. She watched as he struggled to put himself back in the mindset of their prior discussion. She stared at his hands. He'd withdrawn during his outburst, back into his own bubble. Now, he pushed his palms an inch toward her like he wanted to touch her, but he stopped. She grabbed his hands and pulled him to her. His skin had softened. Months of being Chief, and over eight weeks off from work had allowed his skin to heal from the constant soapy beatings of scrubbing into surgery. His fingers flexed in her grip. He stared at her, and his upset expression relaxed. Just a fraction.

“I'm sorry,” he said again, his words deep and sincere. He didn't break his stare. He looked more tired than he had been.

She squeezed his hands. “What flavor?” she said.

Silence stretched as he remembered. “It was from a DQ,” he said. He filled the verbal space with an empty sort of sound. Not a word. Not an um. Just a sound. Deep and soft. She watched his face as the memory unfurled in his brain, and a bewildered, small smile replaced what had been contrition. “I think it was strawberry.”
She grinned. She kissed him. “So, Derek Shepherd has a weakness for strawberry ice cream.” She dropped her voice low. “That's my favorite flavor, too, you know.”

He nodded. “I do know.”

“Must be kismet or whatever.”

“I wouldn't say ice cream is a weakness, exactly,” he said. “And my favorite is coffee-flavored, not strawberry. But it's more a distinct fondness held at bay by my awesome willpower.”

“So, a weakness.”

He snorted. “I don't have those,” he said. But his hesitant expression belied his haughty tone. Still, he was trying despite his outburst instead of sulking, and that meant a lot to her. In the past months, he'd become the king of sulking.


He shrugged. “I like coffee. I like ice cream. It's both.”

“The same could be said for strawberries, you know.”

“Coffee-flavored is still better,” he said.

“Strawberry.”

He leaned forward, his gaze challenging and sparkling. “Coffee.”

“Definitely strawberry,” she said.

“Definitely,” he said. Their noses bumped. “Coffee.” She reached up and stroked the loose hair out of his face. His eyelids dipped, and he sighed.

“Did your dad have some ice cream, too?” she said. “The ice cream weakness could be genetic. Like kryptonite.”

That question brought him up short. “I don't...” He blinked, and the space between them widened. He sighed, though this time he sounded disturbed and not relaxed. “I don't remember. I don't remember much about him anymore. He died a long time ago.”

“What do you remember, then?” she said. “Did he look like you?”

“I see him in the mirror every day,” he said, and he seemed a bit forlorn. “He was taller.” A small laugh twisted in his throat. “Or maybe I just remember him taller.”

He looked at her, his eyebrows raised in an expression doubt. Do you really care about this? said his gaze, as though he didn't believe she would maintain interest in him or his past for such a long conversation. Her heart squeezed. She nodded to urge him on. She wanted to hear. She did.

“He smelled like... some kind of wood,” he continued, “Or... sawdust, maybe? Cedar.” He touched his face as he stared into space. His fingertips followed the line of his cheekbone. “I think he had a wider face. He never broke his nose, either. Or, if he did, it healed straight.”

She tried to imagine from Derek's description the man who had shaped Derek's young life. A less rugged Derek with a rounder face. The man must have been kind, she decided. Soft spoken, but confident. Derek had a soothing way about him that made it difficult to be upset when he was
trying to calm her down. She imagined that quality in a dad, in his dad, and fantasies erupted in her brain left and right. She watched the elder Shepherd soothe away stubbed toes and hurt feelings and broken Barbies for the entire Shepherd family. And then she pictured Derek with their theoretical baby doing the same thing in the not-so-distant, theoretical future. She splayed a palm against her lower body and sighed as a familiar ache ran her through.

She wished it would happen, now. They still didn't have sex every day like they'd used to. But every other day to every three days at the widest gap. Whenever he was up for it, both literally and figuratively.

“Do you have a picture?” she said. “I'd like to see one.”

He shrugged. “Somewhere in a box, maybe. I didn't bring much with me when I moved.”

Another sad look.

“I'm sorry I dredged this up,” she said as his expression knocked sense back into her. What had she been thinking? She'd been trying to avoid the sharks, and then she'd pretty much fed him to one with a bucket of chum and a blood-sickle.

“No, it's okay,” he said. “He was my dad.” As though that were explanation enough. As though family could never be taboo no matter how much it hurt to discuss. He stroked her cheek, and then he glanced at his watch. “But we do have to get moving, soon.”

She sighed. As time had whittled away the moments, she'd really been hoping he'd given up on the idea of going to the memorial. He'd done poorly enough on the bench outside the hospital that she'd been forced to usher him away. He'd relaxed in his office, but at the same time gotten more tense. She stared at his face. Tired. He looked tired. And rubbed raw despite his small hints of returning levity and balance. And now she'd made him sad.

She stood as he stood, and she stumbled into the shoe that had fallen from her foot as she'd sat down. The small pump pinched her toes. She rubbed his back and watched his sleek lines as he took a deep, calming breath and blinked like he was dizzy. If he'd taken Percocet, that would make sense. She waited for a long moment, but he didn't move. The cushion pressed into the backs of his knees. He didn't speak.

She hated to keep prodding him. Hated to keep pushing. Nagging made her feel like the designated driver for an alcoholic who refused to admit he was drunk and couldn't get behind the wheel.

“Derek,” she said. She took a deep, preparatory breath to bolster herself. “Are you really okay?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, actually.”

“Not panicky?” she prodded.

“Maybe, I just needed to get it all out of my system that first time,” he said.

“Maybe,” she said, unconvinced. She smoothed her pants with a brush of her palms. Her blouse had gotten so wrinkled it looked like she'd slept in it. One reason to hate silk. But it was too late to care or fix it. He moved, but she stopped him before he reached the door, and she gripped his arms. “Derek, I mean it,” she said. “Are you really sure about this?”

“I'm sure,” he said, but he didn't sound sure. Not one bit. Her fingers tightened against his arms as she remembered how the whispers had started when he'd had his panic attack.
Meredith had been in the pit when she'd noticed an intern staring at her with a piteous look. And then another intern and another. A custodian. A fellow resident. What? she'd snapped, but no one had explained. No had one told her that Derek probably needed help. They'd just stared and whispered like gossiping leeches. What's the little wife have to run and fix, now?

Dr. Bailey had found Meredith and told her what had happened. Meredith remembered the burn in her lungs as she'd sprinted to Dr. Weller's office, a burble of uncontrolled presentiment coiling in her gut. She'd worried about how upset he would be that he'd fallen apart in front of so many people. At the same time, she'd been frantic. And frustrated. What the hell had he been doing on the catwalk in the first place? The plan, which she'd reviewed with him more than once, had been for him to go home with Mark after his appointment. Immediately. Do not pass go. Do not collect $200. Do not visit the freaking catwalk where he'd been shot! When she'd found him tired and beaten and barely aware even after she'd spent five minutes shaking him awake, though, that had somehow been worse than seeing him hysterical like she'd expected.

Dissociation is a mental defense mechanism, Dr. Wyatt had said. A sort of... self-hypnosis. It allows us to separate ourselves from reality. It helps us avoid processing negative emotions before we're ready.

She didn't want him to go through that again. She didn't want him to have to dissociate to make it through a minute or five or ten. Not ever. But he was a stubborn ass. He would force his body into a breakdown even though it was telling him, no, do not continue. She stared at him, meeting his gaze in the eye. She knew this would set him off. But she had to say something, if only to rip his keys away.

“I don't think this is a good idea,” she said.

A long pause followed. He stared at her, and he twitched like she'd slapped him across the face. She couldn't think of a single time she'd told him something so negative since he'd been shot. She'd been all about the you-can-do-it, maudlin crap, and the positive, fluffy it'll-get-betters. She still believed it would get better. But the longer he languished, the more she doubted that it would happen soon or even in the near-ish future. Not if things continued like they'd been going.

“How else do you expect me to become a human being again?” he said. “You said I had to keep going, and that I shouldn't stop.”

Guilty nausea churned in her stomach. “I did say that,” she conceded. “I think I was wrong.”

The last ounce of confidence in his gaze cracked. “You don't think I can do this.”

“No, Derek. I don't think you can,” she said. “You're pushing yourself too hard. Last week, you came here, and you had a twenty-five minute panic attack on the catwalk.”

“And we've been coming back all week,” he said, his voice even. “I haven't had another one.”

“To sit on benches and talk about our future first couple-y vacation!” she said. “Not to go to a memorial.”

“Meredith—”

“No,” she said. “You're tired. You've been sad. You've been snarly, and all I did was ask about your pain medication.” He swallowed, and he looked away as she spoke. “You're going to walk into the auditorium, and, assuming you make it past the jam-packed mass of hundreds, you're going to have to listen to stories about everybody who died. Did you even look at the program they sent
with the invitation? There's bagpipers. With real bagpipes. Nothing says grief like bagpipes.”

He stared at the floor, silent. His breaths fell into the space between them fast and clipped. She closed her eyes and waited for the eruption. For the yelling match. For the hissing and spitting. She hated his temper, but she wouldn't back down. He swallowed, and the wet sound of it made her eyes burn. When he looked up, he stared at her, his expression like slate. Nothing there.

“I have to do this,” he said with a low voice.

“Why do you have to do this?” she said. “Give me a reason I can get behind.”

“Because I have to.”

“But, why?” she said. “Why do you want to put yourself through this when you know you're barely treading water?”

He blinked. The cataclysmic volcano she'd expected never erupted. His eyes filled with a thick sheen of water. He blinked again, and he sniffed. His lower lip quivered, and he looked away.

“Because they died, and I...” His voice cracked and fell silent.

She stared at him, disbelief and heartache carving out her insides. He hadn't said a word. Not in weeks. Not since the day he'd seen Chief Webber carrying around a bunch of death certificates. Had he really been bottling this up the whole time? A lump formed like a tumor in her throat, and she swallowed. He wasn't crying. She wouldn't cry either. She could give him that much. For the longest march of moments, though, she had no idea what to say.

“They're not dead because of you,” was the best she could come up with.

“They're all dead because of me,” he said. “Gary Clark was looking for me.”

“And Lexie, and Chief Webber,” she said. She touched his face. No stubble rubbed against her palm. He'd shaved for this. He'd shaved, he'd coiffed his unruly hair, and he'd put on his best suit and a depressing black tie. All to torture himself by attending. “It's not your fault, Derek. None of this is. Have you been punishing yourself this whole time?”

He didn't speak. A deep, grieving noise caught in his throat. He stared at the empty bookcase behind the desk where he'd kept all his medical journals and his old textbooks. His breaths shuddered in his chest. He took a deep, long breath and another and another. He blinked again. His eyes didn't spill over. He wiped his face with his hands. He swallowed. He rocked on the balls of his feet.

He didn't cry, but his carefully measured control made him look like an overly twisted paperclip about to snap with the next forced move. His body, from the tripwire tenseness of his muscles, to the crushed expression on his face telegraphed his thoughts for him no matter his Herculean efforts not to fall apart.

“It's my fault,” he said.

She embraced him. He still didn't speak as she rubbed his back. “You've got to let this go, Derek. We talked about this. You're breathing, and you're not to blame for those who aren't. You're not. Gary Clark is to blame. He shot the gun. Not you.”

“I still need to go to this, Meredith. I'm fine.”

“Don't lie to me,” she said. “You haven't been fine in eight weeks.”
“I'm *not* fine,” he said. “I meant I can do this. I need to do this. I need to.” He pushed toward the door, and she tightened her grip. His arm stretched. He stopped.

“We've been making progress this week,” she said. “You're going to see Paul Wandell's wife make a tearful speech, and it'll undo everything. You're going to lose it, and if you keep letting yourself lose it, that'll just make it harder to find yourself again.”

He bristled. “Just like stopping makes it harder to go again?”

“Stop throwing that back at me,” she said. “I made a mistake, and I'm sorry.” She pressed against him, and even though they were fighting, he held her. He was bristled and prickly, but he didn't let go. She sniffed as her stinging eyes overflowed, and she couldn't stop them anymore.

“I don't have anything left to lose,” he said.

She scrunched her fingers underneath his sport coat. Sleek, firm muscle slipped under her fingertips through his shirt. He rocked with the pressure she applied. “You keep saying that, but it's not true,” she said.

“Of myself, it is.”

“I'm here, Derek.”

“I know that,” he said. “I just meant...” He swallowed, and she watched him as he begged his brain for an explanation that would make sense to her. She wanted to hear it. Desperately. She hadn't understood the last time he'd said it either. Or the time before that. Instead, he fell into his old pattern. His expression collapsed. “Please,” he said, and the word slayed her just as he knew it would.

She hated him for that.

“This is your choice,” she said. “I'm not your keeper. You have choices, Derek, and you need to make them.”

“You didn't have a problem making me go to my appointment last week.”

“You never said no,” she said. “You just gave me flimsy excuses.”

His gaze darkened. “You pushed me, Meredith. And now you're pulling.”

“I'm not an expert at this,” she said. “Dr. Wyatt said—”

“I don't want to talk about Dr. Wyatt,” he snapped.

Silence crashed into the room like a wave, and she pulled away from him. His lower lip quivered. He launched from the door and paced like some sort of agitated cat, except his office was the size of a shoebox, and he didn't have more than a few feet to maneuver. The cramped space only seemed to incense him more. But he hadn't run away. Hadn't run out the door. He'd been between her and freedom. If he'd really wanted to, he could have bolted. Why had he stayed to carve a trough into his threadbare carpet?

“I'm sorry that I pushed too hard,” she said, forcing her voice into an even tone, despite the burbling, burning urge to yell and scream at him in frustration. “But I'm not sorry for pushing, Derek. You've been a different person.”
“I know,” he said.

“I'm trying to get to know you again. I am. But—”

“I know. I just...” He stopped pacing and looked at her. “I need to go to this thing. I need to, Mere. Please, just... I need...”

“I said it's your choice!” she said.

“I know, but I want you to...” He struggled for a word and ended up blowing out a breath in a huff. He gave up, and he looked away.

And then the reason for his lingering clicked. The world made sense to her. He wanted her to be okay with it, and he'd stayed instead of going off to the memorial half-cocked and crazy with the desire to prove himself. Which was both reassuring and daunting all at once. Reassuring that her opinion mattered to him. Daunting that her opinion mattered that much to him.

Her lip quivered, and she sniffled. Her mascara would run. She couldn't bring herself to care. She wiped her eyes. She went back to the couch and collapsed. She glanced at the clock on the wall. They still had time.

“Tell me about your nightmares,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because I think if you're not ready to tell me about that, just me and nobody else, after everything we've been through, then you're not ready to do this memorial thing, and nothing you say will change my mind.”

His lip twitched. “Bossy,” he said.

She folded her arms over her chest. “Stubborn.”

He collapsed onto the seat beside her and folded over his knees. He sat on her left. They'd flipped sides from before. He swallowed. “Would you just do this with me?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation.

He stared. “But you said—”

“That you're a stupid, stupid idiot? Yes,” she said. “But I'll go with you. I love you even when I hate you, remember? Isn't that a given by now?”

He remained silent for a long time. When he looked at her, a tired smile caressed his face and made him seem less distraught. “You've changed, too,” he said.

“I know. For the better?”

“I think so.” He sighed. “I'm a lot worse.”

She touched his back and stroked him along his spine. “It'll get better,” she said.

“You really still believe that?”

“I do,” she said. “I've just developed slightly more realistic expectations about how soon.”
“I wish I could believe,” he said. The deluge he'd been holding back collected and spilled over his dark eyelashes. “It hurts to breathe.”

“How physically?” she said.

“No,” he said. “I just...” He shook his head. “I hate this. It's been two months, and I feel the same.”

“How do you feel?”

He swallowed and stared at his knees. He pushed the knuckles of his index fingers into the fleshy area below his eyes. He wicked the tears away, only to have them replaced. “I'm tired, Mere,” he said, his voice soft. “I can't ever sleep.”

“Please, tell me, Derek. One nightmare. It might feel good to get it out.”

He wiped his face. At first she thought he wouldn't give in, but then he spoke. “There are two,” he said, his voice muffled as he pressed his face into his splayed fingers.

“Two nightmares?”

“Yes. Over and over. Just two. Whenever I close my eyes. I have one and then the other.”

She kissed him. “Tell me.”

The couch moaned as he shifted. He turned into her with a sick look on his face. “The first one is just an echo, I guess.”

“Of when you were shot?”

He blinked, and he flinched like he'd been shot in that moment instead of weeks ago. “Yes. I'm...”

“It's okay.”

A noise quivered in his throat, and he stared at her, but the blankness she found in his eyes told her he didn't see her. His breaths quickened, and his eyes turned glassy and bright with terror. “I don't want to die,” he said as though he thought he were. Dying. His twisted, helpless tone ran her through with a sword of disquiet.

She remembered finding him on the white floor in a lake of red blood, staring at nothing. She remembered his clammy, shivery skin. The way he'd panted, suffocating before her eyes. She remembered hitting him. Over, and over. She remembered his scream as they'd tried to pick him up off the floor. She'd never heard him scream like that. Unadulterated agony.

Derek, in the time she'd known him, had proven to be a stoic individual in the face of pain. When he was upset, he got quiet, and the most she'd ever seen from him was a sniffle and wet eyes that he kept in check with an iron fist. Hearing him cry out as though she'd been branding him with a smoking iron had broken her last resolve into shattered pieces. Cristina had barely snapped her out of hysterics. And since then, since he'd recovered physically, Meredith had seen him break into tears so often he could fill a freaking lake.

She swallowed, and she forced her breaths to remain even. She hated hearing this. She hated hearing him speak like this. Hated seeing him prostrate himself like a victim for his ghosts when he was supposed to be the confident, snarky, arrogant man she'd fallen in love with. In a brief moment of fear, a tiny voice asked, “What have you gotten yourself into, asking him to talk about this?”
She wanted to run. For an instant that was so overwhelming, she flinched. And that made her feel like crap because she knew he'd seen it, too. Felt it. The flinch.

_Are you familiar with a condition known as compassion fatigue?_ Dr. Wyatt had asked.

“T’m sorry,” he said, but Meredith grabbed his arm before he could pull away.

“No,” she said, her voice firm. “Keep going.” Both of them needed to hear it. She made a show of staying put. This wasn't compassion fatigue. This was cowardice. She refused to break in front of him, now. Not after she'd finally forced the clog out of his verbal drain.

“He shot me.”

“I know.” He stopped, and she said, “Keep going,” again.

“I remember staring at the gun,” he said as he stared into space. “It was bl... black. He told me it was m... my fault. That I wasn't god. That I wasn't a man. That people needed to be protected from me.”

She wrapped her arms around his body and pulled him against her. His weight sank into hers. She blinked against tears as he filled her silent memory of watching him standing in Gary Clark's line of fire with a soundtrack. She hadn't realized Mr. Clark had demeaned Derek that way.

“It wasn't your fault,” Meredith reiterated. She pulled her fingers through his hair. Slick remnants of gel came away with her fingertips. She didn't care.

The world flashed white, and she stared at Derek across a wide abyss. He stood with his palms outward facing. Stop, said his gesture. Gary Clark held a gun at the end of an outstretched arm. Cristina's hands clutched her as panic drilled into her body. She heard the mumble even across hundreds of feet. Which meant he was yelling. Yelling awful things. At Derek. Who couldn't defend himself against a gun with no forewarning. Who could?

And then the image faded.

A deep, shivery breath filled his lungs. “I don't remember what I said. I don't remember... I hear him every night verbatim, but I don't remember what I said. My legs felt like jelly, and I thought I would tr... trip.”

“It doesn't matter what you said,” she said. “You stood up to him. You were brave. You got him to lower his gun. I watched, Derek. I saw that.”

April had gotten him shot. Meredith had seen that, too. Anger twisted in her gut.

“I don't remember getting shot. I hit the floor, and I couldn't breathe,” he said. “It hurt,” he said. His voice cracked. He touched his side. “It hurt here.” She gripped his hand and squeezed his palm hard enough that she felt the bones mash together. His bullet wound had healed, mostly, but the rough scar was easy to feel through his shirt. “Dr. Kepner was talking. I don't understand what she said. It's like... Gib... gibberish. In my head. I couldn't... She left me.”

Meredith bit her lip at his tone. She held him tight. “Are you mad at her? For leaving you?”

“I shouldn't be,” he said, his voice dark with loathing. “He was going to shoot her, too.”

“I'm mad at her, too,” she confessed. “It's okay.”
“I'm mad at another human being for saving her own life,” he said. “How is that in any way okay?”

“I didn't say it was rational,” she said. “I said it was okay. It's okay, Derek. Self-preservation is the most basic instinct we have, and she left you to die.”

“I'm a doctor,” he said.

“So, what? Doctors are people.”

He pressed his face into her shoulder. “It makes me feel sick,” he said, his voice muffled by her silk blouse.

“That she left you? Or that you feel angry about it?” She stroked his back. He didn't answer. He breathed against her neck.

“I b-begged him,” he said.

A chill ran down her spine. “What?”

“He aimed again, and I begged him. I told him n-no.”

“After he'd already shot you?”

Again, he didn't speak. He trembled like he was in shock, and he didn't say a word.

“It's okay,” she said. “It's okay, Derek. You're okay.” He clutched her shirt, and his body tightened like a screw. He didn't make a single noise, and she felt like she held a terrified rabbit in her arms, one that would die because its heart had exploded with terror. “It's okay,” she repeated, frantic. The wild sense that she'd gotten in over her head, that she was messing with things she didn't understand well enough to be messing with, wrapped around her neck like a noose and made it hard to breathe. She'd wanted to help him avoid a panic attack. Not shove him into one like a pickup truck. What had she done?

She pulled up his shirt and slipped her bare palms against his abdomen. He wasn't breathing. He'd frozen. She pushed her hand along the plane of his stomach, touched his ribs, and rested over the rough remnants of the bullet wound. “You're alive, and you're here, and I'm here, and he's dead. Do you feel my hand? I'm here, and you're here. He's not.”

At once, he snapped into motion and he sucked in a breath as though he'd been submerged. Drowning. “It's okay, Derek. You're okay.” He pulled at the collar of his shirt. At his tie. An unadulterated sound of distress pealed from his throat, and he made a choking noise. “Breathe. Derek, just breathe.”

“I don't know why he left,” he blurted.

She squeezed her arms around him as tight as she could. “But he did. And I found you. And you're okay. You're not going to die. Breathe. You can breathe.”

He did.

She repeated herself. Over and over. You're okay. You're not going to die. And he listened. He rested in her arms, silent. The swell of fear that had overwhelmed him ebbed. His shaking subsided. She didn't let go of him until he grunted.
When she released him from her arms, he turned away from her to re-collect himself. The couch squeaked with his weight. He wiped his face with his hands. The color had drained from his face. His expression seemed sallow. Exhausted. Wrung out.

And he'd only told her about one of his nightmares. He said he had two. She couldn't imagine what would be worse than what he'd just described. Living his experience over and over in high definition.

“Derek, I think you should see Dr. Wyatt,” she said.

The silence stretched into a small eternity, until she felt like the moments had turned to taffy, and instead of stepping forward, they simply stretched into infinitesimal lines of goo that never ended. The battery clock on the wall ticked to spite her observation. The tap-tap-tap of the second hand seemed thunderous in the small space. He didn't turn to face her.

“I told you what you wanted to know,” he said, his voice flat.

“Half of it. I had no idea you were holding onto all of this. I think Dr. Wyatt could really help you.” She swallowed. “Derek, I want to be enough, I do, and I'm not going anywhere, but I'm not enough. Not for this. I didn't know.”

“I don't want to see a psychiatrist,” he said. “I—” His watch beeped, and he glanced at the time. “Will you, please, just go with me? I need to do this. Please.”

She bit her lip.

“I did what you asked,” he said. He wiped his face. He tucked in his shirt. He fixed his tie.

“Promise me you'll leave if...” she said. “Promise you won't push too hard.”

He swallowed. “I promise, Meredith. Do you think I like having panic attacks?”

“No,” she said. “But you're a stubborn idiot.”

A wry, hollow grin spread across his face. “I'm glad you think so highly of me,” he said, though his tone held no bite. No snap and snarl.

She shrugged. “You're my stubborn idiot.”

“Hmm,” he said, though he didn't offer any more comments. He leaned into her and kissed her, and then he stood. She followed.

“Do I look like a haggard, horrid, scary monster?” she said. She brushed her blouse and swept back her hair. She should have worn it up today. Damn it.

A small smile crossed his face. “No more than me,” he said.

“Great,” she said as she stared at his thrashed expression. No amount of makeup magic would hide the fact that he'd been weeping. And in the process of soothing him, she'd wrecked his hair. It didn't look styled anymore. Just wet and shaggy, and a loose lock fell over his forehead. “We're sitting in the back, right?”

He nodded. “We can sit in the back.”

She took his hand. He squeezed her fingers. “Thank you,” he said as they shuffled out of his old office.
She followed him to the elevator side-by-side with him. Her heels clonked in time with his dress shoes on the hard tiled floor and echoed, echoed, echoed. The hallways seemed blessedly empty, and no one stopped to ask why either he or she looked like they'd just been resurrected as zombies. Posters for the memorial hung almost every twenty feet in the hollow halls. The posters weren't illustrated or anything. Times New Roman font announced the time and location and date, and that was all. They were both tasteful and minimalistic.

The elevator hummed as they stood inside. For a moment, her weight lifted as the elevator traveled down the shaft. More memorial posters hung on the walls, all simple white with black text. He leaned into the back corner, staring at the floor, and she stood next to him. His shoulder brushed one of the posters, and the paper bent. He shifted away. She closed her eyes and imagined him standing in front of all his patient scans, a thrilling smile on his face.

_I'm not gonna get down on one knee, he'd said. I'm not gonna ask a question._

Confident. Undaunted by the fact that she'd turned him down already. Twice.

Her heart throbbed as the moment rewound in her head. _If there's a crisis, you don't freeze. You move forward. You get the rest of us to move forward. Because you've seen worse. You've survived worse. And you know we'll survive, too. You say you're all dark and twisty. It's not a flaw. It's a strength._

She blinked at the memory. Her tired, tense muscles ached. He'd intended to be reflective and ended up prophetic. Except for the part about having seen worse. She hadn't. She'd never expected to have to live through a massacre. She'd never expected to press the heel of her palm into Derek Shepherd's chest to plug a gushing bullet wound. She'd never expected to see the muzzle of a loaded gun jammed into Cristina's temple while Cristina operated on Derek to save his life. She'd never expected to see blood between her thighs.

Meredith pressed against him, and he wrapped his arms around her. “It's okay,” he said.

“You proposed in here,” she whispered.

“I did,” he said.

“You still owe me elevator sex.”

A small smile stretched his lips. “Rain check?”

She nodded. “Rain check.”

Gravity welled up at her feet as the elevator came to a stop and dinged. They stepped out onto the first floor, the bright, open area underneath where Derek had been shot. He didn't look up at the catwalk. People bustled through the space, funneling into tight, directed clumps as they followed the arrows on the signs. The masses of them headed toward the big auditorium. The shuffling steps of dozens thundered in the open space. Derek stared at the crowds. His expression didn't flicker. Soft voices swirled around them. The somber mood had turned what could have been chaos into whispers and calm procession.

“Stop,” she said, and Derek stopped.

He peered ahead, his expression cloudy. Distant. “What?” he said, but he didn't look at her. He looked at the marching procession of life that he would have to join. His breaths tightened.

“Your tie is messy.” She pushed into him with spindly fingers and grabbed at the fabric. She
watched his Adam's apple roll down his throat.

“I fixed it before,” he said.

“You really didn't,” she said.

His cologne wafted against her as she breathed. His gaze shifted, and he watched her as she straightened his tie. She patted his chest as she finished. “Thank you,” he said, though he sounded hollow. He took one step. Two. And then he stopped and pointed to the men's room sign at the side of the hallway. “I need...”

She nodded. “Fine,” she said, and he disappeared through the blue swing door labeled with a male stick figure.

This was it, she decided. He would make it another hallway. Maybe two. But he wouldn't make it to the auditorium. She paced outside the restroom door. She watched the people. Everywhere. People. Dr. Bailey walked past in the distance wearing a conservative black dress.

“Meredith,” said a calm, rich voice she recognized.

Her breaths halted. Her steps froze. She turned on her heel. “Chief,” she said.

Chief Webber stood beside her wearing a crisp black suit that looked much like Derek's, though he didn't wear it as well. He didn't look sleek. Or comfortable. “How are you?” he said.

“Fine,” Meredith said. “Derek's in the bathroom.”

Chief Webber nodded. He looked at the men's room door. He cleared his throat. He shifted on the balls of his feet. “Look,” he said. “I'm sorry about—”

“It's fine,” Meredith said. “It's really fine. I'll be okay. There are things going on in my life right now that are more important.”

The Chief regarded her for a long moment. His gaze softened. “I want you to know that I'm proud of you,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said. She didn't know what else to say or do. She clenched her teeth to vent uncomfortable energy. Her purse strap dug into her shoulder.

Chief Webber nodded, and then he joined the pulse of the crowd. She watched the white fuzz on his head until he disappeared into the crush, and then she glanced at the nearby wall clock. Derek didn't re-emerge from the bathroom for almost fifteen minutes, and when he did, he didn't stop for her. He walked. Like an automaton.

“Derek?” she said.

“Hmm?” he said, his voice flat.

“Are you okay?” she whispered, trying to keep her voice under the thrum of the whispers. He wouldn't want to make a scene.

“M'okay,” he said. He stumbled into her like the floor had reached up and grabbed his ankles. Her body popped loose from its stride at the impact, and her lips parted in surprise as she bumped into an older woman walking beside her.

“Sorry,” she said to the woman, who didn't seem to pay her any mind and kept walking.
He looked at her, his eyes lifeless. The blush of embarrassment she expected to sprawl across his face never arrived. He remained pale, and a bit detached. Like he didn't even realize he'd made a misstep.

“Derek,” Meredith said. He only stared, and worry set in. She grabbed his arm, and she pulled him to the side against the wall, out of traffic. He followed her, pliant and unresisting, which scared her even more. “Did you take something in the bathroom? How much?”

He wouldn't look at her. “It hurt,” he said in a soft voice.

A niggling, doubting voice whined in the back of her head. Wrong. This was starting to seem wrong.

“Then you need to talk to Cristina or Dr. Altman or something,” she said, keeping her voice low. Her whispers made her voice a hiss. Some of the passing crowd glanced their way, but she doubted, in the chaos of moving bodies, that anybody could hear anything specific. “You shouldn't be off OxyContin yet.”

“Meredith—”

“Seriously,” she said. “I don't care if you're okay with it. If you're in that much pain, you need to talk to them. And get checked again while you're at it. Maybe they missed something.”

He took breath. He didn't look happy. “I will.”

She swallowed, and she couldn't help the slivers of doubt cracking her resolve. Was he letting himself suffer because he felt like it was appropriate punishment? For living when others hadn't? He'd been keeping all that guilt mashed inside of him for weeks. He hadn't talked about it. Had it festered like a wound?

“You promise?” she said.

He bristled. “I promise, Meredith.”

“Oh kay,” she said, and she let it go, or at least tried to. For now.

She grabbed his hand as they filed into the crowd, getting bumped and jostled. Derek's palm didn't shake. His hand didn't feel cold or clammy. He didn't flinch as people ran into him. He didn't appear jittery or ready to bolt. His uncoordinated steps carried him down the hall with her. She watched him until her eyes burned from lack of blinking, but he seemed... Not fine. Who would be fine going to a memorial like this? But not bad, either. Not falling apart.

Not afraid.

But the essence of his gaze that made him Derek had disappeared. He stared, his face a blank, like he wasn't processing what he was looking at. Like he'd popped his consciousness loose and left it back in the bathroom. Which was...

She didn't have time to consider what that was as they were sucked into the general flow of the crowd, short people, tall people, old ones, young ones, and every variety between. The surge pulled them into the big auditorium. She held his hand to keep from getting separated in the crush. They managed to peel apart from the crowd several feet inside the auditorium. They moved into the sixth row from the back. He sat one chair into the row, where it would be easy for him to escape without causing a huge disruption. She sat in the aisle seat to save him from enduring the people bumping past to find seats further inside.
The shock of being part of the moving, breathing crowd that tried to find empty seats, and then falling out of it into chairs, was a bit like being born, she imagined. She panted with the stress of it all. The large stage in the auditorium had been set alight with candles and deep-hued flower arrangements. Maroons and blackish purples and darker, subdued colors. Pictures of the dead lined the lip of the stage, seventeen in all. All smiling, which seemed incongruous with the occasion. Soft symphonic music played from the speakers overhead.

She scanned the crowd for a moment. She spotted Lexie and Alex sitting together in the reserved seats by the stage. Mark sat by Callie. She didn't see anybody else she recognized. She had no idea where Cristina was, or Owen, for that matter. She tore her eyes from the writhing crowd and stared at Derek, who stared at the stage without expression. And then her stomach tightened with a sick explosion of nerves. “Dr. Wyatt?” she blurted as she saw who sat next to Derek on his right side, and Derek flinched, snapped loose from his air of detachment.

Isn't she a therapist at Seattle- Oh, he'd said.

He wouldn't have known who she was. Dr. Wyatt didn't work surgical cases. She wasn't his employee. He didn't deal with therapists, only psychiatrists approved for psych consults. He knew of her name as somebody who worked at Seattle Grace. Maybe, he would have recognized her face as familiar. But he hadn't had the name attached to a face.

His knuckles tightened against the arm rests of his seat. Though Meredith didn't see his body move, his seat moaned as though his weight had shifted. She touched his hand. His fingers didn't give. He didn't take her hand. She prepared for fireworks.

Dr. Wyatt looked up from her program and smiled. She wore a black suit, and shiny white pearls encircled her neck. “Meredith. Dr. Shepherd,” she said. “Hello. I thought you'd be up front in the reserved seats.”

Derek didn't speak, and Meredith needed to fill the silence. “We wanted to sit in the back,” Meredith said.

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “Understandable.”

“Derek,” said Meredith. Shivery nerves made it hard to think. To speak. “This is Dr. Wyatt,” she said. She didn't know if a proper introduction was appropriate here. But she didn't know what else to do. “Dr. Wyatt, Derek.”

Dr. Wyatt outstretched her hand, fingers splayed. Derek blinked. He cleared his throat. He raised his palm, and he shook Dr. Wyatt's offered hand. “Hello,” he said, his voice whisper-y. A baby shrieked somewhere in the auditorium, and a visible flinch tore through him. His hand slipped from Dr. Wyatt's back into his lap.

He closed his eyes, and he took a deep breath. For all that Meredith had no idea what to say, she read Derek's expression like a Dick and Jane primer, and he felt worse than she did. See Derek. See Derek panic. Panic, Derek.

If Dr. Wyatt knew Derek wasn't doing well, she didn't indicate it. Her lips curved with a cordial smile that reached her eyes. “It's nice to meet you,” Dr. Wyatt said, her voice calm and reassuring, and she didn't add the word 'finally', which made Meredith appreciative of the woman's tact. The word 'finally' would have emphasized how much Dr. Wyatt had already heard about him, like his nighttime erections, the fact that he'd wet himself, all his hopes and fears and everything, which he knew she knew about, but he wouldn't want to know. “I read the article about the Shepherd Method,” Dr. Wyatt continued. “Fascinating.”
Derek looked at her. “You follow neurosurgery?”

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “I try to be familiar with it, at least.”

He didn't respond, and Dr. Wyatt watched him. Unblinking. During sessions, Dr. Wyatt made a disturbing analytical face that Meredith knew meant a snap judgment and conclusion would follow. The conclusion would typically be right, and it would suck to hear. With Derek, she imagined Dr. Wyatt would say something about an injured god complex. His inability to accept inabilities. But Dr. Wyatt remained neutral, and if she was doing any analyzing at all, she hid it well. The cordial smile stuck on her face like the curl of her lips had been shaped with crazy glue.

Derek swallowed. Movement on the stage caught his attention. A custodian wearing a black jump suit tested the microphone, which shrieked with echo-y reverberations before the electronics settled or whatever. Derek blinked at the noise. He didn't flinch, this time, though his even breaths became a forced kind of even, instead of relaxed. For a long stretch of moments, Meredith thought he might ignore Dr. Wyatt for the rest of the memorial, which would be impolite and all sorts of wrong. But if that's what he needed to do to make it through this thing, that's what he needed to do, and she would support it.

“Thank you for helping Meredith,” he said out of nowhere.

Meredith's lips parted. “Derek...”

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “It's my pleasure,” she said. She settled into her seat to read more from her program, as if she sensed he needed emotional space to compensate for the lack of physical space between them.

Then the lights dimmed, and nobody had a chance to say anything else. Loud words became a mumble became silence as the crowd hushed. Meredith leaned against Derek, and she cradled his left hand in her lap. He stared ahead at the spectacle of grief. Blank. She rested her head in the crook of his throat and listened to him breathe, soft, even, alive.

Chief Webber approached the podium in the middle of the stage, which was draped with dark ribbons and flowers. The microphone squealed as he settled in front of the podium, a sheath of papers clutched in his hand. Notes for his speeches. He'd been nominated as the master of the ceremony, given his role in Gary Clark's final moments, and given Derek's leave of absence. From what she could remember of the invitation in the mail, Chief Webber's name littered the program.

He cleared his throat. “Good morning,” he said to the masses, his voice rich and deep and low. “Two months ago, Seattle Grace was put on the map, not for something great, not for a medical miracle, or a scientific breakthrough, but as one of Seattle's greatest tragedies. One of the nation's. We've joined the ranks of places such as Columbine High School. Virginia Tech. Fort Hood. The San Ysidro McDonald's. Seventeen of our fellow colleagues died that day, and seven more were injured. One remains in critical care today.”

The podium squeaked as the Chief shifted. “I wasn't in the hospital when the first shot rang out. My heart goes out to those who were. To the brave people who stayed to help protect those less able.” No one in the crowd moved. No one spoke. A cough filled the silence. A baby cooed.

Chief Webber continued, “We've had two months to heal, and we're all still reeling. Every one of us. I'm sure there's not a single person in this room who's not asking why.” He looked out at the crowd. “Why? Why did this happen to us?”

Everybody in the audience was silent.
“Well, I'm an old man,” Webber said. “I've been working in medicine for a long time. A long time. And I've learned that, rarely, do we ever have the luxury of knowing why. Bad things happen to good people every day. And that day, a bad thing happened to us.” He swallowed. “We're here today to remember those colleagues who aren't with us anymore. To honor their memories. To celebrate the heroes who were born from the tragedy. To share in our grief. And, hopefully, to close some lingering wounds.”

Footsteps echoed on the stage as a middle-aged man with a mustache walked across the stage. He carried a trumpet that shined in the dim light. Meredith let her gaze fall across Derek's lap to the white program resting in Dr. Wyatt's hands. “Trumpet – Archibald Percy,” said the top line where Dr. Wyatt rested her finger. Meredith squeezed Derek's thigh, and she kissed his throat.

Do. Not. Die. Do you understand?

“Please, rise for the national anthem,” said Chief Webber, and the crowd thundered as it stood. Meredith straightened, relinquishing her hold of Derek's palm, and released him from her weight, as insubstantial as it was. Derek stood. She stood. They all stood.

Dr. Percy's... father?brother?uncle? held the trumpet to his lips. The trumpet lowed the first verse of the anthem. The crowd sang, subdued, but thunderous in its volume. An overwhelming sense of solidarity filled the room and wrapped around her.

Meredith found herself watching Derek instead of the stage. Derek's mouth moved with the words, but she couldn't hear his distinct, tenor voice under the crush of all the rest. Dr. Wyatt's voice fell against Meredith's ears clear as a bell, identifiable and pure. She decided Derek wasn't singing. Not really. She couldn't recall ever having heard him sing. She wondered if he could carry a tune, or if he was tone deaf like she was. He'd written a song for Addison, though that didn't necessarily mean he'd sung it. He didn't dance without extreme provocation. Meredith knew he played the guitar, though. The saxophone. He knew music. Or, he used to.

When silence filled the air, and Derek's lips stopped moving, she swallowed. “Please, be seated,” said Chief Webber, but his voice hovered in her awareness like a fly or a mosquito, a barely there buzz that she wished would stop.

When Derek sat, she mirrored him. She found her position from before, wedged against him, holding his hand and breathing in the reassuring scent of his cologne. Somebody read a poem. People made speeches. She thought her resolve to see Derek get through this and her own mental fortitude might carry her, but the memories knocked and knocked again. Her door eventually opened.

“What do we do?” April said. “He can't climb up on that thing; he can't even walk.”

“Well, lower it,” snapped Cristina.

“I am lowering it! This is as low as it goes!”

“I've seen Bailey get it lower.”

“Shut up!” Meredith said. “Please, everybody just shut up for a minute.”

Derek sat in the wheelchair, his spine bowed. He favored his left side with a protective lean. He'd folded his arm, and his bloody hand curled against the left side of his torso to cover the wound. Through parted, bloodless lips, he panted. She'd tried to keep pressure on the bullet wound while they moved him, but it'd started to bleed again despite her efforts. Bright red oozed down his side
into the chair, and his shirt had soaked past the waistline of his pants.

“Derek,” Meredith said. At first, he didn't respond, didn't look at her. She hit him across the face, and he blinked. The slap echoed in the bad acoustics of the operating room. Some sentience flared in his gaze. “Derek, please. Can you stand again? Please? Please, Derek? Stand?”

He looked at her, his eyes glassy and unfocused, but he moved. He achieved upright, barely, and then he wilted against her, no power in his legs. No power anywhere. She held him up with willpower alone, otherwise he would have dropped to the floor like a sack of rocks. Cristina and April converged. The low, deep sound of suffering in his throat made her stomach churn.

“Okay,” Meredith said. She pressed her palm flat against the back of his head. “Okay, it's okay. It's okay.” His body trembled, though whether from shock or cold or something else, she didn't know. They shifted him toward the operating table, pushed him against it so his hip lined up with the flat surface.

He pressed his face against her shoulder. “Pleassse,” he said, the end of the word a hiss of escaping air. He spoke as though his tongue were too thick for his mouth. “Merrr go 'way. He'll shhoot...”

“Lift on three, two, one,” Cristina said. Meredith closed her eyes as he screamed for the second time that day.

She tried to shove the echoes of his pain away.

She wanted Derek to get through this. That was all. She could focus on that. He seemed all right. For a long time. He watched, expressionless. She squeezed his hand, which broke him loose from his detachment. He blinked. He looked at her hand. His gaze followed her arm, and his dark eyes met hers. He stared. He squeezed her hand in return.

She squeezed his hand to reassure him. He stared at nothing in particular and offered no resistance while they peeled away his shirt and socks and pants and threw them into a dirty pile on the floor, out of what would be the sterile field. Blood slicked his left side. Her heart twisted when she saw the state of his underwear. His boxer briefs had been white, but rusty-colored red had soaked them through. More blood out of his body that should have been inside. How much blood had he lost? How much...

“Are you okay?” Derek mouthed at her.

Tears spilled from her eyes. She wiped them away as she nodded. She clutched his coat. “Are you?” she mouthed back.

He didn't answer, which worried her. Just a little. A bagpipe processional wandered down the aisles, loud and full of mourning. In an enclosed auditorium, the volume of a bagpipe overwhelmed all else, like Goliath, unstoppable. An army of bagpipes? Head-splitting. Brain-mushifying. Deafening. They drowned the sounds of shifting and movement in the audience.

He moaned and tried to twist away as Cristina jammed the heel of her gloved palm into the bullet wound. Meredith threw herself across his naked hips to hold him down. The hollow thumps of his body striking the narrow metal operating table pushed her stomach into the floor. She tried to breathe against the urge to vomit.

“It's okay,” she said. “Derek, it's okay. Hang on. We're almost done.”

He gave up his struggle, but she was afraid to let go. His skin felt clammy to the touch. Like a cold,
wet dishrag. He shivered, and she took his hand. “April, get him a blanket,” Meredith said. Her eyes watered. “Please.”

The blood oozing out of him stopped after minutes, and Cristina pulled her hand away.

“I love you,” Meredith said, though bagpipes trampled the sound of her voice.

“I love you, too,” Derek replied.

The men in full highland regalia, kilts included, formed a line on the stage. She didn't really know why Seattle Grace had elected to utilize bagpipers. She'd seen them at military funerals before. She didn't really have experience with civilian ceremonies. It worked, though. The Scots freaking knew grief. Derek watched. Silent.

*I'm not gonna die. I promise.*

Somewhere along the line, the scales tipped. Doubt became hope and then confidence. She believed Derek would make it through the memorial. He'd made it through the crowds and the opening remarks. He'd made it through depressing poems. He'd watched Mrs. Wandell talk about her husband and break into tears at the microphone. He'd watched bagpipers and crying babies, and he'd sat next to Dr. Wyatt the whole time. He'd made it through it all, somehow.

The final speaker before the closing remarks approached the podium. He moved with a pronounced limp, not as though he couldn't put weight on his leg because of an injury, but as though the nerves to the limb had been cut. His foot followed him like a deadweight, and he leaned on a cane. He was a tall man with broad shoulders and curly blond hair. He wore a security guard uniform. The buttons had been shined, and all the metal gleamed in the light.

The microphone amplified the wet sound as the man swallowed. “My name is Ben Forks. I was a security guard in admissions on the day of the shooting,” he said. “Mr. Clark shot me in the hip and again in the back. I have permanent partial paralysis.”

Derek stiffened, and Meredith swallowed.

“When I was shot, I couldn't move from the waist down. I couldn't run.”

For the first time since the memorial ceremony had started, Derek looked away from the stage. He stared at his lap. His breaths shortened. He paled. Meredith squeezed his hand. His lips parted. She leaned close in an attempt to hear what he muttered.

“Stop it,” he said, a hoarse whisper. “Stop.”

Meredith frowned. “Derek,” she whispered. She gave him a shake, but it didn't appear to impact his state of mind.

Dr. Wyatt turned, frowning. “What's wrong?” she mouthed.

Meredith's eyes widened. She could only shrug. She put her hands on Derek's shoulders. “Derek,” she tried again.

“Stop it,” he pleaded.

The people sitting one row up turned at the commotion.

“Noah Cunningham died saving my life. He stood in front of me for the third shot. I will never
forget his sacrifice, and I'm grateful for every extra day I've been given,” said Ben. He looked down at the podium.

Derek snapped into motion. Meredith didn't try to get out of the way as he crawled over her. She knew she'd just trip him if she moved. His knee jabbed her. He clawed at the arm of her seat closest to the aisle. And then he was gone. Bolted. The door moaned to announce his swift departure. People turned to see what had happened. There was nothing to see.

Derek had fled.

She gathered her purse, scooted out of her chair, and went after him. He'd moved fast. She didn't see him in the hall. A lump formed in her throat as worry crashed into her brain. Her mind raced. She had no idea where to look first. Would he have gone back to the car? Or maybe his office. Which one? The old one, or the Chief's office? Or...

On a whim, she shoved through the men's room door where he'd twice retreated earlier. She figured she had as good a chance there as anywhere else. “Is anybody in here?” she called as she stood in the entryway between the swing door and the privacy barrier. The faucets dripped. She heard frantic breathing, but no one answered. “I'm coming in.”

Her heels clicked on the floor tiles, which were each framed with dark, stained grout. She passed the sinks. A short line of urinals. The air smelled damp. A rumpled roll of toilet paper spiraled out from one of the stalls closest to the exit. She bent down and stared under the doors of all the stalls. She winced when she didn't see a pair of feet, but an entire body folded on itself. Derek. On the floor. Back in the corner of the large stall for those with disabilities. The door hadn't been shut.

She approached, and she pushed the door out of the way. The hinges whined. Her fingers slipped along the cool metal of the door as she passed. He didn't look at her, but his eyes traced the movement of her feet. He peered over his knees at her shoes.

She tried not to grimace as she sat on the icky floor with him. This was more important than germs. “What happened?” she said. She touched his arm. “You were doing really great.”

A wry laugh broke loose from his lips. “That was great?”

“That was great, Derek. You sat through a lot of it. Way more than I thought you would.”

“I did.”

“You did,” she agreed, keeping her voice low and soothing. “Did you remember... things?”

He blinked. His glassy eyes widened. His hand wandered blindly at his collar as he swallowed. His voice dropped in pitch. “My head is pounding,” he said. He pressed his forehead against his knees, and a weird sound filled his throat.

“It's okay,” she said. She rubbed his back. “Breathe.”

“No.”

“Shh. It's okay. You're okay. You're alive, Derek. You're alive, and he's not. Okay?”

Derek nodded. Barely. “Okay.”

“You did really well,” she reiterated as she stroked him. “You're safe.”
“I swear I didn't try to push.”

Her lip quivered. That's what he was worried about? That she'd yell? He'd been fine. She'd watched him. He'd been panicky all of sixty seconds before he bolted. There hadn't been any warning. He'd been fine, and then, WHAM. Like a two-by-four to the face or a gushing epidural hematoma. Fine and then dead.


“I'm sorry.”

She ignored him. “Can you stand? This floor is disgusting.”

She held out her hand, and he took it. As he stood, she assessed him. He'd scuffed the knees of his pants. Dirt marred his black suit. His tie hung askew. He leaned against the wall for a second and closed his eyes as he gained elevation. She gave him a minute as he swallowed away disorientation. The Percocet made it hard for him to change elevations quickly. She wished he didn't need it anymore, and she worried that he did. But now wasn't the time.

She squeezed his hand. After a few minutes, he blinked. “Okay,” he said. And they walked out to the car.

Rain fell. The air smelled earthy and felt just a bit too cold to be called temperate. Gray reflections shimmered from puddles sprawled on the concrete. Drops of water plinked and split apart as they hit the hood of Derek's Cayenne. He pulled himself into the passenger seat with a wince. He didn't need help anymore. That was something.

She settled into the driver's seat. The car door slammed beside her. Rain pattered on the roof overhead. She didn't start the car. He rested against the window, breathing. She threw her purse into the back seat and sighed.

“I really think you should see Dr. Wyatt,” she said.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Can we not talk about this right now?”

“When would be a good time?”

He blinked as he watched the rain. “I don't want to see a shrink,” he said.

She reached across the void and touched his leg. She rubbed his left quadriceps through his pants. “It's been eight weeks,” she said. “You're better. You're so much better. But you're not fine, Derek. You're far from fine. And I don't think I'm giving you the help you need, or…”

He looked at her. “Or what?”

“I'm sorry I suck.”

His expression melted. “Meredith,” he said, and his voice dropped low and soothing like an old habit. “I love you. You're what I need. And you don't suck.”

She resisted the urge to let him comfort her. He needed to hear this. “I'm trying really hard, but it's not enough.”

He fiddled with the vents, though they weren't blowing. “I don't know why you stay.”

She shrugged. “I love you. We both signed the Post-it. I'm not going anywhere.”
“You said it yourself, you don’t even know me anymore.” He watched water stream down the windows. His eyes glistened in the muted, gray daylight. “I don’t know me anymore.”

“And that's why I think you should at least think about the therapy thing. I think it would help with that,” she said.

He sighed. She followed his blank gaze to Seattle Grace's main entryway. The sign didn't say Seattle Grace anymore. It said Seattle Grace Mercy West. Bodies dressed in black streamed from the doorways. The memorial must have finished.

She watched a small boy in a tiny black suit swing from the left arm of his mother and the right arm of his father over a deep puddle in the gutter. He shrieked and giggled, like he didn't know he was supposed to be somber. The mother scolded him, but even through the rain, Meredith thought she saw fire in the woman's eyes. Something happy. Not disappointed. The man laughed a rough, rumble-y laugh that told Meredith if he sang, he would be a bass. He swung the little boy onto his shoulders with a playful roar. The boy giggled again. He looked like his father.

Meredith wanted that. She recognized the woman from the Pedes ward. A nurse. Her name was Gretchen. Or... Grace. Grrr something. She didn't know the man.

“Please, Derek?” Meredith said. “Think about it?”

“What'd they say?” Derek mumbled, his voice thick with slurs and sleep as she entered his hospital room. She froze. He lay under thermal blankets, pale and quiet in the dark, and she could just make out the glitter of light reflecting off his pupils. His heart monitor bleeped and cast a soft glow over his bed.

“You're awake,” she said. “You promised you'd sleep.”

“Mmm,” he said. “I did. S'been hours.” His eyes dipped shut, and he swallowed. He seemed...

She tiptoed to the side of his bed. Every time she entered the room, she couldn’t get over how frail he looked. How unwell. Better than before. Alive. But sick. Hurt. She leaned over the rail and kissed him. His lips touched hers, but he didn't really participate, not that she expected him to. His breaths buffered the air, soft and shallow and raspy. She touched his forehead as a lump formed in her throat. Her fingertips met warm, dry skin.

“You should be sleeping,” she said.

“Mmm,” he said. Blankets swished as he stirred. The intravenous line moved as his hand shifted to the bed rail. Toward her. “Tell me how 't went.”

“I'm fine,” she said. “Everything’s fine.” She pulled the stool to the railing and sat beside the bed in the dark. Her eyes pricked with tears.

His head tipped in her direction. He gazed at her through his eyelashes. The rest of his body didn't move. He economized everything. “Not fine,” he said.

She blinked, and tears streamed down her face, unbidden. She sniffed. “Shut up,” she said. “You know what I meant. They said I should expect some more cramping and spotting, but that at this early stage, a D&C wasn't necessary, so I said no.”

Silence stretched into infinity, and she listened to the steady plod of his heart monitor to reassure herself. She stared at the intravenous line dripping fluids into his body. At the nasal cannula supplying him with extra oxygen. At the pulse oximeter clipped to his finger. So many things still...
telling her he was sick, even after three days. Had it only been three days? Not even, because it wasn't light out yet. She found his hand in the dark. She wrapped her fingers around his. His grip tightened against her knuckles to the point of causing her pain, but he still didn't speak.

“Derek?” she said, and suspicion tightened in her gut. “Derek,” she repeated. She leaned, and she touched his face with her free hand. “Derek, are you awake because you're in pain?”

A soft, suffering grunt tore his throat. “This should be about you,” he said.

“And that's very noble of you,” she said. “But let me find a nurse.”

A breath jerked in his chest, and he winced. “Meredith...”

“I swear, Derek. You're alive, so I'm okay. I meant what I said before.”

“M'okay,” he said. “Sit with me?”

“But the nurse—”

“Just sit,” he said.

He blinked and wouldn't look at her. The rain spattered on the windows. His cold expression had cracked, and she pressed onward with the vague hope that she’d made inroads. That he would give in if she kept talking. Kept reiterating. Kept pushing.

“I feel like a failure,” she said.

He jerked his gaze to her. “What could you possibly—”

“Because I'm trying,” she said. “I'm working my ass off trying to be what you need, but I'm clearly not enough. You're better, but you're not sleeping. You're supposed to be talking about things and working through them, but I can't get you to talk without practically threatening you at gunpoint, and I—”

He stared.

Tears welled in her eyes as she caught the sliver of pain in his expression. “I can't believe I just said that to you,” she said. “I'm sorry.”

“It's a figure of speech, Meredith. It shouldn't matter that you said it.”

“Which is exactly why you need a freaking therapist, Derek!” she snapped, and the floodgates fell open. She couldn't help it. She gushed, and she gushed, and she gushed. Everything came loose in a deluge of pent frustration. He made her so tired. He didn't mean to, but he did, and she needed to rest. “I'm prancing on eggshells around you all the time. You're supposed to make choices and not wallow. If I push, you act like I'm forcing you, but if I don't push, you don't choose. I have no idea what's too little and what's too much. I always feel lost with you. I'm trying to learn, but I—”

“He's sorry,” he tried to interject.

Which only infuriated her, and the gray world tinged red. “This isn't about apologies! Stop with your fucking guilt complex about everything! I'm so tired of you apologizing!” Her yelling echoed in her head. In the car cabin. Or maybe she imagined it. The sound of her own voice made her cringe. She felt like a harpy. But she couldn't... He needed to budge. An inch. An inch, and she'd be happy. Silence spread in her wake. She sniffed and wiped her eyes. “Is it me?” she said.
“Is what you?” he said.

“The reason you won't talk. Is it me? Am I doing something wrong? Am I being an insensitive freak too much? Is there something I can change?”

“You're not doing anything wrong,” he said.

“Then what's the problem?”

“There's no problem.”

“There's a problem, Derek,” she insisted. “You're not talking to me. You're not talking to Mark. Unless there's somebody else I don't know about, you're not talking. You should be talking.”

“I am talking,” he said.

“Well, it's not enough,” she said. “You need somebody you can tell everything to. Maybe Dr. Wyatt is that person. Or maybe it's somebody else. Some other therapist I've never met. I don't care who, but you need to see somebody.”

“I do tell you everything.”

“Do you Derek?” she said. “Do you really? What about nightmare number two? I didn't even have a clue until today that you still felt guilty about everything. I still don't know what set you off at the memorial. And you're trying to hide pain from me by not telling me when you take pills. In what universe can you call that telling me everything?”

He looked away. “I don't want to fight.”

“Then promise to think about the therapist!”

He swallowed, and his expression broke. His elbow thumped against the side of the door. He leaned against the window. “You're not a failure, Mere.”

“I feel like one.”

He looked at her, his shoulders slumped, his pallor like chalk. “I'm terrified,” he said. “Every moment of every day. You're the only reason I get out of bed in the morning. Stop calling yourself a failure.”

Her tongue felt thick in her mouth. She sniffled, and she wiped her face. “Derek...”

“It's pathetic,” he said. “I know I'm pathetic. But that's not your fault.”

Tears fell. Both his and hers. Heartbreak drove her into motion. She got out of the car. Water fell down on her like she stood under a shower head. She walked around to his side of the car. Her feet splashed in puddles. She wiped water from her face. Salt burned her skin. People in the parking lot looked at her. She didn't care. She yanked on his door, and she leaned inside, pressing into his space.

She wrapped her arms around him. He shuddered in her grasp. His mouth found her neck. His lips rested against her skin, but he didn't kiss her. He inhaled, and she felt his fingers clutching at her back. “I should be able to fix this,” he whispered.

She tightened her grip. God, damn him and his sense of... his need... to do things himself. He'd twisted this into an exercise to prove his own lack of worth. Rain fell into the gap between the door

“Going to a therapist isn't admitting failure,” she said. “I did it twice, now. You just said I wasn't a failure. So, which is it? Am I a failure, or aren't I?”

“I don't think you're a failure.”

“So, stop with the freaking double standards,” she told him. “You're not pathetic. But you're acting pathetic, Derek. You're rolling over and letting Gary Clark win. He's winning.”

She pulled her fingers through his hair. His pale expression reddened to a deep scarlet. He curled in her grasp. She pressed on, wondering when their relationship had become the Battle of Midway or whatever. She'd never had to fight so hard in her life before he'd been shot. Exhaustion made her head ache.

He needed help. He needed to admit it.

“If your fear was a tumor that Dr. Weller or Dr. Bailey or whoever could cut out, wouldn't you get help?”

He didn't answer.

“Well, it's the same damned thing, only metaphorical. Get your freaking tumor fixed.”

Rain spiraled down from the sky. Car doors slammed. Water sprayed from the tires of a passing vehicle. She wiped strings of wet hair out of her face, and she spat water. He stared at her. For a long moment. She couldn't read his expression.

He blinked. “Okay,” he said, his tone broken, like he'd just admitted to something shameful. He pulled the seat lever. She snapped back as his body lowered. He rolled onto his side. The seat moaned. He lay facing the interior of the car. Away from the rain and her and everything.

“Okay, you'll go?” she said, almost unable to believe he'd listened after she'd worked so hard. He'd put a hand under his cheek. She watched the slope of his body as he breathed. “I'll think about it,” he said.

She wished they were home. She wished he wasn't in a cramped car seat. Screw it. She would fit. He'd rolled, which left her room to gain a foothold. She grunted, and she pushed into the car out of the rain, pulling the door shut beside her. The sound of the rain and the traffic and the people wandering outside world muffled. She spooned him. Cold from the leather seat soaked through the hip of her pants until she warmed it with her body heat. She rested along his length. They fit together. The cramped seat stuck her against his body like peanut butter to bread. But they fit, and she wanted the closeness anyway.

She stroked the side of his face as he stared. Away. “That's all I'm asking, Derek. Just to think about it. You're—”

“Naked,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I almost died.”

“But you're alive,” she assured him by reflex.
“Let me finish, Mere. Please.”

“Okay,” she said. “Okay, I'm sorry.”

He took a deep breath. She watched over top his slim body as his fingers picked at the seams of the seat. His nails made a chuck-chuck noise as he scraped them over the bumps of thread. Like he wanted to grip something, but he couldn't find anything. She reached across his body, and she grabbed his hands. He stilled. His grip solidified around hers. Warmth spread into her skin.

“He didn't kill me, but he took my life. I'm alive because he decided not to pull the trigger a second time. I don't know why.”

“But—” He tipped his head toward her, and she shrank beside him as she saw the flash of his right iris. “Letting you finish. Sorry.”

He sighed. The leather seat groaned as he flipped around. She pressed against the door with a thump to give him room, which still wasn't quite enough. They bumped and jostled. He winced as his hip jammed into the seat belt clip. She scrabbled for the head rest. She would have laughed on any other day. Right now, though? She just needed to see him. He needed to see her. And neither made jokes. When he settled, he stared at her, his dark eyes unfathomable.

“He took my life. My dignity. My choices,” he said. “I have you. And that means... more than anything to me that I do.” He put a hand on her hip. “I don't know why you stay, but you do, and I'm grateful for that. I am.”

I'm not going anywhere, she wanted to say again. She didn't understand why he couldn't believe her when she said it. But she stayed quiet. She let him finish.

He swallowed. “When we got married on the Post-it, there was you, and there was me. And we made...” He shook his head as though he struggled for an appropriate word. “We made a team. Or something. I don't know.” His gaze tore away as he took a breath. “But he took everything from me,” he said. He met her gaze, unblinking. His dark eyelashes hugged red-rimmed eyes. He reached up and wiped his face. “Now, there's you,” he said. He smiled at her. “And you're so strong. And I'm proud of you everyday.” His voice cracked. “But there's no me anymore, Mere.”

He took everything from me, he'd said. She bit her lip. She wanted to speak. To reassure him. To tell him that it wasn't true. But the look in his eyes kept her quiet.

“I had a panic attack at work in full view on top of everything else,” he said. “The only thing I have any control over anymore is what I say. The only privacy I have is in my head. The rest just happens to me. Over, and over, and over again.”


He blinked. “I feel like one. All the time,” he said. “I want to talk to you. I'm trying to talk to you. And I trust you. Implicitly. I just...” He shook his head. “Me not talking has nothing to do with how I feel about you, or whether you're doing a good job at supporting me, which you are. I'm having a hard time letting go of that last curtain. I need it right now, Meredith. Okay? But I'm trying.”

What curtain, she almost asked, and then memories swept over her like lapping waves. She remembered him on the couch. Crying.

The curtain came open, he'd said. I was so sick, I couldn't even cover myself.
Puzzle pieces assembled in a whirl around her head. She had edge pieces. She'd assembled all the colors that looked alike. A clear picture didn't seem so unobtainable anymore.

She stroked his arm. “What scared you at the memorial?” she said.

“I found a dead man by the admissions desk with his neck missing.”

_I don't even know who he was_, Derek had said.

“I remember,” she said. “You told me when we were in the waiting room for your followup appointment.”

“There were pictures on the stage,” Derek said. “I saw him.”

“Who was he?” she said. And then, in a flash of insight, she knew. “Was he the man who died saving that security guard?”

Derek looked at her for a brief moment. Then he shut his eyes. Rain pattered on the roof. She touched his shoulder. Her fingertips brushed his coarse suit jacket. She squeezed his arm. He lay limp on the seat on his side. She brushed his pale face with her hand.

“I just need it to stop,” he said as she traced the planes of his cheeks. His supple skin bowed under the pressure of her fingertips. His jaw squeezed. His temple fluttered. She felt his frustration underneath her hand like a road map to his psyche.

“Need what to stop?”

“This feeling.”

“What feeling, Derek?”

He swallowed. His eyelids lifted. Dull, defeated blue peered at her. “That I'm nothing,” he said. The puzzle snapped into place, completed.

Her lips parted. For a moment, she couldn't find words. Her gut churned with nausea, and she hated. She hated Gary Clark. The extent to which Derek felt dehumanized, emasculated, and powerless funneled fury into her chest. A single bullet had done all that. She couldn't breathe. His endless apologies, his dithering, his refusals to believe he was worth waiting for... They made a sickening, horrifying sense, now.

She'd hated Gary Clark before in snippets. Watching Derek struggle so hard over the past eight weeks had hurt her body and soul, and she'd needed somewhere far away to funnel that hurt. Gary Clark had been a safe target. An inviting target. _Does it make me a bad person?_ she'd said to Mark. _To hate a dead man so much I wish I could add some kerosene to whatever hell he's burning in?_ Those moments when she'd done her funneling didn't compare to this one.

She splayed her hand against his hip, and she squeezed. Hard. “You are _not_ nothing, Derek. You're the man I fell in love with. You're the man who proposed to me in an elevator decorated with miles and miles of case history on its walls. Those were all lives you saved, Derek. That's not nothing. You saved my friend's life. And me. You saved my life when you pulled me out of the water. That's not nothing. None of that is nothing.”

“I'm not that person anymore,” he said. “You said you don't know me.”
She blinked, rendered speechless. Just for a moment. She regathered herself, and she breathed. “I know you like strawberry ice cream,” she said.

“Coffee.”

“Whatever. Both. And I know you like The Clash, and fly fishing, and open space, and old books by Ernest Hemingway. I know you like to grill things, and I know you like crossword puzzles.”

“I don't like anything anymore,” he said.


He sighed. “Mere, I—”

“You love me. That's not new. And that's something. That's almost a fingerprint by itself. Not many people in the world love me.”

“Meredith...”

“Shut up,” she said. “This isn't a Meredith pity party. I'm just stating facts.”

“But that's not a fact,” he said. “That's ridiculous. I know lots of people who love you.”

She smiled at him. “And, see? You support me. More of the not new.”

His lips parted. She watched the argument form, but she kissed it away. He lay passive beside her. He inhaled, and he groaned as she touched him. She felt the vibration tunnel down her throat. His cologne swirled in the back of her throat. He smelled like rainwater and wet fabric. She tasted him. Her tongue touched his teeth, and then he parted for her. Another deep sound rumbled in his throat. A long, rolling m, perhaps a threadbare version of her name. Mere. He panted. His soft breathing touched her skin. She stroked his hair. And his neck. And his shoulders. And his side. All the sleek lines that made his body his and always thrilled her to touch.

When she pulled away, she stared into the endless, bewildered pools of his eyes. “And don't tell me you're not doing a good job,” she said. She licked her lips. She'd mashed into him hard enough that her lipstick had come off on his skin. He brushed it onto the backs of his palms.

“Meredith,” he said, like he still prepared to argue with her. She pushed her hand against his lips and covered his mouth.

“I don’t want to hear it,” she said. “You have extenuating circumstances, and you're doing the best you can do. I'd like to see anyone do better.” He looked at her, gaze almost drunk, and her heart quivered. She'd done that. With just a kiss.

“Bossy,” he mumbled into her hand. He kissed her palm.

She smiled and lifted her hand away. “You love it.”

“I do.”

“It keeps you in line,” she said, echoing a Derek from years before. One who'd smiled more.

His eyes danced despite his glum demeanor. “It does,” he said.

She brushed loose, damp hair out of his face. His curls slicked against his head. “You're still the same person inside, Derek,” she said. “Maybe you have a big, ugly, figurative tumor, but you're
still you where it counts. Would you tell a patient with a brain tumor that he's not him anymore when he snaps at his loved ones or cries at jokes?"

“No,” he said.

“You'd say it's the tumor talking,” she said. “I've heard you say it.”

“I know I've said it.”

She clutched his sport coat. “You're not nothing. And you're not a failure. Your tumor is talking. That's all.”

He sighed. “Meredith, it's not that simple.”

“Well, it's not that hard, either. Stop making this so freaking hard.”

He swallowed. The fight gushed out of him like blood from a sucking chest wound. *I really can't breathe, Mere.* She watched it happen. He stared at the gray world beyond her body, beyond the window. The muted daylight reflected in his irises, making his gaze seem glassy and tired.

“Would you take me home?” he said.

She kissed him again. “Yeah,” she said. She stroked his body one last time, and she relished the feel of him relishing her. He swallowed. His eyes glistened. He said nothing. But the look in his eyes told her what she already knew.

“I love you, he said but didn't say.

She pushed open the door and the sound of the rain made a crescendo. Rain fell through the gap, spattering her with chilly slivers of water. She blinked. The leather seat squealed as she relinquished it to Derek, who rolled onto his back to claim it.

She shut the door. She returned to her side of the car. She turned the key in the ignition. The car rumbled. She felt the vibrations for minutes. Derek stared at the ceiling. When he didn't move, when all he did was muse, she reached across his body and pulled down his seat belt.

He blinked as the latch clicked into place.

“It'll get better,” she said. She latched her seat belt as well, and then she pulled the car out of its space. She didn't turn on the radio. She let the vents blow warm-ish air. Not hot. The day outside wasn't that cold. But the water soaking into her blouse and sopping her hair chilled her, and now that she didn't lie next to Derek in the seat, she shivered. She pulled into traffic while he rested.

She entered the highway and accelerated. The wet pavement made a whooshing noise as it swept under the car. The engine vibrated. Concrete horizon churned underneath them.


She blinked. Her fingers tightened around the steering wheel. The leather pad on the wheel squeaked. “What are you talking about?” she said.

“Gary Clark,” he said. He raised his hands to his face and spoke through his fingers. “I kill him. I try to strangle him. I threaten to snap his neck. And then I shoot him with his own gun while I laugh.”

She shivered, not from physical cold, but at his cold, disgusted tone. He had a temper, yes. He had
a mean streak. But she found it impossible to imagine him perpetrating heartless violence. Words were his weapons. Not guns. The incongruity swam in her head, lazy, nauseating.

You are **so** in over your head, said the voice that had bugged her all day. She swallowed, trying to hold misery at bay. He was talking. He needed to talk. She could do this. The road beyond the car blurred until she blinked.

“Are you talking about your other nightmare?” she said.

He looked away. “I like it.”

“You like your nightmare?”

“No,” he said. “I like killing him.”

“Oh,” she said. She clenched her teeth. Oh. That was the best thing she could think of to say?

“I'm sorry,” he said. His apology wasn't like his others, where he spewed I'm sorry so often the words had sort of become meaningless. He meant something. Something deep.

She glanced at him. The flash of his profile filled her retinas before she had to look back onto the road. The traffic moved fast. Rain splattered everywhere. Misty air and her watering eyes made it hard to see. She decelerated, and she pulled into the slow lane to be safe, though it meant they would get home slower.

“No, he said. “I'm sorry for?”

He sighed and wouldn't look at her.

“What for?” she prodded.

The Cayenne pounded through the rain. The windshield wipers swished. A car cut her off as it changed lanes, but she didn't care enough to yell. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and then back to the road. Back and forth. Back and forth between him and the road. She wasn't being safe. She couldn't even pretend this was safe. They needed to get home.

“I'm a doctor,” he said, in an echo of before, what felt like days ago.

“So, what, Derek?” she said as a searing headache pounded behind her eyes. Exhaustion rolled through her. “I think wanting to hurt somebody who hurt you to that degree is pretty natural.”

He didn't speak. And in the silence, she found panic again. Not his, for once. Hers.

She'd begged him for weeks after the shooting to start talking. In the last three weeks, he'd broken his unending reticence. Today, she'd parted the last gates of his resolve. He'd gone from silence to gushing in the space of a day.

She'd wanted this.

But she hadn't been prepared.

She'd known he'd twisted himself in knots. She'd known the bullet wound extended far past the physical. Really, though? She hadn't known a thing.

You're so screwed, said the voice, and she wished it had a face so she could slap it. She gripped the steering wheel, overwhelmed by the intense desire for it to be Thursday. So she could run to Dr.
Wyatt and get help.

Help.

Meredith needed help.

They both needed help.

Dr. Wyatt had given Meredith her cell phone number to use in an emergency. Like if Derek suddenly decided he did want to die and got all wiggy with a scalpel. Or... Was this an emergency? She clenched her teeth. It didn't matter. She wanted to call that number.

“Do you think about it when you're awake?” Meredith said, trying to keep her voice even. She exhaled as she reached their exit.

The car veered as she followed the loop. “Sometimes,” he said.

She stopped at the light and turned to him. “Just him? Or other people, too?”

He swallowed. “Just him.”

She reached for his arm and touched him. “Did you read the packet I gave you after I told you about Dr. Wyatt?”

“No,” he said. Rain spattered on the windows. He looked at it. “I don't want to read it.”

She sighed, annoyance ruffling her. Why did he have to make this so freaking difficult? The light turned green. She accelerated. Momentum pushed her against the seat. “The very first paragraph talks about how survivors often fantasize about harming their attackers,” she said. “I really think it would help you understand what's happened to you if you would read it. You're not alone. You're not even weird.”

Not weird, she told herself. Not an emergency. No matter how disturbing it was to hear.

He said nothing.

“Are you okay?” she said.

He shook his head. Quick. Like the windshield wiper, except the movement was more muted. “No,” he said, and he sat up straight. “Stop the car.”

“What? Why?” She glanced at him. “We're almost home.”

“Just stop the car,” he said. He scrabbled at the door. “Stop it. Stop.” He gripped the handle. He opened the door before she'd even hit the brake. Traffic noise and rain gushed into the cabin.

She swerved out of traffic onto the side of the road. A car honked, and she flinched. He flinched. “Derek, what—”

The seat belt cut into his neck like a noose as he tried to escape. He pawed at it. The latch popped loose, and the belt swung back into the compartment in the wall. The metal buckle hit him in the face. He shoved it out of the way. He tilted his body out the door, and then he retched. Again. Again. Again.

She watched the red brick house with black shutters beyond the window. Her vision blurred, and the house became a mess of rusty-colored red. The engine hummed. Rain thundered on the roof of
the car. She leaned, and she rubbed his back. “Derek,” she said. His muscles strained and relaxed under his sport coat as his stomach forced him to empty himself.

The spasms stopped after what felt like five years, but he didn't lift his head from the gap formed by the open door. He breathed. She watched his torso as he inhaled. Exhaled. Inhaled. Exhaled. A car drove past them, and the Cayenne swayed. He gripped the door handle. His knuckles turned white. He retched again.

When he raised his body, he held his left hand to his mouth. He sniffed, and a wet, bubbly sound filled his sinuses. He swallowed. Again. Again. Again. After a long moment, he pulled the seat lever. The back of the seat popped up. He fell back. They collided.

He shut the door, and the roar of traffic fell away. He re-clipped his seat belt. “I don't feel very well,” he said.

“Oh, okay,” she said. “Hang on. We're almost home.”

He rested against the window with his eyes shut as she navigated the Cayenne through the last few turns. The Cayenne churned gravel and bounced, and as she pulled up to the house, she sighed. She turned off the ignition. The car rumbled to a halt.

“We're here,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“No,” he said. But he didn't elaborate.

She resisted the urge to help him as he fumbled with his seat belt. His movements elongated and stretched, like it took him real mental effort to keep going. He slid out of the car, and he walked toward the house without talking to her. She watched him move across the front lawn. He didn't battle the rain, didn't speed up. By the time he reached the porch, his suit had soaked through. He disappeared through the doorway.

A deep, aching sense of tiredness seeped into every joint and muscle, and she sat for a while in the car in the rain. Numb. Or wishing she was numb, really, and instead, just aching.

It hurt. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt. It hadn't hurt much the last few days, but today she wanted to scream and never stop. His sisters and mother had gone to dinner, and after hours of trying to hold herself together all day, she let herself dissolve into a shaky pile. The reading chair by Derek's bed cupped her weight in all the right places, but it wasn't comfortable. Nothing was comfortable. Her muscles whined in protest. She squeezed her eyes shut and cradled herself. Late afternoon sunlight falling in through the window doused her in a warm bath. Except the light felt hot and icky. Tears she didn't want spilled loose. What was wrong with her? Freaking hormones. Freaking...

When she heard him return, she tried to smile and look fine. Fine, fine. She could do fine. She wiped her face with her hands, brushed stringy hair from her eyes, and stood, only to wobble. “Hey,” she said. She crossed her arms to make her swaying appear deliberate. “How was your walk?”

Derek pulled his intravenous line along with him as he shuffle-stepped into the room. The wheels squeaked. He moved with slow, deliberate, sliding steps where he barely lifted his feet off the floor. A grimace carved his face, and his pallor looked bad. He wore an old t-shirt, flannel pants, and some Adidas flip flops that made squishing noises with his half-strides.

“Hi,” he said, his greeting clipped between pants of exertion. He didn't look at her, and he didn't answer her question, as though he couldn't focus on talking or thinking or much of anything when
he had to move his feet. He pushed himself to his bed and collapsed.

“Do you need anything?” she said.

She didn’t mean to sound falling apart-ish, but she must have, because he blinked. His head turned. His eyes widened, and his fingers tightened around his IV pole. “Meredith—” he said. He didn't even let himself finish her name before he tried to push himself back to his feet. His breaths rattled in his chest, and his face creased with discomfort.

“Don’t get up,” she said. “I’m fine.” She rushed to the bed and sat next to him to keep him from trying to get up anyway.

He swallowed as he looked at her. “Meredith,” he said again, and she couldn't hold it in anymore.

“It hurts,” she said, which made her feel like a freaking hormonal crybaby whiner, because he was sitting there on gallons of painkillers and shaking and, from the look on his face, feeling a bit nauseated by the mere act of sitting up. She cried anyway. All over him.

“I’m here,” he said.

She sniffed. “Me, too.”

He didn't say any other words. He wrapped his arms around her, and they hurt together.

Meredith shook the memory loose and grabbed her purse from the back seat. She darted through the rain, holding her purse over her head. She stumbled through the doorway and closed the door behind her, panting. In a few moments, she'd gone from damp to drowned rat or something. She slicked her hair out of her eyes.

The alarm by the door shrieked at her. She turned. The green LED display said ten seconds. Ten seconds until what? And then she realized he hadn't disarmed the alarm on his way past. She launched herself at the pad and tapped numbers as fast as she could remember them. Wrong. Wrong. She managed to enter their code at the last moment before the police would be called.

She sighed as her heart rate slowed. She hated that thing, and she hated herself for suggesting it. Hated. She plodded toward the kitchen. She glanced up the long flight of stairs. The floorboards above her moaned. He moved around. She wanted to follow him. She did. But maybe he needed some alone time. She didn't know for sure, but he'd given some pretty clear mope-by-myself-please vibes on the way out of the car.

She took her time in the kitchen. She grabbed a glass of water and replenished herself. After giving herself five minutes, she followed him up the steps. She needed to change out of her wet clothes. The water had probably ruined the blouse. She couldn't care.

He stood at the sink in the master bathroom wearing nothing but his boxer briefs while he brushed his teeth, a sleek profile of pale skin in the relative dark. He stared into the mirror. She watched his eyes trace the ugly red line trailing down his sternum. The toothbrush stopped moving. His lips pursed. Toothpaste collected at he corners of his lips. He caught his own gaze for a long, silent moment, and then he looked away. His expression hollowed, and his eyes shifted out of focus.

The rasping sounds of his toothbrush resumed as she went to the closet to find something simple she could wear on the way back to the hospital. He spat into the sink as she pulled out a shirt and some jeans. Not the most fashionable statement, but she would be in scrubs again in less than an hour. Effort seemed pointless. She pulled off her wet blouse and replaced it with the dry t-shirt.
Derek hadn't moved by the time she'd pulled up her jeans. He stood at the sink, his hips pressed into the lip of porcelain. He moved, then, as she watched him. He seemed sluggish, and he grasped the door frame for what looked like balance as he passed by. He moved across the carpet, his feet thudding against the floor. He didn't comment at her presence, though he looked at her with a dull expression. He knew she was there.

He collapsed into bed on his side sort of like she pictured a sluggish bear would prepare for hibernation. Every movement looked as though it taxed him. He pulled the blankets over his body. The sheets rasped as he shifted. He curled under the blankets and buried himself to his chin, and then he sighed.

“Do you need anything?” she said. She couldn't help it.

“No,” he said.

She walked to the foot of the bed and stared. “Mark is stopping by after his shift. I need to go back to work.”

“Okay.”

She bit her lip. “Can I help?” she said, though she knew he would say no.

He swallowed. “The room’s spinning,” he said in a low-pitched, slurry voice. She blinked at his unexpected admission.

She put a knee on the bed. The mattress sank. She crawled across it and collapsed next to him on top of the blankets.

“Are you still feeling sick?” she said.

She pressed the back of her hand against his forehead. No fever. She didn't know what to do for him. She turned her palm against his skin, and she rolled her fingers back through his damp hair. She suspected today had just been too much. He'd worried himself so badly his body couldn't take it anymore, and, in the end, he'd worried himself sick.

She leaned closer. She moved her hand over his scalp and down the back of his head. He shifted under the blankets. He pressed his face into the pillow, and he breathed. She listened. She pulled the blanket away from his shoulder blades, and she touched him skin to skin.

“You're okay,” she said, and he shuddered.

He didn't cry. Not really. But he grunted. A sniffly, wet sound filled his head. He shifted under the blankets, and his hands popped out from his cocoon. He rubbed his eyes.

“I'll think about the therapist,” he said. “I'll read the packet.”

She embraced him. “You're okay. You'll be okay. You will. I promise.” He stared at her like he wanted to believe her. Wanted it desperately. She kissed him on the lips. He didn't reciprocate, but he didn't pull away. “I know you have sixteen freckles on your back,” she said.

He swallowed. “I do?”

“Yes,” she said. “Sixteen. I've kissed all of them. And three of them are below your waistband.”

The dullness in his eyes receded, just a fraction, as he shifted. His head tipped back, as though he
expected to be able to look at himself. She would have laughed at his perplexed expression if she hadn't just spent the morning watching him disintegrate. "What?" he said.

"Mmm," she purred. "Sixteen. Though I haven't cataloged them lately, because you don't like being on your stomach."

"It still feels weird."

She touched his face. "You're still you, Derek," she said. "Maybe your moods are harder for me to figure out, but I didn't mean you're literally a different person when I said it. And you're not a freak because you want to hurt somebody who almost killed you on purpose, no matter what the hell Hippocratic oath you took. Nobody is a saint. Okay?"

He stared at her. Rain fell on the roof in a percussive storm. Water splattered the window, and the gray light flickered through the rivulets of water cascading down the panes.

"Okay," he said.

She squeezed his shoulder. "And you're not a failure. You're not nothing. And I still love you."

She didn't blink.

He didn't speak, but he watched her. She kissed his forehead before she stood. She didn't want to leave. She wanted to crawl under the covers with him and help him forget the world existed, and that sucky people lived in said world. She wanted. Her head throbbed. She sighed as she glanced at the clock on her nightstand. She was due back for her shift in less than fifteen minutes. She didn't mind getting a little behind. But she didn't want to lose her freaking job.

She glanced at him. He'd closed his eyes. His breaths had evened. She wasn't even sure he was awake. She moved away from the bed, tiptoeing, though the floor of the old house still creaked with her movements. As she reached the master bedroom door and wrapped her fingers around the knob, he called after her.

"Mere?" he said.

She froze, and turned to face him. His dark eyes glinted in the dim light. "Did you need something?" she said.

He met her gaze, unblinking. "I love you, too," he said. "Thank you for staying."

Her hand tightened around the doorknob. She frowned.

He smiled. Not bright or gleeful, but a smile nonetheless. "I didn't mean that literally. Go to work."

"Yes, Meredith," he said. "I literally love you."

"Good," she said with a nod. "See you soon?"

He stared at her for a long, long moment. Rain pattered on the roof. He looked like he wanted to tell her something else, but he couldn't quite find the nerve, and she was done pushing for the day. His gaze softened as he took in the sight of her. She let him look.

"I really like that shirt," he said. Surprised, she glanced down at herself. The word Dartmouth stared back at her, upside down. He rolled. She looked back at him in time to see the blankets flip
up. He buried himself to sleep, and had she not known he'd been in the bed, she might have thought the lump of his body to be pillows.

She let him be.

She wished she had any idea what to do for him. Any idea at all. She could push him to do things for himself. She could listen while he talked. She could support him. She could be his partner. But none of that felt active or assertive or anything. She wanted something she could get her hands on and fix. Something that didn't involve making her feel like a nag or a horrible person.

As she drove her Jeep back to the hospital, she tried to think of something. Anything. She'd been looking at his time off from work almost like a vacation. But, perhaps, that had been the wrong mindset. Derek was a doer. Cancer patients needed things to do to keep their minds off their treatments. Maybe, that was part of the problem with Derek. He'd been left on his own to think too much. Nothing distracted him. Nothing allowed him to live for a few hours without worrying about guns and violence and bad things. The more he worried, the worse it got, and he never had a break from it, because all he did was sit at home and wallow.

She tapped her steering wheel as she pulled up to the last light before the hospital. Her windshield wipers swished, and the car swayed with the movements. She watched a haggard woman in a bright orange poncho jog across the crosswalk with a waterlogged, shaggy creature that was probably a dog, but was maybe a Muppet with teeth or a small, fuzzy pony. The woman didn't seem pleased about the rain. Neither did the Muppet dog. They both tolerated it.

As they made it to the opposite corner, the dog sat on his – or her?— haunches. The woman blinked into the rain and sighed. She jerked the leash once, twice. Even through the rain and her closed window, Meredith heard the jingle of the chain. The dog stood like a lumbering mammoth, or at least how Meredith imagined a mammoth would stand, since mammoths were extinct, and she really didn't know, and off the pair of them went. Orange poncho woman and pony mammoth dog disappeared into the mist or whatever.

It wasn't until Meredith had parked her car that the idea solidified in her head. Like a bolt of lightning, it hit her. Something for him to do. She yanked the keys from the ignition and dashed through the rain into the hospital. Something for him to do. She could work with that.

She changed into her scrubs. She finished her rounds in record time. The hospital still had record low admittance rates. People weren't using Seattle Grace unless they had to. Which meant she didn't feel guilty as she signed off on her last chart and wandered into the research library.

The small library had several computers hooked up to the Internet. Three other doctors sat in the aisles, poring over medical journals and research papers. The air smelled sharp, like the glue from new books. Pens made scribble sounds. People coughed and sniffed and made other people noises. One of the researchers chewed an apple. Meredith blinked, and she sat down by the window at the nearest computer. In moments, Google took her where she wanted to go. She lost herself, and time slipped away.

“What are you looking at?” Lexie asked, and Meredith jumped, torn from her reverie.

She blinked, and she wiped her eyes with her fingers. She glanced at her watch, only to discover hours had passed. How had hours passed? She'd barely sat down. Was it still today, even? Or... She looked out the window and squinted. The sky had dimmed, and the rain had stopped coming down in buckets, cups, or any other form of large-ish container. Drizzle misted the air, barely visible, and that was all.
Lexie squealed as she leaned over Meredith's shoulder. The noise slammed through Meredith's brain like an ice pick, and Meredith winced. “I love puppies!” Lexie said as she hijacked Meredith's mouse and began to click. Click. Clickity click. Until a small, adorable lump of gold fur stared back at them through the small monitor screen. “They're so cute. This one is cute!”

The Labrador puppy's tongue hung out of its mouth and lolled. With his black lips parted, and his head tilted to the side, the puppy wasn't grinning, but Meredith couldn't stop herself from anthropomorphizing. The little dog's left ear had a chunk missing, evidence of a rough start in life, but he seemed happy enough, now, and fascinated by the camera taking his picture. She couldn't help but imagine watching Derek doting over it.

He liked dogs. Well, all animals really, as far as she could tell, but dogs were his main thing. He would try to be macho about it, maybe for a few minutes. But with a puppy like that, she doubted even cocksure Derek Shepherd would last long, let alone Derek Shepherd, version two. She pictured him sprawled on the couch, draped in puppy, while he read his favorite Hemingway novel. And then she pictured him tossing a ball around. The puppy would yip and yap and dance, and they'd just...

Meredith sighed. Irresponsible thoughts, she told herself. No puppies. And she was crisscrossing her desire to see him smiling again with oh-my-god-it's-a-puppy cuteness hormones, which was bad, and girly. And definitely irresponsible. With effort, she pulled her gaze away from the picture.

“I'm not getting a puppy,” she said. “Do you seriously think I could fit a puppy into my schedule? Or Derek for that matter, when he goes back to work? They're like babies. I'd rather save my time for an actual baby.”

“I'd help walk it and train it,” Lexie said. “We had a little Sheltie when I was a kid named—”

“Lexie!”

“Sorry,” she said. She blushed, and some of her effervescence died. She pulled away from the computer and plopped into the chair next to Meredith. The wheels on the chair slipped, and Lexie pinwheeled before she settled. She pouted. “No puppy?”

“No. Puppy. Give me that,” Meredith said. She took back the mouse and returned to the minimalistic, blue-and-white page she'd been staring at. Seattle Animal Shelter. The page had been divided by animal types. Cats. Dogs. Birds. Other things. They even had a section for pigs.

“Then what are you looking at this page for?” Lexie said.

Meredith shrugged. “Pets are good stress relief.”

Lexie frowned. “Do you want a cat or something?”

“No, I—” Meredith blinked. “What's wrong with cats?”

Lexie's nose crinkled. “They're all... fuzzy. And evil. And they barf.”

“Dogs barf,” Meredith countered. “And they're fuzzy.”

“But cats barf with malice.”

Meredith snickered. “You really don't like cats, do you?”

“I hate cats,” Lexie said. She hooked her fingers and made a snarly gesture. “They claw your face
off with zero provocation, and they deposit headless mice in your slippers like it's some sort of gift. Do you have any idea what it feels like to wake up after two hours of sleep and step on a decapitated mouse that likely lived for hours before the cat finally had mercy and killed it? Well, I do. And when you scream, the cat looks offended, like you should, for some reason, enjoy a bloody mouse. It sucks. Who enjoys bloody mice? No one. That's who.”

“Cats do,” Meredith said.

“Cats aren't people!” Lexie snapped, eyes flashing. People looked up from their work all around, eyebrows raised. Lexie hunched in her chair, and her features flushed. “Sorry,” she said.

Meredith stared. “You have issues.”

“Cat issues,” Lexie corrected. Her lip curled with disgust. “Are you really getting a cat? Do I need to move?”

“Well...” Meredith let the silence stretch. Lexie's eyes widened with desperation. “No.”

Lexie glared. “You're mean. You're a mean sister.”

“Sorry,” Meredith said. But she wasn't sorry. Not really. “Derek likes dogs. I was thinking—”

“But you said—”

“I said no puppies. I was thinking we could get an older dog. We both like dogs. I liked Doc. And I think it would help Derek. Having a dog to train might help him cope a little.”

Lexie nodded. “It might give him a sense of control.”

“Lexie...”

“What?” she said. “I've read the packet. For Alex. Photographic memory, remember?”

“Oh,” said Meredith. She looked at her lap. She'd gotten used to defending Derek's privacy with sharp, pointy sticks.

“So, who's Doc?” Lexie said.

“I had a dog for a little bit a few years ago. He was a horrible dog, but...”

Lexie smiled. “But he was your dog.”

“Yeah. Well, he was Derek's dog in the end. I couldn't keep him. I didn't have time.”

“You would have time, now?”

“I have Derek,” Meredith said. She smiled. Even after more than a year of saying it, the words still felt weird on her tongue. They'd struggled for so long to make something lasting. “He managed with Doc.” She folded her arms over her chest and leaned back in her chair. “I don't know. Maybe it's a stupid idea.”

“How is Derek? I saw him at the memorial.”

“Lexie...”

Lexie frowned. “Right,” she said. “Taboo topic. Though, I'm assuming he's not well since he
extended his leave by two weeks, and also because I live with you guys, but I almost never see him.”

“I'm sorry.”

“He's my family, too, you know. You realize he's my brother-in-Post-it?”

“He's having a very hard time, and he's a very private person. I'm sorry,” Meredith said. “What do you want me to say?”

Lexie stared at Meredith for a long moment. She took a small breath. “Pets are proven stress relief,” she said as she put down her daggers. Meredith relaxed in her chair. “I don't think it's a stupid idea at all,” Lexie continued. “Plus, if you get a guard dog, maybe we can get rid of that awful alarm system.”

“Do you think it's irresponsible? Getting a dog? I messed up with Doc.”

“Well, that depends,” Lexie said. She folded her hands together. “Are you getting a dog to be Derek's pet project until he gets better, or are you getting a dog to be Derek's friend for life, and the pet project part is just a bonus?” And then she clapped her hands over her mouth and snickered. “That was a bad, bad pun.”

“Just a bonus,” Meredith said, ignoring Lexie's chortling. “We both like dogs. It would be something we could do together that doesn't involve suture kits. And we'll have lots of space, soon.”

“Space?”

“The new house.”

“Oh. Right,” Lexie said. She beamed, though the expression didn't touch her eyes. “Then, I think a dog would be great!” she said a little too cheerfully.

“I hope so,” Meredith said. She sighed. “This is my last idea. I don't know what else to do, and I'm at the end of my rope.”

“What happens to your mother's house when you move?”

Silence stretched. Meredith peered at Lexie. Meredith ran her fingers along the soft legs of her scrubs in an absent expression of energy. God, she hadn't even thought about her mother's house. Not in any sort of appreciable sense like what do I do with it now that I'm leaving?

“I don't know,” Meredith said.

“Will you sell it?”

“I hadn't... really thought about it.”

Lexie snorted. “That's nice of you.”

“I have a crap ton on my plate right now,” Meredith said. “Moving is the last of my worries.”

“But dogs are big on the list? I live at your mother's house!”

Lexie goggled, and she looked down. “Right. Right, I... Sorry. I...”

“I'll let you know when I know,” Meredith said. “I promise.”

“Okay. Is there anything I can do?”

“I don't think so, but thanks for offering,” Meredith said. She bit her lip. Lexie fiddled with her lab coat. She had thin, long fingers. Her nails caught on the fabric. “Do you have a preference?” Meredith asked, her voice soft. “On the house, I mean.”

“Well, I...” Lexie shook her head. For a moment, she seemed flummoxed that she'd even been asked, which made Meredith feel a little guilty. “Alex and I could rent it. I mean not as a couple couple. Just as a couple of people who rent in the same place. We're not ready to rent a house as a couple. That would be—”

“Lexie?”

“Yes?”

“You babble worse than me.”


“I'll think about it.”

“The dad gene?”

“About renting it to you,” Meredith said.

“Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

Meredith sighed. “So, what kind of dog should Derek and I get?”

Lexie took back the mouse and began to browse the site while Meredith mused. Meredith didn't even know if Derek had a favorite kind of dog. She would have to ask him when she got home. He wouldn't want a dog that barked a lot. Or a little yappy ankle-biter dog. He would want a loyal, friendly dog who would go for walks with him but also be happy to laze about and watch him fish at the lake. And, given her project idea, the dog would need to be the kind that would respond well to training, rather than looking dumbly around whenever it received a sit command.

“What about this one?” Lexie said. “He's cute, Mere.”

“You shouldn't get a dog just because he's cute,” Meredith said as she gazed into space. “I mean, you have to think about breed characteristics. Is the dog trainable? That's important. What kind of dog is it? A guard dog? A watch dog? A lap dog?”

“I will laugh my ass off if you get Derek a chihuahua or a toy poodle.”

“Maybe a rescued greyhound,” Meredith said. “That's pretty noble.”

Greyhounds were big, fast dogs. Her neighbor had owned one when Meredith had been a kid, and his favorite thing to do had been to run away at full speed, turn around, and charge at Meredith from fifty feet away. When she'd been several feet shorter, having the fastest dog breed on earth streaking toward her at full bore had been terrifying, but it had been a good sort of adrenaline-spike terrifying. The dog had always veered at the last second, and she'd laughed and laughed. He'd been a sweet dog. With big brown eyes and a brindle coat and a long, whip-like tail that had always
sported a snoopy band-aid at the tip because he kept thwacking it into things and cutting himself. She stretched the memory as far as it would go, but she couldn't remember the dog's name, and a brief well of sadness rolled through her when she realized the dog was, by now, probably dead.

She shook her head. She could picture Derek with a dog like that. Taking the dog for walks. Playing. It would be a big dog, but gentle. One that would never bite or bark. One that liked to play hard for a little while and crash hard afterward. Greyhounds tended to like lying around when they weren't sprinting, and she imagined one would be perfectly happy watching Derek fish if it had a nice bed from which to do it.

“Seriously, Mere, you should look at this dog,” Lexie said.

“No greyhounds train well?” Meredith said. “I wonder if they make good guard dogs. Derek would want a guard dog, I think. Or are they—” She glanced at the screen where Lexie had been urging her to look. Adorable eyes the color of mocha stared back at her. “—really, really cute,” she finished.

Lexie grinned. “Told you.”


“McPerfect?” Lexie said.

Meredith couldn't disagree.
Gunfire woke the sleeping baby in her arms. The baby began to wail.

"Derek!" Meredith said as she watched across a white void. He toppled onto his back on the floor. He lay on the ground in a blooming red puddle, staring at the ceiling. He swallowed, and his lips worked in a chewing motion, but no words spilled from his lips, as though he were too shocked to yell.

"Derek," she said. "Hang on!"

She took one step through the billowing fog, and the baby screamed in her ear. She winced. She couldn't run with a baby. "Cristina, would you take it?"

"It?" Cristina said, her voice flat. She raised her eyebrows.

"The freaking baby!" Meredith said. "It's screaming, and I have to save Derek, now."

Meredith didn't wait for a response. She shoved the bundle of blanket and baby at Cristina, and she ran. She ran through empty, endless white, but she knew he was there. That way. The fog parted, and she found him. Sprawled. Bleeding. Dying. She skidded to a stop by his prone form. Her knees burned on impact with the floor. Blood splattered his blue shirt. The puddle of red beneath his body spread.

"Derek, it's me," she said. "You're going to be fine." She pushed his useless, bloody hand away and pressed her palm into the wound. She tried not to wince at the wet, fleshy sound as her skin met his shredded insides. His torso jerked like she'd scalded him, and he yelled, only to end in a cough. Two coughs. Rattling, breathy coughs that stuttered from his lips as his lungs filled with fluid. He fought for air.

"Please," she begged him. "Please, don't die. Please, Derek. You can't leave me."

Pained, blue eyes stared, not at nothing. At her. "I can't breathe," he said, his voice a croaky remnant of the soft, silky tone she'd fallen in love with. His skin turned sallow. He coughed again. A line of red formed where his lips pressed together, and then a drop of blood spilled like a tear down his chin.

"Help is coming," she said. "Don't die. Please, you don't get to die."

"Where's the baby?" he said. "You shouldn't be alone."

She froze. Her hand pressed into the wound, and he groaned. His head tipped back, and he thunked his skull against the ground. "Sorry," she said. "Sorry!" She swallowed. "Cristina?"

No answer. Meredith heard only his panting. She looked around, but the fog thickened oppressively, and she saw no one.

A lump formed in her throat. She grabbed his hand and squeezed. He had no grip. "I think I lost it," she said.

"I guess you did," Derek said. He brushed off his shirt and sat up. The blood had disappeared.

Derek wasn't in the bed with her anymore.
She groaned and rolled as her weird dreams slipped away. The covers rustled. Warmth grabbed her body and pressed in like a cocoon. She swallowed and winced at the dry, pasty feel of her mouth. How long had she slept? She groaned again. She mashed her face into the pillows and breathed the soft scent of sleep, sleep she didn't possess anymore because it'd freaking left her. Her nose crinkled, and, at last, she gave up. She breathed, resigned to the fact that she was awake. The lingering scents on the sheets of Derek, and sex, and sex with Derek relaxed her, and she breathed again. Again. Thoughts began to process.

Why wasn't Derek in the bed with her anymore?

Darkness became a crescent of dim sunlight as she cracked open her eyelids. She peered over the white plane of sheets, an empty space blurred by her eyelashes. She blinked. Derek's Oxycontin and Percocet bottles sat by his alarm clock, obscuring the time. The Percocet cap skewed to the side, evidence that it hadn't been screwed shut properly, evidence that it'd been used. The sheets and blankets on his side of the bed lay in a disturbed torrent, as though he'd woken up thinking they were vines trying to yank him into the mattress, and he'd clawed himself free. She rolled onto her back and glanced blearily at the clock on her side of the bed. The red, blurry face began as a mess and resolved into readable digits. 11:30AM.

She sat bolt upright. How had she slept so late? Today was d-day, and the shelter opened in thirty minutes.

She scrubbed at her eyes and face until her skin burned, and then she flipped back the covers. She paused to listen. Nobody stirred. In the far distance beyond the window, she heard a lawn mower. A passing car. Several barking dogs. Birds. But she heard nothing from inside the house. She stood, and she scrunched her toes against the worn carpet. She swept messy hair away from her face and moved.

“Derek, are you up here?” she said. Her voice arrived croaky with sleep, and she cleared her throat. “Derek?” No water running. No closed doors. He wasn't in the master bathroom or the shower across the hall.

She stumbled down the steps, not quite awake enough to counter the force of gravity, and peered into the living room. He liked to mope in the living room. He would stare at the television without watching. Or stare at his book without reading. Or... She looked at the empty couch. No Derek. She checked his office next. Again, no Derek, just his solitary desk and shelves and shelves of books and folders. She didn't find him as she wandered past the open gate into the kitchen, either.

Alex and Derek had fenced off both the kitchen and the dining room with baby gates. The big dog crate they'd gotten rested in the corner of the dining room. Empty bowls rested on a vinyl place mat on the floor by the center island in the kitchen, waiting to be filled with food and water. Lexie had put a huge box full of toys in the corner by the fridge.

Piercing the cobwebs of sleep, an excited thrill ran through Meredith's body as she stared into the toy box. A squeaky fake steak sat on the top. A small rope with a looped handle on both ends rested underneath. Lexie had gone a bit overboard with her assignment to find their future dog some good entertainment. Under the rope and the steak rested a grinning rubber ducky, enough tennis balls for the US Open, and more stuffed animals and squeaky, rubber things than Meredith could count. They were not going to make a mistake like she had with Doc. The dog would have plenty to do and lots to chew on that wasn't furniture or shoes.

“Derek?” she said. No answer.

An empty frying pan sat in the sink, soaking. The faucet dripped. The warm scent of waiting coffee
tickled her nose. Her stomach rumbled. Deterred from her search for Derek by hunger, she opened
the fridge to grab the milk carton for a quick bowl of cereal, but stopped short as her face met a
dinner plate stacked five high with six inch, golden-brown pancakes. Shrink wrap covered the
plate, and a small yellow sticky note had been stuck to the top. 45 seconds on high, the note said in
nearly illegible doctor scribble. Derek's handwriting.

He'd made her breakfast. A smile tore across her face before she could stop it. “Derek?” she called,
and her voice filled the empty house like a thunderclap. Only silence answered.

She pulled the plate out of the fridge, tore away the plastic wrap, and put the plate in the
microwave. She tapped in 45 seconds on the timer and hit start. While she waited, she grabbed the
syrup from the pantry and a fork from the drawer, and poured herself a cup of coffee – Derek's
favorite Irish crème blend was already warm and in the pot. The timer dinged, and she grabbed her
pancake bounty from the microwave.

Breeze hit the window panes with a low whistle. Sunshine fell into the room at a slant,
unadulterated. Not a single cloud marred the sky. A smile broke her face as she peered at
the endless azure beyond the trees. The universe and her plans seemed to have aligned for once. The
weather for d-day was perfect.

Except d-day would not really work so well without Derek.

Where was Derek?

She took a bite of the pancakes as she padded back through the main hallway. Sugar, a hint of
maple, and multi-grain batter split apart on her tongue. A whine of pleasure tumbled through her.
He made really good pancakes. Though he didn't make them from scratch, he didn't just dump
batter into a mixing bowl from the Bisquick box like she did, either. She'd watched him once.

You put honey in the pancake batter? She'd said as she'd raised herself onto the counter top and sat
down. He'd stirred a bowl of cream-colored batter by her hip. He'd worn loose flannel pajama pants
and a rumpled blue shirt. His hair had stuck up all over, and he hadn't shaved yet. He'd looked
rough to kiss, but... delicious.

Yes, he'd said as she'd licked her lips.

I don't think honey can save that recipe. It's all... healthy. Like bran. There's a reason I don't eat
bran muffins.

Just try it, he'd said with a smirk. Don't you trust me?

We just got married, she'd said. We have no pancake trust.

Pancake trust?

Yes. Trust that you won't ruin my pancakes on the one day a week I have time to make and eat
them.

“Derek?” she called again as she moved into the foyer. Silence.

She opened the front door, and before simple curiosity had a bloody crash with worry, she found
him. He sat hunched over a book in the swing on the front porch, wearing jeans, fluffy white socks,
and a maroon-colored t-shirt. The cool breeze ruffled his hair, and the swing swayed in moving air.
The book rested flat on his lap. His cheek mashed against the swing support. His eyes were closed.
She bit her lip, torn between waking him up or letting him be. She wanted to sit down to enjoy her pancakes with him, but she didn't want to surprise him, either. “Derek,” she said, but he didn't budge. Indecision tore at her as she remembered the disarray of sheets on their bed. He looked pale. A bit haggard. She didn't want to interrupt him when he'd managed to fall asleep, d-day or not.

A pickup truck made the decision for her. Her neighbor two houses down started his big Dodge Ram, and as the powerful engine turned over in the nearby driveway, Derek flinched, and he blinked awake a bit like he'd been shocked with a cattle prod or something. His book careened to the ground with a smack. A weird sound caught in his throat, something halfway between startled and outright distress.

“It's okay,” Meredith said. “It's just a truck.”

He stared at her as though he saw her, but his brain hadn't made sense of her yet. “Derek, it's me,” she clarified. She didn't move toward him or move at all, really. She didn't want to look threatening. Her fingers tightened against her plate and her warm coffee mug. “Derek, wake up,” she said.

He blinked once more. He breathed and stared as the blue truck pulled out of the nearby driveway. As it drove in front of her mother's house and down the street, sense seemed to return to Derek's gaze. Recognition pierced some of the clouds in his eyes. And then his posture relaxed.

His face turned red. He bent to pick up his book. “Morning,” he said in a soft voice as his arm extended. His watch flashed in the sunshine. “Sleep well?”

“Hey,” she said. She plopped down onto the bench next to him and took another bite of fluffy pancake. “I slept... weird. These are really great,” she said around her mouthful. “Thank you for breakfast.” The words arrived muffled. She tried to chew.

He shrugged. “Sure,” he said. He righted himself. She glanced at the book, but couldn't catch the title. “Slept weird?”

She chased the pancakes down with a gulp of hot coffee. She grimaced as her throat and stomach heated, and her tongue burned. A little too hot. She blew over the lip of the mug. The surface of the liquid fluttered. “Weird dreams,” she clarified. She shoveled another bite and chewed. “I'm sorry I slept so late. I don't know how that happened. How long have you been up?”

“A while,” he said. “It's fine. Bad dreams?”

“Just weird,” she said.

His eyebrows raised. “About?”

She bit her lip. She didn't want to tell him, because he would take what she was saying and twist it into yet another thing that was his fault, which he'd been doing way too much lately. But not telling him would make her feel like a freaking hypocrite. “You got shot, and you were dying,” she said. “The baby was screaming. I gave it to Cristina and ran for you. And then you were fine, but I couldn't find Cristina or the baby.”

His head tilted, and his shoulders slumped as he regarded her. “Meredith,” he said.

“It wasn't some metaphorical crap or a window to my hidden pain or whatever. I swear,” she said. “It was just weird, and I'm fine now that I'm awake. Honest. You're alive, and I'm happy, but you asked what I dreamed about, so I told you. Golden rule. That's all.”
He looked at the street beyond the yard, and when he didn't reply, she put the plate by her hip and sighed. She searched for any sort of twinkle or excitement in his gaze and found none. Dark circles hugged his eyes. He looked tired. Tired like he looked when he came home after an endless shift. Tired like he looked when he lost a patient. She wrapped her arms around him. He didn't resist. He leaned into her. A lump formed in her throat at the sense of fatigue that washed over her from him like high tide. She stroked his shirt.

“Do you want some of my coffee?” she said.

He breathed against her shoulder. “No.”

“Nightmares again?” she said.

He didn't answer, but he might as well have screamed yes the way his muscles tightened. Her eyes burned. This was d-day. He was supposed to be excited. Not ready to keel over.

“Do you want to take a nap first?” she said.

“No,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

His grip tightened. “I don't want to sleep,” he said.

The cool breeze blew. She swallowed. “When did you get up, Derek?”

He shrugged. “It was dark out.” Which meant he'd been up six hours, probably, if not more. He pulled away from her and wiped his face with his hands. “I'm fine. I'm tired, but I'm okay.” He smiled. For the first time that morning. A smile suited him. Even exhausted, even though it didn't quite reach his eyes, it made him look less haggard. He cleared his throat. “Finish your pancakes so we can go get our dog.”

“I hate that you can't sleep,” she said.

He kissed her, but he said nothing.

“Did you eat breakfast?” she prodded. He looked away. She frowned. “Derek, you really need to __”

“I didn't forget. I'm queasy,” he said. He swallowed. “Please, just...” Leave me alone, he didn't say.

She touched his face. “I really don't mind waiting if you want to take a nap.”

“I'd rather take a nap after we get a dog,” he said.

He stared at her, his eyes endless, tired pools of distress. Drop it, said his eyes. Drop it, please. Her gut twisted at his exhausted, upset look. She wound her thoughts back to the night before, wishing she'd heard him in distress back when it might have made a difference. When she could have woken him up and rescued him. But that was the crap thing about nightmares. They were in your head. He wouldn't necessarily have been making any noise. She'd slept straight through the night and well into the morning. She couldn't recall once opening her eyes and wondering why. He'd suffered in stealth.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she said.

He blinked. His eyes watered. “No.”
Now, he was awake. He wanted to not think about it. She could at least help with that. She hugged him again, mashing her thin body against his. His body heat pressed against her. He shuddered, unresisting and limp in her arms, until, after moments, he sighed. He returned the embrace. She kissed his ear, and then his throat, and then she shifted to meet his lips.

She grinned as she pulled away. “D-day today.”

He nodded. His muscles loosened. The chipped pieces of his broken expression re-collected like a puzzle put back together. He found a small grin. “Yes. I've been waiting all morning for you, you know.”

She hit his arm. “Why didn't you wake me? I wouldn't have minded.”

He shrugged. “You needed the sleep. The animal shelter isn't going anywhere. And it's not even open yet.”

She picked up his wrist and glanced at his watch. “It's open in a few minutes.”

“It'll keep a few more.”

“I need a few minutes to take a shower and get dressed and finish eating, but then I'm ready. I'll hurry.” She picked up her plate and resumed her pancake feast at inhalation speed to demonstrate. The pancakes had gotten a bit cold, but were still tasty even then. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” he said. He glanced at his socked feet and scrunched his toes. “Just need shoes and my wallet.”

“Okay, let me finish my breakfast, and then I'll go get ready,” she said. He read his book while she forked bite after fluffy, delicious bite and another and another, until she'd cleared the plate. She kissed him on the cheek. “Be right back,” she said. “You can have my coffee if you want; I'm awake. I don't need it.” She took her plate back to the kitchen and made a mad dash for the shower.

Her hair was still sopping as she returned to the swing with her purse in tow, and water soaked through her gray t-shirt to her bare skin. She shivered. He looked like he hadn't moved an inch except for the fact that he'd put on his black cross trainers and laced them. Her coffee cup had disappeared, too, though whether that meant he'd dumped it out or drank it, she had no idea. She clutched her purse strap.

He glanced at her. His eyes traced her dripping hair. “Hmm,” he said.

His book rested on his lap. She peered over his hands. Words sprawled before her eyes. Words she recognized. The Sun Also Rises. She hadn't seen that one since the hospital. She wondered if he'd picked up where they'd left off. She'd read about half of it to him over the course of his first and second hospital stays.

He closed the book with a smack, slapped his thighs, and stood. He stopped to watch as one of the neighborhood kids rode by on her wobbly pink bike with training wheels, and then he cleared his throat. “Ready to go, now?” he said. “Or do you need to dry your hair?”

She combed her fingers through the wet, tangled strands. She stared at the empty street in front of the house. No parked cars crowded the curb. Lexie and Alex had gone to work. Mark was on shift. Lexie had wanted to stay to meet the new dog, and she'd made sad puppy eyes about going in to work, but she'd gone. Eventually.

“My hair will dry in the car,” she said. “I'm ready. Let's get a dog.”
He grinned. A real grin, and that made Meredith grin. He placed his hand on the small of her back as they walked to his Cayenne. His touch comforted her. Reassured her.

He went to the passenger side before she could ask if he wanted to drive, which made her smile slip away. He never drove anymore. She eyed him as he opened the door. He hadn't seemed spacey while he'd been sitting on the swing, but she'd found she had a harder time noticing he was on something when he was already upset. *And he might have gotten better at hiding it,* a small voice said. She watched his fingers slide along the door handle, and, though the effect was subtle, she received the distinct impression of a man adrift in a solid sea. Like he didn't quite understand how his hands worked, or... something. Somebody who didn't know him well wouldn't have noticed. Mark might not even notice. But she did. Derek pushed his body into the passenger seat with a wince while she stared. Something cold slipped behind her heart and stabbed.

“Did you take something earlier?” she said as she climbed into the driver's seat.

He blinked and turned his gaze to her. “I'm supposed to take the Oxycontin every twelve hours, remember?”

Her eyes narrowed. No mention of the Percocet, which she knew he'd at least opened from the way the bottle had been disturbed. It'd been nine weeks. Nearly ten. He would be back at work for light duty in three days, at the official ten week mark.

He'd gone to see Dr. Altman at Meredith's request. He'd come home with a fresh Oxycontin prescription a week before. He'd been checked. Research had assured her that gunshot wounds could cause problems for months and months. Years. Forever. But those cases all involved nerve cluster injury. She'd seen his scans. His lungs and heart had been damaged. A hole the size of a dime had been shot through his chest wall. All muscle, bone, and organ damage. Not nerves. His pain shouldn't be so bad he still needed both Oxycontin and Percocet. She'd thought he'd only been taking the Oxycontin since his last visit, and that the Percocet was leftovers. But...

“I know, I just...” She shook her head. He'd been checked by specialists. She wasn't a specialist. “Never mind. I'm being stupid.”

He said nothing as she turned the key in the ignition, which made her skin itch with worry. He was usually the first one to tell her she wasn't being stupid, even when she really, really was. The car rumbled to life, and she shifted the gear into reverse.

She watched him clip his seat belt, watched his fingers slide over the clasp. Derek Shepherd was a surgeon. Seeing his hands move, less than precise, searching, not so much graceful as sloppy, even in the most minute terms... Wrong. All wrong. And why hadn't he mentioned Percocet when he'd clearly opened the bottle?

*I'm queasy,* he'd said. She'd assumed his nightmares had caused him anxiety. Taking too many Percocet could cause nausea, though. Taking too many of any narcotic painkiller could. And another thing the packet had talked about was the high potential amongst survivors for substance abuse as a coping mechanism. She'd let his behavior slide before in light of his clear physical pain.

But... ten weeks. Almost ten.

She touched his arm, and his gaze shifted to her hand. “What?” he said.

Silence stretched as she fumbled for something to say. Something that didn't sound wildly accusatory. Something that didn't sound like some sort of gross betrayal or lack of trust. Are you *really* still in so much pain you need two types of narcotics? How many pills are you *really* taking?
She couldn't think of anything to ask that wouldn't sound like she'd already tried him and found him guilty, even though she hadn't.

“I really love you,” she said.

“I love you, too,” he said without hesitation in that whisper-y lilt that made her heart patter and her lower body tighten with desire. His gaze softened on her face, and she swallowed as the truth of his statement stripped her bare. He loved her. The sky was blue. Fact.

“Meredith,” he said. “Are you really okay?”

His concern slipped guilt in like a knife. Idiot. She was being a paranoid idiot. They'd made it through two-and-a-half months of struggle. He talked to her about things. He was considering a therapist. He'd read the packet. Despite his behavior that morning, he ate. He'd regained his weight. He would tell her if something was wrong beyond the simple fact that he'd been shot. Beyond the fact that healing from a gunshot wound involved a marathon of discomfort stretched over months. He would tell her. If he said he was in pain, he was in pain. Fact. Just like love and blue skies.

And today was d-day.

She could worry on some other day, but not today. What day, though? said that awful, persistent voice. When you find him in cardiac arrest from an overdose? No. She made up her mind. Not today. He had a legitimate prescription that he was following for chronic pain. He wasn't even acting stoned, for crying out loud. She'd seen his grip slip on the door handle and run ten miles in her head with wild thoughts. Idiot. Paranoid. She put on her resolve face.

She flipped on the radio, she hooked her arm over the back of his seat, and she watched through the back window as she pulled out of the driveway. The low murmur of a commercial filled the cabin. He leaned back in his seat, and she couldn't help but scent him – a hint of ivory soap, aftershave, and the soft, reassuring musk that defined him. Warmth spread through her body.

“I'm okay,” she said, and she meant it. “More than.” They were getting a dog. They were starting a family. “We're getting a dog.”

He smiled. “Mmm,” he said. “We are.”

She guided the Cayenne down the street. The shelter was only a few miles away. It would take about ten minutes to get there. She didn't even have to hop on the highway. For the first block, they sat in silence, watching the houses and verdant greens pass by. Every street in Seattle had something green on it. From overhanging trees to bushes to quaint gardens full of flowers. Even in winter, conifers kept the colors alive even as other leaves died. But now, in late summer, every plant and flower had been thriving for months.

She came to the first stop sign and glanced at a trimmed hedge to her right. Cars rolled through the intersection while she waited for her turn. To her left, a white privacy fence spread around a house. A shadow loomed with in. She heard a bark greet the car. A dog, then. She smiled and waved at the mystery behind the fence. From the sound of it, the dog was neither small nor yappy. When she turned her eyes back to the road, she sensed his gaze on her. Derek watched her, his soft, unblinking stare resting on her body. A relaxed grin carved his features. Despite his tired paleness, he seemed content. Content to watch her be her.

“Have you owned a dog before?” she said as she cycled through the stop sign and continued driving. Scenery churned beyond the windows. “Other than Doc, I mean.”
His hand wandered along the upholstery. “I had a dog,” he said.

“What kind?”

He shrugged as the commercial ceased, and the beginnings of a drum beat tapped in the air, tinny and mostly beyond awareness. She couldn't identify the song. “Just a stray I picked up off the side of the road,” he said. “I found her abandoned in a broken crate.”

She smiled as she tried to imagine him managing a stray dog on his motorcycle. He must have had a car, too, then? Or, perhaps, this had occurred after his accident, and he’d had only a car and no motorcycle.

“So, you took in a stray before I knew you?” she said.

He winked. “Yes,” he said. “She was black and white with a patch around her left eye. She looked like some sort of border collie cross.”

A Buick passed the Cayenne going the other direction. The sound whooshed against the windows. “Was she a puppy?” Meredith said.

“Hmm,” he rumbled. “No, but young and still exhausting to own.”

“What was her name?”

“I named her Charlotte,” he said.

“Why Charlotte?”

“The patch around her eye always made me think of pirates, so I looked up pirate names.”

Another stop sign. She rolled the Cayenne to a stop. She'd become used to braking slowly to prevent jarring him, which drew her eyes to his body. He didn't use a pillow for support or protection anymore. She watched his body sway into the seat belt. He put his hand on the dash to support himself. The belt cut into him a little, but he didn't wince. Didn't grunt. Didn't seem uncomfortable whatsoever. See? said the voice she’d tried so hard to quell. He’s not in pain. Why would he be taking Percocet and not mentioning it? She gritted her teeth and tried to shove the thoughts away.

“There was a pirate named Charlotte?” she said forcing her brain back on the conversation.

“Charlotte de Berry,” he said.

“Was Charlotte an awesome pirate?”

He smirked. “Can a pillaging, plundering crook be awesome?”

“Fine,” she said with a huff. The engine rumbled. “Was Charlotte a horrible, dreadful, awful pirate?”

“She had a rather tragic tale, but she was spunky,” he said

“When did you own her?”

“I never owned a pirate,” he said.

She pushed at his shoulder. He grunted and brushed her hand away as he feigned hurt. Feigned.
The twinkle in his eyes and the erupting smile on his face told her he was faking. She couldn't have pushed him a month ago without hurting him, not without pulling every last ounce of force from the gesture. She could push him, now, without coddling. She could play with him again. That thought loitered, but she clenched her teeth, and forced it away.

“The dog, Derek,” she said.

“Hmm,” he said. “I was a second year resident. Addison was a bit mad when I brought Charlotte home.”

“Addison doesn't like dogs?” Meredith said.

“Addison does like dogs,” he said. “Or did when I was married to her, at least. But I didn't really discuss it with her first.”

Meredith couldn't stop the laugh that burbled from her lips.

He stared at her, a bewildered expression on his face. “What's funny?”

“It's just I've somehow convinced myself that you're a completely different person from your Manhattan incarnation. But that sounds just like you.”

He frowned. “I like to think I'm better trained, now.”

“I don't know, Mr. Let's-Make-Izzie's-Room-An-Office.”

“Ouch,” he said. He pressed his palm against his chest in a mock expression of pain. “Touché.”

“It's one of your less fun qualities,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows. A soft chuckle fell from him. “You mean I'm not completely perfect?”

“I know it's hard to believe, sometimes,” Meredith said. He leaned his elbow against the door and regarded her. His eyes twinkled, and a soft, small smile curved his lips. He seemed, in that moment, to exist outside of Gary Clark's influence. Blush crept across her face at his unblinking scrutiny. “What is it?” she said.

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“It's just... you make me feel perfect sometimes,” he said. His words bounced around the car cabin, and her breath caught at his sentiment. Even after more than a year of a committed, steady marriage, she still found reasons to be blown away. To know that she had such influence over another human being was, well, overwhelming. Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel. His face reddened as the silence stretched. He turned away. He shook his head and grunted. “That was corny.”

“That wasn't corny!” she insisted.

“It was a little corny, Mere,” he said. “Not one of my more suave moments.”

“Okay, it was corny,” she said. “But I officially don't care.”

“What about unofficially?” he said. “Unofficially is just as important.”
“Unofficially, I think it's kind of adorable.”

He snorted. “Meredith Grey thinks something is adorable?”

“Don't tell the dark-and-twisty club,” she said. “They'll pull my membership.”

“I won't tell the dark-and-twisty club if you don't tell the great-lines-to-say-on-a-date club.”

“This is a date?” she said.

“It's d-day,” he said. “We're here together. It's not dinner, a movie, or a craniotomy for two, but I'd say it's a date.”

She pushed her index finger into her thumb and drew her hand across her lip in a mock zipper motion, unable to stop the smile on her face from spreading wider as she did so. He grinned back at her. The air conditioning churned the scent of freon into the air, and the space between them fluttered with air currents.

“A date, then,” she agreed, and in that moment, she forgot everything.

Brake lights ahead of her flared. Her heart throbbed, and her stomach dropped in momentary panic. She gasped at the sight of the approaching solid ton of car sitting in front of them. She braked. The pedal hissed with the sudden motion. The Cayenne's tires skidded, and it slammed to a stop inches behind the car in front of them. Her seat belt dragged the breath from her body as momentum churned her toward the steering wheel. In the kaleidoscope of chain reactions, she heard him groan in pain. Real pain. Like when he'd been shot and struggling for air. Relief and shame crushed together in her head.

“Sorry!” she blurted. She glanced at him, even as the voice laughed.

“...You did that on purpose, didn't you? Just to see? Maybe...” Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel as she watched him.

“Are you okay?” she said. “I'm sorry.”

He swallowed, and he picked himself up off his seat belt. “It's okay,” he said. His voice sounded funny, and his pale face had paled a shade further. His lips pressed into a flat line, and he closed his eyes. His posture hunched, his shoulders curling protectively toward his injured chest. There was no way he was faking.

“I didn't mean to,” she insisted.


“I'm fine,” he said with a wheeze that rent her heart. “I just need a minute.”

She bit her lip as the car in front of her cleared the intersection. She pressed the accelerator and moved through the stop sign herself. She turned onto the final street. They were close. Assuming she didn't kill him on the way there. Idiot. Idiot, idiot, she cursed at herself. Her eyes pricked with tears at the realization that she'd intentionally hurt him. The Porsche logo on the steering wheel seemed to glare with recrimination at her.

“I'm really sorry,” she said again, helpless, as she tightened her grip against the steering wheel. She glanced at him. His expression had recovered. He watched the scenery pass by the windows. He didn't pant or wince. That made her feel a little better, but not a lot.

He shrugged. “You had to brake, Meredith. It happens.” She wiped her face with her right hand and couldn't stop a sniffl. His gaze shifted from the passing trees to her. His brow creased with concern. “Are you okay?”
“Fine,” she said.

“Meredith...”

“I didn't mean to hurt you,” she said in a small voice. “I'm sorry.”

Silence stretched as he regarded her. The hairs on the nape of her neck prickled under his scrutiny. “Meredith,” he said, “Are you sure you're... I mean, the dream you had...”

She didn't speak. The animal shelter came up on the left. The shelter was a medium-sized, single story building with a green awning and blue lettering. She turned on the left blinker and stared intently at the road ahead. No oncoming cars. She gunned the accelerator and pulled into the tiny, single-row parking lot. A scratched silver minivan sat in the space closest to the road. The Cayenne was a bit big to maneuver in the small lot. She managed to squeeze into the parking space farthest from the road, leaving a two space gap between the Cayenne and the minivan. She turned off the car, and the background sounds of classic rock cut off into silence. The car settled.

“We're here,” she announced.

He frowned. “Meredith—” he began, but he didn't have time to finish as a man and a woman exited the building with a bouncing, tail-wagging ball of happy energy. The scrappily tawny-colored mutt dog pranced at the end of the leash, his claws scraping on the pavement. The woman was heavy set with frizzy brown hair. The man was thinner but not thin. They both smiled, but Meredith didn't pay attention to that. Her heart squeezed at the sight of familiar, mocha-colored eyes.

“Derek, that's our dog,” Meredith said.

“What?”

“That's our dog,” she repeated. She watched as the man slid open the side of the minivan and guided the happy dog into the back seat. The dog yapped, and the man slid shut the door. The slam resounded in her head. Cars swished past on the busy road beyond, back and forth. “They're taking home our dog.”

“I'm sure it's just another dog that looks the same,” Derek said. “You called ahead, right?”

“I called after I saw him on the website,” she said. She gripped the steering wheel. A lump formed in her throat as the woman climbed into the passenger seat. The man walked around to the driver's side. The engine started. The white tail lights illuminated. The wheels inched backward. Through the tinted windows, Meredith watched the silhouette of the dog she'd seen on the animal shelter's website. She swallowed, and her eyes watered. “Derek...”

His hand touched her thigh. “Let's go in.”

“But, Derek—”

“Come on,” he said in a low, soothing voice. He popped his seat belt loose and opened his door. “Let's find out what happened.”

She watched, numb, as the minivan turned right and drove down the street. She watched until the animal shelter building obscured it. She imagined it barreling down the street to the light. It would turn right, and then it would disappear. Forever.

Her door opened, and Derek appeared beside her. His arms wrapped around her. “Come on, Mere,” he said. “I'm sure there's an explanation.” The reassuring scent of his aftershave swept over her.
She didn't speak as he leaned over her and un-clipped her belt. She slid out of the car. He hovered in her space and wrapped his arm over her shoulder like he expected her to fall over. Did she look that upset? She probably did. She swallowed. The lump in her throat swelled to the size of a softball, and her eyes burned.

She walked with Derek up a small flight of steps and through a glass door. The bell overhead dinged, and they were dumped into compact but bright foyer with a single row of chairs along the wall, and a desk with a computer and a receptionist at the end. Animal posters decorated the walls. Dog barks, from yips and yaps to deep, throaty bellows, interspersed with meows here and there, echoed in the air at a low, distant pitch.

The receptionist was a willowy woman with subtle wrinkles and age spots marring her light skin. She wore thick cuffs of gold bangles on her wrists, which jangled as she stopped typing at the computer and looked up. “Hello,” said the receptionist, who grinned. “How may I help you?”

Derek stretched out his hand and greeted the woman with a dashing smile. They shook hands. “Hi,” he said. “I'm Derek Shepherd.” He squeezed Meredith's shoulder and gestured with his free hand. “This is my wife, Meredith Grey. She called ahead about a dog she saw on the website, and —”

“And they took it!” Meredith blurted. “They took our dog.” Derek's grip on her shoulder tightened, but he said nothing.

“Who took what dog?” the receptionist asked.

“A couple just left with the dog Meredith called about,” Derek said.

“Hmm,” said the receptionist. She frowned. Through a blurry gaze, Meredith stared at the woman's name tag. Cassandra. “Oh, Lucky, right,” said Cassandra. She swept a lock of gray-dusted, black hair aside. “Yes, we just found his forever home today.”

“But I called about him!” Meredith said.

“Ma'am, I'm so sorry,” Cassandra said. Her voice was low and deep and rich and earthy. She sounded sincere, and her gray eyes expressed regret that, inexplicably, made Meredith want to claw off the woman's face. “We can't hold dogs for more than twenty-four hours,” Cassandra continued. She shook her head. “We have no way to know how serious a caller is until he or she shows up, and we can't pass up opportunities to place animals. There are too many who need homes.”

Meredith gritted her teeth. “Nobody told me that.”

“I'm really sorry, ma'am,” Cassandra said. “Do you know who you spoke to?”


The woman's eyebrows raised. “Marvin?”

“Yes, that's it,” Meredith said. She wiped at her face with her hands. “Marvin!”

Cassandra tapped something out on her keyboard and frowned as she read whatever popped up on her computer screen. “Well, Marvin did notate on the file that you'd called so that the dog wouldn't be euthanized.”

“He made me think you were holding the dog,” Meredith said.
“I'm really sorry, ma'am,” Cassandra repeated. “We'll talk to Marvin about it.”

“So, the dog is gone,” Meredith said. “He's just gone.”

“I'm so sorry. Would you like to see our other dogs? We have quite a few lovely animals who are looking for homes. I'm sure we could find one that's perfect for you and your husband.”

Meredith bit her lip as she stared at Cassandra. The woman looked truly apologetic, as if she understood that, to some people, pets were like children, or a dear friend, and a loss could be just as catastrophic. Except Meredith hadn't even met this dog. She'd only seen his picture. Her gut quivered as she remembered his soft, mocha-colored eyes staring at her from the picture on the website. She'd gushed over the picture with Lexie, and Meredith had called ahead specifically so something like this wouldn't happen. She'd known it would take at least a week for her and Derek to be able to visit the animal shelter together. She only had one day off a week, and sometimes those days didn't line up very well. She could get Sunday off one week and Saturday the next, for instance, making the space between her days off almost two weeks apart. It was luck of the draw, really, and she'd had crap luck that week.

She stared at Cassandra. She blinked. The sharp pieces of the room fuzzed. She blinked once more, and then she was crying. Like a freak. In the middle of the animal shelter. Over a dog she'd never even laid eyes upon.

“Oh, Meredith,” Derek said, and his grip around her tightened like a comforting cocoon. “I think we need a minute,” he said, his voice a low rumble over her head. She pressed her face against his shirt as blush exploded across her cheeks in a hot snarl.

“Of course,” Cassandra said. “I really do apologize for the confusion.”

“It happens,” Derek said. Just like he'd said when Meredith had slammed the brakes and hurt him.

Tears spilled in a deluge, and she couldn't stop. He moved her. She let him guide her, pliant. He backed her through the doorway they'd entered. Onto the outside stoop. Cars whooshed back and forth behind her. Breeze ruffled her hair with each whoosh. He shifted her around so his back faced the street. He rubbed her back, his body a warm, reassuring block against the cool wind. His fingers carved runnels into her damp hair. “What's wrong?” he said as he tried to soothe her. “We can find another dog. I'm sure there are dozens here.”

“But I wanted that one,” she said. “I thought...”

“Meredith,” he said, his voice low and worried. “Are you sure you're okay?”

“Do I look okay?” she snapped. “I'm crying like a freaking freak over a dog that was never ours.”

“You're not a freak,” he said. “I meant the miscarriage.”

Oh. She swallowed. “I... I'm,” she stuttered. Her throat closed up. He hugged her. “No,” she wailed.

“No?”

“I don't know.”

He sighed. “You put everything on hold for me,” he said. “Everything.”

“I didn't put everything on hold,” she said. She pushed away from him and clawed loose, scraggly
hair out of her face. She wiped her cheeks with her hands and sniffed. “I really meant it when I said I was okay. I've been okay.”

He raised his eyebrows. He touched her chin and tipped up her gaze to meet his. “This is okay?” he said.

“This isn't okay right this second, but I'm okay overall,” she said. “It just... I wanted that dog.”

“I know, but at least he found a home, and I'm sure he'll be really happy. He looked happy.”

“But he won't be ours!” she said.

He regarded her for a long, silent moment. The roar of cars bounced against the building and echoed back into the space between them. The breeze chilled her. He wrapped his body around hers again. She let him stay. She rested, cheek and ear to his chest. If it'd been quiet, she might have been able to hear his heart beat. She settled for feeling the warmth of his skin soaking through his shirt. His palm stroked her spine.

“Scale of one to ten,” he said. “How bad is it today?”

She swallowed and sniffled. “Six, I guess,” she said. “Maybe five.” She brushed her index finger under her nose. That would be perfect. Getting snot all over his shirt. She looked up at him. “You?”

“Eight.”

“Eight?” she exclaimed. Her stomach sank into her shoes. God, what a... Guilt wrapped around her heart and squeezed and squeezed and squeezed. She'd run him into the seat belt to see if he would wince. She'd cried on him. She'd wailed about a stupid dog. He felt like an eight, and yet he'd talked with and smiled at the receptionist as though he hadn't been rendered unnaturally shy by trauma. As though nothing had ever been wrong with him. He felt like an eight, and yet his hand still stroked her spine and didn't stop. The relaxing cadence of his soothing almost toppled her resolve to stay upset. Almost.

“You said you were okay,” she said. “Derek, eight is really—”

“Better than ten,” he said in a soft voice. “I'm... okay.”

“Are you sure?” she said. Her heart broke over the fact that he could ever think eight was okay. That he'd been living at ten so long eight felt decent in comparison. “It's okay if you want to go home, or maybe we could—”

“Do you want to go home?” he asked.

She frowned. “No,” she said in a small voice. “No, I want to get a dog.”

“Are you sure?” he said.

She nodded. She brushed the last of her tears away. “I want a dog,” she said. “It's still d-day.”

He kissed her forehead. “Okay.”

“Why?” she said. “Are you not sure?”

He shook his head. “Let's go.”

She swallowed. “Home?”
He smiled. “Inside.”

They returned to the lobby. “Can we see what dogs you have, now?” Derek said, and Cassandra was happy to assist. She interviewed them as she led them into the back and down a long hallway. What did they do for a living? Why did they want a dog? Did they have a big yard? General questions that Meredith supposed would help her get a feel for whether Meredith and Derek were suitable dog parents. They passed another woman mopping the halls. She had a volunteer name tag on her green polo shirt, and she smiled and waved as Derek, Meredith, and Cassandra walked past.

The barking noises made a crescendo as Cassandra led them into a wide room with a gray concrete floor. Rows of long, fluorescent ballasts lit the room, giving the space an odd, silvery glow. Chain-link fences rose from floor to ceiling and formed rows of cubicles, each row about five cages deep. Each cage had a water bowl, a food dish, some squeaky toys, and a dog. The taps of claws on pavement skittered into the walls and echoed back and forth amongst the barking, creating aural chaos. There were little dogs. Big dogs. Medium dogs. Noisy dogs. Quiet dogs. Shaggy dogs. Nearly bald dogs.

For a moment, Meredith stood frozen at the end of the row, overwhelmed with the selection. There hadn't been nearly this many dogs the last time she'd been here. “What's our strategy?” she said.

Derek grabbed her hand. “We need a strategy?”

“I don't know,” Meredith said. “Do we?”

He shrugged. “Let's just walk the aisles first and see what they have.”

“Okay,” Meredith said. She nodded. “Walk. Walking. We can do that.”

“Just let me know if you have any questions,” Cassandra called after them. She folded her arms and leaned against the wall by the door.

Derek smiled at the woman. His teeth flashed. “Thank you,” he said, his voice soft and polite.

Meredith stepped into the first row with him by her side. A little brown and white chihuahua bounded up to the fence, his tiny tail wagging miles a minute as he stuck his button nose through the fence. She knelt down to scratch its ears through the fence. Soft fur touched her fingertips. A warm, wet tongue pressed against her skin. She knew Derek wouldn't want a chihuahua, but she couldn't help the grin that split her face as she received a tongue bath from the little creature.

“This one is cute!” she said.

“Just walk,” he said. “See which ones react well, first. We'll come back to those.”

She brushed her hands on her jeans and stood. The chihuahua looked mournfully at her. “React well?” she said.

“The ones who come up to say hello instead of cower or growl,” he said. He pointed at the chihuahua, whose tail wagged back and forth like a windshield wiper set on high. “Like that one. He's an obvious people dog.”

She grinned. “But he's small and yappy. And you don't want small and yappy. You said so. I remember.”

“Well,” he said. He stared down the long line of rows beyond the chihuahua. “I'm sure there's a bigger version of him in here somewhere.”
She bumped her hip against him. “I thought you said we didn't need a strategy.”

“That's not really a strategy,” he countered. “It's walking.”

They stopped in front of the cage next to the chihuahua. A bedraggled, shaggy brown mop that reminded her of Doc cowered in the back corner. He – or she? – didn't come to the fence greet them. It stayed in the back corner, looking traumatized and alone. Meredith bit her lip and forced her shoulders straight. If she felt bad about every trauma case in this room, this was going to be a long selection process. They moved on.

“So, what makes you the expert?” Meredith said.

Derek shrugged. “Did you ever own a dog other than Doc?”

“No,” she said. “My mother didn't like pets, and my twenties were a black hole of irresponsibility, sex, and drinking.”

He smirked. “Lesbian sex?”

“I told you,” she said. “You'll never pry it out of me. My lips are sealed.”

“Are they?” he said, his voice a low purr. He leaned into her.

“What—” she managed before he covered her mouth with his and kissed her, and her words became a squeak stuck in the back of her throat. The mint of his toothpaste swept into her body as he pressed in with his tongue. He tasted good. Her eyes closed. She clutched his shirt to keep from falling into a tailspin. She drew in a deep breath as their noses mashed. When he pulled back, she saw little dark spots dancing under the lights overhead. Her body throbbed. More, please, her insides screamed. Please? She swallowed, and she brushed her hand against her lips. He'd scorched her, and she felt swollen. Unfulfilled.

“Okay, they're not that sealed, but...” She blinked, trying to regain her senses. She watched him lick his lips and couldn't help watch the glisten of his saliva, or the way his eyes had dilated into wanting pools of onyx. His eyes twinkled. “Hmm,” she said, imitating his favored expression, and then she shook her head. She shoved at him, and he fell back a step. He laughed. “Mean,” she said. “You're mean, and you're taking advantage. We're supposed to be picking a dog.”

He nodded. “A dog, right.”

“New strategy.” She poked her index finger into his chest, careful not to press. “No kissing.”

Light danced in his eyes. “That's a tough one.”

“We'll manage, somehow,” she said.

They passed some sort of lab mix. A scragglly beagle. A husky mix with ice blue eyes. Another row full of dogs, big and small. And then Derek stopped so abruptly, she plowed into his back. He grunted on the impact. She grabbed his shoulder for balance, only to let go when she realized what she'd done. Just because he didn't hurt as much anymore didn't mean she could hang off his shoulders as though he were a coat rack. She shook her head and forced the spear of guilt away. He hadn't winced or expressed pain. No harm, no foul.

“What are you stopping for?” she said.

She froze as he knelt by the fence and stared into the cage. A big black dog with a russet-colored
feet and a dusting of russet around its mouth rose to its paws and walked to the fence. The claws on its feet tapped on the floor as it moved. Derek held his hand out. The dog sniffed the air by the fence. It didn't bark. Or whine. Or make any noise at all. It pushed against the fence. Its broad black nose wouldn't fit through the chain links. It stared with soft brown eyes, mocha-colored like the original dog that had brought them here. The dog's tail had been docked, but the stump twitched back and forth. The dog sat, and it looked at Derek with an expectant, quiet gaze.

"Hi there," Derek said, his voice soft and low.

He put his fingers near the fence. Meredith tensed. But the dog didn't snap or snarl. A big, wet, pink tongue slipped out from its powerful jaws, and the dog licked him. A smile crept across Derek's face.

"Hi," Derek said again.

"I think this is a rottweiler," Meredith said.

Derek shifted to read the placard on the cage wall by the latch. "A rottweiler mix," he said as he scanned the placard. "Samantha." The dog's ears twitched as he read its name. Derek dragged his hand along the fence. The dog followed him. When he stopped, the dog sat and watched with knowing eyes. Derek pressed his hand closer and received another lick. "Hi, Samantha," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Rottweilers are bite-y and mean," Meredith said. "Aren't they? I mean, statistically speaking, most bites are——"

"Pit bulls."

"And then rottweilers, Derek," she said.

After working in the emergency room, she knew her dog bite statistics. She'd seen any number of wounds, from simple teeth marks to ravaged flesh and bloody muscle, but as she watched Derek watch Samantha, she had a sinking suspicion that trying to stop this love affair would be futile. He liked this dog. A lot. A freaking rottweiler. With a big, broad, hundred pound body, dangerous teeth, and staggering bite force gifted to it by its wide jaws. Even give or take a few pounds on her eyeball estimate, she barely weighed more than the dog did.

"Unfortunately, rottweilers have a very strong drive to protect that can be turned into aggression with bad training or bad breeding," Cassandra said, and Meredith jumped. She hadn't even heard the receptionist approach. Cassandra smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry," she said. "I couldn't help but overhear." Derek broke his unblinking gaze on the dog and rose to his feet. Cassandra glanced from Derek to Meredith. "Toward their own families, rottweilers are actually average dogs as far as aggression goes."

"So, they're mean and bite-y with strangers?" Meredith said.

"Most rottweilers aren't aggressive — that's more stigma than truth — but the ones who are aggressive typically display the behavior more often with strangers," Cassandra said.

"Can I see this one in a private room?" Derek said.

"Sure," Cassandra said. "Let me see if our play room is open. If not, I'm sure we can find something somewhere for you."

"But, Derek..." Meredith said as Cassandra left them alone again.
“What?” he said.

Meredith swallowed. He looked sold. Already. He’d found his dog. She glanced at Samantha. Samantha's jaws parted, and her tongue lolled as she tilted her head to the side in an innocent-but-smiling dog version of, *Who, me?* Despite her size and her intimidating looks, Samantha *was* pretty cute. Her broad face had an expressive quality to it. An understanding, sage demeanor. The dog stared. Meredith blinked as the subtle feeling of approaching a cliff hit her senses. She looked away.

Meredith sighed and returned her gaze to Derek. “I know that you want a good guard dog, but this is a rottweiler.”

“A rottweiler mix,” he said.

“Whatever!” she said. “The point is I'm not even sure if my home owner's insurance will cover it.”

He stuck his hand by the bars. Samantha sniffed and then licked. “The woman said the ones who are aggressive are more aggressive with strangers,” he said.

“So?” Meredith said.

“So, we're strangers, and look at her.”

The dog, who had yet to speak, barked. Once. As if she understood the gravity of this situation. As if to say, *Please, I want a home. I promise I won't bite.* She had a deep voice. Substantial. One that would be scary to any intruder stupid enough to wander into a home with a rottweiler residing. But she sounded almost melodious at the same time. She sat by the fence, and her tongue lolled as she panted. Derek held his hand by the chain link fence again. Samantha pressed her nose against the fence and licked him through the chains. Again.

“Well, that's true,” Meredith said. “She's pretty lovey, I guess.”

“She's not mouthy,” he said. “She hasn't put my fingers or wrist in her mouth. She's only licked.”

“She can't fit her nose through the fence even if she were mouthy,” Meredith said. “She's big.”

He pushed his index finger through the fence, and she tensed as she watched his livelihood resting next to jaws that could snap his bones. Samantha's tongue appeared once more. She licked. That was all. And then she stared at Meredith. *Give me a chance,* her expression said. *I'm a good dog. Honest.*

The cliff approached, and Meredith couldn't tear her eyes away. She swallowed. “Well...”

Cassandra returned carrying a brown leather leash, and again, Meredith jumped when the woman announced her presence with a cheerful, “All right. The play room is open.” Cassandra approached the latch on the cage. Samantha backed away from the door. The remnant of her tail wagged back and forth, and she sat. Patiently. Cassandra stepped into the cage and leashed Samantha. Cassandra jiggled the leash once, and Samantha stood, but she didn't barrel through the door or push her way through. She waited for Cassandra to exit first and then followed.

“We're trying to have a baby,” Meredith said as Cassandra led them down the row of cages.

“Oh?” Cassandra said. “Congratulations!”

“But, I mean...” Meredith swallowed. “Are rottweilers good with kids? Little kids?”
“Rottweilers can be excellent, loyal, loving family dogs,” Cassandra replied.

They walked out of the main area with all the barking dogs. The door closed behind them, and the barking decreased in volume. Cassandra led Meredith, Derek, and the dog down a small white hallway, to a twelve-by-twelve room at the end. The room had a counter top and a hand sink along the side, but was otherwise bare. Samantha's nails tapped on the scratched, tiled floor as they entered.

Meredith glanced at Derek, but he was watching Samantha. Not her. The dog peered at the new environment with a curious gaze. She sniffed the floor. Cassandra let her wander the edges of the room, exploring. The dog didn't pull when her leash ran out of slack. She changed directions and explored further in the provided radius.

“I'm just not sure this is a good idea,” Meredith said.

Cassandra nodded. “Most bites involving children from any dog involve lack of supervision. Teach your child to treat the dog respectfully, and never leave them alone together before the child is old enough to know better about pulling tails and stealing dog food, no matter what. Even if you're just going into the next room to pick up the phone. That's advice I give everyone, not just rottweiler parents.”

“Is she socialized with kids?” Derek said.

“I believe so,” Cassandra said. “She greets every family that walks through, kids included.”

Derek nodded. “Why is she here?”

“The owner couldn't keep her anymore.”

“Why?” Meredith said. “Behavior issues?”

“No, nothing like that,” Cassandra said. “I don't know the specifics, but I gather there was a death in the family, which caused some unexpected financial burdens.”

A lump formed in Meredith's throat as she watched Samantha finish her circuit of the room. She sat by Cassandra's feet and stared at them. Samantha didn't bark. Or pull on the leash. Or bounce around in a kinetic frenzy of muscle and fur. She watched, a hopeful light in her brown eyes, as the stump of her tail wagged back and forth.

Meredith wondered who in the family had died. Samantha's person? Or maybe Samantha's person's person? The dog had been trained rigorously. That much was obvious. Which meant the owner had spent a lot of time with her. And now that owner was gone. A deep, chilling sense of loss swelled inside of Meredith, and the room flashed away for an instant.

*Please, don't die,* she'd begged. *Please, Derek. You can't leave me.*

She blinked, and the bright room with its painful fluorescence pierced her memories. She stared at Derek, haunted, and pushed closer to him. His arm wrapped around her waist. Warmth pressed against her. She swallowed, and she glanced at Samantha. Samantha whined, as if she could sense distress, and moved to Meredith's legs, where she sat, her broad body pressing into Meredith's knees, not so hard as to trip her, but more like... Support. The dog stared at Meredith, and Meredith's eyes watered as she peered into concerned brown eyes.

“She likes you,” Cassandra said.
“Yeah,” Meredith said. She pushed the word out of her throat before her voice could crack. Anthropomorphizing. She was being irresponsible, and projecting, and... Derek frowned at her. A concerned expression spread across his face, almost a perfect match for Samantha's, and her grief turned into a chuckle. “Yeah,” she said, and this time her voice didn't falter. Derek stroked her back.

Samantha stared up at her, and a sliver of doubt pierced Meredith's haze. This wasn't anthropomorphizing. Maybe dogs didn't have people feelings, but dogs had feelings. They helped sick people by offering comfort – she'd seen it any number of times at Seattle Grace. That's why so many support groups used animals. Dogs guarded their families. They could experience grief. Maybe not people grief, but grief. She'd read too many stories about dogs who wouldn't eat after their owners had died, or...

She swallowed.

“How long has she been here?” Meredith said.

“A while,” Cassandra replied. “She's not a puppy. She's an unpopular breed. And we typically have a hard time placing black dogs.”

“Really?” said Derek. “Why?”

Cassandra shrugged. “It's been speculated that they don't stand out as well in their cages. Plus, they have a bad rap, courtesy of Hollywood.”

“Do you like her?” Meredith said.

Cassandra smiled, and her voice dropped in pitch to something conspiratorial. “Truth be told, she's my favorite dog here. I'd take her home if my husband hadn't put his foot down about more pets. We already have three dogs and two cats.”

“Could we have a small bowl and kibble?” Derek said.

“Absolutely,” Cassandra said. “Spend some time together. See if you mesh well. I'll be back in a few minutes with some kibble and a few toys.” She handed the leash to Derek. He grasped the leather lead. Samantha watched, and Cassandra left, leaving them in silence.

“What do you think so far?” Derek said.

“I don't know,” Meredith said.

He nodded. “Would you hold the leash?”

“Sure,” she said. She took the leash from Derek. The braided leather felt thick and substantial in her grasp. Samantha didn't pull or try to back away, despite the fact that she could easily overpower Meredith if she wished.

Derek knelt on the ground. His jeans skidded on the dirty floor. Meredith watched his muscles bunch, watched his hands as he stretched into the dog’s personal space. He put his palm on Samantha's neck, and he stroked her head to stumpy tale.

“What are you doing?” Meredith said, watching with fascination as he ran his hands along the shiny black coat. He touched the dog’s ribs and stomach. He stroked Samantha legs to the paws. He touched the dog’s face, at which point Samantha pushed forward, but only to lick Derek's face.
A laugh chuffed from his lips as he rolled back onto his haunches and stood. “She's not skittish at all,” Derek said.

“She is pretty sweet,” Meredith admitted. She gave the leash back to Derek.

Cassandra returned with a bowl of food and a chew toy, and Meredith watched as Derek put the bowl down and tried to pet the dog while she ate. Her tongue rasped against the bowl. Wet, slopping sounds filled the air as Samantha shoveled food. She didn't snap or snarl as Derek touched her. She stopped chewing on her kibble, looked at him, cocked her head, and whuffed, as if to say, I'm eating right now. I'll play in a minute. Then she buried her face in the kibble once more.

“She is pretty well-mannered,” Meredith said. “Is she house-broken?”

“Yes,” Cassandra said.

When Samantha finished her kibble, Derek threw the chew toy. Nails scrabbled on the floor. The dog launched at it and caught it in her mouth at the far corner of the room. She yipped, a deep, energetic bark that dripped with ecstasy. Cassandra laughed as Samantha groaned and rolled onto her back, exposing her black belly to the ceiling. Her paws flopped. She chewed.

“She's a bit of a clown sometimes,” Cassandra said.

They took the dog for a walk in the small yard behind the shelter next. Though it had been sunny that day, the rain had been torrential the day before, and reminders of the downpour had slicked the earth into a muddy mess. Footprints of all sizes, both people and dog, marred the wet earth, and only wisps of grass remained un-flattened by the weight of water. A chewed, dirty yellow Frisbee rested by the far fence. A tennis ball marked the middle of the space like a chartreuse cherry on top of a sundae.

Derek held the leash in his loose grasp. Samantha didn't pull or leap or run. She trotted across the sopping earth until she ran out of slack, looked back, and Meredith smiled as she saw that familiar head-tip again. Why aren't you walking faster? This is mud, and I like mud, Samantha seemed to be saying. But she didn't press the issue when Derek didn't speed up. She slowed to a loping walk that showed off her powerful muscles and stocky legs.

“I think you were holding out on me,” Meredith said as they took a lap around the small yard.

Derek didn't tear his eyes from the dog. The dirt made sucking noises underneath Meredith's feet, and Derek's cross trainers splurched in a soaked, deep patch of mud. “Holding out?” he said as he bit his lip and navigated around the obstacle.

“You so totally had a dog-picking strategy, Derek. This whole time.”

“I read a guide on how to pick a shelter dog,” he said.

“You did?” she said. He didn't have a chance to answer before slippery mud gave way, and the earth sent her sliding.

“Don't fall!” he said with a soft laugh, and he caught her. His arms wrapped around her body, and her fall became stillness. She rested against him, breathing as he held her.

Samantha, excited by the commotion, barked once, twice. She circled them in a wide arc, drawing the leash around their hips. She ended by Derek's knees, barked once in approval of her handiwork, and sat beside them, staring up with her tongue lolling in a dog-version of a smile. Her cheerful brown gaze dashed back and forth between them as though she were watching a tennis match.
Meredith stared at Derek. His blue eyes met hers, but in the bright daylight and broad shadows, they seemed almost gray or green or a sea-washed mix of the two. “I think your clown dog is trying to get us to kiss,” Meredith said.

“My clown dog?” he said.

Samantha barked as if to say, Yes, please.

Meredith couldn't help but laugh. “She must have heard about our no kissing strategy or something.”

“I told you it would be a tough strategy to follow, Mere,” he said. He closed the meager distance between them, and he pressed his lips against her forehead. He held the leash in one hand over her shoulder. With the thumb of his other hand, he traced the sharp edge of her jaw and tipped up her gaze. He stared at her. “Do you like her, Mere?”

Meredith swallowed. “I know it's not fair, but her breed worries me.”

He frowned. “How much?”

“Just a little,” she said.

“I wouldn't ever want to get a dog that might hurt our kid, Mere,” he said. “I just...” He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. He glanced at the big black matchmaker at their feet and sighed.

Meredith smiled. “You just like her.”

“I do,” he said. “But we can put her back if you really aren't comfortable with her. This is supposed to be our dog. Not my dog.”

She grabbed the leash from his hand. He relinquished his hold without hesitation. She stared down at Samantha. “Unwrap, please.” Samantha didn't quite seem to get it, and so Meredith found herself spinning around Derek's lithe body. She pointed to the far fence. “Go over there, Derek,” she said.

“Why?”

“I want a minute with her without you making puppy eyes at me.”

“Puppy eyes?”

“Yes,” Meredith said. “You have this expression you use when you want something that makes you impossible to resist, and I want to make a non-brainwashed decision.”

“Brainwashed,” he said.

“Yes,” she insisted. “Brainwashed.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You think I brainwash you?” he said.

She snorted. “You know you brainwash me. I have a weakness for the word please whenever it's uttered by you, and you know it.”

He scoffed. “Have I said please?”

“Not yet,” she said. “Go away before you can't resist the urge anymore.”
He smirked. “I love you, too,” he said, and he sauntered to the far side of the yard. He caught his elbow against the top rung of the fence, and he leaned as he stared at her with a dark-but-mischievous look. His eyes sparkled. Her heart sped as she took in the sight of him in frayed, threadbare jeans, his tight shirt, muddy shoes, hair askew, and a light dusting of stubble that never seemed to go away no matter how much he shaved.

“No leaning!” Meredith said.

“I can't lean now, either?”

“Just go away,” she said. “Seriously.”

He laughed. His teeth flashed as his lips parted, and her body began to melt at the sight of him enjoying the moment in his full, snarky glory. “I'll go inside,” he said after he'd recovered. He pulled his fingers through his hair, and he winked at her. “But when I get back, I'm leaning.” His gaze on her lingered. Samantha stepped forward and whined, but she didn't pull on the leash. Her feet splashed in the mud.

“He'll be back in a minute,” Meredith said as she watched Derek slip through the doorway. His silhouette hovered in the glass pane a moment longer, and then even that disappeared as he gave her her requested lean-free, please-free, Derek-free space.

Meredith brushed the braided leash with her fingertips. The bumps in the leather felt smooth under her palm. Slightly oily. Well-used. Black, aged streaks marred light brown leather that had, at one point, probably been resplendent. She wondered how many dogs this leash had brought outside to meet their prospective parents.

Samantha sat at Meredith's feet.

“Hi, Samantha,” Meredith said. The dog's ears ticked at the sound of her name, and her head shifted. “Or do you prefer Sam?”

Samantha stared.

“I guess you have no idea what I'm talking about,” Meredith said. She reached with her palm and put her hand flat against the dog's skull. Soft, silky fur touched her hand. The dog whuffed and pressed into Meredith's hand, forcing the motion to become a full blown stroke from the top of the dog’s head and down her neck. Samantha's remaining bit of tail wagged, and Meredith couldn't help but repeat the stroke. The dog had a soft coat. Really soft. And shiny. And the dog was sort of relaxing just to pet. Meredith bit her lip.

“You like my husband, don't you?” Meredith said, which felt a little stupid. As smart as she suspected this dog was, it wouldn't understand a question like that. Or respond. Just like it hadn't understood the preference question.

Meredith glanced around the yard. Beyond the wooden fence, parked cars spread out in a sea of metal sparkling in the sunlight, and she wondered if she'd parked in the wrong spot. In the distance beyond that, a large hill rose up into the sky. Houses buried in green trees dotted the rolling horizon. A man rode by on a yellow bicycle down the street that ran parallel to the parking lot. The bicycle wheels squeaked. In the background, she could hear the roar of cars from the busy street in front of the shelter.

Meredith stroked Samantha's head once more. She laughed when the dog licked her and then watched with a bright gaze. More, please, said Samantha's eyes.
“You are sweet, aren't you?” Meredith said.

Samantha shook her black coat as she stood. Meredith took a lap around the muddy yard with her. The dog ambled with a lazy gait. Samantha remained beside Meredith, her body pressing against Meredith's legs. Again, not hard. Not as an obvious attempt to get Meredith to fall over or some sort of dominance play. Just... reassuring.

Meredith stroked Samantha's back. In all Meredith's days, she'd never expected to be in the back lot of an animal shelter, petting a clown rottweiler who liked chew toys and kissing. “Derek's had a really rough time, and he's pretty sad right now,” she said. “Do you think you could maybe help with that? He's trying not to be pushy about it, but he likes you.”

Samantha said nothing.

The faucet dripped and mingled with the sounds of her sniffles. Meredith brushed her nose with the back of her palm. She sat on the toilet seat, shaking. Beyond the blur of her tears, the floor tiles and stained grout spaced and separated as her eyes slipped out of focus.

The door to the restroom swung open, and Meredith winced. She swallowed, trying to force her tears into silence. She didn't want to deal with questions. She couldn't do this. She couldn't. Not right now.

“Meredith Grey,” said Dr. Bailey's soft, rich voice, “I know you're in here. I'm not leaving until you come out.”

Meredith shook her head and stood. She unlatched the door, and she stepped out to face the wolves. Or wolf, really. Just one. The long row of bathroom stalls spread out like a firing squad at her back. Dr. Bailey stared, her eyebrows raised. Meredith scrubbed her face. Her stomach churned with sickening flips and flops, unsettled and unable to deal with the pancakes she'd eaten while Derek had been receiving his post-op scans.

“I'm sorry,” Meredith said. Her throat felt full. She swallowed. The remnant taste of syrup nauseated her. A red-eyed Medusa reflected from the mirror back at her. Meredith pushed loose, tangled hair away from her face.

“I'm not the one who needs an apology,” said Dr. Bailey.

Derek had been crying when Dr. Bailey had returned him to his ICU room. Crying. Unmoving. Silent. His eyes had gotten wet the night before, but Meredith had gotten the distinct impression that his pain had been emotional, and she'd left him alone to sort things out. This time, though? Physical. He'd hurt so badly he cried. All he'd done was stare at the ceiling while his eyes leaked, as though his body were some sort of torture chamber and his soul had been left on the rack. He hadn't tried to reassure her. He'd just lain there. She'd never seen Derek cry before, not like that, and the sight of him suffering that much had snapped her. She'd fled the room to keep him from seeing her fall apart all over again.

“I'm...” Meredith's voice cracked. Tears exploded in a deluge, and she couldn't breathe. “I don't know what to do. Please, I don't... I can't. I'm. I... He's...”

Dr. Bailey's gaze softened. “I had the nurse increase his morphine. He's doing much better.”

“His scans—”

“Were absolutely fine for a man who's been shot in the chest,” Dr. Bailey said. “Which I would have told you if you hadn't bolted like your damned hair was on fire.”
“Then why is he—”

“Anesthesia, Grey,” said Bailey. “It’s all gone, now. And you, as one of Seattle Grace’s most talented residents, should know that.”

“I’m sorry,” Meredith said.

Dr. Bailey shook her head. “Again, wrong person.”

“When I saw him...”

Dr. Bailey nodded. “I know it’s hard.”

“He’s really hurt,” said Meredith. “I just don’t know what to do. I want it to be better, and I—”

Meredith sighed as Dr. Bailey’s warm hand touched her shoulder. Meredith met Dr. Bailey’s hard gaze. “You go back in there, and you sit with him,” Dr. Bailey said. “That’s what you do. Just like you’ve been doing all night. And that’s what will make it better.”

“Okay,” Meredith said in a small voice. “Okay.” She wiped her face once more. She swallowed down against the clot in her throat. She smoothed her shirt as she tried to muster resolve.

And that’s when Dr. Bailey’s lip quivered. Meredith froze at the odd sight. “He lived, Dr. Grey,” Dr. Bailey said. Dr. Bailey blinked, and her eyes seemed to swim, but no tears fell. “Some didn’t.”

“I know,” Meredith said, her voice soft.

They stood in silence, sharing pain for several moments, before Dr. Bailey's forlorn look shifted into a glare. “Well?” she snapped. “Go sit with your fool husband.”

By the time Meredith returned to Derek’s ICU cubicle, her tears had dried, and her eyes had stopped burning quite as much. She hoped she didn't look like some sort of scary freak monster. Derek lay in a mess of wires and periwinkle blankets, unmoving, eyes closed. Meredith glanced at his heart monitor. Fine. He did look better. His breaths rasped softly in the quiet space instead of jabbing at the air like knives. When she sat, the stool Nurse Kent had left behind for her squawked.

Derek shifted. His eyes opened to slivers.

“It's just me,” said Meredith.

His lips spread into a wide, lazy smile. “Hey,” he said, the word stretched and quiet. His eyes shut.

“Hey,” she replied. “I'm sorry I left, Derek. I'm really sorry.”

She waited for condemnation, but it never arrived. She watched his chest rise and fall. His hair hung in a lusterless, greasy shell around his head that was, over the hours, turning to untamed frizz. Stubble had sprouted all across his face in a prickly forest. His skin was pale, and he looked...

Sick.

The lump returned to her throat, and her eyes pricked. Her inner volcano of stifled grief threatened to erupt. She tensed, but she forced herself to lean forward and pet his arm and his hand. His soft skin pressed back against her fingertips. She couldn't help but glance at the intravenous line snaking into his vein.
At least he'd relaxed. Red still hugged the skin around his eyes, and his temples glistened with the evaporating skeletons of what had been tears.

She bit her lip. “Do you feel better?”

“Bailey gave me more morphine,” he said, though his vowels stuck in his mouth and took forever to complete. Another smile stretched across his face. He blinked, and his eyelids rested at half-mast.

A shaky laugh fell from her lips. “I know,” she said. She grabbed his hand and squeezed. “I know she did.”

“M’okay, Mere,” he muttered. “You shh... shouldn’ worry.”

She sniffed and brushed his face. “No pain, now?”

“Even if there was,” he said, his voice soft and weary. “I don' think I'd remember it.”

He drifted, then. She let him sleep while she watched.

In the silence, Meredith's eyes watered. She sniffed and wiped her face with her palms. “I don't know why I'm being so emotional today,” she told the dog. “I've really been okay.”

Samantha had no answers for her.

Meredith wandered to the center of the yard and picked up the lone tennis ball. Dark stains smudged the chartreuse fur of the ball, and it smelled like wet dog, but, given that she'd been given a tongue bath already, today, the unsanitary nature of the toy didn't seem to matter much. She squeezed her hand around the dirty ball.

“Do you like to play fetch?” Meredith said. Samantha's gaze traced the ball as it moved. Her tail wagged. “Guess so,” said Meredith.

Meredith un-cliped the leash and let the tennis ball fly across the yard. The ball bounced off the back fence. The dog launched. Her claws had no traction on the wet earth, and for what felt like eons, Samantha churned ground, but didn't move. Mud and water spewed everywhere. Flecks of dirt landed on Meredith's jeans. And her shirt. And her face. She laughed as she watched Samantha gain a foothold and fly after the ball, which had settled in the muck. The dog barked. She attacked the ball with gleeful ferocity and chewed it with her big, chomp-y jaws as she trotted back to Meredith with her bounty. The dog dropped the ball at Meredith's feet, sat on her haunches, looked up and barked. “Again!” said her gaze.

For several minutes, the pair of them played a sedate game of fetch. On what Meredith intended to be the last throw, she tossed the ball against the fence, but with the force of her throw, the wet earth churned underneath her as though she'd stepped on a banana peel. Just like in the cartoons. She careened hands first into the mud with a shriek. A hundred pounds of muddy dog danced around her in an excited circle and then bounded for the fence. Cold, wet dirt seeped through her jeans and drenched her socks as Meredith clawed for footing. By the time she struggled to her feet, she imagined she looked a bit like Frankenstein with her hair in frenetic, dirty disarray and mud streaking her clothes and skin. She found Samantha staring up at her, yellow ball in her mouth. Samantha dropped the tennis ball at Meredith's muddy feet and woofed.

Meredith stood there, muddy and disheveled, and she laughed. She couldn't stop. This was so ridiculous.
“Okay,” Meredith said. “I guess we can keep you if Derek lets you in his car after this.”

The muddy dog whuffed with appreciation and stood still while Meredith re-clipped the leash. Meredith brought the dog back inside the shelter building and slogged down the empty hallway. She found Derek talking with the receptionist around the corner. He leaned against the wall. Leaned!

Meredith snorted as she approached, muddy dog trailing behind. Cassandra and Derek both stared at her. Derek's jaw dropped, but he closed it before speaking. He straightened. She watched worry creep into his gaze. His expression danced, and she could see the words on the tip of his tongue.

Jesus Christ, what happened? He'd say it just like that. If he were to open his mouth. He didn't.

“Let's take her home,” Meredith said.

He blinked. “Really?” he said.

“Yes, really. I think she deserves a chance.”

“Okay,” he said. For a moment, he stared. His gaze traced her head to toe. He didn't say anything about the mud on her or the dog. “If your insurance won't cover it, I'll find a policy that does. I'll pay for it, Mere.”

“We'll figure it out,” Meredith said.

Cassandra grinned. “Wonderful! Let's go fill out the paperwork.” She glanced at Samantha. “And maybe we can get one of the techs to give this girl a bath. Sorry for the mud outside.”

Meredith shrugged. “It's Seattle. There's mud.”

“Spoken like a native,” said Cassandra.

Meredith handed Derek the muddy leash. He took it without a grimace or a comment. “You do the paperwork,” she said. “I'm dripping dirt.”

She left him gaping at her as she went to the bathroom to clean up her hair and face. Her clothes were a loss, but she could make herself a bit less like an automatic stain on Derek's upholstery. Maybe. Possibly. Nope, she decided after spending twenty minutes scraping at herself with a paper towel. In fact, after careful work, she felt a bit like all she'd done was grind dirt further into her jeans. She gave up.

She found Derek sans dog in the lobby, filling out the pet owner's agreement with a gold ball point pen that he had to stop and shake for ink twice as she approached. She plopped into the chair next to him just as he signed his name on the dotted line. He handed her the pen and the clipboard. She signed underneath his name. Meredith Grey.

In another twenty minutes, a tall, wiry man with brown hair and blue eyes led Samantha from the back of the shelter. Her damp fur was free of mud and glossy. Meredith watched the man as he left Samantha with Cassandra at the front desk. His name tag said Marvin.

Meredith bit her lip. She watched Derek as he watched the dog. The skin around his eyes crinkled, and he watched the newest addition to their family trot toward him. A smile curved his lips as Cassandra smiled, brought him the dog, and said, “All right. I'll take the forms. You take the dog. Thank you so much for supporting the animal shelter.”
Samantha barked once, and after they'd all exchanged a few last minute pleasantries and Cassandra had double checked the forms, Derek, Meredith, and Samantha left through the glass door. The bell dinged overhead, signaling their departure. They crossed the threshold, moved out onto the street. Meredith couldn't stop from beaming. She skipped down the last step.

“We have a dog,” she said.

Derek returned her grin. “Yes, we do,” he said.

Samantha woofed.

And with that, after some juggling, and a pause for Derek to retrieve a towel from his trunk to cover Meredith's seat, they headed home with Meredith at the wheel. Samantha rode in the backseat, sprawled across Derek's shiny leather upholstery.

“Never thought I'd see the day.” Meredith said, unable to stop the grin from splitting her face. Sunny streets churned past the windows.

“What day?” Derek said.

“There's a dog in your backseat, and I look like I won in a mud wrestling match.”

He smirked. “Oh, you won, huh?”

“Yes,” Meredith said. “In this hypothetical mud wrestling match, I would have won.”

He nodded. “You would have. You're a scrapper. And you're feisty.” He watched her, his lashes low over his eyes. She glanced at him. His relaxed posture and the simple awe in his gaze blurred the bright metal rainbow of passing cars beyond his window. “So,” he said. “What's wrong with a dog in my back seat and you looking like you won a mud wrestling match?”

“Nothing. It's just a lot of dirt, and it's in your car. And you're not mad.”

“Hmm,” he said. He glanced at the frothy terrycloth towel he'd placed under her tiny body. Brown stains marred indigo blue. “Samantha is clean,” he said. “It's just you tracking mud all over.”

She scoffed. “Are you calling me dirty?”

“I might be,” he said. Out of the corner of her eye, movement flickered. His seat moaned. The solid, sure feeling of something there beside her, inches away and closing, made her smile. “But it's sexy dirt,” he said, his voice a low rumble by her ear.

“I'm trying to watch the road,” she said. His breaths touched her skin. A warm hand gripped her shoulder. He kissed her throat. She leaned into it, unable to stop herself.

“Hmm,” was all he said.

Breaths tightened in her chest. She pulled the car to a stop at a red light. She turned. His blue eyes shimmered close to hers. He traced her gaze with his own. She swallowed.

He kissed her, his lips to hers, and the car disappeared in a torrent of fire. She moaned into his mouth. They dueled across the parking brake, gaining and losing ground in equal measures. Until something wet that wasn't Derek touched her right ear, and she shrieked and jumped. In a whorl of sights and sounds and colors, she caught a glimpse of big, brown eyes and sharp teeth. Lips parted, revealing a drooping, pink tongue. Their newest addition made her best impression of a smile as
Meredith wiped her face with the back of her hand, and Derek laughed, and laughed.

“I guess she doesn't like hanky panky in the car,” Derek said. Samantha hovered in the space between their seats. He leaned over the seat and stroked her fur as she panted.

“No, she likes it,” said Meredith. “She kissed me. I think she just felt left out.” The light turned green, and she accelerated. The car pressed her back into her seat. Derek's body swayed in the grips of inertia, and he, too, sat back. Samantha wobbled but didn't budge.

“We can save the hanky panky for later,” Derek said.

Meredith licked her lips. “Promises, promises.”

She'd meant to be playful, but his smile slipped out of his expression like liquid. Derek said nothing. He looked away from her, and he stared out the window, stroking Samantha while he watched the world go by.

Her chest tightened. Glass. Every conversation with him was like a piece of glass, ready to drop and break into thousands of pieces, from the highest heights to the bowels of low in an instant. For a moment, she hovered in bewilderment, wondering how her throaty, playful attempt at banter had gone so wrong. And then she thought of him, his cold, trembling, clammy hand clutched in hers. He stared at her through glassy, hooded eyes, and he'd said, *I'm not gonna die. I promise.*

His voice echoed in her head. Over and over. She swallowed as a lump formed in her throat, all hints of levity or lust gone.

*Promised I wouldn't die, didn't I?* he'd slurred a few hours later. He'd said that before he'd had much chance to reflect on the situation. Before he'd become a survivor in his mind. He'd just been... Alive. He'd been doped and barely lucid, but alive. Alive, and...

*But I lied. My promise was a lie. I thought...* he'd said.

“I'm sorry,” Meredith said. “I shouldn't have said that.”

A wet sound filled the car as he swallowed. He didn't speak.

“Derek...”

He shook his head. “I hate that I can't...” he said, but he didn't finish. Samantha whined at him, and he stroked her neck. The motion seemed to soothe him, but he still didn't speak.

Meredith sighed. The car jounced and rocked as she pulled it into the driveway, and she couldn't help but notice Derek wince. This time. He didn't make any noise. But he winced, and his face paled, and he folded his arm against his chest as though he were attempting to protect himself.

“She's a survivor,” she repeated, but he wouldn't look at her.

He un-clipped his seat belt and slid out of the car before she could say more than that. He opened the door for Samantha. The leash jingled as he attached it. The dog leaped down onto the pavement.

“Let's take her for a long walk before we go inside,” Derek said. “I read that it's good to get them tired first, and it's a clear day, for once.”

“But I'm muddy and gross,” Meredith said. “I...” Her voice trailed away as she stared at him
through the gap between the door and the car. He didn't comment on her disheveled state. Or the mud. And what was a long walk, anyway? Derek still had heaps of endurance issues, and he would go by himself if she didn't budge. What if he stranded himself a few miles away because he didn't have the good sense to turn around when his body told him he needed to stop? She could tell from the sharp, determined look on his face that he planned to go with or without her. She swallowed. “I guess it doesn't matter,” she said. “What's some sweat on top of mud?”

She exited the car and pressed the lock button on the key fob. The Cayenne chirped. “How long of a walk are we talking?” she said as she walked around to meet him.

He shrugged, the motion a bit listless. “I imagine I'll be the first one calling it quits,” he said as he looked at the ground. Her heart squeezed. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, but she didn't want to make him more self-conscious. She left him alone.

“Do you have baggies? Just in case?” she said. “I mean, I'm sure she went at the shelter, but—”

“In my pocket,” he said.

Her jaw dropped. “Wow. You really did plan ahead.”

“Yeah,” he said. He didn't greet her comment with humor. Or banter. Or anything.

He turned on his feet and headed up the driveway toward the sidewalk. He turned left up the walk in a vague echo of his first walk, up the pernicious hill that wasn't quite a hill. Samantha followed, and so did Meredith. She hoped this walk wouldn't turn out the way that first one had, with him nearly throwing up because he'd pushed himself so hard. In her head, she repeated a long chorus of let-him-pick, let-him-pick, let-him-picks, until they'd gone several house lengths in silence.

This wasn't like before. Over weeks of healing, his long, sure stride had returned. She didn't have to slow herself down to stay even-paced with him. Though he didn't relax in the presence of strangers, he didn't stop and stare at every pedestrian like he expected to be shot and killed. Improvement. Some. Samantha loped along, stopping to sniff here and there, and they all moved in silence, save for Samantha's happy panting.

For ten minutes, they walked without speaking, because Meredith couldn't think of anything to say, and because his mood had gone from his version of okay, not that eight out of ten could ever be construed as okay, to awful in a whiplash turn of events. He didn't breathe hard or slow down. After ten minutes. That was a vast improvement as well. He didn't turn at the end of her block, either. His goal wasn't a single block. Also improvement.

They stopped as Samantha explored a fire hydrant with interest. Derek watched the dog with fascination as she pushed her nose through the grass blades in a ring around the hydrant and then up the chipping paint to the bolt at the tip. Meredith squeezed Derek's shoulder. His body heat pressed against her as she pushed close to him.

“Scale of one to ten,” she said in a soft voice.

He blinked, and his eyes reddened. Bird calls bounced through the trees. Samantha's ears perked as a dog in a distant yard barked. She glanced at Derek and Meredith, found no excitement there, and calmed. She resumed exploring her more exciting fire hydrant.

“Ten,” he said, his voice rough. “I'm sorry. Or...” He looked away as though he expected her to scream at him. “I'm...” And he ran out of things to say. Silence stretched. She heard him swallow. His breaths fluttered, as though he were struggling not to lose himself in a storm of unwanted,
tempestuous grief.

She wanted to say it. Don't apologize. But she held the words down on her tongue under heaping mountains of willpower, until her jaw muscles hurt from the strain of clenching her teeth. From the reddening tinge on his face, and the way he wouldn't look at her, he knew she hated apologies for this kind of stuff, for his mood swings and for visceral reactions over which he had little to no control.

Samantha stopped and stared at Meredith, her dark eyes accusing, as if to say, Well? Say something. He's not going to do it. She chuffed, sort of like a sneeze, and she pressed her nose back into sensory euphoria. Grass folded under her nose.

“So, what should we name her?” Meredith said, at a loss for anything else.

For a moment, he stared at her with wet, red eyes. He sniffed. His gaze shifted to Samantha as Meredith watched the veritable wheels in his head churn. He followed Meredith's rapid and random subject change. With difficulty, but he followed it. “You want to change her name?” he said, his voice rough with weeping that he'd withheld.

Samantha finished exploring the fire hydrant, and they resumed walking. “I don't know,” Meredith said. “Do you?”

“The shelter said her name is Samantha,” he said. “We've been calling her Samantha.”

“So?”

“So, she probably grew up with that name,” he said. They skirted around an untrimmed hedge. Branches clawed at her muddy shirt and scratched her bare skin. A twig dug into her neck and stung. She hissed and rubbed her throat. Wet bits of crumbled, black bark came away with her fingertips. Derek stopped, twisted, and held the bush out of the way for her. The pain ceased. She and Samantha shuffled through. Through the obstacle, he sniffed, and he wiped his face with his hands. The reddened, crushed expression slathered on his face lessened. “How would you like me to suddenly start calling you Delilah because I think it's prettier?” he said.

“You think Delilah is prettier than Meredith?”

“I meant it as a hypothetical.”

“But you like the name Delilah?”

“Um,” he said. “I don't know.”

“You thought of it off the top of your head,” she said.

“She was a patient.”

“When?” Meredith said. “You haven't operated in more than two months.”

“My last patient.”

“Oh,” she said. She dropped her gaze to her muddy sneakers. The pocked sidewalk blurred. She couldn't win. All roads led to that day. All—

His arms wrapped around her, and she stopped. The world stopped. He hugged her. He breathed against her. For a moment, she stood, dumbfounded, and then her muscles loosened. She wrapped her
arms around his back. Toned, lean sinew pressed against her hand through his shirt as she ran her palm along the lines of his muscles. She pressed her face against his chest and listened to the rustle of his breathing.

“It's okay,” he said, his voice soft. “I'm okay.” The words rumbled through his breastbone. “I just... thought of it,” he said. “Some things, I can...” He breathed. “Some things are better.”

“And this is one of those things?” she said.

“Hmm,” he said. “I guess it is.”

He stroked her hair, careful to keep his fingers from getting stuck in the mud and snarled tangles. She took a deep breath. “I don't remember her,” Meredith said. “Why was Delilah at Seattle Grace?”

He shrugged. “Delilah Rogers. Keyhole craniotomy to clip an aneurysm. I was in and out in about an hour. Nothing special.”

His bitter tone saddened her. A year before, he hadn't minded doing small procedures. A patient to help was a patient to help, regardless of the severity his or her problem or how complicated his or her problem was to fix. But that had been Derek's attitude back when his entire career hadn't been relegated to the simple procedures. Back when he still did groundbreaking casework and twenty-six plus hour surgeries to remove inoperable spinal tumors. Now, he was limited to the things he could fit into his schedule before the mountains of paperwork and interruptions each day would crush him, which meant, really, he could do very little.

That was another discussion, though. Another time. She didn't want to talk about work that much when she'd only steered the conversation back to safety moments before.

“Still,” she said. “You thought of the name over two months later.”

He raised his eyebrows. “So?”

“So, you must like the name,” she said.

“It's a name.”

“But a good name?” she prodded.

He laughed despite the snarly, troubled look lingering on his face. The sound of his levity made her lips turn upward. Mission accomplished, then, however ineptly. She'd made him forget, if only for a moment. “Meredith, what are you trying to whittle out of me?” he said. “Because I'd love to help you out, but I have no idea what you want me to say.”

She held out her hand. His gaze followed the length of her outstretched arm to her splayed fingertips. He took her palm with the hand he didn't hold the leash with. His warm, reassuring palm touched hers. They squeezed, and then they walked.

“Are we not naming dogs anymore?” he guessed.

“No...” she said. The breath deflated from her chest. Were they not naming dogs anymore? How the hell had that happened? And how the hell had he noticed before she had? She really was being a freak today. A freaky, clingy, hormonal... “I don't know.”

A skinny woman wearing holey jeans and flip flops approached on the opposite sidewalk with a
bouncy dalmatian. Samantha perked. She opened her black-and-russet-colored jaws, her broad torso expanded, and she barked, deep and full. The dalmatian barked in return, and the skinny woman nearly tripped as her dog launched at the street, but she held it back. The dalmatian pedaled empty air, its front feet off the ground. Derek pulled on Samantha's leash before she got the same idea, though Meredith wondered if there was much either of them could do if Samantha decided to dash for a doggy meet-and-greet. Samantha tensed.

“No,” Derek said, his voice sharp.

Samantha snorted and relaxed, quiet. She looked up with a chastised expression, as if to say, Aww, Dad. You're no fun. But she kept walking, and after several strides, her stumpy tail began to wag once more. Another block passed, and when Meredith looked back, she gasped. She hadn't realized they'd climbed such a substantial hill. She glanced at Derek, but he seemed okay.

“I like Susanne,” he said as he stepped off the curb into the street. He looked both ways and proceeded. He squeezed her hand as they reached the other side and stepped up onto the sidewalk. The earth tipped downward again into a valley.

“Susanne Shepherd,” she said.

He nodded. “Or Grey. Susanne Grey.”

“I think it's a pretty first name, but it doesn't roll well,” Meredith said.

“What do you mean?”

“With our last names,” Meredith said. “The accent on the 'anne' makes it choppy to say. Susan works, but Susanne doesn't.”

“You'd want to use Susan?” he said.

“Fake Mommy?” said Meredith. She cleared her throat. “No, I just meant... I. Example.”

“Hmm,” he said as he considered her. She watched his lips trace the name as he presumably repeated the words in his head. He frowned. “Susanne does trip on the tongue a little bit.”

“Still, it's pretty,” Meredith said. “And not weird. I don't want to be one of those parents who names her child after a movie character, some obscure word in another language, or something not typically considered a name for a human, like Stapler or Fruit Stand.”

He grinned at her. “Fruit Stand?” he said.

“It was a joke I heard,” she said. “And we can't name her after me.”

“Why not? Meredith is pretty,” he said. “I like Meredith. A joke?”

“Because I'm Meredith,” she said. “I don't want another one. And when I call you Derek, our son shouldn't wonder if he's being addressed. And, yes, a joke. But I don't tell it well.”

“Tell me anyway,” he said in a soft voice. He stared at her. His eyes twinkled. “Please.”

“See!” she said, even as the soft sound made her innards quiver. She pushed at him. He shuffled a step to the side. “You totally brainwash me. And you do it on purpose, you evil, evil man.”

He winked. “I don't know what you're talking about,” he said.
“You do.”

“I don't!”

“You do freaking too!”

He shook his head and scoffed. “Do not. Tell me.”

“Fine,” she said. “A teacher kept calling her student Fruit Stand because that's what his name tag said, but then when the bus driver tried to figure out where to drop Fruit Stand off in the afternoon, the driver flipped over Fruit Stand's name tag to read what his parents had listed as his address, and it said Billy Summers.”

They stopped. She stared at him. His lips parted. He looked like he'd sniffed something rotten. “That's...” he said.

“Not funny when I tell it, like I said.” She sighed. “I'm horrible at telling jokes because I'm not a funny person. I'm dark and twisty and not funny.”

“Meredith,” he said. His head tilted. He shook his head. They kept walking. “What name do you like?”

“For a girl?”

“That's what we seem to be discussing,” he said.

“I kind of like just Anne.”

“Anne Grey,” he said.

“Or Shepherd,” she said. “It should be Shepherd.”

He peered at her as they walked. “Why?”

“I don't know,” she said. “I just...” She'd be the one giving birth. The baby would be, without a doubt, hers. But they weren't married. Not to the world. Giving the baby his name seemed like a good way to announce him as Dad. Or... was that stupid? “It seems right.”

He shook his head. “Shepherd-Grey or Grey-Shepherd,” he said. “Putting my foot down.”

“What?” she said. “Why?”

“Well, because she'll be ours,” he said. “She should have both names.”

“Or he.”

He shrugged. “We were talking about girls' names.”

“But we could have a boy,” Meredith said. “What was your dad's name?”

Silence stretched, and she wondered if she'd made another conversational misstep. A small snake of guilt coiled in her stomach, too, over the fact that she didn't know. She didn't know Derek's father's name. He knew about Thatcher. And Ellis. And Susan. And Lexie. And the other half-sister Molly who she never even spoke to, really. And all her extended not-family family. She hadn't even known all his sisters' names until they'd shown up in Seattle. Nancy, Amelia, Kathleen, and Rachel. She could recite them, now, at least. She stroked his hand with her thumb. His grip
“Michael,” he said.

“Would you want to do that?” she said. “Use Michael as a name, I mean.”

“I...” He paused. His Adam’s apple trailed down his throat as he swallowed. The leash jingled as he shifted his grip. They stopped as Samantha paused to explore an interesting picket fence. She pushed her nose into a pile of crab grass and sniffed as though she’d scented nirvana in the dirt. Her big russet-colored paws pressed into the sponge-y carpet of vegetation. “No!” Derek said in an authoritative voice before she began to dig.

He received a disappointed, “Well, nuts,” look from their newest addition. Samantha resumed walking.

“I don’t know,” he said, his voice a bit stronger.

Meredith stared at Samantha. That was some crazy timing. Almost as if the dog had sensed he’d needed an anchor to yank him out of an uncontrolled spiral. Meredith stared as the dog trotted ahead to check out a patch of dandelions. A bumble bee zipped to freedom. Sunshine glared against the walkway and shined on Samantha’s black coat. Samantha stayed out of the soil and didn’t paw anything or dig, didn’t even try, and Meredith frowned, suspicious. That dog had a plan. Or something. She shook her head.

Ridiculous. No dog was that freaking smart. Right?

“Did any of your sisters already do it?” Meredith said. “I don’t know all your nieces and nephews yet.” She only knew the ones he mentioned in passing. Another shameful point that needed fixing.

“Mary, Nina, Sabrina, Jennifer, Chloe, Mia, Abby, Alexis, Morgan, Cody, David, Patrick, Sean, and Chase,” Derek rattled off without pausing.

Her jaw dropped. “How the hell do you keep all those straight?”

“Cue cards,” he deadpanned.

“Seriously?”

He smiled. “No,” he said. “I’ve had two decades to learn them all, you know. Abby is twenty.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Amelia hates it.”

“Hates what?”

“She was an aunt before she graduated high school.”

“And you were barely out of college before you were an uncle,” Meredith said as she made a mental time line.

“Hmm,” he said, nodding, and his gaze grew distant. He grinned. “I’m the awesome uncle, you know.”

“I bet you are,” Meredith said. “Do you bribe them all with presents?”
“Of course,” he said. “Every Christmas. You could help me shop this year, if you want.”

“Tempting,” she said. “It’d be nice to not be known as that-weird-aunt-we’ve-never-met.” He laughed. She smiled. “Did you get stuck playing doctor a lot?”

“I let Chloe use my stethoscope, once,” he said. “She listened to my heart and told me I had Ebola.”

“Ebola?”

He shrugged. “She was five at the time,” he said. He shook his head. “I don’t know where she heard of it. She prescribed me two jelly beans.”

Meredith snickered. “Did you take them?”

“Of course,” he said. “I didn’t want to die after my recent trip to Zaire.”

“You went to Zaire?”

He winked at her.

“Oh,” she said, and a smile crept across her face to mirror his. Her heart melted at the thought of him regaling his niece with his fake trip while he lay on the couch. Meredith leaned into his body and sighed as she stroked his left arm. “You’d make a really good dad. You really would, Derek.”

“I hope so,” he said.

He stopped against the trunk of a thick maple tree and closed his eyes. He leaned, and his wrist and hand pressed against the damp bark. He breathed, in and out, and he swallowed. Samantha sat by his feet and looked up with worried, mocha eyes. A car roared past beside them on the street. He flinched. Just a little.

“Are you tired?” Meredith said as she collapsed the space between them.

He didn’t answer. She took a peek at her watch. They’d been walking for about forty minutes, and they’d covered about two miles, give or take. Not a fast pace. But not slow, either, given the up-and-down of the terrain. They hadn’t turned around, which meant it would be another two miles back to the house, for a total of four. The last time they’d walked together, earlier that week, he’d managed three miles before he’d needed to stop.

“Please, don’t push yourself,” she said. The touched his bicep and rubbed. “Not today.”

“I’m not trying to,” he said, his voice thready. “It just hit me. Just now. Like a wall, or...”

She bit her lip. “We’ll turn around.”

“Okay,” he said.

“I could go back for the car,” she said.

“No, I’m...” He took a breath. “I just need a minute. I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?”

He didn’t speak. He only nodded, which scared her. She’d seen this happen before with patients in rehab. Seen fatigue that hit like a pugilist. Wham! She assessed him. Really assessed. His skin had a healthy blush to it. Not embarrassment blush, just a nice pinkish tone. He didn’t shake or tremble.
He wasn't out of breath. Sweat dotted his skin at his brows and glistened on the nape of his neck, but, she decided as she brushed sticky hair out of her face, she'd perspired, too. No human wouldn't after forty minutes of up-and-down at a reasonable pace.

“Can we sit?” he said in a soft voice.

“Sure,” she said. She gripped his shoulder, and she guided him to the curb.

He didn't collapse. Not like his strings had been cut. He used her for balance, he folded in half, and he sat. His cross trainers scraped the pavement. Samantha sat by his shoulder as he crouched. He put his head against his knees and wrapped his arms around his legs. Meredith touched his thigh. The soft, worn denim of his jeans pressed into her palms as she stroked him quads to knee. Minutes passed, and he didn't move.

“Are you sure you're okay?” she said.

His clothes rustled as he straightened. His eyes looked a bit bleary. “I'm really okay,” he said. “Just wasn't expecting that.”

“It happens sometimes,” she said. “Ready to go back?”

He nodded. She helped him stand. His body unfolded from a crouch bone by bone in a way that looked almost painful, and when he straightened, he stood still for minutes, as though he had to get used to forcing his body to defy the full force of gravity and stay upright. His fingers slackened, and she took the leash from him. Samantha looked at them, back and forth. She shifted to Meredith's hip. Her tail wagged. Then she moved behind them and back to Derek's side, despite the leash. The leash cut Meredith in the backs of her thighs, swept at a downward angle between them, and slipped behind Derek's knees. Meredith stared at the cord, afraid it would trip Derek, who wasn't very solid on his feet.

“Samantha,” Meredith said. “Dad's not feeling well.” Time stopped. She imagined saying those same words to a small child with twinkling, blue-gray eyes, a wide smile, and floppy, curly brown hair. Her fingers scrunched. She pulled a tent of his soft, worn shirt into her hands and squeezed. Her throat tightened with longing. She swallowed it away.

Samantha stared. And then she moved back to Meredith's side. Around the front. She succeeded in wrapping Derek and Meredith together. Samantha sat by Meredith's feet and looked up.

Derek snorted. “Well, it's the thought that counts.”

“Derek, I really should get the c—” Meredith began, but he kissed her, and she lost her words against his lips. When he pulled away, the verdant cavern of plant life around them spun. She couldn't protest as he put his arm over her shoulder. He grinned at her. He spun her around to get out of the leash prison, and then they moved once she'd regained her senses. He walked, his strides both stilted and slow, but he seemed fine, otherwise. She slowed her steps to match his.

He wasn't panting or sweating buckets or straining. He didn't lean on her. He'd just cut his speed in half. She made up her mind that if he started to show any signs distress, though, she would get the car whether he wanted it or not.

“I'm really not pushing,” he said as though he'd read her mind. “I'm tired, but I'm okay, for now. I swear.”

Her jaw dropped. “I wasn't—”
“You were still thinking about getting the car,” he said.


He laughed. She smiled and relaxed, letting the warm feel of his body chop her tension to bits. He squeezed her shoulder. She reached behind him and hooked her free hand in his back pocket. They moved together. Slowly.

“Do you want a girl?” she said, resuming their conversation from before.

“I want anything,” he said.

“But if you had to pick in a split second, what would you pick?”

“I don't want to pick, Meredith,” he said. “I'd really be happy with anything.”

“I know you'd be happy either way,” she said, “But you have to have some sort of knee-jerk desire.”

He kissed her hair despite the streaks of mud. “Do you?”

“I hadn't thought about it. I guess...” Her voice trailed away. She dreamed about having a baby. She dreamed about losing the baby. But... “I mean I think baby, and I just get baby.” But she'd asked him about his desire. She expected him to pick something. To get a little, she would have to give. She went with her gut as she sighed. “I don't know. A boy.”

“Why a boy?”

She shrugged. “I don't know why,” she said. “It just seems to make sense in my head for some reason. Because you like fishing and hiking and—”

“Girls can like those things.”

“I know, but you grew up with four sisters,” she said.

He nodded. “Four very girly sisters.”

“Did any of them like fishing or hiking?”

“No, but that's not something my dad really fostered,” he said. “Maybe, they would have if he'd tried, but I think he just assumed...”

“What types of things did your dad do with you?” she said.

“We didn't have a lot of money,” he said. “He worked six days a week. Sometimes seven.”

“Is that why Sandy Hook was so special? Because you spent time with him?”

They stepped off a curb into a street. A dingy, rusted Mustang that had been loved a lot less in its life than Mark's cherry-colored car waited while they ambled across the black divide. As they stepped onto the opposite curb, Samantha moved to sniff the crack in the pavement between one sidewalk tile and the next. Meredith jerked on the leash. “We need to go home,” she said to the dog. Samantha sniffed and continued.

“The day he died,” Derek said, “He made me go back to the store with him to help make up time he'd lost by coming home to referee one of my and Amy's spats.” He paused to take a tired breath.
“He was always making up time. He worked a lot, but he was always there when we needed him. Sandy Hook was special because...” He sighed. “I don’t know. It’s just what I remember.”

She pulled her hand from his pocket and rubbed his back. “Did he ever take you fishing?” she said.

“He taught me how,” Derek said. “But he only took me a few times. Five kids is a lot, Meredith.”

She stiffened. Five kids was a lot. A lot.

_I was just thinking how pretty you are_, he'd said as he'd stroked her hair. _And also how pretty our children would be._

_Children_, she'd said. Her stomach had flip-flopped. She'd tried to keep the smile pasted on her face, but she'd failed. _Like multiple?_

_Child_, he corrected. _Let's just start with one and see how that goes._

They'd never really finished that discussion. They'd never talked about what would happen after baby number one. They'd never compared notes. In all the death and dying and trauma, they hadn't talked about anything other than the fact that she wanted to start, now, too. She was ready. Worry carved her thoughts. Five. Five kids. What if he wanted five? Or Twelve? Or a freaking army of little Derek Shepherds? Her breaths tightened in her chest as unbidden panic tumbled into her.

“What is it?” he said.

“Derek, I... want a baby,” she said.

“Well...” He paused, and he looked at her, confusion pinching his tired gaze. “That's good.” A bewildered smile twitched at his lips. He kissed her. “Since we pulled the goalie, that's kind of important.”

She sighed. “Derek...”

His smile tripped into a frown. “What is it?” he repeated.

“Pluralizing baby scares me,” she said. “I can't be a surgeon with a gaggle of kids.”

He laughed. “I don't want five kids, Meredith. Just thinking about five gives me a migraine.”

“How many then?”

“I'd be happy with one.”

“But what's your goal?” she said.

“Less than five.”

She sighed. This was like pulling teeth. Many, many teeth. She didn't understand why he was being so careful to avoid stating his real opinion. “How many less than five?”

“Can't we just see what happens?” he said.

“When you think of your ideal family, how many kids do you have?” she insisted.

“Meredith,” he said, and he stopped walking.
She returned his gaze, unblinking. “Derek,” she said, matching his vexed tone.

Time stretched. His lips pressed into a line. “Two,” he said.

“Two,” she parroted. “Not three of four. That's manageable. That's...”

“We can have just one, Meredith,” he said. “I'd be happy.”

“You'd be happy with anything,” she said. “You said that.”

He shook his head. He loosed a soft, exasperated chuckle. “What do you want from me?”

“I just want to know what you actually want, Derek,” she said. “I don't want to get all the way to our destination only to find out we're in Seattle and you'd rather be in Tacoma. Or, hell, France. Or... whatever.”

“Meredith,” he said, his voice low and flat and definitive. “I want you.”

“I know that, but—”

He kissed her. “I'm fine with Seattle. Or Tacoma. Or France. As long as we're in the same car or boat or plane. The trip matters to me. Not the destination. Okay?”

She growled. “You're so freaking frustrating, sometimes.”

“Why is that frustrating?” he said.

“Because I want to know!” she said. “You've bent, and bent, and bent for me, lately. You moved in when I wanted you to. You live with roommates you hate because I like them there. You've let me be an insensitive, nonsupporting freak for months and months without saying a word. You still do it. Maybe, I'm not going to change my mind or my opinion about anything, but I'd like to know what you want. Pre-filtered. Meredith independent. What would you do in a car or a boat or a plane if I wasn't there? You have to have some sort of solo plan.”

He gripped her shoulder and started walking. She sighed at the fragile, short steps he took. He was going to play the too-tired-and-sick-to-talk card to get out of this. And she hated it. She hated—

“Whenever I think about it, you have a girl,” he said.

She watched his feet as they navigated over a treacherous section of pavement. A tree had grown old, and the roots had pushed up and cracked the sidewalk tiles. He leaned against her as he worked his way over the pile of roots and pavement. His weight on her arm lessened as they reached flat ground.

“You think about it?” she said.

“Yeah, Mere,” he said. “Of course, I think about it.”

“You've never said anything.”

He swallowed. “I didn't want to spook you.”

“You wouldn't spook me,” she assured him.

“Not now.”
A lump formed in her throat. She blinked. “You mean you've been thinking about it that long? About me, and...” She clutched Samantha's leash and rubbed her womb with her fist. “How long?”

“Meredith, I'm forty-two,” he said. “I've wanted kids for fifteen years. Maybe, I don't have a biological clock like you do, but I'm getting a bit old to be a new dad, and I've known it for a while.”

“How long have you... I mean with me. How long?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. Since... before you drowned.”

“Before Addison?”

“No. I think... in the kitchen.”

“The kitchen?”

“Mmm,” he said. He kissed her. “You wore a lavender-colored sweater. You picked up a pair of crystal wine glasses and put them in the sink. I walked in, and I said—”

Hi.

Hi.

I was going to come over this morning, but, uh...

“That's when you told me you loved me the first time,” she whispered. She blinked, and tears popped loose. She brushed the tracks away with the backs of her palms. “You thought about it all the way back then?”

“I knew I loved you,” he said, as though that explained everything, and she supposed it did. Derek had such an entrenched sense of what family meant. He wanted kids. Love meant family. Love, therefore family, therefore kids. She glanced at Samantha, who'd stopped again to lick up a beetle she'd found. Family, therefore dog.

Meredith's hands trembled with the weight and realization of what they'd just done. They hadn't just gotten a dog. Her lower lip quivered.

“Thank you for not pushing,” she said. “It means a lot that you didn't.”

He sighed and shook his head. “I gave up. With Addison. She never...”

She swallowed. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. I love you. Honestly, Meredith, I have the family I need with just you.”

“But not the family you want,” she said. “I really want a baby. Maybe two, but definitely one. With you. I really...”

He grinned. “We will. Soon. We haven't even been trying for a month yet.”

“I know,” she said. She sighed. “Maybe I should get one of those tests that will tell me when I'm ovulating so we can be sure we don't miss it.”

“I thought you didn't want to go crazy about this,” he said.
“I thought I didn't. But...”

His eyebrows raised. “But?”

“You're forty-two,” she said, “And I love you. And nearly losing you made me realize how much I want this, not because it would mean I'm not alone or... whatever. But because it's you. And it's me. And the phrase 'now or never' hits very close to home. We've both wasted a lot of time nearly dying.”

“We have,” he said.

His feet shuffled on the pavement. They finished the walk in silence, sharing company. The return to her house took ten more minutes than the walk away from it had, probably due to their slower pace. He walked up the steps under his own steam, and he opened the door while she held Samantha's leash.

He didn't collapse once he'd crossed the threshold. Samantha glanced at her new surroundings. Her feet tapped on the floor as she walked a quick circle around Meredith as Meredith disabled the alarm. Samantha's tail didn't wag. She whined with uncertainty.

“Are you going to sit down for a bit?” Meredith said. “I can bring you something from the kitchen.”

Derek shook his head. “Bed,” he said. He moved like an old man toward the stairs.

“Okay,” she said.

She frowned. He hadn't been taking naps, as a rule. Emotional stress drew him into hibernation, but for physical exertion, he tended to need only inactivity to recover. She wanted to help, but he didn't ask for it, and she made herself not worry about his exhaustion. He'd been up since before sunrise. He'd just walked four miles less than three months after heart surgery. She didn't need to be concerned.

And now they had a nervous, upset dog to deal with. From the way Samantha paced, the walk hadn't tired her out enough to prevent the homesick anxiety they'd been hoping to prevent. The steps creaked as Derek moved up the flight. The floorboards moaned as he moved around upstairs. Samantha watched the noises with consternation, her ears perked. She barked. Once. Twice.

“That's Dad,” Meredith said, and Samantha quieted.

Meredith kept the dog on the leash and walked her room to room, starting with Derek's office, allowing Samantha to sniff and explore under supervision. Samantha walked a lap, sniffing the shelves and the books and the desk and his chair. She paused at one of the drawers in his executive desk, which had been left open several inches. After a few minutes, Samantha decided to move on to the living room. Meredith followed her as Samantha moved around the first floor.

Once Samantha found the dog gates, Meredith introduced Samantha to her dog crate in the dining room and the box of toys in the kitchen. Samantha ignored the toys and settled on the fluffy bedding in her crate with a huge sigh that heaved her big black frame. Meredith grinned. Maybe the walk-to-exhaustion plan had worked for more than just Derek, after all. Samantha's russet-colored paws stuck out the door of the crate. History had worn the black pads on her feet. Meredith unclipped the leash. She stroked Samantha's glossy fur from head to paw.

“Quiet time for a bit sounds good,” Meredith said. “I need a shower, anyway.”
She filled the water bowl and then closed the dog gate behind herself and latched it. She glanced at her watch. Neither Lexie nor Alex were due back for hours yet, and they both knew to expect a dog. She decided to leave a sticky note on the front door about Samantha, anyway. They were expecting a dog, yes. Not a rottweiler. Samantha seemed pretty laid back, but as a potential guard dog, Meredith thought she might get a little upset about strangers she hadn't been introduced to walking into the house unannounced.

That done, Meredith went upstairs. Dim shafts of sunlight cut into the room at slants around the edges of the blinds. Derek lay on the bed on his stomach underneath a fluffy tent of blankets. She could see the mop of his hair cresting his mashed pillow and not much else. His soft, even breathing told her he slept. He didn't seem agitated, didn't toss or mumble. She hoped that meant he slept well. She didn't disturb him. She grabbed her red robe from the back of the master bathroom door and headed across the hall to take a shower.

Hot water lifted the dirt from her naked body and muddy trails sluiced down her skin. She sighed as billowing steam collected and cleared her lungs. She stayed in the shower for a luxurious twenty minutes, not because she was that dirty, but because it felt really freaking good. By the time she'd towed off, scraped the tangles from her hair with a brush, and put her robe back on, at least a half hour had passed.

She padded back across the hall into the master bedroom. Her wet hair had soaked her robe, and she shivered. He still slept. She tried to be quiet, but the floor of the old house moaned with her weight as she approached the closet. She grimaced when the blankets moved, and he took a deep breath.

“What time is it?” he said, his voice low and full of sleep, his face buried in pillows.

“It's only been about an hour,” she said. “Go back to sleep if you want.”

He rolled onto his back. “The dog?”

“Passed out,” Meredith said. “I think your plan worked.”

“Kay,” he said. He swallowed. He lay with his eyes shut, like he didn't want to face the world yet, but he didn't go back to sleep, either, and the sight of him lying there sparked memories. She listened to him breathe while she dressed herself at the closet. She pulled on some panties and gray knit pants. She shucked her robe and found a soft, clean white t-shirt to wear. When she turned to face him once more, the churn of the past made her grip the door handle. She swallowed.

Meredith stayed with him while the surgical team made the final preparations and Cristina... Cristina prepared in the scrub room. He lay on the gurney, silent save for his worrisome panting, while Meredith held his hand. She watched the anesthesiologist attempt to slip an intravenous line into his other wrist, wincing every time the woman made a bad stick and missed a vein. His whole body shivered, making a good line harder to set. Worse was his lost blood volume, though. Meredith suspected that was the main culprit. The needle broke his pale skin once more.

The anesthesiologist sighed and shook her head. “I'm sorry, Dr. Shepherd,” she said. “I'm trying.”

Derek didn't speak. He stared into the operating table lights overhead. His pupils had dilated with shock despite the brightness.

Meredith wanted to yell. She wanted to scream. She wanted to stomp her feet. She refrained from all three. This wasn't the anesthesiologist's fault. This was Gary Clark's fault. But she made a futile wish that the anesthesiologist would work faster, regardless. Derek couldn't breathe, and he was in
“Got it,” said the small woman, and Meredith’s tension snapped and snarled in her muscles. She hadn’t meant it. She wasn’t ready for him to be asleep. She wasn’t—

“I think we’re ready,” said the anesthesiologist.

They slipped the gas mask over his pale face. Meredith’s eyes watered. She glanced wildly at his heart monitor. The thready, unstable rhythm made her tremble. She blinked. When she looked back at him, she found his glassy gaze resting on her.

“Are you ready?” said a quiet voice in her ear.

She twitched and turned to see Jackson’s sharp green eyes staring at her. “Yes,” she said. No, she really meant. No, no, no. She squeezed Derek’s palm with one hand, and with the other, she pulled her fingers through his sweaty hair.

“Okay,” said Jackson. “Let’s go, then. Put him out.”

Meredith swallowed. “It’ll be over soon,” she assured Derek. The mask hissed as they turned on the gas flow.

“Breathe deeply, Dr. Shepherd,” said Jackson, which made her want to laugh as nerves and stress and pain overwhelmed her. Derek couldn’t breathe at all, let alone deeply. What a ridiculous thing to say.

Derek’s eyelids drooped. “I love you,” she told him.

And then he was gone. Just like that. One moment, awake and damaged. The next, sleeping. Not sleeping. Knocked out. His jerky breaths smoothed out into shallow wisps. They didn’t deepen. They couldn’t. He had no room in his chest for his lungs to inflate. But at least he wasn’t suffering anymore. There was that.

She swallowed, and the tears she’d been holding onto broke loose, now that he couldn’t see them. She kissed his forehead, uncaring of the tense audience waiting for her to back away so they could work. She stroked the skin of his face not obscured by the mask. And then, unable to wait anymore, Jackson and the scrub nurse pushed her away in a frenetic explosion of activity.

All at once, they violated his still body. They pushed an endotracheal tube down his throat. They pulled his bloody underwear down his legs, threw the dirty article into the bio-hazard bin with his other stained clothes, and catheterized him. Though they did try to keep him covered with blankets for his modesty, everyone in the room saw him while he lay oblivious at least once or twice. It couldn’t be helped. They shaved his chest, and then they covered him with blue sterile drapes. The ventilator whirred as they turned it on.

She stayed there, watching, but not watching. Four feet away in a sea of empty space. Adrift.

“What’s wrong?” Derek said, and she blinked back to the present.

She realized she stood at the door of their closet, her hand gripped around the doorknob as though it were her only lifeline. And she’d started crying. What the hell?

He watched her from the bed, his dark eyes endless pools of concern. She wiped her nose with her hand, sniffling. “I’m sorry,” she blurted. “I’m sorry. I just keep thinking about it, today, and I don’t know why.” She stumbled to the bed. She needed him. She crawled under the covers. He wrapped
his arms around her without asking why. She rested against his chest. He didn't comment about her wet, cold hair. Or anything. She listened to his heartbeat, and she let it soothe her out of the rafters of hysterics. The warm sheets and his body cocooned her.

“The miscarriage?” he said in a soft voice.

“No,” she said. “Not the baby. You.” Her throat burned. A tennis ball formed in her esophagus. She couldn't breathe. And then and she lost what little composure she'd regathered. She cried. She didn't know why. He was warm and alive and breathing beside her, and she couldn't stop the waterworks no matter what she tried.

“I'm okay,” he said.

“I know!” she wailed. “Which is why this doesn't make any sense.”

“It makes sense to me,” he said.

“How?” she said. “I'm crying like a freak over something that happened over two months ago.”

“I told you,” he said. “You put everything on hold.”

“I didn't,” she said. “I've been seeing Dr. Wyatt.”

“For me,” he said. “Not for you.”

“But—”

“It's okay,” he said.

The blankets rustled as he tightened his grip. His warm body radiated against her. She cried until her cheeks felt sticky, and her eyes hurt even when they were closed. She lay along his length, and he rubbed her back, saying nothing. The moments stretched. She pressed her nose against his soft shirt and inhaled. Her body relaxed despite her grief.

“When you told me I'd make an amazing dad, you knew you were pregnant,” he said, his voice soft.

“I'm sorry,” she said with a sniff. “I didn't mean to make you think about—”

“I was already thinking about it,” he said. “All day. You wanted to say something, and then you didn't. You told me I would make an amazing dad instead. You knew.”

She brushed her face with her hands. “You knew I knew. I told you later.”

“You did, I just...” He sighed. “It didn't click.”

“I was afraid to tell you,” she admitted.

He rolled onto his side. His glistening gaze met hers. “Why?” he said.

“You said I shouldn't be alone if something were to happen to you. That's why you wanted to have kids.”

He nodded. “I did say that. That wasn't my only reason.”

“But that's what you said, and I thought...” She swallowed. “I thought...”
“What?” he prodded. He stroked her face.

“That I’d be giving you permission to die if I told you I was pregnant.”

“Oh.”

“And then I started getting cramps a little while later,” she said. “Cristina kicked me out of the OR to stitch Owen's shoulder. My pants were bloody.”

“My OR?” he said.

She nodded. “Yeah. They pulled your EKG leads. I thought you were dead. I got a bit hysterical. Cristina didn't want me there.”

He kissed her. “I'm sorry, Meredith. I'm sorry you had to go through that alone.”

She smiled despite her watery eyes. “I got to keep you. I'd trade thirty seconds of panic for that any day,” she said. She shifted, and she splayed a palm against his chest. The scar down his center wasn't as prominent anymore, but she could still feel it where Cristina had cut him in half. Through his shirt. The line pressed against her sensitive nerves. She scrunched her fingers. He stared at her, unblinking, as she appraised his scars. His breaths pressed his chest against her hand. She kissed his shirt and swallowed as a thousand flashes of him sweaty, shivery, and dying sparked in her brain like remnants of flashbulb explosions. She had no right to ask. Not when he was on such shaky ground, himself, about the whole thing, but...

“What do you actually remember?” she said.

Silence stretched. He stared, and she wanted to hit herself for her curiosity. Stupid. Stupid, insensitive idiot. But he pressed his forehead against hers and breathed, his look... not untroubled. But not... Not like it had been. Not when he'd curled in her arms, shaking with terror. Not like when he'd had his panic attack, and he'd been clawing at his collar in a terrifying struggle to breathe.

“When I was shot?” he said.

“That day,” she said. “Before we put you under, but... after. After what happens in your nightmare.”

Again, the silence stretched, and she couldn't help but blurt, “I'm sorry,” into his chest. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked.”

His palm raked her arm, and his eyelids lowered. “Shh,” he said. “I was just thinking. I'm okay. I can...”

“This is one of the better things?” she said.

A small smile crept across his pale face. “You were there,” he said.

“I was.”

“It wasn't as scary.”

She swallowed. She didn't know what to say to that.

His gaze spaced, and he shook his head. “Just impressions, really,” he said. “I remember you wanted me to get up, and I didn't understand why. And then it's a blur for a while.”
“We had to put you in a wheelchair to move you,” she said. “That’s why.”

“Yeah. It hurt to sit up like that. I couldn’t breathe. I...” His breaths shortened, and she tensed. He’d said he was okay. But... She stroked his shirt and stared into his eyes, less than inches from hers.

“You were there,” he said again, but it sounded more as though he were using the phrase as a ward against fear than recalling a memory.

Her throat burned as her own memories crashed into her brain. His screams of pain, the first when they’d tried to pick him up to put him in the wheelchair, and the second when they’d been forced to lift him onto the operating table, burned brightest.

“Do you remember when we moved you onto the operating table?” she said. She clenched her jaw.

“No,” he said, and she sighed with relief. Her teeth unclenched. He licked his lips and continued, his voice rough, “For a while, I... Nothing. But then I felt nauseous. And I hurt. And I was cold. I couldn’t lift my eyelids more than a sliver. You had my hand. You picked up my arm.”

She nodded. “I took your blood pressure.”

“You looked upset,” he said.

“It was bad, Derek,” she said. “You’d lost so much blood.”

They’d had to transfuse him. Multiple units. Thankfully, the OR refrigerator had had eight units of unexpired O-negative leftover from the crew that had been there earlier that morning, or they... He would have died from blood loss. Or somebody would have died running to get blood for him as Gary Clark wound his way through the hospital to the surgical floor. Or both.

“I couldn’t breathe, and I...” He sighed. “Cristina dragged you off before I could say anything.”

She sniffled. “And when I came back, you asked me to kiss you. And you promised you wouldn’t die. You always do that.”

“Do what?” he said.

“Try to make me feel better.”

“I thought I was lying.”

She cupped his face. “And do you remember what I said when you told me that?”

He closed his eyes.

“You’re the strongest person I know,” she said. “I still believe that. I mean it. I’m sorry I brought this all up. I don’t know what I was thinking. I didn’t mean to—”

He kissed her, and he swept her breath away. She inhaled the scent of him. “I’m supposed to talk about this, aren’t I?” he said.

“Yes, but—”

“It’s okay, Meredith. I’m... I’m okay today.”

“An eight,” she countered.

“Maybe, I’ll be a seven tomorrow,” he said.
“I hope so,” she whispered. “I wish—” she began, but he took away her words again.

They didn't speak anymore.

He pressed against her, warm and alive and breathing. His fingers slipped through her wet hair, and the world tipped as he rolled on top of her. He kissed her. He kissed her again. His fingers slid underneath the waistband of her panties, and she moaned as he touched her, searching and gentle. The blankets rustled as he shifted, and somewhere in a tango of bodies and a crash of skin, he pushed her pants down to her knees and away, and he lost his shirt and boxer briefs. His pale body crushed against her, a naked tapestry for her artistry. She painted him with her fingertips. Her lips.

They tangled together, a knot of limbs. She splayed her palm against the flat plane of his chest and wandered down, down, down into the coarse forest below his navel. She cupped him. He growled against her skin. His hips jammed against her. A reflex. And then he regained his sentience. His fingers roamed low, and she gasped as her insides clenched with anticipation and need. He worked her into a mess. She clutched him, clutched his shoulders, begging.

Her lower body fluttered, and she lost all control, helpless as he stroked her. Her breaths shuddered. She grimaced, and a low, desperate, wavering moan boiled in her throat. The triumph in his gaze made her giddy as she returned to her body. She fought the lethargy of release.

“I love you,” she murmured.

They kissed. He didn't reply as he swept her away in the crash of his wave. Through the haze of her eyelashes and the blurry heat between them, she watched his torso huff as he gasped. He kissed her, his breaths buffeting her in the silence, and she drew in a tight, noisy breath as he speared her. He rested his weight on his elbows, above her, looking down, and though he didn't speak, his eyes said the words for him.

I love you.

He pushed in and out, his body a line of sleek, straining, powerful muscles. In and out again. He repeated and repeated, but he didn't crest. His lusting, desirous expression clouded with discomfort. After an eternity of slip and slide, he pulled out and tumbled to her side, panting, spent, but still hard, still ready. He inhaled. Exhaled. His lips parted, and he swallowed, pulling down air. As though he were rallying.

She rolled, and he yielded to her. She straddled his lower body. She kissed him, and she stroked her fingers through his hair. “Let me,” she said, panting. “Please?”

The seconds stretched as he gazed at her, underneath her, submitted to her. She rubbed her palm along his skin. Her hand chased the contours of his ribs. His pectorals. The pink line down his center, and the dime-sized knot of dented, pink flesh underneath his left nipple.

“Please?” she repeated.

“And you think I brainwash you,” he said, his voice hoarse but quivering with laughter. His eyes sparkled.

She snickered, and she kissed him. She pulled at his lip with her teeth, and she sighed. “This is okay then?” she murmured.

“Hmm,” he said. He nodded his assent. “Do something before I burst.”

For the first time in more than ten weeks, she made love to Derek Shepherd. She guided him into
her once again and settled. She squeezed around him, and a rumble caught in his throat. She moved in a slow, luxurious figure-eight pattern that made him moan on the tips and dips of the eight. She watched with delight as his body tensed, and his breaths clipped off into gasps. He arched back into the pillow, his face a mask of thrilling abandon. He filled her. She squeezed, and a throaty, delicious groan fell from his lips.

Torturous hours, or minutes, or seconds later – she didn't know – his body tensed. He gathered air. His eyes turned glassy, and he hit free fall underneath her. His lower body twitched and jerked, and when he came, he loosed a nonsensical shout. Something wet bloomed inside her body. Seconds ticked by. Twelve. Fifteen. His breaths resumed, and he swallowed as his muscles relaxed. He sank against the mattress.

“Good?” she said with a languid smile.

“Mmm,” was his reply. She flattened against him and kissed his throat. His breaths evened, and he fell asleep before he softened. She didn't laugh or comment. He'd been tired, and he tended to nod off for a few minutes even when he was healthy. She stroked his sweat-dampened hair, and she rolled to his side to rest, her cheek against his breastbone. She twirled the tuft of hair there with her index finger as his heartbeat thumped against her ears. She listened, and she breathed, and she felt...

Good.

Great.

Better than ever.

He'd let her do the work for the first time in weeks, and...

She blinked as the room beyond his sweaty body came into focus. The red glow of his clock on his nightstand showed the time. Nearly five. And then she frowned. His painkillers had blocked the view before, and... Now, they were behind his clock. He'd moved them.

Had he taken some? No. No, he'd just moved them. So he could see the time while he slept. Surely.

She swallowed as she stared at his Percocet bottle. Something niggled. Something told her to keep looking at it. Why? She thought back to the morning, when she'd woken, bleary and wanting more sleep. She'd noticed the bottle then, and— That was it. The cap wasn't skewed anymore, which meant he'd taken the time to fix it. Or... he'd taken pills.

Her stomach churned as she listened to him breathe underneath her. He hadn't said anything about being in pain. Not enough to take pills. He'd been acting fine. Not suffering. They'd just had sex, and he'd used his arms to support himself for at least a little while.

Clearly, no pain.

She flipped back the blankets and slid off the bed. She blinked. Outside the bubble of his reassuring warmth, her wet hair and naked lower body chilled her. She shivered. This was stupid. Beyond stupid. Why couldn't she trust him? Why...

He didn't budge as she moved away. Didn't snuffle. Derek slept very lightly. Surely, he would notice something as significant as her weight disappearing from his side. But he didn't move. Like he had help staying asleep.
Help. Like narcotics. Or good sex, she insisted, but explosions of worry buried that thought under piles of paranoid debris.

She tiptoed around the bed and grabbed his pill bottles, both the Percocet and the Oxycontin. The bottles rattled. He didn't stir. She bit her lip, and she took them into the master bathroom with her. She closed the door behind her. She sat on the toilet seat with the orange bottles in her lap. Her eyes watered.

Why couldn't she just trust him?

He's lied to you before, said the small voice. About Addison. About Rose.

Omitted, she told the voice. He never lied; he just omitted.

What do you call not telling you about the Percocet, then?

She didn't have an answer for that one.

Guilt churned in her stomach. She could just ask him. What if he wanted help, but wasn't sure how to explain? What if he hadn't told her because he didn't realize he had a problem? Drug-addicts were champions at living in denial. What if...

What if she was jumping to stupid, freakish, paranoid conclusions?

She felt dirty. And wrong. And awful. But she unscrewed the cap, and she counted the pills. In both bottles. She would count them again in a few days when he wasn't looking. Then, she would have a real idea about how many he was taking, and she could... She could work from there. When she had facts, instead of silly not-quite-baseless suspicions.

She ignored the roiling in her gut as the voice pressed down on her like an avalanche. Doubt churned.

What will you do when you have facts? it said.

What then?

She didn't know.
Chapter 17

The shriek of the alarm pulled him up from darkness. What had been a pleasant, solid black beyond his eyelids became murky. Lighter. Dawn interrupted by flesh. He slammed his hand against his nightstand. Things crashed to the ground in an inanimate cascade, followed by a liquid slosh, but the awful noise stopped. He lay with his arm dangling off the mattress, breathing. Water from his glass dripped from his fingers and fell onto the rug below with a tap, tap, tap. He became aware of his pillow. He'd mashed his face against the cotton pillowcase. Moist warmth touched his face.

He moved his hand and pawed at his mouth. His palm rasped against stubble. Had he been drooling? His nose scrunched, and he made a noise. Nothing particular. Just noise. He rolled onto his back. The covers rustled.

He lay quiet, wrapped in warmth, and he rested, awake but not alive. The house below the floor radiated silence. No Alex. No Lexie. No Meredith? But that didn't make sense. Meredith was supposed to be there...

He swallowed. His mouth felt pasty and gummy with sleep. He didn't want to get up. The daylight brightened against his eyelids as he lay there. Heat spread across his skin with the slow sunrise.

“Just going to lie there?” said Mr. Clark in the distance. “Coward.”

Derek rolled away from the words. Rolled back into the dark. He pulled the blankets over his shoulders, heaved a sigh, and let reality slip an inch. Two. His sense of the room around him stretched. Bright became fuzzy dark, and Mr. Clark didn't seem so loud anymore.

Back again? said her familiar soft voice.

Buzzing pierced his head space, and the image shattered before lethargy could sink in its teeth. His body jerked, and his heart throbbed. He opened his eyes at the unexpected noise. The room blurred as he squinted against the light.

“Fucking...” he cursed when he realized the source of the noise. Another alarm. Across the room. Atop the dresser by the doorway. And it didn't turn off as he lay there, his head swirling. He let it ring for minutes, and the noise didn't stop.

He fell out of bed more than stood. He gathered his treacherous balance for a journey across the carpet. His bare toes scrunched against the soft area rug. He slammed his hand on the off button, but his palm slipped across the plastic, and he crunched his finger bones against the hard, cold wood of the dresser instead. A second haphazard attempt brought silence. His ears stopped throbbing. He didn't remember setting a second alarm. He didn't remember anything except waking up dying in the dark, and then... He stared at the device, dumb and groggy and fascinated for what seemed like eons.

Vague euphoria hovered behind his eyes, and he felt a bit too dizzy to move much. He rested against the dresser and breathed and swallowed as he tried to gather his scattered wits. He didn't notice Meredith for... He didn't know how long.

She sat in the hulking chair she and Mark had lugged upstairs for him, back when Derek hadn't been able to sleep through the night lying flat. The diagonal shaft of light filtering in from the window framed her. Dust motes swirled around her head. She wore khakis and a blouse, and her hair had been pulled into a tight, lanky ponytail. No amount of makeup could hide the haggard,
dark circles under her eyes, or the paleness of her face. He saw it. He did.

But his lips curled into a smile anyway. He blinked. “Hi,” he said. He took a wobbling, laggard step toward her. His body wasn't working quite right, wasn't waking up fast enough, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Except she mattered.

Paradox.

She didn't return his smile. Her gray gaze swept over his body, head to toes. “Hey,” she said. Her voice hung low in the air, soft and tired. Her expression seemed pinched. As though she hadn't slept, or she had a headache.

Her distress called him forward. He approached the bed. He grabbed at the bedspread and scrunched his fingers. He sat on her side of the bed, on top of rumpled sheets and blankets, and the revolutions around his head slowed to a crawl.

“Dizzy?” she said. She didn't blink.

Yes. Very. But he shook his head. “Were you watching me sleep?” he said.

Her eyes narrowed. “You do it, too.”

“I know I do it,” he said. “I was asking you.”

“No,” she said. She bit her lip and looked away. “Sort of.” Her throat wavered as she swallowed. “Yes.”

He laughed. “That's a lot of answers.”

“Maybe, I like watching you sleep,” she said, but she didn't sound playful, or... anything.

He stood. The world tipped, but he caught himself against the arm of the chair. Leather slipped under his hand, and he leaned, chuckling at his own clumsiness. His body swayed. Forward. Into her. Against her. The soft scent of lavender tickled his nose as he pressed his face into her soft hair.

She didn't respond at first. Didn't speak. A soft squeak caught in her throat as he kissed her ear and her throat and low and lower. He pressed into her cleavage. He felt her tiny hand grip his waist. Her palms rasped against his shirt and slid up. Along his spine. She sighed, and he embraced her, and in that moment, the world fell away. Nothing mattered. He breathed, and he forgot everything.

He kissed her lips last. “Mmm,” he said as he pulled away. He licked his lips to linger in her taste. “I like that you like it.” She didn't respond. She gave him silence. Not even a smile. “Normally, you smile when I kiss you,” he said.

She froze. Her eyes widened. A long silence followed. Her mouth opened. And closed. And opened.

“Derek,” she said, but she said nothing else. Her lips curled, poised around a word to which she didn't give any sound.

He frowned. “What's wrong?”

Silence stretched, as if she didn't know what to say. And then her expression crumpled. “You didn't brush your teeth before you kissed me.”

“Oh,” he said with a laugh. “Sorry.” He swiped a palm against his lips and blew into it, trying to
get a whiff of whatever he'd tortured her with. He couldn't smell a thing, but... “I guess that's my cue.”

“Cue?” she said.

He kissed her temple and grinned. “To get ready. Truth be told, though, I think I'd rather kiss you.”

She smiled a wan smile as he stood, but she said nothing. The room heaved into motion. He grimaced as he tried to navigate across the room to the door. His head felt like a faucet, rushing endlessly, and his empty stomach churned and squeezed. Why...? He couldn't remember.

“I'm still here, you know,” said Mr. Clark.

Derek swallowed. Out of Meredith's infectious eclipse, his mirth waned. He didn't look behind himself as he traversed the hall on unsteady feet. He needed to take a shower. He needed to shave. He needed to brush his teeth and be a person again. Somehow. Today. He needed. Last night had been... He couldn't remember.

“You can't make me go away.”

Derek pushed the hallway bathroom door shut behind himself and drew clumsy hands to his face. His palms scraped against stubble. When he looked in the mirror, he saw bloodshot eyes, dark circles, and a wiry mess of gray-dusted, curly hair. He swallowed. No wonder Meredith had seemed upset. He looked like he'd barely survived a—

*Derek! Hang on; I'm coming!*

“Pretending I'm not here won't work.”

Derek shook his head and sighed. He looked like he hadn't slept. Which he hadn't. Not... mostly.

He relieved himself, and then he shaved as he stared into his own haunted eyes. The razor swerved across his face and rasped against his skin. Tilting his head made the room feel like it was toppling, and he gripped the lip of the sink with his free hand. He needed to shave today. He needed to wear a suit. He needed...

Something.

*Derek!*

His hand shook, and he paused with the razor as the mirror world beyond the silver glass shifted into endless white. His body was falling. The ground met his back, and he couldn't breathe. He couldn't breathe, and his own blood slicked his hands. *No, Mr. Clark...* Derek's fingers grasped at nothing but air as he begged.

The mirror snapped as Derek yanked it back on its hinges, revealing the medicine cabinet behind it, full of over-the-counter medications, band-aids, gauze, a small set of scissors, extra packs of dental floss, and even a scalpel, courtesy of living in a house full of surgeons. His razor clattered in the sink.

“Stop,” Derek told the shelves in front of him. “Leave me alone.”

Silence stretched. The tension in the waiting became unbearable as he washed his face. He moved away from the sink, from his dying shadow in the mirror. Mr. Clark said nothing. The chilly air made Derek shiver as he peeled off his shirt and slipped down his cotton plaid pajama pants to pool
at his feet. Still nothing, and Derek paused, reveling in the silence. No ridicule. No tormenting. No flashes of death or mayhem.

He swallowed, and he closed his eyes, and he let the room revolve around his head. He had to reach for the sink to steady himself, but he listened to the quiet. His awareness shifted away. Nothing. If he let his brain stop thinking, if he let himself stop fighting the current of impairment, there was nothing, and it was... Nice. Really nice.

For a long moment, he let the force of it sweep him away. His muscles relaxed. His breaths evened. He stared, but it didn't matter, because his eyes didn't process. Time didn't pass, except it did.

They lay on towels on the docks, their hands interlocked as they stared at the cerulean sky. Seattle had that sort of idyllic, cloudless sky perhaps a few weeks out of the entire year. Here, though, the endless blue was just that. Endless. Eternal. No rain. No weather. Just perfect. Water lapped at the dock supports and spread out beyond them like a plane of chopped glass. A rim of spruce and pines divided sky and earth.

“You took a lot of pills last night,” she said.

He tilted his head to the side. His cheek met sun-baked terrycloth. Her eyes glittered. Her fingers stroked his hand.

“So, what?” he said.

“It's just...” She bit her lip. “That was a lot.”

He looked away. “I was having nightmares.”

“I know,” she said. She rolled onto her side and mashed against him. He grunted as her slight weight fell into his space. She kissed his throat, nuzzled the juncture where his throat met his chin, and kissed him again. Her tiny fingers toiled with a twist of dark, curly hair nestled between his pectorals. “I'm sorry you can't sleep,” she said. “It sucks. But—”

“I didn't come here for lectures,” he said.

Meredith didn't speak. She sighed. She rolled away and looked at the sky.

“What's wrong?” he said, feeling like a broken record. Nothing should be wrong here. Why had wrongness followed him?

“Nothing.”

“You're lying to me,” he said.

She swallowed, and she looked at him. “Please, don't take more,” she said. “I think you might hurt yourself if you do.” She kissed him. “I have a vested interest in you not hurting yourself, you know.”

“Meredith, please,” he said. He grabbed her hand. “I need it.”

“You don't,” she hissed. “And stop calling me Meredith. I'm not her.”

“Yes, you are,” he said. “You're her. You're her, and I need you.”

She glared. “Get out, Derek. Stop letting him win.”
The room snapped back into place. He blinked, and the daze dissipated. His body existed. He brushed his newly shaven cheeks with his palms. With some difficulty, he leaned into the shower, stretched across a porcelain void, and twisted the knobs, mixing hot and cold water until he had inviting warmth.

Little things surprised him, like when he'd noticed that he could sleep on his stomach, though it had felt weird. Then, a few weeks after that, he'd found himself on his stomach in the morning, and he'd felt nothing. No pain. No little twists underneath his ribs. He could lift. Not a ton, or he'd get twinges. But he could lift. Three days earlier, he'd had sex with Meredith, and he'd supported himself. Not for the whole time. It had hurt. But he'd managed for a while, and she'd stared up at him with a glassy, loving gaze. Stairs didn't bother him. He didn't need naps, just a few rest stops now and then to regather.

“Such progress,” Gary Clark said. “You're my idol.”

Derek turned on the spray and stepped over the lip of the tub into the heat. Two months ago, he'd needed help to do something so simple. Mark and Meredith both had assisted him into the shower because he'd been unable to lean and twist to turn on the water, let alone maneuver over the slippery porcelain lip without toppling. A little before that, he'd barely been able to walk to the bathroom, and a little before that, he'd been in a bed with a machine breathing for him, helpless.

Hi, she'd said, her voice warbling with tears. Oh, god, hi. She'd touched his face, and he hadn't been able to move.

Water pounded his body. Steam billowed. He dipped his head under the warmth and sighed. The stream cascaded over his face and sluiced from the tip of his chin.

The mistake was closing his eyes to shut out the water. Before, he'd had a sink to grip. A dry one. And a rug to scrunch between his toes. As soon as his eyelids crashed together, the running faucet sensation in his skull swelled like the crush of a wave. The room tipped. He reached for the side of the shower, but his wet hands scrabbled on cold tile. He gasped. His feet lost purchase. And he slipped.

In a flailing, desperate gamble for balance, he reached for the plastic shampoo rack, only to have it snap apart and tumble after him in pieces. Shampoo and conditioner and lotion bottles slammed into him. His hip connected with the spigot as he collapsed. He landed in a heap at the bottom of the shower. Water plunked down around him. He breathed, bell rung, and blinked as he sat in a pile of bottles, sharp plastic, and a gold-colored bar of Dial soap. He gasped. His feet lost purchase. And he slipped.

How had that happened?

“Because you're high, idiot,” said the deep, caustic voice of his tormenter.

Derek closed his eyes and swallowed back nausea. Sitting, the swirl wasn't as bad when he couldn't see because he had nowhere to fall. He let his head thunk against the cold tiles. Warm water slipped over his skin. He imagined it was her hands. Touching him. He smiled as he focused on the faucet flowing behind his eyes. A distant sort of bliss, untapped. His lips parted. He let the blackness beyond his eyelids revolve around him. And then, without any effort at all, the world snapped away from him like a rubber band, and he didn't have to listen to Gary Clark anymore.

Her arms wrapped around him. “Derek, please, what are you doing to yourself?” she said, her voice hoarse. She kissed his neck as he lay cradled in her arms in a bath of light. Seattle had
disappeared. He lay with her naked in a perfect sprawl of nothing, her flesh to his flesh. He didn't hurt, and he didn't fear. Why did she have to nag?

His lip quivered. “He did this. Not me.”

“He didn't,” she said against his ear. “You're doing it.”

“This is the only place I have,” Derek said. “Please, don't take it away from me.”

Her fingers ran through his hair. “You can't come here anymore.”

“Where will I go?”

She smiled, though her eyes glistened. “Someplace real, Derek. I think you're ready if you'd just take the leap.”

He blinked, back in the shower, waterlogged and cold. The heat had leached out of the water, and the blood streaming from his wrist had stopped, leaving a small gash the width of his thumb. His wristwatch would hide that small bit of carnage. He glanced at his body, startled to find a darkening bruise the size of a softball over his left hip. It didn't ache. He shifted. Bottles tumbled into the tub basin, wedging themselves between him and the porcelain. Plastic plinked.

He reached for the lip of the tub. His fingers wrapped around it. He gripped. All fine. But when he pulled, his chest squeezed, and he couldn't stop the grunt of discomfort that spiraled through him. Flames engulfed his healing sternum. He swallowed as unbidden tears of discomfort flecked his eyes. He blinked, trying to catch his breath. Pain thumped in his chest with every heart beat. Every inhalation.

He couldn't get up. He'd gotten better, but he couldn't lift himself. That was just too much. He tried to push up with his feet and shaky quads, but the slippery floor of the shower prevented any hope of gaining purchase. He shivered from the chill of the water and the cold air. He turned the knobs, and the spray ceased, leaving him dripping and crumpled and helpless.

“You can't do it,” said Mr. Clark. He roared with laughter. “Pathetic.”

“It hurts,” Derek said.

“So, call her,” Mr. Clark said. “Call your wife. Let her fish you out of this like a guppy on a hook.”

Derek flailed for the lip of the tub, and he pulled until his muscles shook. Bottles rolled underneath him. His skin squeaked as it slipped on the porcelain. Through the haze, the center line down his chest screamed as he moved. A moan burbled over his lips, but he didn't stop pulling until he'd fumbled to his feet. When he let go, he expected relief, but instead he felt as though he'd ripped off a band-aid inside his chest.

“Fuck!” he belted. Stinging tears welled from his eyes. He couldn't stop them. It fucking hurt.

Footsteps thundered up to the door. The doorknob twisted, but he'd locked it. When had he locked it? “Derek!” Meredith said, her voice muffled. The warble of panic in her tone made his heart squeeze. “Derek, did you fall?” The door rattled as she knocked. “Are you okay?”

He forced himself to breathe through the agony, and he hobbled out of the tub. His balance spun out from him like a car doing donuts in an icy parking lot. His body swayed into the shower stall door. Glass shrieked as the door slipped on its tracks. He slid an inch. Bones jarred. Pain rolled through his body, and he stood there, naked, dripping, hunched, the towel rack carving a furrow
into his bruised hip. He vibrated with hurt. He stood still, but the room wouldn't stop spinning.

“I'm...” He clenched his teeth and breathed. Once. Twice. He didn't think he'd re-broken anything. He swept his palm past the lurid, ugly knob between his clavicles to the scar that trailed down his torso underneath it. He felt warped skin where Cristina's blade had sliced him in half, but his sternum underneath remained smooth. Not off kilter as though a fault line had slipped. Noisy pain was already subsiding into a dull hum. He hurt, but he didn't feel something had shifted inside or snapped, nor had he heard anything pop or crack. No, he just felt battered and stupid. “I'm fine,” he said.

She tested the doorknob again. “Did you fall?”

“No,” he said. With a shaky breath, he pushed away from the shower door. He wiped the tears away from his eyes. “No, I'm fine.”

“You yelled.”

“The shampoo rack fell, and everything hit me,” he said. Not a lie. Not really. She didn't have to know that part had happened earlier. “I'll fix it later.”

A long pause. “And you're okay?”

“I'm said I'm fine,” he snapped. Why didn't she believe him? His muscles tensed, and he closed his eyes. Except that made the room waver around his frame. Gravity seemed to leave him. The rug under his feet disappeared. Free fall without falling. Vague nausea coiled at the sensation. He opened his eyes and sighed.

He took a long, slow breath, and regathered himself. “I'm fine,” he repeated in a calmer tone.

Another long silence followed. He wondered if she'd left, if he'd scared her off for good this time with his molten temper, but then the floor creaked, and a line of moving shadow passed underneath the door. He imagined her beyond the door, biting her lip and looking pensive and cute as she shifted from foot to foot. He pulled his fluffy blue towel from the rack and wrapped it around his waist, careful to cover the ugly bruise. He steeled himself. He gripped the doorknob. Smooth brass filled his hand. And then he turned the knob.

She stood there, a lone, small island in the empty hallway. She chewed on her lip, exactly as he'd imagined. And she did look pensive and cute. His heart squeezed.

He put on his best smile and leaned against the door frame. He focused on her face. The tiny freckles that dotted her skin. On her long brown eyelashes. On the gray of her irises and the endless pools of her pupils. Shadows of himself danced in her eyes. He watched those. He watched her. He watched his wife, and the room stilled from its annoying spinning.

“Watching me sleep,” he said. He took a breath and leaned closer. “Watching me in a towel.” The remaining ache became numb as he kissed her. “Are you stalking me, Meredith Grey?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Stalking.”

“I'm going back to work today,” he said. “You can stalk me all day, now, you know.”

“I could.” Her voice wavered. She brushed under her nose with her index finger and sniffed. Her inhalation sounded wet.

“If you want to stalk me to a supply closet, that might help my day go quicker. I'm—”
Her eyes reddened and spilled. She covered her mouth with her hand. Tears glistened on her face, clear and sparkling in the early morning light, and they drew his attention to her. Not her as an anchor for him. Just her. Her eyes were puffy and swollen. Like this hadn't been the first time she'd cried that morning. Like she'd been crying while he'd been an uncoordinated oaf fumbling around in the shower.

His heart trembled. He hated when she cried. He hated when she was upset. Why hadn't he noticed the puffy face sooner?

“Need I repeat myself?” said Mr. Clark.

“Meredith,” Derek said, his voice soft. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” she said.

He left the support of the door frame and wrapped his arms around her. He'd never felt so clumsy and inadequate in his life. “What happened? Are you upset about the miscarriage again?”

“No,” she said. She pressed her face against his chest. The tip of her nose touched the pink scar between his pectorals. She breathed as though she were inhaling the scent of his body. He held her close. She was so small in his arms. Small, but... So strong, too.

“Then what's wrong?” he said.

“It's your first day back today.”

He nodded. “It is.”

She looked up at him. “Are you okay? I mean really?”

A lump formed in his throat. He forced himself to smile. “I'm okay,” he said.

“Oh, you liar,” said Gary Clark. “You can't even fucking walk straight.”

Derek stiffened. Her palms brushed his arms. Her stare burned him. How long had he been awake?

“Not very,” said Mr. Clark.

And how many times had Derek already painted untruths?

Mr. Clark snorted. “I lost count.”

“Still an eight?” Meredith prodded.

Derek swallowed. “I guess.”

“You didn't sleep last night,” she said. “You were yelling.”

He blinked, and any attempt at mirth slipped through him like grains of sand passing through an hourglass. He'd been full. And now he'd been abandoned.

“I'm sorry if I kept you up,” he said.

The world blurred and turned to colored slivers. He sniffed. The bright hallway sharpened as he blinked. A pair of fat, pathetic tears crept down his face. He brushed them away with clumsy fingers as his face heated. He was so fucking tired of all of this. It would be easy to let the spinning
room spin him away.

Easy.

And yet...

Her grip tightened around his arms. “Derek, that wasn't my point, and you know it.”

“I slept some,” he said.

“Yeah, after you—” she began, only to be interrupted as a long, lonely howl crept through the house. The hairs on the nape of his neck stood up at the sound. Meredith sighed. “I haven't fed Sam yet.”

“I'll do it.”

“No, you still need to get ready,” she said. “I'll do it.”

“Meredith—”

“I'll do it, Derek,” she snapped.

Frosty silence stretched. Nausea quivered in his gut. He swallowed around the lump in his throat. The whiplash of her mood swing left him uncertain of anything but the fact that if he said something, it was sure to be the wrong thing.

Mr. Clark chuckled. “Now, I guess you know how she feels.”

Derek took a long, slow breath. “But you've been crying,” he said, his voice low.

She glared. “Well, so have you.”

He didn't really have anything with which to counter that. He stood, silent.

“Get dressed or whatever,” she said. She turned on her heels and left him before he could protest. Her footsteps thumped down the hall. He watched her retreat, wanting to say something, anything. But he didn't.

He listened to the sounds of her moving downstairs. Samantha yipped. He heard the tap of the dog’s nails on the floor, and he heard the lilt of Meredith’s voice. Not the words. Just the tone. Samantha would feel loved, even if Meredith wanted to smash something with a mallet.

He shuffle-stepped to the master bedroom, where he would have changed. Would have gotten ready for work. He sat on the bed in his wet towel instead. The mattress sank with his weight. A lump formed in his throat as he stared across the empty room. He didn't know why. His chest tightened. He thought about lying down instead of getting up and getting dressed. Two opposite courses of action, warring.

Dread collected like a solid ball in his gut. He'd been back to Seattle Grace almost every day for a few hours since his follow up check and his panic attack. Trying to build up his tolerance. Trying to get himself used to people again. But he could have left anytime. He could have opted not to go, then. He'd had options. Today...

No options.

A shadow lumbered past the corner of his eye like a living thing, and Derek twitched. Turned.
Apprehension tightened every sinew in his body.

The shaft of sunlight that had once framed Meredith on the chair remained empty. Dust motes swirled around nothing. The birds outside chirped, an incongruous, happy reminder that he shouldn't feel like this.

He closed his eyes and let the room swirl. The revolutions didn't seem so bad anymore. He sighed as he fingered the damp terrycloth covering his legs. He tried to force his mind blank and couldn't. Gary Clark stared at him from the empty chair. No matter if he was really there or not, his tormenter waited, and Derek felt eyes. Staring.

Derek took a long, steadying breath. Black dripped over his senses like sticky, thick tar. Gary Clark laughed at his efforts.

Then the laughing stopped. The birds stopped. Everything crumpled into a muffle of sound and light.

When he opened his eyes again, he wasn't in his bedroom.

The empty stainless-steel table stretched out in front of him, gleaming in the bright overhead lights. The doorless, tiled walls echoed his breaths back to him. He stood in the center of the quiet thunder. His gaze dropped to the instrument tray. Scalpels gleamed. But she wasn't there.

Ghosts of her presence slipped at the edges of his perception. Like the tickle of her laughter against his ears. The touch of her lips against his skin. The liminal hint of lavender he kept thinking he smelled, but when he inhaled, only sterile, empty air that was neither hot nor cold touched his nostrils. He waited for her to appear, but when he turned, emptiness greeted him.

"Where did you go?" he said. His voice bounced off the walls.

No one answered.

He prowled in a circuit around the room. Shiny instruments. Silence. Nothing else. With a sigh, he pushed his back against the cold wall and slid to the ground. He closed his eyes. Bright lights beat against his pupils even through his eyelids.

Birds chirped. A distant set of wind-chimes tapped against each other in the breeze. What birds? What breeze? He opened his eyes and

found himself back in the bedroom. Resigned, he fumbled his way to the closet. Meredith had hung up a freshly pressed pair of slacks and a shirt for him on the doorknob. He couldn't help but chuckle at her tiny attempt at domesticity. She never ironed unless Hell was frozen. Usually, he was the one stuck doing it, even for her clothes. The fact that she'd done it for him made him smile. She hadn't stamped out many of the wrinkles, but she'd gotten some. Enough for the clothes to be presentable. He brushed his hand along the fabric. Black pants, with a bright blue shirt just like the shirt he'd gotten shot in except there was no bullet hole. No blood. He pulled on the pants and the shirt as he stared at nothing in particular.

When in doubt, always go with blue. It brings out the blue in your eyes.

He moved into the master bathroom to brush his teeth. The scent of unlit, waxy candles filled his body. He inhaled as he remembered the way her laugh crawled along his skin. He'd kissed her wet shoulders in the flickering light. I can do slow. He brushed his teeth on that thought and no other. When he spat out the used toothpaste, he looked into the mirror. He saw himself as he'd looked the morning he'd left for his last day of work. Except he was different. Thinner. More stretched across
his bones. Darker. Tired. Not happy. A stranger. He slicked his wet hair back with product, but he didn't spend much time on taming the mess.

“I guess this means you're off to save the day?” Mr. Clark said.

Derek glanced at his pill bottles, which rested on the lip of the sink. He'd come in here last night with them. To hide from her while he supplanted desire. His stomach tightened and twisted. He gripped the sides of the sink. Porcelain dug into his bones as a deep, cold need so profound swept through him that his body shook.

“Take more,” Mr. Clark taunted. “Shut me up like a coward who can't bear the truth. That's the spirit.”

“Stop talking to me,” Derek said. “Please. Just stop.”

“Why should I?”

“You're not real,” Derek said.

“So, the weeks you spent at the hospital, and the months you've spent at home, helpless and weak and pathetic... Those were just figments of your imagination?”

Derek closed his eyes as phantom pain sliced into him. He felt quivery. Like his body would explode if someone would only pull the trigger... “He was real,” Derek said. “Those were real.” He took a deep breath, deep enough that his sternum, taxed from the accident in the tub, whispered with ache. He took another deep breath, and another, and another. His lip trembled. His legs felt weak. The barrel of a gun faced him in a stretch of endless white. Maybe, he would fall again. Maybe, he would—

“Woof!”

He opened his eyes as his hand brushed the cap of the Percocet bottle. Samantha sat on her haunches at his feet, her big, black body sleek and comforting against his knees. He reached to stroke her head. Soft fur slipped underneath his palm. She panted, and the raspy sound of it soothed him.

“Hey, Sam,” Derek said. He sounded rough. Weak. Shaky. Even to his own ears. “I thought Meredith was going to feed you.”

Samantha had no answers for him. She stared with large, chocolate-colored eyes. Her tongue lolled, giving him the vague impression of a smile. He swallowed, and he left the security of the sink. She stood, and she guided him down the stairs. The house seemed to be performing cartwheels around his head. He took the steps one at a time, leaning on the railing, leaning on the dog, leaning on anything that helped keep the floor under his feet. Samantha went with him and matched his speed.

When he moved into the kitchen, he frowned. Kibble filled Samantha's bowl to the brim. She'd left her morning meal to come upstairs? Samantha left him, then. She made deep gulping sounds as she resumed inhalation of the breakfast she'd been howling for minutes earlier.

Derek's gaze roamed to Meredith, who sat at the small kitchen table with a bowl of Raisin Bran while she read a neurosurgical journal he didn't recognize. Meredith didn't look at him. She stabbed her spoon into the bran. Milk leaped from the bowl and splattered around the edges. Pocked splotches in the place mat told him this wasn't the first time she'd tried to murder her bowl, and it wasn't the first time the milk had escaped its torture.
An empty bowl and clean spoon sat across the table from her on the opposite place mat. The jug of milk rested in the center of the table with the open box of Raisin Bran. The smiling Kellogg sun seemed to glare at him from the box.

He sat in the space she'd set for him. The thought of food made him feel a bit sick, but he poured himself a bowl anyway. A small one. He took a bite, expecting cardboard. Cardboard it was. He couldn't bring himself to chew it much. When he swallowed, the bran felt like blades slicing down his throat.

“You're coming home after lunch today?” Meredith said without looking up from the journal.

“Yeah,” he replied. He forced himself to take another bite. “At two.” After the spectacle of Derek's panic attack, Richard had insisted Derek only work partial days to begin with. Derek hadn't protested. He didn't really want to work at all.

“You'll be here when I get home at nine?” Meredith said.

He frowned. “Where else would I be?”

“I don't know.” She shrugged. “Out.”

“Me,” he said. “Out.” He couldn't keep his grip on the sardonic laugh that burbled in his chest. It escaped and slashed at the air.

She glared. “Well, you used to go to Joe's a lot. Or you fished. Or whatever. You have to start going out again sometime. How am I supposed to know whether that's tonight or next week or in two years?”

Silence stretched.

He looked at his lap. “It's my first day back, Meredith,” he said. “I'll probably collapse the second I get home.”

She blinked. “Oh,” she said. “Right.” She slammed her spoon into the bowl and crammed the heaping pile of Raisin Bran in her mouth. Her cheeks bulged like a chipmunk, which, under normal circumstances, he would have found adorable. Something to smile about as he watched his wife do adorable things. Instead, he felt sick.

He reached across the table and touched her wrist. She froze. “Meredith,” he said, his voice soft. She dumped her spoon into the half-eaten bowl. Her face reddened as she stared. “What, Derek!”

“What did the Raisin Bran ever do to you?”

She stared at him for a long time, but she didn't answer. She yanked her napkin off her lap and wiped away the wet remnants of milk and bran from her lips. She threw the napkin on the table beside her bowl, and she said, “Are you ready to go?”

He glanced at her bowl. She never left anything in the bowl, and yet she'd left mouthfuls behind. “You haven't finished eating,” he said.

“I can't eat right now.”

“Why?”

“Because I can't eat,” she snapped. “Are you ready to go?”
A sick, guilty feeling coiled in his gut, and he didn't know why. He stared at the bowl in front of him. The bowl he'd taken two bites from. She always nagged him to eat.

“T’m ready,” he said, his voice soft.

“Liiiar,” Mr. Gary said in a sing-song voice.

“I'll crate the dog,” Meredith said as she stood. “Meet you at the car?” she added, though it was not a question or a request. She turned to the dog, away from him, and clapped her hands. “C'mon, Sam,” she said. Samantha looked up from her empty bowl and barked at the sound of her name.

Meredith proceeded to leave Derek's presence in the room unacknowledged, as though he were a coat draped on the chair or something else inanimate. Derek swallowed. He stood. He grabbed his briefcase from the hallway closet. And then he walked to the car, feeling a little bit like he'd been hit by one.

He climbed into his Cayenne on the passenger side and settled his briefcase by his feet. His briefcase. Something he hadn't touched in months. He couldn't even remember what he'd put in it, and he didn't really care, either.

The taillights of Meredith's lonely green Jeep blurred as he stared through the windshield at the driveway. Crushed gravel sprawled under the Jeep's tires. Shadows skittered across the driveway as the leaves in the trees overhead moved. He closed his eyes, and he listened. The spinning was gone. Or... mostly gone. Enough of it remained to leave him off balance. Unsteady on his feet.

He heard her footsteps on the walk. That was the only reason he didn't flinch or startle when she ripped open the door across from him. She wrestled herself more than settled herself into the driver's side seat. A flowery curse slipped into the air between them as she missed with the seat belt and jabbed the upholstery with the buckle instead. A soft click followed on her second try as the buckle slid into place. She heaved her huge tote purse into the back seat. The car rocked with the motion.

“I guess I'm driving,” she said as she stabbed the key into the ignition and turned it. Her lips formed a flat line. “Again.”

The car rumbled to life. He stared at her. At the anger frothing from her tiny body. She'd been upset. Crying. Unwilling to talk. And, now... He blinked. Something he'd done? But what had he done...?

She raised her eyebrows at him. “When are you going to start driving again?”

He swallowed. “I don't know.”

She stared, and he felt like the seat beneath him withered away. Sinking. He was sinking. He had no idea what was upsetting her, but he was smart enough to know he'd picked the wrong thing to say. He looked away first. His chest tightened, and his heart ran away from him. Thu-thump. Thu-thump.

“Mere, I—”

She ignored him, and instead twisted the gearshift into reverse. The transmission wailed at her violence. The noise hit his ears muted, from somewhere far away, as he listened to his blood rush. She backed the car out of the driveway. His stomach flip-flopped when he tipped forward, a slave to inertia.
“Meredith, what is wrong?” he said as he righted himself.

She didn't answer. He braced himself against the door as the car bounced into the street. She pushed the gearshift into drive. The car roared underneath them as she slammed on the accelerator. Inertia pasted him to his seat. Scenery churned past them in a blur of greens, grays, and blues. But he didn't watch the specifics. He watched her. Blush bloomed on her face in a slow, delicate crawl. She kept her eyes plastered to the road ahead of them, as though she knew that he was watching her every breath and hated it.

He stared into his lap instead. He wanted to know what was wrong, not embarrass her by his scrutiny.

“Maybe, she knows,” said Mr. Clark.

Derek clenched his hands and jaws. He wouldn't reply to a fucking figment anymore. Whether it made him feel better or not. He picked at the seam of the left cuff of his shirt to vent nervous energy. How could he deal with work today when he couldn't even deal with her?

Mr. Clark snorted. “Pathetic.”

Derek closed his eyes. Stop it. Stopitstopitstopit.

“Can I wake you up tonight when I get home?” Meredith said abruptly.

He opened his eyes. The highway stretched out in front of them. He watched a green Jeep much like Meredith's split off from the road and curve away as an exit flashed past in the side mirror. His muscles tightened when he realized they were almost there. How had they gotten there so fast? He dared to look at her. Her blush had receded, at least.

“You can always wake me up,” he said.

“Okay,” she said.

She nodded. Her lithe body stiffened. Her lips flattened into a grim, determined line, and her upset expression leaked away. As though she were resolving herself to do something she didn't want to do. He'd seen it before when she went to tell a waiting, sobbing relative that her husband or brother or father had just died. He'd seen it when she'd demanded that he discuss his nightmares with her.

“Meredith, what is this about?” he said.

She wouldn't look at him. “I need to talk to you about something.”

“So, talk to me, now.”

She sighed. “I can't.”

“Why can't you?”

“Because this isn't the sort of thing I can discuss with you in our freaking car on the way to work.”

Cold silence. Buzzing nerves became a chorus. He gripped the door handle. Despite the confusion and misery of this conversation, a small seed of hope bloomed. “Are you pregnant?” he said.

She snorted. “You're an asshole.”

“But I—”
“I’m not pregnant,” she said. Her hand drifted to her womb. “And I'm not PMSing, either.” She blew out a breath as they barreled down the exit to the main street.

“But—”

Her pager shrilled.

“Would you check that?” she said. Her fingers squeaked as she worried at the steering wheel. “I'm watching the road.”

He sighed. “Meredith...”

Her temples fluttered as she ground her jaws together, as though she were holding onto another outburst by a thread. “Please,” she said through gritted teeth.

He twisted in his seat to grab her purse from behind him. His chest, fatigued from repeated punishment, flared with pain. He winced, but held onto the gasp that wanted to escape with all of his might. She said nothing, her eyes riveted on the road. With a jabbing motion, he managed to hook the straps of her purse onto his index finger, and he pulled. Her heavy purse slammed into his lap. Fire funneled through his body as he resettled. For a moment, all he could do was sit there, trying not to breathe or move.

A horn honked. Through the blur of his eyelashes, he saw lines and lines of cars. The parking lot. When had they gotten to Seattle Grace?

“Well?” she prodded.

“Um,” he said, more a verbal tick than anything else. A closeted expression of pain. He took a breath. The fire extinguished. Slowly. He pulled her pager from the clip inside her purse and squinted at the pixelated display. “911. They want you in the pit.”

“Ohokay,” she said as she pulled into one of the staff parking spaces closest to the main door. She turned off the car and whipped the keys from the ignition.

“Meredith, please,” he said.

“I'm late, Derek,” she replied. She leaned across the parking brake, gave him a peck on the cheek, and said without smiling, “I'll talk to you later.” The weight from her purse disappeared. She slipped out of the car, and the door slammed. Muffled silence stretched wide in the car.

He blinked, bewildered, as he watched her go. She stopped two parking spaces away and turned on her heels. Tears that hadn’t been there seconds earlier made her face look red and snarly. Her feet scraped the pavement as she ran back to the car. She pulled open his door, and before he had a chance to speak, she wrapped her arms around him and crushed him in a tight embrace.

“I love you,” she said against his ear. She pulled the hair at the nape of his neck as she clenched her fingers into a fist. “Please, please, don't push yourself today.” The warm, soft smell of her body wrapped him like a cloak, but before he could take any sort of comfort, she stepped away.

“Meredith, wait—”

“I just can't,” she said, her voice sharp like shattered glass. She sniffed and wiped her face. “Not right now, okay?” Her lower lip quivered. “Please,” she said, her voice raw. Please was a word she teased him about, always mentioning that she was helpless to say no whenever he chose to utter it. He wondered if she realized he suffered from a similar affliction with regards to her. He reached
for her. The chaos in his head eased. Wet, slippery tears rubbed away with his fingertips when he touched her skin.

He swallowed. “Okay,” he said.

When she left him again, she didn't return. He watched her, head spinning, for once not from dizziness, but utter confusion. He'd never seen her like this. Never.

He closed his eyes and tried to relax, but sounds kept intervening. The distant chirp of an ambulance pulling into the ambulance bay. Cars prowling in the parking lot, engines growling. People walking and talking. Birds chattering in the trees. The stiff breeze's moan as it whistled through the side mirrors of the car. After ten minutes, he gave up, and he glanced at his watch.

Late. Just like Meredith.

He picked up his briefcase, climbed out of the car, shut the car door behind him, and walked across the parking lot. He looked at the towering hospital as he approached the main entrance, and he felt nothing. No twinge of nerves. No fear. No apprehension. He walked across the threshold, just as he'd conditioned himself to do over the last few weeks, and he felt nothing. He walked toward the elevator where he'd proposed to Meredith. Proposing had been a good thing, a good memory, but the elevator brought him close to the catwalk, which was a bad thing. He still felt nothing, even as the elevator car ascended. Three more things to catalog in his little book of surprises.

“Good morning, Dr. Shepherd,” said Dr. Weller in a deep baritone voice as Derek stepped off the elevator. Dr. Weller smiled. He clutched a patient chart in his hand. The pages had been flipped back, as if he were examining every minute detail of the patient's history. “You're back to work today?”

Dr. Weller was a tall, thin man. Taller than Derek by at least four inches, maybe five. Taller than Mark, even. Derek looked up at the man who had replaced him as head of neurosurgery. Dr. Nelson had fought tooth and nail for the job. He'd puffed himself up and strutted about like an overbearing peacock, talking about how nobody ever remembered he existed, how he was perfectly capable and competent. How he was good at his job. Except he wasn't good. He was adequate. And while Dr. Nelson had been on his self-advertisement campaign, Dr. Weller had been in the OR, quiet, unassuming, fixing people, letting his meticulous work speak for itself. Dr. Weller possessed both better surgical skills and better people skills. The decision, for Derek, had not been a difficult one, and one of Derek's first tasks as Chief had been to calm down a hissing, spitting Dr. Nelson and congratulate Dr. Weller in two back-to-back meetings.

“Part time this week and maybe next,” Derek said. “But, yes.”

Dr. Weller nodded. His skin had a jovial, reddish tint to it, as though he were in a state of perpetual cheer. He reached out with long, lithe fingers and offered his hand. Derek swallowed as they shook hands. “I'm glad you're back,” said Dr. Weller, his voice rich with sincerity.

“Me, too,” Derek said. He flashed his best smile as a ball of ice collected in his stomach. Dr. Weller stepped onto the elevator that Derek had exited. And that was that.

Derek's smile bled away. He'd conditioned himself to go inside Seattle Grace and to act like he didn't hate being around people, but that was about all the progress he'd managed. White, sterile hallways stretched out from his feet. He followed them until white opened into empty space. Echoes bounced off the walls. Footsteps. Voices. He stared at the catwalk where he'd gotten shot, and beyond that, the Chief's office. His office. Two places he hadn't voluntarily stepped foot in
since he'd nearly died.

He didn't have time to be upset.

“Derek, it's good to see you back,” Richard Webber said as he approached and put his arm over Derek's shoulder. Richard dragged Derek along as though he were tackling the ball carrier in football, and the blotched floor where Derek had bled swept under Derek's feet in a blur. The door to the Chief's office opened and shut behind them before Derek had a chance to react. Sounds from the outside hospital muted. Derek stood where Dr. Kepner had been, covered in blood and frantic.

“Richard,” Derek managed. He tried to focus on the man who had once been his friend and mentor. Richard wore his lab coat. His stethoscope poked out of the front breast pocket. He rifled through his desk for some papers and turned as he yanked a pen from the knit wire cup by the computer monitor.

“There was fourteen car pileup on the freeway,” Richard said.

Derek blinked. “I'm not cleared for cutting. I can't—”

“Multiple abdominal traumas,” Richard said. “They need another general surgeon.”

“Oh.”

“Look, I realize this is your first day back,” Richard said. “And I realize you've been having... a difficult time.” Derek pressed his lips into a flat line. A difficult time. Understatement. The ball of ice heated into something molten. Richard continued, “I'm sorry for dumping all the budget work on you before you've had a chance to set down your briefcase, but they need bodies downstairs. Now. Dr. Bailey is overrun.”

Derek glanced at his desk. Richard's desk. A sheaf of folders and paperwork sat in a fourteen inch pile on top of the desk calendar that covered the desk's surface. Derek stared at it. “Go ahead,” he said softly.

“You're okay?” Richard said.

“I'm okay.”

“There won't be any surprise welcome back parties, so you don't need to worry about that,” Richard said as he barreled toward the door, brushing past Derek, who hadn't moved. When Richard grasped the door handle, he turned. “By the way.” He pointed at the corner of the room where the coat rack stood. Colorful balloons bobbed against the ceiling. A pile of shiny wrapped gifts and cards full of what Derek could only assume were well wishes rested on the top of the file cabinet. A framed picture of Meredith that Derek had put there when he'd moved his things into the office had become buried. “Those are all for you from the staff,” Richard said.

“Thanks,” Derek said as heat flamed across his cheeks.

And then Richard left, leaving Derek in crushing silence.

Derek looked at the balloons. And then at the desk piled high with paperwork. He blinked. Something swelled in the back of his throat. His eyes stung. His lips pulled back. A soft snarl became a roar, and in a blur of motion, he launched himself across the room. His briefcase slammed into the desk and dropped by his feet. The Chief's stacked paperwork exploded in a flutter of budgetary confetti as Derek rammed into it. With a furious huff of breath that made his chest hurt, he collapsed into the executive chair that had been his for months. Paper crumpled underneath
him. He wiped hurting eyes with his hands as the molten ball churned.

*I grew up on a farm, so, you know blood... blood doesn't... doesn't bother me, I...* Dr. Kepner had said, standing less than ten feet away, covered in another woman's blood.

He closed his eyes as papers that had been balanced precariously dominoed off the edge of the desk. How was he supposed to do this? Any of this? He inhaled. The hospital, even in the Chief's office, had a faint, antiseptic smell that tickled his nose. He leaned back in the chair. The seat rocked with his weight. He let threatening disorientation crush him, and then it swept him away.

"Would it help to show you this?" she said, disembodied.

He sat on the floor in the dreary hallway, shoulder-to-shoulder with Mark. His wet hair and his wet clothes made him shiver. He'd made a puddle on the tiles. Dripping. He shook as he looked up from his knees. Ice formed a block in his chest.

The door opened. She saw her swathed in blankets. Still and cold and blue. The people who surrounded her weren't him. Bailey. Richard. Burke. Even Addie. But Derek had been relegated to the hall to wait.

Derek stood so fast his knees popped and protested. He wiped the clawing tears from his face. "Why would it help me to show you like this?" he snapped.

She didn't answer. Mark didn't move. He stared forward, as though Derek still sat on the floor, crying into his knees.

"I don't want to see this again," Derek said.

No answer.

"Stop it."

Silence. Derek's lower lip quivered. He tried to approach the door that blocked him from where she lay. He couldn't pass. As though an invisible barrier had knit together and barred his way. He couldn't pass. He could only watch as they fought to force her back to life.

For three hours, she'd been dead.

"Please, stop," he begged.

The blackness faded. He sat in his chair, alone. His hands shook. A void had hollowed out his body that he wanted to fill. He knew he needed. Something. Slivers of ache slipped behind his eyes. He pinched his nose with his fingertips and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He placed his elbows on the desk and stared through blurry eyelashes at the pile of work Richard had left for him.

Papers spread around the desk and on the floor as though a hurricane had swept them up and displaced them. He picked up the closest paper, scanned past all the numbers and dollar signs and words, and sighed as he absorbed the page number listed at the bottom. 23 of 76. And that was only for Seattle Grace's plastic surgery department, which was smaller than their world-acclaimed neurosurgery and general surgery departments, mostly because Mark, as good as he was, didn't make a department by himself. Plastic surgeons flocked to Los Angeles. Not Seattle.

Derek spent his first hour back on the job sorting the papers he'd sent flying. His brain tripped every time he tried to shuffle things into order. Staring at text made him feel spacey and disconnected. He double and triple checked page numbers, only to forget what number had come
before, and what went after. Other times, he found himself staring at nothing, or chasing a stray thought to the ends of creation, or riding the subtle buzz of elation that made his mind feel like it'd been replaced by cotton balls. He would blink, and it would take minutes to reassemble himself into sentience.

He hated budget work, but after he'd repaired the results of his tantrum and placed everything into neat stacks, he flipped on the computer, pulled up the hospital's accounting software, and he tried, but he suffered much the same problems balancing numbers as he did sorting. It seemed like he had to double check himself after every row. He lost his place over and over. He kept going until his head throbbed with the effort of concentration. Until his eyes refused to focus no matter how hard he tried to make them. He rocked in the chair, venting nervous energy. He needed something.

“You brought this on yourself,” said Gary Clark.

“Shut up,” Derek said.

“You fought for this job. You fucked Richard over. It's your fault.”

Derek loosed an agitated sigh.

“Everything is your fault, you know.”

He didn't know what he was doing until the second bitter-tasting pill was falling apart on his tongue in a mess of his own saliva. He swallowed, confused, and yet not surprised by the orange bottle in his hand. The pills slipped into his stomach. He closed his eyes, and as the minutes passed, the carousel began to spin. He sighed. The empty hole had been filled, and Gary Clark shut his fucking mouth. Finally. Derek looked at the bottle, lethargic, and put it back into his briefcase where he'd stowed it. When had he stowed it? Did it matter?

No. He swallowed, and he closed his eyes, and this time, she returned.

_He found himself in a place he didn't recognize. He stood on a lush, green hillside with grass that came up to his knees, a rolling hill in the middle of hundreds. A weeping willow draped the crest of the hill. Crows circled, gliding up and down in the gray air currents as they mourned with woeful caws. He swallowed when he turned and saw Meredith standing by a chipped marble headstone. The dirt on the plot lay fresh at her feet, churned and black and rich with nutrients._

_Derek C. Shepherd, said the elaborate headstone. April 7, 1968 – September 9, 2010. Beloved son and husband._

_Meredith looked up as he approached. The long grass caught his ankles. He slogged through it, his eyes riveted by the sight before him. The breeze ruffled his hair and made the willow sway. Leaves rustled._

_He came to an unsteady stop two feet from the stone, panting. His feet sank into the loose earth. He stared at the dates sprawled across the headstone. September 9th was less than a month away. “What is this?” he said._

_She shrugged. “Isn't it obvious?”_

_He couldn't look at her. “But it's safe here,” he said._

_She pointed at the headstone. “It's not safe. Think like a doctor.”_

_“I don't know what you mean.”_
“You do, Derek. You do know,” she said. “You’re just ignoring it because you want something easy.”

“I don’t,” he said. “I’m not.”

Meredith stared at him. “Percocet has acetaminophen in it,” she said, speaking low and soft as though she were teaching a kindergartener. “Do you remember that?”

“Yes,” he said.

“What does acetaminophen do in large doses?”

His lip trembled. “It's a painkiller.”


“I don’t remember.”

“You do,” she insisted. “You do remember. It's basic medicine.”

“Please, don’t.”

She wrapped her arms around him. The soft scent of lavender made his muscles loosen. He breathed against her hair, and he couldn’t stop himself as frustration tumbled out of him. He sobbed. Once. And then he rested his nose against the warm skin of her neck, breathing, existing. The rush of blood under her skin heated him, reminded him he lived. Her grip tightened. She kissed his ear, and she ran her skillful hands along the trembling sinews of his back. He closed his eyes, and the crows and the weeping willow and the gravestone disappeared behind his eyelids. This was what he needed today.

“You can’t be here anymore,” she said. “If you keep coming here, you can never go back there.”

He took a shaky, deep breath. “I don’t care about there. I hate it there.”

“That’s bullshit.”

He shook his head. “It's not. It's not. I want to be here.”

She tugged on his sleeve, and they sat, shoulder-to-shoulder, their backs against the cold stone that marked his plot. For an eternity, she said nothing and stared at her knees instead. He watched the black birds flying in the distance, and he let the gray clouds and the crows’ black, feathery bodies blur into a bleak, impressionistic painting.

“You want to be with Meredith, right?” she said, her voice soft. Gentle.

“I do.”

“And you want to have a baby?”

“I do,” he said. “I want that so much.”

She swallowed. Her fingers touched his face. She pulled his gaze toward her, until their eyes met. He lost himself in deep, sad gray. She blinked, and when she blinked, wet tears popped loose. Her distress crushed him.
“I'm not her, Derek,” she said. “And you can't be a father if you stay in here.”

“But you have her face.”

She shook her head. “I showed you what happened while Meredith was dead,” she said. “Would Meredith remember that?”

Derek swallowed. “But—”

“You needed me to be her before,” notMeredith said. “You don't need it, now. Now, you need to listen to me, Derek.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

Her body shimmered as though she’d been strung with a thousand Christmas tree lights. The flash made his eyes hurt. He blinked and turned his head away until the bright white faded from view.

When he looked back, he saw himself like a twin in the mirror. The other Derek wore the same blue shirt and black pants that Derek had dressed in that morning. Except this Derek hadn’t lost weight. He didn’t look tired or stressed or scared. Derek II stared. Their eyes met.

“Are you listening, now?” Derek II said.

Derek could only nod.

“When you have too much acetaminophen, what does it do?” Derek II said, his voice soft.

“It causes liver damage.”

Derek II nodded. “It does,” he said. “And what does too much oxycodone do?” When Derek didn’t answer, Derek II kept prodding. “What does it do, Derek? Think.”

“It causes depressed respiration.” Derek swallowed. “Hypotension. Bradycardia...”

“And?”

“Coma...”

“And?”

“Cardiac arrest,” Derek admitted. “It causes heart failure.”

Derek II nodded. “Do you remember how you felt when Meredith died?”

Derek thought of gray, cold hall where he’d sat, sobbing. “Yes,” said Derek. “I remember.”

“Do you want to put her through the same thing?”

Derek swallowed. He stared at the churned soil over his grave. The gravestone at his back chilled him to the marrow of his bones. His eyes watered. “No, I don’t,” he said, his voice breaking. “I don’t ever want to do that.”

“If you don’t want Meredith to have to go through that, then what are you doing?” Derek II said.

Derek blinked. Tears wobbled in the nets cast by his eyelashes, spilled over, and chased down his face. He swiped at his eyes with his knuckles. “I don't know.”
“If you seriously don't want to die, Derek, then what the fuck are you doing?” Derek II prodded.

“I don't know,” Derek said.

Derek II laughed, but the bitter sound cut like sharp glass, and Derek flinched. “I guess that's the crux of it.”

Derek looked away, and then in a blur, the odd landscape disappeared.

Derek blinked and swallowed. His head felt clogged and full. Like his mental capacity had shrunk. He put his head down on the desk, and he rested for what seemed like eons. The clock on the wall ticked. Probably anybody walking down the catwalk would see him through the glass windows. Sleeping on the job, or at least giving the appearance of it. He peered at the clock. Lunch hour had crept up on stealthy feet. He should at least get a bagel. Or something. He wasn't hungry, but visiting the coffee cart would give him something to do, at least, that might make him appear productive and participatory in the hospital at large.

He squinted as sat up. The paper he'd been resting on stuck to his face, and he pulled it away as he grimaced and stretched. His eye caught mention of her name before any context arrived in his brain, and he pulled the paper back into his field of view. Meredith Grey. Pay scales. Nothing exciting. He shook his head, almost ready to dismiss the paper, when something in the financial blur made him read the spreadsheet more closely.

Meredith Grey. The sheet was alphabetized, which meant Lexie Grey's name was just above Meredith's and served as an easy comparison. His gaze followed the columns left to right. At first, he didn't know why what he was seeing caused niggling doubt. His head felt cloudy, and comprehending through the thick cotton took considerable work. Numbers. Dollar signs. Pay scales. He focused on the text and tried to understand it. This was silly. But then he realized what he was looking at, and in his laggard shift from not knowing to knowing, he tightened his grip on the paper and fought to keep his breathing steady. Both Meredith and Lexie were making the same pay. Both Meredith and Lexie were listed as third year residents. Both of them. He scanned down the page to Karev. Fourth year. Higher salary than Meredith. He would have checked Yang, too, but the page ended on the letter M.

Why hadn't Meredith said anything to him?

Can I wake you up tonight when I get home?

I want to talk to you about something.

“God, damn it,” he said as he slapped the paper back onto the pile. He pushed back his chair and stood. The room swayed like it had that morning. He counted to three before he left the safe island of space where he could still reach out and grab something if he fell. The disorientation settled. Slowly. All while the office space around him seemed to be closing in.

He glanced at the doorway.

A shadow crossed his view, and then she was there, babbling, covered in blood. I grew up on a farm, so, you know blood... blood doesn't... doesn't bother me, I...

“Fuck!” he yelled. “Stop hounding me, you fucking, heartless bitch!”

“You brought her back to work,” Mr. Clark said. “It's your fault she was there that day.”

Derek walked toward her. She was a hallucination. Just like Gary Clark. It didn't matter. They
didn't matter. He was fucking hallucinating. Like people with PTSD did. They hallucinated. Her body separated like mist as he exited his office. Outside, he could breathe. The air felt cooler.

“You can't outrun me,” Mr. Clark said. “I'm in your head.”

“Leave me alone,” Derek said.

“Your little solution isn't working so well anymore, is it?” said Mr. Clark. “I think you need to take more.”

Derek needed a walk, and so he took one. A slow one. People said hello. They smiled. They well-wished him. But he couldn't help but notice the stares. Couldn't help but notice the eggshells cracking as people metaphorically tiptoed around him, as though the entire hospital expected him to fall apart in the hallway or have some sort of psychotic break, which he supposed wasn't exactly unjustified. When he found Mark chatting up a voluptuous, blonde nurse in the corner by the oncology ward, Derek felt stress unwinding from his body.

At last, something normal.

Mark smiled as Derek approached. He rested against the lip of the nurses' station desk with his body at a slant and his elbow propping up his torso. A chart lay by his hand. Derek didn't read the whole thing; the mere thought of trying to decipher Mark's usual chicken scratch made his head spin, but he did catch one word in the mess. Rhinoplasty. In an oncology ward? It took Derek a minute to add two plus two. He blinked dumbly at the pair.

“Hey, man,” Mark said. “First day back.”

“Yeah.”

“Hi, Dr. Shepherd,” said Mark's nurse 'friend'. She smiled, showing pearly, bleached teeth. She brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face, smiled shyly behind a waterfall of platinum bangs, and leaned into Mark. “Call me later,” she said, her voice throaty and sultry and sexy, as she slid past Mark's broad shoulder. Her hip brushed Mark's as she went. Derek watched her depart.

Derek raised his eyebrows. If it had been a normal day, and he had never been shot, Derek would have smirked. Teased. Instead, he felt nothing but irritated. He sighed. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Seriously, Mark? You used a rhinoplasty chart as an excuse to talk to an oncology nurse?”

“It's not like she could read my writing,” Mark said. “I told her it was for a mastectomy.”

“That's mature of you.”

Mark shrugged. “Lexie's not interested.”

“Oh,” said Derek. Lexie had been spending an inordinate amount of time with Karev. Derek didn't mention it. Silence stretched. He grasped at straws. “Did Meredith talk to you recently?”

Mark cleared his throat as though something had gotten stuck in it. “About what?”

“She's upset about something, but she won't talk to me.”

“Hmm,” Mark said. He fidgeted. Since when did Mark fidget? “No idea, man.”

“She hasn't talked to you?”

“Why would she talk to me?” Mark said.
Derek ground his teeth. “Since I got shot, she's been talking to you. Or hadn't you noticed that?”

“Oh,” Mark said.

“So, has she?”

“Has she what?”

“Talked to you, Mark,” Derek said, rolling his eyes.

“Oh,” Mark said. He jumped and fished his pager out of his pocket. The pager hadn't beeped. He squinted at the screen. “I have to go.”

“Mark, come on,” Derek said. “You didn't get paged. I'm not an idiot.”

“I had it on vibrate,” Mark said. “I gotta go.”

Derek watched his supposed friend depart down the long hall, dodging between moving bodies and crash carts and stretchers. Mark had lied. He'd fucking lied to Derek's face. Derek had seen that type of lie many times before, enough to recognize it without any effort. Mark screwed a lot of women. Inevitably, one would try to continue a relationship past Mark's arbitrarily chosen expiration date. Derek had watched over and over again as Mark had told his latest in a long line of victims that he had other plans without having any other plans except a new lay.

“And yet you missed it entirely when he was fucking your wife,” Mr. Clark said.

Derek stilled.

“Nobody wants to stay with you,” Mr. Clark said.

Derek closed his eyes, drew in a shaky breath and let it out, and he forced himself to focus. Mark had lied. Which meant Meredith had talked to Mark about the thing from this morning. Apprehension gripped Derek. What could Meredith possibly be so afraid to talk to him about that she would be okay talking to Mark about? What could Meredith want to discuss that had nothing to do with her being pregnant, but she thought it would be a long, scary conversation? Unless the thing from this morning was her working up the nerve to mention she'd been bumped back a year in her residency, he had no idea. None.

“Whatever it is, I'm sure it's your fault,” said Mr. Clark. “That's the theme of the day, isn't it?”

Derek needed to find her. Meredith. He needed to know what was going on. He moved downstairs to the pit, first, where he knew she'd been paged when they'd arrived. Chaos spread before him, and trying to separate that chaos into individuals and unrelated events made him lean on the wall and stop to stare for a long, long time. The shrieks of somebody's baby broke the air into pieces, and he winced as he stared out over the bay. Doctors he knew fixed bloody noses, stubbed toes, stitched wounds, and diagnosed. He caught a glimpse of Dr. Hunt as he moved at a jog beside a stretcher with a moaning, bloody woman on it. A whiff of perforated bowel as they passed made Derek grimace. Dr. Bailey and Richard were absent. Derek didn't see Meredith.

As a nurse trotted past, Derek touched her sleeve. The motion felt clunky and imprecise, but she stopped, smiled. “Dr. Shepherd,” she said.

“Have you seen Dr. Grey?” he asked.

“Sure,” said the nurse, and she pointed with a gloved hand to the small room less than twenty feet
away. “She's in trauma room two.”

“Thanks,” Derek said. He strode to the door, knocked once, and entered.

Lexie looked up as she palpated an overweight, hairy man's abdomen. The man moaned, and his jowls seemed to shudder with suffering. Lexie's eyebrows raised as she caught sight of Derek. “Dr. Shepherd,” she said.

“Dr. Grey,” Derek said. “Sorry. Wrong room.” His heart sank as he closed the door behind him.

When his pager beeped, he almost didn't recognize the sound, a single thread in a tapestry of bedlam. His pocket vibrated. He blinked, and he looked down. Who would page him on his first day back? He was useless. He hadn't been cleared to do anything but desk jockey. He stared at the display, and nerves clenched. OR 2. Who would page him to OR 2? And why? He stared. And stared, and stared, until a loud crash startled him into looking up. Paramedics had brought in another stretcher, and they'd transferred a cyanotic, seizing patient onto a gurney fifteen feet away. A free ER doctor rushed over. Derek shook his head. The pager in his hand didn't display a number anymore. It'd gone dark. How long had he been staring?

The thought that the page might have been from Meredith got his feet moving. When he arrived at OR 2, he grabbed a sterile mask from the dispenser, and he poked his head in to see what was going on, he didn't see Meredith.

Dr. Weller and two newer residents Derek didn't recognize stood over an open skull flap. The body and face of the patient had been obscured by flowing curtains of blue sterile drapes. The ventilator hissed, and the EKG monitor bleeped with a steady, stable rhythm. Dr. Weller looked up. The skin around his eyes creased, and he gestured with the pneumatic drill in his hands. His white gloves shined with a red sheen.

“Dr. Shepherd,” he said.

“Dr. Weller,” said Derek, his voice muffled behind the mask he held. He didn't move from the door. He tried to ignore the heat of everyone staring at him. Doctors. The scrub nurses. All on eggshells. All waiting for him to choke.

“I have a bit of an unusual aneurysm, here,” Dr. Weller said. “It's a lot more complicated to clip off than the scans indicated it would be. Dr. Langly, Dr. Fisk, and I were discussing how to proceed, and we were wondering if you could take a look.”

Derek tried to dip into his mental well for information about aneurysms, but he received only cobwebs and dust bunnies for his trouble. He should know things like this. Instead, his head had been stuffed with cotton.

“I'm not cleared to cut,” Derek said.

“We just want you to take a look,” Dr. Weller said.

Derek gripped the doorframe. The bright OR lights disoriented him, and the sea of eyes disappeared behind the nuclear flare. He swallowed. “I'm...” he began. He took a step toward the body on the table without thinking about the sterile environment, and then he stopped. Scrub in. He should scrub in if he was going to contribute to...

He stared at the table. The lights ran into him like a train, and then all he could hear was the beep, beep, beep of the EKG. His heart pounded.
It'll be over soon, Meredith had whispered as he struggled to breathe. I love you.

The room became a kaleidoscope of color and light, and the beeps and whirs and voices mushed together.

“Dr. Shepherd?” Dr. Weller said.

I know this is very scary, Dr. Shepherd.

“Dr. Shepherd?”

Derek blinked, and the room tightened into focus like a screw. Where had he gone? He... “I'm sorry,” he said. And he fled before they could say a word. He tossed the used mask in a trash bin as he passed it.

Do you want to see Dr. Grey? Meredith Grey. Do you want to see Meredith, Dr. Shepherd?

He went to the nearest nurses' station and paged Meredith once. Twice. He waited twenty minutes, but she never showed. He checked her favorite coffee cart, which was covered with scones and chocolate croissants and smelled like some sort of mocha blend. He checked the cafeteria to see if she was eating with her friends. He checked the residents’ locker room, and every other place he could think of. He became so determined that he didn't feel dizzy or strange or nauseous or scared. He just kept moving. Place to place. He checked x-ray. He checked all the MRI machines and CT rooms. He checked the lab, and the pharmacy, and every nurses' station in sequential order.

As his last stab in the dark, he went to the hallway where the hospital kept decommissioned gurneys and other equipment because it had nowhere better to put them all. The long hallway with a snack machine where he knew Meredith and her friends liked to hang out. He didn't find Meredith. It was as though she'd been stamped out of existence. Or she was intentionally keeping her eye out for him and hiding. His page would have alerted her to keep her eye out for him, whether she'd answered it or not. But he did find Cristina, who sat on the empty bed with her legs crossed.

She didn't look up as he pushed through the doorway. Sunlight framed her dark hair with a bright halo. She'd drawn her hair into a thick ponytail with a white band, and she wore a yellow undershirt beneath her blue scrubs. She read a thick medical text with keen focus. Her highlighter squeaked as she drew it across the page. He came to a stop in front of her and cleared his throat. He watched her highlighter drag across another line. She read an article on angina. Her gold bracelet sparkled as she flipped the page.

“Cristina,” he said when she didn't look up.

She still didn't look up. “Is there a particular reason you're hovering?”

He folded his arms over his chest. “What's wrong with Meredith?”

“I don't know,” Cristina said. He watched the highlighter brighten another line with neon pink. “What's wrong with Meredith?”

“You don't know?” he prodded.

Cristina shrugged.

“So, she hasn't talked to you?”
“Nope,” Cristina said.

“Great,” he said with a sigh. He sat beside her on the gurney. His head had started to pound again, and the hallway lights seemed impossibly bright. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Perfect.”

Cristina glanced at him once out of the corner of her eye. Her head flicked to the side as she did it. She capped her highlighter, slammed shut her book, and stood. She went to the snack machine and dumped a pile of quarters from her pocket into the change slot. She hit buttons and waited with her hands on her hips. When she returned to her seat, she tossed her bounty at him. It landed in his lap.

The sudden movement and unexpected contact made him flinch. His heart throbbed. He took a shaky, slow breath, trying to calm himself down, trying not to show visible panic. He wouldn't let Cristina scare him with a fucking bag of Doritos or whatever she'd bought. He swallowed, and he stared at his lap. She pulled out her book again and didn't watch him. Her highlighter squeaked.

“What's this?” he said.

“It's a sandwich.”

“I know it's a sandwich,” he said. “I meant why.”

She glanced at him with a withering look that told him he should ask what he meant, then, if he expected a certain answer. Her lips pursed. She pointed at the clock over the door with her marker. “It's lunch time. If you're going to hover and annoy me, you can eat.”

He frowned. “I'm not hovering.”

“You're hovering.”

“Why does everybody think I hover?” he said.

She shook her head. “Because you do. It's your thing,” she said. “You lean, you have perfect hair, and you hover.” She pointed at the sandwich with her highlighter, her expression imperious. “Eat.”

He stared at the sandwich wedge encased in saran wrap. Two stale slices of bread hugged a sliver of dark yellow cheese, pale pinkish meat, old lettuce, and a lackluster tomato that seemed a bit greenish. He fingered the package. The saran wrap crinkled. He peered at the expiration date. Tomorrow. It looked like it had expired last week. The mere sight of it made his stomach turn.

A brunette nurse guiding an emaciated man in a wheelchair pushed through the doors by the snack machine. She smiled at them and waved, but didn't say hello. The man didn't seem coherent. He stared ahead, his gaze blank. An IV pole dripped fluids into the back of his boney hand. “You're doing great, Mr. Finch,” the nurse said, her saccharine voice too sweet to be comforting. Derek glanced at the telltale Foley bag hooked on the back of the chair, and he closed his eyes as the nurse and her ward departed.

That'd been him. In the chair. When he'd had pneumonia, and they'd transferred him out of ICU. Meredith and Mark together had helped him move into the wheelchair to be taken downstairs while the nurse had supervised. His first time out of bed in days, and he'd barely been able to stay upright. His chest had squeezed with the agony of gravity, and he hadn't been able to breathe without wheezing. He'd still been attached to everything. Mark, of all people, had moved the Foley bag from the bed to the back of Derek's wheelchair. That's good, Dr. Shepherd, the nurse had exclaimed as Derek had collapsed into the chair, breaths whistling in his chest. You're doing great.

Derek shook his head, and the memory faded. “She really hasn't talked to you about anything?” he
“Nope,” Cristina said. “She really hasn't.”

“And you're not worried.”

“I'm still not even clear why I should be worried,” Cristina said.

“Because she was upset this morning, and I can't figure out why.”

Cristina shrugged. “A man can't figure out his Post-it wife. Like that's news.”

“She has a lot to deal with,” he said. “I just want—”

“You just want to stroke your wounded hero complex and save something,” Cristina said.

“That's not what this is about.”

“That's so what this is about,” she said. “McDreamy's coming back.”

He glared. “Don't call me that.”

“Well, what do you want me to call you, then?” she countered.

“Derek would be fine. It is my name.”

“Fine,” she said. She pointed at the sandwich. “Derek, take a bite.”

“Why are you—”

“Because this is your first day back,” she said. “Cardio patients typically don't know what the hell hit them on their first day back, and if you relapse before dinner, Meredith will get all sad and pout-y-faced.”

He pulled the sandwich to his mouth and took a bite. The stale bread made him want to choke. The soggy tomato burst under the pressure of his teeth. He had no idea what kind of meat this was. Turkey or chicken. He could only identify that it was cold and tasteless. The lettuce didn't crunch. The mayonnaise made everything slimy. He chewed once, and he swallowed.

“It won't kill you before the expiration date,” she said.

He glared at her, and he bit off another chunk. He swallowed with a grimace. “I'm touched that you care,” he said.

“I care,” she responded.

He raised his eyebrows. “You care?”

“I do care.” She shrugged. “I just don't 'care'.

He scoffed. “Because that makes sense.”

They sat in silence for several moments.

“She didn't tell me you're food challenged,” Cristina said.

“Right,” he said. “You figured it out in five minutes of talking to me.”
“I pay attention.”

He crossed his arms. “So, you have me all figured out.”

“Yes.”

“Really.”

“Yes,” she said. Silence stretched. “How's your pain?”

“Why would you ask me that?”

Her lip twitched. “Why wouldn't you answer?”

They stared at each other. Her deep brown eyes pierced him, and he couldn't help the feeling that he'd been laid bare. She knows, said a small voice. She knows, and Mark knows, and Meredith knows. They all know. He closed his eyes, and he took a breath.

“Meredith would talk to you,” he said. “If there was a problem. Right?”

“If there was a problem, yes.”

“So, you don't think there's a problem.”

“At this point in time, I'm reading this book about angina,” she said. “I'm not thinking about problems.”

“You really frustrate me.”

She snorted. “The feeling's mutual. Take a bite.”

He stared at the partially eaten sandwich. His stomach roiled. He couldn't do it. “I'm not hungry,” he said. He stood and stretched.

The room blacked out, and the floor dropped away in a sickening twist. Just for a moment. He put his hand on the gurney behind him to steady himself. He inhaled as he waited for the fuzzy blackness to recede. As colors replaced the black dots, he found her staring at him, eyes narrowed. Face heating, he turned away. When he reached the trash bin by the snack machine, he tossed the gloppy remnants of his sandwich into it. Relief flooded him when his poor coordination didn't cause him to miss his shot while she watched. He felt her gaze on his back, peeling away layers of his skin.

“She wouldn't talk to me if it was about you,” Cristina said as he grabbed the door handle.

He stopped and turned. He couldn't withhold a burble of bitter laughter. “She talks to you about me all the time.”

“Something she thinks you'd want kept private,” Cristina clarified.

He sighed. “And she really hasn't talked to you?”

“Really hasn't.”

“Would you tell me if she had?” he asked.

Cristina drew her highlighter across the page. “If it meant I could read this book in peace, I would.”
He took the hint and left her alone. He returned to his office, past more and more people who thought it was great that he was back, and told him so in detail. When he entered, he scowled at the bobbing balloons and glittery cards in the corner on the filing cabinet and went to the desk, where he'd left a still huge stack of paperwork.

When he sat down, a profound wave of tiredness crashed into him. He sighed, and he glanced at his watch. 1:00 PM. He only had to make it to 2:00 PM, and then he could leave. He stared at the pile of paperwork. He couldn't do it. He just couldn't.

He took a breath, and he let the room tumble out of focus. If he didn't think, everything was easy. And it didn't hurt. And nothing frightened him. He let his eyelids droop. He wouldn't fall asleep. He wouldn't let himself. If he fell asleep at work after only five hours on his first day back... His head tilted, and the world panned downward, into his lap. He blinked.

_Dark, choppy water splashed in his eyes and then swallowed him whole. He dipped underneath the surface, searching. Everything, black. Dark. His eyes burned. He would need air soon. Blue, in the distance. In the deep. Like a blue jay. Or a bird egg. Or..._

_He kicked. His body sliced the water. Bubbles sprayed in his face. His frozen fingers caught in the wet web of her tangled hair. He hooked his arm around her chest, underneath her armpits, and then he kicked harder than he'd ever kicked. Spots formed in his vision. And then dark and black and cold split apart into light and gray and colder._

_Wind blustered against his face. He choked on the air. Sputtered._

“Meredith,” he gasped.

_Shе didn't help. Or speak. He fought his freezing limbs and the heady urge to sink as he splashed and kicked them toward the dock._

A soft knock at the door rescued him from the abyss. His mouth felt gummy. He swallowed, and he glanced at his watch as he pushed the chill of the water to the back of his mind. 1:40 PM. How...? He swiped his face with his hand. His head pounded. But he could make it twenty more minutes.

Though he never beckoned the person on the other side, the door opened, hesitant. As though whoever stood on the other side was—

“Meredith,” Derek said, surprised.

All the bricks in his demolished world aligned. He sighed as he looked at her. She carried a small object wrapped in white paper. Her lunch? He hoped she wanted to eat lunch with him. That would be nice. She used to do that from time to time while he was stuck in the office with not just mountains but mountain ranges of paperwork, and she needed a break from the bustle and constant noise of the hospital. She wore her baby-blue scrubs, her favorite beat-up Converse sneakers, and a lilac-colored undershirt, and she looked beautiful. She looked right. He hadn't seen her in a work capacity in forever. He let a small smile tug at his lips despite his apprehension.

“Decided to stalk me, after all?” he said.

“Hi,” she said, her voice soft and apologetic as she pulled up a chair on the opposite side of his desk and sat. She seemed almost bashful.

“Hi,” he replied.
She looked at her lap. The paper in her hands crinkled as she fiddled with it. After a moment, she seemed to gather some courage, and she looked at him. “Have you eaten?” She pushed the white paper thing across the desk at him. He studied it. Wet spots marred the paper. He inhaled, and he scented the warm spices while she said, “I brought you a sandwich because I figured you’d forget to eat.”

He wasn't hungry. Cristina had already force fed him. He grinned, anyway. “Split it with me?”

“Okay,” she said.

He peeled the paper while she watched, silent. She’d brought him wholewheat wrap filled with grilled chicken, pesto, ripe sliced tomatoes, and alfalfa. The wrap and the paper were still warm. Juices dribbled from the chicken onto the paper. Steam wafted against him, and he inhaled. He sighed when his stomach didn't rumble. He just wasn't hungry. But she stared at him with such hope in her eyes.

“They don't have these in the cafeteria,” he said as he took his half and bit into it as a peace offering. The chicken split apart on his tongue as he chewed. It should have been delicious.

“I went to the deli across the street,” she said.

He swallowed. “Thank you.”

She watched in silence as he finished his half. She didn't touch hers. She shifted in her seat, and she chewed on her lip. When he finished, the pesto wrap rested like a brick in his stomach. She said nothing, until he couldn't do it anymore. Couldn't keep waving the truce flag, hoping she'd start talking on her own.

“You got held back, and you didn't tell me,” he said. “Your pay didn't get bumped up with the other residents' this year.”

Her eyes widened. “It wasn't important,” she said.

“It's important. Your career is important.”

“It's not important, Derek,” she said, her voice firm. “You're important.”

He looked away. “I'm sorry.”

She sighed. Her chair shifted as she stood. She circled the desk, and then she hovered there, in his space. She wrapped her arms over the back of his chair and she kissed his temple. “It's not your fault.”

“You took three weeks off to take care of me,” he said. He blinked, and the sharp edges of the room quivered and blurred. Grief dug into his throat like a blade. “And you've been getting in late. And—”

“And I had appendicitis,” she interrupted. Her grip tightened. “And I drowned, Derek. And I went to Hawaii with Cristina when her wedding to Burke imploded. And I had a piece of my liver removed to fix my alcoholic father. All me. Not you.”

“But—”

“I'm okay with this,” she said. “In twenty years, I'm not going to care that I became an attending one year late or two years late or even three. I'm just not, Derek. But I'm still going to care about
you. I don't regret spending time with you instead of being at work.”

He swallowed against the lump in his throat. “What wouldn't you tell me this morning? Was it this?”

Please, let it be just this. He'd hate it, but he could live with this.

“Derek...” she said.

He closed his eyes as she crushed his hopes. His headache roared. “Please,” he said. “Please, I've been worrying myself in circles all day. I need to know what's wrong, Mere.”

She didn't say anything. Her fingers trembled, and her choppy, hitching breaths hit the air by his ear. He couldn't see her face, and he needed to. He needed. He wobbled to his feet, and the sight of her twisted his heart.

“I'm sorry. I'm really sorry,” she babbled, and he couldn't stop himself from wrapping her in his arms, even though he was frustrated, and angry, and upset, and worried to the point that he'd given himself a raging headache. She rested, her body flush with his chest. “I didn't want to upset you on your first day,” she said. “I hate to upset you.”

Her grief cut him. “Well, I'm upset, Meredith. Would you, please, tell me what's going on?”

“I don't know how,” she said.

An icy chill gripped his body. “Are you dying? Are you sick?”

“No.”

He swallowed. “Are you leaving?”

She shoved at him with her tiny, ineffectual fists, and he stumbled backward a step. He bumped into the glass wall behind the desk. A flash of fury crossed her tear-stained face. “Stop acting like I've got one foot out the door all the time,” she said. “It's freaking insulting.”

He growled with frustration. “What the hell do you want me to think when my last marriage blew up in my face, and you're making this out to be doomsday, but you're not dying?”

“I...” she said, but her voice trailed away. She took a long, deep breath. Her jaw worked as he watched her steel herself. “This is really hard for me.”

“Why?”

“Because I'm the one who's been upset all day, and you're already making me feel like I'm the bad guy.” She threw up her hands. “I haven't even said anything, yet!”

He still. Point for the 'Derek, you've done something stupid' column. Maybe... a whisper began in his head, but he stomped on it. She didn't know. He ground his teeth in frustration. Why couldn't she just say it? Rip the fucking band-aid already?

“I can't fix it if I don't know what it is, Mere,” he said.

“Stop talking to me like that!”

“Like what?”
“Like you're put upon,” she said. “You're not put upon, Derek. You have no idea the meaning of
the phrase 'put upon'."

Tension gripped his muscles. “I'm sorry,” he said.

When she rolled her eyes at him, he fought biting the urge to spew vitriol. They didn't need vitriol.
She needed to talk to him. Why did he have to fight so hard with himself?

_I'm so angry_, he'd said weeks ago. _All the time._

He pushed down into his center and battled for calm. “How can I help?” he said.

“I need to work myself up to this,” she replied. Silence stretched as she thought for a moment, but
then her gaze turned hopeless. She shook her head. “I can't. I need someone else. I can't talk to you
about this yet. I need... I don't know what I need.”

But I know it's not you. Those words hung on the end of her sentence without being spoken. That
stung. He held ruffled, frayed nerves at bay by counting to ten in his head while he breathed.

“What about Cristina?” he said.

Meredith shook her head. “I can't talk to Cristina about this.”

“Are you and Cristina fighting again?” he said. “She was really—”

“No. We're not fighting. I can't talk to Cristina about this, because it's about you, and I...”

Meredith's lower lip quivered, and a new pair of tears escaped her eyes. “I don't want to make this
even worse.”

She'd already fucking made it worse. He looked at her, biting back the snapping retort before it
leaped from his tongue. Time seemed to stretch as he stared at her. She'd never made him feel
more helpless in his life, even when he hadn't been able to walk to the bathroom by himself. He
wanted to yell, but he couldn't stand to see her so upset, either, and that just made his frustration
swell in his chest like an overinflated balloon. His heart tore in two.

He wanted to help, but...

He closed his eyes. No. He wanted to help. There was no but. She was too important. He tangoed
for a moment with his pride, but he let the dance end when he stared once more at her face.
Perhaps, if he could help her sort herself out...

“I could be Cristina,” he offered.

Meredith wiped her face, making ugly snot-filled sounds as she sniffled. “How?” she said.

“I don't know.” He shrugged, helpless. At least she hadn't laughed in his face. “Role playing.
Something. You've done it with Alex. I've seen you do it. Please, Meredith. Let me try to help.”

Her eyes narrowed. “But you're...” She bit her lip. “I mean you're...” She made a vague, hand-
waving, frustrated gesture that said nothing to him except for the fact that she had no idea how to
describe who he was.

“Why don't you think I can do it?” Derek said.

She crossed her arms. “If you do, that means you can't be Derek right now. No knight in shining
whatever. You get that, right?”
Anyone but you as you are she said but didn't say. Another deep gouge in his soul. He swallowed and looked at the floor to recollect himself. Or keep himself in check. Or something. Anything. His fists clenched.

“Okay,” he said. He kept his voice even. “No knight in shining whatever.”

Her skeptical gaze widened into hope. “You swear?”

He stared at her. He could do this. If Alex, of all people, could be a fucking girl for her, Derek could. And he could do it without taking her desire to talk to somebody else personally. And he could help her.

He could.

“I swear, Meredith.” He took another deep breath. “Just don't tell Cristina I'm subbing in, or I might die of embarrassment.”

His heart lifted just a little when Meredith snickered. She wiped away the last of her tears, and the world didn't feel so crushing anymore. “That would ruin the whole point of this exercise if I told her, anyway,” she said.

“Good,” he said. That also placated him, somewhat.

She offered him a tiny smile. “So, you're my person?”

“I'm always your person, Meredith,” he said.

“I know, but...”

He nodded. “Yes, I'm your person,” he said, matching her soft tone.

She took a deep breath and walked to the center of the room. He watched, perplexed, as she dropped to the floor and lay on her back, looking up at him, or rather, the ceiling. She waved her hand, like she wanted him to get down on the floor with her.

“It's just...” She swallowed. “We do this sometimes.”

He stared down at her. “You and Cristina lie on the floor?”

“Yeah,” she said.

He glanced at the glass wall of the Chief's office. The hospital bustled behind him as people walked to and fro on the catwalk. Nurses, patients, doctors. A woman toting a sloshing Starbucks cup in one hand and dragging along a small child with the other ran across the catwalk. Her mouth opened as though she were shouting. A doctor Derek didn't know very well, Dr. Ransom, turned, a bagel clutched in his teeth because his hands were full of post-op charts.

“You can't see the floor from outside,” Meredith said. “The office will look empty.”

He smirked. He couldn't stop himself. “This is something you've checked before?”

She reddened. “Floor, Derek.”

He stepped around her prone body and locked the door, just in case anybody wanted to be daring like she had been, and walk in without a verbal okay. He lowered himself to the floor, trying not to wince as his stiff muscles and his bruised hip protested. He lined himself up with her body as
though they were lying abreast of each other in bed. The room spun as he adjusted to the new
elevation.

She grabbed his arm and squeezed. “Other way,” she said.

He gaped. “You and Cristina spoon?”

“No.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “I mean flip around so we're facing each other, shoulder-to-
shoulder.”

“O...kay.” He scooted into position. “Do I get gold stars for this? I think I deserve gold stars.”

She didn't reply.

He lay flat on the floor. His right shoulder touched hers. He stared at the ceiling. So did she. She'd
cupped her arms over her stomach, and so he mirrored her, just in case that was a necessary
Cristina-ism for this exercise.

Silence ensued while she worked up her nerve. So, she wasn't pregnant. She wasn't dying or sick.
And she wasn't leaving. What she had to say had nothing to do with her demotion. She clearly
thought he was to blame. Which meant... what, exactly? He reached up and pinched the bridge of
his nose, wishing the throbbing ache would stop so that he could think without crushing pain.

Maybe, she did know. Maybe.

Before any dread could coil into tangled loops, she spoke. “So, you're Cristina,” she said. “Not
Derek.”

He nodded. “I swear, Mere.”

“Thank you for humoring me,” she said in a small voice. “Thousands of gold stars.”

He didn't respond. He didn't think she wanted him to. He wasn't sure he could. He swallowed and
gave the affronted, unsettled feeling in his gut a few moments to even out. He could do this. He
could be what Meredith needed. He lay there, and he waited. And waited, and waited. Until she
made up her mind and spoke.

“I really need to talk to Derek about something,” she said.

He swallowed. What would Cristina say to that, exactly? He'd grown up in a house full of women.
Though the mindset made little sense to him, he'd learned, over the course of his life, that a lot of
times, when a woman said something sucked, she just wanted a sympathetic ear. Someone to
commiserate with. She didn't want solutions or suggestions or offers to fix her problem. No knights
in shining whatevers. Except Cristina wasn't really a sympathetic person. At all. She had the
commiserating abilities of a prickly pear. Which left only the option for biting sarcasm.

“You mean you guys do more together than have McDreamy sex?” he said.

That earned him snort. He imagined her blushing as she tried not to laugh. He tried not to grin
himself despite the absurdity of this situation and his jumble of twisting nerves and dread. He
failed. But they were on the floor staring at the ceiling, and she couldn't see his expression anyway.
He hoped.

“He's very chatty when he's in a good mood,” Meredith said. “And he's funny. He makes me laugh.
He's my favorite person to talk to about anything because even when I don't have a lot to say, it
never seems to faze him. And, when I do have something to say, even if it's really bad and freakish, he doesn't judge me.”

“Your favorite to talk about anything? Really?” he said, and then he winced. He'd forgotten his role playing hat already.

She didn't seem to mind. Or, maybe, she sensed his need for a stroke of reassurance. She shifted. Her hand found his, and she squeezed. “You don't know anything about what happened when I went to Europe. He does.”

A lump formed in his throat. He swallowed, and he tilted his head. “Mere, I—”

“You're not Derek right now,” she scolded, though her eyes sparkled.

“You squeeze Cristina's hand?”

Meredith laughed. “Shut up,” she said, but the words had no bite.

He nodded, more to make himself focus than to reply. He stared at the overhead fluorescent light, and he lowered his eyelids. He let the light separate into two. He could do this. “Ready to be Cristina again,” he said.

Meredith sighed. “So, I need to talk to Derek about something. I think it's going to really upset him, and I'm worried.”

Nerves clenched in his gut. “What do you need to talk to him about?”

“I can't tell you,” she said.

He frowned. “But I'm your person.”

“This is something I can't talk to my person about. That's why I'm talking to you.”

“But I'm your person right now,” he said. “I'm not Derek.”

“You're Derek pretending to be my person.”

“So, pretend I'm Derek not pretending to be your person.”

“But that's not pretending,” she replied.

He opened his mouth. The beginning of a word came out. His jaw clacked shut. Seconds passed. “I'm confused,” he said.

“You're not being a very good person,” she said wryly.

He pushed up onto his elbows. His chest twinged, but he ignored it. He watched her as she stared at the ceiling.

“Does Cristina give you advice with this little to go on?” he said.

“Yes. No.” She shook her head and sighed. “Sometimes. I'm... I don't know.”

Her lips twitched with the hint of a smile, and he couldn't help but match her with his own sliver of a grin. He shifted and put more of his weight on his hip, the side he hadn't bruised. He picked up her hand and stroked her thumb.
“That's a lot of answers,” he said, his voice low as he echoed himself from that morning. He pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed her. Her soft skin brushed his lips. Her fingers flexed. He pushed his cheek against her palm.

“Cristina doesn't do that, either,” Meredith said.

“She doesn't kiss you?”

Meredith popped up onto her elbows and mirrored him. They stared at each other. “Pretty sure she doesn't kiss me,” Meredith said, her eyes sparkling.

“Good,” he said. “That'd be a little weird.”

That earned him a playful smack. He laughed as she growled a tiny growl and launched at him. They met in the middle, embraced, and he fell back to the floor. She settled her weight against his chest. As insignificant as her body weight was, it didn't hurt. Not anymore. Her ponytail fell beside her face. He brushed it behind her ear. She dipped, and her lips met his.

“I love you,” she said as she pulled away. “I really do, Derek. I'm so glad...” Her voice trailed away. Her gaze searched his face.

“What?” he prodded.

She kissed him. “I'm glad I made that stupid house with candles.”

“It wasn't stupid,” he said.

She made a face. “Maudlin or whatever.”

“Hmm.” Warmth spread through his body, and he relaxed. “You're beautiful, you know. Even when you're maudlin.”

She licked her lip, and blush crept across her face. “We can't have sex in your office when it's still Webber's,” she said. “That's a bit icky.”

He stroked her cheek with the pad of his thumb. “Please, don't tell me you and Cristina do that.”

Meredith laughed. Really laughed. The sound hit his ears like a bell. She kissed him again and shook her head. “No,” she said.

“I do still owe you sex in the elevator, though,” he said.

“Rain check?” she replied.

He nodded. “Rain check.”

He watched her. The way her nose scrunched with delight. The soft dusting of freckles across her face. The soft blush that gave her face a youthful vibrancy when she laughed. He couldn't help but return her grin as a layer of nerves and worry sloughed away. She did that to him all the time. Made him forget bad things.

“I love you, too,” he said, his voice deep and low.

She shifted and resettled, shoulder-to-shoulder with him just as they'd started, except she didn't let go of his hand. They stared at the ceiling, and he forced himself to remember he was supposed to be somebody else, at the moment. Focus. He could focus. If he could just keep nudging...
“So, you want to tell Derek something,” he said, “But you're not sure how he'll handle it.”

“Yeah.”

He let his eyelids fall shut. Her fingers tightened around his.

_No, I'd rather fuck Addison_, he'd said with a straight face when Meredith had approached him about being unhappy with their sex life. He'd been pissed at the time. Pissed that she would even intimate he'd want to have sex with somebody else, let alone baldly say it, and he'd erupted. _Get out!_ he'd roared minutes later.

For a large portion of this entire conversation, he'd been fighting with himself not to explode at her.

He tried to breathe around the queasy squish of his innards. “Is it because he's been really moody and short-tempered lately?” Derek said.

“No,” Meredith said. “Well, yes.”

He raised his eyebrows. “So, yes?”

“Or no!”

He sighed. “Meredith...”

“I'm trying,” she said. “I'm really trying to explain this.”

“Take your time,” he assured her. “I'm sorry, Mere.”

She didn't answer him. Her hand rubbed her stomach as she worried for a moment. “I think if I'd talked to Derek about this before he'd gotten shot, he would have been really upset, too. Or he would have laughed at me and wondered if I'd snorted too much tequila. But I don't think I would have ever had to talk to him about this if he hadn't gotten shot. So...” Her voice trailed away.

“So, no,” he said. “But yes.”

“Yeah,” she said. Another sigh. “I'm sorry. I'm being wishy-washy. Or unclear. Or... whatever.”

“It's okay.”

“So, are you looking for my advice on how Derek might react?” he said. “Or are you trying to figure out how to tell him in the first place, or—”

“Yes,” she said. “I need to know what to say, and I don't. I just want him to be okay.”

“You think Derek's not okay?” he said.

“I know Derek's not okay.”

“You're sad he's still an eight?” he hazarded.

“He's worse than that,” she said, her voice soft.

Tension locked his muscles. She did know. She did.

“Why don't you think Derek's okay?” he asked.
She didn't make a sound, and the agonizing silence stretched and stretched. He listened to the blood rushing in his ears. He listened to footsteps outside his office. He listened to distant voices and bustle. But Meredith didn't speak.

“Meredith,” he prodded. “Why don't you think—”

Her pager shrilled, and she flinched. She sat up, and she pulled the pager from her belt to peer at display. Her ponytail had skewed to the side. She looked bedraggled and startled and... She was going to bolt. He hadn't seen her do it in over a year, but he recognized the sinking, wide-eyed look on her face as though he'd last seen it yesterday. She didn't look at him. Wouldn't look.

“Please, don't take that page,” he begged.

“I'll talk to you tonight,” she said, her voice hoarse, and he wanted to kick and scream.

Motherfucking hospital. Motherfucking, flighty, frustrating... He clenched his fists. He'd almost gotten her to talk, and she'd let something as silly as a page spook her out of it. What did she want to talk about?

“I'm telling you,” Mr. Clark said, “She knows.”

The interruption was so abrupt, so unexpected after minutes and minutes of silence from his tormenter, Derek didn't have a chance to dampen his reaction or bolster himself to ignore it. “She doesn't know,” he snapped. “Nobody knows.”

Meredith froze, and she looked at him. Wide-eyed horror filled her expression, and her beautiful blush drained to pallid white. She swallowed, and his heart quivered when he saw her hands shaking.

“I'll take a river in Egypt for $300, Alex,” said Mr. Clark.

“Meredith, please,” Derek said. “Why don't you think I'm okay?”

Meredith opened and closed her mouth. Once. Twice. She found her voice as she crab-walked backward two steps and then shoved herself to her feet. “I have to go, Derek,” she said. “I'm not having this discussion with you when there's a time limit.” And then she left him on the floor of Richard's office. The door slammed shut behind her.

He sat in stillness, bell rung and stupid for... Minutes. Hours. Days.

She knew. She knew, and...

“You,” said Mr. Clark, “Are the most inconsiderate, pathetic, sniveling waste-of-space I've ever laid eyes on. I'm glad I shot you.”

Derek had crawled to his briefcase, stuck his hand under the leather flap, and closed his hand around his pill bottle before he realized what he was doing. Crawled. On his knees. To get pills. His gut clenched, even before Mr. Clark spoke again.

“That's right,” his tormenter growled. “Run away. That's what you wanted to do all along, isn't it? You kept backing up like you were going to fucking trip and fall on your ass, and you don't think I noticed?”

Derek let go of the pill bottle and wobbled to his feet. He pulled the strap of his briefcase and set it on his shoulder. He didn't glance at his watch. He didn't care anymore what time it was. He'd
worked enough. He left the office, and he stalked down the hall without stopping. Without thinking. Cool gusts of air hit his face as he rounded corners. Dodged people. Nobody said hello to him, this time. They all stared. Like they had when he'd been on the catwalk, panicking. Broken eggshells lay everywhere in his path.

“Because you're falling apart again,” said Mr. Clark. “Obviously.”

Her door was open. Wide open. He didn't knock.

“Didn't I say you were inconsiderate and useless?” Mr. Clark said.

Derek's head pounded. He crossed her threshold, and he collapsed onto the couch before his legs decided to make the choice for him. His briefcase fell to the floor by his feet with a loud thunk. He pushed his head into his hands and breathed. The room smelled flowery. A bit like potpourri. Or... something. The fish tank bubbled and burbled. Muted sunshine made the world behind his eyelids more fleshy pink than black.

“Dr. Shepherd,” Dr. Wyatt said, her voice soft and low. She didn't ask how he was. That part was probably pretty fucking obvious.

He swallowed. He couldn't open his eyes. He shivered with stress. His stomach churned and he thought, for a moment, that he might vomit all over her coffee table, though he had nothing inside. He was empty despite having eaten.

Why did he feel so empty?

Her chair squeaked. Her soft footfalls allowed him to trace her position as she moved across the room. The sounds of the outside hospital faded as she closed the door with a thunk. She moved again. He heard the swish of water pouring. She approached his personal bubble, but only to set something onto the table in front of him, and then she left, giving him a wide berth. Her chair squeaked again.

She let him gather his wits in peace. She said nothing.

“I don't like therapy,” he said. He barely recognized his own voice. “I don't want to be here.”

The silence stretched, as if she were waiting for him to elaborate. When he didn't, she prodded, “Can you tell me why?” in a gentle tone.

And how does that make you feel?

Old memories flipped over and over in his head like a crashed car rolling on pavement. He rubbed the bridge of his nose and dared to open his eyes. The light made him feel bleary and hungover. He rubbed his eyes with his hands and sighed. He stared at the Dixie cup she'd set on the table. The surface of the water shimmered, reflecting the light.

She leaned back in her chair and folded her hands together over her lap, her expression calm. Passive. Not piteous or concerned or wondering when he actually would vomit all over her coffee table. Her blond hair fell to her shoulders. She wore a gray cardigan sweater over a striped blouse and dark pants. Her wedding ring sparkled on her left ring finger. He stared at her. This woman who'd seen him metaphorically naked before he'd ever met her.

“It never works,” Derek said.

“Can you elaborate?” she said.
He looked away. “I thought you knew all about me already.”

“I know what Meredith has told me, but you're here, now,” Dr. Wyatt said. “I’d like to know from you.”

“Why?”

Her pen clicked. She pulled a notepad up from the crevice formed by her hip and the arm of the chair. She scribbled notes. He imagined what she might be writing. Paranoid. Fearful. Passive aggressive. Angry.

“Dr. Shepherd,” she said as her pen looped. “Do you ever make a diagnosis based on hearsay?”

He looked at his lap. He gathered a clump of his slacks. His pants wrinkled in his sweaty grip. His fists clenched. “No. I...” His throat closed, and he couldn't breathe.

“Take your time,” she said.

“My dad was still dead,” he said. “It didn't fix anything.”

He put his head into his hands. Maybe, it would stop the room from mushrooming like some sort of nuclear disaster. Stop it from swallowing him whole.

*Your mom is worried about you. She says you're not talking much since your father died.*

“How old were you when you saw a therapist for that?” Dr. Wyatt said.

“I don't remember,” he said. “I was in high school.” He pulled his fingers through his hair because it gave him something to do with his hands. His mother had waited a while before insisting that he see someone. Waited until he'd already boxed everything away and thrown away the keys. Being forced to pry open those boxes had been...

*Can you tell me about your dad?*

Horrible.

“So, you were young,” Dr. Wyatt said. “A teenager.”

“Yes.”

“So, it's been more than twenty years, and you measure the success of that venture by whether things were fixed.”

He shrugged. “Why is that important? Why shouldn't I measure it that way?”

She leaned forward. “Because therapy doesn't fix anything, Dr. Shepherd. That's not the point.”

“What do you mean, that's not the point?” he snapped. “You fixed Meredith.”

“I didn't fix Meredith.”

“You fixed her.”

Dr. Wyatt shook her head. “I really didn't.”

He exploded from his seat and launched into agitated pacing. “But she used to run away, and she
never touched me, and she never said she loved me. You fixed her.”

You're a lemon, he'd said when he'd been too drunk to think straight. There's no fixing you. Another regret. He'd been so fucking wrong.

“I helped give Meredith the tools and perspective to improve herself,” Dr. Wyatt said. “The rest was all her.” Dr. Wyatt didn't stand, as though she consciously wanted to give him the upper hand in the conversation if he wanted it, though her eyes tracked him back and forth and back and forth. He saw her out of the corner of his eye. He didn't focus on anything. He just moved. “That's what therapy is about,” Dr. Wyatt continued. “Helping you do what you need to help yourself. It's not like surgery.”

He stopped. “But I need you to fix me. I need...” He blinked, and tears slashed his face. “Please, fix me.”

Silence stretched. Dr. Wyatt regarded him, gaze discerning. “Dr. Shepherd, what spurred this visit?” he said.

“Meredith's been trying to get me to come for two weeks.”

“What made you listen to her after resisting for two weeks?”

“I told her I would think about it,” he said.

“Which means you didn't immediately agree with her,” Dr. Wyatt said. “And you just said you don't like therapy.” She spread her hands, palms upward in a Gallic shrug as she stared at him. “So, what made you change your mind?”

He collapsed onto the couch, and leaking tears became muffled sobs. He couldn't stop himself. He pressed the palm of his hand against his lips as he tried to contain himself and failed, over and over and over again.

“That's right,” said Mr. Clark. “You're a failure.”

“I'm sorry,” Derek said.

“It's okay,” Dr. Wyatt said.

The room blackened and blurred around the edges. A low-pitched, dull buzzing replaced the rush of blood in his ears. He panted as he gulped for air. “I don't feel well,” he said, but he sounded as though he were speaking from miles away.

“This is your first day back at work, isn't it?” Dr. Wyatt said.

“Yes,” he said between gasps. His stomach hurt. His chest hurt.

“It must be exhausting,” she said.

And frightening. And infuriating. And frustrating. And stressful. And awful. His remaining resolve snapped in two. “I can't,” he blurted.

“Can't what?”

“Do this,” he said. Alternating hot and cold bleached his bones. “I...”

She moved, then. From her chair. He felt the cushion underneath his body sink. She sat beside
him. Breaching personal space, though she didn't touch him. “Can you tell me what you're feeling right now?” she said.

“No.”

“Is that because you don't know?” she prodded gently.

He swallowed as he looked at his knees. The room flashed in and out, and panic like a tsunami swept over his body. He couldn't breathe or speak. He thrashed. He clawed at his collar, but nothing helped. He tried to suck down air, and he couldn't.

“Slow, deep breaths,” Dr. Wyatt instructed. “You're in a safe place.”

*It's safe here, Derek. You can talk to me. Tell me about your dad.*

Sound blotted out except for the throb of his heart in his ears. He listened to that for the longest time. He didn't know how long. By the time the room stopped moving, he felt flayed, quartered, and left for dead in pieces. His throat hurt. His hands felt clammy, felt slippery against his hair as he yanked and yanked. He swallowed.

“I'm sorry,” he said in a low, tired pitch, too tired to care about the flames of embarrassment licking at his skin. He couldn't manage anything else but breathing.

She pushed the paper cup at him. He grasped it with shaky hands. He tipped back the cup, and cool, soothing water flowed over his tongue. He swallowed, and he set the cup down on her coffee table.

“I want you to make an appointment with me,” Dr. Wyatt said. “For a full session. I'd like to start from the beginning.”

He couldn't speak. Couldn't move.

“I know sometimes everything can feel insurmountable and terrifying,” she said. “But we can work on that.”

“I just want it to stop,” he said. “Please. Please, make it stop.”

She gripped his shoulder. Squeezed. “What time this week is good for you?” she said.

“I don't know,” he said. The roaring in his head returned. “I don't...”

“Okay, slow down,” Dr. Wyatt suggested, her voice soft, calm, gentle. “Take a deep breath.”

He tried. He really did.

“I want you to think of something in your life that you love.”

“Meredith,” he said, his voice a bare wisp of air.

Dr. Wyatt shook her head. “Don't tell me. Just think it. Okay?”

He nodded because he didn't trust himself to find his voice. He closed his eyes and hovered in blackness. He thought of Meredith's taste when he kissed her. Her scent. The way her skin felt underneath his fingertips when he touched her.

*I want to try again, Derek, Meredith had said. When you can. When you're ready. For the dirty sex.*
When I can? he'd said. You know that part's not broken. Right?

She'd blushed. I meant. I mean when you can exert... When. I didn't mean to imply that you can't. Um.

He found a shaky smile for himself despite everything. He still wavered on the knife edge of a cliff, and looking down took his breath away, but at least she'd given him a grapple hook and a prayer.

“All right,” said Dr. Wyatt, her voice low and calm. “Can you tell me what day this week is good for you?”

“I don't...” He still found it hard to speak. “I don't know.”

She nodded. “How about Friday at 2:00 PM, and if that doesn't work for you, you can call me to reschedule?”

“Ohkay,” he said, his voice the barest sliver of okay.

Dr. Wyatt stood. “You can bring Meredith to your session on Friday if that would make you feel more comfortable.”

He nodded, but his neck felt stiff. Unyielding. “Okay.”

Dr. Wyatt went to her desk to retrieve a small business card. She pulled a pen from the pencil cup and scribbled something on the back of the card. She returned to the sofa. He took the card when she offered it. On the back, she'd written another phone number in blue ink.

“I want you to call me, day or night, if you're panicking like that again, or if you just need to talk to somebody,” she said. “That number on the back is my home number.”

He stared at the card. “But—”

“You don't have to do this alone,” she said. She smiled. “Okay?”

His fingers clenched. The card rumpled in his grip, though he didn't mean to crush it. He swallowed. “Okay,” he said.

She shook his hand and made no comment about his sweaty palms. “I'll see you on Friday, Dr. Shepherd,” she said.

“Ohkay,” he said again, like a busted, skipping record.

Or he thought he said it. Maybe, he didn't. She might have replied. Maybe, she didn't. A haze sort of like a fugue swept over him, and he walked out. Walked away. He didn't think Meredith would drive him home, given how she'd fled. He didn't want to find Mark or beg a coworker he didn't know very well. He stepped into the taxi line at the main entrance and fled.

When he got home, he wandered like a ghost past the open dog gate in the kitchen and then to Sam's crate in the dining room. He unlatched it. She greeted him, stumpy tail wagging, fat, pink tongue dripping with affectionate saliva. He opened the door to the back yard for her. She bounded outside, barking and yipping with glee, but when he didn't follow to play, only stood on the threshold and stared at nothing in particular, she did her business, and trotted back to him.

“Woof,” she said as she pressed against his knees.
He stroked her fur. Exhaustion bound him like a pair of handcuffs, and all he could think about, if one were to call his thought processes thinking, was collapse. He shuffled toward the stairs. The dog followed. He stripped, and he put his Percocet bottle by his clock. When he fell into his and Meredith's queen-sized bed, Sam sat on her hindquarters by his nightstand and stared at him, soft brown eyes level with his own.

He stared back at her. “You can come up,” he said, his voice flat.

Emotionless.

Sapped.

Meredith's side of the bed exploded with black, furry dog as Samantha leaped on top of the covers. She chased herself around in a circle and then settled on her side. Her clawed feet dangled off the side of the bed, and her strong, stocky body formed a solid barrier along his side. He rolled into her, rested his right arm on top of her body. He stroked her belly, and she loosed a low-pitched, pleased sound. The covers rustled. Her breaths made him rise and fall. He slipped his fingers underneath her leather collar. Gripped and held on tight because he needed it. Needed something.

He closed his eyes. Sunshine fell through the window at a slant, bathing him in muted heat. He pressed his face into Samantha's neck to blot it out. The dog sighed. And then he slept.

The billowing blue curtain slid shut with a metal scream as Dr. Smythe and Derek exited the small patient cubicle and headed back to the nurses' desk. The emergency room at NewYork-Presbyterian had a bright, yellowish look from the unwavering bath of fluorescent lights on all the white surfaces. Equipment and curtained-off sections where patients waited in privacy to be treated crammed into what would have been a wide space, had it been empty.

Derek yawned, though he tried to hide it behind his notepad as he scribbled note after note. Overnight emergency room shifts taxed his stamina. He glanced at his watch. Only a few more hours until lunch, and then he could go home and nap before class.

“Now, remember,” said Dr. Smythe. “When you see a head wound like that, always get a complete history and patient workup. You don't want somebody coherent to get stitches and leave, only to collapse later.”

Derek nodded. “So, check for symptoms of increased ICP.”

“Exactly, Mr. Shepherd,” Dr. Smythe said. Derek clipped his pen into his lab coat pocket as Dr. Smythe set the chart for Henrietta Wilkins down on the counter. The nurse at the desk took the chart.

“Can you tell me some of those symptoms?” Dr. Smythe said as he blinked the cobwebs of the long night away. He brushed under the nose pads of his gold wire-rim glasses, rubbing with his long thumb and spindly index finger, and then he wiped his face with his palms. Silvery stubble rasped. His knobby knuckles flexed. It'd been a long night. The older doctor's skin had paled, and his silver hair had flattened and dulled as the night had worn on into the morning, though he always managed a bright smile for patients who needed one.

“You'll need lots of coffee on this job, Shepherd,” Dr. Smythe had said with a wink when Derek had shown for his first day. Third and fourth year medical students had always supplemented the emergency room staff at NewYork-Presbyterian.

“Symptoms of ICP,” Derek said to his teacher. “Headache, vomiting, pupillary dilation—”
He was interrupted when heavily bundled EMTs burst through the bay doors with a stretcher. A light dusting of snowflakes mantled their thick navy coats. A gusty, cold draft followed the gurney and sent icy fingers crawling down Derek's spine. Dr. Smythe snapped on a fresh pair of latex gloves. The nurse at the desk, Julie, dropped her paperwork on the counter and stood to follow.

“What have we got?” said Dr. Smythe as the EMTs moved the gurney into an empty bay.

Derek halted mid-corridor as he took a good look at the thin, pale girl lying still and lifeless. She’d been wrapped in thick blankets to protect against the arctic winter chill outside. White flecks of melting snow dusted her raven-brown hair. Her eyes were closed, and she looked... Dead. A thick lump formed in his throat. He blinked.

“Seventeen-year-old female, student at Clara Barton High School, found unresponsive on the floor by a teacher,” said the left EMT.

Dr. Smythe checked her pulse. “Do they know why she fell?”

The EMT on the right adjusted the straps holding the girl to the gurney. “They don't know, sir. Displays hypotension, bradycardia, decreased breath sounds, and pinpoint pupils.”

Dr. Smythe nodded as he leaned over the girl with a penlight. He peeled back an eyelid. Sightless ice blue irises sparkled in the harsh fluorescent lights and caught Derek like sucking quicksand. Dr. Smythe let the eyelid fall. The girl's eyelashes resettled without fluttering. Without awareness. Without... anything.

Derek clutched his notepad. The room and his surroundings slowed, until sounds played at a low, incomprehensible pitch, his breaths hit his ears like thunder, and a crushing weight constricted his chest. Heat pooled in his gut and burned.

“Possibly an opioid overdose,” Dr. Smythe said. He seemed far away.

“That's Amy,” Derek said. His throat wouldn't work, and his voice arrived as a croak. “Amelia Shep... Shepherd. That's my sister.”

Dr. Smythe glanced at Derek. His eyes flared with surprise before he hid it behind sterility. Detachment. “Do you know if she was taking anything?” he said.

Derek shook his head. Of course she’d been taking something. She always took something. “She takes anything she...” He struggled to find his voice. The world blurred as he blinked and blinked and blinked again. “I mean I...” A cloudy picture flashed in his head. Crushed white pills and a tipped liquor bottle. A year ago, but... His brain stopped working, and his stomach churned. “Oxycodone?”

Monitors shrieked. “Asystole!” yelled Julie. The two EMTs, Julie, and Dr. Smythe exploded in a frenetic burst of activity.

“Get me epinephrine and atropine, stat,” said Dr. Smythe. They pushed the blankets away, revealing Amelia's body. She was a waif. A wasted remnant of a girl. “Beginning compressions.” The doctor stood over Amelia, who didn’t move or speak or smile, and heaved with his upper body. The gurney squeaked, but the sound seemed small in the bedlam.

The crack of Amy's ribs as they broke under the forces of CPR brought the room into pinpoint focus. Derek dropped his notepad. He launched himself at the gurney. “Amy!” he belted. “Amy, don't you dare do this.” He touched her hand. She didn't grip his fingers. He squeezed. Harder than he should have. “Don't you dare.” Tears jagged across his cheeks. He couldn't see. And he...
couldn't breathe. And he couldn't think.

Dr. Smythe glared. “Mr. Shepherd, you need to back up.”

The screeching monitors seared Derek's ears. “But I—”

“Mr. Shepherd!” Dr. Smythe said. One of the EMT's pushed Derek out of the way. The crew of them bustled while Derek stood by, shaking. Julie injected fluid into an IV. They all stared at the monitors. Dr. Smythe kept pushing. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. “Anything?” he said.

Julie shook her head. “No response, sir.”

“But she could... five minutes...” Derek managed. “She could come back.” He had less than five minutes before his sister would be declared dead and gone. He rushed the gurney again. He clutched her hand. “Amy! Come back!”

“Get him out of here,” Dr. Smythe said.

One of the EMT's grabbed Derek's sleeve, strong-arming Derek down the corridor, and he didn't stop pulling until the whine of the monitors had faded behind two sets of double doors, until Derek swallowed, and blinked, and looked around. His body shivered as he registered the waiting room. A television blared the morning news. A woman nursed a baby. A man held a bloody cloth to his head.

“You're family, now,” said the EMT, his tone apologetic. “Not staff, son.” The snow on the EMT's shoulders had melted, leaving only wet stains. “They'll update you when they can.”

“She can't die,” said Derek. Helpless. Hopeless. Heat licked his face.

The EMT didn't respond except to say, “I'm sorry.”

Derek stared after the EMT as he disappeared behind the double doors to rejoin his partner. Derek's legs threatened to give out, and so he sat. He should call Mom. Or... He sniffed, trying to keep himself from falling apart in front of a dozen strangers. He put his head in his hands. His stomach churned. His white lab coat cut him in the armpits as he leaned over his knees to calm the seesawing sensation he felt when he looked at the room.

He couldn't do this again. He just couldn't. He should have tried harder to get her to stop. He should have...

He glanced at his watch. 9:18AM.

They'd be declaring time of death, soon.

He woke feeling like he'd been flayed, quartered, left for dead, and hit by a train. Darkness hugged him. He didn't know what time it was. Didn't care. Samantha howled, and his chest constricted with a deep-seated, gelid, consuming need for something that made it hard to think straight. He reached for the pill bottle on the nightstand, and then he froze. Fury burbled.

He flipped on the light, which stung his eyes. He blinked, caught a glimpse of the drug label set ablaze by the lamp before pain made him look away, and turned his head out of the glare.

“God, damn it,” he hissed.

He pushed back the covers. Samantha followed, as if she were afraid to leave him alone. He
stumbled into the bathroom, flipped on the light, and in a pained, frustrated explosion of ire, he dumped the contents of the pill bottle down the toilet. He took deep breaths. And then he grabbed his Oxycontin, which still perched on the lip of the sink, and did the same. He watched the pills sink to the bottom. White wisps trailed from their surfaces into the water as they dissolved. He knew he shouldn't. It wasn't environmentally conscious to throw opiates into the water supply. And, maybe, he would need... Mayb—

When he realized he was contemplating reaching into the water to rescue the pills he could reach, he slammed his hand down on the lever. The toilet flushed. He dropped the empty pill bottles on the floor. They spun apart in two wide circles. He laughed as he imagined their trails forming an eight, or infinity, or... something. Ludicrous. This was all—

What had he just done?

He slid to the floor, dumbfounded. The cold tile and porcelain chilled his bare legs and back as he leaned against the tub. He shivered. Samantha settled next to him and lay her head against his lap. He stroked her, not sure what else to do. It was the only thing he could do.

What had he just done?

“In a few hours,” Mr. Clark said, “You're going to wish I hadn't missed your heart.” And then he laughed, glee dripping from each burst of noise.

What had he just done?

When Meredith pushed open the door to the bathroom and glanced down at him, Derek couldn't read her expression. Couldn't quantify anything he saw in her eyes. She'd changed her clothes, back into her khakis and blouse. He swallowed, and he looked at her. His haggard, tired wife who'd fled. Samantha whined.

“Meredith,” he said, his voice a weary croak.

Meredith's eyes widened. Her gaze caught the empty pill bottles resting on the floor, the caps scattered, one by his knee, one near the pipes underneath the sink. She made a sound he'd never heard before. A shriek, or a moan, or... something broken on her vocal cords. “Oh, my god, Derek,” she said. “How many did you take?”

“I didn't take any,” he said in a small voice.

She didn't seem to believe him. She scrambled across the constricting room. He inhaled the reassuring, sweet scent of lavender as her body pressed close to his. She could do whatever she wanted as long as she didn't leave. As she grabbed his wrist and felt for his pulse, Mr. Clark laughed.

“See?” said his tormenter. “I told you she knows.”
Day Zero

Somehow, despite the two years of careful, intense conditioning since that night on the cliff when she'd made that stupid candle house and professed to Derek that she would try to be extraordinary, Meredith Grey had devolved. She'd been on the brink of something momentous. On the brink of a level of bravery classified only by superheroes with serial movie deals like Batman or The Fantastic Four. She'd had a moment to declare, unequivocally, that she was committed, and strong, and supportive, and **completely extraordinary** in the face of adversity that would make even the most steadfast person think, why me? Instead, she'd exchanged her human veneer for that of a giant. Freaking. Chicken. She'd become poultry. Poultry!

There hadn't been any emergency. The lab had been letting her know the post-op blood tests she'd run earlier that morning were finished, and it would have made very little difference if she'd picked them up an hour later. But she'd gone to get them, anyway.

*Please, don't take that page,* he'd said.

*I'll talk to you tonight,* she'd responded, which had been the wrong thing. The poultry thing.

Then he'd taken her heart in his hands and squished it with the look that followed on his face, because she'd seen herself reflected in his eyes. She'd seen the unextraordinary Meredith Grey who bolted and couldn't commit and wouldn't stick around when things got bad because they weren't easy. The one who broke up with Derek on frivolous whims and used him for sex and didn't trust him. The one who heard words like house and babies and marriage, and froze like a freaking popsicle.

She hadn't wanted to see that Meredith Grey ever again. The unextraordinary one. She should have stayed and talked despite the pager's summons. She'd known it, but the urge to run had overwhelmed her, and she'd broken like she'd been water boarded. She had run away.

She'd never had any intention of **staying** away, but her momentary cowardice still made her feel like scum. He had a serious problem, he needed help, and she'd abandoned him. Scum. She'd wrung her hands all afternoon as she'd replayed that last moment in her mind.

*Please, don't take that page.*

She'd chewed her lip bloody. She hadn't been fair to him, and, yet, at the same time, she'd been furious. How could he not know on his own what was wrong? Why was it her job to be the one spell it all out for him? How dare he make her feel like the bad guy in this equation? Why couldn't he just say, “Meredith, I'm in over my head, and I need help.” How was it that he was the one abusing Percocet, and she was the one who felt like crap for it? Seriously? How dare he! And, even still, her fury had taken the better part of a day to burn off the frozen locks that barred her from her courage.

When Meredith arrived home at 10:00 PM, one hour after she'd said she'd be home, and approximately eight hours after she'd done her poultry devolution thing, she was freaking mad. She planned to stomp up the steps as loudly as possible, burst through their door, and... and what? Okay, she hadn't planned that much. And the second she stepped across the threshold of their house, despite her grinding molars, she didn't stomp. On her way up the stairs, she wondered how she would wake him up without scaring him, but still remaining firm. This topic needed to be
She wouldn't run away again.

She didn't expect to find an empty bed. For a moment, she halted at the door of their room, unsure. What if he'd never come home? What if, because she'd run, he'd thought she wasn't fixed anymore, and he'd— Logic broke her spiraling thoughts when she let her gaze fall on the unmade rumple of sheets and on the pile of clothes by his side of the bed. The blue shirt and black pants she'd pressed for him that morning lay in a crumpled heap with his boxers.

She glanced toward the master bathroom. The door hung open partway. She didn't see Derek, but she saw the black outline of Samantha's stocky body. Ominous. They hadn't even had her for a week, yet, but the dog had developed pretty predictable habits already. She liked to follow Derek around, and when he wasn't around to follow, she tended to hang out in the kitchen or in her crate. Samantha wasn't in the kitchen or her crate, which meant Derek couldn't be far.

Meredith padded across the room. She knocked softly, just in case. Nothing. The hinges creaked as she tapped the door and sent it swinging inward, revealing a pale, familiar foot and leg. Two feet and two legs. Samantha's head. Derek's scarred torso. And then his face. He sat on the floor, shivering, naked, and looked just like he had when he'd learned Gary Clark had killed seventeen people. The dog raised her head off his lap and whined at her as if to say, “Mommy, something's really wrong.”

Derek met Meredith's eyes. His broken gaze made her gasp. “Meredith,” he croaked.

Then she saw the uncapped pill bottles on the floor, and, in that moment, her world stopped spinning on its axis. Her planning and fury and everything else? Gone in a whorl of panic. The moments blurred immediately after her discovery. “How many did you take?” she thought she said. She wasn't sure.

“No,” he said. Or something. Something she wanted to hear but knew she couldn't believe.

She closed the gap between them to check his pulse, expecting some sort of gasping, weak flutter underneath his skin that would indicate he was moments away from heart failure and death, but she didn't find it. A strong, steady rhythm thumped against her thumb as she stroked his right wrist, that, if anything, was a little too fast. A broken line of skin startled her, and she looked down to see a scab hugged by the tan lines usually covered by his watch. He pressed his face against her neck. She pushed him away so she could assess.

“I swear I didn't take any,” he said.

His quiet voice startled her, and she jerked her gaze to meet his eyes. He didn't blink, or twitch, or do anything that would indicate a lie. She dropped to her knees. She grabbed the bottle by his leg and shook it. No weight inside. No jingle. No pills flew out the open end and skittered on the floor. She glanced at the label. His Percocet. All gone. Her fingers clenched around the bottle. Her knuckles hurt.

“So, that's it. That's all you've earned for now. The rest you're just... just gonna have to take on faith.

“Are you really going to lie to my face?” she said. Her eyes watered, and the room blurred. When she blinked, her focus sharpened. “That's not omitting. That's not even stretching the truth. That's lying, Derek. You're lying to me.”
“Do I look high?” he said. He didn't sound incredulous. Or incensed by her intimations. Or much of anything, really. Just... dead.

She pressed her palm against his face. Despite his shivering, his skin felt normal. Dry. Warm. He didn't resist as she tipped back his head and watched. His pupils constricted to adjust for the lighting change. Not pinpoint, then. And the whites of his eyes seemed clear. Not bloodshot.

She touched his lips and rubbed her index finger across the skin. She looked at his fingernails and his toenails. No signs of cyanosis. She listened to him breathing. In and out. In and out. Not deep, but not shallow, either. Like normal.

And he seemed lucid, if aloof.

“No, you look...” She shook her head. There were empty pill bottles on the floor. She couldn't let herself believe him. “I think we've established I'm a clueless, insensitive freak about everything. Tragically so.”

“You're not.”

“You're going to console me,” she snapped, incredulous. “Now. When you're sitting on the floor potentially on a one-way trip to the emergency room. That doesn't console me, Derek. That makes me want to freaking hit you! How's that for sensitive?”

He broke his gaze away from her, and he looked at the floor. “I didn't take any.”

“You've been taking twenty pills a day,” she said. “Twenty. Your prescription is for four a day, eight at most, if you're in agony. Are you seriously trying to convince me these bottles on the floor are empty because... what? Because the Easter Bunny wanted your Percocet?”

“You've been counting my pills?” he said.

“Don't you dare turn this around on me, Derek,” she said.

He didn't look up. Didn't meet her eyes. “I'm not trying to,” he said. His voice seemed strangely flat.

His state of undress, and his weird attitude, and the mopey dog, and, well, everything about this freaking situation, filled her with the thrum of disquiet. She found it hard to scream at somebody who was so disengaged. Hard to be angry or stay angry. Harder when it was Derek, knowing how Derek typically liked to fight, all snarly and spitting and burning with fury. Instead, she was getting this... this broken thing. He seemed... almost shocked. Like he'd flipped his emotional mute switch or something. He seemed tired. And sad. Hopeless. Dejected. Any word for beaten she could yank out of a thesaurus would have sufficed. His shivering concerned her, too. She knew she should call 911. She should call it no matter what he said, did, or looked like, but something niggled about the situation.

“You told me you were in pain, and I believed you,” she said. “Was that all a lie?”

“No,” he said, but he didn't elaborate.

He wouldn't look at her. Derek Shepherd was chatty. This person was taciturn. Responding in short sentences. Uncertainty supplanted her hurt. Maybe... Maybe, this was it. His, “Meredith, I'm in over my head, and I need help.” The one she'd wanted. He wouldn't be wordy about it. Maybe, he really wasn't lying. Maybe, he'd rescued her from being the bad guy, after all. He'd come to his senses. Maybe.
She scratched Samantha's soft head, and then pushed the dog gently away. Meredith sat beside him. Their shoulders touched. The cold tub propped up her back. She pulled his wrist into her lap, and she rested her thumb over the thump of his pulse. His fingers flexed at her touch and then spread as he relaxed. If his heart started skipping or slowing, if he lost his lucidity, or if he took a nosedive for the floor because he couldn't stay awake, she'd call 911, she told herself. If she saw anything, even a hint, that he was lying, that he'd taken even one pill, she'd call 911. Samantha settled by Meredith's hip and rested her broad snout on Meredith's thigh.

“Describe it, then,” Meredith said.

“Describe what?”

“Your pain.”

He swallowed, and for a long time, he didn't speak. “My... my sternum,” he said, his voice rough. “It still flares up.” His naked body shifted. He didn't move the hand she held captive. He fingered the puckered, splotchy scar underneath his nipple where the bullet had slammed into him with his free hand. Her throat closed up as she watched his wandering exploration of the damage that had been done to him. “And h-here.”

The fact that he still hurt after nearly three months made her want to cry, but she refused to allow herself to do so. “When does it flare up?” she said.

“Sometimes.”


“It hurts to breathe,” he said. “I—”

“Well, is it tolerable?” she prodded.

She waited for the no. The word she needed to hear that would explain the situation he'd allowed himself to fall into. She couldn't decide if that made her horrible on top of being a chicken, wanting to hear him say no, wishing her husband hurt so badly he took twenty Percocet a day to assuage it.

He didn't answer. Her hopes shattered. Derek Shepherd was a drug addict, and he'd been lying. Plain and simple. How had this happened? How had he let it happen? And how had she not noticed?

Call 911, the persistent voice said.

He moved beside her. Away. He pulled his wrist from her hand, and he gripped the lip of the tub. His knuckles whitened. His biceps shook. He stood with a grimace that confirmed he did, indeed, still experience pain from his injuries. She saw the bruise on his hip slide past her eyes. Her eyes widened. He looked like he'd been kicked by a freaking horse or something. She'd been too focused on the pills to notice before. The shampoo rack fell, and everything hit me, she heard him say in the back of her mind. No shampoo bottle would create a fist-sized bruise like that, not unless it'd been shot at him out of a cannon. Another lie. When he wobbled to the doorframe, she stood, and she chased him.

“You really did fall, didn't you? When you yelled this morning,” she said. How had she let things get so bad?

He stopped at the doorframe. He looked at her. “The room was spinning, and I—”
“Why didn't you just call me for help?”

“I needed to do it myself,” he said.

“Why?” she demanded.

“Because I needed it!” he snapped. The first sign of that temper. Lurking.

“Well, you're stupid, Derek!” she said, surprised to find the renewed burble of anger a relief, if only because it was familiar. “I am so freaking angry with you. Your compulsive need for control should not be at the expense of your health.”

His face reddened. He didn't bite back with a retort, and her innate sense of wrongness settled in again.

“So, you want me to believe that you haven't taken anything, and that when you do, it's just for pain. When you're taking twenty. A day. Seriously?”

“No,” he said. Again, no elaboration.

She raised her eyebrows. “No? No, what?”

He pressed his forehead against the doorframe, and he inhaled. “I... I've been taking them to... to not think,” he told the white molding.

“How many?” she prodded. “About dying?”

He looked at her, then, and the desolation she found in his gaze stripped her bare. “About anything...” he said.

He moved toward their closet. The floor creaked with his slow footfalls. Call 911, the voice said again. Call it. He took those pills, and he's a ticking time bomb. She wanted to tell him to sit. Stop moving. But...

She watched as he reached for a shirt among the forest of hangars with a slow, searching hand. She couldn't exactly deny him the dignity of clothes in this conversation, no matter what he'd done or hadn't done. He pulled a bathrobe from the tight clump of garments, not a shirt. A navy blue one. She'd bought it for him on their first Christmas. He swallowed as he pulled it over his shoulders in silence, and she felt odd, watching him dress like this with such a clinical stare. Like suddenly the concept of privacy was obliterated because he didn't have the right to it anymore.

“I took some before you came with lunch today,” he admitted.

“How many?”

He shrugged. “I remember... two.”

“But you're not sure,” she said, not a question, more an incredulous, snarky observation she couldn't tamp.

“I'm not a fucking bean counter,” he snapped. “I just took them until it stopped.”

She touched his shoulder. “Until what stopped?”

“Him.”
“Him, who, Derek?”

“Mr. Clark,” he said. He swallowed. His body moved. He was in her space, and his arms wrapped around her. The fuzzy bathrobe pressed against her. She wanted to press her cheek against his solid chest and pretend. “Please, Mere, I—”


He blinked. He said nothing. They stared at each other. Close, but not touching.

He'd admitted taking pills, and not for their prescribed purpose. He'd admitted taking some. Openly. But sworn he hadn't taken others. Why would he lie about some, but not others? And he was walking. And breathing. And lucid. His heart rate was fast, not slow. He had not a single sign or symptom that he'd taken anything, plus, he'd shown pain when he'd stood up. The squeeze on his sternum from standing wouldn't even have been a blip on his radar if he'd taken the entire missing bottle of Percocet, let alone the Oxycontin that was missing as well. The crushing sense of how precarious this situation was even without her dragging him to the hospital lingered in the back of her mind. Please, she heard him saying, I don't want to spend the night in the hospital.

The pleading call 911 voice seemed quieter.

“Where are your pills?” she said. “You had twenty-two left this morning, and now they're gone, and you want me to believe you didn't take them, so, tell me where they are.”

Had he hidden them? Like an emergency stash? Or...

“I flushed them,” he said.

Silence stretched.

“What do you mean, you flushed them?” she said.

“They're all gone,” he said. His voice cracked. Like that was something that disturbed him. Deeply.

“You mean you dumped them all,” she said. She had to be sure. “All of them. In the toilet. And you flushed it.”

“Yes.”

“How long ago?”

He shook his head. “I don't know,” he said. “A little before you came home. Or...” Which would explain why he'd been sitting in shock on the freaking floor.

“Well should I believe you?” she demanded.

He laughed, but it was a bitter sound. “You shouldn't,” he said.

He moved to the bed, and he sat down, leaving her alone and adrift by the closet. A gold halo of lamplight framed his body. The dog whuffed and sat on her haunches by his feet. She stared up at him, mocha-colored eyes expectant. He made no move to pet her. The dim lighting made the dark circles underneath his eyes seem darker, somehow.


He stared at nothing. He held his hands against the edge of the mattress, fingers clenched. “Amy,”
he said. “After my dad died. She started using. Anything she could get her hands on. She overdosed. Her heart stopped right in front of me.” He shook his head. “I knew all that, and I still...” His voice trailed away.

Another big thing she hadn't known until recently, and not because she'd asked about it. She hadn't even thought to ask about it. It was a big. Freaking. Thing. And she'd been clueless. Little things he'd said about painkillers in the past made even more sense to her, now, but not a single bit of it — his history, his attitude about drugs, nothing — jibed with the current situation. How could he have done this?

“She lied to me. Over and over,” he said, oblivious to Meredith's confusion. He blinked. He sniffed. Tears streaked his face when he looked at her again. He looked at her, and he didn't flinch. “I'm so sorry, Meredith.”

She swallowed. “You really flushed your pills?”

“I don't want this anymore,” he said.

“And I shouldn't believe you.”

“No,” he said. He brushed his face with his palms. “But I want you to.”

She closed the space between them, and she sat beside him. “You're really quitting?” she said.

“I can't do this anymore.”

She pulled at his wrist again to check his pulse, and he didn't resist. She bit her lip. His heart rate seemed to agree with his words. Opiate withdrawal caused a spike. Opiate overdose caused a depression. She'd listened to his heart beat too many times, ear to his naked chest, to not know that the rapid pounding against her thumb was too fast. Not too fast for a human being, or for somebody his age and fitness level. Just too fast for Derek.

She believed him. She refused to allow herself to feel relief, though.

“Well, do you...” She swallowed. “I mean. Should I take you to a rehab program? What's the protocol for this?”

He shook his head. “No rehab.”

“Why?” she said. “They could help you.”

“No more hospitals,” he said. “I don't want to do this on display. I just want it to stop.”

Beads of sweat bloomed on his brow and collected on the nape of his neck where before there had been none. She touched his forehead with the back of her palm. He didn't seem all that hot to the touch. Low grade, at worst, but, “You look feverish,” she said.

“It's hot in here,” he said.

“It isn't hot, Derek.”

“Well, I'm fucking hot,” he snapped.

His breaths shortened, and his lips parted. He fumbled with the bathrobe. She helped him pull it off his shoulders. He didn't look very good. He'd been shivering moments before, and now sweat slicked his skin. Withdrawal took the human body's temperature regulation controls and flipped
them like pancakes until they didn't know which way was up, which caused alternating hot and cold flashes. Goosebumps, profuse sweating, both things to look for. If he hadn't taken anything since before lunch, that meant it'd been eight hours or more since his last dose. Withdrawal symptoms started to show around then. With a gut-twisting coil of worry, she realized she was watching the beginning.

If he wasn't already, he would be in pain soon.

“Will you be okay for a half hour if I leave?” she said.

“Why?”

“Because I'm going to fill your prescription again.”

He stared at his hands in his lap. He wrung his fingers together with a clump of terrycloth from the bathrobe, as if he couldn't quite force himself to sit still all the way. “I don't have any refills left,” he said. “Those were my last...”

She wondered how, if he hadn't come to this drugs-are-bad epiphany now, he would have gotten more. Her stomach sank into the floor when she thought about it. His Oxycontin. The Oxycontin she'd pushed him to get. Oxycontin was heavier stuff, but time release. Addicts liked to crush the pills to get the full hit at once. She didn't want to think about a Derek so desperate for a high he stooped to crushing pills. She swallowed. She'd almost pushed him up a rung on the abuse ladder. Percocet had been his gateway... Then Oxycontin. Then... Her brain had boarded the 'Derek on heroin' bus before she snapped herself out of it.

“I'll write a new prescription for you,” she said.

He looked at her. “Meredith, you could lose your DEA license doing that.”

Writing a prescription for a controlled substance when one had no established doctor patient relationship was like inviting the Drug Enforcement Administration and the State Pharmacy Board for tea. On the other hand, the script would just be for one time. One sheet of paper. One bottle of Percocet. No refills. Just this once. Law enforcement wasn't likely to care much about a 'just this once' sort of infraction. She hoped.

“Well, would you rather I explain this situation to Dr. Altman?” she said. “You can't quit cold turkey, Derek. Just look at you. You seriously need the script, so it follows the spirit of the law, if not the letter. I'd feel comfortable defending myself for writing it. I'll rob a bank for you and hope for the best. End of discussion.”

“Please, don't,” he said in a soft voice.

Please. The word sent hot fury pouring down her spine. He did that on purpose, damn it, even after she'd asked him not to. “Are you insane?” she snapped. She grabbed his hands before he could rip a hole in the terrycloth with his worrisome fidgeting. She squeezed his fingers. “You're already starting to show some withdrawal symptoms. It's only going to get worse.”

“It won't kill me,” he said.

“No, but you'll wish you were dead,” she said. “Maybe, I don't know about step A, step B, step C for drug addicts who don't anymore or whatever, but I know that opiate withdrawal is horrible. Any doctor does.” So did he, when he was thinking rationally. She ground her teeth.

He shook his head. “I don't want to taper.”
“Screw what you want, Derek,” she said. “Your crap choices got you into this.”

Silence filled the space between them for a long time, and he wouldn't look at her, as if he couldn't justify arguing with what she said. His body rocked. Forward and back at the waist. Small motions at first, but he soon became a seesaw. He hugged his stomach like it would tumble out of him if he didn't. And then he broke. Tears cut slivers down his face. “I just want it to stop,” he said. “I don’t want any more. I don't want it in me another second. Please. Please, help me.”

She blinked, dumbfounded. The words she wanted. They sounded so freaking wrong. The room felt like it was sinking into a black hole, and she'd been caught in the pull toward oblivion. “Okay,” she said. “Okay, I...”

“Please, help me,” he said. “Please. P-please. I can't do this anymore.”

“Okay. Okay, I won't write a script,” she said. She wrapped her arms around him for the first time. He was shaking. His whole body. He didn't return the hug, like he didn't know what to do with his corporeality or something. He huddled in her grasp. What were they going to do? He couldn't just stop, and if he refused to taper... What was left? “I'm sorry,” she continued, “But, Derek, rehab is —”

“Please, no.”

“If you're quitting cold turkey, rehab is really the smartest—”

“No,” he said. “Please, I can't. I don't want to go back to the hospital.”

“It doesn't have to be Seattle Grace,” she said. “There are plenty of facilities in—”

“No,” he said. His voice cracked. “No, I won't go.”

His vehemence rattled her. He pulled out of her grasp, and he stood, flipping up the bathrobe as he did so, and his pale, shivery shoulders disappeared under navy terrycloth. The dog stood with him. He looked bad. Sweat glistened across his skin. His hair had dampened with it. She watched as he fumbled to the closet. He reached over his head. He searched the top shelf, his hands wandering along the edge. The dog watched this weird behavior for about two seconds before she started barking, loud and panicked, and in the enclosed space, every throaty vocalization bounced off the walls in an endless, nerve-wracking spiral. The horrible noise made Meredith flinch.

What the hell was Derek doing? He pulled down a black Nike duffel bag. The duffel bag he used as his overnight suitcase when he flew out for consults. A neon-orange luggage tag gripped the arm strap, one that she could spot yards away. She remembered, in a strange flash of memory, grinning as she'd darted through hovering crowds for it at the baggage claim when she'd picked him up from Sea-Tac half a year earlier. He'd been gone for three nights to attend a conference in Las Vegas. He'd wanted to take a cab home from the airport, but fate had left his plane touching down just as her shift had ended, and she'd picked him up on the way home. She felt the nylon arm strap of the bag in her palm, a ghost of the past, and she flexed her fingers as she stared at him. She gaped.

What did he think he was going to do? Go have his withdrawal in a freaking hotel? Or in his trailer or something?

“Derek, you're not thinking straight.”

“Rehab doesn't do anything,” he said, barely audible over Samantha. “I won't go.”
He yanked shirts off hangars with no apparent rhyme or reason. Some dress shirts. A few t-shirts. Some not even his, but hers. He pulled down pants. Some khakis. Sweat pants. A holey set of jeans she hadn't seen him don since he'd moved in. Incredulity turned to panic as she watched him prepare incoherently for a trip he couldn't possibly take. She swallowed, and she stood, and she rushed for the bag to take it away, but he blocked the door to the closet.

“I'm not going to rehab,” he said, and when she touched him, he yanked away as though she'd burned him.

She kept her distance. Tension locked her frame. He couldn't do this. She wouldn't let him. “Derek, they do help,” she said. “They offer support, and counseling, and medical care, and—”

Everything he freaking needed.

But he wasn't listening. He dropped the duffel bag by his feet. “No,” he said. “No.” His eyes bugged out, and he slid down the doorframe to his ass as he scrabbled for the bathrobe collar. Except there was no collar, and he ended up blindly grappling with the invisible noose around his neck. His lips formed a third no, but he didn't speak the word. The tendons in his neck bulged as he tried to breathe. He floundered.

The dog barked in his face, and he flinched away, too far gone to understand it was just the confused, panicking dog. Samantha shifted back and forth on her big, russet-colored feet. Her nails scrabbled on the floor. She licked him and whined before resuming her litany, but that just made everything worse.


When Samantha didn't immediately listen, Meredith added a harsh shh, which, finally, made the horrible, earth-shattering barking cease. The dog moved into the closet and sat on her hindquarters, her dark eyes full of worry. Garments on the lower rack fell to the floor with soft thuds.

Meredith couldn't bring herself to be angry. The dog didn't know what was going on. She didn't speak English. She just saw Derek doing something terrifying, and she was reacting to the emotional vibes in the air.


With the dog subdued, she shifted to Derek. “Derek, it's me,” Meredith said, careful to keep her distance. He was beyond reason, and she didn't want to scare him more. “It's okay. You're okay. Do you hear me? Listen to me. Everything is okay. Derek?”

“Meredith,” he croaked. He met her eyes, terror carving his gaze, but he recognized her. That was enough. She wrapped herself around him. Tremors coursed through his body, and his heart pounded. He didn't speak as she enveloped him.

“It's okay,” she said, keeping her voice soft and low.

He jerked in her arms. “I can't.”

He pressed his nose into her skin. “I won't go,” he whispered against her neck.

She felt sick. Her stomach clenched. “I know,” she said. She swallowed, trying to hold down bile. This was... She didn't know what the hell else to say. What was she supposed to do? “I know.” She pulled her fingers through his damp hair. “You don't have to go. It's okay.”

He made a deep sound, low in his throat. Not a grunt or a groan. A low, agonized sound of grief. His fingers clenched around her shirt. He trembled, but she thought that might be withdrawal. Not nerves or cold. He pressed his face against her, and she held on tight.

And that, she realized, was all she could do. He was a human being. Not only that, but a very prideful human being. And a freaking stubborn one. She couldn't force him to go if he didn't want to, and he clearly didn't. And what if he wouldn't seek help, if she pushed?

He wanted help. He wanted it. He'd begged her. She'd never thought she would see that. Not ever. She didn't want to push back so hard that he reneged.

And hadn't Dr. Wyatt insisted Meredith help him make choices about his life, wherever feasible? She'd nearly ruined that. She blinked. The room blurred. She swallowed grief. She knew she hadn't been wrong. Suggesting rehab to a drug addict was not wrong. Just... Potentially catastrophic anyway, in this case. And that felt just as horrible.

Guilt coiled into nausea.

A warm, black body pressed against her side. She leaned her head against the dog. Derek rested in her arms, silent. The three of them sat in a crumpled, quiet heap, half in the closet, half out. She waited for the room to settle, though nothing seemed to want to stop her flip-flopping stomach. She listened to the chorus of crickets filtering in from outside the house.

“Can you...” she said. Her voice cracked and broke. She cleared her throat and wiped her nose. “What do you want to do, Derek? Should I call the Chief? I can tell him we both need more time off.”

He didn't answer right away. He rested against her at a slant, his shoulder pressed against her chest. She couldn't see his eyes. His face was pointed at the floor by their bed. She brushed her fingers through his hair. She wasn't sure it would help him, but it felt good to her, soothing to her. She let her eyes fall shut. Exhaustion burned, even then, and the room swirled.

“You can't take more time off work,” he said.

“I can, Derek,” she said. “If we're doing this your way, there's no way in hell I'm leaving you alone.”

“No.”

“You made your choices,” she said, fighting to keep her voice even and cool despite her rapid descent back into fury. He was so freaking stubborn it made her teeth hurt at times. Actually literally hurt. She clenched her jaws. “I'm making mine. I'm not budging.”

“What if we get fired?” he said.

She had her Grey name. She had a fake-daddy who was extremely susceptible to all things Ellis. And she worked at a hospital that now had to beg interns to apply and for world-class attendings to stay. People weren't knocking at the door to replace her. Or him. Seattle Grace's reputation was in free fall. They'd found a precarious ledge, but then Gary Clark had shot it out from under them.
“We won't get fired,” she insisted. “You're a rock star on a ship that's mostly still sinking, and I'm —”

“I'm not worth losing a career over,” he said. He shifted, his movements stiff and stilted. Out of her arms. He looked at her. She frowned at how pale his face had gotten. “Please,” he said, his voice soft and low. He stared at her with a haggard expression, his blue eyes unblinking. “If you lose your job over this, I will never forgive myself.”

“You're worth it to me,” she said. “And I won't lose my career. Or my job. I swear.”

“Meredith, you can't.”

“I can, and I will,” she said. She kept her voice firm. She held up her right hand, palm facing him. “You have three options.” She raised her index finger. “A, taper off.” Middle finger. “B, go to rehab.” Ring finger. “Or, C, let me stay home with you to make sure you don't drop dead.” He didn’t look pleased. She scooted toward him, and she reached for him. “Stop looking for option D. There is no freaking D.”

He looked at the floor. “Mark.”

“Mark, what?”

“He could stay with me,” he said. “Or... Please.”

She sighed. “Okay,” she said. At least he seemed to acknowledge that he needed supervision. Except that didn't feel like any sort of victory. She still felt sick. “Okay, I'll talk to Mark. Maybe, we can arrange shifts or something, but I'm not making promises.”

She staggered to her feet. Samantha stood as well. Derek didn't move. He looked thrashed. Pale. Sweaty. Sick. She went into the bathroom and poured him a glass of water. She pulled the ibuprofen bottle from the medicine cabinet. He would be in pain. If not now, soon. Muscle aches. Joint aches. Headaches. All common side effects of withdrawal.

She walked back into the bedroom. The floor creaked as she moved. He reached for the glass and the pills with a shaky hand. When he finished, she helped him stand. Pain flashed in his eyes as he stressed his torso with the movement. He had no Percocet in his system anymore to dampen that. It was unavoidable.

She swallowed. He didn't look good, but he didn't look horrible, yet. There was little sense in waiting around for the inevitable. She felt tired. And sick. And she didn't want to think about this anymore right now. Not before it was needed.

“Let's watch a movie,” she said.

He gave her a wary gaze, as if, wherever he'd expected the conversation to go from there, it hadn't been to impromptu movie night. “What movie?”

“I think we need a comedy,” she said. “A raunchy one.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Specifically raunchy?”

“Yes, specifically,” she said with a nod. “Like Wedding Crashers.”

“I haven't seen that one yet,” Derek said.
“I saw it in Alex's Netflix stash,” Meredith said. She fluffed the pillows on his side of the bed, and she helped him settle. He moved with glacial, purposeful movements that spoke of weary discomfort. She frowned as he shivered and pulled his bathrobe closer, hugging himself. The movement seemed incongruous with the sweat on his brow. She pulled the covers over his legs, and then she patted the bed next to him.

“Up, Sam,” Meredith said.

Samantha, excited by the invitation, leaped up and settled along Derek's side with a practiced circle and flop maneuver, a pleased look on her face. Meredith silently thanked whoever had owned Samantha before and trained her so well. The dog already understood up, down, sit, stay, come, go, and, apparently, shh by rote. Both Meredith and Derek had been careful to make sure their bed was by invitation only. The dog seemed to think it was the greatest treat in the world when she was allowed on top. All-in-all, the plan worked well, and Samantha's integration into their household had been flawless.

“I'll go get your laptop,” Meredith said. “We can watch the movie up here in bed.”

Derek stared at her, eyes dark and unfathomable. She bit her lip when he didn't speak. He swallowed, and then he looked at his lap. She gritted her teeth as she prepared for another apology. Another heart-wrenching statement of his worthlessness. Something she'd gotten tired of hearing long ago. Instead, he surprised her.

“Thank you,” he said in a rough, quiet voice.

A thousand sentences careened through her head, then. I hate you, among them. Another, how can I ever trust you again? He'd lied by omission again. And not just about something little, but about something life-altering. He was definitely on the third strike with that. Addison. Rose. And, now, this. Also, why did you do this? She still didn't understand that one. Why. It'd been nearly three months since he'd been shot and nearly died. They were supposed to be worried about babies right now. Babies and houses and all the things that made the unextraordinary Meredith Grey scream in terror. And, despite it all, no matter how irrational, she couldn't help but think for a moment that this was her fault. At least some of it. She'd tried to help him. She'd tried to give him the support he needed to get through this. She'd clearly failed.

The crickets sang outside.

She sighed. Her lower lip quivered, and she brushed her hands across her face as new tears streaked down her cheeks. Hot anger snarled in the back of her throat in a lump that was hard to swallow around. She clenched her fists.

He didn't look at her. His shaky hands ran along the rib of the blanket. She watched his feet move underneath the comforter. Not much. Just enough to tell her he couldn't sit still. Not quite.

“I'll be back in a minute,” she said, and she meant it. She went to find Derek's laptop and the movie, and to give herself a few minutes, just five, to cry without him making mopey, guilty, sick eyes at her.

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**Day One**

The harsh sunlight streaming through the window made her squint. Her head hurt, and she felt...
pasty and headache-y and ill from lack of sleep. Getting through the night had been a lesson in misery. At least they'd managed to avoid collisions thus far with Alex and Lexie. That would have been fantastic.

Derek had either paced or tossed back and forth in the bed because he couldn't hold still. All. Freaking. Night. He was irritable and prone to panic attacks at the slightest provocation, and he cried. Worse, whenever he was upset, the freaking dog got upset. Samantha liked to follow Derek. Derek paced. Meredith had listened to his sniffling, the dog whining, claws tapping on the floor, and floorboards creaking for an hour before she'd snapped like a twig.

They'd inflated an air mattress for him and put it down in his office so she wouldn't be disturbed by his restless, upset energy, but it hadn't helped. When she hadn't been able to see him with her own eyes, she'd just worried more, and hadn't slept anyway. They'd moved him back into their bed, and she'd suffered with him. It'd been awful. All freaking night.

"Somebody'd better be dead," Cristina growled into the receiver when Meredith called at 3:30 AM.

"I need you to swap your off day with me this week," Meredith said without preamble. A patch of moonlight cut through the windows, illuminating the kitchen with a soft, silver glow. The refrigerator hummed.

"You're waking me up on my off day to tell me to go into work? Couldn't you have at least waited until 5:30 to call like a normal squawking alarm clock?"

"Cristina, please. I'm begging. Okay? It's an emergency."

"Are you dying?" Cristina grumbled.

"No."

Silence stretched for several seconds, and then Cristina sighed. "Whatever. Fine," she said. She hung up to get her remaining two hours of sleep. The dial tone echoed in the darkness. Meredith put her head on the table and sighed. She had many more calls to make.

Meredith sighed as she rubbed her eyes. Her eyelids dipped as she hovered by the microwave. The microwave hummed. She'd dumped a can of chicken noodle soup into some Tupperware and added water. Chicken noodle would be easy on the stomach. She hoped. His stomach, anyway. Her stomach churned endlessly. The mere thought of eating something, no matter how easy or soothing, made her insides curdle, and so she opted not to think about food at all, anymore. She rested her eyes and listened to the microwave whir. Just for a minute.

"Holy..." Lexie muttered as she stopped short in the doorway.

Meredith snapped awake from a doze and turned to face her half-sister. Lexie's eyes widened. Meredith had dressed in her red bathrobe, which she knew made her look pale in the mornings. Her hair was scraggly and tangled. She wore no makeup. No concealer. She'd drunk no coffee. And she felt like she was going to barf all over herself. The results probably made Frankenstein look like Miss America in comparison. She didn't need a mirror to confirm. She only had to look at Lexie's horrified face.

"Are you staying home today?" Lexie said.

"Yeah," said Meredith. "I swapped shifts with Cristina."

"Is Derek okay?"
Meredith's fingers clenched. She thought they'd avoided collisions. “Why do you ask?”

Lexie frowned. “Well, his car is still here. Does he have the plague, too?” She moved to the refrigerator and pulled open the door to hunt for breakfast.

Meredith's stomach flip-flopped. “Don't you people ever help clean?” she snapped.

Lexie frowned. “What?”

Meredith stomped to the fridge. “Something reeks,” she said.

“I don't smell anything.”

Meredith pushed Lexie aside and stared at the fridge's innards. Her nose scrunched, and her stomach roiled. She looked at all the shelves. She grabbed a greasy takeout container and some mushy grapes that looked like potential culprits. She threw them in the trash without sniffing. If she sniffed, she might die. Her stomach squeezed.

Lexie stared.

“What?” Meredith grumbled.

“Nothing,” Lexie said.

The microwave beeped. Meredith rolled her eyes, liberated Derek's soup, and left her half-sister in the kitchen. “Throw out the milk, too,” Meredith said over her shoulder as she left. “And take out the trash when you leave!”

She shambled up the steps sort of like a zombie. Their door was open a crack so the dog could get out if she wanted. Meredith bumped it with her elbow and walked inside. The soup bowl steamed, and wet heat wafted toward her face. Dim sunlight streamed in through the window. Stillness gave the room a muted, soft feel.

Derek was nothing but a dark head of hair and a lump under the blankets. The dog lay on the floor by his side of the bed, her head cradled against her russet-colored paws. Derek's feet, for once since this had started, weren't churning underneath the covers. Meredith wondered if he'd managed to get some sleep. She hoped he had, but as she approached his nightstand to put the soup down, the blankets moved. He turned his head. He didn't speak.

“Hey,” she said, a whisper. His hair stuck up in random chunks. The skin below his nose and at the corners of his eyes glistened with runoff, and sweat slicked his brow and temples. He looked ghastly. She felt his forehead. Still a very low grade fever. Nothing to worry overmuch about. “I brought some soup,” she said. “Would you, please, try to eat it?”

“No,” he said.

She frowned. “Okay,” she said. She didn't want to argue with him. Belaboring such a small issue when there were larger battles to fight was pointless, and her head ached with exhaustion already. “Well, I'm leaving it here on your nightstand if you change your mind.”

The covers rustled, and he buried himself again without replying as she pushed aside his clock and put down the bowl. She bit her lip. This was the first time she'd seen him able to sit still since last night. Able to rest. Even if he wasn't sleeping, the downtime had to help. Or, maybe, he'd just gotten to the point where he felt so sick it didn't matter that anxiety compelled him to burn off energy, because he couldn't bring his body to move.
The thought made her throat constrict. But she wasn't sure what to do for him. Or if anything could be done at all. Keep him hydrated. The rest had to run its course. That's what she'd read in her thirty-minute crash refresher from old medical texts and Google, and she was tired enough and grouchy enough and nauseous enough that it all seemed hopeless, anyway. She bent to pet the dog, and the room went topsy turvy. Bad idea. She stumbled back to her side of the bed and dumped her bathrobe on the big chair by the window. She crawled under the covers, and she closed her eyes. Derek said nothing, and he didn't move. She didn't really care anymore.

“Many more people go through withdrawal at home rather than at rehab centers,” the adviser explained with a deep, comforting voice. He'd probably been hired for his voice alone, and Meredith wondered, briefly, if he knew what he was talking about. He spoke a bit like he belonged dubbing movie previews.

“Are you sure?” Meredith said. She pushed back the dinette set chair. The feet squawked along the floor. As soon as she had her balance, she paced in the dark. Just like Derek. “I mean, how qualified are you?” She needed somebody who knew about this crap to tell her this wasn't the stupidest thing she'd ever done, not taking Derek to rehab, a feeling that had propagated and spawned little clone feelings the more advanced his symptoms and misery became.

“It's doable for most people, though, of course, not in all cases,” the man said. “I've been an addiction counselor for ten years, but if you'd like to speak to somebody else, I'd be happy to transfer your call.”

“Really?” Meredith said. She sniffed. She heard Derek pacing upstairs again through the ceiling, and she closed her eyes. Birds had begun to chirp outside in the dark, a precursor to dawn. Her eyes burned with exhaustion. She felt like she'd found Derek in the bathroom years ago. Not last night. Eternity stretched before her as the floor overhead creaked. “What's a professional addiction counselor doing on the phone at 4:45 AM? No offense, but isn't that more of a nine to five job?”

“Really doable, and really a counselor,” said the man. Meredith could hear his smile through the phone line. “I'm on the phone at 4:45 AM because tonight is my night to be on call. I've volunteered with the hotline service since I moved to Seattle four years ago. Helping people get sober is important to me.”

“Oh,” said Meredith. “Well, I... Thank you.”

“You're very welcome.”

“So... It's okay? That he's doing this at home? I'm so worried.”

“Oxycodone withdrawal is rarely life-threatening. As long as he doesn't need constant supervision to overcome temptations, it's okay, if that's what he prefers. Think of rehab like a willpower enhancement, in that respect.”

“He flushed his pills on his own.”

“That's a good start then,” the counselor said.

“Okay,” she said.

“What's important to remember, though, is that drug addiction is typically a symptom masking another problem. You need to help him figure out why he started abusing in the first place, and he needs to address it, or it'll just happen again. And, if it does happen again, his risks for overdose
increase because his drug tolerance will be low. Most overdoses happen after a period of abstinence.”

“So, he needs counseling,” Meredith said.

“It's a very good idea, yes.”

She rolled onto her stomach, trying to ignore the squeeze of stress. She didn't want to think about how she was going to get Derek to stop "considering" seeing Dr. Wyatt, and actually see Dr. Wyatt, or somebody else. She shook her head. She would worry about that if they got through this freaking part of the whole ordeal. She let her thoughts drift. Derek still wasn't moving. Or sobbing. Or making any kind of noise. She took that as a blessing, and she slept.

The sound of the toilet flushing woke her up. She opened her eyes to slits. She had no idea what time it was, but she felt better. A little. The sun had brightened, and the heat of its light beat on her face. She snuggled under the dark sheets. The mattress shifted. She listened to Derek sniffle and re-settle. She closed her eyes, and she slept.

The toilet flushed again. She swallowed against the pasty feeling in her mouth. She rubbed her eyes. She rolled to look at the clock. She'd been in bed five hours. Her head didn't feel so cloudy anymore, and it didn't hurt, and her eyes didn't burn when she blinked. The nausea that had been rolling in her stomach seemed to have found her ceasefire request, too, which was nice.

She listened to him re-settle in the bed. “Are you okay?” she said. Her voice sounded muzzy. She licked her lips. He didn't respond, and she rolled toward him. She stroked the blankets over his body, but he tensed. She pulled her hand away, and she sighed. “I'm here,” she said, and it was the first time that morning where she felt like she wasn't lying. She let her eyes drift closed once more when he didn't speak, and she slept.

This time, a loud, miserable cough woke her. Not a cough. A heave. “Derek?” she mumbled. She rubbed her eyes. The sun felt hot, and she wasn't tired at all anymore. He wasn't in the bed. Another cough that was a heave. She glanced at the bathroom door. It was closed. The toilet flushed. She waited for him to come back to bed, except he didn't. He didn't make any noise. The bathroom door never opened. Long minutes passed.

Samantha's raspy panting drew Meredith's gaze to her side of the bed. The dog stared at her. “He locked you out of the bathroom, huh,” Meredith said. The dog looked chagrined. Meredith stroked Samantha's head, and Meredith groaned as she stood.

She walked to the master bathroom. She knocked on the door. “Derek?” she said, careful to keep her voice soft. Noninvasive. When he didn't answer, worry twinged in her gut. She glanced at Samantha. “You'd be more upset if he was really sick,” Meredith said. “Right?”

Samantha licked Meredith's hand.

“That's not very helpful,” Meredith said. “You're an unhelpful dog.”

Samantha's stumpy tail wagged.

Meredith sighed. She tested the doorknob. It turned. She hadn't expected that. He'd been locking doors left and right since he'd been shot. The fact that he hadn't stopped to lock this one worried her. He'd been in a serious rush. She braced herself for anything. This was the sickness part of in sickness and in health. Right? Right, she told herself. The dog waited at the door.

The faint odor of vomit hovering in the air made her nose crinkle as she pushed open the door. He'd
curled up in a fetal position on the floor by the toilet, half on, half off the bathmat, a position that
couldn't have been comfortable. He'd wrapped his arms around his stomach. His choppy breaths
cut the air, like he was crying. Or trying not to cry. Or... something. She didn't dare turn the light
on in case it set him off.

She sank to her knees by his shaking body. A whiff of his body odor made her stomach turn. He'd
been sweating buckets since last night. She held her hand to her mouth and swallowed once, twice,
trying to keep the nausea at bay. He was sick, but not so sick that he wouldn't see or notice her
suffering. Embarrassing him by gagging wouldn't help the situation. If the smell bothered her, it
definitely bothered him. The fact that he hadn't taken care of it lent to her earlier theory that he'd
been feeling too sick to move, and guilt collected over the fact that she'd been too tired to worry
about it. She'd been a selfish idiot. She swallowed again. Her stomach settled from flip-flops to
quivering through sheer power of will, enough that she could function, anyway. Barely.

“Derek,” she said softly.

“Go away,” he croaked. His fingers caught her t-shirt, and he pushed at her, but the motion was so
frail she didn't even sway. She grabbed his wrist before he could pull it back, and she slipped her
thumb against his vein. His heart pounded, and his arm trembled, though whether that was
withdrawal, fatigue, or chill, she had no idea. She leaned, intending to feel his forehead to make
sure he didn't have a serious fever.

“Don't touch me,” he said with a snarl.

She pulled away as her throat constricted. She held up her hands in surrender. “Okay,” she said.
“Okay, I'm not touching you.” He pressed his face into the cold tile floor as though it were
soothing. There was something so wrong about a human being lying on the floor like that. “Do
you... want a pillow, or...?”

A flash flood of sweat spilled from his pores. His face reddened. A noise caught in his throat, a
low-pitched, miserable moan. His body hitched and undulated. He heaved. A wet sound gurgled in
his throat, but nothing came up. She forced herself to hang back as he dragged himself to the toilet
bowl. She wanted to help. She wanted to do... something. But what was there? Nothing. He retched
again. Spittle collected on his lip and dangled in a stretching, glistening line. He panted, looking
like he'd survived three miles while being dragged by a train, but only barely, when he'd finished.
Fluid crackled in his nose as he sniffed. He wiped the back of his palm against his lips, and the spit
train fell away. His hands shook.

“Leave me alone,” he said in a dark, tired voice.

“I got worried when you didn't—”

“I can't even fucking get sick by myself?”

“I'll give you privacy, Derek, but I'm not going to let you die in the other room because you might
be embarrassed,” she said.

“I'm not dying,” he grumbled. He didn't sound like he believed himself.

She sighed. She would not let herself cry. Not in front of him. Not like this. “Well, I don't know
that until I check on you, do I?”

He glared at her. His eyes glittered in the dim light, and his fury seemed to heat the air like lava.
He moved, then. He could barely stand without swaying, but the look he gave her kept her from
trying to help despite the lump in her throat. She swallowed as she watched him. He shambled out of the room, stopping once to catch his precarious balance on the door frame. The dog walked with him, her footsteps slow and halting to match his pace. Moments later, Meredith heard the distinct sound of him retching in the bathroom across the hall. Then he fell silent. He didn't return. Neither did the dog.

She closed her eyes, and she forced herself to wait. Just a few minutes. Though the idea of him lying on the floor in the bathroom, wishing he were dead, while she sat there and twiddled her thumbs made her feel like a horrible person. No matter what he said or snapped at her, no matter how angry she was with him, or how much she felt like crying or barfing, she didn't want him to suffer. Not like that. She clenched her fists.

“So, you want me there on Wednesday at five-thirty?” Mark said.

“At dinner, yeah,” Meredith replied, pinching the bridge of her nose. She tapped her pen against the notepad in front of her. She’d written things out after she’d given up sleeping, after she’d lost all hope of ever sleeping again. The sheet looked like a rocket science diagram. Her helter skelter shifts, courtesy of her resident status, didn’t help things much. No clockwork, there. They were just... whenever. “My shift starts at 6:00 PM that day.”

“Oh, and then you’ll be back... Thursday?”

“Friday morning.”

Silence. “So, what’s that look like overall?” he said.

“I have him today and tomorrow morning,” she said. “You get him Wednesday evening, Thursday, and Friday morning. I get him until at least Friday night. I haven’t worked out the rest of Friday, Saturday, or Sunday yet. I’m not sure what shifts I’m covering, or whether it will be necessary, anyway.”

Derek would have somebody with him at all times for, at the very least, four days. She hoped that would be, for the most part, enough. He hadn’t been on painkillers very long, in the grand scheme of things. His body couldn’t have built up a rock solid tolerance. His brain chemistry couldn’t be that damaged. Right? She’d seen some people go through withdrawal in twenty-four hours or less and be all smiles on the flip side. Others took more than a week. Two weeks. She’d seen a man who’d abused Oxycontin for years fall into a deep depression that had lasted for months while his brain’s dopamine receptors healed. She glanced at the ceiling. The floor didn’t creak. Derek had stopped pacing for at least a little while. He wouldn’t be that man. She refused to consider it, but...

“All right,” Mark said, pulling her out of worry freefall, “I’ll have all my elective surgeries rescheduled. I have one there might be some problems moving, but I can get Dr. Silver to cover, I think, if I bribe him.”

The page in front of her with the arrows and diagrams and schedules blurred, until all she saw was vast, endless white. She sniffed as she wiped her face. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, Grey.”

At least, when Meredith had called him at 4:00 AM, he’d been a little less grouchy about it than Cristina had been. Then again, he’d had the Derek-on-drugs context that Cristina had lacked. And he’d been waiting for an update, anyway. “Thank you,” she said. “For helping.”

“No sweat. And, Grey?”
“Yeah?”

“He’ll be okay.”

Meredith sighed. Derek hadn't come back from the other bathroom. She glanced at the clock. She'd given him ten minutes. She stood, and she walked to the bathroom across the hall. “Look, Derek, I'm sorry, but could you at least call out every once in a while, so I know you're not—” Her voice cracked and halted when she stared at the open door and the empty, dark room. He wasn't there. Her stomach twisted. “Derek?” she called, a bit louder. She wheeled on her heels.

Where? He couldn't have gone far.

The dog barked once, and Meredith raced down the steps. She skidded to a stop at the foot of the stairs. Derek looked at her as he wobbled into the foyer. Dark splotches stained his maroon shirt at the armpits and along his neckline. Perspiration glistened on his skin. His nose ran. And he cried. The low-pitched, hitching sounds of his weeping made her heart clench. His face and ears and neck bloomed bright red when he saw her staring like some sort of gaping freak. He wiped his face, and he looked away. He kept moving down the hall, and he disappeared into the kitchen without speaking to her. The dog ambled after him.

She clutched the banister and debated whether to follow him. He didn't want help. He was embarrassed and sick and upset. But... He popped back into the room at the foyer where he’d entered, and he went down the hall again. Laps. He was walking, or stumbling, or... laps. Through the kitchen, the dining room, the living room, the foyer, and the hall. His agitation squeezed her heart. She didn't know what to do. What was she supposed to do? She sat on the couch in the living room.

“I'm right here,” she said as he wandered past, but he didn't look at her or speak. She flipped on the television and tried to watch the news, tried to engross her brain with other things, which was difficult, because every few minutes, he'd hobble past her and block the picture with his nightmare countenance of sweat, tears, and misery.

On his ninth or tenth lap — she'd lost count — he lurched to stop in the archway between the dining room and the living room, and he clutched the open dog gate. The plastic gate creaked and moaned, giving testament to how much weight he put on it. His willowy body swayed like a sapling in the wind. Her heart caught in her throat, and she launched herself off the couch.

He tensed as she wrapped his thin body in a bear hug. “Don't touch me,” he hissed as she helped him fall without hurting himself. A controlled descent. That was the best she could do when she was so much smaller than he was. He panted. “Don't—”

“I'm not touching,” she said. “You're falling.” She pulled away as soon as soon as he reached equilibrium with the floor. He rested with his back against the dog gate. He closed his eyes. She swallowed against the lump in her throat. “See?” She wanted to touch him. Badly. “Let me get you some water,” she said, a whisper. Keep him hydrated. She could at least do that.

She pushed herself to her feet and went into the kitchen. She debated orange juice for a moment, but she decided the citrus might do more harm than good if his stomach was upset. They didn't have anything milder like apple juice. Water would have to suffice. She pushed a clean glass under the faucet, but then thought better of it and dumped it out. She grabbed mini-ice cubes from the tray in the freezer, and she filled the glass with those. She brought him the glass and next to him on the floor. She stared at the legs of the dining room table, if only to help him feel less scrutinized. Samantha heaved a tired sigh and flopped down in her crate in the far corner. She'd been up all night, too.
The glass clinked. He crunched on an ice cube. He swallowed.

“I'm sorry,” he said in a low, tired voice.

Meredith closed her eyes.

“My skin doesn't...” He swallowed. “Fit.”

“Is that why you don't want me to touch you?”

He shivered, or trembled, or... “Stop talking to me,” he said, but at the same time, he rolled into her. He clutched her shoulder. Forcing herself to not respond tortured her limbs. She sat, rigid, and let him take the comfort he wanted without offering any he wouldn't want.

“We don't have to talk,” she said. She pointed at the glass. “You do have to drink, though.”

He shook his head as though he were startled. “I didn't mean—”

“I know,” she said, though she didn't know. “Drink.”

They sat in silence while he worked on the ice cubes, one by one. He finished about half the glass before he put it down and made a noise. A sick, disgusted grunt. He staggered to his feet. His breaths tightened like screws in his chest. He tripped and shambled away. A door opened. She heard him flip up the toilet seat. He vomited. Again. Again. So much for ice cubes being easy to deal with. The toilet flushed. Then the house went silent, and he didn't come back.

Again.

She rolled her eyes and followed him. He was such a stubborn, annoying, frustrating bastard when he wanted to be. “Derek?” she said. She rapped her knuckles on the door of the downstairs bathroom. “Derek, come on. You can't keep—”

The door opened and swung inward. She peered into the dark, which shimmered haunting blue under the security of the night light. For a moment, she blinked, and all she could think about was that horrible morning when she and Mark had discovered something was wrong, really wrong, with Derek. He'd been so terrified he'd wet his pants, and then he'd fled into this room, here. He'd sat in the same spot he sat in, now. He'd trembled much like he did, now. He hadn't been sweaty or sick, then, though. Just scared.

_I didn't know Mark was visiting_, he'd said, his voice wispy and hoarse.

He sat in the corner, semi-wedged between the wall and the toilet bowl. He had his arms wrapped around his stomach, and he looked into the dark water with a disinterested, dull gaze, like he'd seen it far too many times that day for it to be interesting.

“Can you tell me how you're feeling?” she said. She kept her voice soft. It seemed like an obvious question, she knew. Horrible was the obvious answer. But she didn't want him so sick he needed intravenous fluids before she broke down and took him to the hospital. If he couldn't even keep water down...

He stared, listless.

She slid to the floor beside him. “Please, can you talk to me?” she prodded. She didn't touch him.

He swallowed. “Stupid,” he said. He reached and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.
“What's stupid?”

“I feel stupid.”

“Why stupid?”

Fury flared in his gaze. He looked like he wanted to snap at her. He closed his eyes instead, and he breathed, long and slow. “This is my fault.”

She nodded. “Some of it is, yeah.” And some of it... She clenched her fingers as hate churned in her stomach like hot tar, slow and sickening. This was supposed to be her happily ever after, and it wasn't happy. It wasn't anything but awful.

“All of it,” he said.

“No, just this is,” she said. She gestured at him. “The part where you're sick and sweaty and ick? That's your fault. The part where Gary Clark shot you? That's not your fault. That's his fucking fault, Derek, and I wish you would just stop.”

He blinked. Fresh tears slipped down his face. “I'm so sorry I did this,” he said. “I'm sorry I lied.”

She closed her eyes, and she let herself count to ten. She clenched her teeth to vent frustration. He didn't move. “I'm going to run a warm bath for you,” she said. “Okay?” At the very least, a bath might help him with the ill-fitting skin thing. The not wanting to be touched. Nothing soothed like relaxing, warm water. And if the bath didn't soothe him, at least it would wash him off, and he wouldn't reek like a dirty sock drawer anymore.

He sniffled. “What if I'm sick in the tub?”

“We'll worry about it if you're sick,” she said. “There's always the waste basket in a pinch.” Of course, that would require him to be sick in front of her while she held the basket, something she doubted he was keen on, given his behavior. She blew out a breath in frustration. Her loose hair went flying. “I'll be upstairs. Come up when you're ready.” With that, she left him before he could ponder it more or protest. She left him before he could see her lose it.

Her throat clogged, and she sniffled as she walked up the stairs. Why was this so freaking hard?

She stomped into the master bathroom and stared at the tub. I may not be cut out for bright and shiny, she'd said. She remembered the stroke of his foot as he'd run his toes along her leg underneath the water. I am glad you're in my bathtub, she'd added. Her lower lip quivered. She hadn't had any idea, back then, that she would be here. Now. She'd had no idea what she'd been talking about.

Not the bathtub part. He was hers. She wanted to freaking strangle him, but he was hers, and she wanted him to stay that way. She just meant the bright and shiny part. That'd been before. Before she'd drowned. Before he'd been shot. Before she'd found out that Derek's father had been gunned down in front of him when Derek was fifteen. Or that his sister was a drug addict, too. Before Ellis had died and before fake mommy had died and before everything had gone so horribly wrong. She'd been a spoiled brat back then. A freak.

Not cut out for bright and shiny. She snorted as she lit candles while the bath ran. She'd been a freaking lighthouse of bright and shiny back then. She'd known nothing. She turned on the little FM radio resting on the shelf. Tinny classical music bounced in the small room. She dumped in bubble bath to the frothing water, next. Bubble bath was more her thing than his, but he hadn't shown up yet, and she was starting to suspect this would be her relaxing bath, not his.
She reached for her hemline and was about to yank her shirt over her head when the door pushed open. She curtailed her exclamation of surprise as he shuffled into the room, and she let her hands go. The shirt fell back against her waist. He moved to the tub, and he gripped the porcelain edge with shaky fingers to keep his balance. He swallowed. He didn't speak to her.


“I can do it,” he said, but he didn't snap. He just seemed... tired.

She sat on the toilet seat to supervise, much like she had on his last day in the hospital after his heart surgery. He'd spent nearly ninety minutes soldiering through the grooming process, and it'd been difficult for her to watch without offering to help, but he'd managed on his own, and she'd managed not to offer assistance once. He peeled off his sweaty shirt, and he let his cotton pajama pants pool at his feet. When he bent to pull off his socks, he didn't do as well, and she rushed to steady him before he collapsed and hit his head on the tub or something.

“I see how it is,” he said, his voice soft, as she held his naked waist.

“How what is?”

“You did this for the free show.”

“Derek, I didn't—” She stopped when she realized his tone hadn't been mean. Just teasing. Sort of. Except gutted by how ill he felt. His arms tightened around her. She swallowed. “Oh,” she said. Her voice warbled. She'd missed him so much. She didn't know why he was there, in that moment, but she took his olive branch and clutched it. “Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” he said.

His eyelids dipped as she helped him with his socks. He took a weary breath. He held onto her shoulders with a weak, shaky grip, and he stepped over the lip of the tub with one leg. Two. That done, he slipped into the warm bubble bath and let the water swallow him. The pink, twisty scar on his chest and the bullet wound and all of it disappeared behind a wall of bubbly white. His pale kneecaps poked above the surface. Water sloshed. He sighed, and he sank up to his neck.

“This helps,” he said. “Thank you.” And then his eyes slipped shut the rest of the way.

“Do you need anything?”

He grunted. “A hammer to bash my skull in with would be nice.”

“Your head hurts?”

He didn't move. “Everything hurts, Mere.”

“Well, I can't give you ibuprofen if you're not eating anything.”

He didn't respond. The water sloshed, and he just lay there. Eyes closed. His nose ran into the water, and sweat covered his face, but he seemed... better. She stood, and she walked to the door. She'd left her book on her nightstand. She could catch up on it while he relaxed.

“Would you stay with me?” he said.

She halted at the threshold. “I wasn't planning on going anywhere. I was just going to grab a book.”
She tossed the idea of retrieving her book, though, and she slid to the floor on the bathmat. She rested her arms against the cold lip of the tub. If he felt her watching him, he made no comment. His pale skin contrasted with his almost-black stubble, making him seem even paler than he was. The crow's feet around his eyes pinched with misery. She traced his tired lines with her gaze.

“We can be dull and lifeless together,” he'd said with a pleased smile. As if that'd been the greatest plan he'd ever proposed. He'd been so happy then, just to be there with her.

“Derek?”

He twitched. “Mmm?”

“What made you stop?” she said. “The pills, I mean.” His eyes slid open. He watched her. “I thought I would have to... I mean I didn't expect this.” This. She'd come home last night expecting a war, only to find that he'd already fought it for her. Her war had been in believing he'd already been on the battlefield.

Silence filled the space between them. He blinked, long and slow. He didn't move. “You did,” he said, at last.

She frowned. “But I didn't do anything,” she said as a lump formed in her throat.

He shrugged. “I don't want you to go through what I went through with Amy. I don't want you to go through what I went through when I thought you were dead.”

She swallowed. “Oh.”

“I'm not trying to make you feel guilty about... what happened before,” he said.

“I didn't say you were.” But she did, anyway. Feel guilty.

“I just... I don't want you to go through that.” His eyes reddened. He blinked. But he didn't look away with embarrassment. He faced her, and he let her see. His expression carved her to shreds. “I never want you to go through that.”

“Derek...” she whispered.

“And I'm really sorry,” he said. The water sloshed as he shifted in the tub. His wet, pruned thumb stroked her cheek. He cupped her face. She barely noticed the water as it dripped from his wrist to carve splotches in her shirt. “I'm so sorry, Meredith. I know you don't think I mean it, but I do. I am. Deeply.”

She grabbed his hand. “Shut up,” she said, her voice soft.

He pulled his hand back into the water, and he looked away. Like she'd struck him in the mouth or... something. A lump formed in her throat. She reached across the bubbles and the empty space, and she touched him, first, the back of her palm to his forehead. He didn't feel very hot. Still fine. Low grade. But then she turned her palm against his forehead and stroked his damp hair once. Twice.

“I know you mean it, and I love you,” she said. “That doesn't mean I'm not pissed. Okay?”

His eyes met hers. They stared, until she almost forgot why she was sitting on the floor, and why he was sick in the tub. Mmm. I can take it slow, he'd said. I can take it incredibly slow. The echo of his kisses on her collarbone, as he nibbled on her ear, made her eyes water. Bright and shiny. She
could do with some of that again. Someday soon. She'd been such an idiot back then.

“Okay,” he said. He closed his eyes, and he sank into the water. She leaned against the tub and sat with him until the water got cold.

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**Day Two**

Meredith stood in the ER. Cristina hovered over an empty bed a few feet away, scribbling notes on her chart for the patient she'd just dismissed. She'd been trolling for cardiac cases and been disappointed when the woman reporting chest pains had simply been suffering a bad bout of acid reflux, though she'd managed to keep from cursing at the woman's good fortune until the woman had left, at least. Meredith sighed as she searched through her tool tray with latex-gloved hands. Shiny scalpels, tweezers, a sonic debrider, gauze, and other metal implements glimmered in the bay's fluorescent lights from the tray.

“I don't know why I let him convince me not to take time off from work,” Meredith said to Cristina. “I'm not getting anything done because I can't stop thinking about what's going on at home. Surely, not being at work and not getting things done would look less glaringly unproductive or whatever than being here and doing nothing whatsoever.”

Her patient cleared his throat. “Fixing my foot isn't productive?” he said.

Zachary Keller was an older man. Thin, but toned. He took care of himself. Mostly. Not all the time, or he wouldn't have been in the ER, but everybody made mistakes now and then. He lay on the gurney, propped into a sitting position. Meredith sat at the end of the gurney on a small, rolling stool, facing his bloody foot.

“It would be productive if I were an ER doctor,” Meredith said.

Mr. Keller frowned. He pulled his leg back an inch. “You're not an ER doctor?”

“I'm a surgeon,” Meredith said.

“Wow,” said Mr. Keller. “Really? I get a surgeon to fix this?” He gestured to his foot. He'd stepped on something. A nail or a tack or something else sharp. The wound would have dragged a normal person into Seattle Grace days ago, but Mr. Keller was diabetic, and he hadn't even noticed the cut until it'd gotten infected. Luckily, they'd caught the infection before it had become a threat to his life and limb. He'd been put on antibiotics already. All Meredith had to do was debride the wound the nail/tack/whatever thing had left behind.

Meredith smiled. “Today's your lucky day, Mr. Keller, because I'm being unproductive. Productively speaking, I mean.”

“Because your husband made you come to work,” Mr. Keller said. “And that's not productive.”

“Exactly,” said Meredith.

Mr. Keller frowned, but he said nothing. His wavy brown hair had mixed with threads of washed out gray and blonde, giving him a salt-and-pepper look that didn't become him. Exactly like Meredith's hair would look when she aged. She preferred the more distinguished way dark brown and black turned to silver or shock white. Like... Well, like Derek. She sighed. She'd managed to distract herself for... fifteen seconds before thinking about Derek. Again.
“You’re welcome for swapping off days,” Cristina chimed in.

Meredith rolled her eyes. “Thank you, Cristina.”

“No problem,” Cristina said. She scribbled the finishing touches on her notes and clipped her pen back into her pocket. She looked across the ER bay. Brown-scrubbed trauma nurses wandered to and fro, but none of them jogged. The typical rush and bustle of the ER was absent. It was a slow day, just like every other day since the shooting. Cristina sighed with disappointment when she saw no available prospects, and she folded her arms over her chest. “So, who’s home with—”

“Mark,” Meredith said. “Mark, the pillar of emotional immaturity, is nursing my sick husband.”

She still wasn’t quite sure what had possessed her to allow this situation. Derek needed not just care, but support. Emotional support. Mark had the emotional capacity of a flea. A small flea. She should have just taken a week off. She’d already been held back. They couldn’t legitimately hold her back another year until she’d missed more than one, and, while she’d been absent a lot, she still hadn’t missed an entire freaking year. Right? More like several months. Half a year, at worst.

“I’m sorry he’s sick,” Cristina said. “It’s not pneumonia again, right?”

Meredith stopped, frowned, and looked at her friend who was now, technically, her boss. Cristina wore her hair in a high ponytail. She looked regal. Like an attending already, if not for her light blue scrubs. She fit in her lab coat. The sympathetic expression, however, seemed foreign on her face.

“It’s not pneumonia,” Meredith said slowly.

Cristina shrugged. “What? When he’s sick, you’re mopey.”

Meredith shook her head and turned back to her patient. “Mr. Keller, I’m going to debride this, now. Tell me right away if you experience any discomfort.” She’d numbed the area with topical anesthetic.

“Honestly, I’m not even sure I can tell I still have a foot at all,” Mr. Keller said with a grunt. “Just do what you’re going to do.”

Meredith picked up the sonic debrider and swallowed as she stared at the wound. White, dead skin swirled like marble with blood and gore. Out of nowhere, the stench of infection clogged her nose. Her stomach turned, and then she couldn’t look at it, either, which was patently ridiculous. She’d seen plenty worse. She’d been inside people’s skulls. Brain soup was not exactly the easiest thing to look at. But the smell... Rotten. Decrepit. Dead flesh. After another quick glance at pus, and she had to look away and couldn’t look back because her stomach had twisted into oozing knots. Sweat dotted her brow.

“What’s wrong with you?” Cristina said, her tone more accusing than concerned.

“I’m sorry,” Meredith said. She shook her head and tried again, but she thought of the sound of a scalpel cutting dead flesh. She imagined the layers of dead skin she’d have to peel away. She could push herself through that, but the foul odor of the wound kept hitting her like a brick wall. The reek magnified everything. She pushed back from the debridement tool tray so hard the instruments clattered. She swallowed and swallowed and swallowed again, trying to keep her stomach from rebelling. She set the sonic debrider down on the tray table, and she squeezed her eyes shut as bile burned her throat. God, the smell...

“Cristina, could you get this?” Meredith said, her voice hoarse and shaky. Hot. It felt hot in here.
She swallowed as the lights all around her brightened like a firestorm.

“Having me do your busywork is going to make your unproductive productivity look more like complete inactivity, you know,” Cristina said, her voice wry.

Meredith didn’t speak. She was certain that if she were to open her mouth, she’d lose her dinner on the floor. Her throat swelled with a full feeling as her tongue pulled back. She snapped off her gloves and raised her bare hands to her mouth. She shook her head. In the blur, she saw Cristina, who actually looked concerned, now. She heard Mr. Keller asking her if she was all right, except his voice sounded low-pitched and far away, as though he were yelling at her from behind a pillow.

She bolted.

She tore through the hallway past nurses and crash carts and equipment and doctors, and she didn’t stop until she reached the bathroom. She ran to the sink because she didn’t think she’d make it through something complicated like a stall door. She stared at the silver drain at the bottom of the sink. Water dripped. She breathed in and out. In. Out. As fast as the wave of blood and gore had crashed into her head, it receded like the tide, and she didn’t feel sick at all. Not a bit.

“What the hell?” she croaked at her haggard counterpart in the mirror, but the room was empty, and the only sound that greeted her was the echo of her words bouncing back into her face. She sighed. She wiped her eyes. This didn’t make any sense, unless withdrawal was contagious, which, as a skilled doctor, she knew it wasn’t.

“You're not getting the flu,” she told the mirror. “You're not. Okay?” She pointed at her pasty reflection and glared. “You don't have sick leave. You can't get sick. You cannot.”

She sighed as she thought of Derek. Fluids were hit or miss. Keeping food down had been impossible for him since yesterday. And even when he didn't have anything in his stomach, he vomited bile. On the rare occasions he had energy anymore, he paced. Over the hours, though, she’d caught him lying on the floor in the bathroom more and more often, trembling and sweaty and pale like wax paper. He’d stopped telling her to go away. He’d stopped saying much of anything. He’d just lain there, on the floor, in a fetal position by the toilet. Either silent or crying. Anxiety, depression, insomnia, irritability, restlessness... All symptoms of withdrawal.

And she’d let Mark deal with it. Mark, of all people.

She went into one of the bathroom stalls. She sat on the seat and pulled her cell phone from her lab coat pocket. She checked for messages. None. And no missed calls, either. She dialed home, and Mark picked up on the second ring.

“You were just here like three hours ago,” he said.

She startled. She’d dialed the land line. She didn’t have caller id. How would he have known... “I wanted to check in,” she said.

“Mother hen.”

She frowned. “I am not.”

“Are, too,” he said. “I’d be embarrassed.”

“Am not!” She stood from the seat and stomped her foot. “I’m not!”

“I won't tell him you called, if you want,” he said. “You can still salvage the situation with a lie by
She heard the dog bark and growl on the other end of the line. Not like she was snarling or being nasty. More like playing. The phone made jostling noises. Meredith wondered if Mark was playing with the rope toy in the kitchen or something. How could he be playing with the damned dog at a time like this?

“But I did call,” Meredith said. “I am calling. I'm...” She swallowed as she sat back down. “How is he?”

“About the same as three hours ago,” Mark said. “Time to go out,” he said, not into the receiver. The dog barked once close by, and again and again farther and farther off.

Meredith clenched her fingers. “You're mocking me.”

“You know I've been a doctor a lot longer than you have, right?” he said. “I can care for another human being.”

“And if Derek needed a nose job, I wouldn't doubt your abilities,” Meredith assured him.

“Ouch, Big Grey. That stings,” he said. “And he does need a rhinoplasty, you know. Haven't you looked at his face?”

“Because you broke your hand on it! Which is exactly my point!” she said. “You can't fix this by punching it.”

“He told you about that, huh?”

“And I'll have you know I like his nose,” she said. “It's rugged and charming.”

“Glad I could help with that, then.”

“Mark...” She sighed as she rolled her eyes. “Just put Derek on the phone, please.”

A pause. “I can't.”

“Why not?” she demanded.

“Because he's in the bathroom.”

Meredith sighed. She stood up. She exited the stall, and she started to pace. “Is he lying on the floor again?”

“I don't know,” Mark said. “The door is shut.”

“He could be really sick!”

“He is really sick, Grey,” Mark said. “That's sort of the definition of withdrawal.”

“You know what I meant!” she snapped as she stopped by the trashcan. She gave it a half-hearted kick to vent frustration, but it didn't help her feel better. She didn't want to be here. She didn't want to be at Seattle Grace. What had possessed her to promise Derek she'd try to go into work if she could arrange her shifts with Mark? His mopey eyes, and his please, please, pleasees. That's what. She kicked the can again, a bit harder. The lid swung. Stupid... leaning... mousse-loving... man. Her eyes watered. Stupid sick man.
“He's fine,” Mark said.

“But how do you know? You can't be sure,” she said. “What if he has a stash in there? Why are you even on the phone when you're supposed to be watching him!”

“Because you called me!” Mark said. “And he doesn't have a stash.”

“Well, you should have known not to pick up,” Meredith insisted. “And how do you know he doesn't have a stash?”

“You just established I'm an emotional Cro-Magnon. You want me to be psychic, now?”

Her face heated. “No.”

“Good,” he said. “And I know he doesn't have a stash because I checked every fucking nook, cranny, cave, and crevice in this house the second you left, and I made no apologies about it.”

She blinked. Tears swelled and streaked down her face in an unexpected deluge of grief. The fact that Derek needed this sort of policing, now, made her heart squeeze, but the fact that Mark had done it, that Mark had been the bad guy and saved her some of the heartache in this horrible situation... “Really?”

“Really.”

“How did you know to—”

“Amelia went through this,” he said. “Remember?”

“Oh. Right.” She closed her eyes. They burned. God, she didn't want to be at work today. She wanted to be curled up on the bathroom floor with Derek. Or hiding in a dark hole until this all went away. “You swear you can handle this?”

“I swear I can handle this,” Mark said. She imagined him standing there holding his hand in a mock boy scout salute. “Shit happens in his life. He deals with it badly every fucking time. But he gets through it. He'll get through this.”

“See, I don't think he really does get through anything,” Meredith said. “Well, most... some things.”

Big Things. Derek's method of coping seemed to be all about stuffing things in boxes in the corner and leaving the room, until he had a whole big pile of boxes, nowhere to cram the next Big Thing, and then they all toppled on his head when he came back to stack the next box. Not that she could throw many stones. She hadn't been a card carrying coping champion until... well, until she'd married him and let herself believe she could be the extraordinary version of herself if she tried.

“He'll be fine, Grey,” Mark said. “Really. I promise I'll watch him. Nothing will happen.”

Meredith swallowed. “You swear?”

“Absolutely swear,” Mark said. “Cross my heart and hope to die. Needle in my eye and everything.”

She scoffed. “That's mature.”

“Either I'm a Neanderthal or I'm not,” he said. “Make up your mind.”

She wiped her eyes and sniffed. “You said Cro-Magnon before.”
“They're both prehistoric stupid people.”

“Fine,” she said. “You can be both. Can I call later?”

“Do you want me to pick up?”

She rolled her eyes. “Mark...”

“Just making sure,” he said.

She pressed her forehead against the cool, tiled wall, and she closed her eyes.

“What do you mean, odd behavior?” Mark said.

They sat in the conference room. He had a steaming Starbucks cup and a pile of patient charts stacked in front of him on the table. She'd pulled him out of rounds with an emergency page. He hadn't complained or commented, which made her feel worse. Worse for stumbling all over this. Worse for wasting his time and looking like a foolish idiot.

“Well, I think...” she said. She shook her head. “I mean, I'm suspicious... I mean.”

He leaned forward. “Spit it out, Grey.”

She sighed. She stared at the open doorway. Nobody hovered nearby, but she couldn't just blurt... She stood. She brushed off her lab coat, and she went to the door to close it. She stood with her back against the door. Mark whirled in his chair and stared at her with his eyebrows raised. He crossed his arms.

This was Derek's friend. Derek's friend since... Who knew how long? Derek hadn't really specified, though she suspected, from clues uttered here and there, from little conversational tidbits, that Mark had been around since their childhoods. Since before Derek's father had died. Which meant this was going to be horrible. Mark would laugh at her for even suggesting that Derek was an addict. Not Derek, who'd been his friend for nearly as long as Meredith had been alive, if not longer.

Just rip the band-aid, she decided. Rip it.

“I think Derek might be taking too many Percocet,” she blurted.

Mark closed his eyes, and he let out a slow breath. “Shit,” he said.

She blinked. “I kind of expected more disbelief.”

“A few weeks ago, I took him grocery shopping to get him out of the house. It was the week after Seattle Presbyterian released him.”

“Oh, okay,” she said. She shook her head. “What did that have to do with anything?”

“He wasn't feeling well,” Mark continued. “He went back to the car before I'd finished with the shopping list. I found him in the car later. I thought he was asleep. He'd dropped his pills, and they were all over the floor of my Mustang.”

She gaped. “Seriously?” she snapped. “You didn't think that might be worth mentioning?”

He shrugged. “He woke up when I shook him. He said he must have fallen asleep without screwing the cap on the bottle, and it'd fallen out of his lap.”
“And you believed him?” Meredith said, her voice dripping with incredulity. She’d known Mark wasn’t the most emotionally intuitive guy around, but... “Mark, he’s taking like two dozen a day. And, now, you’re saying this might have started over a month ago?”

“You’re counting his pills?” he said.

“Yes, I’m counting them!” she snapped. “I’m worried about him.”

“I guess I’m an idiot.”

“Yes, you’re a freaking idiot,” she said. “I can’t believe you wouldn’t mention something like that.” She stalked back to her chair and sat down. She sighed, and she slumped onto the table. Her elbows squeaked on the wood. “I can’t believe this. I just can’t,” she told the table.

“With his history, I didn’t think he’d... I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt,” Mark said. “Okay? I’m sorry. If I’d seen something else, I would have said something. Honestly, I’d forgotten all about it. He’s seemed fine, lately. Well, not fine. But not two-dozen pills worth of stoned.”

She stared at him, but her eyes lost focus on his features, and her gaze wandered through the open blinds behind him. A redhead attending in navy scrubs who she didn’t recognize trotted down the hall, followed by a clot of interns. She closed her eyes and let darkness soothe her. She rubbed the bridge of her nose as a headache bloomed like an unwanted dandelion weed thing in her skull.

“What history, Mark?” she said.

“You didn’t know?”

She opened her eyes. Tired. She was tired. This was too much. Why did there have to be more? Derek being a freaking addict was already a lot. “Didn’t know what?”

“His sister,” Mark said. “Amelia.”

Meredith shrugged. “She seemed nice. What about her?”

“She’s an addict, Grey,” Mark said. “She’s why he crashed his bike, and he nearly flunked out of medical school because of her, too. I didn’t exactly think he was clamoring to follow in her footsteps.”

“What do you mean?” She shook her head. “Flunked... crashed...” she repeated uselessly.

“You didn’t know any of this, did you?”

“No, I didn’t know any of this!” she said. “He doesn’t talk about medical school. Or his crash. Or anything prior to Seattle, really.”

“There’s a reason for that, Grey.”

“Oh, god,” she said. She cradled her head in her hands.

“It’s not your fault.”

“No, but it’s my fault I didn’t know any of this. I’m an insensitive freak, and if I hadn’t been, maybe, I would have caught this crap sooner.”

He laughed, low-pitched and wry. A sympathetic chuckle. “I think we’ve established that I’m the insensitive freak in this club.”
“Do we still even have a club?” she said.

He gave her a sad smile. “Dirty mistresses for life,” he said, his voice soft.

She sighed. She flopped back in her chair. “Mark, what the hell do I do?”

“There might be some other explanation.”

“Like what? What possible explanation could there be? And how am I even supposed to bring this up with him without him having a nasty, shout-y fit complete with door slamming?”

“I'll back you up,” he offered.

“No,” she said. “No, if we're both there, he'll think we're ganging up on him, and he'll lash out, whether he's abusing or not. You can't talk to him about this, yet, until I can think of something. You have to promise.”

“Grey...”

“Promise, Mark,” she said.

Silence stretched. He stared at her for a long, weary moment. She thought he might protest. Instead, he sighed. “I promise.”

The drip, drip, drip of the faucet pulled her out of old memories. “Mark?” she said, her voice a whisper against the receiver. She hoped he hadn't hung up in the lull.

“What, now?” he said.

“Thanks,” she said. “I know I’m...” She cleared her throat. “Thanks.”

Silence spread on the line other end of the line. Static hissed in her ear. “See you later, Big Grey,” he said after a long moment. The phone clicked and disconnected.

“Yeah,” she said to no one in particular. “Bye.”

She stuffed the phone into her lab coat pocket, and she sighed. She glanced at her watch. Somehow, she had to live through thirty-two more hours. This would be a long shift.

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**Day Three**

Meredith lay on her back on the gurney in the hot sunshine, her arms cupped over her stomach. She sighed. Heat laved her face, but it wasn't a good kind of heat. It was a sweaty, room-spinny heat propagated by a fishy stench and the panicky thought that, if she moved, she would vomit. Something crinkled, and another wave of nausea overwhelmed her. She covered her nose and mouth and rolled to a sitting position. The gurney squeaked.

Alex sat in his lab coat and scrubs. He chewed on something. He clutched a shiny metallic potato chip bag in his hands, and as his temples moved, she heard him crunch, crunch, crunch. Logic drew her attention away from the bag and to his plate. She fixated on the goop-y conglomeration of cheese and whitish pinkish... gunk, smashed between two toasted slices of bread. Still hot, the sandwich steamed slightly. She groaned and reached for it, but he sat at the other end of the bed, and it was so. Far. Away.
He glanced at her with an affronted expression, and pulled the plate closer to his body.

As if she would want to steal it!

“Could you put that away or eat it somewhere else?” she snapped. “It's making me want to hurl.”

He stopped crunching. “My chips?” he said.

“No,” she wailed and gestured to the source of the noxious odors. “That.”

“It's just a tuna melt,” he said.

“I don't care what it is; I can't freaking stand it,” she said. She flopped back onto the gurney. “It's making my stomach churn. I'm already struggling to find reasons to stay in this horrible place for my entire shift, and that's not helping me. I want to go home.”

Alex narrowed his eyes.

“What?” she growled.

He shook his head and slid off the gurney. He put down his potato chips. He took his plate to the trashcan, and—

“Throwing it out right there won't make it smell less!” she said.

He rolled his eyes, passed the buzzing snack machine, and pushed through the doorway. He disappeared through the little window in the door as he cut to the left on the other side. She sighed with relief as the clot of tuna odor left her nasal passages, and she could breathe again. She rolled onto her side to face the door as she cupped her tortured stomach.

Alex returned empty-handed through the doorway. “Thank you,” she said. “I'll pay you back.”

He shrugged. “It didn't look that good anyway.” And yet he'd tried to keep it from her? Her lip twitched as she fought a smile. He flopped back onto the gurney with a sigh and pulled a chip out of his bag. His pager whirred. He pulled it from his lab coat pocket and checked it. His gaze shifted to his watch. With a small nod, he put the pager back in his pocket, and he relaxed.

“What time is it?” she asked the mattress.

“11:20,” he responded. “I'm scrubbing in at noon.”

She sighed. She didn't feel any amount of jealousy that he'd managed to find a real surgery. She just felt dismay over the time. How had it only been seventeen hours since she'd started this horrible shift? “I should be at home,” she said.

“You're being kind of melodramatic,” he replied “Shepherd can live for thirty-six hours without you.”

“I'm not being melodramatic.”

“Yes, you are,” Alex said. He shrugged and munched on another chip. “So, he's an addict. He'll cry and vomit for a few days. At least he's trying to fix it, now. Wanting to fix it is the hard part.”

She clawed into a sitting position. “I never said he's an—”

“Meredith, I'm not an idiot,” he said.
“I never said he's an addict.”

“Dude,” he said. He waved a chip in the air for emphasis. “I get that you want to preserve his privacy bubble, but don't patronize me.”

“But—”

“I figured it out this week,” he said. “It wasn't really hard to do the math.”

“But—”

“I see vomiting, sweating, chills, a runny nose, a nasty-ass temper, endless pacing, and sobbing, and I'm pretty much going to think crazy psycho with the flu, or withdrawal. And we all know he's not a crazy psycho.”

Meredith's mouth tumbled open. “He was sobbing?” she said. “Right in front of you?”

Which meant Derek was still really, really sick. Not in a million freaking years would he have let himself fall apart where he could be seen by people he considered subordinates if he could have helped it. Alex was, like Cristina, in Derek's life because he mattered to Meredith. He was not a part of it because Derek and Alex were friends. Derek hated the whole roommates thing, but he'd stopped complaining, and he'd lived with it for over a year, even after Alex had returned sans Izzie, and Lexie had returned sans Mark, both somewhat uninvited. This wasn't the first time she'd thought about it since Derek had been shot. He did that for her, and not once, since their initial conversation about it, had he ever brought it up or used it as ammunition or anything since then, just as he'd promised. She clenched her fingers as her lungs and stomach constricted. She wouldn't cry. Not now.

“In the hallway, when I left this morning,” Alex said. “Sloan gave me the glare of death and practically shoved me out the door, so I figured you guys have it covered, and it's not really my business.” He shrugged. “So, whatever.”

“Oh,” she said. Her eyes watered, and she brushed her face with her hands. Alex would think like that, wouldn't he? She forced herself not to give him a hug. What was... She was not a hugging person unless it was with Derek. Where was this coming from? She sniffled. “He's still that bad?”

“I'm sure it'll get better soon,” Alex said. “The first few days are the worst.”

And it'd only been, well... She squinted as she thought about it. Monday night to lunchtime Thursday wasn't even three full days. She hadn't planned for more than four, yet, though she knew Mark was on standby if she needed backup. Still... She closed her eyes. It sure felt like an eternity, and she wasn't the one who'd been lying on the freaking bathroom floor, too sick to move other than to puke. She wasn't the one who had panic atta—

She covered her mouth with her hands.

You're stoned, she'd said. Did you hurt yourself? Are you hurting? Derek?

He'd acted like a lumbering, tranquilized elephant after his panic attack on the catwalk. He'd done it then. Taken pills to supplant bad feelings instead of pain. She'd seen it, it'd been blatant, and she'd just... let it go. Guilty nausea and hot sparks of anger coiled in her throat. She hated rewinding her life with him and finding idiocy and lies wherever she went. She'd been like one of those freaking horses with the blinders on its bridle, and he'd been feeding her falsities for... How long would she keep remembering new things?
She didn't want to remember new things.

“I should have paid more attention to him,” she said as she stared at her lap and clenched her fists around a tent of her scrubs. “The proof was all right there, and I—”

“Addicts can be persuasive people.”

She peered at him. “Did you have suspicions before?”

“I just knew he wasn't dealing well with all of this.”

“Oh,” she said. “No tiny inklings?”

“I barely saw the guy.”

“Not even an itty bitty clue?” she prodded. “Something he said? Something you saw?”

“No,” Alex said. He crumpled up his empty chip bag and tossed it like a basketball into the trashcan on the opposite wall. “What are you getting at?”

“Nothing. I just...” She crossed her arms and scooted back against the window. “I feel like such an idiot.”

“Why?” he said.

“He's been falling off a cliff, and I didn't even notice,” she said. “Or, I did notice. I just did the wrong thing. I saw him using drugs, and I assumed it was pain, exactly like he said. I should have realized the second he started fixating on the Percocet. Or sooner.” She sighed. “I went to medical school. They train us on what to look for. And I knew people who suffer the kind of trauma he did are prone to substance abuse in the aftermath.” She shook her head. “He lied to me, but I let him.”

Alex grunted as he scooted across the gurney and sat next to her. “You can't blame yourself.”

Meredith looked at her lap. “I'm not. Not really.”

Alex raised his eyebrows.

She sighed. “I mean, I know Derek is the one who did this to himself. I know that on a conceptual level or whatever. **He** took the pills. **He** poisoned his body. I just wish I'd noticed he needed help sooner. I wish I'd...” Her eyes stung, and she rubbed at them. *Please, help me*, he'd said. *Please, P-please.* She'd waited for the literal cry for help, and that just felt... wrong. And clueless. “I just wish I'd... done something.”

“That's crap. You're doing a lot.”

“This whole *thing* is crap. Derek's always been a flag-waving, card-carrying member of the say-no-to-drugs club.”

Alex nodded. “Which is why it makes sense that you gave him the benefit of the doubt.”

“How could he *do* this?” She punched the mattress with her fist.

Alex shrugged. “Crap happens to good people. At least he didn't go crazy.”

She raised her eyebrows. “That's it?” she said. “Those are your words of wisdom?”
“Shepherd was hurt,” Alex said. “He took pain medication legitimately for pain, at least for a while. Shitty luck gave him a big shove.”

She stared at Alex, and she bit her lip. He'd bounced back from near death, physically, after he'd come out of his sepsis-wrought coma. The bullet had migrated to the surface of his torso as he'd healed, and he'd had it removed under local anesthetic by Dr. Bailey. Afterward, Lexie had driven him home and plied him with babble-y, bubbly TLC, much to his chagrin. He was younger and more athletic, and none of his bones had been broken. He hadn't been like Derek, who still struggled with fatigue, malaise, and pain on top of everything else. Sometimes, she found it difficult to remember that Alex had been, at one point, so much worse off than Derek, that she'd been told her over the phone to come and say goodbye.

*You should visit him,* Derek had said.

*I can't,* she'd replied.

*Why not?*

*Because I just can't do it right now, Derek. I can't.*

A sliver of guilt slipped behind her heart. Derek hadn't known about the call. He'd been fishing for names of the deceased. He'd been upset. She'd lost the baby, and he'd nearly died, and she hadn't been able to deal with Alex maybe dying, too.

*Alex is a freaking iceberg, Derek. Ninety-nine percent of what's going on in his head, you'll never see. I sincerely doubt he's fine, and I imagine his whole life-is-great Broadway musical routine will crash and burn just like mine did after I drowned. It's fake,* she'd speculated. *More for Derek's benefit than anything else, but, what if she was doing the blinder thing again?*

She swallowed, and she touched Alex's shoulder. Not a hug. There would be *no* hugging. “Well, how are you fine, then? You were—”

“I don't know,” he said. “I just am.”

“Are you?” Meredith said.

“Look, just because your husband is a disaster doesn't mean I am,” he said. “It wasn't personal for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I didn't know Mr. Clark. I saw the gun for two seconds, and then I'd been shot and left for dead.”

“So, you're equating you getting shot to... to what?” she said as she struggled to grasp his attitude. “A freak accident like getting struck by lightning or a piano falling on your head?”

“Shit happens,” he said. “I'm better, now. Why dwell on it?”

“You were shot, Alex. How can you—”

The door burst open. “Hey guys,” Lexie said. She chomped on a familiar-looking toasted sandwich full of melted cheese and goop-y white pink meat. Was that a freaking daily special in the cafeteria or something? “What are we chatting about?” Lexie said rudely around her mouthful. She clutched a green apple and a juice box in her other hand.
Meredith had about three seconds of clean air before the tuna stench hit her. Her stomach roiled, and she put one hand to her mouth and the other against her rebelling, churning, kickboxing stomach.

“Dude, you can't eat that here,” Alex said from somewhere far away.

Lexie's eyes widened. The half-sandwich dangled from her mouth. “Why can't I—”

Alex jerked his thumb at Meredith. “Tuna makes her barf today.”

“What do you mean? She likes tuna,” Lexie said, as though Meredith weren't even in the room. Meredith clenched her teeth. She would not throw up. She would not.

“Not today,” said Alex.

Meredith groaned and hobbled off the gurney. She shambled toward her half-sister. The trip took her closer to it. The sandwich. The horrible smell. It. But she needed to get to the trashcan— “Ugh. Lexie.” She gasped, and she pushed on Lexie's shoulders as she stumbled past. “Get it away.”

Meredith slammed into the trashcan with her hands, and she lost track of Lexie. Blood rushed in her ears, and the heat and swelter of nausea made her perception of the world swim. She clenched her jaws, and she stood over the open bin, fighting a gag reflex that really wanted her to hurl. The warm reek of garbage wafted against her face. Strong hands wrapped around her shoulders, squeezed, and pulled her away from the can. *Shh,* she imagined Derek whispering. *It's okay. Breathe.* And she did, and the stench of the trash receded, and tuna didn't replace it.

She groaned. “Oh, that was bad,” she said as she held the back of her hand to her lips. Alex supported her and kept her from slipping to the floor.

“Okay?” he said.

She nodded as her stomach calmed down. “Yeah.”

He let go.

Lexie returned through the doorway empty-handed. No tuna. The apple and the juice box had disappeared, too, as though she thought *any* food might offend. “I'm so sorry,” she said. Meredith didn't have a chance to protest before her half-sister stood in her face, the back of her hand pressed against Meredith's forehead, all hovering, hyper-concerned, and crowding. Lexie frowned. “Do you have the flu or something?” she said. “You were sick on Tuesday, too.” She glanced at Alex. “No fever,” she relayed.

Alex and Lexie pushed Meredith back onto the gurney. Lexie stood over Meredith, dark brown eyes full of concern as Meredith lay back on the mattress. Alex hung farther back by Meredith's ankles, but, still, he stayed close. Lexie didn't lift her hand from Meredith's forehead. She stared. A long time.

“Any muscle aches?” Lexie said.

“No,” Meredith grumbled. “What are you looking at?”

Lexie's frown deepened. Her hand shifted. Meredith felt her cheek press inward with pressure from Lexie's thumb. “Your face is really full,” Lexie said.

“Are you saying my face is fat?” Meredith pushed Lexie away.
“No,” Lexie said. “Just full, and I...” Her eyes narrowed as though she were staring at puzzle pieces that almost fit. Almost. If she were to just shift an edge piece one way and flip another... Her eyes widened. “Oh, my god, are you pregnant?” she blurted.

Meredith sat up so fast the room swam. She glanced back at Alex through a dissipating waterfall of black. “What?” Meredith said.

Alex held up his hands. “I wasn't gonna go there.”

“But you thought it, too?” Meredith snapped.

He backed away, as if to say, “Yeah, and that's exactly why I didn't go there.”

Lexie's concerned frown broke into a wide, warm smile. “Well, you've been trying, right?”

Meredith folded her arms over her chest. “Yeah. So?”

“So, you don't normally barf over tuna,” said Lexie. “And your face is full. And you've been nauseous all week. You threw out my leftover Moo Goo Gai Pan, and it wasn't even a day old.”

“Those are small bullet points in a long list of possible symptoms,” Meredith said. “How do you get that I'm pregnant from that? Maybe it's stomach flu or something, like you said.”

“You don't have a fever or muscle aches. And your face is full. How is that flu?”

“I moisturize,” Meredith said. “I could have a full face! I could have a full face and have the flu.”

“You do look a bit busty, you know,” Alex said.

She gaped at him. “Busty!” Meredith exclaimed. She looked down at her chest. She didn't notice anything strange. She hadn't needed a larger bra. She wore her favorite one – white with no lace or ornamentation — because it was comfortable, though Derek didn't like it as much because the clasp confounded him for some reason she couldn't fathom.

How could she be more busty if she could wear the same bra? That made no sense.

Alex shrugged. “Well, you're not popping out of your scrubs or anything, but you're bigger.”

“Because you stare at my breasts all day and notice these things?” Meredith said. “Alex!”

“What?” he said. He smirked as he gave her a once over and then gave her an approving nod. “I think your jugs look good today.”

“I'm not even dignifying that with a response,” Meredith said. “I can't be pregnant. It's impossible.”

Lexie's face fell. “Oh,” she said.

It's totally possible, said a small voice. You haven't had your period yet since the last one, and it's been five weeks. Which was normal, Meredith insisted to herself. After a miscarriage, cycles were screwy for a bit. That was a given. Right?

“I cannot be pregnant,” Meredith said. “Not right now.”

Lexie nodded. Her smile returned. “Oh,” she said. Her tone sounded more... knowing. “Maybe, you should take a test.”
Meredith blinked. “But Derek is—”

“Probably looking for some good news in his life right now,” Alex said.

“Well, yes, but he’s—”

“I hear good news cancels vomit.”

“What?” Meredith said. “Alex, that’s—”


Lexie frowned. “So, he is sick again? Meredith, I'm sorry. He just can't seem to catch a break.”

“I can't be pregnant!” Meredith insisted, ignoring her. “I just miscarried. We've had sex like ten times. Not even the sweaty, shout-y, bed-break-y sex you guys always complain about.”

“It only takes once,” said Lexie.

“It know it takes only once, but I drowned, and Derek got shot. Our childhoods have enough trauma and abandonment in them to give Freud a wet dream or whatever when you mash them together. And let's not even get into the whole freaking mess with Addison. It's clear to me that the universe hates us with a fiery passion. Why would it pick our side, now, of all times?”

Lexie shrugged, her expression helpless.

Meredith growled with frustration. “Great. This is just great.”

“You're not happy?” said Lexie.

“No, I'm not happy!” Meredith snapped. “I promised Derek I wouldn't take a test without letting him know, and because I also let him make me promise I'd try not to take more time off work, I'm stuck here for another...” she stopped to glance at her watch, “Eighteenish hours looking even less productive than the utter not productiveness I was exhibiting when we started this chat, and I can't take a pregnancy test here and tell him over the phone because who tells people gigantic news like I could be pregnant over the phone when there's a reasonable amount of vicinity and means to freaking get together? Plus, I told him on Monday I wasn't being hormonal, and I apparently have been. Or might have been. Maybe. Assuming he knocked me up again like a virile he-man jerk instead of letting me have the stomach flu like a normal person.”

Meredith flopped flat on the gurney and heaved a dramatic sigh. Lexie snickered. Snickered!

Meredith glared. “It's not funny, Lexie.”

“It's kinda funny,” Alex said.

Cristina joined them before Meredith could respond, and the horrible cycle of sickness began again when the funk of tuna rolled over her like a dump truck. Heat burned her from the inside. Meredith's stomach clenched and jerked. She gagged. Bile and other fluid filled her throat as she rolled to the side. And then everything spilled onto the floor out of her innards. She gagged and gasped and choked as everybody scattered to avoid wayward projectiles.

Meredith sniffed. Her nose ran. She wiped her mouth with her hand as her body relaxed, and she pushed away the sticky, wet ends of her ponytail from her face. “There's too much freaking vomit in my life right now,” she croaked as she lay there with her eyes squeezed shut against the gurney.
“Seriously. Is that sandwich a special or something?”

Cristina looked at the mess on the floor as she munched on her sandwich, and then back up at Meredith. At least, now appeased with its need to evacuate itself, Meredith’s stomach had stopped protesting the mere presence of tuna. “Okay, what’s wrong with you?” Cristina said. “I thought you said yesterday night was a fluke.”

“Dude,” Alex said. “She’s hormonal.”

“I am not hormonal!” Meredith snapped. “What time is it?”

“11:51,” Alex said. “Why?”

Meredith pressed her face into the gurney, breathing. Oh, god. Derek's sperm was a bunch of super-powered, squiggly bullies. She didn't need a test. She knew. That was the exact time. She'd puked right on time. How could she be pregnant, now? Now, of all times, when Derek was so sick from withdrawal because of his freaking drug addiction he couldn't even pick himself up off the bathroom floor half the time. Neither of them were in any shape to be parents, right now. How the hell were they going to do this? What had they been thinking? Oh, god, how were they going to do this?

“Crap,” Meredith said, her voice the barest whisper. She struggled to sit up.

“Neat,” said Cristina. She sat on the gurney and swung her feet. “Am I still the godmother?”

“Crap!” Meredith repeated. She crawled off the gurney. Her sneakers squeaked and squished as she nearly slipped on the puddle of vomit she’d created. Her vomit. Great. This was just great.

Lexie stared with a helpless expression. “Congratulations?”

“I don't like you people anymore!” Meredith snapped as she stalked off to find a towel and the janitor.

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**Day Four**

“You can't freak out,” Mark said in a hushed voice. He blocked her from the front door with his big body. He'd come out to greet her as she'd rushed down the front walk. He wore jeans and a stained white t-shirt and cross-trainers, and he had his laptop bag shouldered, as though he expected to leave as soon as he passed on his message. The birds chirped in the early dawn, and a cool breeze blew against her skin.

She clenched her fists. “What do you mean? What happened? Why would I freak out?” She had to pee. She had to pee, and she wanted to take a pregnancy test to be sure sure, instead of just sure, and she wanted to do it now. Now. She stared into the foyer through the glass of the front door behind Mark. Nothing but empty space. She'd thought Derek might be feeling well enough to come to the door. Or, well, been hoping. His absence, in conjunction with Mark's greeting, though, sent a chill down her spine. She hadn't spoken to Mark since early evening the night before. “Is something wrong with Derek? Why didn't you call me?”

Mark grasped her shoulders and met her eyes with his stark blue ones. “He's fine,” Mark said in slow, enunciated syllables. “I took care of it.”
“Took care of what!” she hissed, careful to keep her voice matching his whispered pitch. Why whisper? She didn't know. She shifted on her feet.

Mark stepped to the side, clearing her path. “He's asleep in his office on the air mattress.”

She frowned. But she and Derek had decided the air mattress was pointless. She'd thought... “Why?”

Mark shook his head. “Just leave him be,” Mark said. “He's fine, and that's all you need to care about. Okay? Just wait a few hours before you go to bed.”

She searched his face. What the hell? What had she missed? “Mark...”

He shifted his laptop bag to his other shoulder. His keys jingled. “I have to get to my shift. Just in case you need me this weekend, I need to make up some time.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but opted to close it before she said something. He'd bent over backwards to accommodate this whole screwy situation, and he'd let her deal with it the way she wanted, and he'd been quietly supportive this whole freaking time. He'd just spent thirty-six hours nursing Derek, and now he was on his way to a shift that would last who knew how long?

“Oh okay,” she said, though curiosity burned as she watched him nod and head down to the street where he'd parked his cherry-colored mustang.

She danced over the threshold and set her purse and keys down in the foyer. She really had to pee, but she'd promised Derek she'd warn him about taking a pregnancy test first. She glanced at her watch. 6:30 AM. She didn't have to be back at work until 7:00 PM. Another graveyard shift. She'd managed to have horrible luck with scheduling this week. At least she had twelve hours to sleep and take pregnancy tests, though. And, with luck, Derek would be okay enough that he could be on his own for a little while, and she wouldn't need to drag Mark back or swap shifts with somebody else.

She closed the front door behind her, and she walked to Derek's dark office. The door was open. He lay on the air mattress crammed between the desk and the walls and the dog, who looked up at her as she entered. Billowing, frothy red blankets covered him. A smile bloomed across her face when she looked at the lump he formed, and she realized he wasn't moving. No rolling side to side. No agitated toe flexing. Nothing. She listened to him breathe for a moment in the quiet space, raspy and slow with sleep, not labored. And sleep! Real, honest-to-god sleep. She didn't think he'd slept much, if at all, since before Monday.

She knelt by the mattress. The dog's stump tail wagged, and Meredith gave her a happy wave, though she couldn't reach to pet. Derek shifted, and she saw his face. A thick rash of stubble covered his chin and throat, but there was no perspiration at his brow or anywhere visible. His hair looked clean, and he smelled soapy, not sweaty. Actually, a bit like fabric softener, as if he'd just changed his shirt or something.

She hated to wake him up, but her bladder twinged, reminding her of the filtered water she'd guzzled during the last hour as her shift had drawn to a close, and the 32oz lemonade she'd purchased on the way home at the drive-thru and sucked dry.

“Derek,” she whispered, not wanting to startle him. She didn't touch him. “Derek, wake up.”

His eyes slipped open. He blinked. His gaze softened when he focused on her.

“Hey,” she whispered. She brushed his face with her palm. The stubble scraped, but his skin was
smooth and dry. When she drew her fingers through his hair, it flicked back into position. Dull and frizzy with lack of product, but completely dry. Dark circles wrapped underneath his eyes, and his skin seemed way too pale, but despite that, the improvement in how she found him, now, over how she'd left him stole her breath. She'd hoped for him to be better, but not like this!

“You look a lot better,” she said, louder, as a smile tore across her face, and she wondered what on earth Mark had been going on about.

“Meredith,” Derek said, still muzzy with sleep. His voice seemed a bit weak. A bit bleak, too. Hoarse. His eyelids drooped, and he looked like he wanted to roll over and go back to whatever dream he'd been having.

She rubbed his back through the blankets. Guilt formed a lump in her throat. “I'm really sorry, but I need you to get up,” she said.

“Mmm?” he said. “Why?”


“Better,” he replied.

He rubbed his eyes with his hands and grunted. She backed up to give him room to sit up. The big red comforter spilled away from his body. He wore his gray Bowdoin t-shirt and black shorts. There were no sweat stains at the neck or in the armpits of the shirt. The fabric smelled fresh and clean. The shirt hung too loose on his frame, which made her sigh. He hadn't been eating enough going into this to be able to withstand days of vomiting and not replenishing calories.

“Do you want something to eat?” she said.

A dark expression crossed his face that she couldn't read. “I'm not that much better,” he said.

“Okay,” she said. She pushed away the building ache. He was better. He was a lot better. She would be content with that.

He struggled to stand, and she helped him without comment. The wince that carved his features made her wince, too. When he achieved upright, he stopped for a long, lurching moment. His grip was shaky and feeble, and he took his steps with care when he began to move. The dog stood and followed them out into the living room. Her nametag and rabies tags jingled as she moved.

He moved with agonizing slowness, and when he sat on the sofa in the living room, he collapsed at a slow pace, too, as though he didn't want to exacerbate something that was already painful. He sank into the cushions like a glacier sliding into a valley. Samantha resettled on the floor by the coffee table. She rolled onto her back with a snort. Her dog tags jingled again. And then she evened out and closed her eyes.

Meredith didn't sit with Derek. She stood in the middle of the room. She shifted foot to foot. Now that she was finally here, and she had him awake... Derek, I think I'm pregnant, she thought. It was easy to think. Why not say?

“Well,” he said, his voice dull. He rubbed his eyes again. “I'm up.”

She stared at him.

“Why am I up?” he said. He didn't sound irritated or mean. Just curious. And exhausted. And sick-
but-better.

Silence stretched. She opened her mouth. She closed her mouth. She started a gesture. That didn't work, either.

“First word,” Derek said tiredly. He leaned into the arm of the sofa and pressed his face into his palm. “Rhymes with clue.”

She laughed. She couldn't help it.

“It doesn't rhyme with clue?” he said.

She shook her head and sighed. The burning feeling in her bladder urged her onward. “Derek, I'm sorry. I had a speech planned. I did. But it died a non-speech-y death as soon as I walked through the door. I want to take a pregnancy test,” she said.

For a moment, a long moment, he didn't react, and she could almost see the gears in his head grinding against sleep deprivation. And then his breaths shortened. His eyes widened. He pressed his hand into the arm of the couch, and he stood like he'd been shot out of a cannon. “What?” he blurted, only to take a slow step. His foot stuck, sort of as though he were stepping through molasses. He blanched. The dog stood and began to bark. His gaze lost focus, his eyelids dipped. He made a sound sort of like, “Ungh,” and then he toppled.

She'd seen that happen any number of times with people who donated blood without eating a big enough meal beforehand. They thought they were fine, stood up in a rush, and wham. Down they went. She stepped forward more on instinct than anything else, arms outstretched. She hooked her arms underneath his as he flailed. She fell onto the couch with him more than sat, and she rolled off his willowy frame as soon as they'd landed. She swallowed, still catching up with the situation. “Shh,” she said to the dog, who shushed.

Meredith blinked and rolled back toward Derek. His lips were the color of chalk. His eyes rested half-closed, and he wasn't seeing, but he wasn't all the way out, at least. She patted his face, and he blinked a bit like his eyelids had been attached to his eyeballs with slowly drying glue. “Derek,” she said. His hand twitched. She slapped his cheek a bit harder. “Derek, wake up.”

“M'okay,” he slurred.

“You fainted,” she said. She ran her fingers through his hair. He blinked again, but he still didn't look like he was perceiving that much. “Derek? Derek, are you awake?”

He made a noise that wasn't exactly coherent. She stroked his face. She didn't want to leave him, but she doubted she would get very far just by smacking him. “I'll be right back,” she said, and she ran to the kitchen, careful to keep him in her line of sight as long as possible, just in case he did something like faint all the way.

She needed orange juice or something else sugary. She pulled open the fridge, only to be delighted by what she saw. Apple juice. Mark must have bought it. She grabbed the jug and poured Derek a glass. She ran back to Derek with her hand cupped over the top of the glass to keep the sticky juice from spilling too much.

She helped him hold the glass. He sipped weakly at it while she brushed her fingers through his hair. Color seeped back into his face.

“I haven't eaten,” he said in a wispy, disturbed voice.
“In days,” she said. “I know. It's okay.”

He took another sip and blinked. Another sip. Another blink. She tried not to bounce from foot to foot. She had to pee, damn it, but she didn't want to rush this and have him faint all over again because he didn't have enough sugar in his body to deal with the situation.

Another sip, and his whole body jerked. “You're pregnant,” he said, his tone confused. “You said you're pregnant?”

“I don't know yet. I have to do the pee test,” she said. She stood. “Which is good because I'm floating. I drank lemonade all the way home to make sure I'd be ready in case the water I drank before I left didn't work.” She thought, however, that both had worked pretty amply, from the painful pressure in her lower body. She moved toward the foyer, waiting for him to show some sign that he understood the situation, so she could go.

“Okay,” he said, his voice flat. He set the half-finished glass of apple juice on the end table. He pushed at the arm of the sofa, and he stood again. He swayed as though, now that he'd accomplished this goal, he had no idea what he'd been planning to do.

“What are you doing?” she said as she rushed back into the room.

He gripped her shoulders. His arms shook. “You have to take the test.”

“You sit,” she said. “I'll go do it.”

“What?”

She raised her eyebrows. “You want to watch me pee on a stick?”

That seemed to penetrate the thick fog that'd clouded his senses. He blinked. “Not really.”

“Well, you can't pee on the stick for me, so sit.”

A deep red hue sprawled across his cheeks. Color restored. He glanced at the living room, and at her, and seemed to be taking stock, finally. He gifted her with an adorable, sheepish grin. “Sorry,” he said. He settled back on the couch and made a point out of sipping more apple juice.

She grinned. “It's okay,” she said. She kissed his temple. “Gold stars for determination.”

“Lacking in rational thought, though,” he said.

“You just fainted,” she said. “I give you a pass. And, now, I have to pee.”

She bolted before he could respond. She ran up the steps as fast as her feet would allow. She barreled into the bedroom to grab the pregnancy test box she'd opened from her nightstand, only to halt. Birds chirped through the open window, and a fan whirred on high. The room reeked like lemon. The pillows, sheets, and blankets had been stripped from the mattress. Someone had propped the fan against a small table, and the fan blew across the bed on Derek's side. She stopped. She pressed her palm against the mattress as she bit her lip. Damp cloth met her skin. A light stain splotched the carpet by the bed on the floor. More light stains splotched the side and the top of the mattress. Light stains that looked like they had, at one point, been dark. But then somebody had scrubbed. A lot.

*Just wait a few hours before you go to bed,* Mark had said.
You can't freak out.

Just leave him be.

She raised her hand to her mouth as a lump formed in her throat. Derek had been *that* sick? Guilt swept over her like a wave for waking him. The mattress was still wet. It was only about 7:00 AM. That meant Derek had had a late, awful night. No wonder he was shaky. Her stomach churned as she thought about all the work Mark must have done to clean Derek without brutally embarrassing him, and then clean the room. No stench of vomit remained. Just lemon, and she could deal with lemon without her stomach flip-flopping. Mark had done a good job. And Derek seemed none the worse for wear. Her fingers clenched. Mark had done a *really* good job.

You can't freak out, he'd said. Mark's one demand. Her bladder screamed at her.

She forced herself to drop it. It wasn't important. Derek was clean and obviously okay, if not well. They could buy a new mattress. None of it mattered, and asking about what had happened would just ruin all the work Mark had done to make this all okay. She would put new sheets on later when the bed had dried, and she wouldn't ask about it.

She grabbed the pregnancy test from the drawer. She barely made it into the bathroom. She ripped open the test package, scrabbled her fingers along the packaging for the applicator, and yanked it free. Then she sat down, and she exploded. She sighed as she emptied herself. Thank God. When she'd finished, she grabbed the applicator and headed back to the living room. She met Derek on the stairs. The dog teetered up the steps with him. He clutched the railing as though it were the only thing keeping him from oblivion. Probably true, from the way his body shook. She rushed to support him.

“Derek, what are you doing?”

“You were gone for a while,” he said.

She swallowed. For a moment, her head blanked. “I was reading directions and peeing,” she said after a pause. A white lie. Half a white lie.

“You've already read the directions.”

“I wanted to refresh myself,” she said.

“It’s a pregnancy test,” he said. “It’s not rocket science.”

“Well, I might be pregnant, Derek!” she snapped. “That’s pretty rocket science-y to me!”

“Sorry,” he said, though his eyes glittered, and his lip twitched.

She grinned back at him and squeezed his hip. “You are not.”

“I am!” he insisted.

“Whatever,” she said. “Upstairs or downstairs?” she added before she remembered the mess in their bedroom. She squeezed her eyes shut. Crap. She wondered if he knew about the state of the bedroom, or if he'd been too sick to really understand what had happened. Except she'd promised herself she wouldn't ask, and so she wouldn't.

“Where do you want to go?” he said, saving her however inadvertently. “I just wanted to be with you.”
“Let's sit downstairs,” she said.

“Okay.”

They made slow progress. He wasn't moving well, and his limbs shook with fatigue. He put more and more weight on her, and by the time they'd made it to the landing, he breathed hard, and his body swayed. She guided him back to the couch. Samantha watched them for a moment, whuffed, and departed for the dining room, presumably to lie down.

“How long do we wait for this one?” Derek said as he collapsed. He swallowed, and he wiped his face with his palms.

“The booklet says ten minutes,” she said. She set the applicator on the coffee table, dropped onto the couch, and snuggled into his arms. He wrapped her in his embrace, and he didn't say a word. But he trembled. She felt it against her skin like the flutter of a leaf. His whole body.

“Derek, are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” he said.

“Because you seem sort of like you might faint again.”

He reached for the glass of apple juice on the end table and took another sip as if to demonstrate he really was fine, despite how his limbs were behaving. He swallowed, and he stared at her with an odd expression. “You really think you're pregnant?”

Like she would jerk his chain or something just for the hell of it. Her mouth tumbled open with a snappy retort, but she held it back when she looked at him more closely. His expression had an innate fear to it. Like he didn't want to hope too hard, lest he ruin everything, but he hoped anyway, and it'd spilled over into his speech like water from a glass that was too full.

“I don't know for sure,” she said. “I've felt sick this entire week. And then yesterday I threw up. Pretty much right on schedule.”

“Schedule?”

She glanced at the applicator and then at her watch as nervous energy twitched through her body. Not long enough. It hadn't been long enough.

“I'm a punctual barf-er when I'm pregnant, apparently,” she said. “Well, maybe pregnant.”

“A punctual barf…” He blinked. “What?”

“When I was pregnant before, I vomited every morning at the same time,” she said.

“Oh.”

She thought of her last bout of vomit and snorted. “Do you think I look busty?” she said.

“Busty?” Derek said.

“Big-breasted,” she clarified. “Like my boobs have exploded out of my chest.”

He blinked. “Is this a trick question?”

“Alex says I look busty, and I don't see it. I mean I fit in the same bra. I love this bra. And you’d
think I'd notice if—”

“Alex says?” he interjected.

“Yeah. They said my face was full, and that I looked busty.”

He shook his head, as though this whole train of thought had lost him at the last stop. “Who are they?” he said.

She took a deep breath. It was hard to remember he was sick, and he'd just woken up, and he'd just fainted earlier, too. There was just so much other stuff swirling in her head. “They, Derek. Lexie, Alex, and Cristina. Who else?”

“Oh.”

“So, am I busty?” she said. “You'd know.”

He chuckled. A lecherous grin slipped across his features, belying his shaky grip and his pallid skin. “Oh, I would, would I?”

“Well, of all the people on this planet, I'd say you're probably the only person other than myself who is legitimately allowed to be staring at my chest and thinking, good god, she's busty.” She scooted back from him, took a breath, lowered her arms, and presented her chest to him. She tried not to puff herself up on purpose or think of how ridiculous this looked. “So. Busty?”

His eyes twinkled despite his sick countenance. You know what says thank you like nothing else? he'd said long ago. She was reminded of that moment as his lip curled, and he gave her a look that said plainly, I'm taking off your clothes right now in my head, and I like it. His gaze traveled south. His assessment took him approximately one fifth of a second. “You're a little bigger,” he decided.

She gaped. “Really?”

He shrugged. “Not very. Just a bit more full. I wouldn't have said anything, yet.”

“How the hell did Alex notice that?”

“He's Alex,” said Derek. “He's a guy.”

“You're saying all guys would notice?”

“Well, I doubt they'd say anything,” he replied. “That's the 'he's Alex' part.”

She frowned. “What the hell? Why can't you use that power of observation for anything else?”

“How did we get from debating whether you're pregnant to demeaning the side effects of testosterone?” he said.

“You started it!”

“I did not,” he said. “You asked me if you were busty. There's no good answer to that, anyway.”

His eyes twinkled. “It's a trap.”

She snorted. “A trap.”

“I know how this works,” he said with confident smirk, as if women had a secret code or something, and he'd cracked it. “Either I notice you're busty, and I'm a lech, or I don't notice, and I
wasn't paying enough attention to you.”

“But you are a lech.”

“Yes,” he said with a conspiratorial wink, and then he dropped his voice low, “But I prefer to keep my cover when I can.”

She laughed as she flopped back against his body. He grunted as she settled. Warmth enveloped her, and she sighed. She pressed her cheek against the soft cotton of his shirt. She stroked him with her palm. “Well, you're screwed,” she said. “Your cover was blown a long time ago. You fail at incognito lechery.” She kissed his stubbly throat, and she relished the rumble as he chuckled.

“You only think so,” he said.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

Her insides tightened as he dropped his mouth next to her ear, and practically purred, “I'm a rock star at incognito lechery.” He kissed her earlobe.

“How so?”

“Do you have any idea, how often you turn me on?”

She shivered at his raw, desirous tone. “Um,” she managed. He tipped her back against the cushions and pressed against her, and suddenly he didn't seem so weak or sick. His lips met hers. “But I thought you were sick and faint-y,” she murmured.

He nuzzled her. “I'm distracting myself,” he replied. “Slowly.”

He tasted like Crest and Derek and all male and all hers. She hadn't had him in a week. Not since they'd brought Samantha home. “Mmm,” she said. She hadn't been able to stomach the idea of intimacy while she'd been skulking around behind his back, counting his pills, but now he was better, physically, and there were no more secrets, and she might be pregnant—

“And you might be pregnant,” he echoed as if he'd read her mind.

“Mmm-hmm,” she moaned. The hairs on her head shifted as he pulled her ponytail loose and ran his shaky fingers through her hair.

“And I love you,” he said. He licked her lip and plunged. She moaned as she lost sense of everything but him. Him in her space. Him breathing. Him. She pulled a tent of his shirt into her needing, searching fingers, and clutched.

“This isn't incognito at all,” she said.

He laughed. “I'm not trying to be. It's intense, you know.”

“What?”

“This thing I have for you.”

“Not ferryboats?” she said.

“No,” he said. He kissed her again. “You.” She tilted her head to the side as he wandered south. Her gaze moved past his shoulder. For a moment, her insides tightened, and she saw nothing but blur and wanted nothing but sex. But when she blinked, somewhere in the torrent, she found
enough presence of mind to glance at the coffee table. Her eyes fell on the applicator. He growled in her ear, soft and low. “Plus,” he continued, “I—”

“Plus,” she blurted.

“What?” he said.

“It's a plus,” she exclaimed. She glanced at her watch, just to make sure. The sofa disappeared from underneath her body. Floating. She was... She smiled as she pointed. “The thingy. It's a plus, Derek. Look.”

He broke away from her, panting, and stared at it. “What does plus mean?” he said.

“Um.” She shook her head. “Positive. Plus means positive. I'm pregnant.”

He stilled. “Really?”

She nodded. “Really,” she said. Her eyes watered, and she brushed tears away with her palms.

He kept looking at the applicator as though he didn't quite grasp what was going on. He swallowed, and then he pulled his gaze away from the coffee table and looked back at her. “We made a baby?” he said, wide-eyed.

She nodded. “Yeah, kinda.”

He didn't speak. Not a word. He blinked, like he didn't know up from down or left from right.

“Are you okay?” she whispered.

He flinched as though her voice had pulled him miles. His gaze fell to her lap. She stilled, watching him. He splayed his palm, and he pressed it against her body over her belly. Warmth spread through her shirt where he touched her. He blinked once. Twice. A pair of tears spilled over his eyelashes, and his body hitched. “I thought it would take months,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

“I know. You said.”

He shook his head. He sniffled. “I thought...”

She kissed him. “I guess it's good you're not a rock star at obstetrics, too.”

“Yeah, I...” He shook his head. He blinked. Another pair of tears. Then he laughed. The way his eyes sparkled made the room seem dim. And then he pulled her into his arms and squeezed so hard she thought she might never breathe again. “Happily stupid about obstetrics,” he said against her ear as he hugged her. He grunted. “Um.” The sounds of his hitched breathing hit her ears, and her throat closed up.

She stayed in his warm arms and clutched him. She'd panicked. She'd panicked for the large majority of Thursday, and for a few hours that morning before she'd loaded up on water and lemonade and come home, because Derek had been so sick the last time she'd seen him, he'd just lain on the bathroom floor, because Derek had been sick and a drug addict and a liar, and she'd been feeling like crap from the constant nausea, except she didn't feel sick now, and Derek was better. Derek was so much better. And he was crying. Not like holy waterworks, Batman, but... tears, and not over something superfluous because withdrawal and anxiety and stress had wrecked his brain chemistry. He was crying because he'd made a baby. With her. She'd never seen him react
that way about anything happy, not even when she'd said she'd marry him, and, frankly, it struck all her worries dumb and silent. Derek was so much better, and she loved him, and he loved her, and anybody who could react to being a parent like this surely deserved to be one no matter what. They deserved this. Together. He'd been shot, and he'd nearly died, and he was having a rough time, and she'd lost a baby, and she'd nearly lost him, and she was having a rough time, but they deserved this, and they could freaking do it, hateful universe be damned. She blinked, and her view of the world pressed with her eyelashes into a blur, and then she was crying, too.

She lay her ear against his chest. His heart pounded against her ear, clamorous and alive. “I'm really, really happy, Derek,” she said, her voice breaking. She was breaking into a billion euphoric pieces. Or broken. She couldn't tell.

He kissed her, and he kissed her again. She ended up on her back, her legs wrapped around his slim hips. She sank into the sofa as he crashed against her and kissed her again. “I love you,” she said.

“I love you too,” he said, his voice breathy.

He'd paled further instead of blushed with passion, and he shook as he touched her cheek to cheek. His almost-beard scratched her, but she didn't care because it made her alive with him. He kissed her clavicle, and he traced a line south to her belly, and lower. He kissed her womb through her pants. When he rose to kiss her lips, they touched. He made a soft sound. Delightful. And then another sound. Collapsing.

He blanched. His weight pressed into her as his eyes went glassy. “Oh,” he said, his voice low and deep and exhausted. He had the presence of mind to roll off of her into the crevice between her body and the back of the couch. His hands and arms shook.

She panted, struggling for her senses. She stroked him. “I'd say you're still pretty shaky, and still pretty faint-y, even with the slow distracting,” she said as she wiped at her swollen lips. He hadn't quite fainted this time. She helped him sit, but he didn't stop trembling.

“Do you want to try and eat something, now?” she said. “You don't seem barf-y on top of everything else.”

He didn't answer. He stared, bewildered.

“I'll make some soup again,” she said. She kept her voice soft. She squeezed his shoulder. He didn't reply or stand or try to chase her, which worried her, but she left him, and she poured a fresh can of chicken noodle soup into a bowl. She stuck it in the microwave and left it heating while she went back to check on him. He held his head in his hands. He breathed short and fast, like he was trying not to be sick. She touched his shoulder. Everything was still shaking as though electric current ran through him. “Derek,” she said.

“I'm fine,” he said faintly.

She sat down beside him and rubbed his back. “This was a lot,” she assured him before he could beat himself up about his collapse.

“That was embarrasing,” he said. He looked at her. A faint smile curled his lips, and she relaxed. She could deal with happy, self-deprecating Derek. He shook his head. “I fainted during sex.”

“It wasn't sex.”

“It would have been sex if I'd eaten something, first,” he said. “I don't care how shitty I feel. I'd flog myself through it if I could stay conscious.”
She snickered. “Flog yourself, huh,” she said. She leaned into him and kissed him. “That's very romantic.”

“You know what I meant,” he said.

She stared at him. His blue eyes twinkled, something she hadn't seen in a long, long time. No drugs. No brooding. Just... happy. Happy Derek. Her throat clogged with an unexpected swell of... everything. He still needed lots of help and support and love to fix everything that had gone wrong. But, when he smiled at her like that, the prospect of all the work that would be involved didn't seem so hopeless. She returned his smile as she wiped her eyes. “I won't tell anybody if you don't.”

He winked. “I'm not sure what you're talking about. My wife is pregnant. I gave her a hug.”

The microwave dinged, but it was a distant thing, and she couldn't bring herself to move. “That's how I remember it, too,” she said.

He pulled her into his arms. He was shaky, and his grip was weak, but when he hugged her and squeezed, she wrapped her arms around his body and squeezed right back. There was no end or beginning. They simply were, and it didn't matter that he did slightly less, because there was no less or more or anything at all.

“For posterity,” he said as he held her.

“I guess that's literal, now.”

“What should we tell people?” he said.

She blinked as his words pulled the real world back into the room with them. She tightened her grip and sighed.

“What?” he said, his voice low.

“Maybe, we shouldn't say anything until I make it past the first trimester,” Meredith said. “I mean I've shown a recent aptitude for failing at this whole human incubator thing.”

He cupped her face, and he kissed her. “No.”

“No?”

“You're pregnant, Meredith.”

“Well, I—”

He swallowed. “You're pregnant,” he said, as though he needed it ranked with the sky being blue, grass being green, and gravity pulling him down into his seat. Needed. She met his eyes. They stared at each other for a long, passing moment. She stroked his arm, his shoulder. His muscles quivered under his skin. She leaned into him, and she kissed him. His eyes closed. She rested body to body with him, and she realized she needed it, too. There was too much other crap going on to add this worry to the laundry list. She wrapped her hands over her womb, pulling his hands with hers. She squeezed his fingers.

“I guess I am,” she agreed. A smile spread across her face.

“Hmm,” he said. “You are.”

“I think everybody who matters pretty much already knows except Mark and your family, though,”
she said. “I'm not sure how much there is to tell everybody else.”

He snorted. “We have got to stop this trend of me being the last to know about my rock star sperm selling out another concert.”

She kissed him. “Well, they don't know,” she said. “They only saw me barf. They didn't see the plus sign. And that was a crap metaphor, Derek.”

“Was not.”

“Was, too.”

“Was not!” he insisted. He leaned into her. “I am a rock star at getting you pregnant.”

She laughed at his ego peeking through the clouds. She'd grown to miss it. So much. “So, you're making this into an ego stroke, huh,” she said. She pulled her fingers through his hair and ran her big toe up the soft slope of his shin.

“Well, that's why you love me, isn't it?” he said. “My extreme confidence?”

Yes, so much. “You wish,” she said. “It could be me, you know. Maybe, I'm more fertile than the garden of freaking Eden. Don't me and my hoo-hoo get any credit?”

He snickered. “Hoo-hoo? I don't remember that one from basic anatomy.”

She swatted at him, but he captured her, and tipped her onto her back. He leaned over her. Their lips met once. Twice. He rolled to the side, and they lay side by side, pressed together, unmoving. “Hmm,” he said against her skin. His hands shook, but his warmth filled her. “Maybe, we just fit.”

She grinned. “I really like that idea.”

He rested his forehead against hers. Their noses mashed. He sighed, and the bluster of his breath hit her skin. She stared at his stark blue eyes.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too,” she affirmed. They kissed. Her world stopped and spun on that moment for blissful hours.

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**Day Five**

She arrived home again at 7:30 AM after her twelve hour shift, just as shafts of sunlight struck the pavement through the trees in front of her house. She yawned as she plodded through the warm patches of sunlight and approached the door. Her heels clicked on the walk. Mark didn't greet her like he had last time, though she didn't know why she'd expected it, since she'd left Derek alone. Her stomach churned with nerves. She hadn't been able to focus much on her shift. She gripped the doorknob and turned.

“You're sure you'll be all right?” she said as she put her hand on the doorknob.

“I'm tired,” he said. “I'll probably just sleep.”

She couldn't bring herself to turn the knob. Instead, she turned to face him, and pressed her back
against the door as she clutched her purse. He stood behind her in the dim lamplight, still in his shorts and Bowdoin shirt. He ran a hand through his unkempt, frizzy hair and stared at her, his eyes sapped of expression. He still looked pale and tremble-y and sick, though better, much better. He'd eaten earlier. Finally. Nothing big – some warm soup and then later some peach yogurt mixed with cereal.

“You're sure?” she said.

He nodded. “I'm sure. I'll be fine for twelve hours.”

She swallowed. “And you'll call if you need anything?”

“I'll call.”

“You promise?”

He nodded again. “I promise, Meredith,” he said.

They'd lain together for a long time that day, just cuddling, marveling over the fact that they would be parents, and it'd been nice to forget everything for a little while, except, now, she had to go to work, and the real world crashed back into her head. She bit her lip. “Please, help me,” he'd said. “Please. P-please.” She couldn't help but wonder if he'd bankrupted himself on asking for help, if he wouldn't ask again, even if he did want somebody to stay home with him. She'd let the day rot away, and neither of them had talked about his drug problem, or how he intended to continue from here.

“I'm not sure I believe you,” she said.

A dark sliver of hurt flashed in his gaze, but he didn't retort. He swallowed, and then he looked at his feet. “You can call Mark, if you want,” he said, his voice low. If you don't trust me, he didn't say.

I don't anymore, she didn't need to reply. She squeezed her purse straps. “I already called him an hour ago. He got pulled into an emergency surgery, and he can't come.” Either she stayed home, or he would have no one.

“Oh,” he said.

She sighed, and she closed the space between them. She wrapped her arms around him. She kissed him, and then he pressed his nose into her hair, and he inhaled her scent. “Would you tell me honestly if you wanted somebody to stay with you?” she said. “Would you really?”

He remained in her arms, breathing and silent for a long time. She felt his fingers clench her shirt in the small of her back. “I'm not that sick anymore,” he said.

“That's not what I asked, Derek.”

“I won't take any Percocet.”

“That's not what I asked, either,” she said.

“I'd tell you,” he insisted as his face reddened.

The crickets chirped outside, and a car drove past the house, its low-pitched rumble of exhaust shaking the windows. His body tensed. As the noise receded, he relaxed. She pulled back and
stared at him, at the troubled wetness in his gaze, where before there hadn't been anything but exhaustion. He'd tried to hide it, but that car had frightened him, or at least... made him anxious. She wondered how much courage being high had given him, and how bad he would be at functioning beyond the threshold of their door, now that he wasn't taking anything. There were so many unknowns. When he'd been sicker, it'd been easier to focus on just getting through that part.

“I should... stay home,” she said. “You need somebody here, Derek. At least until we figure out what we’re doing.”

“No,” he said. “Twelve hours. I’ll be fine.”

“I'm going to get more behind anyway, Derek. I'm pregnant. Popping out a baby means time off.”

“That's different,” he said.

“How is it different?”

“Because that was your choice,” he said. “Our choice.” He touched her stomach. “Meredith, I'm not fine, and I'm not trying to tell you that I'm fine. But I'll be okay for twelve hours. Really. And I don't want you to miss work just to watch me sleep.”

She bit her lip. “We need to talk about this. What you're going to do. We've ignored it.”

“I know,” he said.

She raised her eyebrows. “When I get home?”

“When you get home,” he agreed with a nod.

“Please, don't make me regret this, Derek.”

He pulled her into his arms and sighed. “I could never forgive myself if I did,” he said against her ear as he stroked her back. “I don’t want this anymore,” he’d said. The conviction in his tone sold her, and she decided that if she couldn't leave him alone for a mere twelve hours, it would be better to know, now. Better, so she could figure out how best to convince him he needed to enter rehab as fast as possible, whether he wanted to go or not. She squeezed his shoulder once to remind herself of him, solid and alive. She inhaled the soft scent of his body. Musky. No aftershave. He hadn't shaved in a week.

“I love you,” she said, and then she turned out of his arms to leave. In twelve hours, she would know if this had been a mistake.

Sighing, she plodded over the threshold and stopped at the quiet stillness that greeted her. “Derek?” she called, keeping her voice low in case he was sleeping. He didn't answer. She went into the kitchen to let the dog out, but Samantha wasn't in her crate. Meredith refused to be worried. Yet.

She walked upstairs. Relief flooded her within moments. Their bedroom door was open. She saw the snoring dog sprawled on top of the covers. Derek had his fingers wrapped around her collar and his face pressed into the dog's black neck. He didn't stir as she walked into the room. He didn't stir as she changed into an old t-shirt for bed. He didn't stir as she slid under the covers and settled next to the dog. Two adults and a big dog in a queen-sized bed was a tight fit, but she didn't want to disturb him if he’d managed sleep. Insomnia was something she'd expected him to grapple with, particularly given his nightmares. She stroked the dog's stomach, pushed a floppy paw out of the way, and then pressed her nose into her pillow. She relaxed to the raspy sounds of Derek's
breathing, and she slept.

She woke up, sort of, hours later, when the dog decided to hop down. She had the presence of mind to mumble something like, “Do you need to go out?” as though it were spoken through a mouthful of cotton, but the dog didn't stick around or whine. Samantha shook her big black body. Her dog tags jinged. And then she plodded out of the room. Meredith rolled, spreading her legs and arms at this new, luxurious freedom, and she slipped back into dreaming without any effort at all.

By about 1:00 PM, she was ready to be alive again. She smacked her lips, rubbed her eyes, and sat up, squinting against the dull sunshine. The covers rustled. She glanced to her right. Derek. Still in the bed. He'd burrowed under his pillow, like he tended to do when she was making too much noise, like snoring. She frowned. Maybe, he hadn't gone to bed right away the night before, after all. She didn't want to wake him, so she padded quietly out of the room and went downstairs for lunch and to let the dog out to run and do her business.

By 3:00 PM, Meredith was worried. She went back upstairs. “Derek?” she said, careful to keep her voice soft and low as she tiptoed into their room. He moved, but only to curl more tightly under the blankets. The mop of his hair shifted, but she couldn't see his face. She sat on the bed beside his body. The mattress sank. His hip pressed into hers as she leaned over him. “Derek, are you sick?”

She wanted to check his temperature, and she wanted to rub his back, but she restrained herself. He tended to wake up terrified if he was being touched. She didn't want to scare him. Not ever, but certainly not now.

“Derek,” she said. “Wake up.”

He shifted. Familiar, listless blue eyes stared at her for one blink, two. He swallowed, said nothing, and turned away from her. A creeping sense of wrongness took hold of her and squeezed. She shouldn't have left him alone.

“Hey,” she whispered. “What's wrong?” Had he been awake this entire time? She rubbed his back through the blanket, only to bite her lip as nerves coiled in her stomach. She pulled back the covers, and she felt his skin through his shirt to confirm what she'd felt through the comforter. He trembled. She touched the back of her hand to his forehead. He didn't feel hot, not even a little. “Derek?”

“I don't feel very well,” he said, his voice dark and low.

She frowned. “What's wrong?”

“I don't know what's wrong, or I would fix it,” he snapped. He pressed his face against the sheet and tried to burrow again, but not before she caught the red-tinged glisten of his eyes as his mood splintered. The unhindered shiver of his muscles and the tightness of his tendons spoke of fear. She pulled his wrist into her hand and felt along the center for his pulse. Racing. A trickle of sweat dotted his brow and his neck, not buckets like before with his withdrawal. He made a deep noise as he swallowed.

This looked sort of like the precursor to a panic attack, or maybe an ongoing one. Panic and anxiety tended to cause a positive feedback loop by begetting more panic and anxiety. The smallest snowflake could roll into an avalanche if left unchecked. She frowned. When had this started? Had he been afraid to get out of bed all day? How long had he been awake and suffering instead of sleeping?
“It's okay,” she whispered as she stroked him. “Can you sit up?” When he didn't budge, she grabbed him by his shirt. He still wore the Bowdoin shirt. He hadn't changed. The fabric stretched as she pulled on the hem. “Come on. Sit up.”

One moment, he'd been lying on the bed in a defensive, semi-fetal curl, buried under blankets. The next, she inhaled at the force of his embrace as he wrapped his arms around her body and pushed his face against the warmth of her neck. The blankets rustled as they fell away from his shaky torso. His frozen hands chilled her through the back of her shirt. He panted. Chuffs of air fell against her skin, and for minutes, he didn't speak at all. She wasn't sure what to do. He'd clutched her as though she were some sort of teddy bear.

“It's okay,” she said.

He moaned, long and low and distressed. “I don't feel very well,” he repeated.

“I know,” she said. She stroked his back. “It's okay. You're okay. You're okay, Derek. You need to take deep breaths.” She forced herself to take her own advice. Feeding his own anxiety with hers wouldn't do anything but exacerbate everything.

“I'm sorry,” he said against her skin.

“Why?”

“I didn't call, and I promised I would.”

She swallowed. “Have you been feeling like this all night?”

“No.”

“Well, when did this start?”

“I don't know,” he said. “I don't... I...”

“Were you awake when I got home?”

“Y-yes.”

“Why didn't you say anything, then?”

“I don't know...” he said. “I didn't want to move.”

“Why?”

“I don't...” He shuddered. “Please, I don't know. I don't... I'm sorry I didn't call.”

She pulled her hands through his hair and stroked his back in slow, soothing motions. His whole body trembled. She clenched her fingers. He was so terrified he wouldn't get out of bed. He hadn't been able to speak to her when she'd been lying three feet away for hours. How could he possibly be worried she'd assume he'd been attempting subterfuge about his freaking drug problem by not having the presence of mind to pick up a phone in the middle of a panic attack?

“I'm sorry,” he told her neck miserably, his voice a cracked whisper, as if he couldn't not worry. About anything. No matter how unreasonable.

“It's okay,” she assured him.
His grip tightened. He breathed against her shoulder. In and out. In and out. He grunted. “I want to
go back,” he said, as though it were the most shameful admission in the world. He shifted in her
embrace. He wouldn't look at her.

“Back where?” she said. She stroked his back as she swallowed back lump after lump of dread.
“You still want the Percocet?”

“Yes,” he answered baldly. He cleared his throat. “But I won't take it. I don't have any; I swear.”

“Can you tell me why you want it?”

“I just want to make it stop,” he said.

“You say that all the time, but I don't know what that means.” She brushed the back of his neck
with her palm, and then she chased down his spine along the soft cotton of his shirt. She pressed
her nose against his temple and kissed him. “I thought I did, but...”

“I like it there better than here.”

“Like where?”

“When I'm high, it's just...” He shifted. “I can be anywhere I want, and it doesn't have to be here.”

Here. He said the word as though he meant hell, deep and dark and grating. She glanced beyond his
shoulder at the dim room. Dust motes carved a lazy diagonal path from the window to the floor,
caught in a slanted prison of sunshine. The room smelled faintly of lemon. The stains on the
mattress were covered by fresh, soft sheets and blankets, but the stains on the carpet remained, and
would remain, likely until she purchased a new area rug. She heard the distant laughter of one of
the neighbor's kids, playing. Birds whistled through the windowpanes.

I'm terrified, he'd said. Every moment of every day. You're the only reason I get out of bed in the
morning.

“Where do you go?” she said.

Dunno. Someplace with you, he'd answered vaguely the last time she'd asked.

He sniffed. “The lake sometimes,” he said. “I like to sit on the dock.”

I went to the lake and lost track of the fucking time, he'd said to explain why he hadn't called for
help when he'd gotten stuck downstairs in the early morning. That's all. Maybe, I'm stubborn, but
I'm not a masochist.

The lake?

He'd blinked, confused. The lake?

You said you went to the lake.

Nothing, he'd said. A daydream.

Tension locked her frame as weeks of history started making painful sense. Things he'd said. Or
done. Or hinted. “Why do you like to sit there?” she said.

His fingers clenched. “Because you're there, and he's not.”
A cold feeling crept down her spine. She swallowed. “Gary Clark?”

“I hate him,” he said, his voice low. “I hate him, Meredith.” He shivered. His torso shook, not with tremors, but with stiff twitches that jerked his whole frame. She realized he was crying. Such a sharp contrast to the happy crying she’d experienced in his arms barely more than twenty-four hours ago. “I just want him to go away. I want to make it stop. He won't stop.”

“What do you mean, I'm there, and he's not? When is he there?”

“He's everywhere,” he said. “All the time.”

*She doesn't know,* Derek had snapped at no one. *Nobody knows.*

She blinked, and she froze, a solid block clutched by his nervous energy. For a moment, her brain refused to assemble the pieces for her. Sort of like... surgery. When you saw a person who'd been maimed, sometimes, you didn't see the person. Just the gushing wounds. The broken bones. Torn muscles and ligaments. Splattered organs. If you saw only the pieces, and not a man who had three children and a wife who loved him, it was easier. Easier to cope.

For a horrifying moment, she didn't want to know. She didn't want to see the man she loved more than her own life struggling with a mental illness wrought by bloody violence. She saw shivering. She saw sweat. She saw fear and dissociation. She heard his words, bleak and nonsensical against the backdrop of piece after piece after piece in the big picture, not assembling.

She squeezed her eyes shut. She'd known. She'd known his panic attacks had been escalating, ever since that day when he'd somehow ended up on the catwalk, reliving his near murder, and before then, he hadn't had any. He'd just been painfully easy to startle and scare. But, why? Why had he been getting worse?

The big picture flipped her the bird and formed solidly before her. Her eyes watered when she realized how sick he was.

“You mean you see him like...” She swallowed. Her teeth chattered with nerves, but she clenched her jaws shut and forced her voice to stay even. “When you're awake?”

“I know he's not real,” Derek said. “I'm not crazy.”

She closed her eyes. “That's not what I asked,” she said.

*I see things sometimes, too,* he'd said, but he hadn't elaborated at the time. Nearly two months ago. Another clue she'd missed in the fray. Or, well, hadn't missed. She'd let it go prematurely.

“Is he here, now?” she said.

Derek didn't answer.

“Like... memories?” she prodded.

He sniffed. “Sometimes.”

“Well, how else?”

Again, no answer.

“Like a hallucination or something?”
He stilled in her arms. His elbows pulled inward, almost as though he were trying to protect himself from injury, and every trembling muscle stiffened like iron rods in her grasp. His breaths choked to a stop.

“Stop,” he said. His voice sounded more like a wheeze than anything else. “Please, stop.”

Hallucinations were appetizers on the post-traumatic stress buffet. The fact that Derek experienced them was horrifying, but not so much because he hallucinated, but because he hallucinated. Her Derek. And she didn't want to look at the big picture anymore. She wanted to throw it away.

“Oh, okay,” she said around the lump in her throat, attempting to curb the flare in his panic attack before it went nuclear. “You're okay.” She rubbed his back. “Breathe.” He gradually loosened up.

He rested in her arms, quiet. Exhausted. Shivery with stress.

The big picture hovered in her mind's eye as though it had been burned there.

Why? Why had he turned to drug abuse? She'd asked herself that question so many times in the last few days, and now it seemed stupid that she hadn't grasped the reason before. Maybe, he hadn't used a ton of words, but he'd already explained it once or twice. She hadn't understood, but he'd told her, all the way back when Mark had scared Derek inadvertently, and Derek had fled into the dark, cave-like downstairs bathroom to hide.

I thought I was going to die, he'd said as he'd wept, huddled in the corner by the toilet.

I know, she'd said, though she hadn't known a thing back then. She'd just wanted to help.

I don't want to die.

I know, she'd repeated.

Facts slid into sharp relief as she blinked back tears. Derek didn't want to die. A trauma-born echo of his would-be murderer haunted him, reminded Derek daily by his mere presence that Derek had nearly died and could again. Easily. Derek had been using the Percocet to self-medicate away reminders of his own death. He'd been using the Percocet to medicate the ghost of Gary Clark away. She was certain. And, now, he didn't have the Percocet anymore. All he had left was himself as a barrier.

And he was sick. More sick than she'd thought. Compromised.

She wiped her eyes. She couldn't afford to fall apart right now, no matter how much she wanted to take the big picture and stuff it in a raucous, crunchy garbage disposal to be chewed and torn to bits. He was sick. He needed an advocate with a clear head because he couldn't be that advocate himself, and if she freaked out, neither one of them would have that advocate. She took a deep breath and steeled herself.

“Derek, I know I said I wouldn't push, that I'd let you decide, and I'm sorry. I am,” she said. “But you need to see Dr. Wyatt. Or someone. Anyone. I don't care who. Just tell me where, and I'll take you. Right now. I'm putting my foot down.”

He swallowed. “I saw Dr. Wyatt.”

She gaped. “When?”

“The day you found me with the pill bottles.”
“Why didn’t you say—” She shook her head. Way to divert the issue. “Never mind. Do you like her? Did she help?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, are you going again?” Meredith said.

“I was supposed to go yesterday at two.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I forgot,” Derek said. “I was so happy, I...” His voice choked into silence. He pulled away from her. He wiped his face. His eyes were red and puffy. The skin of his cheeks streaked red with irritation from tears. He blinked. “Meredith, how am I supposed to be a dad like this?”

“The same way I can be a mom after everything that's happened to me,” she replied. “You'll get through this.” There was no other option. She wouldn't allow it. “I'll help. And I really think Dr. Wyatt will help, too. Way more than I can. It'll just take some time.”

He looked hopeless. “I don't know how.”

“Well,” she said. “You said you forgot because you were happy, right? Yesterday?”

“You're pregnant,” he said. “I forgot everything.”

“So, there you go,” she said. “It's possible for you to feel better. We just have to figure out how you can tap into that at will instead of waiting for me to get pregnant, because I can only do that so often, even if I am more fertile than the garden of Eden, and your sperm is a bunch of super-powered, squiggly bullies.”

“Bullies?” He snickered despite his haggard expression. “Meredith,” he said, his voice soft, chiding, but... less stressed.

She smiled. “Do you want me to make you another appointment with Dr. Wyatt?” she said. “I bet she could fit you in today.”

He grunted as he cleared his throat of his remaining grief. “It's... Saturday.”

“I have her home phone number for emergencies,” Meredith said. “I think this might count as an emergency. Maybe, she'll come in for you.”

“I'll be okay until Monday.”

She squeezed his shoulders. “Derek, you just told me you want Percocet, and you wouldn't get out of bed this morning. I'll call, now. Putting my foot down. Remember?”

“No,” he said. He wiped his eyes. “I'll call.”

“To make the appointment?” she said. “Are you sure?”

He touched her womb with a splayed, cold palm. “I'm sure.”

“Will you tell her about Gary Clark? About how you see him? Or hear him? Or... whatever?”

He looked away. “I didn't even want to tell you.”
“But you did.”

“I did,” he said.

Meredith pulled him back into her arms. Her eyes watered. “I'm glad you did. I really am. But I think Dr. Wyatt could help you more with it, Derek. I'm sure she's seen this sort of thing before.”

She hoped. She dearly hoped Dr. Wyatt could give him some tools. Something. Anything. For now, Meredith refused to allow herself anything but hope and determination, because Derek was talking. With short sentences, yes, but he was talking. He was sick, but he was talking, and if he kept talking like this, he wouldn't stay this sick forever. He couldn't. It wouldn't be right or fair if Gary Clark won after all this freaking heartache.

Silence stretched.

“I'll think about telling her,” Derek said. He pulled away and shifted his attention to his nightstand. He moved aside a half-empty glass of water. His watch. The lamp. A picture of him and her that made her smile because she remembered the moment he'd held out the camera in front of them and told her to say cheese. His fingers wandered across each item. She bit her lip as she watched his hand shake. He stopped and looked at her, eyebrows raised, after he finished searching. “Where's my phone?”

“I don't know,” she said. She scrabbled across the bed and grabbed hers from her nightstand. “You can use mine, though.”

He nodded as she handed the small flip phone to him. He stared at it as though he couldn't quite commit, but he didn't set the phone down, didn't move. She swallowed, and she kept her mouth shut, fought to keep her mouth shut. She didn't want to push him when he didn't need it. Not after the morning he'd had. He was still deciding, which meant he hadn't decided on no, yet, and—

“When does your shift start?” he said at last.

“I'm due in at 9:00 PM,” she said. “I have another graveyard shift.”

He looked at his lap. “She won't see me at 9:00 at night...”

“Ask her and see, Derek. If you need to wait until Monday to see her, we'll deal, but let's not make assumptions before you've spoken to her. Her number is in my contacts.”

He nodded. “O-okay,” he said softly. His nervous stutter made her heart clench. He popped open the clam shell of her phone. She listened to the beeps as he navigated her contact list. When he placed the speaker against his ear with a shaky hand, she settled behind him and wrapped her arms around his stomach. She kissed the back of his neck, and she rubbed her hands along the soft cotton of his shirt to reassure him.

“H...” he began. His voice died, and he regathered himself. “Hello, Dr. Wyatt.”

Meredith closed her eyes as she listened to Derek Shepherd ask for help for the second time.
Chapter 19

The shower rained around him, washing the vomit and bile away. Derek looked at the white and red tiled blur beyond his eyelashes, but didn't see. Nausea swirled. His mouth hung open, and his lips dripped the fluid remains of his stomach as he stood there. Helpless. Mark's bare, shaking arm wrapped under Derek's shoulders and held him up under the spray, but that was Derek's only barrier between upright and collapsed.

“See,” said Mark, his voice low-pitched and playful despite everything, “I imagine this is why people think we're gay.” The washcloth rasped against Derek's skin. Soap and suds spilled over him.

Derek shifted with a low groan. He hurt. Everything. His head throbbed. His joints creaked. His bones and muscles thrummed with discomfort. The battered fault line in his chest slipped with every breath, and he felt a bit like he'd swallowed acid.

Warm water gushed against his skin, and Mark stood against Derek's back to hold him upright, a massive well of body heat, but Derek was cold. Empty. He shivered. A deep-seated, crushing need squeezed him with every heartbeat. He needed to be full, and he would never be full again. His foot shifted and slipped on the porcelain floor of the tub. He didn't have the wherewithal to fight for balance, and so the slide continued until Mark squeezed, and his grip tightened around Derek's chest. Pain crushed him, and his armpits throbbed as he was dragged to his feet.

Again.

“Almost done,” Mark said.

Derek blinked. Water dripped into his eyes. His neck wouldn't support his head, and his gaze lurched to the side. He saw the slope of Mark's pale arm, a mist of water, and then nothing. “Hurts,” he croaked.

“I know,” Mark said. “Almost done.”

Derek shook his head. He needed. He needed. He wasn't almost done. He would never be done. He would never be full again. This hell would never end. He would be stuck here for... forever. His eyes pricked with tears. “It hurts,” he repeated, caught in a sob as the shower spun around him. He couldn't stand anymore. He couldn't—

Mark held him up. “I know,” said Mark. The washcloth rasped.

Derek's stomach churned. He tried to move. He tried. He twisted, feeble. The tub seesawed. Naked skin slipped on naked skin. Mark grunted with pain. Derek ended up bent over Mark's forearm at the waist, and the washcloth merely shifted to Derek's back, rasping. Derek panted. Each breath brought a line of fire to the slipping fault line in his chest, and his throat hurt. It hurt. His stomach clenched, and he vomited onto the floor of the tub by Mark's bare foot. Burning bile dripped from Derek's teeth as he sputtered and choked. He had nothing left. He was empty, and he hadn't slept. Empty, empty, empty. And tired. And glacier cold despite the steam and swelter and Mark.

“Stand up straight,” Mark said, his voice strained as he kept Derek from crashing to the floor of the tub. Barely. Derek shook. The washcloth made a wet splat as Mark slapped it onto the rack and grabbed Derek with both arms. The world shifted like a pinwheel. Colors. Pain. “Stand up,” Mark commanded again, and whether Derek could or would obey, it didn't matter. Pain followed, and
Mark dragged Derek up. Bigger. Mark had always been bigger. And stronger.

“Mark,” Derek wheezed more than said.

“I know this sucks, man,” Mark said. “But you have to help me out a bit.”

Derek needed, and it hurt. “Can’t.”

Mark's grip shifted, and he sighed, but he said nothing.

Derek shook. “I'll taper,” he said, his voice the barest wisp of sound between tortured panting. “Please.” He was empty. And broken. And he would never be full again. And he needed. Pounding shame wrapped around him like a frigid cloak as he begged. “Please.” He swallowed. “You could get me... refill.” He tripped over the words. Unforgiving ache loitered in his throat.

Mark washed the soap away, and the new vomit, and everything, without comment or complaint. He twisted the shower knobs and the thunderous rain ceased. Silence constricted around Derek. Empty. All empty. And cold. Freezing.

“Please,” said Derek, breathless as he dripped.

Mark shook his head, all vestiges of good humor sapped from his expression. “Even if I did get you a refill, and I let you take a pill,” Mark said as he dragged Derek out of the tub, “At this point, you'd just puke it up anyway. I'm not interested in more cuddle sessions in the shower, and I'm really not interested in cleaning up the rest of the fucking rug.”

Mark pounced on Derek with the towel as though he expected a fight. Derek didn't struggle as Mark wrapped him up. Derek had nothing. And he needed. The room lurched as Mark hauled Derek onto the toilet seat. The towel tightened and wicked the dripping water away. Derek shivered. He stared over his knees at the floor mat. He hurt, and he needed, and there was nothing else.

“Please,” Derek said, beyond rational thought, beyond anything. The room contracted and constricted. The lights dimmed. He couldn't breathe. He was empty, and cold, and he'd never be full again. “Please, I can't. I need it.”

The towel tightened around his body, and Mark squeezed Derek's shoulders like a vise, unyielding. “You can,” Mark snapped. “Stop saying you can't.”

“No,” Derek rasped. He struggled feebly with the wet towel. He couldn't breathe. "No, I can't." He fought the press of Mark's hands on his shoulders and tried to stand. Where would he go? He didn't know. He didn't know anything. The room spun. The towel caught his arms as he flailed for balance, and he stumbled. He fell in a gangly heap on the toilet seat, hobbled, but he couldn't stop struggling. Mark stared, open-mouthed, but the sight was a small needle in a haystack of sensory overload. Derek hurt. He hurt, and he needed. He needed, and he couldn't breathe, and the room was getting smaller and smaller. Shrinking. Crushing. “Please.” His vision blurred as a sheet of tears spilled over his eyes. He fought with the towel. Weak. “I need it.”

“You're weak,” Gary Clark growled. “Pathetic!”

Fire smashed Derek's face as Mark slapped him. The room whipped to the left with the blow. “Get a fucking grip, man. You don't need anything.”

Derek blinked, bell rung for a long moment.
Mark gripped Derek's shoulders, and he leaned in, inches from Derek, eye-to-eye. “You can do this,” Mark said, enunciating. Certain.

Derek swallowed as the room came back to him on an even keel. He was empty, and cold, and he would never be full. He hurt. Everywhere. But the slowly expanding balloon stuck in his chest had popped and dissipated. The pressure died. His feelings didn't grow. He just was. He wasn't becoming more.

“Do you hit all your patients?” Derek said, his voice cracking with strain. His throat bloomed with caustic fire, and he decided he wouldn't speak anymore. He grabbed the towel from Mark and started helping despite his exhaustion. Everything hurt. He was empty. He wanted to lie down and let the world go away.

Mark shook his head. “Just the idiot neurosurgeons,” he said, his voice soft. His eyes crinkled with a hint of returning humor.

Derek nodded. He closed his eyes and rested while Mark grabbed a towel and dried himself. Derek would say thank you when his throat didn't hurt so much.

Gary Clark laughed raucously in Derek's ears, and all he wanted to do was shut it out.

“Have you even listened to a fu— single word I've said?” Derek snapped, barely holding the top on the funnel of fire in his head. His head hurt, and he wanted to yell until he couldn't anymore, because Gary Clark was laughing, and he wouldn't stop, and Dr. Wyatt thought a pill was the answer.

Dr. Wyatt met Derek's angry gaze with calm rationality. “I've listened to every word, Dr. Shepherd.”

The fish tank burbled. Colorful fish floated lazily back in forth in the small tank. The room smelled like some kind of flower or potpourri. The colors in the room were muted. Taupe and soft oranges and cheerful things. Dr. Wyatt sat in her chair with her fucking pen and her notepad, and he wanted to yank the pillows from the sofa and throw them at her. Or the fish. Or both.

“Then why the hell do you want to put me on Paxil?” he said.

“Because I believe, for your situation, it's the right choice,” Dr. Wyatt said.

Meredith trusted this woman. He'd come here for help. He'd asked for help. He'd spent the last two hours telling her everything. Everything. From the nightmares, to the panic attacks, to the time he'd wandered into the gun shop, to the drugs, to everything except for his loitering murderer’s ghost. All the things that had taken him weeks to admit to Meredith, because he needed help, and he wanted to get better, and he was sick and tired of being sick and tired, and Dr. Wyatt's response was that she wanted to put him on a fucking pill for his trouble. All that, and her solution was a drug. One that would take Meredith away from him along with everything else, and he needed Meredith. He needed her.

“I just went through hell to get clean, and you want to put me on another drug,” he said.

“You'll never be free,” Gary Clark said between guffaws. He'd been laughing and commenting for hours. He'd walked in circles around Derek's bed, and Derek had tried to ignore him. Tried to burrow away. He had. Then Meredith had pulled him out of freefall, but Mr. Clark had still been there. “No one can help you,” his ghost continued. “She can't help you. The look on your face
when you begged her was worth it, though.” His voice crept into falsetto. “Help me, Dr. Wyatt. Please.”

“Paxil is an SSRI,” Dr. Wyatt explained, her voice rich, cool, calm. Everything Derek didn't feel. “It's non-addictive.”

“I don't care,” Derek said. “It's still a drug, and I can't...” He closed his eyes, and he ran his fingers through his hair, and Gary Clark laughed. “Stop it!” he roared, and then he collapsed on the couch as his eyes pricked with tears. As fast as the molten fury had sloshed into him, it receded, leaving only desperation. The empty, cold feeling in his gut constricted. He needed this to stop. “I can't... Please.”

“Yes,” said Gary Clark. “Beg more. That will solve it.”

“Dr. Shepherd.” Dr. Wyatt shifted. She put her pen and her notepad down and she leaned forward. “Derek. You're right. It is a drug.”

“But—”

“Drug addiction is often co-morbid with mental illness,” Dr. Wyatt said. “SSRIs are often a first line of defense in treating addiction. Paxil, specifically, is used to treat panic disorders, anxiety, depression, and post traumatic stress, all of which you experience badly enough that they're affecting your ability to lead a normal life. Given those factors, I believe that Paxil is the appropriate choice for you.”

“It's another drug,” Derek said. He wrapped his arms around his stomach. He needed. He needed so badly. He couldn't take needing more. And he couldn't... He didn't want... “I can't. Please, I can't.”

“Can you give me a reason why?” Dr. Wyatt prodded.

“It's a drug. I don't want a pill telling me how to feel.” Taking Meredith away.

“Anti-depressants don't tell you how to feel, Derek,” Dr. Wyatt said, misinterpreting him, not that he blamed her this time. “Not if they're working correctly. They're not like benzodiazepines. All they do is tell you that you don't have to feel like you feel, now.”

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“A few antidepressants don't tell you how to feel, Derek,” Dr. Wyatt said, misinterpreting him, not that he blamed her this time. “Not if they're working correctly. They're not like benzodiazepines. All they do is tell you that you don't have to feel like you feel, now.”

“It's a drug,” Derek spat.

Dr. Wyatt nodded. “It is,” she said. “And I know that's invasive.”

“It's a mind-altering drug,” Derek said. “That's pretty damned invasive. And Paxil is infamous for the side-effects.”

“You're right,” she said. Placated. “It is. But it's also lauded for how powerful it is, and how fast it acts. You could be feeling better in a matter of weeks. Not months, if we try something else.”

“If I get the side-effects, I won't feel better,” he said.

“Can you tell me which side-effects concern you?”

“Which do you think?”

“I want you to tell me,” she said reasonably.

He swallowed, and he closed his eyes. Meredith had found him in a shaky heap hours ago. She'd held him close as he'd called Dr. Wyatt, who had not only offered to come in for him on her day
off, but had offered to see him immediately. Meredith hadn't complained as she'd driven him to the hospital at 5:00 PM, four hours too early for her shift. She'd waited with him outside Dr. Wyatt's office. She'd hugged him when Dr. Wyatt had arrived, made sure he was okay, smiled her soft, hopeful, effortless smile that he loved, told him everything would be okay in a way that made him want to believe despite everything, made him want to believe Dr. Wyatt could and would help. He could still feel the brush of Meredith's lips on his skin, the heat of her body as she rested against his chest. And she was pregnant. They were going to be parents.

“I don't enjoy anything anymore but Meredith,” he said, blunt, hopeless, because he didn't. He didn't enjoy anything but her. She was his sanctuary. One he'd perpetuated in the Other Place. The one he couldn't go to anymore. “I hate my job. I can't stand being around people. I'm frightened all the time. I'm tired all the time. My body hurts. All the time. I need to be able to have sex. I need to want it. I need it because it's all I have that I look forward to anymore. It's the only thing that feels good except...”

He looked at his feet because he couldn't look at Dr. Wyatt or the fish or anything. He'd spent five days in hell. He'd been held up in the shower by Mark. He'd ruined his and Meredith's bed with his vomit. And he still wanted. Needed. And he couldn't have. Wouldn't have. Never again. His wife was pregnant, and he couldn't do this anymore. His throat closed as hopelessness burbled through his body. This would never stop. And if he took the Paxil, the only thing he found solace in would be gone, and all that would be left was this horrible, eternal wanting.

“The Percocet felt good?” Dr. Wyatt said, as though she'd sensed innately which way Derek's thoughts had drifted.

Silence stretched. He listened to the fish tank. “Yes,” he admitted.

“It helped you forget those things that you don't enjoy.”

“Yes.”

“Like your job, and being around people, and being scared and tired and hurting.”

“Yes,” he said softly.

Dr. Wyatt leaned forward. “What if you could flip a switch?”

He looked up. “What do you mean?” he said.

“What if you could like your job again, and not be scared or tired or hurting?”

He blinked. He wanted that so much. A lump formed in his throat. “But... I couldn't have sex,” he said.

“Derek, that might not even happen to you,” Dr. Wyatt said.

“No,” he said. “No, there are a million things that can go wrong with...” He swallowed. SSRIs caused all sorts of problems. They could tank his libido. Prevent orgasms. Remove pleasure from orgasms. Cause erectile dysfunction or slow his ability to climax to a frustrating level that would sap all the fun out of whatever intimacy he might be able to achieve. The penis was sort of a marvel of biological engineering, and it was one of the easiest things in the male body to fuck up. One broken or weak bit brought the whole system down. “I don't want to mess with it. I need sex. I need Meredith.”

“That's right,” said Mr. Clark. “Your options are being a eunuch, or being a sobbing, cowardly
pansy who wets himself. Pick your poison.” Laughter followed. “I can't believe you thought she'd actually help you. There is no help for you. You're a raging failure, and you're stuck that way.”

“If you have problems, we can always make changes and adjustments,” Dr. Wyatt said. “I just want to get you to a stable baseline as fast as possible.”

“I can't,” Derek said. “Please, I need help, but I can't do that. I can't do... I can't.”

“We can try just therapy if that's what you truly want.”

He pressed his face into his hands and sighed as the lump in his throat bulged like a melon. He couldn’t swallow. His eyes burned. There were no options. It was hopeless.

“But you don't think it will work,” he said. His voice cracked.

She shrugged. “It might.”

“It won't,” said Gary Clark with a sneer. “Ever.”

“Determination can do a lot to help move things along,” Dr. Wyatt said.

Derek sighed and looked up at her. “Then why do I sense a 'but'?” he said.

“Because there is a 'but',” said Dr. Wyatt. “I want you to think about things realistically.”

“How am I not being realistic?”

“You have an illness, Derek. Because of what happened to you, your brain is sick. It's sending you messages that aren't normal, and that you don't want, and that are interfering with your ability to function. Not treating this with medication is like, in my mind, not treating a gushing wound with stitches. The wound might still heal without them, but there will be more scarring, it will be more painful, the skin will take a lot longer to knit, and in your case, things have already gotten infected.”

“How much longer will it take to knit?”

“A lot longer,” Dr. Wyatt said.

“Would it take longer than eight months if I didn't take the pills?” Derek said.

She shook her head. “I don't know. I can't give you that answer. Every person is different.”

“But if I took Paxil, I might feel better next week?”

“Or the week after, or maybe in a month, yes,” Dr. Wyatt said.

“Choices, choices. Don't fuck your wife, or listen to me,” said Mr. Clark. “Forever.”

“I really think it will make you feel better,” Dr. Wyatt continued, “And when you feel better, therapy is a lot more likely to work for you, and you'll be a lot less likely to want to utilize harmful coping methods.”

“Like Percocet,” Derek said.

“Exactly,” she said.
“It would help me... not want that?” He brushed streaking tears from his face. He had no idea when they'd started. He'd given up ever controlling himself again. Things happened, and he was left with the pieces. His vision blurred as his eyes filled up again. He blinked. Wet slivers curled over his eyelashes and tore down his cheeks.

“It would,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Subconsciously or purposefully, you've been self-medicating. If we take away the reasons you did that, I think it would help with the addiction as well.”

Derek, it'll be okay, Meredith had said a long time ago. Maybe not tomorrow. Or next week. But it will be. If I can be here, wrapped around you, not running and not wanting to run after all this, we can be okay. Eventually. It just won't be a surgical fix.

He sniffed. “Paxil is my... surgery?”

“It is,” said Dr. Wyatt, following his metaphor. “I truly believe it is. And if I'm wrong, or if you're unhappy with how it affects things it's not supposed to be affecting, we can always change it. There are lots of different choices we can make. Zoloft, for instance. It's not an exact science. But the sooner we start, the faster we'll get to a solution that works specifically for you.”

“O...okay,” Derek said. Abject misery pulled his face into his hands, and he couldn't look up while he cried.

“Pathetic,” said Mr. Clark. “Eunuch it is.”

“Okay?” Dr. Wyatt prodded.

Derek nodded. He couldn't find his voice.

“We can do this, Derek. Okay?”

He swallowed. “I'm tired,” he said. He sounded pathetic.

Dr. Wyatt licked her lips, and she stood up from the chair. “Derek, we will find something that works for you. I promise we will. And you'll feel better. The point of this is to get you feeling better, not worse. Okay? Some doctors might be happy with a partial solution, but I'm not and never will be, and if you don't like the Paxil, we'll change it once you're stable. This isn't a death sentence for your sex-life.”

The cushions sank as she sat on the couch beside him. She didn't touch, and she kept a wide, professional bubble between her and him, but the closeness... helped. Her calm, reassuring presence helped. He swallowed. His throat felt raw. He thought for a minute about Meredith. What she would want him to do. She smiled at him behind his eyelids.

I want you to be happy again, she'd say. Sex isn't the only way to express love or whatever. Why are you so freaking worried? He could hear her saying the words in all her inarticulate glory.

“I need you to be on board with this, or I won't prescribe it,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Are you on board with this, Derek?”

He nodded. “Okay,” he said.

She nodded. “Okay,” she said with a small smile that was probably supposed to be reassuring. “Now, I know you're tired, but want to discuss your panic attacks before you leave. I think that the Paxil is likely to decrease or eliminate those, given time, but in the meantime, there are lots of things you can do that can help when you experience one coming on.”
By the time he finished with Dr. Wyatt and picked up his Paxil prescription from Gregory Wallace at the hospital pharmacy, nearly four hours had passed. 8:00 PM had come and gone, and 9:00 PM had knocked. He felt tired and sick and nervous. His throat still hurt from the abuse of the last week. And he just wanted to go home, except home would be empty.

He needed to find Meredith. Just for a moment. He'd promised he would. And he needed to see if Richard was around because he didn't know when he would be back anymore. He didn't know anything. And Richard needed to know he would be in charge for a while longer. Derek hadn't spoken to Richard in weeks. Meredith had done all the work, and that wasn't fair to her.

Derek closed his eyes. They burned with exhaustion, and his sense of the hallway seemed to wobble. The rumble of a stretcher rolling past at the hands of an orderly dragged him back into focus. He sighed, and he tried to relax his stiff muscles. Everything ached from tension to the point that ibuprofen wasn't really helping. He kept moving.

Richard was in Derek's office. A dim light illuminated the small desk with sharp yellow tones, but darkness gripped the rest of the office. Shadows stretched in the room, muted by the bright white light in the hospital beyond the glass windows. Derek glanced at his watch and shook his head. 9:00 PM on the nose on a Saturday, and there Richard was. Working. His undivided attention on the paperwork in front of him. His pen scribbled as he signed something.

Derek rapped his knuckles on the open door. “Richard,” he said. His voice cracked, and his throat hurt. He sounded sort of like he'd had strep throat. Or like he had when he'd been recovering from pneumonia.

“Derek,” Richard said without looking up. He flipped to the next paper in his stack and scribbled more with his pen. Then he froze. The heavy sheaf of papers collapsed with a slap, and Richard stared at him. “Derek!” he said. He pushed back his chair and stood as Derek moved toward the desk. “You want to tell me why my star neurosurgeon disappeared for a week after showing up for a day, just a day, and all I got was a cryptic message from Meredith about the flu?”

“I'm not here to work,” Derek said. “And I'm not your neurosurgeon.”

“Not here to...” Richard shook his head, and his look creased into a frustrated glare. “What do you mean, you're not here to work? You certainly don't look like you have the flu.”

“I... can't,” Derek said. He collapsed into the chair across from Richard, who didn't sit. His former boss remained a tower of incredulity on the other side of the desk. “I need more time off.”

“Well, you can't have more time off,” said Richard. “You've taken almost three months already if you include this week.”

“You're not my boss anymore, Richard,” Derek snapped, and then he closed his eyes as regret filled him. God, he was tired. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “I was going to... tell the Board. Jennings. I have a letter from...” He swallowed. The recommendation letter Dr. Wyatt had typed for him felt heavy in his pocket, like a slab of iron. They wouldn't make him work after reading it. “I have a letter.”

“I can't force you to take time off,” Dr. Wyatt said.

“I thought...”

“I can't force you to take time off,” Dr. Wyatt repeated. “I know you were worried about that, and I want to assure you because of privacy laws that I'm in no position to force you not to go back, or
to tell your superiors what you've told me about your drug problem, but I'd really like you to take time off. In fact, I urge it. You're not in any shape to work right now. Not in such a high stress position."

He closed his eyes. “I don't want to go back,” he said as he thought of all the people. The strangers. The bustle. The pressure. The now, now, now of it all. His collapse on the catwalk in front of everybody. The mountains of budgetary paperwork he'd suffered through within hours of returning in an official capacity. The parts he didn't despise scared him to death.

“Good,” Dr. Wyatt said. “That's a healthy decision.”

“But I've already taken all my disability leave,” he'd said. “There's nothing left.”

She nodded. “Let me write a letter of recommendation for you. I can make it as vague or as specific as you want. You can show it to your boss, and that should give you a bit of breathing room.”

He nodded, silent.

“Then why are you even here?” Richard demanded.

“I can't work right now. I'm not in any... condition to work. I'll take an unpaid leave of absence if I have to,” Derek said.

“How long?”

“A few more weeks.” At least.

“Weeks?”

Derek nodded.

It is my professional opinion that Dr. Shepherd cannot fulfill his duties without considerable danger to his psychological well-being, the letter said. That was it. It didn't mention post traumatic stress, or drugs, or anything. It just made it clear that making Derek work would be a disaster in the long run. The Board wouldn't be happy, but they couldn't afford to have a high profile surgeon suffer a nervous breakdown on the job. Not ever, but especially not after everything else that had happened to tarnish Seattle Grace's reputation. He'd already had a panic attack on the catwalk in full view. A year before, he'd gone a drunken binge and nearly quit after Jen had died on his table. The Board would read the letter and believe it.

Derek Shepherd was a flight risk.

Richard's eyes narrowed. “You could do that,” he said.

He sat in his chair, which creaked. Derek followed his mentor's gaze to Derek's hands, shaking at the edge of the desk as he clutched the bag containing his new prescription. Derek licked his lip and stuffed his hands in his lap with the bag, out of view. He fiddled with the bag. It crinkled. One moment passed. Two. Richard's gaze softened, and the space between them seemed to cool as the older man switched modes from frustrated boss to something else.

“Derek, tell me what's going on,” Richard said.

Derek looked at his lap. The stonewashed denim of his jeans looked dark indigo in the dim light. “Meredith is preg...” He cleared his throat when his voice failed. “Pregnant.”
Richard's expression lit up like a sparkling bouquet of firecrackers, and a smile tore across his face. “Really? That's wonderful!” he said as he launched forward. The sudden movement to shake Derek's hand, or clap him on the back, or... something, made Derek flinch and roll back in his chair. He lost his grip on the bag containing his prescription, and the bottle spilled and rolled onto Richard's desk. The bag fluttered to the floor. Derek's heart throbbed, and he panted. His blood rushed in his ears. Tension coiled as Richard fell silent and watched Derek put himself back together. Slowly.

“Pathetic,” said Mr. Clark.

Derek pulled his shaky fingers through his hair. “I'm sorry. I...”

“Not a problem,” said Richard, his gaze suspicious.

Derek moved to pick up his pill bottle. He met Richard's hand midair. Richard cleared his throat. Derek took the bottle from Richard's warm grasp.

“When is she due?” Richard asked as Derek fumbled for the bag on the floor and stuffed the bottle away out of sight. If Richard had seen what the pills were for, he made no indication.

“We don't know yet,” Derek said. “We just found out yesterday.”

“Is that what this is about?” Richard said. “Can I help?”

“No, I... If I had a scalpel right now... I wouldn't mean to, but I'd kill someone. I can't be this way if I'm supposed to be a dad.” A noise crashed in the hallway, and Derek flinched again. A startled exclamation stuck in his throat. He couldn't stop himself from reacting to anything anymore. His heart raced as he looked over his shoulder to see what had happened. Just the janitor passing with a cart and a mop. That was all. Frustration coiled in his gut.

“Derek...” Richard said, his voice low. Concerned. “You weren't out with the flu, were you?”

“No,” Derek said as he resettled himself in the chair. “No, I'm...” His eyes burned. “I'm a bit of a mess,” he admitted. He didn't know why. Like he'd been abraded, and rubbed raw, and he had no fortitude anymore to not spill himself to the first person who asked a prying question. At least this was Richard. Someone who'd been his friend. Not as much lately, but...

“He'll think you're a hypocrite if he finds out,” said Gary Clark. “You practically got him canned for the same problem. And then you took his job like a shark.”

“Is it the shooting?” Richard said.

Derek nodded. His voice was gone.

“He wanted you. And he was upset,” Richard said. Derek squeezed his eyes shut. Richard had spoken to... Richard had... Derek rocked in his chair. He couldn't think about this. He couldn't think about anything. A gunshot ricocheted in his head. The room snapped into endless white. He tumbled backward, and he hit the ground. Pain. He couldn't breathe. “What happened to you, Derek? What did he do?” Richard prodded, pulling Derek back. Derek blinked, and the sprawling white bled away.

“I made a mistake by unplugging his wife, and he shot me,” Derek snapped. “He shot everyone.”

“Mr. Clark was a sick man, Derek,” Richard said. “His wife's living will was very clear. You didn't make a mistake. And his wife was my patient. Not yours.”
Derek shook his head. “I need to go. You just... You have your job for a while. I wanted to warn... tell you.” He stood, and the room spun around his head like a carousel, and he almost toppled. He was tired. And stressed. And he couldn’t...

A warm hand cupped his shoulder and pushed him back into the chair. The light at the desk went out, and the room sank into comforting, cold darkness. “Why don't you relax for a minute?” Richard said. “I’ll see if I can find Meredith for you.”

Derek said nothing as Richard closed the office door behind him with a soft thud. Derek closed his eyes, and exhaustion pulled him into a doze in moments, despite the tension, despite everything. His sense of the room waned to nothing.

He lay in the dark in the bed, propped to the side by pillows. He clawed at the sheets. He couldn't move. His chest hurt, and it was dark. Pitch. His throat hurt like he’d been yelling.

“He lay in the dark in the bed, propped to the side by pillows. He clawed at the sheets. He couldn't move. His chest hurt, and it was dark. Pitch. His throat hurt like he’d been yelling.

“Derek, you're dreaming,” Meredith murmured. Her hand wandered over his shaking bicep. She snuggled closer as sleep abandoned him.

He made a noise. This wasn't the hospital. It was too dark. He tried to remember where he was. The house. The bedroom. He'd been home for a night. He couldn't breathe or move as he listened to the odd sounds of the house settling and civilization beyond the window. Rain thundered on the roof, and wet cars swished past on the street outside.

“S'okay, go back to sleep,” Meredith said against his skin. “Bad dream.”

He clenched his jaw. “Meredith,” he said. He sounded wrecked. Breathy.

She twitched and snapped awake as he clutched her. “What's wrong?” she said. She raised her head and stared at him. He couldn't see her face, but he felt her there. Eye-to-eye in the darkness. Worried.

“Meredith,” he repeated.

She brushed his face with her hand. “It's okay. You're okay,” she said. “Do you need something?”

He swallowed. His breaths arrived as wheezy pants. His eyes watered as he tried to force himself to inflate. An elephant had stepped on him. “My chest,” he said. “Hurts.”

“Not your back?”

He shook his head. “Chest.”

She nodded, sniffing. “Let me get your pills,” she said, and she rolled away. The jingle of the bottle hit his ears.

“Hey,” Meredith said, her voice low and whisper-y, and she brought the world back. He opened his eyes, and light bisected the darkness. He blinked. Her blurry shape resolved in front of him. She smiled. Her palm touched his face. “How are you doing?” she said.

“Meredith,” he murmured. He swallowed and wiped the sleep from his eyes, except it wouldn't go away. Exhaustion weighed him down. The prescription bag fell from his lap as he shifted, trying to become aware. She kissed him.

“How did it go with Dr. Wyatt?” Meredith said. She wore her periwinkle scrubs and a white undershirt, and she looked... fresh. For once. Not beset by worry. Glowing.
He pulled her against him, and he rested with his face in her hair. Breathing. Her body was warm. She wrapped her arms around him, and they hovered in silence for a long time.

“You're pregnant,” he said, his voice tired, as he rubbed her arms with his palms.

“I am,” she said.

A wide smile stretched across her face and lit her up like one of his young nieces on Christmas morning. Uncle Derek, he remembered Mary saying, with her big brown eyes wide like bowling balls as she stared at the lighted tree, Santa came! The last Christmas he’d visited his family. Years ago. Addison had still been asleep. Mary had tugged on his pajamas with her tiny hands and dragged him down the steps to join the other kids who'd woken early. He'd been the first adult sentient that morning. 4:00 AM. The tree had glowed in the dark living room like a bonfire, and shiny presents had sprawled for what seemed like miles.

His heart squeezed when the words changed in his head. Dad. Daddy. Daddy, look! Santa came! A lump formed in his throat, and he tightened his grip around Meredith.

“I told her,” he said.

Meredith ran her fingers through his hair. “Everything?”

He sighed. “Most things.”

“It's a start,” she said. “Are you going back to see her again?”

“Every day this week except tomorrow.”

Dr. Wyatt had penciled him in for 1:00 PM, every weekday until the end of creation, actually. She'd insisted he see her every day until they started making some progress. The thought of it, of putting himself on display for a stranger again and again and again, made him tired, and he became acutely aware of all his aches and pains. His eyelids drooped.


He gave her a weak smile. Ditto, he said with his eyes, but didn't speak it. “I'm really tired,” he said.

She nodded. “I know. I know you are. Thank you for going to see her.”

“Yeah.”

He gripped her shoulder and struggled to stand. His back unfurled, but not without protest, and he couldn't stop the wince that crept across his face, or the soft, muttered groan that fell from his lips. He stood in her space, breathing the soft scent of lavender, as the aching receded. She bent down. Something crinkled. She'd picked up his prescription. She looked at it. Her eyebrows raised as she pulled the bottle from the bag and stared at the instructions.

“That's a really big dose,” she said.

“Apparently, I'm messed up enough to warrant one,” he snapped, raw and hurting. He swallowed, and he looked away. “Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm tired.”

“It's okay,” she said, which made him feel worse. It wasn't okay that he yelled at her for no reason. It never had been.
They moved slowly to the office doorway. Richard stood on the far side of the hall, his arms crossed. He looked at the ceiling, surreptitious, but obviously waiting for his office to clear out. Derek rubbed the bridge of his nose. He took the prescription away from Meredith and sighed. He leaned into her.

“I need to go home,” he said, his voice soft against her ear. Her loose hair brushed the side of his face, and he breathed her in, once, twice, before he added, “I'll take it at home.”

“That's fine,” she said. “I'll drive you.”

He shook his head. “I can get a taxi.”

“Are you sure?”

“You need to work, Mere.”

She sighed but didn't argue. She stood, her arms wrapped around his back, and they hovered in the office doorway for minute after minute. She stroked his back, and he listened to the rasp, rasp, rasp in the quiet hall. This late on a Saturday, the catwalk and office complexes in the surrounding areas were often empty, and not many people walked to and fro. She kissed his throat, and then the stroking motions stopped. Her fingers scrunched his t-shirt.

“Let's go somewhere,” she said.

He lifted his head. “Hmm? Now?”

“Next weekend,” she said. “You need to get out of the house and relax. We both need it. It'll be good. We've been talking about our future first couple-y vacation. Why not?”

“Meredith—”

She splayed a palm against his chest. “Don't say it,” she said, interrupting him. “If I smash two thirty-six-hour shifts together with a small break between, I can hit my eighty hour cap by Friday afternoon. We'll have the whole weekend.”

He stared at her. Her gray eyes sparkled in the dim light. Her lips pressed into a flat line, and her nose scrunched. Her determined face. He'd seen it a lot lately. When she'd told him he couldn't stay home alone for his withdrawal. When she'd told him he needed to see somebody. He swallowed. The ache in his head that her presence had tempered returned with roaring force. He was too tired to argue when he knew he would never win.

He shrugged. “Whatever you want.”

“I'll think of someplace we can go,” she said. “You relax this week.”

Except she was pregnant. And if she intended to work eighty hours in the space of five days... where would she find the time to plan and arrange a trip? That wasn't healthy even for somebody who wasn't pregnant. “Meredith, you—”

“Maybe wine country?” she interrupted. A small smile tugged at her lips. “First impulses are usually good.”

“Maybe,” he said.

She cradled her womb. “Forty-eight hours. Uninterrupted.” Sex, she didn't say, but she'd seen the
Paxil. She'd commented on it. She knew what it did. Didn't she? He felt sick as she continued, “Though, sampling the wine would be out.”

“It would,” he replied. “But, Meredith—”


“You have a cabin?” Meredith said.

Derek closed his eyes as he listened to the excitement drip into Meredith's tone. He wouldn't win. Not when she sounded like that. He fingered the bag, and it crinkled. Mood killer in a bottle.

“I bought it on a whim when Adele kicked me out again,” Richard said. “When I was drinking.”

“Oh,” replied Meredith. Silence followed.

“It's a bit of a bachelor pad, but it's quiet,” Richard added. “It's got a beautiful view of the lake. And it's free. I can bring you the keys tomorrow.”

“That would be really nice, Chief,” Meredith said.

“Listen, I, uh...” Richard swallowed. He glanced at his watch. “I'm headed home.” He looked at Derek. “Did you need a ride?”

“I was going to grab a taxi,” Derek said.

“Well, I'm happy to take you,” Richard said.

Derek shrugged. One the one hand, it meant he didn't have to wait for a taxi or help the driver navigate. On the other, it meant he would have to ride home with Richard. “If you're sure,” Derek said, trying not to sound too wary. He figured he sounded more tired than anything else. He rubbed his burning eyes.

“Oh, this will be swell,” said Mr. Clark.

“No trouble at all,” replied Richard, oblivious. “Let me just grab my coat and hat.”

Meredith turned to Derek. They shuffled out of the doorway to allow Richard to pass and then leaned against the wall by the door. She brushed her fingers through his hair, and he pulled her into his arms. “I'll see you tomorrow when I get home, okay?” she said. “Call me if you need anything.”

“Okay,” he whispered.

“Meredith...” Richard said as he exited the office and pulled shut the door, his briefcase, coat, and hat in hand. “I wanted to say congratulations.”

Meredith glanced at Derek. He gave her a thin smile. They'd decided to tell whoever was pertinent at the time, since most of her friends already seemed to know, anyway. Or, at least, that's what he'd thought they'd decided. “I told him,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, and he relaxed when no anger swelled in her sparkling gaze. She just seemed... pleased. Thrilled. Her hands absently went to her belly, and he couldn't help the smile that ignited
on his face as he watched her do something so small and simple. She turned to Richard. Her cheeks flushed, but Derek thought it made her look beautiful. Not embarrassed. “Thanks. I’m...” She made a small shrugging motion and bit her lip in a gesture that was purely Meredith. The Meredith he loved. “Thanks.”

They said their goodbyes and parted. Derek, clutching his prescription bag, followed Richard to the parking lot as fast as his tired body would allow, which wasn't fast, though Richard said nothing about the stilted pace of their departure. The older man had a jaunty step. His coat folded down over his leather briefcase, and he held his hat tucked under his arm. The weather outside was fairly balmy, though damp, as summer stretched its remaining muscles. The street lights buzzed and reflected on the dark, wet pavement. The staff lot was quiet, mostly.

The soft purr of a car prowling past made Derek look up and assess. The vehicle kept moving into the dark, away, and he would have relaxed, except looking up made him realize how dark it was. How solitary. His pupils strained to adjust as he stared beyond row after row of cars. His heart squeezed as he looked at all the places where one could hide with a gun. Parked cars became malevolent. Unlit headlamps and front grills became glaring faces. Each vehicle could hide the crouching body of a person. Easily.

A cool breeze ruffled his hair and his shirt. Richard whistled as they walked. At least he didn't make small talk. Derek forced himself to move despite the disquiet snarling in his head and pressing on his chest. They walked between a pair of parked cars. Nervous energy made his steps shaky.

They'd almost made it to Richard's car when the air around Derek lit like a supernova. Cacophony burst in his ears, unexpected after the muted almost-silence, and Derek slammed into the parked car on his left. His fingers slipped on the wet paint as his eardrums curdled with the horrible noise. His innards dropped out from his body, and his knees wobbled. He fought the urge to curl up into a ball or explode into a sprint as the blaring horn kept going, and going, and another horn joined it, a rapid blast of noise, until Derek's chest hurt and everything hurt, and he wanted to run, except he had no idea where to, because the painful light and the muted colors flashed and confused everything.

Through the blur, several feet away to the right, the headlights of a car speared the intersection, blocked in part by a shadow and glowing tail lights and a blinking yellow turn signal. As fast as the honking had started, it stopped. He blinked against the bright glare of the oncoming car. Having settled their quarrel, the first car slid through the intersection. The second turned left and moved perpendicular. Derek tensed as the first car rumbled in front of him as it moved down the parking lot's aisle, and then faded into the distance. The parking lot darkened and quieted. Derek's heart throbbed. He swallowed. A hand touched his shoulder, and he made an embarrassing noise. Not a word. Just fear. Solid, abject, unabated. “Stop,” he managed, his voice throaty and miserable as he made his stand against his nerves, but Gary Clark, who'd been silent for so long, began to laugh and laugh and laugh. The hand that had touched him lifted away.

“You're a hoot to watch, you know,” said Mr. Clark. “It's better than cable.”

And then all Derek could hear was laughing and more laughing, and he tried to curl away, but a solid wall of metal blocked him on one side. Shadows lurched around him. He couldn't breathe, and he—

“Derek!” Richard shouted in Derek's ear, and the shock was enough to snap reality back into place. Derek stood in the dark parking lot, trembling against a beige Impala. He turned. He felt nauseous, and he fought the urge to let the threat of Richard's imposing figure slip into his thighs and his
knees and his toes and make him move backward. It didn't work. Derek stumbled. His back hit the parked car with a thunk, and he couldn't speak. His throat closed.

“Derek,” said Richard, his voice softer. He backed away, and he raised his hands so they both were visible. Pink palms hovered in the darkness.

“I'm sorry,” Derek croaked. He blinked, and then he was crying. In front of his fucking former boss. “I'm sorry,” he repeated. Useless. Nothing helped. He was useless. He tried to remember all the things Dr. Wyatt had told him about panic attacks, but they flew from his grasp like a scattering flock of birds, and he couldn't think about anything other than the fact that the parking lot was really dark. Tenebrous. Shadows stretched and then seemed to coil and gather. Somebody was hiding out there somewhere. He knew it.

“It's okay,” Richard said, soft, slow. He pointed to his car, parked three spaces down, and hit his key fob with his thumb. The car chirped, and the headlights turned on. The keys jingled. “Move when you're ready. It's okay.”

Derek forced himself to shuffle toward Richard's car. Forced. He couldn't stop his hands from shaking. He settled into the soft leather seat of Richard's sedan and pulled the seatbelt over his lap. He swallowed. He swallowed again. Nothing would stop the sick feeling quivering in his stomach that he was being stalked. He locked the car door beside him, and he sat there. Shaking.

He flinched when Richard settled into the car, and he flinched when Richard slammed shut his door. The walls closed in. Derek tried to think about the rules. What Dr. Wyatt had said. His heart pounded in his chest. And then he couldn't breathe, and he couldn't think, and he was dying. In the seat. Dying. He clawed at his throat.

“Breathe in,” Richard said from far away. “Listen to me. Breathe in, and hold it.”

Derek breathed.

“Now, let it out,” said Richard.

Derek exhaled.

“In.”

Derek closed his eyes.

_The most important thing you can do for yourself during a panic attack is breathe_, Dr. Wyatt had said. _Focus on yourself. Breathe in. Hold it for three. Breathe out over three seconds. Okay? Keep doing that as long as you feel like you need it._

Derek collapsed over his knees and kept breathing. He lost track of Richard as Dr. Wyatt's voice filled his head. _Stop and replace the panic thought. Think about something you know you like instead of what's scaring you._

Derek scrunched his fingers in his hair. Meredith. Pregnant. Meredith was pregnant. He needed to be able to do this. _Pickles and ice cream_, he imagined her demanding at 3:00 AM. She would tug on his shirt in the middle of the night. He'd roll over and mumble something. _Derek, she'd say more insistently. Derek, I really want pickles, and we don't have any._ She would be swollen with their child. A boy or a girl. He would be thrilled with either one. _The spears, not the little circles. And they should be extra crunchy!_ she would command. And he would take pity on her and drag himself to the supermarket in the middle of the night. Again. Because she'd asked, and it was his fault she was suffering, anyway. Well, half his fault. But he would do it.
When he came back to himself in the car, he felt... better. Exhausted. Beaten. Hurting. But better. Not scared. He blinked when he realized it'd actually worked. He'd stopped panicking on his own, and he'd only had to get to step two of seven. He cleared his throat as he unfurled his body and relaxed shakily in the seat.

“You weren't like this on Monday,” Richard said.

“I know I wasn't like this on Monday,” Derek snapped. He'd been fucking high. Now, he had nothing, and every little thing was making him feel like crawling into bed and never getting out again. He stared at the bag by his feet containing the Paxil.

*I really think it will make you feel better,* Dr. Wyatt had said.

A lump formed in his throat. He hoped so. He couldn't live like this. He couldn't do this anymore.

“Sorry,” said Richard as Derek stared out the window through a blur of tears.

Derek wiped his face, but he said nothing. As they went over the last speed bump before the main street, he pressed his face against the cool glass. He didn't want to think anymore. Exhaustion won. His eyelids drooped, and he hovered somewhere less than half-awake, but not quite unaware. Cars swished past on the wet road, repetitive. Hypnotic. He blinked once. Twice. The blur beyond his eyelashes became unimportant, and he closed his eyes.

“So, what should we name her?” Meredith said as they sat at the table in the kitchen.

*Derek nursed a small bowl of cereal mixed with peach yogurt. He crunches through another bite as he looked up. He swallowed. Sunlight fell through the windows. The bright light made the ends of her hair glow, and she looked warm. Happy.*

“Her?” he said.

“The baby.”

“It's a her?”

Meredith shrugged. “I think so.”

He leaned on his elbows and grinned at her. “Oh, you do?”

She nodded. “I do. So, what name?”

“I thought you liked Anne.”

“I do,” she said. “But do you? Maybe, we should get a name book since this is more relevant, now.”

“I like Anne,” he said.

*He took another bite of cereal. He swallowed. She sat across from him with a glass of apple juice. Her soft skin glowed, and her eyes were... happy. Just happy. He leaned back in his chair, and he couldn't stop the smile that overwhelmed him. His body ached. He felt like shit. Tired. Spent. And yet... None of it mattered, and he'd never felt better.*

“What?” she said in a soft voice.

“Just you,” he said. *He finished another bite of his cereal. His stomach behaved instead of*
“What about me?”

“Everything.”

Her eyebrows raised. “Is this a good everything?”

He nodded. “It’s a perfect everything. You’re perfect.”

“I’ll be fat in a few months,” she countered.

He shrugged. “No, you won’t. You’ll be pregnant.”

“Smooth.”

He winked. “I try. We should get a name book, though.”

“I keep thinking there’s a name out there I don’t know about that’s better.”

“Exactly,” he said. “And we have eight or more months to kill, don’t we?”

She grinned and cocked her head to the side as she stared at him. “We do.”

“Plus, we need a fallback,” he said.

“A fallback?”

“In case you’re not psychic, and it’s a boy. We should have a plan for that.”

She giggled. “I’m telling you, it’s a girl.”

“Would you be upset if it’s a boy?”

“Nope,” she said. “But it’s a girl, anyway.”

He finished his cereal. The entire bowl. He dropped his spoon into the bowl and rested on his hands. He couldn’t stop watching her. She really did have a glow. Something... Otherworldly. Whenever he looked at her. Perfect. “I love you, Meredith. I really do.”

“Derek,” a soft male voice whispered. Derek twitched. “Derek?”

“Hmm.”

“We're here,” Richard said.

Derek opened his eyes and wiped his face with his hands. Richard had parked along the curb in front of the house where Mark liked to park his Mustang when he visited. Home. Derek was home. He stared at the dark, wet walk, the small flight of steps, the deck with the swing, and then the house beyond. Every window was dark – Lexie, Alex, and Meredith were all at work — but the light in front of the house was lit as if welcoming him home. Meredith. She must have flipped the switch before they’d left that afternoon. He gazed at the door, and longing so profound it ached swept through him. He wanted to go back to bed. He wanted to crawl under the covers, where it was safe and warm, and he could sleep.

“Thank you,” Derek said as he released his seatbelt. He coughed as he cleared his throat.
“It's no problem,” Richard said.

Derek pushed open the door of the car. Deep, energetic barking began. Once, twice, and then a staccato of earnest welcome. Dad, dad, dad, he imagined Samantha saying as she danced at the front door. Oh, boy! You're back! Can we play?

“You got a dog?” Richard said.

“Yeah,” Derek said as he fumbled with his seatbelt.

“I love dogs.”

Derek paused, his fingers on the latch. The seatbelt popped out and rolled back into the holder. Won't you introduce me? Richard hadn't said it, but...

“Richard, I'm...” Derek swallowed. He wanted to hibernate, and he needed to take the first fucking pill. He needed to be safe. For an hour. Two. He couldn't take this much longer. “I'm really tired.”

“Let me come in,” Richard said. “You can go to bed.”

Derek closed his eyes. “Richard...”

“I just want to help.”

“Why?”

“Because I think you need it,” Richard said. “You seem like you need company. Just somebody in the house. I won't bother you.”

“Adele—”

“Won't mind if I'm helping a friend. It's the extra work she hates.”

Friend. Derek's fingers clenched. “I nearly got you fired.”

“I nearly got me fired,” Richard said. Derek faced him. Their eyes met, and Richard didn't blink in the dark of the car. “I'm an alcoholic,” he said. “People got hurt. I took advantage of Meredith. Thank you for stepping in. I know that wasn't easy.”

“You're...” Derek swallowed. “Welcome.”

His mentor – his friend – nodded. A small nod. As if to say he considered the matter closed and done with. No hard feelings. “Now,” Richard said. “Let me meet this dog of yours.”

Derek grimaced as he climbed out of the car. “Her name is Samantha.”

Richard glanced down the walk at the house. Samantha hadn't stopped barking. “She sounds big.”

“She is big,” Derek said. “She's just a gregarious clown, though.”

“When did you get her?”

“About two weeks ago,” Derek said. “We're... building a family.”

Richard smiled. The car chirped as he locked it. “I can see that,” he said.

They ambled up the walk. Derek turned the key in the lock and was immediately greeted by a
hundred pounds of slobbering dog. Finally. Something that didn't make his heart want to burst in his chest. He was kissed. Again, again, again. His tension unraveled. Just a little. He couldn't help but laugh as he pushed Samantha out of the way so they could get into the house and he could disable the threatening security alarm.

“Down, Sam,” he said, and she backed away, but her stumpy tail wagged, welcoming him home.
Chapter 20

(Loud and clear, pulls you near)

“Punch buggy yellow, no return!” Meredith blurted, and she jabbed Derek in the arm. She zipped past the cheerful yellow Volkswagen plodding along in the slow lane and spread the distance between them.

Silence spread in the car cabin between them for one second, two, and she could have kicked herself. What better way to startle a man who was easily startled than to yell in a cramped space and then hit him? Derek had about zero tolerance for loud noises, sudden movements, or any combination of the two, which was something she found perilously easy to forget after having developed years worth of habits around him. Except he didn't flinch this time. She'd gotten used to watching him with a lump in her throat as he resettled his jumbled, tattered nerves, and she didn't see that behavior, now, out of the corner of her eye.

Torn from his commune with the dreary road ahead, he rubbed his arm and turned to face her. “Hey,” he said, the word stretched out by bewildered indignation. He frowned, and he looked across the parking brake at her as though she'd grown another head, or maybe two heads. Or maybe some wings and a tail. She snickered. She hadn't socked him that hard.

“Have you never played that game before?” she said as her eyebrows tipped upward.

Trepidation overcame her playful grin when he didn't answer right away. He had four sisters, and he'd gone to the beach every summer with them. He'd said so. How could he have four sisters and not know the punch buggy game? Even she'd picked it up, and she'd had no one. She'd learned it on a school field trip to the zoo, of all places.

“I've... played it,” he said. “Just not...” His eyes trained on the yellow Beetle in the rear view mirror that was quickly becoming a speck on the horizon. “You cheated.”

“What? I did not cheat,” she said. “There was a yellow one, and we just passed it.”

He shook his head. “It was a new one,” he said. “You can't count the new ones.”

“Why not?”

“Because you can't!” he insisted. “Those are the rules.”

“Well, if we only count old ones, we'll never see another one,” she said. “Weren't they discontinued over thirty years ago? You weren't even a teenager yet when that happened!”

He scoffed, though his lip twitched with the hint of a smile as he stared at her. “Are you calling me old?” he said in a rare bit of self-deprecation.

He had a decade on her. The age difference wasn't something they discussed very often because, really, to her, it didn't feel like any sort of issue. She loved him. And he knew that.

“No,” Meredith said evenly, “I'm merely saying that cars aren't typically on the road for... gee... decades. They're not like people.”

He shook his head. “Such a pessimist.”
“Well, have you seen one recently?” she said.

He shrugged. “I can't say I was paying attention,” he said. “I haven't exactly played this game in a while.”

She sighed dramatically as she fell into the familiar, comfortable role of teasing him. Playing. “So, you're one of those people who has no fun,” she said.

His eyebrows raised. “Excuse me?”

“No fun on road trips,” she said. “I bet you don't even allow bonus points for Karmann Ghias.”

“Bonus points?”

She nodded. “Those are worth ten because they're rare.”

“I think you're making this up as you go along,” he said. “Karmann Ghias aren't Beetles. Are we going to count Rabbits, and Golfs, and all of those?”

“No,” she said, heaving another sigh. “Two points for old ones, including Karmann Ghias, and one point for new ones. No Rabbits or Golfs. It's 1-0 so far, my favor.”

“Fine,” he said, surrendering. “But that won't last.”

She flashed a competitive grin at him. Her fingers squeaked as she wrung the leather steering wheel. She thought she'd found something to pass the time. Something fun. Except the engaged, lit expression on his face evaporated as the odometer crept up another mile, two, three.

He propped his head on the side window of the Cayenne and resumed the intense brooding she'd just tried to crack open like a nut. She zoomed along in the left lane a good nineteen miles over the speed limit. The road wasn't crowded. They'd beat rush hour out of the city. No other Volkswagens came along. Not even one that wouldn't count, like a Jetta or something.

They'd been on the road for about forty minutes. They'd left from the hospital as soon as he'd finished with Dr. Wyatt. They'd passed the turnoff for Sea-Tac as they'd looped around. If they'd been able to travel in a straight line, Lake Cushman was, really, only about fifty or sixty miles away. But Seattle, surrounded on three sides by water, posed a rather annoying obstacle. There were no roads as the crow flew between them and the lake. They had to drive around all the water, first down the 5, and then back up on the 101 in what looked like a big horseshoe when the route was drawn on a map. The trip burgeoned to over two hours and thirty minutes, that way. About 110 miles.

The ferryboat to Bremerton wouldn't have chopped off that much time, if any, given the wait times and the length of the ferryboat ride, so they'd opted for simplicity. Well, she'd opted. She should have known something was wrong the second he hadn't fought tooth and nail to take the ferryboat. He'd just nodded and shrugged at her logic, and let her do her thing. You're the native, he'd said. With her busy schedule, she hadn't seen him much that week, didn't have much of a barometer on his mood. She hadn't registered his response as a clear funk until later.

The day had been gloomy, at best, thus far. Overcast without a hint of sun, but not raining or drizzling or otherwise precipitating. Deep, verdant greens spread to the left of the roadway across rolling hills, and then in the distance stopped short at the snow-capped, craggy mountains, Mount Rainier among them. To the right, the plant life spilled away gradually into water. The vast but somewhat random elevation differences in just a few short miles always made her breath catch. Derek's, too.
He'd commented any number of times since he'd moved to Seattle on how much he loved the way civilization seemed to stack on itself like a haphazard pile of building blocks, instead of like Manhattan, which was flat, flat, and more endless flat, the only things towering being buildings. Anywhere in Seattle or the surrounding suburbs that you could stand, there was pretty much always more up, more down, and lots between. Two-dimensional skyline pictures didn't do the city justice in that way.

But Derek had been quiet for the forty minutes they'd been on the road. He didn't comment on the mountains. He stared at the road, not as somebody sightseeing, gaze flicking to passing sights, but as somebody engrossed in his own head. The horizon pinned his gaze, and it didn't shift. He barely even blinked.

Cool air whooshed from the vents. Something in the trunk wobbled back and forth. Maybe, his fishing poles or something. He'd packed a lot of fishing junk. The radio whispered a hint of Layla, the Eric Clapton version, barely audible above the hum of the engine and the sound of the wind buffeting the car. She pulled into the slow lane to let somebody crazier than her pass in the fast lane, and she sighed. This was their vacation. Their first vacation. Nothing had even happened yet. Why was he broody-faced already?

“Derek, are you okay?” she said.

His gaze didn't shift. “I'm fine.”

“Because you seem fine in the sense that you're totally not,” she countered.

“Hmm?” he said without moving.

“You. Monosyllabic and glower-y,” she said. “We don't have to play the game if you don't want to.”

He tore his gaze from the road, and for a moment, she saw confusion slide across his face. Like he had no idea what game she meant. Her body tensed. She couldn't help it. Dissociation, she heard Dr. Wyatt say. Was he dissociating? She hadn't seen that sort of behavior since... since he'd gotten clean, not that she'd been around him all that much since then. But... Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel.

“It's not the game,” he said at last.

Not, What game? Or, We were playing a game? She relaxed a little. “Do you miss the dog already?” she said, grasping at straws. Derek and Samantha were practically attached at the hip. Wherever he went in the house, the dog was there. They'd left Samantha in Lexie's care. Lexie had been more than thrilled about it.

Don't worry, Lexie had said. I'll be sure to walk her four times a day, and I'll play with her as much as she wants, and—

Well, don't spoil her or anything, Meredith had replied, a wry grin on her face. She'll swindle you for all the dog treats.

Of course, not, Lexie had replied, her skin blooming red, and then she'd dissolved into smiles and sighs. You're going to a cabin on the lake alone together. For a whole weekend. That's so romantic!

“I don't miss the dog,” Derek said, interrupting Meredith's thoughts. “I...” His voice trailed away, and his gaze shifted to the road again.
“What?” she said.

For moments, he didn't speak. She tried to keep her eyes on the road, which was frustrating, because she wanted desperately to watch him, instead, to try and interpret the minutiae that might give her a clue about his mood. “I don't like this,” he said at last.

She swallowed. Dread washed over her. “The trip?”

He shook his head. “The Paxil.”

“Oh,” she said. “What don't you like about it?”

He shrugged, and he rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I feel really lethargic.”

Relief replaced dread. That would explain the fact that he hadn't been his usual chatty self. It would explain, really... everything. “You should give it more of a chance,” she said. “The somnolence is supposed to go away after you get used to it. A few weeks.”

“I know that,” he snapped. Discordant energy clotted in the car. She bit her lip. He sighed. “I'm sorry,” he said, his voice lower-pitched and tingeing on hopelessness. He took a deep breath and blew it out. “Sorry.”

“It's okay.”

“Stop saying it's okay for me to yell at you,” he said. “It's not okay, Meredith.”

“Yeah, well, me yelling back at you whenever you make a cross remark or whatever isn't going to help, either,” she said. “We both know why it's happening. You're getting help. I'd rather just let it go.”

He ran his fingers through his hair once. Twice. He sighed again, more agitated. “I'm already ruining this.”

“Already?” she said, raising her eyebrows. Her heart clenched. “What do you mean already? You were planning on ruining something?”

Silence. He opened his mouth and closed it. The car rumbled as she zipped along in the gloom. At last, he said, “Planning implies intentional sabotage.”

“Fine,” she said. “What are you expecting to ruin?”

More silence. He shifted to fiddle with the air vents and then the door lock before answering, “I'm worried about the side-effects.” He stared at the road. She watched him out of the corner of her eye. His skin was pale, and the cloudy gray outside darkened the circles under his eyes and turned his irises a stormy, dark blue.

“It's okay if you sleep more,” she assured him. She'd expected it, even. She knew how SSRIs worked. “That won't ruin anything. I brought a couple books.”

“I don't mean the sleep, damn it,” he said. “I mean... the other stuff.”

“Oh,” she said with a sinking feeling. Other stuff. She ran through all the side-effects in her head, trying to pinpoint potential 'other stuff'. There was only one side-effect on the list that would get Derek this bent out of shape so soon, and it would explain the moping.

“I feel like I'm trapped,” he confessed.
She blinked. “Why?”

“Being with you is...” He ran his left thumb along a crease in his frayed jeans. “It’s the only thing I enjoy anymore. If that goes away, I don’t know what I’ll do, but...” He blinked as he watched the road. Blinked, blinked. A glassy, watery coating filled his eyes, but they didn’t spill over. His fingers scrunched, pulling up tents of loose denim in his hands. “But I really want to feel better,” he said, his voice soft and cracking, as though he were ashamed to admit it, but he’d been broken past his capability to tolerate.

A lump formed in her throat. He had been. Broken. He was frightened, and seeing things that weren’t there, and nervous, and stressed, and... That’s what the drugs had been for. The Percocet. To fix something he couldn’t tolerate by himself. At least, she understood it, now. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting to feel better,” she said, her voice soft. “I want you to feel better, too. I want that a lot.”

He swallowed. “But what if we can’t have sex anymore?” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

She wanted to stop the car. She wanted to pull over, stop the car, pull him into her arms, and just... sit. Breathe. Remember they were alive. She didn’t mind if they couldn’t have sex for a while if it meant he would be okay. Surely, he knew that. Didn’t he? He must. The urge to pull over became an overwhelming, consuming need. As an outlet, she settled for grabbing his hand. She gave it a squeeze that he reciprocated, though not as strongly.

“What do you think... anything has changed yet?” she said.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. We haven’t really had much time together to find out since I started taking it.”

Which was true. She’d worked 6:00 AM on Monday to 6:00 PM on Tuesday, 6:00 AM on Wednesday to 6:00 PM on Thursday, and then 6:00 AM to 2:00 PM that Friday. She’d seen him awake all of three hours since the Sunday before. She’d arrived home on both Tuesday and Thursday evenings exhausted, and she’d been in bed by 7:30 PM, sound asleep. He’d cooked her dinner both evenings. Chicken mixed with vegetables the first night, and some sort of casserole thing the second night. She could recall the warm smells of roast chicken and fresh baked bread as she’d walked through the door both times. She’d been a bad, horrible, inattentive wife, and she hadn’t really chatted with him about anything, let alone whether the Paxil was working its magic yet, but she figured she had a good excuse, what with cramming her schedule full so that they could fit in this weekend. She had thanked him for dinner both times, at least.

“Well, do you want sex?” she said.

He pulled his hand free from hers, wiped his face, and stared at her. “Like, now?”

“Yes, right now,” she said. “Can you imagine yourself having sex with me?”

“In the car?” he said, his voice tinged with a hint of uneasiness, as though he thought she expected him to get ready and take her right then.

She shrugged. “Anywhere.”

“I can always imagine sex with you,” he said.

“But do you want it?” she prodded. “Like want, want it? Or is it more of a insert tab A into slot B and win sort of imagining?”
“I’m...” He swallowed. He stared at her for an interminable moment, like he was trying to kick start behavior he knew should be there, but wasn't. She felt it. Him staring. Intent. Intense. To the point that, even though she watched the road and could only glance at him in small, too-short intervals, she felt her skin heat with blush, and her lower body tightened as she imagined what he might do to her after staring at her like that. He'd push her against the side of the car with a thump. He'd be hard, and ready, and he'd devour her. She blinked to push the enticing image away and glanced at him, expecting him to have a similar fantasy written all over his face. But he didn't smirk, and he didn't have that cheerful peeling-your-clothes-off-with-my-eyes countenance that she'd grown to love. He looked... disturbed. And then his shoulders crumpled. “No, I don't want, want it,” he said, “But maybe I'm thinking too hard. I mean...”

“Derek,” she said. She reached across the car and touched his arm. “It's okay.”

“It's not okay,” he said as he shrugged her off. He shook his head. “It's not okay. I need to want sex.”

Her heart clenched over the fact that he was so twisted up in knots about this. She switched gears when she saw she wasn't making any headway in improving his outlook. Maybe, there was more to this anxiety than lack of wanting. Maybe, he'd noticed something physical already.

“Have you had an erection since you started taking it?”

He blushed, and he looked at his knees. “Not this morning.”

But he'd had nightmares last night. Not horrible ones, but... bad. He'd muttered in his sleep, and he'd tossed and turned. The sheets had stuck to his sweaty skin, and she'd had to fight him for them in a perpetual tug of war. He'd groggily told her he'd see her later and that he loved her as she'd slid out of bed that morning, which meant he'd been sort of awake already, if not fully aware. She doubted very much when he'd eventually crawled into the bathroom that morning that he'd just lapsed out of REM sleep, which was when nighttime erections typically occurred in men.

“How about earlier this week?” she prodded. “Anything?”

“I... Yes. One. But that was...” He ran his hands through his hair, agitated. “That was days ago.”

“Have you... tried by yourself?” she said in what she hoped was a gentle tone.

The red on his face deepened into scarlet. “In the shower this morning.” His look darkened. “Nothing happened.”

“But weren't you already upset about this by then?” she said.

He didn't answer.

She imagined the stressful pressure that he put on himself alone might have been enough, emotionally, to make him choke. “Maybe, you just need some help getting into the mood. Kissing. Touching. Something slow and fun,” she said. “It might be different when we're naked. Does it really matter if you're not ready to strip me every time you look at me, as long as we can get going when we're both ready?”

“But I always...” he stammered. “I mean...”

“Or, maybe, you're worrying yourself in freaking circles, and the Paxil has nothing to do with it.”

He took a deep, shaky breath, and he laughed, but the laugh wasn't happy. “I know this is stupid,”
he said.

“It's not stupid.”

“It's stupid,” he said. “I worry about stupid things, and I can't make myself stop.”

“We're on this trip to relax,” she said.

“But you made it about a weekend of sex when I'm not even sure I—”

“When did I make it about a weekend of sex?” she said, interrupting him as a sinking feeling overwhelmed her. He **did** think she would be upset if they couldn't. She rewound frantically in her head, trying to think of when she might have said something to give him that impression, but she couldn't think of a single moment, or a single word.

“You said forty-eight hours. Uninterrupted.” His temples danced as he clenched his jaw. “And I just started a huge daily dose of a medication known for quashing libido, and for causing erectile dysfunction and ejaculatory problems.”

She frowned. “Did I ever use the word sex to describe this weekend?”

“No, but we did before when we talked about wine country,” he said.

He sounded *so* lost. She reached across and rubbed his thigh in what she hoped would be interpreted as reassurance. She closed her eyes. Just for a moment before fixing her gaze back on the road.

*You want to go away with me this weekend?* he'd said.

*Why would I want to go away with you this weekend?* she'd responded.

*Because of this.*

He'd kissed her. Again and again. He'd been the one to make it about sex. All sex. Nothing but. In order to lure her into saying yes, he'd done that, because that was all she'd permitted him to do with her, then. Have sex. Of course, he would have framed it that way.

But the sentiment had perpetuated when she'd brought it up again.

*You almost died, and we've never even left Seattle together. We've never left, Derek. We haven't done anything, and we should.*

*For sex?* he'd said.

She'd steered him away from the idea, sworn she'd be happy doing anything at all with him, but that made two times his knee jerk interpretation had been sex. Of course, he would have connected the dots the same way, this time, particularly when she'd regurgitated the same words. Again.

*Forty-eight hours. Uninterrupted.*

“Derek,” she said. “When I said uninterrupted this time, I meant uninterrupted. As in, I get to be alone with you, my mostly healed husband, for forty-eight hours, and there will be no guns, no hospital crap, no roommates, and no near death whatevers.”

He sighed, and he gave her a frustrated look. “That sounds like sex to me.”
“Only because you're a freaking lech,” she said with a snort. “I want to relax, and pick baby names, or go for a scenic hike, or... just do... whatever it is you do at a cabin. I'm all for sex, but we could do the freaking crossword puzzle all day – you could even cheat – and I'd be happy.”

“Oh,” he said.

“I'm happy, Derek,” she assured him. “And I want you to be happy again, too. If that means no sex for a while, that means no sex for a while, and that's okay. I mean that. Do you realize we've never even done this before?”

“Done what?”

“Spent this much uninterrupted time together when neither of us has been sick or hurt?”

Silence stretched as he considered that. “I guess we haven't,” he said.

“I don't think we've ever even been in a freaking car this long.”

“We have, too,” he said.

“When?”

“When you drove me home from the hospital, and we got stuck in traffic.”

“That doesn't count,” she said.

He frowned. “Why not?”

“Because I was in the car,” she said. She rubbed his arm. The soft hairs dusting his forearm followed her thumb, and she grinned. “You were on the planet Neptune.”

He scoffed. “I remember most... some... bits of it.”

“Name one thing.”

“I'm your...” He paused, and he bit his lip in a ponderous expression that seemed so anti-Derek it made her want to chuckle. He gazed at her, and he offered a hesitant, “Um, I'm your arm?” as though he didn't quite believe what he was saying, and he thought, maybe, he really had been on Neptune.

She's your person. I'm your arm. Got it, he'd said with a laugh.

“Oh, fine,” she huffed. “Fine, we've been in a car this long.”

He smirked, and he crossed his arms in a haughty gesture. “Thank you,” he said with a small nod.

The taillights on the blue car several lengths in front of her bloomed red. She gasped as she saw telltale lights flashing on the side of the road by the shoulder, and she slammed on the brake. Derek stuck his hand out against the dash to catch himself as she shaved 20 MPH off the speedometer in a matter of seconds.

She glanced at the parked police car as they passed. The policeman had already pulled somebody over. He sat in the front seat of his car, scribbling notes on a pad of paper while a depressed-looking blond woman sat in a pickup truck in front of him, her forehead on the steering wheel and her shoulders slumped. As soon as the flashing lights sprawled in her rear view mirror, Meredith jammed her foot on the accelerator and resumed her normal cruising speed.
“You know,” Derek said as he resettled in his seat, “If you can see them, it's too late, anyway. If you're going to speed, you should commit.”

“Shut up,” Meredith told him. “I will rubberneck when I feel like it.”

He snorted. “Yes, dear.”

Another mile passed. He seemed lighter, now, that she'd told him under no uncertain terms what she expected from this weekend, as though the pressure had been lifted, which frustrated her. There never had been any pressure. He'd made up all the freaking pressure by himself. She wished he would have said something, instead of forcing her to pry it out of him. He did that. Assumed and brooded and internalized and—

“Hold up your pinky,” she said in a flash of inspiration.

“What?”

They'd had a few mishaps on both sides over the years. Failures on her part. Failures on his. She knew he was capable of treating an event with good humor when he was in the right mindset for it. She knew it. If she could just... nip the bad thoughts in the bud?

“Just do it,” she commanded.

“Okay...” he said, his voice wary. He showed her his pale hand. He had long, slender fingers, perfect for surgery and other precise movements. His pinky stuck up from his loosely formed fist, and she pictured him with a hoity-toity, British accent. *Meredith*, he'd say. *I'd like a spot of tea.*

She fought back a chuckle at the imagery as she curled her pinky around his. He dwarfed her. “We'll try sex if you want to try it, but I want you to pinky swear that if something happens, and we can't, you will not get upset about it,” she said. She glanced at him. He looked... bemused.

“Okay?” She turned her gaze back to the road. “I don't want my forty-eight hours to involve you being all dark and broody-faced about a problem that isn't even a problem. This is our weekend, and it should be fun.”

He made a soft noise that sounded suspiciously like a laugh, buried under pounds of restraint and the rumble of the car's engine. “Dark and... broody-faced?” he said.

She ignored his maybe-mirth. “Pinky swear, or even if you want to, and even if I want to, nothing happens this weekend,” she said. “We'll be celibate. Like monks or... other celibate people.”

“Celibate? Monks?”

She nodded. “Yes. You won't get any if you don't swear.”

His pinky shifted. She tightened her grip, not that she could tighten her pinky all that much, but... it was the thought that counted. “That's... cruel and unusual,” he said. “Our first weekend alone together, ever, and you want to make it celibate?”

“I mean it,” she said. “I'd rather chop out performance anxiety altogether than deal with it in flagrante.”

He chuckled. Outright. “And you're very bossy.”

“Yes. Yes, I am,” she said. “I keep you in line, remember? And you haven't sworn yet.”
“I swear.”

“Pinky swear!”

He sighed. His pinky squeezed hers. “I pinky swear, Meredith.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Swear what?” she prompted.

“That I won't get upset if I can't—”

“If we can't,” she corrected.

He rolled his eyes. “If we can't have sex.”

She nodded. “Okay, then,” she said, satisfied.

“Are you going to ask me to put it all together, now?” he said.

“Shut up,” she said.

He sighed. “Yes, dear,” he said, his mock-weariness making her feel gooey and warm inside, though she didn't reply.

She couldn't stop herself from smiling as the normality of it, of Derek being Derek, consumed her. Every so often, he would remind her that the man she'd fallen in love with was still there, trapped, but there, waiting to break out from under if he could just get some relief, and she cherished those moments. He was playing, which was what she'd been trying to instill since that first yellow punch buggy. He was playing, and joking a little, even after a discussion about potential mechanical failures during sex, and... that was good. Right?

Yes, that was good. Weight lifted from her body as she pushed the car through the miles. They could do this. Have a vacation. A full forty-eight hours of no doom, gloom, or personal injury, even if things did go belly-up in the sex department.

Silence stretched. He shifted. “Can I have my pinky back, now?” he said, his voice soft.

“I guess so,” she said with a smile. She relinquished her grip, and he pulled his hand away.

He sighed, and he leaned back in his seat. “Hmm,” he said. “I don't think I've pinky sworn since I was...” His voice trailed away. He shook his head. “I don't even remember.”

“Megan Swift,” Meredith said. “Second grade.”

He looked at her, his eyebrows raised. “Oh?”

She nodded. “Yep,” she said. “I wanted to make sure she'd pay me back my lunch money.”

“You pinky swore over lunch money?” he said.

“You pinky swore over lunch money?” he said.

“Yeah, I...” She searched her memories as she watched the road. “She needed to pay for...” She scrunched her nose. She remembered her friend. Brunette. Always wore her hair in a curly, twisty ponytail with a pink ribbon that spilled down her back. She'd been short for her age. A stick, like Meredith. She could feel the money exchanging hands, but the memory stopped there. “I don't remember. I do remember my mother wouldn't give me any extra ever, though, no matter what the reason, which is why I needed the pinky swear. My mother said I needed to learn to budget, and if I couldn't budget, I could starve.”
“But... you were seven,” he said. “Six?”

“I was eight, I think,” Meredith said. That had been at the tail end of second grade. Her teacher had been Miss Finch, an elderly woman who'd never married and never seemed to leave the school.

Derek shook his head. He looked horrified. “That's...”

“How I grew up,” Meredith said. She shrugged. “So?” She rubbed his arm. “Spill.”

“Spill what?”

“Pinky swearing,” she said. “When was your last?”

“I really don't remember,” he replied.

She grinned. “Must not have been a worthy pinky swear, then. Pinky swears are supposed to be big things, you know.”

“Really,” Derek said, a playful look on his face. “And you're the expert?”

“Yep, I am,” Meredith said. She splayed her palms and spread them midair for emphasis. “Big things.”

He snapped his fingers. “That was it,” he said.

“What was it?”

“Amelia,” he said. “She made me pinky swear to help her with her science fair project that year. I thought it was stupid, but I humored her. I...” His mirth fell away like shattered glass. His expression flattened as he presumably dipped further into the memory.

“What is it?” she said.

“The year before, I blew her off,” he said.

“Derek?” she prodded.

He shook his head, swallowed, and wiped his face with his hand. He took a deep breath. “Sorry, I...” he began, only to fade out again.

She touched his leg. “What, Derek?”

He stared out the window into the gray and rolling green beyond, expressionless. He blinked. “The year before. That was when Dad died,” he said, flat again. Sapped of emotion. She'd seen him do it before. I was fifteen when my dad died, he'd said. I was there. Like he was reading a list. Like he needed to separate himself from the event in order to process it.

“I blew Amy off to help some girl I knew at school,” he continued. “I got beat up for my trouble. Dad came home from the store to lecture me, and he made me go back with him afterward with Amelia to make up the time he'd lost by coming home. Two men were in the store arguing at the cash register with Peter when we got there.”

She tightened her grip on the steering wheel. This was the most he'd ever told her about it. Ever. She swallowed as her eyes watered. “Peter?” she said, trying to keep her voice even. She tried not to imagine his younger self walking into his father's store, one foot in front of the other. The little bell over the door would have rung, and he'd have smiled at this Peter person—
“Dad's clerk,” Derek said. “He was young. In his early twenties. He died, too.”

She squeezed Derek's shoulder.

“I'm... okay,” he said. He shook his head as if to clear it. “I haven't thought about that in... a while.”

“You don't look okay,” she said, her voice soft. Or, he did look okay. If one were to call this strange emotionless demeanor okay, which it wasn't. It wasn't okay for a passionate person like Derek to be dead like this.

He frowned at her, swallowed. “I tried to stop the bleeding, but I couldn't. He showed me how, but I think it was just to distract me from realizing he was dying.”

“Your dad?” she said. “Or Peter?”

“Dad,” he said. “Peter was already dead.”

She hadn't realized he'd seen two people murdered, not one, or that his dad had lingered long enough to speak to Derek at all, let alone to provide supervision over his own first aid. That seemed, in her mind, worse. Worse than if it had been quick, with no suffering. Sort of like she felt about her mother. Wasting away. Not knowing who she was half the time.

He held out his hands, the heel of his right palm pressed downward as if to show her how he'd tried to staunch the bleeding, and she watched his younger version in her head, holding closed a gaping, bloody wound. Where? If his dad had been speaking, but had still died in front of Derek before help had arrived despite pressure on the wound... she guessed the liver. Or bowel. Both were very ugly wounds. Wounds a fifteen-year-old should never see.

“The light in his eyes just... went out,” Derek said, his face blank, but his words thickening with grief, “And then Amy was screaming, and screaming, and—”

She gave his shoulder a shake. “Derek,” she said, a lasso back to the present. As vivid as her own imagining, his had to be worse. Visceral. He grunted as she shook him, and then he blinked. He looked at her.

“That's why I became a doctor, you know,” he said baldly.

“Because of your dad?”

“He bled out right underneath me, and I didn't know how to fix it. I wanted to be able to fix it.” He sighed. A dark expression overtook his face as the last of his enforced detachment faded from sight. “I wanted to save people.”

“You do, Derek,” she said. “You save lots of people.”

He shook his head. “Not anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't save anyone, anymore,” he said. “I just do budget work.” He said the word budget as though it were synonymous with cancer or plague. He made a deep sound in his throat. An ugh. Sort of. He blinked, and his dour expression bled away. He gave her a guilty, soft smile, and the jagged pain in his eyes lessened. “Can we change topics?” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “This is not a relaxation subject for me.”
“Sorry about the pinky swear,” she said.

“You didn't know,” he replied. “I didn't even know until I thought about it. It's okay.”

She bit her lip as she watched the dreary road. The clouds far beyond had a thick, almost black quality to them, and the air between the clouds and the earth was misty, moving blue. Rain ahead. In a disorienting, shimmering wall. They were driving right into it. The radio station they'd been listening to started to hiss and crackle with static. They still had a few minutes before they drove into the cloudburst, though.

“I'm glad you're in my car,” she blurted.

I'm glad you're in my bathtub, a ghost of her past echoed.

As soon as she'd said it, she blushed. He looked at her. “It's your car, now?” he said, confused.

“No, I mean...” She sighed. “I mean I know the road sucked, but... I'm glad it brought you here. To me. In the... In the car. Your car. Not my car.”

That sounded even worse. She'd tried. She'd tried, damn it, and now her freaking face was on fire. He stared at her. She wrung the steering wheel with her fingers. “That was... like criminally corny,” she said. Why did nobody ever shut her up? “Sorry.”

He shifted in his seat. The leather squeaked. He pressed his shoulder into the back of the seat, and he faced her instead of the road. He grinned at her, and he reached across the parking brake to stroke her cheek. She smiled. “It wasn't, Meredith,” he said, and he seemed... pleased. Pleased that she would say something like that, even if it was as corny as a freaking bowl of popcorn. “I'm...” He swallowed “Likewise.” He tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She fought the urge to close her eyes and lean into the touch. She had to watch the road. Freaking... Watch. Watch, the road.

“I'm glad you're in my car,” he said, his voice soft as he twisted her words back on her.

She felt his gaze on her. The air smelled wet and earthy with the coming rain, and she inhaled. Her nose crinkled. She didn't know when or how it happened, precisely, but one moment, she was fine, and the next, her stomach lurched.

“Oh,” she said.

His eyebrows raised. “Oh?”

“Oh, I need to pull over,” she said as her throat thickened with nausea.

“What?” he said. “Why?”

She didn't even try to explain as she yanked the steering wheel hard to the right, pulled into the slow lane, and then out of traffic. The wheels of the Cayenne had barely stopped moving as she clawed at her seatbelt, almost fell out of the car, scurried to the wet grass beside the road, and heaved until it felt like her stomach had popped loose from her innards. “Oh,” she moaned. She held the back of her palm to her mouth as she leaned over in the grass. The smell of vomit made her heave again.

The sky overhead seemed almost black with oncoming rain. Not yet, but soon. Wind buffeted her small body. Goosebumps crinkled her skin as the chilly air gripped her. His car door opened slowly. She lost track of him after that while her gut quivered, and then his warm palm pressed
against her back. He rubbed her in slow, comforting circles.

She wiped her lips and stumbled away from the chunky puddle in the grass she'd created. She curled into his arms as she swallowed away the remains of her nausea. She grimaced as she pressed her face against his soft, blue shirt. Ugh. Bile burned her throat. Now, she needed a freaking toothbrush. And some mints. At least her stomach felt good as new, now. Not even a flip or a flop of a flip-flop told her she'd just barfed. She didn't even know what had triggered that one, but whatever it had been, it was gone.

She'd puked. All freaking week. In the morning. In the afternoon. At night. There'd been no rhyme or reason to it, and definitely no schedule. Morning sickness was such a freaking misnomer. She wanted to hit whoever had come up with the term for misleading the masses. She wondered if the schedule thing had been a crazy fluke. A crazy fluke she wished she could return to, because that was so much better than this random upchuck of the day.

“That was not on schedule,” he said softly.

“Thanks,” she said between gasps as she recovered. “Thanks for observing that.”

His embrace tightened. “I thought you only puked in the morning?”

“Apparently I puke whenever, now!” she said. “I don't know. I've been puking all week.”

He kissed her forehead. “Give me the map.”

“What? No.”

“Give me the map, Mere,” he said. “I'll drive.”

“I thought you were sleepy.”

“I'm not sleepy,” he assured her.

“You said specifically that you were sleepy,” she said as they shuffled back to the car. “You used the word lethargic.”

He chuckled. “Well, I'm awake, now,” he said. “There've been like a thousand conversation points since then. Plus, you just threw up.”

“Well, I'm sorry my vomit ruined your would be nap,” she snapped. She wiped her mouth again, trying not to grimace at the acrid taste lingering in her mouth.

“It's not. It didn't. I meant...” he stuttered, and then he relaxed as he found his words. “I mean you're pregnant. You threw up because you're pregnant with our child, and that's...”

She looked up at him and grasped the look on his face as he searched for a word. He had a wide-eyed look of awe to him. Like he'd forgotten something monumental, had just been reminded of it, and it... staggered him. Like the enormity of it was a hulking boulder he couldn't hope to wield in his hands. “Really neat?” she said with a smile, finishing his sentence for him when he didn't.

The wind buffeted them. She stood in the shelter of his taller figure. He stared down at her. His blue eyes were bright, and they twinkled. He kissed her on the forehead again. “Yeah,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. But... good emotion.

She surrendered the driver's seat to him without further protest. He glanced at the map and at
Richard's directions to see where they were going as he settled himself into the seat. He had to crank the seat back several inches and adjust the steering wheel. He looked at her with a cheerful shrug as if to say, *What? You're very tiny.* He turned the key in the ignition. The car rumbled to life. He stared in the side and rear view mirrors, back and forth, like a windshield wiper, decided it was safe, apparently, and the car kicked to life. Inertia pushed her back against the seat.

Within moments, he'd settled the car back into a steady pace, about ten miles per hour slower than her habitual speed, but that was okay. She leaned back in the seat and let herself relax. She'd been go, go, going all week, and now she wasn't going, and it felt... nice.

They hit the rain they'd been approaching within moments. A raindrop plinked on the roof of the car. Once, twice, and then the whole car sounded like it'd been swallowed by an ice shaker, forever doomed to make martinis or something. Derek flipped on the windshield wipers, but otherwise paid the storm no mind. It was Seattle. It freaking rained. All the damned time.

She watched his profile in the darkening cabin. He was driving. He hadn't done that in a long while. His attire was the epitome of vacation and relaxation. He wore stonewashed, thready jeans that had seen better days, old, beat up cross trainers, and a dark but threadbare navy shirt that brought out his eyes. He'd gotten his hair cut recently, but the length, she thought, was perfect. He had just a bit of wavy curl at the end, a hint of disarray that needed taming. He'd shaved that morning, so the skin on his face was mostly smooth. Almost perfect for kissing.

Static filled the cabin. He frowned at the radio dial and shifted to a new station.

"You're looking at me," he said.

She shrugged. "You're my husband, and you're sexy. I like looking."

"So, it's a good look," he said, "And not a Derek is a ticking time bomb and might freak out on our first vacation look."

She would have kissed him were it not for the recent vomit. She settled for stroking his shoulder. "Definitely a good look," she said. "No time bombs. Though, I was a little worried before we got the sex stuff worked out."

"I'm okay," he said, his voice soft. "Thank you for... Thanks."

She smiled. "I know." She squeezed his shoulder and settled back in her seat to look. His lip twitched with a pleased grin. "Our first vacation is going to rock, you know."

He glanced at her. His eyes glittered in the dim light. "Oh, will it?" he said.

She nodded. "I have it on good authority."

"Good," he said. "I could really use a rocking vacation right now."

"Well, you'll have one," she said. She grinned. "Guaranteed."

"Hmm. Will I catch fish?"

"Yep," she said. "Dozens."

"Will my wife join me in the boat?" he said. The hope in his voice made her smile.

"Well, she probably won't fish. But she might come along."
“Hmm,” he said. He nodded, a pleased look on his face.

She wrinkled her nose. The radio station he'd flipped to was... not good. Some... country thing. He hated country. She despised country. He must have stopped when he'd hit identifiable noise instead of static. She jammed her thumb on the power button, and the weak strains of twanging guitars faded into the thunderous rain pounding on the roof.

“So, what do you think?” she said.

He glanced at her again. “About what?”

“Do I get credit for going camping with you on this rocking vacation?” she said.

He snickered. “Meredith, I love you. I do,” he said. “But this is not camping.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “It is, too,” she said with a pout.

“It's not in a tent, and there's working plumbing.”

“But there won't be any Internet,” she countered.

“That's... sad,” he decided. He shook his head as he mock-pondered her shame. “That's sad that you think camping is the mere absence of Internet.”

“What? We turned our phones off. We didn't bring any laptops. Our beepers are at home in the bedroom. We're driving to the middle of nowhere—”

“Lake Cushman isn't the middle of nowhere,” he interjected. “It's Lake Cushman.”

“Thank you,” she said. She kissed his temple, recent vomit be damned. “That's helpful information.”

He didn't seem to mind. “Well, it's not nowhere,” he said with a frown.

“It's way more nowhere than I'm used to,” she said. “I grew up in Seattle and Boston, you know.”

“Brooklyn and Manhattan. I win.”

“You do not win just because you're from New York,” she said.


She giggled. “But Karmaan Ghias don't count for ten?”

His fist jabbed her shoulder lightly, and she jumped at the unexpected contact. A little shriek fell from her lips. “Punch buggy red. No return,” he said. He looked pointedly at her. “And, oh, look. It's an old one. That counts for two, so I'm ahead. 1-2, my favor.” He grinned as he turned back to the road.

Her mouth tumbled open, and she gaped as she watched a rusted, tomato-colored Beetle putter behind them in the right lane. The hood had been patched with gunmetal gray. “That's...” she stuttered. “That's...”

“An old one,” he said again, as if to rub salt in the wound of her defeat.

“You're mean,” she said, staring with incredulity his shit-eating grin. How the hell had he whipped
this whole thing around on her? “You're a mean, mean man.”

He snickered. “I gave you a full twenty seconds to notice it,” he said.

“How am I supposed to notice a car when I'm looking at you?”

“I don't know. Should we give me a handicap?” He waggled his eyebrows at her. “I am pretty hard not to stare at.”

She snorted with laughter, and then she jabbed him in the arm. Hard. His whole body swayed in the seat with the impact, and he grunted. “Hey, what was that for?” he said. “I said no return!”

“I'm taking out a loan against future sightings,” she grumbled.

“A punch on the basis of a car you haven't even seen yet? Seriously?”

“Yep,” she said. “And I'm allowed.”

He laughed. “You are, are you?”

“I am. And don't you dare give me a lecture about slippery slopes.”

“Bossy.”

“You said that already.”


She rolled her eyes. “Whatever, Mr. Manhattan.”

“McBossy,” he retorted.

“I'm not calling you McDreamy just because you McNamed me,” she said. “And since when do you McName people?”

“I don't know.” He shrugged. “Since now?”

“Well, stop it. It makes you sound like Cristina, and that's just weird. You two exist in separate spaces in my head, and you're threatening my reality.”

He shook his head, amusement lighting his face. “I love you,” he said.

“I guess you can keep talking, then.”

“Good,” he replied. “Because we have at least another hour to kill until we get there.” He glanced at the clock on the dash, and then the odometer. “More like an hour and a half.”

She grinned. “License plate game?”

“If we must,” he said with a mock-weary sigh belied by his smile. “At least it's less violent.”

“Oh,” she said. “Oh, pull over.”

He frowned. “Again?”

“Yeah. Just... Pull over!”
He barely had time to stop the car before she darted into the pouring rain. Her feet slipped and slid on the wet shoulder. Pavement became gravel became slick, muddy grass. Rain plastered her shirt to her body as she slurched through a sucking puddle. Then she threw up, and the last of her lunch emptied onto the ground.

The rain slamming down on her stopped its assault. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him standing there, holding an umbrella over her. She straightened. Her stomach roiled. She leaned over and barfed again. Right by his feet. She grabbed his shirt to keep her balance. At least he didn't flinch or move. When she'd finished, she trembled, and her stomach hurt. What the hell was causing this? Maybe, something she'd eaten disagreed with her. There'd been no smells to set off this or the last barf session. None that she'd noticed, anyway. She wanted to go back to the schedule.

“I'm sorry,” he said softly over the rain, and he pulled her into a tight hug under the umbrella. He guided her back to the car, and he held the umbrella over the gap between the car and the door while she settled herself back in the seat. He didn't move until she'd closed the door.

She spat water from her lips and wiped the raindrops out of her eyes, shivering. The rain thundered on the roof. It made a steep crescendo as he opened the driver side door and he resettled himself to drive. When he closed the door, the thunderous pounding muted. He turned the key in the ignition, aimed the vents at her, flipped a switch, and then adjusted dials on the dash. Blowing, frigid air became warm. Soothing.

“Thanks,” she said. She closed her eyes, ready to go again, but he didn't move the car. She felt his gaze on her. “I'm okay,” she said.

“Do you still feel nauseous?”

“No, it's sudden, and then I puke, and then I'm fine,” she said. “It only sticks around if I try not to throw up.”

“Oh,” he said.

He sounded really concerned. She couldn't decide whether that was adorable, or whether he deserved to suffer for this. This was his super-powered bully sperm's fault. Right? She cupped her hands over her stomach. The churning stopped after a few moments. Sort of like a switch had been thrown. One moment, sick as though she'd been on a boat in the middle of the Atlantic, braving fifteen feet swells. The next? Dry, solid land, and not a single twitch or quiver. She sighed and let her hands slide lower. Underneath her belly button. Warmth seeped through her shirt as she pressed.

*Baby,* she told herself, hoping the new life below would hear. If you could settle down this weekend, that'd be nice.

Nothing answered, of course. She sighed.

“It's really okay,” she assured him. “Keep going. I want to get there.”

He stared at her. “Are you sure?”

“Mmm.” She nodded. “Keep going. I'm fine, now.”

A chuff of air released from his mouth. He shook his head, and the car started moving.

“What?” she said.
“You really are *very* bossy,” he said.

“You love me for it.”

“Hmm, I do,” he agreed. “So much.” The delight on his face made her shiver. She wanted a toothbrush. And she wanted the cabin. And then she wanted *him*. Badly.

“Me, too,” she said, hypnotized.

He snickered. “I'm glad you love yourself, Mere. That's important.”

“Just shut up, and drive, jackass,” she snapped, but she couldn't keep the grin off her face.

“Fine, McBossy,” he replied. “But when we get there, there’d better be some sex.”

“I just threw up next to your shoe, and you want sex?” she said.

He nodded. “Attempted sex that I won't get upset about if it flops,” he assured her with a grin.

“I'd say your libido is still pretty healthy.”

He laughed. “Sex? Please?”

She smiled. “I think that can be arranged. After I find a toothbrush.”

“Good,” he said with a nod. “I want my newest pinky swear to get a work out.”

(Can you feel my love?)

Gravel crunched under the tires as the Cayenne crawled through the darkness. A sprawling cave of trees, fauna, and other blurry shapes surrounded them. The scenery beyond the dim glow of the car's headlights seemed indistinct and inky black. The rain had stopped as they'd gotten closer to the lake, but the thick, frothy cloud cover had guaranteed an early sunset. Far outside the city, the sky at night was dark. Black. Not glowing purple. Like the sky at Derek's trailer, she bet the lake was a perfect place for stargazing on clearer nights. Maybe, even better.

The car rumbled to a stop. Meredith stared out the window. The road stopped abruptly at a pile of bracken and ferns and... other plant stuff that she wasn't woodsy enough to identify. A narrow walk proceeded to the right, where there was a small, glowing light the size of a soup can about fifty feet in the distance. The light framed a small set of steps and a large, boxy shadow. Between the soup can and the car, though? Black. She wasn't even sure if she was looking at grass, gravel, or dirt in the sea of ink beyond her window.

“Here we are,” Derek said, his voice entirely too cheerful and sure considering she knew he wasn't sure at all. They'd seen a sign on the road that he'd had to chop his speed in half and flip on his high beams to read. Supposedly, the Chief's cabin was at the end of Cedarwood Place, and, well, they were at the end of this ambiguous road for which they'd identified the first three letters. Ced. Ced what?

Who knew for sure? But she was hungry and tired and willing to roll with it for now.

“Finally,” she said. She shifted in her seat and popped her seatbelt loose. The belt rolled back over her shoulder. Her stomach growled. She wanted to stand and stretch and not be in this stupid car
anymore, no matter how nice the company. She wanted to eat, too.

He turned off the engine and the car cabin lit up with a soft glow that made the outside look even blacker. “Don't you grumble at me,” he said. His keys jingled, and the seat squeaked as he turned to face. “What did I do?”

“It took us an extra year to get here!”

He smirked. “You were the navigator. I'm blameless.”

“And I told you to turn on Hemlock!” she said.

He nodded. “Five miles too early, yes.”

“Well, I'm not psychic,” she said. “The Chief's directions said turn on Hemlock. How was I supposed to know there was a Hemlock Court, Hemlock Lane, Hemlock Circle, and a Hemlock Street all in different places? That's ridiculous!”

“By checking the physical map first?”

His sage-but-laughing look made her want to strangle him. She jabbed her finger at him and poked him in the chest. He grunted, though it was more an amused sound than an indignant one. “You, shut up,” she said. “These people here are too obsessed with wood! It's their fault.”

His eyes narrowed. His cheerful grin turned into a leer. “Really,” he said as he looked her up and down.

“Yes, really, I...” Her voice trailed away as she thought about what she'd said. Obsessed with wood. “Derek, seriously? Are you five?”

He winked. “Admit it.”

“Admit what? That I said wood?”

“You can't deal with life when you don't have a GPS,” he said.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I can, too!” she protested. “I told you to turn on Hemlock!”

“Too early.”

“Not that early.”

“Five miles too early!” he said. “I had to use the map.”

“You could have just pulled a u-ey and gone back to the main road,” she countered.

“The map told me a shortcut.”

“Which wasn't short,” she said. It felt like he'd driven them around the entire freaking lake. Possibly more than once. And he'd seen another damned punch buggy and walloped her because she'd been too busy poring over Richard's directions, trying to figure out where they'd gone wrong, to see it first. They'd ended their trip at 3-4 his favor instead of a tie because of that.

He shrugged. “I knew where we were.”

“Lost,” she said. “That's where we were.”
He grinned. “Well, it was scenic,” he said. “Wasn't it?”

She glowered. “It was long.”

“You saw the lake.”

“I heard my stomach growling more,” she said.

“And it was wood-y,” he said, and she couldn't help but chuckle at his lascivious expression and his what had to be an intentional slip. “Sorry, woodsy.” Her chuckle became a laugh. “Wooded?” he pondered. “Perhaps arboreous would be more appropriate.” She snorted. “And less innuendo-laden.”

“Stop,” she said. She wiped her eyes, convinced tears had formed as she'd cackled at him. “Oh, my god, stop. You are five.”

“Horny,” he corrected. “And the people here are obsessed with wood. You said it, not me.”

“Horny and five,” she amended. She smiled at him, leaned, and she kissed him. She relished the small groan that loitered in his throat. His warmth swept her up, and she couldn't help but lean in further. She clutched his shirt. Soft cotton ran underneath her fingertips. Even after hours in the car, he smelled fresh and musky and... hers. All hers. How did he do that?

She felt kind of icky, to be honest. They'd stopped at a rest stop shortly after she'd finished puking, and she'd been able to brush her teeth. Then, about thirty minutes ago, when they'd finally stopped to ask for directions, she'd washed her face in a convenience store bathroom and grabbed a bag of chips to sate her growling stomach. Except the chips hadn't done more than provide momentary distraction for the gnawing hunger, now she tasted like French onion dip, and, really, she just didn't want to be in the freaking car anymore.

He stared for a moment as she pulled away, as though she'd knocked him senseless, though that may have been the onion taste. Or, maybe not. He blinked. “You promised me attempted sex,” he said, his voice low and throaty, and it sent an anticipatory thrill meandering down her spine. Apparently, he was impervious to onion breath.

She shook her head. She leaned back, licked her lips, and popped open the door. A chorus of crickets and other nighttime insects swept into the cabin along with... frogs? Or toads. Something croaking. Over and over. “Let's at least get the car unloaded before you jump me,” she said with a laugh as she slid out of the car to her feet and into the darkness. Gravel churned under her shoes as she found her balance, and she groaned as she leaned against the car and stretched her aching muscles.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Fine, but after suitcases, there'd better be sex.”

She smiled across the car cabin at him. “I think your record is broken,” she said.

“I want sex,” he said, and his eyes crinkled as he grinned back at her with delight. “I want, want sex. I'm relishing it. Okay?”

She stared at him. He looked so happy. And himself, for once. The shadows she'd gotten used to on his face had disappeared over the course of their long drive, as if, the further he'd gotten from Seattle, the less the world weighed him down. They'd laughed and joked all the way down the highway, and it'd been nice. Nice to play. And talk. And be Post-it married without anything else getting in the way.
“I’m glad,” she said, her voice shaking with emotion. She gripped the door handle and squeezed because she couldn’t reach him at this distance. “I’m really glad, Derek.”

He popped open his door and followed her to the ground. “I love you,” he said, “even though you’re a horrible navigator.”

“And I love you,” she said, “even though you're horny and five.”

They stared at each other across the void of the car cabin for several seconds, and many things were said without words as the nighttime world around them fell away. Good things. You're mine. I love you. I'm so lucky. I'm glad you're here. They both closed their doors at the same time, and the night swallowed them whole as the car's cabin light blinked out. For a moment, she stood, dazed, her head swirling as she swallowed. Who would have ever thought, years ago, when she’d been seeing Dr. Wyatt to become whole and healed, she’d have made it here?

She stretched before she moved. First her arms. Her shoulder blades and triceps pulled as she grabbed her elbows one at a time and yanked them behind her head. While she did that, she lunged to return some feeling to her calves.

Something snapped twigs and brush in the undergrowth in the distance, and it made the hairs on her neck stand on end as she leaned against the black SUV and stretched her quads. Deer, maybe? Wind creaked through the wet trees, and a fat drop of water fell on her nose. She blinked and looked up. Nothing but rustling black.

A breeze ruffled her hair, and more twigs snapped in the distance. Leaves rustled. The air smelled wet and full of the promise of rain. Her nostrils flared in the dark. She closed her eyes, and for a moment, all she did was listen as the cool air tickled the nape of her neck. There were no traffic sounds or hints of civilization. Just... emptiness. And the whisper of the wind through the leaves. And an owl, mournful in the distance.

Another twig snapped, and she squinted at the darkness. Had to be a deer. A single one. Or maybe a herd. She wished the light was better so she could see. She wanted to see deer. She loved watching them in the early morning on the deck by Derek's trailer while she sipped her first cup of coffee. They came close. Quiet. In small groups. They would stare at her with their delicate brown eyes and wet-looking noses, only to shoot off into the distance in response to some sound only they could hear, or some threat only they could determine.

Derek would love it here, she decided, and she'd been glad the Chief had suggested this place. Derek needed open space and quiet to relax. To not stress.

“So, what all should we bring in from the car? Can we leave your fishing stuff out here?” she called over the hulking SUV as, at last, she walked to the rear of the vehicle.

She kept her hand on the cool metal of the car's frame as she moved. The feel of the car gave her some orientation in the black. Her night vision had kicked in enough to identify shapes, at least. Tall trees surrounded them, reaching up into the sky, and at their swaying feet, she felt small and insignificant. She kicked a large rock with her shoe by accident as she moved. When she shuffled to the trunk, Derek wasn't there. She pulled open the door. The rear light came on.

She frowned when she realized Derek hadn't replied. At all. She began, “I would assume you'd want to take that stuff directly to the...” only to trail away. He still hadn't arrived. “Dock...” She glanced beyond the car windows. With the light on in the car, and the relentless darkness outside, she couldn't see a thing through the tinted glass.
“Derek?” she called. Maybe, he'd stopped to stretch. She listened to his footsteps and watched his shadow move.

He reached the corner on his side by the trunk. His breaths hit the air, steady and even. “Okay,” he said, his voice quiet.

“Do you have a flashlight or something? I can't see a thing out here except the car trunk.” He liked to carry a little two-inch long LED light sometimes, particularly at his trailer at night. Things got freaking dark there when the moon wasn't out, which, in Seattle, with the copious cloud cover, was actually a common occurrence.

A pause. “In my pocket.”

She hauled her rolling suitcase from the pile in the trunk. She grabbed his suitcase next. His fishing gear clanked and crashed in a cascade that made her wince. She hoped she hadn't broken anything. “Umm,” she said as the last box tumbled to the floor of the trunk, “Sorry.” What the hell had he done? Stacked all the suitcases like he was playing Tetris or something?

He didn't respond or make a snarky comment about her clumsiness, and her guilt quickly bled away. Surely, his gear wasn't that breakable, and he didn't seem disturbed by the prospect of his careful equipment stacks being disrupted. He stood by the corner of the trunk, gripping the frame of the car, breathing.

She marveled at the weight of his bag as she hauled it over the lip of the bumper. He'd managed to pack just as much as she had, for once. Maybe, more. On his consult trips, he tended to stuff a few things in a duffel and run, but he'd been meticulous this time. On Thursday night, before she'd fallen into bed to sleep, she'd watched as he'd tucked about thirty thousand pairs of socks along the edges of his suitcase, buried underneath piles of clothing. Lots of layers. Undershirts. T-shirts. A fleece vest. A sweatshirt. And a thick, lined coat that seemed too heavy for the end-of-summer they were experiencing.

*What's all that for?* she'd said.

*You'll need layers,* he'd replied.

*Why?*

*Trust me. You'd rather have them and not need them. It's a camping thing.*

She'd shrugged and packed heavily as he'd suggested, though she still didn't get it. It was chilly at night, yes. But not arctic. Though, she decided as she frowned, it was a lot colder out here than it'd been in Seattle. A shiver crawled through her. Perhaps they'd climbed elevation a bit? And, maybe, he planned for them to spend at least one night outside in a tent, if only to say he'd roughed it at least a little. She hadn't asked him about his specific plans. She'd been so busy simply getting through the week, she hadn't even thought about it. She grinned. A tent could be fun. Maybe. She wasn't sure if he'd packed one under all the other crap in the trunk.

“Here,” she said as she pushed his suitcase at him. Gravel spit under the suitcase's wheels. “Take your bag.” He skipped backward a step, but the suitcase still thumped his knee and fell to its side. “Derek? Flashlight?”

For a long moment, he didn't speak. With slow, exaggerated precision, he shifted, and he reached into his back pocket. The small LED light she'd remembered him carrying flashed to life. The jiggle of the light as his palm shook gave his state of mind away, and her stomach felt like it was
sinking as she watched him try to give the light to her. He couldn't keep his hand still. She felt like an idiot for not noticing sooner when she looked at his face in the dim light, really looked, and saw unadulterated, nauseated terror loitering in his wide-eyed, glassy gaze.

“Here,” he said, his voice breathless as he gave her the flashlight. His fingers brushed hers as he did so, and a lump formed in her throat. He'd been so warm, moments ago, and now? Now, his limbs had had frozen through with anxious chill as his body pulled his blood supply to his heart and his core.

What on earth had set him off? He'd been so happy. Her eyes watered. She shook her head. It didn't matter, now.

She swallowed as she slammed shut the trunk, plunging them into darkness, save for the white cone of brilliance offered by the LED. She bent to grab his suitcase along with hers, because she doubted he possessed the presence of mind to carry it himself, and she then positioned the LED so that it was jammed between her hand and the suitcase handle in her right hand. She could steer the light a little by squeezing her palm.

“You know what, we've got our clothes,” she said, forcing her voice to stay low and calm and soothing. “We can get the rest in the morning. Let's go inside.”

“Okay,” he said on a tight exhale, but he didn't move with her.

She swung around after several steps toward the soup can light and urged him on. He took a step after what felt like an eon of stillness, but that one stride looked as though it were a fight against the earth to keep it from swallowing him. Like it was a struggle to force himself to follow her. His fight-or-flight had kicked in, except flight had become freeze in terror when he'd realized he couldn't see to run anywhere, or to identify where the mysterious threat resided. It was written all over his footsteps and his posture and his shaky voice. She gripped their suitcases and kept urging him onward, hoping her voice would help and maybe give him an anchor. He didn't seem annoyed by her constant peppering of requests to keep moving.

They made it up the walk, which, thankfully, was paved and made for easy suitcase rolling and for frightened shuffling. They moved out of the well of blackness, and into the small sanctuary offered by the soup can light, which she realized was actually a glass lamp held in place by a shiny brass frame. She hauled the suitcases up the steps, grunting. The gold numbers posted by the door said 3137. Thank god. This was the Chief's place. Unless they'd somehow ended up on 3137 Cedarwood Court, or Cedarwood Lane, or Cedarwood Circle, or Cedarwood Street, or some other Cedarwood Something, named like all the freaking Hemlocks in a tree parade. The people here were obsessed with wood, damn it. She refused to claim a bad navigator rap for that.

“Do you have the keys?” she said as he shuffled behind her. She flicked off his little flashlight and slipped it into her pocket.

“Yes,” he said, but he didn't move.

The frightened verbal tremor in that one syllable made her want to throw her arms around him and never let go. But the situation would get better if they could move inside, first. That way, she hoped whatever had caused him to fall into panic mode would cease, and he could recover instead of linger and suffer like this.

“Can you get them out?” she prodded, trying to force him to function.

His nostrils flared as though he fought a wave of panic. “I'm okay,” was all he said.
“I'm going to reach into your pocket,” she told him.

Again, he didn't move. He made no comments. Didn't smirk. Didn't joke about the fact that she would be stuffing her hands into his pants, and that felt... Wrong. Discordant and wrong and bad. She closed the short distance between them with a cautious, telegraphed step as she tried not to spook him. She squeezed his shoulder with one hand as she reached into the front left pocket of his jeans, where she saw the telltale bulge of keys. His breaths came in slow, forced inhalations and exhalations. Regulated and even. His body was stiff as a board and shivery, and he swayed, as though she could topple him with a light push. Warm metal jabbed her fingertips. She clutched, and she pulled his keys loose.

She fumbled around the storm door and looked for a key that didn't seem familiar to her. She recognized the house and backdoor keys she'd given him when she'd asked him to move in. The keys to his trailer. Keys to both his Cayenne and her Jeep. A bike lock key. The keys to his office at the hospital, both his new office and his old one, which he'd never officially relinquished. She grabbed the next key and tried it in the door. No. Next one, yes.

The key sank into the keyhole with a metal crunch as the lock's pins fell into place. She turned the key and pushed open the door. She pulled the suitcases through, and then she motioned Derek forward. He followed. Slowly. He felt at the door frame with a shaky palm. Like he'd been blinded and needed grounding.

She felt by the door along the wall for a light switch. When her fingers touched a ripple on the wall, she flicked it. Pitch black plunged around them as the outside light winked off. She winced as his breaths hitched, and he made a scared, I-might-faint sounding gasp. The second switch next to the outside light illuminated the main room of the cabin in welcoming brilliance, and she sighed in relief. She didn't take any time to stare at their surroundings, though.

She pushed the door shut and locked it behind them. The thunk of the deadbolt echoed in the silence. Derek flinched, and his gaze ticked to the door handle. He swallowed, and he seemed to deflate a bit, but not much.

“I'm going to touch you,” she announced.

When he said nothing, she stepped forward and pulled him into her arms. His body shook, and his grip convulsed around her as he pressed his face against her mussed hair and the warmth of her neck. His body jerked as he pulled breaths in and pushed them out with forced, even slowness, and as she rubbed his back, trying to soothe him, she realized he must be counting or something. He held every deep inhalation for three seconds. No more. And he blew his breath out over three more seconds. No more.

“It's okay,” she assured him as he trembled in her arms, wondering what on earth had caused this. “You're okay.” The rasping sound of her skin as she brushed his shirt filled the eerie silence. He trembled. “You're okay, Derek. You're not going to die. You're safe. Nobody will hurt you.”

One of the suitcases fell with a thunk, and he flinched and made a small moan. Her heart squeezed, and she kept whispering at him. She had no idea how long she stayed that way. On the welcome mat. Holding him. His mood gradually began to shift. His controlled breathing tightened into sharp gasps and wet sniffles. He turned away from her and slammed his hand against the wall. Once, again, another time. A hanging picture wavered, and she caught it with her hand before it fell. She let him burn off his tear-streaked frustration in silence.

When he stopped hitting things, she pulled him back into her arms and rubbed his back. “Let me get you a glass of water,” she said, her voice soft. He didn't respond as she wandered away. She
wasn't sure where she was going, entirely, until she took a moment to orient herself in the new space.

The main room of the cabin was a wide, airy space. Hulking couches and a beat-up, wooden coffee table surrounded a fireplace on the right wall. Huge paned windows with aging blinds adorned the rear wall and the front wall. To the left, open space across a wooded floor, and then a dining room table. Beyond that, a large kitchen with a marbled center island and a stainless steel fridge and dual ovens. A hallway in the back led to, presumably, the bedroom and bathroom and whatever else was there.

A long handwritten note had been stuck to the fridge. She grabbed it. Curious. Apparently, a man named Ben had stopped by at the Chief’s behest and put some perishable items in the fridge, along with fresh bars of soap in the bathroom, clean towels, and sheets, and all of that. Some bananas and a small pile of tomatoes sat on the back of the counter next to the salt and pepper shakers. This Ben guy had gone all out.

She searched the cabinets for glasses. Jackpot on the first try. She grabbed a thick, heavy glass from the cabinet closest to the sink and ran it under the faucet after testing the temperature with her finger. Good enough.

When she returned to the living room, she found him sitting on the sofa staring into space. He’d turned on the crooked lamp on the end table. His eyes were red and puffy, and though he wasn’t crying, now, the skin on his cheeks glistened, and red irritation spread across his face like sharp, streaky blush. The rest of his pallor was bad, though. Sunken and pale and tired, and the contrast to how he’d been not fifteen minutes ago, happy and alight, made her eyes prick with tears. She blinked, and the blur sharpened once again.

“Derek,” she whispered to keep from surprising him as she wandered into his field of view.

He didn't move. She sat beside him, sinking into the thick cushions. She handed him the glass of water. He took a shaky sip, but didn't speak.

“Are you okay, now?” she said. He clearly wasn't okay. In the broadest sense, that was the stupidest question she could have asked. She supposed what she really meant was, was he still frightened? He seemed... better, at least. Better than he had been.

He looked at her with desolation. Without words, he set the water glass on the coffee table on a coaster, and she accepted him into her arms. He sighed, and she tightened her grip around him. She rubbed his back in slow, soothing circles, just as he'd done for her when she'd been throwing up on the side of the road. She swallowed around the lump in her throat as she stared beyond him at the empty fireplace.

“I love you,” she said.

A breath ratcheted in his chest. He grunted. “I want this to stop happening to me,” he said, his voice dark and tired. Upset.

“I know,” she said, unable to stop her tone from plunging into sadness. “Me, too.”

He didn't respond.

“What scared you?” she said.

He tensed, and silence stretched for moment after moment, as if the mere thought of trying to identify his fears scared him. “There was somebody out there,” he said. He sounded sick. And
embarrassed. And all sorts of things she didn't want him to feel on their forty-eight uninterrupted hours.

She didn't bother telling him that there hadn't been anybody out there. Just a deer snapping some twigs as it walked through the brush. Or some other furry wildlife thing. He knew. Which was what made all of this worse. To be scared to the point of gibbering malfunction, and at the same time, knowing that it was your brain playing chemical tricks on you? That would be horrible for anyone. But, for a control-oriented man like Derek, it was breaking. Had already broken. She pulled her fingers through his hair and said nothing. She rested her cheek against his head and sighed, offering as much silent support as she could.

“I'm sorry for ruining this,” he said, and she closed her eyes at his shame-laden tone.

“Don't be sorry,” she said. Her eyes burned over the fact that he felt guilty for this. He felt guilty for everything. He didn't need to feel guilty for this, too. “You're here in the best capacity you can manage, and I love you. It's okay. You're okay. You didn't have a panic attack. That's a start, isn't it? Better than before?”

Which was true, she decided, as she found some hope and lit it bright like a lantern in the dark. He'd nearly incapacitated himself, but he'd kept breathing, and he'd moved when she'd asked, and he hadn't collapsed in a choking mess to claw at his throat or tell her that he felt like he was dying, like she'd seen him do, now, several times.

He cleared his throat. “Replacing the panic thought helps,” he said, his voice rough. “Dr. Wyatt...”

“She taught you that?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“How does it work?”

“I think about... something,” he said. “Something else.”

“Like what?”

He swallowed. “Pickles.”

“Pickles?”

“I keep imagining you want pickles and ice cream in the middle of the night, and I go to get them at the marketplace you like a few blocks down from your house. The pickles, I mean.”

She frowned. “Why would I want pickles?” She usually picked them off her cheeseburgers, and he knew that.

He shrugged. “I know it's cliché. But you're pregnant,” he said, and even then, even when he was upset, the words tinged with a brilliant sort of hope and eagerness that made her heart flutter. She hugged him tightly and didn't move, relishing the warmth as his body reanimated slowly from fear over the passing moments.

“Like cravings?” she said.

“Yeah.”

She grinned, and she kissed him. “Definitely gold stars.”
He wiped his face with his hands and sniffed. “What for?”

“At my beck and call even in your head.”

He didn't answer. He rested in her arms, and she lost track of the crawl of moments as she rubbed his back and his toned bicep. She watched the fireplace with an absent stare. Extreme stress followed by its absence must have pulled on his consciousness. She felt the weight of his body press down on her, and his breaths evened into thick, raspy blasts of warmth that hit her skin. She tried to look at his face, but with him curled against her shoulder, his nose resting at her chest level, all she could see was his silver-dusted curls and the slope of his side and hip. She kissed him while he dozed, unwilling to disturb him.

At least, the Chief's cabin was cozy, she decided as she stared at the living room, unable to do anything else for the moment. It was a bachelor pad, exactly as he'd said, but it was livable, and homey, and just... nice. The two couches didn't match, exactly. They were two different shades of worn green, one more olive, and one more spruce, as though they'd been picked out at separate yard sales, and whoever had chosen them had simply eyeballed the color. A fluffy white shag rug accented with green and black swirls that, again, didn't quite match either of the couches, covered the hardwood floor between the couches and the fireplace. Ornate, flowery carvings crawled up the sides of the fireplace and created a huge mantle over top.

The wood scent of the cabin tickled her nose, and she closed her eyes as she was reminded vaguely of the smell of a freshly cut Christmas tree. Her mother had always used the fake ones that didn't smell at all, and, as Meredith had grown into an adult capable of buying her own tree, she hadn't really understood the appeal of it, anyway. Real trees would only die, turn brown, become giant fire hazards, and shed their needles all over the floor in a sticky, sappy pile. Izzie had gotten a real tree, though, and the whole first floor had filled with the sweet scent. Meredith had found that she kind of... liked it.

The lights and sparkles and other Christmas vomit, she could have done without, but she'd liked the smell. Spruce-y and fresh. When Derek had dragged another Christmas tree over her threshold for their first Post-it Christmas, she hadn't complained.

Post-it Christmas number two would be coming again in four months, she realized. Only four. When had that happened? How? With all the shooting crap and the hurt and pain... She'd pretty much missed the passage of time.

Her free hand roamed to her womb, and she opened her eyes to stare at the fireplace. She could imagine hanging Christmas stockings from the lip of the mantle, and she could imagine a real tree in a stand by the window, decorated with shiny ornaments and a bajillion lights. There would be glittering presents adorned with pretty bows sitting underneath.

She didn't want to suck as a mom, and a big tree and a sparkly Christmas was an important facet of not sucking, she decided. She hadn't had it as a kid. She would make sure baby had it. No matter how ridiculous and fake she felt doing it. She'd have to let Derek explain to her exactly how to do all the happy Christmas vomit stuff. He loved Christmas.

He'd tried to get her to participate more their first year, but he'd backed off a bit when all she'd done was glare at him. They'd compromised, and they'd had that painfully awkward dinner and invited everyone. His idea. Not the awkwardness. The dinner. Mostly his cooking, too, though she'd fooled people by being in the kitchen at opportune times. She'd gotten him that fuzzy blue bathrobe that he liked to wear, and they'd exchanged gifts over coffee the day after Christmas because they hadn't had time on Christmas day. She'd called it progress, then, and he'd happily agreed with her. Progress.
She could make more progress. Right? Her throat thickened with emotion as she stared at the empty mantle and imagined a stocking for Derek, and for Samantha, and at some point in the future... a stocking for baby. She was artistically challenged and couldn't sew. She imagined lopsided, patchwork stockings with sloppy glitter for the names instead of embroidery. Derek's would be big and striped like a candy cane. It would dangle from the mantle all the way to the floor and be large enough to fit a small person. That seemed to fit his Christmas personality. Exuberant and sort of funny and full of cheerful awareness that Christmas should be something enjoyable and full of wide-eyed innocence, rather than something to fear or dread.

She squeezed his body as he slept. She wanted that. For baby. Christmas.

_You could help me shop this year, if you want_, he'd said as they'd given Samantha her first walk. She wanted that. She needed the practice. _For baby._

He stirred after about thirty minutes and groggily smacked his lips. “Fell asleep,” he muttered against her skin.

She grinned and squeezed his shoulder. “You did. Feel better?”

“Well,” was all he said as he pulled away from her, blinking life back into himself, and whether that meant yes or no, she couldn't tell. He rubbed his face and looked slightly dazed. He ran his fingers through his flyaway curls, and she watched as he, at last, had a chance to assess his surroundings. His sleepy gaze traced the fireplace, and the shag rug, and the dinged coffee table. He looked behind them into the dining room, and beyond to the kitchen.

“Richard must be colorblind,” he decided after giving everything a lackadaisical once-over.

She chuckled. “That's common in men, you know.” She kissed him. “Both literally and figuratively.”

He shrugged, an amused look on his face. He glanced at the crooked lampshade beside him before turning to face her. “He kind of needs Adele to function,” he'd said.

He'd told her once about how the Chief had acted on their camping trip to the wilderness, what seemed like eons ago. When she and Derek had been taking some space or whatever because his sister Nancy had twisted him up in knots, which he'd also later explained. And she'd seen the Chief trying to peddle his clothes to be mended and ironed when he and Adele had been separated. And, really...

“He kind of does,” Meredith agreed. “I like it, though. It's very homey. Rustic, even. And it was really nice of him to offer it up for us.”

“It was,” Derek said. He glanced at the crooked lampshade once again, sighed, and reached to set it straight.

She smirked. Neat freak.

“It's got real food,” she said as he continued to look around. They'd been expecting soup and things in the pantry after Richard had said it was fully stocked. On the way there, Derek had suggested that they rough it with whatever was available tonight, and then buy fresh food in the morning after they'd gotten some sleep, and she'd agreed. “Apparently, the Chief had a neighbor drop by with some perishable stuff like fruit,” she continued. “Oh, and clean sheets and soap and stuff. There's a note on the fridge. It says call Ben if we have any problems, and there's a number on the sheet.”
He sniffed, and he gazed at her. The cloudiness of recent sleep had receded, leaving only sharp, aware blue. “Who's Ben?”

She shrugged. “I don't know. The grocery fairy neighbor?”

“Hmm,” he said, at which point, her stomach broke the silence with a burbling, obnoxious growl.

She blushed. “I guess I'm really hungry.”

He nodded, and he rose to his feet with a grimace and stiff movements that told her his body was still asleep, even if his mind wasn't. He wiped his face with his hands again, reached toward the ceiling and stretched, stared for a moment, and then swallowed. “Well, let's fix that,” he decided after a pause. “What was in the kitchen?”

“I don't know,” she said as she rose to join him. “Kitchen stuff.”

“Well, did the grocery fairy bring bread?”

“I don't know,” she said. “Maybe. I saw bananas.”

He glanced at her and gave her a wry grin. “Bananas are not bread,” he informed her. He shook his head and plodded into the kitchen. She followed.

“I know that,” she said. “I'm a doctor, you know.”

“A doctor who can't cook or identify bread, apparently,” he said with a soft chuckle as he pulled down a loaf of white Wonder Bread from the top of the refrigerator. The plastic crinkled. She hadn't even looked there. He stared at the package and grimaced. She couldn't help but smile. Not whole wheat. He would be slumming it with America's comfort food tonight.

“Normal people like crappy white bread, you know,” she said. She leaned against the counter and gave him a sheepish grin as she watched him explore the large kitchen.

“Normal people aren't healthy,” he countered with a haughty smirk. “That's why we're employed.”

He rifled through all the cabinets and then glanced at what was in the fridge. Beyond his thin frame, she saw milk and eggs and OJ and a pile other things that looked potentially edible, given preparation.

“Why do you want bread?” she said.

He turned and winked. “The better to feed you with,” he said with a wolfish grin that lit up his whole face, and she wondered what that might mean. If he still wanted sex, now that he was feeling a bit better, after he plied her with a scrumptious dinner. Relief fluttered in her body. Even if she was over-interpreting, at least he felt better enough to smile like that. She just wished he could feel like that most of the time, again, rather than experiencing fleeting moments of normality.

Soon. She hoped. With Dr. Wyatt's help, and when the Paxil started to work.

She frowned as he pulled a jar of boysenberry jelly and some Skippy peanut butter from one of the cabinets. He pulled knives and plates loose next. “And that means...” she pondered as she stared and added everything together, “peanut butter and jelly?”

He nodded. “At this precise moment, it does.”

That hardly seemed like a healthy, scrumptious meal to ply her with. Good in a pinch. But more her
style than his. "Derek Shepherd makes peanut butter and jelly?" she said with incredulity as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Yes," he said. "Tonight, I do."

She watched as he pulled out bread. Enough to make one sandwich. Not two. She frowned. He hadn't ever gotten his appetite back since the shooting. She still had to remind him to eat. Time and time again. Like it just didn't occur to him to feed himself anymore. How weird would that be, to just... not be hungry. Ever. Even as you wasted away. "You should make two sandwiches," she said. She kissed his bicep.

"You're that hungry?" he said.

"No," she said. "Make one for yourself."

He didn't comment as he added two more slices of bread to the stack.

"That's not cooking, you know," she said as he slathered peanut butter on the first slice.

He paused. "Did I say it was?"

"You impugned my cooking skills earlier."

"You don't have any cooking skills to impugn," he replied.

She laughed and held him tightly. "Mean, mean man," she said as she pressed her face between his shoulder blades and kissed him through his shirt. The shirt felt soft against his lips, and his shoulder blades shifted and moved as he worked the peanut butter across the bread. The heat of his body made her feel warm inside. Warm and complete and happy.

"How is feeding my starving wife mean?"

"Come on. I can make a peanut butter sandwich," she said. "You could have just pointed me at the kitchen and let me fix it myself."

"I know. I just..." He paused. The knife clinked as he set it against the plate. He'd put peanut butter on two slices. "I wanted to..." He waved the knife in the air as he fought for the right words to explain his feelings. "But I don't think I'm up for elaborate right now."

She pressed her cheek against him and sighed. She could understand that. He'd driven for several hours, which was tiring by itself. Then he'd been scared witless and beset by panic that he'd fought against. Valiantly. He didn't think he could do something complicated, but he wanted to do something. Something for her. Something to show his Gary Clark ghost and his damaged self-esteem that he could function. Live. Be a man. Provide. Normally, she might have labeled that sort of behavior as some sort of alpha caveman jerk thing. But... not now. He needed something to prove to himself he wasn't omega and helpless. That he wasn't without choices.

She kissed him through his shirt again, only to pause. She hadn't closed the cabinet. Beyond the space from which he'd pulled the jelly, she saw a stack of familiar-looking bags full of fat marshmallows. White, puffy cylinders of sugary awesome.

"Oh," she exclaimed, and he stopped before he dipped his knife into the boysenberry jelly. "Oh, there's marshmallows in here!"

He raised his eyebrows at her as she pushed past him and grabbed one of the bags. He'd moved
them into the kitchen, and he'd put the peanut butter on the bread. He'd done something. She hoped he wouldn't mind if she—

“So?” he said.

“We can make fluffernutters!”

“Fluffywhats?”

“Nutters."

The lascivious snicker on his face made her roll her eyes, but she couldn't help her grin. “You are so freaking five, Derek,” she said. She gave him a light shove. “I can't take you anywhere.”

He laughed. “What are fluffernutters?” he said.

She ripped open the marshmallow bag and dumped out several of the marshmallows. They were the big kind that you could put on sticks and roast to make s’mores. She'd always used a fork and roasted them over a candle, though. While her mother wasn't looking, anyway. Ellis Grey probably wouldn't have appreciated her smallish daughter playing with fire, of all things. Then again, she'd approved of a suture kit for a present when Meredith had been ten.

Looking back on it, that was sort of bad, wasn't it? Meredith filed that away as something not to do with baby. No sharp knives before baby was old enough to drive. She shook her head as her mind wandered back to the situation at hand.

On a hunch, Meredith glanced again at the open cabinet. Yep. Graham crackers and milk chocolate Hershey bars stacked in the back behind where the marshmallows had been. A grin she couldn't stop overtook her. They could do those, later, though. She tore a couple marshmallows to bits while he watched, and then littered them on the first piece of peanut buttered bread.

“Marshmallows and peanut butter,” she explained as he watched her culinary burst with a touch of horror in his gaze. “Normally, we'd use marshmallow paste, which comes in a jar, actually, but marshmallows will have to do in the meantime.” She paused and turned to him. “Unless you want to nuke these, so they melt?”

His expression was comical, and she couldn't help but snort with laughter at the way he stared at her concoction. Like she'd ruined his perfect sandwich by putting mud on it instead of jelly. “Melt the marshmallows?” he said.

“Yes! Melt.”

“With peanut butter?” he said.

She nodded.

“That sounds...” He stared at the plate, looking thoroughly uninterested, and, maybe, a little sick.

“Bliss,” she said. “Bliss on bread. You have to try it.” She jammed the two pieces of bread together and shoved the sandwich at him. He frowned. “Come on. It won't kill you. I swear it won't. One bite.” When he didn't budge, she gave him a pout-y face she knew he had trouble resisting. “Please? Please, Derek? Try it? It's great. I swear!”

With a look of doubt, he took the sandwich from her hands and raised it to his lips. Her heart fluttered. Victory! She stared as he bit into it and chewed.
“So, what do you think?” she said, anxious.

“This is...” He made a face and handed it back to her. At least he swallowed. “This is pretty disgusting, Mere. You eat these? As meals?”

She frowned. “It’s a delicacy!”

“It’s... marshmallow-y.”

“Marshmallow-y,” she said. “That’s all you have to say? What is wrong with your taste buds?”

He chuckled as he picked up his knife and resumed making his own sandwich. A normal, ho-hum PB&J that made her want to weep with the injustice of it all. “My taste buds are perfect, thank you,” he said.

She snorted. “Well, at least we know you’re not completely defective, since we’ve established that you’ll eat ice cream.”

He put a finishing dollop of boysenberry jelly on the last slice of bread and smooshed the two remaining slices together. She bit into her marshmallow sandwich and chomped, the motions pronounced, as if she could prove a point. He glanced at her and shook his head, an amused smirk on his face.

“Remind me never to let you feed our kid,” he said.

“I could so feed our kid!” she said. “I fed myself plenty when I was a kid. Therefore—”

His eyebrows raised. “You grew up on this?”

“I might have,” she said indignantly.

“It’s really kind of a miracle that you’re this tiny,” he said. He smirked, and his eyes roved her figure, up and down, appreciatively. “And alive.”

“You, shut up,” she said. “Jelly isn’t that much healthier. It’s solid sugar, and you’re a hypocrite.”

He shrugged. His eyes sparkled as he bit into his sandwich and chewed his first bite. He swallowed. “I’m actually kind of jealous of you. You eat like a garbage disposal, but you’re the size of a pea.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

He laughed. “That’s mature,” he said.

She put her sandwich down and slid up against him with a smile. His body accommodated her presence almost like a sixth sense. She didn’t see him move, but she just... fit with him. Like an interlocking piece. He took another bite of his sandwich. “You know what would make this perfect?” she said. She kept her voice deep. A low purr.

“It’s not perfect already?” he said. “I thought you called it bliss.”

She nodded. “It is bliss, but it could be blissier.”

He stared. “Blissier.”

“Yes,” she said. “It’s a word.”
“A word you made up just now,” he said with a wink.

“Whatever,” she said, rolling her eyes. “More blissful. And we're never playing Scrabble, by the way.”

He pouted as he chewed. “Not even strip Scrabble?” he said around a mouthful of sticky peanut butter, as though he couldn't wait to empty his mouth for that complaint.

She shook her head. “Not even.”

He sighed with disappointment and swallowed. “So, what would make this more blissful?”

“Mmm,” she moaned. She pressed her lips against his cheek, in his space and close. His breaths tightened. She ran her fingers through his hair and hovered by his ear. “Pickles,” she whispered.

His eyes widened, and he dropped his sandwich on his plate. “Now?” he said, his tone incredulous, but what was funnier than his disbelief was the fact that she could tell he'd do it if she asked. Get pickles.

She couldn't stop herself from bursting out laughing. “No,” she said, and his body deflated with relief. She kissed him. He would have gone back outside into the terrifying pitch blackness, braved a panic attack, gotten back into the car, and driven to find a freaking supermarket. For pickles. Because she was pregnant. And she'd asked. And that was just... adorable. Adorable, and she loved him. “No, I just wanted to see the look on your face,” she said.

“And you say I'm mean,” he replied, his eyes twinkling.

She nodded as she rested her head against his shoulder. “You are, but I love you, anyway.”

He snickered. “No, I'd say you are. Abusing my willingness to get you odd food items in the wee hours.”

“Maybe, we're both despicable,” she said.

“You're despicable,” he said, a playful grin on his face. “I'm not despicable. I was willing to get you pickles. Now, I'm not so sure. I think, maybe, I'll pick another replacement thought.”

She pouted. “No more pickles?”

“Mmm. No. You've ruined pickles,” he informed her. His lip brushed her ear, and he left his sandwich behind on the counter. Forgotten. “I'll take you to bed,” he rumbled against her ear, and she shivered at his desirous tone.

“As your replacement thought?” she whispered. He kissed her, and she gasped.

“For real,” he said.

For a moment, she stood senseless as he kissed her. Again, again, again. His mouth trailed along her throat, up her chin, and to her lips. Tasting. Searching. Wanting. Needing. Taking. A groan fell from his body, telling her that he'd found his dinner for the night. His delicacy. She was in his arms. Warm and solid, and she forgot her sandwich, too. Where had she put it? She couldn't even remember setting it down. She— He kissed her again, and she couldn't think about anything anymore, except the fact that she wanted him. She'd wanted him since he'd hit her with his first punch buggy sighting. Since before then, even. She'd always wanted him.
Since that first night in the bar when she'd tried to ignore him and his sexy red shirt and his horrible pickup lines and his cute arrogance. And, now, she had him. All to herself. No secret wife or nurse in the way. No mommy or daddy issues left to interfere. All whole and healed, herself. They were Post-it married. And both breathtakingly alive with beating hearts and no physical wounds left to speak of. She was alone with him, and he was kissing her. Loving her.

She was his. She let him own her in that moment, and she liked it.

He backed her into the counter with a thud, pressed against her, dwarfed her. Retaking some ground in a war of love, she slid her hand along his soft shirt to the waistband of his pants and fingered the fat brass button that kept his lower body away from her and entrapped. She licked her lip and relished the taste of him. Derek-y with a bit of peanut butter and boysenberry.

She undid the top button of his jeans, and he groaned. She slipped her hands underneath the soft, fraying denim at his waistline, underneath the clinging waistband of his boxer briefs, and down. Down, down, down into warmth. Heat. He pressed against her and made a delightful, deep noise in his throat that told her yes. Yes, he liked that a lot. But he wasn't hard. At all. She cupped him, felt his weight in her hands, just like he liked, and he bucked a little. A plate clinked as he pushed her backward. She pressed her lips against his and swallowed his growl with a moan of her own. She stroked him, and he shuddered. But, still nothing.

“Derek, are you sure?” she said, her voice breathless, as she forced herself to pull away from his body enough to speak. The separation was a physical sort of pain, but the last thing she wanted was attempted sex that failed, because even though he'd pinky promised that he wouldn't get upset, she imagined he might get upset. Just a little. After the harrowing experience he'd had not even ninety minutes ago. And, if they failed, now, that didn't bode well for future attempts as his self-consciousness started to crush him like a bug.

“I was in the mood before,” he said. He pressed himself against her hand. She gripped him. Nothing. “Maybe, I can get back into it.”

She pulled her hand away and hugged him. She hated to say it. Not when her insides felt gooey and her breaths had shortened and she felt a bit dizzy with hedonist thoughts about making love to him, but, “Maybe, we should wait a bit,” she whispered.

He pressed his nose against hers and sighed. “I want to get back into the mood,” he said, his dark eyes millimeters from hers. “This yo-yoing kills me. Please, Meredith. I want to make love to my wife.”

“I'm not saying we can't,” she said. She kissed him. “But trying to force yourself to have sex after what just happened less than two hours ago wouldn't exactly help you with that emotional whiplash feeling.”

He sighed. His frustration made her bite her lip. He kissed her forehead. “I know,” he said, his voice tinged with regret. “I know that in my head, I just...” He shook his head and looked away, blinking. He growled with irritation, not lust.

“How about a bath instead of bed, first?” she said, a compromise.

He stared at her. “A bath?”

“Just to relax,” she said. She kissed him. “Maybe, play a little. We'll see how you feel afterward.”

“We don't even know if this place has a bath,” he said.
She frowned. “How could it not have a bath?”

“Because it's a cabin,” he said. “It might only have a shower.”

“I refuse to allow this cabin to have only a shower,” she said.


She made a face.

“Well, let's see, shall we?” he said. He grabbed her hand and pulled at her, and she relaxed as he consigned himself to this new non-lusty plan. Their footsteps thunked on the hardwood floor. There was an alcove to the left in the short hallway, where an old washer and dryer sat. The hallway ended in two doors, one on the right, and one at the end. The door on the right? Bingo. She flipped on the light. Bright circular bulbs flashed on over the vanity at the sink. A heat lamp in the ceiling also flicked on.

Her eyes widened as she stared. The shower was the size of a house by itself, or, well, a shed, at least. It was about six by six feet with sliding glass doors. Two fat metal shower heads the size of dinner plates pointed downward onto a tiled floor. And there was definitely a freaking tub.

“Oh,” she said with a gasp as she took in the sight of it all. Derek slid up behind her and peered into the room over her shoulder. “Oh, wow. This is...”

“A giant pit,” Derek said.

“A whirlpool tub,” she corrected as she stared at the huge platform by a large half-frosted window that looked out into darkness at the top. The tub looked like a small pool and was surrounded by a tile platform where they could stack towels and candles and other relevant things. Huge, fluffy white towels and washcloths adorned the shiny towel racks against the far wall, and the room smelled slightly of fresh soap. Her nostrils fluttered as she stared at the rose-colored bar of soap in the dish by the big window on the ledge around the tub. The soap matched the pastel-colored tiles. I bought it sight unseen, the Chief had told her as he'd given her the keys. Almost as if he'd been a little embarrassed about it. She'd wondered why at the time. This bathroom? Probably why. It was obscene. And pink. And not a freaking bachelor pad bathroom by any stretch of the imagination.

“Definitely not what I was expecting,” Derek said, his voice airy.

“Oh, my god,” she said as she stared at the luxurious bathroom. Derek's grip tightened around her body. He kissed her ear. “I want to take a bath. Please, please, can we take a bath? It'll be fun and relaxing and... it's a whirlpool tub!” She turned into him and kissed his lips before he could reply. She bounced. Just a little. She couldn't help it. This was bounce-worthy.

“Are you sure it's safe?” he said when they parted. His gaze seemed apologetic, as though he were reluctant to dampen her excitement.

She frowned. “Why wouldn't it be safe?”

His warm hands roamed low against her belly. He rubbed her shirt. Instinct drove her to lean against him as he said in that soft voice of his, “The baby.”

“Oh,” she said. Her forehead crinkled with consternation. “Oh, um...” There was a freaking whirlpool tub, and if she couldn't take a freaking bath in it, she might cry. And then yell at him for
his super-powered bully sperm. And, maybe, pout a little. But... “Well, I can't imagine it being bad if it's not too hot. Aren't the problems from... like... hot tubs?”

He shrugged. The concern in his gaze didn't lift. “I don't know. I fix brains, not unborn babies.”

Unborn babies couldn't sweat because they were swimming in a uterus. Hot tubs tended to cook unborn babies. A sliver of fear ran through her as she tried to remember the facts from her neonatal cases, some long ago with Addison. She couldn't remember any specifics as her mind raced for answers, and she had no way to check for information. She pouted at him. “Derek, I want the Internet.”

His gaze softened as he stared at her. “And a bath?”

“The Internet and a bath,” she said with a nod. “Yes.”

“Why don't you run the water?” he said. He gave her a so-so motion with his right hand. “Not too hot, yet.” He turned back toward the hallway. “I'll be back in a minute.”

She frowned. “Where are you going?”

He looked over his shoulder and winked. “Just... run the water,” he said, and he gave her a secretive smile that made her curious. The Internet was not like pickles. He couldn't just run to a convenience store for that. Could he?

She snickered as she imagined him wandering back into the bathroom tomorrow morning, bedraggled and tired as he dragged a new shiny laptop and a router in with him. Look, Mere, he'd say. I found a Best Buy. And it only took me eight hours and three laps around the lake!

“Okay...” she said, shaking off that image in her head as he disappeared down the hall. She leaned across the porcelain void, fiddled with the shiny hot and cold knobs, and let the water warm up from freezing. She stared at the pit as it filled with water and giggled with anticipation. A whirlpool tub! She licked her lips. A whirlpool tub. With Derek. She sat on the tile ledge around the tub and stared at the water as it swirled to fill the huge, bath-tubby abyss.

Derek returned in about five minutes. “It's safe as long as the water isn't hotter than you are, and we don't stay in it until we're shriveled prunes,” he announced as though he were quoting somebody directly. There was something familiar about his phrasing...

“So, we keep it low 90s and limit ourselves to less than thirty minutes or so?” she said.

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Where'd you find that out?” She combed her spread fingertips through the frothy water. It felt good. Not hot. Definitely not cold. Perfect. She turned on the jets. “Did you get me the Internet?”

He winked as he sat on the edge of the tub with her and pulled at his shoelaces and slipped off his shoes. “I'm a miracle man,” he said with an arrogant smirk.

She laughed. “No, really,” she said. “Where—”

“I called Miranda.”

She gaped. “Bailey?”

“I owe her charts for a month,” he said.
“For her telling us we can take a bath?”

He shrugged, but his eyes sparkled. “She doesn't like knowing I have sex, apparently.”

“But we're not having sex right now,” she said.

“We'll be naked in a bathtub,” he countered. “I think that's enough for her sensibilities. She says congratulations, by the way.” He frowned. “Or rather, 'Congratulations, fools. Now, leave me alone, so I can fix this poor man's liver and not think about the specifics of how that baby happened.'”

Meredith blinked at his impersonation. Really, he did a good job at it. “You called Bailey,” she said, not a question, yet. She glanced at her watch. “At 8:30 PM. To ask about unborn baby safety? How did you know she was working tonight?”

He shrugged and winked. “I didn't. I risked it. And I didn't break the cellphone rule, either. I used the land line.”

The fact that he knew Bailey's number by heart made Meredith smile. Dr. Bailey had visited him every day in the hospital for at least a few minutes, more than anybody else outside of his family and Mark. She'd even come across town once to see Derek when he'd been at Seattle Presbyterian with pneumonia. For all their claims to the contrary, those two were thick as thieves, and the fact that Derek had thought of Bailey instead when he probably knew Addison's number as well made Meredith smile more. Bailey wasn't a world-renowned neonatal specialist or an OB-GYN. She was, however, a mom and a doctor that he apparently trusted to know the answer.

“She likes you, you know,” Meredith said.

Derek grinned. “Everybody likes me,” he said. She rolled her eyes as he slid across the tiled ledge. Closer to her. He kissed her ear and whispered over the rushing water, “You like me.”

“I do,” she said. The tub was almost full. She bent to begin undressing, but he stopped her with a look. The look. His look. The one that made her feel special and loved and perfect despite all her flaws and all her problems and all her freakishness. She leaned into him and raised her arms as he lifted her shirt. His warm palms slid up her bare skin and cupped her breasts over her bra. She moaned as she relaxed into his arms. He undressed her as though he were unwrapping a present, intent on saving the paper because it was pretty and perfect, but he marveled over the present, too.

She stared through her eyelashes, drunk on the sensation of being pampered, as he put her socks on the pile with her pants and her shirt and her underwear and her bra. “Well,” she said as she languished at the side of the tub, “I'm naked. Now, what will you do with me?”

He grinned at her and let her watch as he undressed. Slowly, as if to tantalize her. She licked her lips as the blue of his threadbare shirt became pale skin, and his pants fell away from his slim hips into a denim pool on the floor. His biceps bunched and flexed as he moved. Curly, wispy hair dusted his torso in a triangle at his chest, covering most of the harrowing, pinkish scar where he'd been split open by Cristina. The bullet wound remained sharp and ugly and pocked under his left nipple, but... she barely saw it as she basked in the sight of his naked body.

He didn't seem to favor the marks left by his injuries anymore. Didn't hunch over them or hide them. He might not like them, but at least he'd grown a bit more comfortable with them, or at least comfortable with the fact that, even if he found them ugly, she wouldn't balk at them or look at his body with horror or pity. She looked at him, yes. But horror and pity were the last things on her mind.
Her mouth dried as she trailed along the flat plane of his stomach with her gaze, to the twist of dark curls below his belly button, and lower. Even flaccid, she found him pretty impressive, or maybe that was just the knowledge of what he could do with what he had. He wasn't small, not hardly. But he wasn't large, either. They fit, exactly as he'd said that day on the couch when they'd found out together that she was pregnant. They fit, and that was all that mattered to her. The toned swell of his quads and his sleek calves completed the picture. Artwork. Her body twitched, and she inhaled tightly in anticipation as she stared at the tapestry of him. Of Derek Shepherd.

All hers.

He flashed a grin at her, and her heart skipped. She swallowed, trying to recover her wits, but that was a hard thing to do when he looked at her like that. He had an irresistible smile, which was one of the reasons she loved when he was happy and at peace, and one of the reasons she hadn't been able to ignore him at the bar when she'd been just a girl, and he'd been just a guy.

They climbed into the warm water together and sank down to the bottom. The tub was deep, and the swirling, moving water enveloped her up to her shoulders. The water was warm, but not hot. Perfect. He spread his legs and pulled her against him between his knees, her back to his chest, where she rested, relaxing in his wet embrace. His kneecaps offered support for her arms. She gripped him, and she rubbed her thumbs against his shins. He sighed as she twisted her fingers with the soft, wet hairs peppering his legs.

He was still flaccid. She could feel him mashed at her lower back along her spine. That thought remained in a cobwebby corner of her mind, somewhere. Fleeting. But she stopped thinking about it so much when he lathered a washcloth and rubbed her with it until she thought she might slip down the drain when they unstopped it, boneless and fluid in the churning water.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice sleepy and soft as he worshiped her head to toe without involving a single kiss, a streak he then broke almost as if he'd read her mind. She felt his lips graze her throat, and she listened to his breathing, soft and sure, as he tasted her skin.

“For what?” he whispered by her ear. The washcloth rasped. Water dripped.

“Just... thank you,” she said. She let him do what he wanted. He'd worked her into a pile of goo, and she couldn't bring herself to care much beyond the fact that she didn't want the goo feeling to ever end. They hadn't done this in a while. Well, they'd taken a bath or two. But not like this.

He rubbed her nipples with his soapy thumbs until they perked. She moaned, and his touch slipped lower. He kissed her neck and rested the flat of his palms against her belly. Her stomach at first, and then he sidled lower and lower, until the edges of his pinkies brushed the wiry hair down there. She put her palms over his and held him close.

“Can you tell, yet?” she said.

The water sloshed as he shifted. Not enough to disturb her much. “That you're pregnant?” he said.

“Yeah, I mean...”

He nuzzled her. “Well, you can't possibly be more than six weeks along,” he said, his voice a soft slip of fur down her spine. She tingled. “We've only been having sex since mid-July.”

“I know,” she said. They'd missed the fireworks, she thought in a blur. The literal ones, anyway. How had they missed so much? “I still look the same to me. Even the so-called bustyness.”

“You're not that much bigger,” he said. His knees squeezed against her sides, and he cocooned her.
“I told you I wouldn't have said anything, yet.”

“Still,” she said. She pressed his hands against her. “Can you tell?”

“I can't tell, yet,” he replied. “Other than the fact that since we found out, I can't look at you without knowing. I...” His voice trailed away. A soft noise filled her ear as she listened to him swallow. She turned her head and leaned back against his pale shoulder.

“What?”

She kissed his wet skin.

A sigh that moved her body with it rumbled through him. The water swirled around them. She watched the ripples chase along the filmy surface. Their bodies reflected in a soft shimmer. “You make me so happy,” he said, his voice thick and low and choked up with... everything.

She smiled as she languished in that feeling. That he loved her so much that he felt like that, just thinking about the fact that they'd made another person together in an act of love. She squeezed his hands. “You're not so bad yourself, you know,” she said.

“I love you so much,” he murmured.

She leaned, and she kissed his kneecap. Water dripped as she resettled. “Ditto,” she whispered.

Moments passed. The water sloshed, and the whirlpool jets whirred. “When do you think we...?” she began, soft words against his skin.

“Conceived?” he finished for her, as though he simply... understood. No matter what kind of freaky off-topic thing she could come up with, he would always get her. That was his thing. Getting her. She loved that about him.

“Yeah,” she said, swallowing.

“Hmm.”

“I think it was the night before the memorial,” she said. He'd been happy that night because he'd managed a bit more athleticism than their first few couplings since the shooting, and he hadn't needed any timeouts or assistance righting himself out of a position that caused him pain. She closed her eyes as she remembered the taste of him, and the sound of his soft groans as he filled her body to the brim. Her lower body fluttered at the simple thought of it. Of him. Filling her. Her breath caught.

As if he sensed her sudden desire, his hands moved. At first, she wanted to die with the abandonment as the warmth of his palms against her belly left her, but he slipped down through her forest of wiry curls and lower, and he touched her there. At the fluttery spot. She gasped, and she stiffened against him. “Derek,” she managed, her voice a choked whisper as he wrung her senses out like a wet washcloth.

He kissed her ear as he stroked her. Need built in her body, slow and coiling. “I think you're wrong,” he said, his voice low and challenging, and she couldn't think straight to ask him why or what about. He touched her, and she mewled in his arms.

“Derek,” she said again, helpless as he played her like his violin.

“I think it was the first time,” he said as she gasped and shuddered.
The first time, she thought. The words filled her brain like a soupy oatmeal and refused to coalesce. She couldn't think. She couldn't speak. She scrabbled at his knees, and he laughed against her ear as he leaned over her, his larger body dwarfing hers. He laughed, and the sound vibrated against her body like heady, thick music. Her head swirled like the water as she fought for breath. Air. Something.

His sigh rolled against her ear, and his arms enveloped her like a warm coat. He pulled her against his body, until her skin slipped against his, naked and wet and strangely frictionless in the slippery fluidity of the water. She sucked in a breath, leaned back, into him, and she couldn't breathe as her body tightened. She could only moan to tell him yes. Yes, that was good. That was perfect. She moaned like she was dying. Was she dying? Yes, yes, yes.

He kept her on that painful, perfect precipice for... hours. Days. Years. Eternity. He touched her, working his magic, and then she died in his arms for real, and yet only metaphorically. La petite mort. That was what the French called orgasms, right? Little deaths. It didn't freaking matter. The phrase was appropriate. Bliss squeezed her brain. Everything popped loose at once. Her body twitched like she'd been zapped with lightning, and then she became a pile of jelly and boneless limbs in his arms. Unmoving. Languishing in stupor. Pleased to the point of malfunctioning synapses. Her eyelids drooped, and he held her, not speaking.

This was the most perfect freaking bath. Ever.

She lay against his arms, not moving, and her awareness of the room blurred. Exhaustion overcame her. She'd just had the most amazing orgasm she could recall in months, and she'd been working nonstop all week, and she just... Couldn't. Couldn't do anything anymore but enjoy his body close to hers and let her brain shut down.

She moaned when he shifted, and he whispered gently in her ear, “Mere, we've been in here about forty minutes.”

Forty minutes? How? Already?

She didn't want to move. Or think. Or anything. He turned off the jets. The drain gurgled, and the warmth surrounding her drained away. He slipped his arms underneath her body, and the world skewed as he lifted her.

She had the presence of mind to croak at him. He hadn't lifted that much since before he'd been shot. “No,” she moaned. “You'll hurt...”

“I'm okay,” he said, his voice strained but even. He panted, but he didn't seem to struggle too much with her weight, and she stopped caring as much as he wrapped a billowing, fluffy towel around her lax body. The world skewed again.

“Derek...”

“Really, I'm okay,” he said, and he sounded sure, but not defiant, and no pain laced his tone. “I can carry you ten feet. Maybe, not eleven, though.”

She was too spent to argue, and she curled up in the towel and against his chest. In the blur, she thought she saw the hallway, and then things got dark again. Bedroom? He laid her flat on cool, clean sheets that smelled like Downy fabric softener or something. The mattress squeaked as he joined her. He pulled fluffy blankets and a soft, light down comforter over them. He wrapped his arms around her, spooning her. He stroked her hair, and he breathed against her ear. They lay naked together under the sheets.
Somewhere, in her grottiness, she flopped her hand against his bare hip, underneath the blankets. “Mmm,” she said. She felt him against her. Ready where he hadn't been before. Thick and pressed against her spine like a steel rod. “Sex?” She swallowed. “Don't mind.” She'd just lie there. He could still have fun.

He laughed. “I'll wait until you're conscious, if it's all the same to you.” He kissed her ear. “I'm okay.”

He meant it. She knew he meant it from his tone. He'd done more than make a freaking sandwich for her. He'd kicked his shoddy self-esteem's ass. He'd needed that, and he was happy. Pleased. Sated, though unsated.

She rolled, turning the spoon into a fork, and she pressed her nose into his chest. Soft fuzz tickled her nose. “Kay,” she muttered sleepily. She kissed him. Her lips touched the dent where his sternum had knitted underneath his skin. Her eyelids creaked open as she realized a bit more about their surroundings. He'd wrapped himself around her tightly like a cloak, her own personal Derek cloak, and though it was nice, it seemed it was also a necessity. “This bed is really small,” she said abruptly.

He kissed her again. “Yes,” he said. “Our very own microcosm.”

“Huh?”

“Bachelor pad, remember?” Derek said. The blankets rustled. “It's a double bed.”

She didn't wake up enough to contemplate it, much. They'd fit together in a hospital bed, and that'd been a single, though that had had railings, and... Did it matter? The room turned fuzzy again. The warmth of his body pulled her toward dreaming like quicksand. She yawned and breathed the musky, soapy, clean scent of his body. “If I'm right,” she said, “You have to eat a fluffernutter.”

He laughed, soft against her body. “Right about what?”

“I think it was the night before the memorial,” she murmured.

He stroked her back. “Okay, Mere,” he said.

“You'll eat one?”

She felt him nod. “If you're right,” he said.

“I am,” she replied.

“If I win,” he said, and she felt him smile in the darkness, “I'm eating you, though.”

She fell asleep in his arms to that thought, and dreams of him naked shimmered in her head like the reflections on the whirlpool water.

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(We got all the memories)

Meredith paced in the hallway outside of Derek's hospital room for what felt like years as she tried not to think about how sick he was. How sick he'd been. About how close he'd come to dying in the last month, not once, but twice. Once via attempted murder, and another time via a combination of
crap luck and his horrific stubborn streak. This wasn't fair. None of this was freaking fair.

He'd been transferred to a step-down unit late that afternoon after two nights in the ICU. The step-down unit was a real room with real walls, a lockable door, and a private bathroom, and it was a glorious rung up on the privacy ladder for him. Except she wasn't entirely convinced he should be there, yet. He still had a fever, and they'd stopped making serious gains at lowering it. The antipyretics seemed to have gotten stuck in neutral as he'd hit 101.7 or so. On top of that, he wouldn't eat. She'd watched breakfast, lunch, and dinner trays being taken away from him that day, all untouched, and he hadn't eaten anything the day before, either. At least he was lucid, for the most part, though his grasp on reality didn't seem all that firm. With his voice in shreds, she couldn't really call what he did speaking, but he seemed to interact with nothing at all, sometimes.

Her hands trembled. A worried lump gobbled up the empty space in her throat, and then she couldn't swallow because the lump had grown to basketball proportions. He'd nearly died again, and he wouldn't eat, and she couldn't touch him, and his fever was stuck, and he should be back in the ICU, being more closely monitored. Except if it were anybody else and not Derek, she'd be signing the 'discharge to step-down' papers herself. His fever was stuck, yes, but it was far better than it had been, and unless it stayed stuck for a long time, like days, not eight hours, she was being irrational, and stupid, and freaky, and she wished this would just... Stop. He was very sick, and she hated it, but that was all. Except telling herself to stop didn't make anything stop. Derek had almost died again.

Again. Once was already too much.

She paused in the quiet hallway and rubbed her temples. Her eyes hurt from lack of sleep, and her head hurt from endless worrying. The white walls seemed to brighten, turn incandescent, and then stab at her retinas with vicious knives. She closed her eyelids, and sighed as she rested against the wall, listening to the sounds surrounding her. A pair of doctors conversed in whispers several doors down. The floor nurse tapped away at a keyboard at the station just around the corner, and the sound fluttered back to Meredith, vague and distant. The scent of antiseptic tickled her nose.

“For the record, I am not here, and I never was here, and I certainly never drove across town for this,” a familiar voice told Meredith.

Meredith's eyes slammed open, and she found herself inches from her boss. Dr. Bailey stood by the door, wearing a tan raincoat that covered street clothes – slacks and shiny loafers. The shoulders of the raincoat had darkened with rainwater. Meredith's jaw tumbled open.

“Dr. Bailey?” she said.

Dr. Bailey frowned at Meredith, her eyes intent, concerned pools of brown. Dr. Bailey glanced at the closed doorway to Derek's room, and her frown deepened. “Why are you standing in the hallway?” she said. Her wet shoes squeaked on the tiled floor as she shifted. “Did that fool kick you out of the room?”

Meredith blinked. “Dr. Bailey?”

Dr. Bailey nodded. “That would be my name, Dr. Grey.”

“But...” Meredith swallowed. “How are you here?”

“I thought I already explained that. I'm not here.”

“But... Why aren't you here?” Meredith said, feeling strangely clueless.
“Because I do not drive across town to visit arrogant, stubborn neurosurgeons when they get sick.”

“But...”

“Spit it out, Grey,” Dr. Bailey said as she folded her arms over her chest. Her small frame puffed up with her authoritative tone.

Meredith shook her head. “I mean, who told you... about...?” Derek. Nearly dying. Again.

“I have spies, Grey,” said Bailey. “Everywhere. I see and know everything. Or haven’t you learned that by now?”

“But this isn't Seattle Grace—”

Dr. Bailey held up a hand as if to silence her. “I see and know everything,” Dr. Bailey said. She shuddered and shook her head. “Not that I want to.”

An orderly walked past, rolling an empty gurney covered in rumpled sheets. Meredith paused as he went by. She swallowed. “Derek didn't kick me out,” she said. “He's... using the bathroom. I wanted to give him some privacy.”

Not quite the truth, but close enough. He had an intravenous line feeding him fluids, antibiotics, and other medications nonstop. No longer intent on monitoring Derek's kidney function so closely, the doctor had removed Derek's catheter just before they'd moved Derek out of the ICU. Except Derek was still sick. Still feverish. Still weak. And tired. And lethargic. He didn't even want to get up. Didn't want to try. Meredith had handed him the plastic urinal and left so he could do his business in private.

“How is he doing?” Dr. Bailey asked as her voice dropped low with empathetic concern.

Meredith shrugged. “He's sick, and he doesn't want to be here.”

“He's one of those, is he?”

“One of what?”

Dr. Bailey's eyebrows raised. “Horrible patients?”

Meredith shook her head. “He's too sick to be a horrible patient. He... almost died again.”

“He what?”

“His temperature hit 104.9. The doctor was debating whether to put him on a ventilator because he couldn't breathe. It's agony for him to cough. And he... he almost...” Died. Died. Died. She closed her eyes and tried to stop the quailing in her gut as she remembered how bad he'd been two nights ago. How frail he'd looked when they'd had to pull him from the car and wheel him into the emergency bay. His eyes had been open, but he'd been caught in feverish delirium, and there just... hadn't been anybody home.

“How is he, now?” Dr. Bailey said, her voice gentle.

“He's not eating, and he's in a lot of pain, but they got his fever down to 101.7...” Meredith sighed. “I thought we were done. I thought we were done when I took him home after the shooting. This is...” Her throat hurt. “I don't know what this is, but it's horrible.”
“Grey,” Bailey said, “if there’s one thing I know about that man, it’s that he’s annoying.”

Meredith blinked. “What?”

“He’ll be fine.” Meredith opened her mouth to protest, but Bailey barreled onward. “And not your version of fine, just so we’re clear,” Bailey said. She splayed her palm against her chest. “My version. Which is actually honest-to-god fine.”

“But—”

“If he’s not fine, he can’t be annoying,” Bailey clarified.

Meredith looked at the floor. “Oh.”

A warm hand touched Meredith’s shoulder. Dr. Bailey moved closer. Wet shoes squeaked. “And he loves you,” Dr. Bailey said, her voice soft and mothering. “That idiot would move heaven and earth to be fine for that.”

Meredith nodded, but she didn’t respond. They stood in silence in the hallway for several minutes. Meredith glanced at her watch. She’d given him ten minutes. To pee. He had to be finished. Surely. She pushed away from the wall, trying to ignore the swaying feeling as her body fought gravity and an upset stomach. She blinked, and the dizzying, black waterfall receded.

“Let me see if he’s done,” Meredith said. As she began to turn the doorknob, she glanced at Dr. Bailey. She tightened her grip until the knob’s edges bit into her skin. “Give me a second, okay?”

Dr. Bailey nodded. Meredith moved across the threshold, back into Derek’s private room. He’d filled the urinal, which rested on his tray table over his lap, at the opposite end from his still untouched bowl of oatmeal. After he’d refused breakfast, lunch, and dinner that day, she’d gotten desperate to see him eat. She didn’t want to have to see him with a feeding tube, and she’d wondered if, perhaps, he hadn’t been eating simply because the full meal trays served by the hospital were too daunting for somebody so sick, but she’d had no luck. He wouldn’t eat the oatmeal, either, though she couldn’t tell if that was her failure to cook more than his failure to consume.

Subtle wisps of steam curled up from the Styrofoam bowl. A plastic spoon poked up from the concoction a bit like a flag, which made her think she might not have added enough water. Shouldn’t the spoon fall to the side or something? Oatmeal should be mushy, she thought.

She walked under the television, which hung high on the wall and had been muted. The only sounds in the room were the high-pitched, background whine of the television electronics, the slow bleep of Derek’s pulse oximeter, and his chuff-y, labored breathing. He lay on the bed on top of the sheets, not sitting so much as propped at a shallow angle. A sheen of sweat dotted his brow along his hairline and down his temples to his wet sideburns, but that was all. A far cry from how bad he’d been the day before, when she’d had to bathe him. He still wore the full oxygen mask, and he stared dully at the muted television, where the Yankees were decimating the Mets 4-0. His gaze didn’t shift to face her as she entered. He didn’t greet her. He didn’t move. He stared, listless. She couldn’t even tell if he was a Yankees or a Mets fan, though she knew he likely had to be one or the other, given where he was from.

She resisted the urge to touch his naked shin as she moved alongside the bed to his tray table. No touching except when necessary, she chastised herself. She still had no idea what kind of touching was okay, and what kind of touching wasn’t. She didn’t understand it at all.
“Derek,” she whispered. Finally, he looked at her. “Hey,” she said. She gave him a small, wobbly smile that she hoped he would find encouraging, and for a moment, the empty space between them seemed to connect with a tangible cord. Some connection. The sense that her gaze pulled at him like an anchor overwhelmed her. For all his shaky reality, he was in the room then, and he loved her, and she knew it. His pupils sharpened in the sea of blue surrounding them, and she couldn’t help herself. She touched his brow and rolled her fingers back through his damp hair as she leaned over the railing on the bed. Her eyes watered when he leaned into her touch like he'd been suffering through a drought, and her palm was water. Which made no sense, damn it. What was good, and what wasn’t?

“Bailey's here to see you,” Meredith said. She grabbed the urinal. “Let me... take this.”

He didn’t move or blink as she walked into the bathroom and dumped the receptacle’s contents into the toilet. In fact, she wasn’t quite sure he’d understood the bit about Bailey. But when she set the empty urinal down in the bathroom and moved back into the main room, she discovered she was too late for further clarification.

Derek blinked at his short, determined visitor, and then his gaze sharpened from somewhere adrift into helpless panic. Meredith read the thoughts crossing his face as though he’d spoken them. I'm sick. I'm lying on a hospital bed in nothing but a skimpy gown. I can't lift my own head off the pillow. I don't want a visitor.

Guilt stabbed at Meredith for not policing the situation better despite her exhaustion – she hadn’t been thinking — but Bailey intervened before the awful, churning feeling gutted her. “Oh, don’t give me that look,” Dr. Bailey said as she pulled a chair close to the bed and sat. The chair squawked as she settled. “You know you're happy to see me,” she told him. She leaned against the railing and gripped it. Her gaze didn't wander away from his face, not to the monitors, or his bare legs, or the muted television, as if to say, I'm here to see you. Not whatever you're embarrassed about.

His eyelids drooped. He pulled his mask down and panted in the open air, as though that small act had sapped him. His wheezy breaths filled the silence while Dr. Bailey waited patiently for him to speak. After about fifteen seconds, he tried, but his throat butchered whatever the original utterance had been. One syllable popped. Another dropped like a brick into oblivion and made no noise at all. The last was a hoarse, mumbled, unidentifiable whisper. And then he was coughing. First, a bubbly, weak cough that stuttered in his throat, but that was followed in sharp succession by a stronger, more forceful one that sent him rolling forward with its momentum. He grabbed feebly at the railing for support. An expression of abject pain sliced his face.

Dr. Bailey snapped into motion. She leaned over the railing, and she put her hand against his back. “That's right,” she encouraged. “Get that bad stuff out of your lungs.”

She swallowed as she sat down in the small reading chair in the corner of the room. She wished there was something she could do for him. Anything. Home, he'd croaked at her, and she'd only been able to tell him he would be stuck here for a few more days.

His eyes slid shut as he flattened against the bed, breathing noisily. Dr. Bailey resettled the mask back over his nose. “You don't have to talk,” she told him as she settled back in her chair. She pushed her arm under the railing and grabbed his hand, mindful of the intravenous line stuck in
the back of his palm. Her knuckles turned white as she squeezed. Another cough ripped him up and spat him out, leaving him haggard and sniffling and panting. He blinked, and his collection of tears spilled. He looked away. His Adam’s apple rolled along his throat, and the mask shifted as he swallowed.

“I know you're tired, and everything hurts, and life's not fair, but you are not allowed to give up,” Dr. Bailey said. “Okay?”

Derek looked at her, his expression desolate.

Dr. Bailey smiled. “You have too many people who want to see your stupid smile and your stupid hair back at work. Not that I'm one of them, because I'm not here.”

The skin around his red eyes crinkled. Not much. Just a little. A small hint of a smile. Meredith leaned forward in her chair. That was something she hadn't seen in... days. His head shook minutely, as if he meant to say, “Nope, never happened.” The oxygen mask fogged.

“Exactly,” Dr. Bailey replied with a firm nod as though he’d spoken aloud. She glanced at his tray table to the cooling, solid-ish oatmeal. “So, is something wrong with your oatmeal? Not enough cinnamon? It smells good.”

“I cooked it,” Meredith said, her voice glum.

“Grey, that's immaterial,” Dr. Bailey said without looking away from Derek. “You can't mess up oatmeal.”

Meredith sighed. “I think I probably can mess up oatmeal, yeah.”

“Instant oatmeal?” Dr. Bailey said, eyebrows raised. “All you do is add water.”

The crinkle around Derek's eyes deepened as he breathed under the mask. Meredith stared at the bowl and the unappetizing glop she'd made. She'd put the bowl on his tray table less than twenty minutes ago. Just before she'd left the room, actually. Theoretically, the oatmeal should still be edible. Just as, theoretically, it shouldn't be possible to start a kitchen fire while microwaving pizza, but that had still happened to her, once. Theoretical was a tricky word.

“I'm... talented that way,” Meredith admitted. “Talented at sucking,” Dr. Bailey frowned, and Meredith's face reddened when she realized what she'd said. She rushed to add, “I mean it's probably horrible, disgusting, awful oatmeal.”

Dr. Bailey snorted. “You see this?” she said to Derek, but gestured at Meredith. “You're making your wife feel bad about something she cooked for you. At least give it a try.”

Meredith's eyes widened as Derek pulled his mask down. He said something. Two words. An unidentifiable crackle followed by a rasping, “H... Hungry.” His noisy breathing flooded the room, and he stared at the bowl she'd microwaved with glazed disinterest.

“Well, if you're hungry, eat,” Dr. Bailey said.

Derek made a face. “Not,” he croaked, his entire chest heaving the with effort of pushing out that single, intelligible syllable. “Not... h...” He choked on the h, and his expression turned molten as he stumbled all over it and gave up. He glared.

Dr. Bailey blinked. For a moment, she remained silent. She took a breath. Her voice shook with intensity when she said, “If you mean to tell me, Dr. Derek Shepherd, that after all of this, a bowl
of oatmeal is going to stop you, I don’t know what to say. Because the Derek Shepherd I know would want to get better, and he would know that starving himself wouldn’t do much, other than torture the poor woman who made his dinner for him in the first place.”

His expression crumpled, and Meredith twitched in her chair. Don’t bully him, she wanted to say. He was sick, and he couldn’t speak to respond, and he felt bad enough already. Except then he picked up the spoon from the bowl with a shaky hand and plunged it into the oatmeal goop almost vengefully. She watched him take his first bite to eat in more than two days. His dark, stormy expression clouded the entire room, and his nose crinkled with what had to be disgust, but his jaw worked, and he settled into a chewing rhythm, and no matter how miserable he looked, Meredith couldn’t help but smile. Because he was eating.

Dr. Bailey leaned back in her chair with a satisfied nod, still holding his free hand.

“How bad is it?” Meredith said as Derek swallowed. “I mean, on a scale of oatmeal to brick?”


Dr. Bailey snorted.

Meredith blinked as he picked up his spoon for a second bite. “Ten?” she said. “Is oatmeal a ten, or is a brick a ten?” From his expression as he stared at the bowl, she could only assume that ten meant brick. “I can get you something else. Just name it. Please.” She left her chair and approached the bed, only to be interrupted when the floor nurse bustled in with a smile and a clipboard.

“Dr. Shepherd,” the woman said. Her brown hair was pulled into a stark bun, and she had a pen tucked over her ear. “You're eating! That's wonderful to see. Are you feeling any better?”

He looked up at her and swallowed bite number two, but he didn't speak. The nurse approached the bed and quickly checked his pulse and tympanic temperature. She smiled again. “101.5,” she said as she glanced at the digital display on the small ear thermometer. “Looks like we’re moving again. Hang in there. You'll be out of here, soon.” She scribbled some notes on his chart. “Be sure to put your mask back on when you're finished eating,” she said, and then she left as quickly as she'd come.

The woman's name was Janet. Meredith liked her. Janet was fast and unobtrusive, but warm and caring, and, really, just a very nice person.

Derek shook his head and dipped the spoon for bite number three. A tired expression swept over his face, and Meredith gripped the railing by his bed. The hand and arm he used to lift the spoon trembled. The plastic ticked as it hit his teeth, and he took his next bite. She glanced at the bowl. Some progress. Not much. Three bites. Three bites should never be such horrendously difficult achievements.

He tried a fourth bite. He did. But his eyelids drooped, and the spoon stuck in the oatmeal while he stared at the bowl. Like he saw it, but he just... couldn't. Couldn't lift it. He wheezed, and he blinked once, twice. Each time his eyelids took longer to rise, but he didn’t let go of the spoon.

Dr. Bailey stood. She smiled. “Well, I don’t want to keep you up. You keep fighting, and I’ll see you soon. For the first time. Because I wasn’t here. Okay?”

Derek nodded. Sort of. Except with the last dip of his head, his chin tilted toward his chest and didn't rise again. He stared at the oatmeal, holding the spoon, a dead glaze robbing him of any
“By the way, I'm slightly relieved,” Dr. Bailey said as she reached the threshold of his room.

“By what?” Meredith said as she sat in the chair Dr. Bailey had been using.

Dr. Bailey gestured at Derek, who, at this point, was barely sentient. “At least I know his hair isn't always stupidly perfect,” she said. She shook her head, and then she left.

Derek didn't react at all as his last blink became slumber.

When Meredith snapped awake in a bath of moonlight, curled up in his arms, she didn't know where she was, and the disorientation kicked her heart into overdrive. She jerked and looked around, blinking muzzily, fighting sleep to try and figure out... what... His arms tightened around her, and she was warm, and cocooned, and protected. The sheets smelled like him, musky and male. Her muscles relaxed, and as her dreams slipped out of her grasp, she remembered. She wasn't in the hospital with Derek. She was in a very small bed in a cabin in the middle of nowhere with Derek.

He’d spooned her again at some point. He'd pressed his nose into her neck. She listened to his thick, even breathing by her ear as she squinted at their surroundings. A large window at the head of the bed towered over them. The moon hovered in the sky, a bright pie plate poking through the wispy ends of puffy clouds. It spilled a diagonal shaft of white light onto the bed where she and Derek slept. Half the sky, it seemed, had cleared up over the hours, leaving twinkling bits of glass-like stars flecking the endless black.

The bedroom was small and danced with long, dark shadows. A small nightstand with a lamp and a clock sat on her side of the bed, and the black mass of a dresser rested against the far wall by the doorway. She couldn't read the clock on the nightstand. It wasn't digital, and she couldn't see the hands marking the time despite the bath of moonlight because the face was so small. A second window looked into the night on the wall to her right, pouring another shaft of moonlight into the room on the floor a few feet away.

He twitched. An almost snore pressed against her ear. She stroked the arm he'd wrapped over her naked hip. He'd been so sick in the hospital the second time. She'd almost lost him twice, now. The universe had sent her two blaring messages that what they had together could easily be severed through no fault of their own, and she'd received them crystal clear.

His grip tightened, and he muttered something in her ear. He moved, his body a pale, disrupted line of stress in the dim moonlight as his legs scissored. She clutched his hand and squeezed.

“Derek,” she whispered.

He shook his head like he was trying to break loose from his dream. “Mmm, no.”

“Derek,” she said, more insistent.

A terrified gasp hit her skin. His body jerked. He kicked at some phantom that wasn't there. “No!” he snapped, and then his sleep shattered. He sucked in a breath. She listened to him swallow. The blankets rustled as he pressed his naked body tightly against hers. His body trembled with disquiet. He grunted.

“You okay?” she whispered as she stroked his arms. The tiny, light hairs on his skin chased her fingertips.

“S'dreaming,” he said thickly.
“That's right,” she said. “You were dreaming.” She stroked his arms. “It's not real, and you're okay.”

He didn't speak for a long time. His breaths tightened as he struggled with his demons. She stared at the shadows dancing along the sides the room, wondering if he saw Gary Clark there. Loitering. Waiting. She imagined him standing there with a gleaming pistol, and she heard his snarled words as he told Derek he was worthless.

“He's not real, Derek,” she said. “It's just you and me here.”

“I know he's not real,” Derek said. “That doesn't mean he's not there.”

“Is he talking to you?”

Derek didn't answer, but that was answer enough. Yes. Yes, Gary Clark was speaking.

“I want...” Derek said, his voice breathy, and his body shook.

She swallowed. “Percocet?”

A pained sigh hitched in his chest. “I just want to sleep,” he said. “It helped me sleep.”

Meredith rolled out of the spoon Derek provided, turning, struggling in the small bed, and pressed her face against his naked chest. He grunted, deep and dark, like he was trying not to cry. She kissed his skin. A taste of salt touched her tongue. And then she kissed him again. His tension drained as she lay on hands, just touching, pressing her warmth into his.

“You can sleep without it,” she told him, a soft, soothing whisper. “Shh.” She kissed him again, and he loosed a stress-venting sigh. “Just think. We're here on the lake, lying naked in the moonlight. We have our forty-eight hours. Uninterrupted. Just you and me. And you can go fishing on the lake tomorrow and relax. I'll go with you in the boat. I promise.”

“Hmm,” he murmured. “Sex?”

“Now?”

“Morrow,” he said, sleep thick in his voice, robbing him of syllables.

“Absolutely,” she assured him.

His thick breathing evened into steady rasps. His grip loosened.

“I'm here,” she soothed. “You're fine. Everything is fine. You can sleep. You can.”

As he spilled into dreams again, she pulled on his arm, and he wrapped around her, warm and naked and hers. Except when she closed her eyes to sleep beside him, she kept thinking of her dream from before, and she couldn't stop hearing Bailey's voice in her head, telling her Derek would be fine.

Dr. Grey, if his pulse-ox gets any lower, we'll need to put him on a ventilator, Derek's doctor at Seattle Presbyterian had told her after pulling her aside. Her world had snapped in two on that moment. Putting somebody on a ventilator was a big freaking deal. A maybe-permanent freaking deal. Whenever somebody was put on a ventilator, there was always a chance, some quirky, unpredictable possibility, that his or her lungs wouldn't start again, and he or she couldn't ever be removed from the ventilator in the future. That was why a ventilator was usually used only as a last
But what had been worse than realizing how bad things were was realizing there wasn't a blessed thing she could say in the situation. The doctor had told her about Derek. Informed her. Not asked her. She'd been a visitor who had no say about his treatment. Never once had the doctor said, *Should we put him on a ventilator? Or, Do you know what his wishes are about being on a ventilator?* Seattle Presbyterian staff had enforced strict visiting hours that first day, when she knew full well that hospitals, or at least Seattle Grace, went out of their way to give loved ones more time with family members who were dying.

When he'd been in the ICU in Seattle Presbyterian, she'd been allowed ten minutes every two hours during visiting hours, and not at all overnight. *He's in critical condition, and he needs to rest,* they'd claimed to keep her away, which was true. He *had* been in critical condition. And he had needed rest. But that was what hospital staff said to somebody they didn't feel should be allowed free access, for one reason or another. They'd loosened up a bit after that first awful day and night, once they'd seen she wasn't some loitering nut job, and he clearly recognized her, even as out of it as he'd been, but, still...

To Seattle Presbyterian, she wasn't Derek Shepherd's wife or his family or anyone.

She was just some girl, and she'd had nothing in her possession to prove otherwise. She doubted they would have done more than nod and smile at the framed Post-it she and Derek kept over their bed.

The situation at Seattle Presbyterian had been so different than her experience at Seattle Grace when he'd been shot. At Seattle Grace, she'd been allowed to see him before he'd recovered fully from the anesthesia. They'd let her sleep in a chair in his ICU cubicle as long as she stayed out of the way of the nurses and doctors. They'd put out a spare cot for her to sleep on in his step-down room without her even asking.

She pressed against him, snuggling closer. They'd been lucky, so far, that their tragedy had been limited to Seattle, and largely limited to Seattle Grace, where everybody knew them. Knew they were a married couple, even if it wasn't by law. If Derek got seriously hurt again, or had some new complication from his injuries or his PTSD or his drug whatever, to the point that he couldn't speak for himself, she didn't know what she would do. She didn't want to be just some girl again.

She bit her lip. What if he slipped, metaphorically, took some pills, and they had to start all over? He'd been clean for little more than a week and a half. It would be so easy, and so tempting, for him to stumble. Wouldn't it? Her gut churned as she worried. *Yes,* a small voice said. That annoying voice that always told her things she didn't want to hear. *He still wants it, even if he's not acting on it,* said the voice. *He's said so. He said so just now.*

If that were to happen, if he were to slip, she would insist on rehab. She'd told him she would. She knew he wouldn't want to go back to Seattle Grace for that, which would mean the Seattle Presbyterian situation all over again, be that at Seattle Pres itself, or some specialized rehab clinic somewhere.

If he became unable to speak for himself, somehow, she'd be just a girl again. Not a wife. Not unless she and he took great pains to get a lot of additional paperwork signed before whatever crisis might pop up in their faces, unwanted.

And they were having a baby together.

What if something happened to Meredith? A lump formed in her throat. She had nobody but Derek
and Cristina and Lexie and Alex. Mark, maybe, too, though he was more Derek's person than hers. But that was it. She had five people in the universe. Four and a half, since Mark didn't quite count. Because George had freaking died, and Izzie had stormed out of Meredith's life and refused to return a single phone call except to say stop calling. It's just a place I worked, and I can do that anywhere, Izzie had said when Meredith had tried to tell Izzie she had a home. Izzie was working somewhere in... Boise, now, enjoying her fake fresh start. Or something. Alex would know. Meredith didn't care much anymore. Not after Izzie had lit up a blowtorch and burned the last bridge.

Meredith listened to Derek breathe, such a strong, steady sound compared to how his lungs had sounded when he'd been in the hospital with pneumonia. In and out. In and out. When she moved, he resettled around her as though he were conscious of her needs even in dreams, though he didn't wake. He pulled her close with his strong arms. She relaxed against his heat and the safe cocoon he offered, even as her throat closed up.

She had nobody but him and Cristina and Lexie and Alex, and if something was going to happen to her, she wanted them all to be there. All of them. But at the very least? Him. In the room. Not kept out by stupid visiting hours, or some slip of paper he hadn't freaking signed. She wanted him to be able to say, No, my wife wouldn't want a ventilator. Let her go. Or, Yes, save my wife. Or whatever he thought was necessary for the situation.

She was the recipient of crappy, freaky genes. If she got all early onset Alzheimer-y and couldn't remember who the hell he was, or who the hell she was, she wanted him to be able to speak for her. She needed for him to be able to speak for her, because he understood her. He got her. Getting her was his thing. If she was Alzheimer-y and couldn't remember anything, she wanted decisions on her care to be in his hands. They hadn't really talked much about living wills, or their thoughts on life saving measures in various situations. She wasn't even sure she knew what she wanted for sure. But she trusted him as her soul mate, arm, Shakesma in a blender whatever, to be able to make the right decision because he got her, and that was his thing.

She kissed his chest along the line of the scar on his sternum and closed her eyes, musing until the moments bled together, and she lost track. The moonlight burned overhead, bright like the sun crowned the sky, and she closed her eyes to shut out the blaze. She listened to him breathe. Over and over and over, unceasing. Alive, and okay.

He jerked around her, and his arms tightened like a vise, shocking her out of hypnosis. “No,” he blurted, and the single word exploded next to her ear like a bomb in the close space. His breathing hitched, and then he swallowed.

“You okay?” she said.

He grunted, and then he moaned. It was a thick, weeping sound that made her chest tighten. “No,” he said. “I'm not.” She stroked him, and his tight, shaky breaths subsided into smoother, raspier things, but not the soothing waves she wanted to hear. She reached up, and she pulled her fingers through his hair. Slowly, he relaxed.

“I'm sorry you can't sleep,” she said.

The blankets rustled. “Not your fault,” he said. “I'm sorry to keep you up.”

“You didn't, and you're not,” she said. “I was just thinking about stuff.”

“Mmm. Like what?”
“Just...” She sighed. She didn't see the point in belaboring how she'd felt when he'd been sick and she'd been kept away. Not when he was trying so hard to sleep. She settled on telling him, “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” he echoed, his tone sleepy. Lethargic. Like this nightmare hadn't been as bad, and he was close already to putting it behind him.

She kissed him. The moonlight was freaking bright, even through her eyelids. She sighed and sat up. He pressed his face into his pillow with a groan at her loss, but she ignored him, determined. There must be a cord for the blinds, somewhere. She squinted blearily at the window and felt along the sill, only to stop and stare out at the view. From her new vantage point, she saw not one moon, but two, the second reflected in shimmery, shifting glass. On a whim, she leaned forward, her palms against the latticework, and she pushed with a grunt that made the bed frame jerk and groan. Derek flinched, and the bed squeaked with the harsh movement.

She grimaced. “It's just me. I'm opening the window,” she said. Stupid. She shook her head. She should have warned him. “Or, well... trying to.” Her arms shook with the strain, but she kept pushing. She'd already started this. Better to finish it. And, maybe, chopping out some of the light would help him sleep.

“Need help?” he muttered into his pillow.

“I got it,” she said, half groaning more than speaking, as she forced the window up along its tracks. The thing did not want to move. But then it hitched once. Twice. Finally, the window jerked upward with a protesting moan, and a chilly breeze blew across the bed from outside. The sound of lapping, slosh-y waves and a chorus of frogs spilled into the room and soothed her ears. She'd heard the frogs before, but not the waves. She hadn't realized the frogs meant they were right on top of the water.

She glanced through the screen and down. The ground wasn't several feet below as expected. There was a dock down below to the right, but from this vantage point? Right. On top. Of the lake. Like the cabin was partially on stilts or something. Or maybe a cliff-y thing. On that note, she found the cord for the blinds and plunged the bedroom into muted darkness, which was made imperfect by the moonlight falling through the other window.

Derek sighed as she resettled into his arms. She panted from her exertion. “We're right on the lake,” she said. “Like right. Freaking. On it.”

“Hmm,” he said. He didn't sit up to shove the blind away and look out the window with excitement. He rubbed her shoulder sedately. “I'll catch a fish,” he said, random and half-asleep.

She smiled. Apparently, the window disruption hadn't ruined his progress back to sleep as much as she'd thought it had. She let her eyelids droop. She kissed him. “You'll catch plenty,” she said. She stroked his face, and they both fell asleep to the rhythm of the waves.

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(Meredith woke up sprawled from corner to corner on the small bed as though she'd become some sort of amoeba overnight, spreading with no rhyme or boundary. Muted sunlight streamed through the window on the neighboring wall. A soft, steady breeze blew over the bed, and the blind made a tapping noise as it swayed freely. The waves outside swished so close to her ears she thought they)
might come to sweep her away as she blinked her eyes and readjusted to life over dreaming. The clock beside the bed read 7:30.

She inhaled. The pillows smelled like Derek, and the sheets enveloped her in a deep, comforting warmth that made her reluctant to move and face the day. Except Derek had already gotten up, and this was their forty-eight hours, and she didn't want to miss anything. She sat up and stretched with a yawn. The sheets and green comforter fell away, and the cool air hit her naked skin. Goosebumps crawled over her body. She shivered and crossed her arms over her chest.

She didn't know where her suitcase was, she realized. They'd sort of skipped the unpacking step last night. Wait. There it was. Propped against the wall by the dresser. Derek must have brought it in after he'd woken up. She stood, letting the sheets fall away from her entirely. In the dim light, she paused, and she let her gaze slip downward.

She cupped her breasts, and she frowned. They really didn't look that much bigger to her, but this morning? They ached. Liked they would be getting bigger soon. And that was... pretty cool. A smile spread across her face as she continued her exploration. She slid her palms down her abdomen to rest just below her belly button. She pressed. She couldn't identify anything other than intestines. There wasn't a bump. Not yet. But she grinned, anyway.

“Hi,” she said, staring at her bellybutton, but then she felt corny, and she shut her mouth.

She leaned, and she peeped through the blinds. She took a deep breath as she absorbed the sight of endless blue beyond the window. The clouds had finished clearing up. Placid, deep-blue water spread out underneath an azure sky. Gray mountains stretched across the back of the lake, and green forest crept along the left and right sides of the water. Meredith felt a bit like she was looking down a narrow pipe, and she remembered from the map that the lake was oblong, shaped kind of like a curly mustache, actually.

She let the blinds fall back against the window and looked around the room. She padded over to her suitcase on cold, bare feet, and she slipped into a t-shirt and flannel boxers. When she opened the bedroom door, she heard noises coming from the kitchen, and a warm, fresh scent of something cooking tickled her nose. She inhaled. Something good cooking. Her stomach growled like a beast awakened. After a brief pit stop in the bathroom, she wandered down the short hallway toward the scent. Toward Derek.

Derek stood at the stove wearing nothing but a loose pair of plaid flannel boxers, almost identical to the ones she wore now, which were actually his, but she'd stolen them from the clean laundry basket when they'd been packing. He'd taken out a carton of eggs, milk, and a box of pancake mix. A red bowl with a drip of batter spilling over the lip rested next to the stove, along with an empty plate. A wide circle of batter sizzled on the pan on the stove. He hovered by his bounty with a spatula.

Sleep had mussed his hair into a big, messy disaster, and dark circles hugged his eyes, but... Meredith leaned against the wall, a smile on her face as she watched him skirt the edge of the batter with the spatula, peering underneath to see if it was ready to flip. He whistled. Whistled! His shoulders were loose, and his posture relaxed. He had a bounce in his step as he shifted on the balls of his feet. He slipped the spatula loose and let the pancake fall back onto the pan to cook some more.

When he looked up at her, a wide grin spread across his face, crinkled the skin around his eyes, and made his irises sparkle. Their eyes met. The air sucked out of the room, and she swallowed against the elation that swelled in her throat like a giant bubble at the mere sight of him so... perfect. She hadn't seen him like this in... in...
You a cereal person? he'd asked. Straight out of the box? Or are you all fruit and fiber-y? He'd laughed, the sound clear and happy like a bell, and then he'd kept peppering her with questions, a smile on his face and a sparkle in his eyes. Pancakes? Do you like pancakes?

"Good morning," he said. 

"Hi," she said softly.

He looked away to flip the pancake, and the broken eye contact collapsed the tunnel-effect she'd experienced. She saw the room again. The batter sizzled, and steam rose from the pan.

Her stomach rumbled. She loved his pancakes. He wasn't a master chef or anything with the day-to-day stuff, not that she was one to throw stones about cooking, considering she couldn't. At all. He produced edible meals without the assistance of miracles, which beat the crap out anything she could accomplish in the kitchen other than amazing countertop sex. Regardless of whether he brought flare to a beef stroganoff recipe, which he didn't, or dumped his spaghetti sauce out of a prepackaged jar, which he did, he made freaking awesome pancakes. Thick and fluffy and perfect circles, and they always fell apart on her tongue like sweet ambrosia.

"How are you feeling?" he said.

"I'm... fine," she said. "Why?"

He pointed his spatula at her and winked. "The baby. Vomit?"

"Oh," she said. "Oh, I'm..." Her lips parted as her gaze trailed across the hair dusting his chest and giving way to his flat, smooth abs. The pink, raised scar from his surgery, and the ghost of his bullet wound barely registered as her gaze wandered down and down. Underneath his navel, a thin line of dark fuzz tapered, interrupted by the waistline of his boxers, but her brain filled in the rest from exquisite memory. She swallowed as she dragged her gaze back up, except that didn't help. He had such a nice chest. And shoulders. And biceps. And everything. She cleared her throat. "I'm really good."

"Not sick?" he prodded.

"Not right now. It sort of just hits me," she said as he turned and flipped the pancake from the pan onto the plate with a twist of the spatula. His hand barely moved. He reached for the batter bowl and poured a new dollop of batter onto the pan. "How long have you been up?" she said.

He shrugged, which probably meant it'd still been dark out when he'd given up on sleep. A twinge of worry hit her as she wondered if, maybe, he was overcompensating for being exhausted. She didn't even realize her foot had moved until he waved his spatula at her like a sword and shooed her away from the stove. "No," he said, and then he pointed across the center island at the small dinette set table in the dining room area. "Sit."

"But—"

"Sit," he commanded. "I'm making you pancakes. I can't have your wretched cooking karma over here overwhelming mine."

"Wretched?" She frowned, but she didn't move. "That's really mean."

He quirked a grin at her as he leaned against the stove and crossed his arms. Her breaths tightened as her gaze wandered up the slant of his hip and side. His boxers dipped with the new position to ride sinfully low on his hips, and a dark line of curly hair peeked above his waistband. The whorl
of fuzz below his navel pointed downward like an arrow that she had to exercise amazing restraint not to follow to its terminus. God, he looked good doing that. Leaning. His quads flexed as he balanced himself.

“We've had this discussion before, you know,” he said. “I fail to see how feeding my starving wife is mean.”

“It's not,” she said. “I like pancakes.”

He moved, destroying his luscious lean. She couldn't help but sigh as he flipped the second pancake onto the plate next to the stove, and he poured more batter onto the pan.

“Sit, will you?” he said.

She pouted. She felt a bit like her hormones had smacked her in the face with a two-by-four, but she wanted to ask him to keep doing that. The leaning thing. He could even burn the pancakes if it meant he would just... pose. Like that. Forever. Well, not forever. Until she burst with sexual frustration and jumped him, at least, though.

He pulled up his boxers with an absent tug, and she just about died. “Seriously?” she said.

“Seriously,” he replied. “Sit.”

“That's what's mean!” she said as she stomped to the table. “You're practically naked, and you're making me sit at the table, which is far, far away.”

He smirked. “Just building things up for later.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and collapsed into the small wooden chair. “Later, huh?” she said. “What about now?” From this vantage point, the center island blocked the goods below his waist, but she could still watch his delectable—

“Now is pancakes,” he said, and she flinched, ripped from her musing.

She sighed. “I'm surprised you didn't fish for breakfast or something. Don't you New Yorkers like lox or whatever?”

He flipped the pancake over in the pan. She watched the curve of his spine and the way his body shifted. His deltoids were truly fabulous. Hard and smooth, and... She blinked when he turned to face her again. Heat bloomed across her face.

“A, salmon is not a freshwater fish, so I wouldn't be able to catch one here even if I wanted to,” he informed her with a haughty grin. “B, there are no bagels, just Wonder Bread, and—”

“Wait,” she said, and he stopped talking. “Wait. Lox is salmon?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mere. Lox is salmon.”

“I thought lox was lox.”

His lip quivered, and he blushed, not from sexual heat or embarrassment, but almost as though he were fighting not to laugh. Fighting and losing. His gaze sparkled, as though he found her precious and adorable and... hopelessly ignorant about fish. “There is no fish called lox.” At least he managed to keep his voice patient and even, despite his dissolving expression.

She frowned. “So, you can't catch it?”
“Well, you can catch pox,” he said. “But not lox.”

She watched him flip the fourth pancake onto a stack on the plate. “This sounds like Dr. Seuss,” she said.

He shrugged as he reached across the counter. His shoulders bunched, and a fleshy tearing sound filled the room. What the hell? She leaned to see beyond his torso. He'd ripped a banana off the bunch that had been resting on the back of the counter with the tomatoes. “I'm just making my wife pancakes,” he said.

“As long as we don't talk about fox, socks, and co—”

“Besides,” he said, interrupting her. He spun around to face her, holding a partially peeled banana. She couldn't stop the burble of laughter that made her snort. He looked at his phallic bounty, and his expression lit with something... evil. Lecherous. He rested the fruit on the web of flesh between his thumb and his index finger and slid his hand along the underside in a gesture that seemed vaguely and blatantly dirty all at once. Her eyes widened, and she lost her laughter somewhere when her brain decided to paint the same picture with him cupped in her hand as she slid her grip along his hard length. He would rumble in her ear, aroused and glassy-eyed, and she would—

“Pox, lox, and all Dr. Seuss aside, I didn't want to contribute to your new nickname,” he concluded with a smirk, interrupting her fantasy, though she still saw it. Hovering. Stuck in her brain like gum in her hair. He turned away from her and grabbed a knife, leaving her floundering.

She blinked, and the brilliant, sparking image faded. She was at the table. And he was over there. And there was no nakedness or touching or sex or anything. Sadly. And then she frowned. He'd done that on purpose, damn it!

“What... What new nickname?” she said, her voice faint as she caught up with what he'd said.

He glanced over his shoulder and winked. “McPukey.”

Her jaw tumbled open. “McMean!”

He sliced the banana into pieces. “I'm cooking you pancakes, trying desperately to save you from the pain and suffering of vomiting next to my shoe again, and I'm half-naked and letting you watch,” he said. “That's not McMean.”

“Well, what would you call it? You pulled your pants up. And you're not leaning. And you did dirty things with a banana.”

He chuckled. “What things with a banana?” he said. “Where your mind takes you is not my problem. And I don't know that there's an adequate word to describe what an awesome husband I'm being,” he countered. “Do you?”

She rolled her eyes. “McWhatever.”

He sighed. “So unappreciated,” he said as he walked to the refrigerator. He pulled open the door. “I was even planning on putting it all on a little tray and carrying it to you, but you woke up too fast.”

She snickered. “So, I've botched your nefarious breakfast plans?”

“Yes,” he said with a pout as he carried a can of whipped cream back to her plate. He shook the can. “And it's a real shame,” he said, and then he popped the cap off the bottle. He aimed at the pancakes, and he gave her a lecherous smirk. He squirted the can as he told her in a low voice,
“Because they were very.” He accented the word with a squirt of cream. “Very nefarious.”

“That's...” She swallowed. Her chair creaked as she shifted. A hot flush bloomed across her cheeks and her throat as she thought about what he might have done with pancakes and syrup and whipped cream if he'd found her sleeping naked earlier.

*If I win,* he'd said last night, a rumble in her ear, *I'm eating you, though.*

“What are you...” She cleared her throat. “Um, what are you having?”

He turned to face her, the plate of pancakes in his hand. His gaze roved her figure appreciatively, and she felt naked despite her clothing. “See,” he said, “the breakfast in bed plan involved me eating, but now you're awake, and you've ruined it.”

He delivered her plate to the table with a fork and a bottle of syrup, but she barely looked at it as the space between them closed. His body heat pressed into her space, and she licked her lips. Focus. She had to fuck— focus. He leaned into her as the plate thunked onto the vinyl place mat. He kissed her, a deep rumble stuck in his throat as his lips brushed her skin, light, tantalizing, and all too brief. She moaned as he drifted away from her.

“Don't stop,” she said. “I want...” Incoherency strangled her. “Banana...”

To which he replied with a smirk, “Isn't the anticipation worth it?”

No, she wanted to say. Now!

He swaggered to the chair beside her and sat down. It was the slide of his ribs along his pale torso that yanked her back to earth as though her parachute had failed. He wasn't thin to a dangerous degree, but he was thin, and it didn't take much to offset his sexy, delicious illusion of perfect health. She shook her head and tried to calm her thudding heart. He couldn't cheat like that. He couldn't use subterfuge to take her away from the issue at hand, damn it.

“Derek, seriously, what are you eating?” she prodded gently.

“I had a pancake earlier. With syrup, even.”

A pancake. A single pancake. Not hardly enough, but something, supposedly. She glanced at the stove where he'd been fixing everything. The spatula rested on the countertop. Only one egg was missing from the open carton that she could see, and there were no dirty plates anywhere except the one that held her pancakes. The room had smelled like something cooking as she'd walked in, but...

She frowned. A lump formed in her throat when she realized she didn't believe him.

Silence stretched.

He sighed, and he didn't speak as he stood. She watched him through a watery blur as he returned to the kitchen and poured himself a small bowl of shredded wheat. He put the eggs and other perishables away while he stood at the counter. He came back with a spoon tucked into his bowl, and he sat. He looked her in the eye as he spooned a piece of shredded wheat and stuffed it into his mouth. He winked at her as he chewed, and a bit of sparkle returned to his gaze, as if to say, *See? Eating, now. All okay.*

“Sorry,” she said, her voice soft.
He shrugged. “Are you going to eat your awesome pancakes?”

She nodded. She picked up her fork. And she looked at her plate. Tension drained out of her as though a dam had broken. She chuckled as she stared at his concoction. She couldn't stop herself.

“Derek...” she said, incredulous.

“What?”

She covered her mouth with her hand to hide her grin. Unsuccessfully. “My breakfast is smiling at me.”

“Well, it's a happy day, isn't it?” he said. He leaned, and he kissed her. “And we can do naughty, naughty things later tonight.” He hovered by her ear, and his voice dropped low. “With bananas.”

“Nefarious things?” she said.

His face lit up. “Oh, yes. I like the sound of that.”

She rocked in her chair with his touch and laughed as she brought her fork down onto the stack of pancakes. She almost hated to cut them. He'd made a smiley face with the banana slices, and he'd given the face a fluffy whipped cream toupee. In fact, she decided as she sliced her Donald Trump pancakes into bite-sized, Trump-let pieces, eating them felt a bit like murder.

“You're so...” she said. She took a bite and forgot about Donald Trump as she sighed with bliss. He really did make good pancakes.

He munched on his shredded wheat. “So?” he prodded with a goofy grin.

She waved her fork as she searched for a word. “Unimaginably corny,” she decided.

He bumped her with his elbow. “I should have given you a frowny face,” he said, his tone indignant, but his face belied the seriousness he managed to fake.

She laughed. Really laughed. A loud, chortling belly laugh. Not at the smiley face, or his response, or anything except the fact that being with him made her feel... just... good. Euphoric. She stabbed a banana piece and ate it with a pancake chunk. The whipped cream and perfectly browned batter melted on her tongue as she chewed. She swallowed, and she looked at him. He liked the way his eyes danced, and how carefree this place seemed to make him.

“Thank you for the pancakes,” she said.

He nodded. “You're welcome.” His jaw worked as he chewed another piece of shredded wheat. He swallowed. “So, what's the plan today?”

“I thought you wanted to go fishing.”

“I do want to go fishing, but not if you'd rather do something else,” he said. His chair scraped on the floor as he scooted closer. “This is our forty-eight hours. Not mine.”

She shoveled a huge bite of pancake. Melting whipped cream dripped down her chin. She wiped it with her finger and she licked it away. She closed her eyes, unable to contain a small whine of pleasure as she chewed. When she swallowed, her eyes drifted open. He watched her with an intent adoration that made her feel warm inside.

“I want to,” she assured him as she took another tasty bite.
A bright, hopeful smile spread across his face. “Fish?”

“You can do the fishing part,” she said. “I'll read.”

His smile wavered. “Are you sure?” he said as he took another bite. “We could do something you're interested in.”

“I'm interested in seeing you relax, and spending time with you, and finding out what happens in chapter twelve of my book,” she said. “This will take care of everything at once.”

She'd found a new book series recently and had been both dismayed and thrilled that there were at least eight books already written. With her busy schedule, she couldn't read more than a chapter here and there. She made slow progress, but progress. She'd packed the one she was reading, and the next one, just in case, because she'd had no idea how much he'd want to do on a trip like this, less than two weeks after he'd quit abusing Percocet, and on top of everything else going on in his head.

He frowned. “I don't want you to get bored.”

“I won't,” she said. Truthfully, the forty-eight hour push had been an excuse. To force him to relax. Take a breather. Get out of the freaking house, where he'd festered for months. She'd known there'd been a possibility he would do nothing more than sleep on this trip, in too much deficit from all the heaping portions of stress life had served him, and too befuddled by the new medication, to do much else. She hadn't minded that prospect, because he needed sleep as much as he needed to relax. Though, as she grinned at him, she couldn't help but be glad that he'd bounced back enough to do things. To play. To smile. To enjoy himself.

She put her fork down with a clink and touched his knee. “And, if I do get bored, we'll come back,” she said to appease him. “I have great faith in your ability to steer a boat.”

He snorted. “Your confidence in my abilities is appreciated.”

“We could call you McFishy,” she suggested as she took another bite. “Or McCaptain.”

He made a face. “I think I liked McDreamy better,” he said with a wry tone.

“I'd agree, but I think waxing your ego at this point might be a mistake.”

“Fine, McPukey,” he said. He shook his head and took a bite of his shredded wheat. “We'll have it your way.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, and he snickered as he swallowed. She watched him eat another bite and glanced at his bowl. He'd nearly finished the whole thing. Stringy bits of orphaned shredded wheat swam in the leftover milk, along with some half pieces, but he'd eaten all of the large pieces.

She forked away a chunk of her pancakes, stabbed them onto the tines, dipped them in syrup, and shoveled another bite. She sighed with bliss. When she heard a clink on her plate that she hadn't initiated, she opened her eyes in time to catch him making off with a piece of pancake.

She gasped. “Thief!”

With a smirk, Derek spooned a banana piece and took that, too, staring at her, as if daring her to protest. She didn't. His eyes twinkled as he chewed. “Just making sure it's safe,” he said. “I'd hate to kill you with a stack of poisoned pancakes.”
“Aren’t you supposed to do that before I start eating?” she said.

He shrugged. Her eyes widened as he pushed his spoon into Donald Trump’s remaining eyeball and took another bite. He chewed and swallowed without comment. She nudged her plate toward him, amazed as he went for another bite. And another, including an extra heap of whipped cream. He leaned back in his chair, chewing. His face relaxed. A subtle curl twitched the corners of his lips. Almost like he looked in that last moment between sweet release and collapse, during that last throb of pleasure. Her eyes watered as she pinpointed with unmistakable clarity the emotion hovering on his face. Enjoyment. Unadulterated.

“You really do make good pancakes,” she said, her voice soft, but her throat felt thick. She blinked. She couldn't remember the last time he'd shown anything other than indifference or dislike toward eating. Her breaths tightened in her chest. She pushed the plate the rest of the way in front of him. Her fork, too. The plate and the fork clinked, and the noise snapped him out of that strange hypnosis.

He frowned at the plate of food he'd so artfully constructed and then at her. “You're done already?” he said. “You usually eat the whole thing. All four of them.”

“I couldn't eat another bite,” she said as she crossed her arms over her stomach, barely able to keep her tone from cracking. She hadn't lied. She'd eaten about half of the stack, which, honestly, was enough to fill her. She ate the rest to stuff herself, usually, because it tasted good. Because his pancakes made her into an unrepentant, raging glutton.

A fullness settled into her body as she stared at him. A sated, happy feeling. More full than she'd felt in months. Not with food. Not really. Just...

Everything.

She almost broke when he shrugged and kept eating, swapping from his spoon to her fork without hesitation. Like he didn't even realize what this moment meant. Maybe, he didn't realize at all. Maybe, he'd gotten so used to gray, he didn't recognize color anymore. Or... Something. She stared, dumbstruck for the longest time, until the last bite disappeared between his lips, and he'd cleaned her plate.

He swallowed, and he cocked his head at her. “You're staring at me again,” he said.

“I know,” she said. “You're nice to stare at.”

She wanted to stare forever.

She stood, and he tensed to follow, but she put a hand on his shoulder to keep him where he was. She came up behind him, and she leaned against the wooden back of his chair and arched downward. She rested her chin against his shoulder, pressed her cheek to his, and wrapped her arms around his chest. His unshaven face rasped against her skin as she nuzzled him, but she didn't care. Didn't care about anything except being close to him. She pulled him tight, and she rested against him, breathing him in, silent.

He didn't speak. Didn't ask her why. As though he sensed her need for closeness. She kissed him. He turned his head. She leaned, and she brushed his lips. He smelled like syrup, and he tasted sweet. A rumble pressed against her lips as he made a sound against her. Soft. Pleased. A deep, masculine purr that slipped down her spine like silk.

She'd almost lost this. Twice. Almost lost him. Twice.
“I um...” She cleared her throat with a cough, and she reached to wipe her face. Was she crying? No. Sort of? A little. Stupid, stupid hormones. “I was thinking last night about things.”

“What things?” he said.

She kissed him, and then she pulled away. Tugged on his arm as she bit her lip and smiled. He followed without hesitation, and they moved into the bright living room, which, in the daytime, she realized, had a gorgeous view. The huge window against the far wall opened out onto a wooden deck and a set of winding steps that went down, down, down to a dock, far below. The dock she'd seen stretching out to the lake last night, she presumed. Beyond that, the lake spread in a long blue curve, hugged by sloping, verdant green on either side. The sunshine slanting down from the east made the water shimmer and sparkle. If she squinted, she could see little dark dots interrupting the shine. Boats. Or something.

He shuffled toward the olive-y-colored couch, which faced the window looking out on the lake. He pressed his back into the arm of the couch. She collapsed against him and curled up in his arms. He kissed the top of her head. He pulled her fingers through her hair. She felt the tickle as strands shifted, and she sighed. His body heat pressed against her as he looked at her, a questioning gaze in his eyes, as if to say, Well?

She took a breath. “I think we should get married.”

Confusion wavered in his gaze. “We are married.”

“Not according to the State of Washington,” she said.

Silence stretched, and she tensed, wondering if, maybe, he wouldn't like this idea. The Post-it had been his idea. He'd insisted he was happy signing that instead of signing a marriage license. She hadn't really thought much about it at the time because so much other stuff had been happening. Maybe, he'd had some secret agenda.

“Okay,” he said, but she barely heard him as her mind raced.

“I mean, our anniversary will always be Post-it day,” she assured him as she stroked his chest. “And, I don't want to do anything crazy or fancy, but I really think we should do this, and I...” Wait. She blinked, and she looked up at him. “You said okay? As in, okay, let's do it?”

He nodded, and a bright, infectious smile spread across his face. “Let's do it,” he said.

“Oh,” she said. Oh? What kind of response was oh? “It's just that the Post-it was your idea, and I thought you might—”

“Meredith,” he interrupted. He kissed her. “It was my idea because you were freaking out.”

“About time,” she said. “I was freaking out about time. Not about marrying you. I'm so glad I married you.”

“I know that, but you were still freaking out.” And I needed to fix it, said his gaze, though he didn't speak the words.

“I was freaking out,” she admitted. “I do that.”

“You do,” he said. His tone dropped low, almost reverential as he added, “But you wouldn't be you if you didn't.”
“You really want to get married?” she asked. “I mean officially? Like 'let's file joint taxes' married?”

He grinned. “Maybe, we could claim all your strays as dependents.”

She hit his shoulder playfully. “Derek!”

“Yes, I'd love to go to city hall with you,” he said. He kissed her. “But our anniversary is Post-it day.”

“Okay,” she said.

Content, appeased, she settled against him, and she stared out the window at the little dots floating on the water. One had wandered closer and had become a large, frothy white triangle. A sail. She watched, unable to do anything but be relaxed, as boats wandered back and forth across the view. A soft breeze creaked against the windows. A white bird swooped low over the water, dipped with a splash, and then pulled away with something wriggling in its beak.

“May I ask what brought this on?” he said.

She shrugged in his arms. “Just... everything that's happened.”

“The shooting?” he said, his voice soft. She glanced at his face. He didn't seem disturbed. Only reflective. Apologetic. Concerned for her.

“Everything, Derek,” she said. “We've both been seriously hurt. I've needed surgery twice. You got very, very sick. It's worked out okay, so far, but what about next time? I'm pregnant. I just want... things to be taken care of.”

He swallowed. He rested his left palm flat against her belly and rubbed her. “Nothing's going to happen with the baby,” he said, forceful despite his gentle touch. Almost as if that thought were a life-preserver for him in the choppy, relentless waves of all that had gone wrong.

You're pregnant, he'd told her when she'd tried to tell him the first trimester was dangerous and prone to disaster.

“I'm not saying anything will happen,” she said, “but it would be pretty idiotic to assume we're invincible after all the freaking memos to the contrary.”

He nodded, though his expression remained rocky. Sharp. Jagged. She reached, and she stroked his face before wandering down. She found a soft curl between his pectorals, and she twirled it with her index finger. The bump of his scar wandered underneath her touch. She turned, and she kissed his chest, lips to his bare skin. A hint of salt pressed against her tongue. Salt, and... him. She inhaled as her mind sparked with all the times she'd touched him there. Kissed him. Loved him. She wondered if his thoughts had shifted from the baby to himself, and wondering if something would happen to him. Again. She hated that she might have turned his thoughts from away from the joy of pancakes to worries of being hurt by someone evil, simply by suggesting a legal marriage.

I'm terrified, he'd said. Every moment of every day. You're the only reason I get out of bed in the morning.

A lump formed in her throat. He'd done nothing to deserve those fears, and it wasn't fair.

He surprised her with a kiss. “I'm okay,” he said, his voice soft. “I'm okay. Just a bad turn, there.”
She stared at him. His expression had lightened, and she believed him.

“When do you want to do it?” he said, as if to keep them moving. Away from the bad spot.

“We could go on Monday.”

He nodded. “We could.”

“Why do I sense a but?”

He shrugged. “Our Post-it was a three minute thing because we didn't have time. Why not plan this a little more and invite people? Don't you want Cristina there?”

She raised her eyebrows. “You want Cristina there?”

A small smile pursed his lips. “Yeah, I do.”

She frowned. “Okay, who are you, and where'd you stash Derek's body? Because I'd like it back.”

He chuckled. “I'm serious, Mere. I want her there because I love you, and you've told me point blank that she's your family. Her and Alex and Lexie. Don't you want your family there?”

“It feels weird to treat a ten minute city hall thing as more serious than our actual marriage.”

“It's not more serious or more special,” he countered. “But we have some time to think about it and not be impulsive. This is our chance. Why not?”

The longing that squeezed his tone surprised her. Izzie and her overzealous wedding hurricane, one that had had everything to do with Izzie's dreams, and none to do with Meredith's or Derek's, had swept away any traces of their plans. Actually, Meredith realized, they'd never really discussed what kind of wedding Derek would want. She'd told him she wasn't a frilly dress person, and that she didn't see herself getting married in a church. He hadn't countered with his own desires.

_We'll get naked and get married in a field of flowers_, was all he'd said in response. Joking. Putting her at ease. Letting her know he would be comfortable with whatever she decided.

He didn't seem to be a big wedding person. Meredith could recall his look of horror at being forced into a tuxedo with tails, and his quiet disbelief when they'd stood in the middle of the church Izzie had booked for them.

“So, you want to plan something instead of just doing it?” she said.

“I guess I do,” he said. “Since we're on the subject.”

She stroked him. “You are such a cheesy romantic.”

He frowned. “It's not cheesy.”

“Hopeless, then,” she decided. “Hopeless romantic.”

A scarlet hue spread across his face as though he were embarrassed by her assessment. After all, hopeless romanticism wasn't macho or arrogant or strong, not according to the Bible of Testosterone. _He's still an optimist_, a voice said. _He still believes in true love and magic and soul mates..._ She blinked, and her vision fuzzed as she leaned into him, wrapped her arms around him, and breathed. He still believed in true love and soul mates, and somehow, he'd decided that was her. She was his soul mate. She was his true love. And he made her remember it whenever he
spoke her name like the breath before a prayer, and whenever he told her he loved her, and, really, whenever he looked at her. He made her feel like a person. Not a freak.

Do you know what kind of miracle it is that Derek is who he is?

She hadn't understood it at the time. Now, she did.


She grinned, and she kissed him long and deep. He panted as she pulled away, his gaze glassy. The flush on his face had shifted from embarrassment to arousal. She placed a palm against his cheek. Stubble scraped her palm. She pulled her fingers back through his disheveled, untamed hair.

“It's something I love about you,” she said, honest, stark. It was something she'd come back for, she thought. Though she didn't quite know what that meant. “That you can think like you do after everything that's happened to you.” She swallowed hard as she stared into the fathomless blue of his eyes, hoping she made him feel even an eighth of what he did for her. Her body quivered. “Sometimes, I wish I could be like that,” she admitted.

“You wouldn't be Meredith without your dark and twisty,” he said.

She pressed her nose against him, relishing his scent and the warm feel of his skin. He shifted underneath her. “I guess we do sort of complement each other,” she said.

He nodded. “We do.”

She settled on the couch, her head in his lap. She sighed as she watched the sparkling water outside while he stroked her back with slow, soothing circles. “I could pick out a nice dress,” she said. “Not a froofy white gown or anything, but... something nice.”

“I'd like that.”

“Do you want to invite your sisters and your mom and Mark and whoever?”

He looked down at her, his eyes sparkling. “My family?”

“You want me to bring mine.” She kissed his bare knee. “It's only fair.”

“You'd be willing to put up with my family again?”

She smiled. “You'll be able to protect me this time.”

A bark of laughter jerked his frame. “I don't know if you noticed, but they're kind of a force of nature,” he said. “I might get steamrolled, now that I can't play the wounded and vulnerable card.”

“They're your family,” she said. “I'll live.”

She'd already lived through the whole Shepherd shindig without him in good enough shape to save her, and she'd done all right. His sisters had started out dismissive of her when they'd shown up at Seattle Grace, back before he'd even been able to walk, but other than Nancy, they'd warmed up to her over the days that had followed, as though they'd realized she was a real person with feelings and hopes and dreams just like the rest of them. Not the gold-digging, home-wrecking bar whore that Nancy had no doubt described her as. Before they'd all left for Sea-Tac from the hospital, they'd pulled her into a big, sandwich-y hug that had squeezed the breath out of her, and they'd
made her promise to make Derek visit them more often.

His sisters overwhelmed her. She didn't understand them. But she didn't hate them, and she could live with them for a wedding if he wanted them there.

“You'd seriously be okay with that?” he said as though he'd read her thoughts.

She looked at him and grinned. “Okay with using you as a human shield? Absolutely.”

“Your concern overwhelms me.”

His wry tone made her laugh, which he met with a small smile. She shifted, and he lifted his hands while she struggled to move onto her back. She stared up at him as he resettled around her. He put a warm hand on her belly as he stared out the window, rubbing, absent, and with the other, he cupped her forehead and ran his fingers through her loose hair. The flannel of his boxers felt good against her face. She leaned into his stomach as he watched the water, his gaze growing distant as he plunged into his thoughts.

“What are you thinking?” she said.

He shook his head. “My family.”

“What about them?”

“That'd be twenty-two plane tickets for my sisters, brothers-in-law, nieces, nephews, and mom, and I'm not sure where we'd put them all when they got here. Mom would have to stay at the house. That's not negotiable. I guess hotels for the rest, but...” He swallowed, and he rubbed the bridge of his nose. “If my entire immediate family comes, I'm sure I'm going to have at least three sets of aunts and uncles who tag along. Maybe, four. Five if the ones who moved to New Mexico find out.”

Meredith blinked. She'd been thinking sisters. Not the entire cadre they'd inevitably be traveling with for an occasion like this. The idea of meeting a Shepherd army that size made Meredith's stomach quiver with nerves, but she forced them away. She'd told him she would deal with his family, and she would. She could. They were related to him, and they all loved him, and he loved them, and she would try.

“So?” Meredith said. “We can figure it out.”

“Yeah,” he said, his tone wavering and not at all sure. The look on his face shifted to something troubled.

She sat up. She touched his shoulder. Unyielding tension met her fingertips. “Derek?”

“That's more than thirty people just off the top of my head,” he said. The color seeped out of his face, leaving him pallid instead of a healthy fleshy pink. His head ticked to the side, as if someone had shouted in his ear, and he'd been surprised by it, but had managed to cover up most of his reaction. “They'd all want to talk to me,” he said. “And Mary, Morgan, and Cody are still practically babies. They'd—”

“Hey,” she said, her eyes widening. He'd started to tremble. She wrapped her arms around his bare shoulders and squeezed. Tight. “Hey. It's okay. We'll put them up in a hotel, and we'll have a reception or something, and it'll be fine.” She hoped, though she had no idea how she'd pull off that level of organization, but she would, if he wanted them there, and he couldn't handle the planning because it was too stressful. She would do that for him. She'd figure it out, somehow.
Except her assurances didn't appease him. He shook in her arms, and she had no idea why. The speed at which this conversation gone from happy to upset made her head swirl. His behavior almost smacked of a slow motion slide into another panic attack, though she had no idea how thoughts of his family had triggered it. He loved his family. Didn't he? Before she could tell him to breathe and, maybe, take stock of himself, though, he did it on his own. Worked at calming himself down.

He made a sick, disgusted sound, and then he took a deep, long breath and blew it out with his eyes closed, and she felt the rhythm of the night before resume. He breathed in for a count of three, and out for a count of three, and in, and out, and in, and out. She didn't say a word. She pushed up on her knees, pressed her chest against his shoulder, and she held him. He leaned into the touch, and she splayed a palm against his spine. She rubbed in slow, soothing circles, while he rested with his eyes closed, breathing.

The tension left his body as though it were water flowing through a sieve. The shaking stopped. He curled into her embrace. “Oh,” he said, his voice deep and low.

“You're getting really good at that,” Meredith said, her voice soft. “No panic attack. Do you want some water?”

He nodded. She hated to leave him, but she stood, and she stretched, and she walked back to the kitchen to fetch him something to drink. She dumped some ice cubs into a tall glass and ran the the tap in the big, stainless steel sink to fill it.

When she walked back, he had his face pressed into his hands, and he rested propped against his knees. She sat down beside him and placed the glass on the dingy coffee table. The water caught the sunlight with a flash as it wavered back and forth and settled. She kissed his shoulder and leaned against him.

“Doing okay?” she said.

“I think I'd like to do something more quiet,” he said, almost as though he couldn't find his voice. He leaned, and he reached for the glass. He didn't shake, but he seemed... willowy. As if he were ready to topple.

Meredith frowned, watching him as he took a sip and then rolled the cool glass against his forehead. The thick crystal sparkled in the light. “So, you don't want your family there?” she said.

“I do,” he said. Shadows seemed to gather on his face. His eyes watered as he put the water glass down. “I do want them there, but...”

She blinked. Her heart squeezed when she realized it wasn't just logistics he was upset about. Derek loved his family. He loved them. But they were an army of sisters and brothers-in-law and screaming kids and doting aunts and uncles and who knew what else? Cousins? Were his grandparents still alive?

Kids, particularly toddlers who liked to shriek, were going to be noisy and nosy. Babies would cry. And adults, even if they knew they needed to be quiet and considerate, would have issues as the crowd grew more concentrated... or inebriated. City hall rooms were tiny to begin with, which meant the wedding itself would be concentrated, and any sort of wedding reception was bound to have alcohol, which meant the reception would fall under the inebriated column.

For a man who had problems with sudden movements, loud noises, and lots of people crowding him, the whole Shepherd mess would be a recipe for disaster. And that was just... crap. She
swallowed, and she hugged him so hard her arms hurt. She pressed her nose into the soft mess of curls over his ear.

“That is a lot of people,” she said. “It's okay if you don't think you—”

“I can't,” he said, interrupting her. “I know I can't do it.” The frustrated hopelessness in his tone made her feel so freaking helpless. He stared at the water beyond the window, a brooding cloud in his gaze.

“Maybe, soon?” she said. “I don't mind waiting. We could wait until—”

“Until I'm better?” he snapped. “And when will that be?” All at once, he closed his eyes and sighed, as if he'd lost patience with himself. “Meredith,” he said, the word soft and cleansing and apologetic. He continued in a more even tone, “That might be a year from now. Or never. I want to do this. We should do this. Soon. And if we wait...”

He didn't finish his sentence, leaving the impending, predictable future dangling, unspoken. If they waited too long, they would never get it done. The Post-it had narrowly averted a never-ending engagement as it was. They couldn't wait. But she wanted to wait. For him. So, he could have the wedding he wanted. With his family. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know anything. She pressed herself against him. He sighed, and he relaxed in her arms.

“Maybe, just my Mom?” he said. “And Mark?”

She pulled her fingers through his hair. “Would you be happy with just them there?” she said.

“Meredith, the mere fact that you want to do this makes me happy,” he said. “The rest is just window dressing.”

“You're sure?”

He nodded. “It's a compromise.”

She searched his face. He seemed... okay. Not thrilled. But content. She could live with that if he could.

“Do you think your sisters would get it?” she said.

A wry bark of laughter fell from his lips. “I have no idea. They all had huge weddings with lots of people, and my attendance was never optional.”

“What about before? With Addison?”

“That was big, too,” he said. “And they all came.”

She kissed him. “Let's ask your mom,” she said. “I bet she'll have some ideas on how to pull this off without hurting any feelings.

His gaze brightened with hope. “Maybe, yeah. Though, I don't know how. I want you there, but I don't want you there?” He made a face. “How do you even say that?”

She shrugged. “We'll think of something.”

He sighed. “I hate this.”

“It'll get better,” she said, and when he said nothing in response, she squeezed his shoulder. She
kissed him. “I love you, and it'll get better, and, now, I think I have a better nickname for you.”

He looked at her. “Oh?”

She winked. “McHusband,” she said.

A small smile curled his lips. He leaned into her, and he kissed her. “That's a good one. Let's go with that.”

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**Better than our first kiss**

A steady, chilling wind whipped over the lake. Meredith shivered, staring at the cabin's dock behind them over Derek's shoulder as it shrunk from life-sized to miniature proportions. The little engine on the boat whirred and sputtered, and she fingered her orange life jacket. She frowned at the water rushing past the sides of the boat. The very cold water.

The Chief had happily babbled on and on about his boat after he'd handed over the keys to the cabin. He'd promised the boat was in good working order, and that she and Derek could take it out if they wanted. When Meredith had, in turn, suggested to Derek that they go fishing on this trip, she'd been thinking the Chief's boat would be, well, an actual boat. Maybe one with a real steering wheel and a deck and chairs with actual padding. Maybe a sheltered down below. Or sails. Or... something. She had not pictured what was essentially a little rowboat with an outboard motor and a chipping paint job.

But Derek had grinned like a kid high on sugar when he'd pulled off the blue tarp covering the boat and checked the fuel, and he'd kept grinning as he'd transferred his fishing junk from its mountainous pile on the dock into the little boat, where the pile seemed even more mountainous. Like mutant mountainous. Rockies versus Appalachians. He had a cooler, and fishing poles, and a tackle box, and other crap she couldn't even begin to identify that looked like it might be important. For fishing, anyway.

The choppy surf caused the boat to skip and jump as it cut through the water like a blunt knife through gristly steak. Meredith gripped the bench she sat on, knuckles white, her hair snapping all over the place. Smacking her eyeballs. Getting stuck between her lips. She blinked and spat. She probably should have worn a ponytail holder. That would have been smart.

At least the open air refreshed her lungs, the cerulean sky was clear, and the water sparkled in the sunlight almost as much as Derek's happy grin. That all made this endeavor worth the dubious nature of their transportation.

The motor of the boat whirred to a halt as Derek picked their spot, somewhere in the middle of the giant blue expanse. The green blur along the bank became trees interspersed with houses and cabins as the boat slowed to an aimless drift. Craggy mountains towered along the horizon in all directions. A flock of ducks or geese or... water bird things floated several hundred feet away, bobbing on the surface of the water, splashing. A pair of hikers wearing yellow weaved through the tree trunks in the distance, barely identifiable as more than bright specs of color. Water sloshed against the boat. She swallowed and pulled her messy hair away from her face. His fishing gear rattled as he rummaged through it.

He selected one of his fishing poles and looked up with a hopeful grin. “Are you sure you don't want to fish?”
She stared at him. He sat on the opposite bench, bundled in a dark navy coat and a clashing neon orange life jacket. His tangled hair fluttered in the chilly breeze. The scarlet hint of windburn had flushed the tips of his ears and his cheeks and his nose. He had a windblown, breathless look that contrasted with his dark stubble. He looked... alive. Exhilarated. Happy. And the sight of him warmed her to the core.

She gave him a coy smile. “I don't even know how,” she said.

He smiled back at her. “If only you had somebody with you who was known for his excellent teaching skills.”

“I love that you love fishing,” she said honestly, watching as he fiddled with the pole he'd picked up, making adjustments or... something, “but it really doesn't interest me.”

He sighed and shook his head, though that didn't disrupt his grin. “I guess I'll live,” he said, mock woe hugging his tone. He looked at her again, and his gaze shifted into something subtly pleading. “You're absolutely sure you don't want to try it?”

She flexed her fingers, working life back into them and displacing the numb bite of wind. “I'll just read, thanks,” she said.

She hated to be a killjoy, but the very idea of fishing numbed her brains almost as much as the unseasonable cold had numbed her knuckles. Staring at the water for hours on end, hoping some slippery little trout or lox-salmon whatever would wander past and think, *Oh, hey, I'll eat this suspicious looking worm on a hook...* Not her idea of fun no matter how much she tried to convince herself of the potential amusement of it all. She got that he liked the quiet time and getting perspective or whatever, but... Yeah. No. She pulled her novel from her big coat pocket.

He waggled his eyebrows. “I have an extra rod.”

She snorted. “I bet you do,” she said.

“Don't you want to grip my pole?”

She giggled that time, unable to stop the infection of his grin from spreading sepsis. She was a goner. A hopeless, lovesick goner, and he was adorable. Horny, hopeless, and adorable. But she still had no desire to learn how to fish. He could keep that hobby to himself.

“We could rock the boat,” he continued, undeterred by her reticence.

“Let's not,” she said wryly. “This thing is more scary than the contraption Tom Hanks made in *Cast Away*.”

At first he didn't react. His blank stare made her wonder if he'd even seen that movie to know what she was talking about. The main protagonist had built a raft out of a latrine door, some logs, rope, the film from a video cassette, and some other odds and ends.

“You know,” Meredith prompted, “the one about the FedEx guy who got stuck on a deserted island after his plane crashed, and he made friends with a volleyball?”

Derek made a face as his memory kicked in. “Horrible movie.”

“But it had Tom Hanks! And Wilson!”

He raised his eyebrows. “You're counting the volleyball as an asset to the movie?”
Meredith frowned. “Well, he was a really good character.”

“It was a volleyball.”

She shook her head. “Don't you have any imagination at all?”

“It was a volleyball,” he said, as if that were reason enough to denounce it. “And I hate gimmicks.”

“And Star Wars, which officially means you're broken,” Meredith said.

He frowned. “I'm not broken.”

She rubbed her palms against each other, trying to warm them. She didn't understand his dislike for the trilogy. Derek had been in that first generation, just a kid when the first one had been released, and he'd grown up with the two sequels. The whole Star Wars thing for him should have been like... Harry Potter for the most recent generation of tiny humans.

After a lot of hemming and hawing, she'd gone by herself to see the first one during the re-release. She'd sat in the back row, eyes caged with layers of dark makeup, her fuchsia-tipped hair tied up in a messy, scattershot ponytail. She'd hunched in her seat, a black hoodie covering her thin body like a suit of armor. She'd just wanted to see what the stupid fuss was about. She'd gotten tired of all the pop culture references going right over her head. She'd already felt like enough of a freak. She hadn't needed some stupid, ubiquitous movie making it worse.

In the space of two hours, however, she'd become a fan. It was a fantastical story. Like a swashbuckling western in space or something. There were knights in shining whatever. Sword fights. A princess and a scoundrel. Good versus evil. Magic. Faith. For a few hours, she'd been somewhere else, rather than a delinquent teenager hiding in a movie theater. When the credits had rolled, she'd walked out of the theater smiling a big, stupid smile, and she'd ended up returning to view the rest of the movies as the re-release had rolled them out.

She looked at Derek. She just didn't get it. He would have been about ten when the first film had been released. Maybe, younger. She would have thought he'd at least identify with some of the characters. Maybe idolized Luke or Han when he'd been growing up, or... something. Anything positive. She wouldn't have expected hatred.

“Didn't you go to see them as a kid with all your friends?” she said.

“Mark,” he said.

“You saw it with Mark?”

“Yes, but I meant I didn't have 'all my friends', Meredith,” he said. “I had Mark. I wasn't very popular.”

“Oh,” she said. She blinked. Somehow, she'd never pictured him as anything other than cocksure, and everywhere, and always smiling, and well-liked by anybody who cared to get to know him. Certainly not the shy kid sitting by himself in the cafeteria at lunch. Her worldview shifted as she found another kindred facet of his personality, another piece of the puzzle that made sense of his 'arrogance as a suit of armor' front. A small thrill followed the shift. She'd dug something up about him that she hadn't known before. She was getting good at that. The boat swayed with the lapping waves. “I didn't have many friends, either,” she said for solidarity, if nothing else.

He waved his wrist like he was testing himself to cast a line. She watched the graceful, sloping movement of his arm. He didn't extend the pole beyond the boat. He stared at the water. “I liked
“the first one,” he conceded.

“Why didn't you like the next two?”

He shrugged. “The second one was okay, I guess.”

“But not the third one?”

He shrugged again and didn't speak.

“Let me guess,” Meredith said. If he couldn't handle a volleyball having a major role in a feature film, she doubted he'd been happy with three-foot tall teddy bears destroying the Empire with rocks and sticks. “The Ewoks ruined it for you. Right? They must have.”

His lips tightened into a thin frown, and he looked out at the water through his dark eyelashes. For a long moment, he didn't speak, didn't move.

“The third one came out a month after my dad died,” he said, his voice grim.

She blinked. “Oh,” she said.

For a moment, she didn't get it. Lots of things had probably happened that year. Did he hate all of those things, just because of their vicinity to a horrible event in his life? And then her stomach sank when she thought about it. The latter two Star Wars movies had introduced the theme of redemption for Vader. Luke's father. He'd been redeemed, yes, but he'd also died at the end of the movie. In Luke's arms. Maybe she was being too analytical, but... that final scene between Luke and Vader had probably resonated pretty freaking badly with Derek. Even if he couldn't verbalize the why of it.

“Derek,” she said, her voice low and wary.

He stiffened. “I just don't like it, okay?” he snapped. “It's a stupid movie.”

She jerked, surprised by his lashing tone. “Okay,” she said. “I'm sorry. I was only teasing about being broken, you know.”

He swiped his palms against his cheeks, looking at the water, not at her. “I know,” he said, his voice tired, strained.

Carefully, she shifted off her bench. The boat wobbled with the movement. She didn't want to topple into the water by standing up. She crawled over his carefully stacked pile of gear, only to wince when she kicked his tackle box by mistake. Her big toe flashed agony up her shin, which quickly faded to an achy whisper. She cringed at him and gave him an apologetic frown, but he didn't seem to notice or care that she’d almost demolished his things with her klutziness.

She sat on the bench next to him, stiffening as a shock of cold transferred from the bench through the seat of her jeans. She wrapped her arm around him. The nylon sleeves of their coats whispered as they slid against each other. She leaned into him, and she kissed his cold, windburned, stubbly cheek. Hovering close to his skin, warmth built between them despite the breeze.

He blinked, and a hint of a smile returned as he looked at her. “I thought you didn't want to rock the boat?” he said.

“It's not rocking,” Meredith said as a small swell made the little boat seesaw a few inches. “It's swaying gently.”
He chuckled, and the last of his upset expression bled away. The breeze ruffled her hair with chilly fingers as she leaned closer. “You're really toasty,” she said by his ear. She put her hand on his knee. “Can I sit here while I read? Or, will it mess up your special fishing technique or whatever?”

He gave her a small, suggestive smile. “Well, you won't mess up my technique,” he said, his voice dripping with a hint of sex, as if to tell her she'd certainly mess something else up. Like his concentration. Or his blood flow.

She shivered in the cold and decided he could live with a bit of sexual tension. Repayment for the naughty banana, if nothing else. She settled between his legs onto the damp floor of the boat, grimacing as more cold pushed through the seat of her pants.

When this outing was over, her backside would be numb. Or possibly frostbitten. Was it possible to become frostbitten in high sixties weather? Maybe. With her luck, she'd find out the answer was yes.

She rolled her eyes and hooked her arms over his knees for support. His knees squeezed against her ribcage. He mashed his front against her back, a cloak of body heat and a shield against the nippy breeze. She sighed as she flipped to the dog-eared page in her book and settled in to read, wrapped as more cold pushed through the seat of her pants.

Gradually, she lost her sense of Derek at her back and the lake around the boat as her book immersed her. Dark Lover. The first in the Black Dagger Brotherhood series. The romance aspects of the plot boggled her mind. The hero, Wrath, fell in love like a falling bridge, apparently. Suddenly, unexpectedly, and irreparably. Speaking of which, what the hell kind of name was Wrath? And then there was Beth. The heroine. Meredith shook her head. The woman had taken one look at Wrath and was ready to jump his freaking bones. Literally. Because like four paragraphs later, she'd jumped his freaking bones. Then again... Meredith rubbed Derek's knee. She supposed it could sort of happen like that. Sort of. With a lot more crappy pickup lines and superficial protests before calling the metaphorical taxi, at least. She turned the page, almost against her will, and after a few more pages, her criticisms seemed faint and not as important as the story drew her inside its addictive, reality-defying bubble.

She'd read about forty pages when he grunted, and he moved, shoving her inadvertently when he moved his knees. She resettled, ready to ignore it as aimless fidgeting, but then he grunted and moved again. As though he couldn't quite get comfortable on the bench anymore. She looked up at him.

“You okay?” she said.

He sighed, lines of pain pinching the skin around his eyes. “Yeah. Just getting sore.”

“How’s your sternum?”

He rubbed his chest through his coat and frowned. “A little. I'm used to more padding for my back, I guess.”
“It's almost like being in a chair down here,” she said from the floor of the boat.

He looked at the drop from the bench to the floor with doubt. He still had trouble with heavy lifting and with over-extending his arms. If he braced himself on the bench to lower himself to the floor, he'd be putting his full weight on his still-healing sternum. He'd had trouble carrying her the night before, and he weighed a lot more than she did.

She moved, flexing her numb joints as she shifted. Feeling returned to her ass. She rose up on her knees and wrapped her arms around his torso to help take some of his weight. Even with the help, his wince flared into blatant suffering like a blast of trumpet as he moved off the bench. He gripped her shoulders so hard her bones hurt, and his half-barked, half-grunted, “Oh!” slammed into her ears. She winced at the sound as he thumped to the floor. She hoped he hadn't pulled or re-broken something. To her relief, his pained expression evened out in nanoseconds, and he gave her a more even, more calm, “Oh, that _is_ better.”

“You're okay?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice even. No hint of pain pinched his tone.

She relaxed. With a bit of rearranging, they managed to stuff an extra life jacket and a spare sweatshirt between his back and the bench like a pillow. She resettled against his shoulder. He sighed with renewed comfort and recast his line.

“Thank you,” he said.

She kissed him and resettled to read. More chapters flew past, until she found herself reading and rereading the page, trying to force her suspension of disbelief to hold the line, but it wouldn’t. She tilted the book, and peered closer at the words, trying to get a sense of... How. On Earth. She shook her head. She frowned. “That's totally impossible,” she muttered.

Derek chuckled beside her. “You're reading a book about vampires, and you're critiquing the realism?”

She pressed the open pages against her chest and gaped at him. How did he— “Were you reading over my shoulder?”

He snickered. “His erection was a painful, rigid length,” he said in a dark, sultry tone. Except he looked close to bursting into gales of laughter.

Heat flamed across her cheeks. “Oh, my god, you were!” she said.

“I want you to take me,” he continued, his voice deep.

“Look, there's mythical lore that's not possible, and then there's blatant abuse of physics that's not possible,” she said. She'd had sex far too many times in far too many ways to not be able to pick out fictitious drivel a mile away. “This sex is totally not possible!”

“The entire book is impossible,” he said. “It's about vampires.”

She smacked his shoulder with the book. “You really have _no_ imagination,” she said. He pawed at where the book impacted and mouthed the word ow, though he didn't speak it. His eyes twinkled.

“We're back to this again?” he said.

“Clearly, because it's true,” she grumbled.
He frowned. “Is not.”

“Is, too.”

“Is not!”

She folded her arms over her chest. “Prove it.”

He shook his head. “You're naked. I'm too busy staring to prove it.”

“I'm not naked...”

“See?” he said. His expression split into pleased, haughty grin. “Imagination. I have it.”

“You are such a— Oh.” She dragged the palm of her hand to her mouth and covered it. A rush of heat flushed her face that had nothing to do with sex, pleasure, or anything of the kind. Within moments, she felt as though she were stuck somewhere in the bowels of a sauna. Not on a chilly lake that seemed more like a wind sock than a body of water.

He frowned at her. “I'm an oh?” he said, confusion loitering in his gaze.

She wanted to answer. She did. But her stomach flip-flopped before she could open her mouth to speak. Flailing, she grabbed for the side of the boat. The whole thing swayed and sloshed in the water, and she heard Derek grunt something like a surprised, “Whoa!”

Water splashed. Something thunked in the bottom of the boat. His fishing pole? She didn't care. Gripping the side of the boat, she leaned over the edge, her face and neck straining toward the frothy blue water. “Meredith, stop—” he said, somewhere in the back of her awareness. Something shuffled. The boat tilted precariously, and she heaved. Her stomach emptied itself into the lake as she hung over the side. The stench of vomit flew back up into her face, and her innards clenched and churned, but the wind dispersed the odor in moments, before she had a chance to lose the rest of her breakfast in some sort of digestive tract reenactment of The Poseidon Adventure.

She rested against the side of the boat, sniffling, breathing. Bile burned the back of her throat and made her eyes water. The boat rocked back and forth with the waves. Eventually, she sat up, swallowing back the burning sensation. She made a sound. Ugh. Uck. Something like that. She wiped her face with shaky hands.

Derek stared at her from the opposite side of the boat, his elbows hooked over the side as though he'd thrown his weight that way to offset her disruption. His fishing pole lay in a diagonal, off-kilter heap at the bottom of the boat. The thin line extending from the tip of the pole dangled over the side of the boat and disappeared into the water, as though he hadn't had time to reel it in before ditching the pole.

“Well,” he said, his expression wry, “at least you're feeding the fish.”

She grimaced. “That's disgusting.”

He gave her an apologetic smile. “I'm sorry,” he said. “Are you okay?”

She glared as he rescued his fishing pole and reeled in the line. Cold wind slashed her face, which at least made her feel less nauseous. He put the pole on the floor of the boat once he'd fixed it, and then he spread his arms, inviting. They scooted across bottom of the wobbly boat and met in the middle, a tangle of life jackets and coats and cold, red noses.
“You know, this is your fault,” she said as he rubbed her back.

“Oh, we're blaming my sperm again instead of your hoo-hoo?” he said.

“You can't say hoo-hoo like that,” she said. “Hoo-hoo is my word.”

“Whatever you say, McPukey.”

She glared at his chest, because lifting her head took effort. “I hate you.”

He laughed. The sound of it rumbled against her ear, muffled by his coat and his breastbone. “You love me,” he said.

She did, and he knew it. But she didn't have time to respond before she was flying out of his arms to the side of the boat again to heave. In the back of her awareness, she heard the boat's outboard motor chug. The breeze whipped against her face, and the waves churned against the boat. They were moving. Slowly. As soon as her stomach settled, she tried to pull him away from the motor, her hand on his sleeve.

“I don't want to go back yet,” she said.

He gave her a flabbergasted look. “But you're sick.”

“It'll go away in a second.”

“Are you sure?” he said.

She nodded. “I'm sure.” She swallowed. At least her throat had stopped burning. The fresh air plunged into her system and refreshed her. She gave him a shaky smile that probably looked horrible on her pasty face with her windswept, tangled hair. “See?” she said. “Already better. And the fresh air helps.”

He cut the engine. The boat drifted. “You're not just saying that so I stay out here?”

“Why would I do that?” she said.

“Because you're worried about me, and you want me to relax.”

She gaped. “How did you—”

“Meredith, I'm a basket case,” he said, his voice gentle. “But that doesn't mean I'm unobservant.”

Silence stretched for a long moment. A flock of birds arrayed like a letter v darted through the air overhead, casting moving shadows on the water. A small crowd of people on the opposite shore laughed and talked, and the sound carried across the lake with the blowing wind. Water churned, and the boat swayed.

“You used to be,” she said, her voice soft. She remembered when she'd left the pamphlet on assault victimization on the table in the kitchen by accident while he'd been eating. He'd glanced at the pamphlet, but what she'd thought would be the inevitable 2+2 moment where he demanded to know why she had it had never happened. His dead gaze had moved onward. Elsewhere. Disinterested. And he hadn't asked about it. With the Percocet, he'd been almost oblivious.

Derek nodded. “I was. I'm not, now.” I'm clean, said his unwavering gaze.

Meredith swallowed. “I'm sorry.”
He shrugged. “Don't be. I'm glad you're here.”

“Vomiting?”

He shook his head with a smile. “Making me relax.”

“Vomiting is relaxing?” she said.

“You're vomiting because we have a baby on the way.”

She bit her lip. She hadn't thought of it that way. She pressed her hand against her belly. The nylon windbreaker and her life jacket slithered underneath her palm. She wished she could feel the warmth of her skin. “I guess it's happy vomiting,” she said.

He nodded, and a wide grin brightened his face. “It is.”

She grabbed a water bottle from the stash next to his tackle box and rinsed out her mouth. As she screwed the cap back onto the bottle, she giggled. Where had that come from? She didn't know, but suddenly she couldn't help it. Giggling. She did it again as he watched her with an adulate gaze. Blush crept across her face. A smile took her face hostage and wouldn't let it go, all while her eyes watered, and a lump the size of Cleveland swelled in her throat. She put the bottle on the floor of the boat, and then she moved. The boat wobbled as she sought his body, almost not caring if they capsized. She needed his warmth and his touch and him. Just him. They resettled on the floor of the boat, their backs to the bench by the motor, and he wrapped his arms around her.

She sniffed and blinked, and her eyes spat tears onto her cheeks, and yet, she'd never felt more giddy. “We have a baby on the way,” she said, grinning like a fool. She'd known this fact for over a week, now, and still, sometimes it hit her like a bug slamming into a windshield. Pregnant! Splat! The reality of it struck her stupid and made her do non-Meredith, hormone-y things like sob. And have nearly epileptic bouts of smile seizures.

“We really do,” he said softly against her ear, a low rumble barely audible against the wind. “I'm sorry it makes you sick, though.” He kissed her temple. His hands slipped over hers and then down to her thighs, searching over the soft denim of her ratty jeans. He pushed underneath her mountains of layers – her coat, her life jacket, a sweatshirt, a t-shirt — and he pressed against her belly with his—

“Cold hands!” she shrieked.

He flinched away. “Sorry,” he said. He kissed her ear.

He backed up a few layers and let her shirt and sweatshirt fall down before he resumed rubbing her in slow, soothing circles. The world drained away, and she sighed. She let her eyelids drift half-closed. She stared through her wet eyelashes at the sparkling water. The breeze made their coats and life jackets flap, but she didn't feel cold. Not at all. Not even her ass against the freezing, damp seat.

“Will you make me pancakes again?” she said as she leaned against him. “I need to replace the ones I involuntarily ejected.”

“Aren't they what made you sick?”

She shrugged. Her coat rasped against his. He rubbed her shoulder. “Hell if I know what makes me sick anymore,” she said in a weird combination of hopeless and unconcerned and freaking euphoric. Happy vomit. Who'd have thought? “There's clearly no schedule. The schedule was my
own delusion. I think it's more of a Russian roulette type deal or whatever.”

He nodded. “I'll make you whatever you want,” he said.

She grinned. “What if I wanted chicken galantine or something?”

His arms tightened around her body as he chuckled against her ear. “I'd drop you off at a nice French restaurant, at the very least,” he said.

“My hero,” she said, playful and full of mock adoration. She simpered for him and batted her eyelashes.

A breath chuffed against her ear as he laughed. “Hmm,” he said, his voice low-pitched and rumbling, and then he fell silent as he stroked her body.

They watched the water. His chin rested against her shoulder. Somewhere, in the passing moments, the vague thought hit her that he seemed to have abandoned the whole idea of fishing, and he was wasting his boat time doting on her and daydreaming about babies and watching the surf and... not fishing. He hadn't even caught anything. She turned.

He didn't seem to notice as she assessed him. The way he stared over the sparkling waves, a strange, longing expression carving his face, tugged at her heartstrings. What could he be longing for? Or dreaming about? She kissed his cheek and nuzzled him. His stubble rasped against her skin, but the sharp sandpaper only made her feel more alive.

“Hey,” she said, the barest whisper. “What are you thinking?”

He blinked, and his gaze shifted to her. “Nothing,” he said, which he then amended to, “Everything.”

“That's a lot of thoughts,” she said.

He shrugged. “My family, I guess.”

She wondered, then, if he'd changed his mind about the wedding. If he wanted to wait, or something, so that he could have them all there. “Still thinking about them?” she said.

“Yeah.”

“You really love them.”

“I do. I haven't seen them in...” He swallowed, and when he continued his voice sounded choked. “Years. It's been more than three years since I moved here.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “You don't count the hospital?”

“I was drugged out of my mind and in pain,” he said. “I barely remember the hospital. I have bits and pieces in my head, but...”

“That's not a visit, I guess.”

“It's not,” he said. And then he sighed. A deep, world-weary sigh that made her heart squeeze. “I miss them a lot.”

“We still need to tell them about the baby,” she said. “We could call them all when we get back to the cabin.”
He nodded. “We do,” he said. “We could,” he said in a smaller voice. And then he stopped and swallowed, as though he were building himself some courage to say something big.

She pulled her fingers through his messy hair. “I really don't mind postponing the wedding, Derek. If that's what you want—”

“No,” he said. “No, it's...” He gazed at her, his expression doubtful. “Will you go to New York with me for Thanksgiving? We could tell them in person, then.”

She blinked. Whatever she'd been expecting him to say, it hadn't been that. But it made sense, she supposed. Thoughts of the wedding had dragged his thoughts to his family. Thoughts of Baby had dragged his thoughts to his family. Sort of like kismet, or something, when you were trying to make a decision about something and everything in the world at that moment seemed to lead to that thing.

Except he wasn't mentally well. He'd admitted that he didn't think he could handle a big family gathering for a soonish wedding. And Thanksgiving? That was soonish, too.

“That's only three months away,” she said.

“I know,” he said, his tone apologetic, as if he thought she were annoyed with the short notice, and not worried about the fact that he might not heal fast enough in three months to be ready for something like that. “My mom invited us when I was in the hospital. I told her you might not want to, but...”

Meredith nodded as understanding sank in its teeth. “But, now, I offered to do the wedding with your whole family.”

“Yeah,” he said. He looked at the floor of the boat. “If it's too much, it's okay. We don't have to go. I just thought...” His voice trailed away and he shrugged. He looked up at her again, and the hope in his eyes crushed her. “Maybe.”

“You really want to see them.”

He nodded. “I do.”

“But...” She licked her lips and closed her eyes. She didn't want to discourage him. Or needle him. Or make him feel bad. Or shut him down without consideration. But he had a tendency to push against his limitations, rather than work with them, and the clashes were... bad. They were horrifically bad. They resulted in things like Percocet abuse and exhaustion and panic attacks and near misses with pneumonia. She trusted him with her life, but... she didn't trust him with his. And that was the crux of it.

She put her hand on his sleeve and rubbed. “Forget about me for a sec. What about you? Would Thanksgiving with your family be too much for you?”

“I don't know, but...” He took a short, frustrated breath. “But I want...”

“How would it be different than the wedding?” she said, trying to keep her tone reasonable. Not condemning.

“It's an even-numbered year,” he replied. “Nancy and her family won't be there. That cuts it down by eight, and—”

“What do you mean?”
“Nancy spends time with Rob's family on even-numbered years. She trades off.”

“Oh,” she said. “Rob is her husband?”

“Yeah,” he said. “My brother-in-law. He's got a big family, too.”

“What about your aunts and uncles?” she prodded.

“Even-numbered year,” he said. “They won't be there.”

“Okay, so that's eight less people in your immediate family, and no aunts or uncles,” she said. “I assume that rules out cousins?”

“Yeah.”

“Grandparents?”

“Dead,” he said.

Her momentum failed and sputtered. She blinked. “Sorry,” she said.

He shrugged. “Don't be,” he said. “It's been a long time, and they lived good lives.”

In his eyes, she saw whimsy. Maybe a bit of sadness. But he seemed mostly reflective. She pushed onward. “Family friends?” she said.

He shook his head. “Not for Thanksgiving,” he said. “There's no room.”

“Well, I still count...” She let her voice trail away as she thought about it. There were three remaining sisters, which meant three husbands. Wait. No, two husbands. Because Amelia wasn't married. That meant five adults. Nancy and Rob together reducing the family gathering by eight meant six less kids, so still eight nieces and nephews. So, thirteen plus his mom, and, “Mark?”

“Probably,” Derek said.

“Fifteen total, then. I think.” She stared at him. He didn't counter her assessment with his own figure. In fact, he looked glum, which didn't inspire confidence. Fifteen people in close quarters didn't really sound like a good plan for him. Not if he needed space. Or quiet. She frowned. Her stomach churned as she was torn between wanting to do this for him and with him, and thinking this was the worst idea ever. “That's still a lot of people, Derek,” she said.

He sighed. “If we're just at Mom's house, and I can get away if I need to...” he said, a subtle hint of desperation pinching his tone.

“Do you have a room at your mom's house where you could go and shut the door?”

“No,” he said. “It's a small house. Addie and I always went home instead of staying the night because we lived so close.”

“Is there a guest room?” Meredith said.

“Three,” Derek said. “My sisters usually take them. The kids use sleeping bags in the living room and the den. The house is wall-to-wall people, honestly.”

“Well, if Nancy's not there this year, maybe, your mom could set something aside for you,” Meredith said, hope tingeing her tone. She really wanted this to work out. “Like a quiet place?”
Derek sighed. He blinked. His eyes reddened. He rubbed the sleeves of his coat absently with his palms as he stared at the water, his expression darkening. “I hate this,” he said in a low, frustrated, hissing voice. “I hate feeling like navigating my family is rocket science. I hate—”

She kissed him, cutting him off. “I'll go,” she said against his lips, her voice soft as she made a split-second decision. Having Derek hate himself for something he couldn't help wouldn't be any better than Derek having a panic attack, and at least, with some careful preparation, they could try to work around his PTSD instead of feeding it Wheaties by not going at all. At worst, even in a full house with no spare guest rooms, surely his mother could let him use her bedroom if he needed to retreat for a little while. “We'll go,” she said. “We can rent a hotel room nearby instead of staying at the house. And we'll make sure you have a quiet place to go at the house while we're there. Or somewhere close. Are the neighbors nice?”

He cleared his throat and shook his head. He wiped his face. Coughed. And then he hid himself in his arms. “Helen and Jean,” he said into his hands. His body began to rock minutely. Fidgeting. Agitated. “They live next door, and they have a married brother who visits with his wife and daughter, but that's it.”

“Do they know you well?”

He shrugged. “They're good friends with Mom,” he said.

“Well, there's an option, maybe,” she said. She wrapped her arms around his body. His frame was stiff with tension, and he still seemed upset. Unhappy. She kissed his coat at the shoulder, and she squeezed her arms tighter. “We'll figure it out. I think this is a lot more workable than the wedding.”

He raised his head and looked at her with bloodshot eyes, but he didn't speak. He seemed shaky. Sick with all his worrying, almost. Like he was overwhelmed, maybe. Except with his current mental health issues, he turned being overwhelmed into an extreme sport. Which meant it was break time.

“We can worry about all the logistics later,” she said. When they weren't on their forty-eight hour vacation, trying specifically to relax. “It's okay,” she said. “We'll figure something out, and we'll see your family. Okay?”

He sniffed. “You'll really go with me?”

“Really, I'll go,” she said. “I'll be your wingman.”

“Woman,” he corrected.

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

He pressed his face against her throat. His warm skin heated the space between them. “You make a good wingwoman,” he said, his voice soft. Wistful.

“I hope so.”

“I know so,” he said. She smiled as he kissed her clavicle and nibbled. Then his voice dropped into a lilting murmur as he said, “I love you,” to her skin, and he breathed her in.

“I know,” she said.

A chuckle broke his remaining tension. He looked up, wiping his face once more. Unshed tears
tangled in his thick, black eyelashes, and his cheeks had gotten puffy, but when he gazed at her, his
glistening eyes sparkled. “Stealing lines from Princess Leia, now, are we?” he said.

She bumped his hip with her own. “I guess so, Han.”

“I think you should try on one of those metal bikinis,” he said. “Then I might like Star Wars.”

“Use your supposed imagination, and put me in one.”

He smirked. His eyes narrowed. The remaining upset in his gaze shifted into lechery. He stared
with a cheerful intentness that told her she was naked in his head. Not in a metal bikini. Blush
spread across her skin despite the chill. “You're making this fishing trip very naughty,” he decided
as he peered at her.

“I think you did that with your rod,” she said.

He pressed his palm against his chest, and he laughed. “Touché!”

She leaned into him. She found it hard to look away, even for a moment, but she glanced at the
floor of the boat to her discarded book. It had a bright red cover. Easy to spot. She grabbed at it.
The pages crinkled. She flipped to the relevant section, and she showed it to him. “Speaking of
naughty,” she said, “do you think we could try this later?”

His eyes darted back and forth as he skimmed the page. “That's...” He shook his head and tilted the
book as if it might cause the words to make sense. Clearly, the new perspective didn't cause any
epiphanies. He made a face. “Impossible. If his arm is going that way, then how is he—”

“See?” she said. She kissed his throat. “Impossible physics. Told you.”

“Well,” he said. “Maybe, vampires are more flexible.” He regarded her for a moment. And then he
grinned a dangerous grin. Like he had an idea. A dangerous idea. “You're pretty flexible, you
know,” he said.

She giggled. “We could try.”

He shook his head. “Do, or do not,” he said. “There is no try.”

She snickered. “For a non-fan, you sure know the lines well.”

“It's been pop-culturally hammered into my brain.”

“Sounds painful.”

“Oh, it is,” he said with a nod. “It's very painful. Want to help me fix it?”

“How?” she said.

The delectable look he gave her made her spine tingle and her toes curl in her sneakers. Her breaths
tightened. He shifted away from her and started the boat's tiny engine. Water churned at the sides
of the boat as he steered them around in the direction they'd come from. Birds scattered. And the
trees along the banks of the lake kicked into a solid green blur. Their cabin was a tiny dot,
hundreds and hundreds of feet away, but it grew and grew. The boat bounced over the waves, and
she clung to the bench with her numb fingertips.

“Where are we going?” she said with a sly grin, playing along, though she knew the answer. The
chilly wind whipped against her face.
He looked back at her and winked. “Imagination only goes so far, you know,” he said.

“And what did you have in mind, exactly?” she prodded.

“Attempted sex,” he said with a definitive nod. “I'm tired of putting it off.”

(Snow falling at Christmas)

A soft, soothing heat pressed against Meredith's skin as the fireplace popped and sputtered. She and Derek sat on the fuzzy shag rug in front of the fire, which Derek had started after she'd begged him. That request, at least, hadn't left him as nonplussed as he'd been when she'd dragged him outside in the waning daylight, barely clothed, to look for perfect sticks.

Perfect for what? he'd said with a frown as his flip-flops had clapped against the damp earth.

She glanced at the big living room window. The colors surrounding the cabin had eased from verdant greens and cerulean blues to sapped grays and the blackest blacks, though at least the moonlight illuminated the now silver lake a bit like something out of a fairytale. She gazed at the shifting, flickering flames in the fireplace, which were bluish where they hugged the burning logs, only to flare into haunting orange at the tips. She rubbed her bare arms with her hands and blinked, trying to sever the hypnotic pull.

She migrated her gaze to Derek, and a whole new languid slowdown turned her thoughts to mush. Derek sat Indian-style beside her on the soft rug, wearing nothing but a loose pair of black sweatpants that stopped under his navel, just below a dark whorl of hair. His Adidas flip-flops rested on the corner of the rug by the spruce-colored couch, which they'd pushed back against the wall with the coffee table to clear space for their endeavor. He was barefoot, and bare-chested, and his dark hair crowned his head, loose and unkempt with the tangles of recent sleep and sex. His eyes were bright, and a delectable smirk tugged at the corner of his upper lip.

Her insides fluttered. She wanted to kiss him.

“What is with you and marshmallows?” Derek said, as if he'd mistaken her trip to la la land for a food craving instead of a craving for him.

She blinked. “Marshmallows are the best thing ever,” she said absently as she shifted on the rug.

“Better than me?” he said with a faux pout. His eyes twinkled. “I'm hurt.”

She scrunched her toes. The soft yarn threads of the rug moved against her skin. Her muscles ached, and she felt a bit sore between her legs and deep within her quadriceps, but it was a good kind of sore. A kind of sore that said she'd had a lot of awesome sex after a while without. She smiled, and her palm slipped to her bare leg to rub as she thought of about it.

Her eyelids lowered as memory sparked in her mind's eye. Memory of his palm chasing up the curve of her hip. Memory of his lips as he languorously worshiped her. Memory of the hot, slick slide of his body against hers. He'd touched her everywhere as he'd moved within her like a heavy piston. Kissed her everywhere. He'd left no part of her unloved, inside or out, and when he'd found his own release, she'd been so buzzed and loose and crackling like live wire, she'd thought she would never move again.

“Food,” she said, blinking, trying to bring herself back to the task at hand, which was roasting
marshmallows. Not sex. They'd had sex already. Lots of it. More would... be really... really nice, though. If he wanted it, anyway, and she didn't want to pressure him. Their attempted sex had turned out fantastic and fulfilling, and they'd even managed that wacky position from her book for a few minutes before he'd had to put her down and rest his arms. She didn't want to ruin the streak or bust his confidence after he'd built himself up so far. She shook her head. Marshmallows. “Best food thing ever,” she said. “You're definitely the reigning king at sex.”

“Mmm. Thank you,” he said.

She couldn't help but notice how his shoulders straightened at her words. How his general demeanor inflated. His improved freedom of movement, along with his recovering stamina, had made a big appearance today. The hungry, confident smirk that crept across his face warmed her soul, and she smiled at him as she fiddled with the plastic bag full of jumbo-sized marshmallows. The plastic crinkled.

He glanced at the bag. His eyebrows raised as he looked back at her. “So, you think marshmallows are even better than strawberry ice cream?”

She frowned. “Well, no.”

“Chocolate?”

“No.”

“Pizza?”

“I guess not.”

“My pancakes?” he said.

She sighed. “No, but—”

“This isn't going to be like the fluffernutter, is it?” he said, a look of distaste pushing his mirth aside.

She rolled her eyes and jabbed a fat marshmallow at the end of the thin spear-like stick. She'd selected it for him from the myriad of other sub-par roasting sticks that surrounded the cabin in the woods outside. “No, it's not like a freaking fluffernutter, Derek,” she said as she slid the marshmallow into place and released it. “It's better. Much better.”

Derek frowned at the marshmallow she'd bisected. “It's hard to be worse than that.”

“Would you just humor me?” Meredith said.

“I am humoring you,” he said. “I'm here, aren't I?”

“Well, yes.”

He waved the stick at her. Though the stick was thin, the marshmallow didn't jiggle, which meant the wood was strong enough to support it. “And I have a marshmallow on a stick, don't I?” he said.

“Yes.”

“See?” he said. He leaned across the pile of marshmallow bags, Hershey bar wrappers, and graham cracker boxes littering the space on the rug between them, and he kissed her on the cheek. “Humoring you. So, what's next?”
She grinned. “Light it on fire.”

“What?”

“The marshmallow,” she said. She pointed to the fireplace. “Burn it. Some people waste time trying to roast it evenly to a perfect, bubbly brown, but I think the trick is to mercilessly blacken the outside.”

“I’m quite sure in the times I’ve seen this done before that the fire stayed in the actual fire pit,” he said, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

She frowned. “I thought you said you’ve never made one!”

“I’ve never performed a quadruple bypass surgery, either. That doesn't mean I've never seen one done.”

She narrowed her eyes. He had a point. “Well,” she said, “my way is better. So, light it on fire.”

He laughed. “Seriously? So bossy.”

“Yes, but you love it,” she said. “And, really, the whole freaking point is to get it gooey and perfect.”

“Gooey and perfect,” he said. “By lighting it on fire.”

“Yes!” she insisted with a laugh. She grabbed his wrist, trying to ignore the brief zing at the soft feel of his skin underneath her fingertips, and poked the stick at the fire. “You're supposed to be humoring me. Remember?”

He shook his arm loose from her grip and warily dangled the marshmallow over the flames. The bottom of the marshmallow browned a bit. He spun the stick and presented the white edge of the marshmallow to the fire. “I really don't see the point of all this,” he said. “How are marshmallows on graham crackers any different than marshmallows on Wonder Bread?”

“Because of the chocolate and the graham stuff and the warm gooey goodness!” she insisted, jerking with surprise when he dipped the marshmallow into the fire and caught a blast of flame with it. The marshmallow ignited. She clapped. “Oh! There you go,” she said. She squeezed his shoulder. “Now, pull it out of the fire, and blow on it.” The look he gave her as he withdrew the stick from the flame made her swallow before she could shake off the heady desire. “Blow on it,” she said, trying to flatten any lurking, smirk-y innuendo before he could utter it. He puffed on the marshmallow at her direction, and the flame winked out.

She gave him an excited grin as she pulled two graham cracker squares and a Hershey bar loose from their packaging. She gestured with the two graham crackers. He presented his stick to her, marshmallow end first. She smashed the marshmallow between the crackers and the chocolate. The chocolate softened, and the crackers slid a bit in her grasp.

“What next, Ms. Expert?” he said.

“Pull it out,” she said.

He gave her another look, and she rolled her eyes.

“The stick, Derek,” she said with a giggle.
He snickered, but he did, and she held the leftover marshmallow concoction together between her palms. She could smell it. The roasted, gooey marshmallows. The soft, melting chocolate. She licked her lips and held it out for him.

“Okay, now, try it,” she said.

He stared at her with dark, hungry eyes as the fire flickered. The light danced in his pupils. After a long pause, he held his hand out. She gave him the s'more and watched with bated breath as he lifted it to his lips. He bit into the cracker with a crunch. He paused for a long moment, as if assessing what was on his tongue. Utter stillness hugged his frame. For a moment, he didn't even breathe, but then his jaws began to work, and he chewed. His eyelids drooped, and a small, deep sound loitered in his throat. She watched his temples move with his jaw as he ate in silence. When his Adam's apple rolled, he blinked, and let loose a low, pleased, “Oh,” that made her toes curl with desire. He usually only said things in that tone during sex, a fact for which he'd given her ample reminders that day.

He leaned back, and he stared at the s'more with new appreciation. He took another bite without prodding, and then another.

“See!” she said. “See, it is good!”

His happy expression evaporated into a humoring smile as he rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mere, you're absolutely right,” he said. “It's very good.”

She pumped her fist. “I knew it!”

“I'm not budging on the fluffernutters, though,” he said.

“When the OB-GYN proves my conception theory, and you have to eat a real one with real marshmallow fluff, I think you'll change your mind.”

“That won't happen, because I'm right on the conception date.”

She snickered. “Do you have any idea how statistically improbable it is that you got me pregnant on the first try?”

“Me getting you pregnant on the first try is more probable than me getting you pregnant through birth control, which I did, might I remind you.” He winked.

“Derek, there's virility, and then there's pure hubris.”

“What can I say?” he said with a haughty smirk. “I am good at getting things on the first try.”

She laughed and shook her head. She couldn't help it.

“Look, I'll give you s'mores,” he said. He took another happy bite of the subject in question. His temples worked as he chewed. “But conception date is mine,” he said around a mouthful of graham cracker.

She grinned as a thin white line of marshmallow stretched into infinity when he pulled his hand away from his mouth. The gooey string of sugar snapped back and curled over his lip, and she sat on her hands to keep from licking it off him. The room seemed warm and floaty as she watched him polish off the rest of the graham cracker and gooey marshmallow. Not only because he was him, and he was gorgeous to look at, but because he was eating, and he was enjoying it with an almost cheerful gusto.
His appetite seemed to have barreled back into place like a linebacker tackling a ball carrier. Yesterday, she'd had to prod him just to make a freaking sandwich. This morning, he'd eaten his naughty banana pancake leftovers without her prodding. And then he'd eaten pancakes once more, whipped cream included, when he'd made them again for lunch at her behest, once they'd gotten back from the non-fishing fishing trip. He'd eaten a full dinner without being reminded, too. And, now, this...

Sweet, delicious dessert. She stared as he licked his finger clean. She cleared her throat, trying to force her mind away from sex. Sex... “What about the sex of the baby?” she said.

He swallowed, and he looked at her. “You still think it's a girl?”

“I know it's a girl.”

“I'll even let you have that one,” he said. “No arguments.” He smiled and made a faux zipper motion across his lips with his thumb and his index finger.

She rolled her eyes. “Because you want a girl. That doesn't freaking count.”

“I want anything as long as it's with you,” he said. “And you wanted a boy, I thought. So, why are you so set on it being a girl?”

She pressed her hand against her soft shirt. Warmth spread through the fabric to her skin. She smiled at the contact. “Because I just know it's a girl. But I'd really be happy with anything as long as it's with you.”

His expression smoothed into something... almost post-coital. Relaxed. Sated. His eyelids dipped, and he stared at her with a satisfied gaze. “I'm glad we agree on something, at least,” he said, his voice a husky slip and slide of syllables against her skin that made her think of his hands. Touching her. His tongue. Tasting her.

She shook her head. She jabbed another marshmallow on his stick and then put one onto hers. They pressed their sugary bounty into the flames together. “How is it that you've never made one of these before, anyway?” she said as both marshmallows bloomed into fire at once. They withdrew their sticks and blew on them.

“When would I have?” he said. He mashed his marshmallow between two graham crackers and the Hershey bar, and then withdrew his stick, almost as though this hadn't been a foreign concept to him not ten minutes earlier. She mirrored his certain movements.

“You never made a bonfire on the beach when you went with your family?” she said.

“Sandy Hook doesn't allow bonfires. Or, it didn't then, at least.”

“Well, that's stupid,” she said. “Bonfires on the beach are like... essential.”

He smiled. “Like s'mores are essential?”

She bit into her first s'more of the night and sighed as it sat on her tongue, a chocolatey, gooey, warm mess of sugar and everything right in the world. She almost couldn't bring herself to chew while she savored the calories in their tasty, full-figured glory.

“Mmm,” she purred before she could recover her drifting senses. She swallowed. “I mean, yes, like s'mores,” she said. “When we go to the beach, we're going to one that allows bonfires.”
He grinned. "When we go?"

"Well, you didn't think this was going to be our only vacation ever, did you?" she said.

Her cheeks bulged as she stuffed her mouth full of the s'more. She had no idea how she'd eaten the entire graham cracker square in less than four bites, but she'd managed it. She licked all of her fingers, one after the other, scouring them for every last bit of dietary sinning she could manage, and then she stabbed another marshmallow on her stick. She shoved the stick into the fire with a merciless grin.

She was being a pig. A big, oink-y, unrepentant pig. But... these were so, so good, and she never had opportunities like this anymore. It often seemed like if she wasn't sleeping or playing nursemaid, she was at the hospital. She didn't have any freaking time to slow down. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a two-day weekend that didn't involve her or Derek being injured or sick.

Her marshmallow burst into flame, and she pulled it out of the fire.

Derek held a pair of graham crackers in his hands for her, and she flattened her newly charred marshmallow between them with a Hershey bar. She smiled at him. At least, despite the omission of s'mores from his childhood repertoire, he made up for lost time like a pro. She forced herself to slow down and not take a bite. Pain to enhance the pleasure.

"What beach did you have in mind?" he said. His gaze danced in the firelight.

"One that won't freeze off my toes when I step in the water."

He snorted. "That pretty much rules out the entire west coast."

"I'm sure you'll think of something."

He raised his eyebrows with incredulity. "I'll think of something?"

She nodded. "I got us this cabin," she said. "It's your turn to be creative."

"Richard got us this cabin."

"Because I said we should do a vacation while he was standing there, or did you miss that part?" he said. He shook his head with a laugh, and she barreled onward. Sugar made her bouncy and hyper and happy, and her brain raced. She felt... good. Great. Excellent. She gave him a bubbly grin. "So, what about camping?"

"For a vacation?" he said.

"No, silly. For making s'mores," she said. "They're like... a classic camping pastime, and you're all nature-y."

"Now, yes," he said. "I grew up in Brooklyn, Mere. The nature bit is a recent development."

She gave up on patience and took a huge bite. The graham cracker crunched, and then her incisors sliced through soft, melting chocolate. She chewed, letting her eyes close. Just for a moment. To savor it. "You never even went camping as a kid?"

"Meredith, I really didn't—"

"Not even as a boyscout?" she prodded before he could finish. She swallowed. "Or a cub scout? Or
a scout-y something?"

“didn't want to.”

She bit into her s'more. “Why wouldn't you?” she muttered around the graham cracker.

“Because I got picked on and teased, and I had no desire to spend any more time with the kids at school than I had to,” he said. He took his own bite. Crunching filled the silence as he stared into the fire.

_ I wasn't very popular_, he'd said.

She swallowed. “Oh,” she said. “Why did you get teased?”

He shrugged.

She polished off the rest of her s'more, and she shoved the pile of wrappers and refuse away, under the coffee table with the sticks, both his and hers. She scooted closer to him across the soft shag rug. She rose to her knees, wrapped her arms around him, and rested her chin on his shoulder.

“Well, they were idiots,” she said. She kissed the crook of his neck. “I got teased, too.”

He gazed at her, and his eyebrows rose, as if he couldn't fathom why anybody would want to do that. That thought, that simple support, even without a word from his lips, made her smile. She pressed her cheek against his warm shoulder, rubbing his abdomen with her palms.

“I think kids are a bit like sharks,” she said. “They'll pick off anybody who's bleeding in the water a bit.”

He finished his s'more and turned. “I somehow can't picture you as shark bait.”

She shrugged. “Having a single mom was rarer back then. I just didn't feel like I fit anywhere, and I didn't have many friends. At school, I just...” Her voice trailed away.

“I know the feeling,” he said.

“But your parents were awesome.”

He nodded. “They were.” A long silence stretched. He filled himself with a huge breath and blew it out between his lips. As though it were a struggle to think back to that time without making himself upset. “I was small,” he admitted in a voice that was just as small, as though those ancient wounds still lingered underneath his skin. “I got teased because I was small.”

She stared at him in the flickering light. A sense of wholeness filled her as more and more of him made perfect sense. His attitude. The way he compensated for insecurity by acting more secure than anyone, acted secure to an arrogant degree, but at the same time, was probably one of the most insecure people she knew. Insecure, but... also the warmest, sweetest man she'd ever met.

“I bet they're all eating their words, now,” she said.

He smiled. His eyes danced in the dim light. “Meredith...”

She licked her lips. This was a vacation. He hadn't bothered to shave, and after a day, his stubble was a thick, scruffy carpet across his face, which... while not being the funnest thing to kiss, made him look freaking hot. The overall effect gave him an unkempt, dark look that matched his dark, almost obsidian eyes. His bare toes moved underneath his thighs, and his knees shifted, as though
he felt like getting up and pacing. The dark sweatpants matched his dark hair, but contrasted with his pale skin. He seemed... Like a pent up panther, all sleek lines and the promise of sex.

_I can take it incredibly slow, he seemed to growl in her ear._

Her body flushed as her thoughts tightened their sexual noose. She couldn't help herself or stop herself. She was selfishly lost, feeling his phantom caresses as they explored an ocean of her skin. She leaned against him, and she nuzzled him.

“You're smart, funny, sensitive...” she murmured against his skin. He turned into her touch with a low, dangerous sound in his throat, as though she were playing with fire, and not just sitting next to it. “Successful,” she continued, “extremely hot, really great at sex, and you're all...” She paused to lick a drop of melted chocolate stuck in the stubble of his chin. Sugar and cocoa melded with the salt of his skin. “Mine.”

“Mmm,” he rumbled against her, a deep, vibrating well of need as she kissed him. “Again?” he said, but he didn't sound surprised or at all put out. Only desirous. Wanting. Demanding. The fire he'd threatened her with burned her to cinders as he crashed against her and laid her back on the floor, his bigger body dwarfing hers. She reveled in the heat. He pushed his hands underneath her shirt and touched her. His palms slid along her abdomen, past her navel. He cupped her breasts as he kissed her. The heat of the fire stroked her skin, and the air seemed to whoosh out of the room. She brushed his sides, found the waistband of his loose sweatpants, and pushed underneath the band to his toned gluteal muscles. She squeezed. His skin was slick and smooth and hard beneath her palms. His breaths chuffed against her, and the room ignited with their tangled war of push and pull. He nuzzled her, and then pressed in to kiss her again, his weight heavy against her.

Memories flickering like kindling, she recalled how he'd touched her in the shower after they'd returned from the lake, his hand between her thighs as soapy suds had meandered down her spine, and again when they'd moved to the bed. He'd made love to her until she couldn't do more than lie there in a pleased, pleasant catatonia. He'd made the whole day and all the passing eternal hours about her. Pleasing her. For the bouquet of orgasms he'd given her, he'd taken only one for himself that she could remember. When they'd been in the bed. Before he'd collapsed next to her in a panting, sated heap, and slept, sweat dotting his pale skin.

He'd done that since he'd been shot. Always drove the intimate moments, refusing to give her the keys. She'd made love to her husband exactly once in the last three months or more, and that moment seemed to have been a fluke, when he'd been too tired and hurting to support himself, and too far gone into the act to stop himself from wanting to finish despite any reservations. He'd let her crawl on top, then, and she'd given him release, like the ones he'd given her over and over again. She'd thought then that they'd been making progress, but today, their first sex since then, and he'd never once relinquished control. He was better, now, physically, but his mental wounds still ran deep.

The pain of denying him scorched her, but she swallowed, and she pushed at his shoulders. He pulled back from her lips, a surprised look loitering on his face, dark in the flickering firelight.

“What?” he said, his voice low. Murmuring. Like a slide of satin along her spine. Deep concern hovered in his gaze. “Are you feeling nauseous?”

She rose up on her elbows. Her loose hair spilled behind her, and she kissed him, staring into his eyes. “No, I just...” she said. “Will you let me?”
“Let you what?” he said.

She reached and stroked his face. His hair. And then she pushed, guided, not expecting him to listen. He surprised the hell out of her when he moved at her direction onto his back, and they swapped positions, her slight weight resting flush against his side while he stared up at her. She rubbed her palm against his sleek, flat abdomen, and then chased his raised, pink scar to his throat. She rested her fingers on the raised bump at the tip of the scar, a knob like a marble, just below his clavicles. It was an ugly, rough remnant of his surgery that would remain for a long time. She kissed it to prove it didn't matter. And then she kissed his lips. Hope twisted in her throat as he submitted.

“Let me do this,” she said against his skin when he pulled away to breathe. “Let me do for you what you do for me. Please.”

“Meredith...” he said. No, he didn't say. But she could see the word in his eyes. No, I don't want you to do that. He wanted to say it. He wanted to. The indecision in his eyes killed her, and she hated Gary Clark again. She'd gone for several days without wishing the dead man ill, but, now, Derek lay underneath her, ready, wanting, but not wanting because it wasn't on his terms, and that just... hurt. Stung. Ripped her open like a horrible wound.

She stared at Derek. “Please. Please, let me.” He blinked and looked away. Her lip trembled, and just slid out of her like oil through a funnel, sluggish, but... moving all the same. Dripping. “It's just us,” she said. She coiled her index finger in the hair dusting his chest. “Just you and me. Please?”

A deep, troubled sound loitered in his throat. She kissed him. Stop, she waited for him to say. Actually say. I don't want to. Real words instead of just a mopey stare left for her to interpret. But he didn't say that. Didn't say anything. His lips parted, and he let her in. She lay against him, searching, tasting. His hand touched her back, sloped down, cupped her ass, squeezed, as if he couldn't simply be still. As if he had to do... something. She shook her head as she pulled away from him, placed her hands in the soft tufts of hair at his armpits, and pushed him back. She chased her hands along the lean muscle of his triceps, and then his forearms, and then she tangled with his fingers, pressing him flat against the soft rug.

She bit her lip. “Is this okay with your arms like this?” she said. Keeping his arms over his head could be painful for his sternum or his back or both.

“I'm okay,” he said, his voice deep and low. No pain hovered in his tone, and his face seemed relaxed. He breathed, steady and even.

As soon as she moved her hands away, he pulled his arms down, just a fraction before she leaned and pushed him back. “No,” she said. “Stay.” He lay with his wrists crossed above his head. She could almost imagine him relaxed and sated on his back in a hammock. “Please, let me.”

He shook his head, his gaze confused. “Please, let you what?”

“Love you,” she said simply.

She kissed him, and then she straddled him. He watched as she grabbed the hem of her shirt with both hands and lifted it over her head. She looked down at him through her naked cleavage, watched his breaths quicken, and his gaze narrow with need. He'd always been about visuals, and she'd become a master painter over the years. She cupped herself, rubbed her nipples with her thumbs to perk them up, and then let her breasts fall free in the warm air. His lips parted, and he stared, his dark gaze stripping her more bare than she'd felt wearing only her skin. His pleased look made her smile back at him. Her lower body throbbed at the sight of his desire.
“You want me,” she said.

“Oh, yes,” he replied. “I want you.” He stared at her with adulation, as if he couldn't believe he'd found her, or that he had her, or that she was and, in that moment, sitting on top of him, wet and almost naked.

She rolled her shirt into a wrinkled, twisted line of fabric. She leaned forward, and she placed the twisted shirt over his wrists. He kissed a nipple as she slid past, and she jerked back in surprise. He gave her a sly grin as she pulled away, as if to say, *What? It was there.*

She brushed his face with her palm. “I want you to pretend the shirt is a rope.”

He frowned. He lifted his wrists off the rug an inch before resettling. “It's a pretty shoddy rope.”

“Use that imagination you said you have.”

“But—”

“If you move your arms, we stop for the night, and I put my shirt back on,” she said.

He sighed. “Meredith...”

She shook her head. “Please, Derek. The rope is fake. You can always move if you need to. You *always* have choices. I love you, and I want you, and you've been perfect, but I don't want to feel kept anymore. I want to do this for you, and I want you to let me.”

The fire snapped and popped. The glow flickered against his face. “I didn't mean to make you feel kept.”

“Well, you do,” she said. “When it’s all about me, and never about you, all I am is a cherished plaything.”

“I didn't mean...” His voice cracked, and he looked away.

She kissed him, brought his gaze back to hers. “I know it's what you needed, Derek, and I was happy to give it for a while because of that. But I want to go back to how we were, now.”

“How were we before?” he said darkly. He swallowed.

Meredith shrugged. “Equal. You gave, but you took, and so did I, and I want that back. I want you to let me give.”

He stared at her. She swallowed against nerves when she realized his body trembled, and she didn't think it was from lust. She stroked his skin, the hard expanse of his chest. Her palms plowed over the soft hairs dusting his front. He breathed, long and slow. His fists clenched and then relaxed.

He blinked. “I thought... you were happy.”

She pulled his fingers through his hair. Her eyes watered. “I was, Derek. You satisfy the hell out of me. You do, and I love you very much. But how would you feel if things were reversed between us in the long term?”

He tipped his head toward the fire to look away from her. Closed his eyes. Swallowed.

*I just want to be able to give... something,* he'd said, their first time together since the shooting. *Because it was my choice. I need that.*
She'd frowned. *You don't feel like letting me be on top is giving something?*

*I don't know. I...*

She deflated. She'd been a stupid idiot, and she'd pressured him, and she'd said a bunch of things. Things that had fallen out of her mouth like a freaking waterfall of insensitive idiocy. “I'm sorry,” she said. She wiped her eyes with her palms. “If you're not ready, I can—”

He threw off the shirt and moved his hands to clutch her thighs, which stopped her from sliding off of him. “No,” he said. He took a breath. He blinked as he watched the fire, and then he turned to face her. “Okay,” he said. *I trust you.* “I'll play.” *For you.* A smile curled his lips as he put his hands back behind his head. He winked. “Be gentle, though. I'm fragile.”

*No funny business in the shower, all right? I'm fragile,* he'd said mere days after he'd been shot.

For a long parade of seconds, all she could do was blink at him. The hugeness of the moment popped in her chest like an overladen balloon. She breathed, blinking back the stupid, upset, hormonal tears that plagued her. She wiped her face again. She returned her shirt to his wrists, ‘binding’ him. She kissed him as she scooted away, down his waist, down past his knees. She leaned over his body, and she grabbed the waistband of his sweatpants.

“You're sure?” she said as she tightened her hold on the elastic that kept him hidden from her.

He nodded. A small smile curled his lips. “I can think of worse ways to cure me of this stupid hangup.”

“It's not a stupid hangup, Derek,” she said. “But I would like it to go away.”

“Me, too,” he said in a soft, choked voice. “I'm sorry.”

“Shut up,” she whispered.

He laughed, soft, self-deprecating.

With a nod, she pulled his pants away, all the way to his ankles, and off his feet. She kept her eyes averted, knowing if she stopped to stare, she wouldn't stop staring, and that would be... bad. Bad when he was lying there, stripped, his will taken from him by a submission game they were playing at her behest. She spread his legs until she could comfortably kneel between them, and then she laid the pants across his ankles, the soft, fleecy side against his skin. His toes curled and straightened.

“Another rope that's not a rope?” he said.

“Yep. If you move your legs, the sweatpants go back on.”

“That would be...” He swallowed. “Really frustrating.”

She grinned as she moved back to him. She kissed his lips. “That's the idea. I needed a good deterrent.”

“So, if I move my legs, my pants go back on, and if I move my arms, your shirt goes back on?”

She nodded. “That about sums it up.”

His eyelids lowered, and he stared at her through his thick, dark eyelashes. “I guess I'm ready, then,” he said, his voice soft.
She brushed her fingers through his hair as she stared at him. A slow smile spread across her face. She kissed him. “Okay,” she said.

She pushed her panties down her legs as he stared, and then she lay along his side and settled against the warmth of his body. He breathed, long and slow as she stroked his chest, and she listened to the rhythm of it. His life. His heart, thumping underneath her ear, bold and strong, and the soft, rustling whooshes of the air filling his lungs. She kissed his left pectoral, and then underneath, where the bullet had pierced him. His skin had an ugly pockmark there, an indentation to show him where his life had bled away.

_Please, don't die,_ she'd begged.

“Well,” he said, his voice low and throaty and rumbling through his healing sternum where she pressed her ear. This would have been one of those moments where he would wrap his strong arms around her and tell her he was fine, and that he loved her. But he didn't move except to breathe. His head tilted to the side, and he met stare her with his eyes. A smirk-y smile twitched his lips. “I'm here. I'm sinfully naked. What do you plan to do with me?”

She didn't answer right away as the moments passed. “I don't know,” she decided. She lay naked against his body, her arm draped across his torso. She stroked his ribs in slow, soothing, repetitions as she wondered. Would he get impatient? Would he wonder what was going on? Would he get more nervous, or antsy, or...?

She tested him, staring at the fire. Stroking him. Skin to skin. He didn't move his arms or his legs. The lasts remnants of his trembling eased into perfect stillness. Patient, he let her do what she wanted. The minutes passed. She checked his face. His eyes were open, but half-lidded. He seemed relaxed. Content to be in her arms, even if she did nothing else all night. The warmth of the fire pressed against her face, and she sighed as she shifted into action.

She kissed him. She didn't pull away. “What do you want?” she said. When she pressed her lips against him, he met her with a starving sort of desperation that made her body hum and belied his calm stillness. She'd built him up. Ignited his anticipation. He tasted chocolatey. Sweet. He devoured what she gave him, only the sounds of their breaths and the pops and crackles of the fire interrupting the intimate silence.

When she pulled away, his even breathing had become panting. She licked the taste of him from her lips and grinned as she stared through her eyelashes at him. At his pale, naked body. She ran her fingers through his hair, staring at him as he grappled with her abandonment. His fingers flexed.

“What do you want me to do, Derek?” she said. She kissed his Adam's apple as he swallowed, licked the crook between his clavicles, tasted his scar and his skin and then, when he still didn't answer her question, she took his left nipple between her teeth and tweaked. “This?” she said. She moved to his right and sucked.

“Mmm,” he said.


“How about that?” he said, cheerful, encouraging between jerky breaths. “I like that.”

Entirely too composed for her tastes.
She slid the flat of her palm past the bullet wound, along the ripple of his ribs, to the crease of his groin. He wasn't hard or even semi-erect. The Paxil hadn't left him unaffected. He'd proven, now, that he could still function on demand even on his high dosage, but no amount of enticing visuals, or staying north of his navel would fire him up on all cylinders. He needed a more... direct sort of help, so to speak.

She hefted his flaccid weight in her hands, and he gasped as she said, “Maybe... this?”

She circled his scrotum with her index finger and thumb and lifted it away from his body. The gentle pulling sensation was one of his favorite things, she'd learned over hours and hours of experimentation. His back arched and then snapped straight at the unexpected touch. She sank the fingertips of her free hand into the warmth between his legs, behind his sack, and stroked his perineum once, twice. Another of his favorites.

A deep, shivering moan wrung from his lips.

“Do you want more of that?” she said.

“Yes,” he managed.

“I didn't hear you.”

“Yes,” he blurted, and her lower body throbbed and her breaths tightened from the simple act of watching him undone and at her mercy. She pressed and stroked and teased. A sensation of emptiness hollowed out her body as she stared. She wanted him, wanted him, now, and suddenly it was hard to think in more terms than the simple beauty of his anatomy. His dark, curly hair framed his lower attributes like a bulls-eye, sort of his own pick me, choose me, love me.

She thought of him aroused and full and ready, and she thought of his girth as he cleaved her. A gasp tightened in her throat. She shook her head. Focus. She had to focus, or they'd both be in the frustrated bowels of sexual purgatory, unable to ascend. Getting him going, now, took... calculation.

“What about this?” she said as she moved, and she pressed her lips to the whorl of soft, wiry hair underneath his navel. She skipped down his front, following the fuzzy arrow to its terminus, exactly how she'd imagined earlier that day, kissing, touching. With a slight stroke of her fingertips, she retracted his prepuce. It slid down his length. He sucked in a breath at the gentle motion, and then she kissed his sensitive head.

“Does that feel good?” she said.

“Yes,” he said, his voice hoarse and raw.

“Really good?”

The muscles in his lower abdomen twitched as she kissed him again, and then she licked once, looping her tongue around his corona much like she imagined working the raised ridge of a Tootsie pop. A rough, deep sound pealed from his throat. Sort of like a yes. More of a moan. Animalistic. The panther she'd seen in the coils of his muscles, growling. Caged and dying to be released. That was more like it.

When she took him into her mouth and sucked, his whole body skipped off the rug like he'd been zapped. The shirt against his wrists shuddered, and his knees poked upward in surprise, dislodging his fleecy sweatpants, but she let his misdemeanor go with a light, chastising slap to his smooth
hip. “Hold still, or the pants go on,” she threatened, and he settled, his breaths chuffing with desperation. When she ran her hands along his quadriceps, along the flat expanse of skin below his bellybutton, the tightness, the unyielding tension she found there made her throb. He was trying to be still. For her.

*You know you're my best friend, right?* he'd said in the car on the way home from the hospital.

*Mark is your best friend,* she'd replied.

He hadn't blinked. *Now, who's got no faith?*

She ached. For all the torture she committed, she received it back in spades. Her breasts felt as full as her core felt empty, and a hot flush swept across her naked skin, along her cheeks, down her throat, and over her chest. She forced herself to breathe.

She licked the underside of his length, gratified to feel that his blood had begun to pool there. The veined skin was hot and feather soft and filling with the deep, blushing promise of sex. Soon. A bit more help, and he would be ready to fill the horrible void between her legs.

She raised her head to grin at him. “What do you want, Derek?” she said, her voice low, husky. *Ready.*

*It's intense, you know.*

*What?*

*This thing I have for you.*

He blinked at the ceiling, and his fingers clenched and unclenched. “Do... that. Again.”

She licked her lips and pulled away. “You'll need to be more specific.”

“Your mouth,” he said.

“What about it?”

“Taste me.”

She knelt before him between his legs, encircled his widening girth with her hands, and took him into mouth her again. She bobbed up and down, once, twice, a slip and slide, pressing him into the back of her throat. When she pulled away, she sucked.

“F... fuck,” he said.

She gave him a languid grin. “That's the idea,” she said, her voice even despite the churning coil of desperation underneath her guise of command. She wanted him, and she felt. So. Empty. She pressed her breaths in and out of her chest with the force of her diaphragm alone. She stroked him, encouraged him. Touched him. Kissed him. Tasted him. Until his arousal was a thick, heavy weight. *Ready. Eager. Enticing.*

“What do you want, Derek?” she asked again. She reached underneath his erection and massaged his perineum, a barrage of his favorite stimulation.

*Do you have any idea, how often you turn me on?*

He blinked at her, a glazed look of desire on his face. “I want...” He gasped. Twitched. “You.”
"How do you want me, Derek?"

His eyes widened, as though he were incredulous that she expected him to be able to explain the needs his nerve endings at that moment. Nerve endings she was twisting up with erotic fire in all his favorite spots. At that moment. She ran the nail of her index finger along his frenulum, and his whole body jerked. The sweatpants at his ankles shifted, but he didn't dislodge them.

"How, Derek?"

"I want..." His breaths squeezed in his chest, and she couldn't help but mirror him. The empty void within her throbbed. “Mmm.”

"Yes?"

His knee twitched. He blinked like he was trying to concentrate. “Dirty.”

"You want it dirty?"

He bared his teeth at her in a grimace of sexual frustration. “Dirty fucking...”

“We could do that,” she replied. “But you're going to have to be more specific than that.”

He panted. “Pool. Dirty... fucking... p...”

She laughed, stroking him.

He moaned, deep and low. His arms shifted. Three inches.

“Don't move, or we stop,” she warned. “Remember?”

Her heart beat like a crashing gong in her chest as she stared at him, naked and glistening and ready, if only he would say the words. Derek was a want, take, have sort of guy, and now he couldn't take or have. He could only want. The tables had been flipped on him. She licked her lips with anticipation as she watched him attempt speech.

“I want to be...” he said. His eyelids dipped as she applied pressure. “Mmm.”

She eased forward. “You want to be...?”

“Please,” he said. “Inside.” His breaths came thickly. Quickly. She watched his ribs slide and jerk with his desperation. “Just fuck me,” he blurted at last.

“That,” she said as she straddled him, “I can definitely do.”

She gripped his erection with her hand as she raised her lower body. For a moment, she hovered as wicked, thrilling anticipation pounded through her body. She guided him to her. The head of his erection pressed against the nerve clusters at her opening. She gasped. Twitched. Delighted at the feel of him pushing against her, a mere fraction inside. Pleasure set her nerves on fire, and the conflagration made it difficult to think.

He sucked in a breath and pushed up with his hips, slamming into her, wanting, taking, having. His hot, slick length slid home to her center. Her teeth clacked shut in surprise with the jounce, and then gravity took them down to the rug again with a jolt. She blinked. Her vision fuzzed and then corrected.

“Oh,” she moaned as her insides adjusted to him, and her body throbbed with unmet needs.
He looked at her, panting, a familiar sly smirk slathered on his face, as if to say once more, *What? It was there.* Neither of the two 'ropes' had moved. She couldn't exactly fault him for speeding things along.

She squeezed with her insides, feeling him deep within her, ready, hot, and he groaned a mirror, “Oh,” that bounced back at her with the same desperation of hers, only in a lower, choppier pitch.

“You feel really good,” she said.

“So do you,” he said.

Her lips parted, and she panted as the desire to move coiled within her like a spring. Her engine idled, ready and aching to accelerate. *Go,* said her brain. *Just go. Go, go, go.* Shaking, resisting, she squeezed around him as she splayed her palms against the flat expanse of skin below his navel.

“I really love you,” she said, looking down at him.

*Maybe, we just fit.*

“Hmm,” he said. His nostrils flared. He panted, and he stared at her with a fathomless expression that said those same words without any words at all. *I love you.* The fire made the dim light between them flicker and dance. She lowered herself to lie flush against his body, her breasts mashed against his heaving ribs, her lips at his throat. Where their skin met, the heat between them bloomed with perspiration.

She scrunched her fingers in his damp hair, and she kissed his lips. His chin. His throat. His chest.

“I love you,” she repeated, a murmur.

“I love you, too,” he managed.

And then she started to move.

Slowly, at first. Up and down to give him the sensation of thrusting, though he didn't thrust. He filled her, and then he left her, though he didn't move much. He rocked his hips against gravity to meet her on the downswings. Over and over. But he didn't move his arms, or his legs.

*I'm in love with you,* he'd said. *I've been in love with you... forever.*

His tight abs struggled to keep her pace as she leaned back, changed gears, and eased into more frantic thrusting of her own. Rocking. Like a grinding wave against his pelvis.

“Huh,” he managed, not a question. An observation. He smirked, though the expression carried more need than amusement. It was as though the heat of friction had taken his mind from him, and he burned.

“What?” she said.

“Save a horse.” He blinked. A rough groan stuck in his throat. “Ride a surgeon?”

“I swear you've said that before,” she said.

“Maybe...” He panted. “In another universe. Fuck.”

She snickered. “Feels good?”
His head twitched. Sort of like a nod. “Ye... oh.” His body snapped back in an arch of sinew and lean muscle as she slowed her rhythm, jerking her lower body in tight circles.

She pressed her fingers between her legs, jamming herself between their bodies to add needed pressure in the right places. Needed touch. She moaned as she hit her spot. A breath funneled out of her like a tornado. The feel of his shaft running her through her from underneath, while she pressed with her fingers over top...

“Oh, Derek. You feel so good.”

“Dit... ditto. You're so... wet.”

She clenched her teeth as a wave tore through her, made her toes twitch and her shoulders heave. “It's for you,” she said. “You make me that way.”

His pleased look gratified her.

The room fuzzed as she massaged herself. She bit her lip. Glorious need crushed into a fine point like a diamond stuck in the earth. She throbbed with it. Pulsed with it. She was ready. On the cliff. Looking down into the valley. She could jump, if she wanted. Enter freefall, if she wanted.

If she wanted.

She pulled her hand away and left herself dangling on the precipice, wanting and in glorious pain from it. She focused on him. This was about him. She only wanted to be able to find completion when he did. As much as he humored her by lying there bound in fake ropes, she doubted he would be okay with it if she didn't finish, and he did.

She leaned down, mashing her body against his. She nuzzled his throat. Kissed him. He ravished her with his endless hunger, returning what she gave him and more.

“What do you need?” she whispered against him.

His mouth moved. She saw her name form on his lips, but he didn't speak the word. He gasped. She met his eyes. His unfocused, desperate expression sucked her in like quicksand, and it took eternity to escape. She pushed against his groin, and he moaned, deep, low, unfettered.

She pulled away, re-seating herself. She rocked against his body. Slow, and fast, and fast and slow. Alternating. Patterns gave him no end. Neither did change.

“What do you need?” she repeated, breathless, almost frustrated.

Something was wrong. Was something wrong?

His fingers clenched and unclenched. Beads of sweat formed on his brow. She watched his Adam's apple slink along the skin of his throat. He thunked his head against the rug, and his gaze rolled back to the ceiling behind him as the knife edge of orgasm split him open. His body arched as he rose to meet her and then snapped flat.

Nothing happened. He panted.

“Fucking,” he said. He jammed his lower body into her. “Paxil.”

All the dots connected in a rush. He'd had one orgasm for her many because he'd camouflaged his slower climax with a meticulous ode to her body. He'd kissed her. Touched her. Every crease and
crevice. Every freckle. Every hair. He'd sent her into blissful paroxysms once and again and a third time while he'd been sheathed within her, hot and hard and powerful, but not because he'd held himself back.

Paxil could cause delays. He'd used it to his own advantage then, and he'd enjoyed it. Now, he thought she was waiting for him, and he couldn't send himself down the beckoning slide. He was stuck and letting himself feel stuck instead of allowing the sensation to build his pleasure.

She slowed her pace and relaxed with a sigh. She smiled. She stroked herself to renew her toehold on sweet oblivion. She stared at him through her eyelashes. “We'll get there,” she said. “I'm just enjoying the ride.”

He'd smirked. *You're telling me I'm a smooth ride.*

She squeezed her insides around him, and he groaned.

She tangled her fingers in the delicate hair below his navel. She touched his flat, sweat-slicked lower body, and she splayed her palms. She flattened against him, a wave of flesh, still moving, rocking. She rode on top of him, against his skin. The heat between them built as she stared into his eyes. Endless blue stared back at her. Needing. Wanting. Having, not taking. She plunged her fingers into his sweaty hair and brushed it away from his face.

“I love you,” she said. She kissed him, and he drank her down, panting. “And we'll get there.”

*When we got married on the Post-it, there was you, and there was me. And we made... We made a team.*

“Meredith,” he said, the word a murmured group of loosely connected syllables. He tilted up his head to kiss her. Derive his existence in her skin. Her heartbeat.

She grinned. “It's not work if it's totally fun, right?”

A helpless smile crinkled the skin around his eyes and lit up his face. He laughed breathlessly against her lips as she kissed him. Pressed against him. Became him.

Time seemed to slow and stretch into the infinite.

She lost track of the moments they shared in the endless, buffeting heat. Staring at each other while the dying firelight flickered. Slipping against each other in a well of friction. She rode him into the darkness, toeing the line and towing him with her, waiting, encouraging.

Until she heard it. The telltale gasps of his breaths tightening in his chest. Felt it. The tension coiling his muscles into tight, pressure-loaded springs. Saw it. His eyes rolling back.

He'd passed close to no return. The sliver between him and release was the size of an atom.

She pressed her fingertips into the slick heat between them, pushing down as he pushed up. The flare as their two opposite forces met was cataclysmic. Brilliant. Punishing and perfect and bright all at once. She grimaced, showing her teeth to him. Not in pain. And then it all came apart at the seams. Euphoria sparked at the ends of all her nerves. She loosed a pleased, desperate moan. Her insides fluttered, squeezing around him in rhythmic pulses. She collapsed against him, boneless and out of steam.

Momentum carried him the rest of the way.
He arched backward into the floor. His belly pressed into her as he came off the rug, lifting her with him an inch. Two. His lungs filled to the bursting brim, and then he didn't move. Didn't breathe. Didn't speak. Bliss evened his expression into blue glass. His lips parted. And then his whole body jerked. Twitched. He spurted within her. Liquid heat filled the space between her legs.

He sank to the floor with her like the subsiding crush of a wave, and then he stilled.

They lay against each other, breathing. Silent. Exhausted in the languid aftershocks.

The last lick of fire popped. Snapped. Died.

It'd been a long day.

*You were like coming up for fresh air. It's like I was drowning, and you saved me. That's all I know.*

They didn't need words.

They slept.

---

(Like sleeping in on Sunday)

*Meredith woke up feeling like a popsicle lying on a hot grill. The heat underneath her body pressed against her, inviting, beckoning her to curl closer. Her bare back and ass, however, felt frozen. She blinked and grimaced. A strange yin-yang of raven-brown mashed with fuzzy white replaced the blackness of sleep. She raised her head, squinting in the dim light. She smacked her lips as sentience arrived, and the yin-yang became her husband's hair, and the expanse of the white shag rug beyond him.*

*Derek, her personal furnace, lay on his stomach underneath her, breathing soft and even. He’d rolled over in the night, and she’d draped herself against him at a slant in her sleep. Heat seeking, or something, she supposed. Which was probably why Derek hadn’t stirred despite the loitering chill left by the vacant fireplace. She’d been his unintentional human blanket, leaving him all toasty and comfortable while her backside succumbed to the gelid wilds of Antarctica. Well, maybe not Antarctica. But at least a very cold territory in northern Canada.*

*She pressed a kiss against the slope of his pale neck despite her rue, pausing to inhale the familiar scent of him. All hers. And then she wriggled away, careful to avoid disturbing him. He didn’t wake. Didn’t mumble. Didn’t move.*

*Standing up felt a bit like trying to untwist a paperclip. Little curlicues of stiff muscles remained no matter how much she stretched. The shoulder and hip she’d been putting all her weight on overnight ached and twinged, and she was pretty sure, if she were to look in the mirror, she would find her hair to be a scraggly snarl, and crinkled imprints from the rug would dent her face.*

*She shivered and rubbed her hands against her naked skin for friction. Warmth. A latticework of dark and light, dim sunlight glimmered through the trees by the window next to the front door. The vague daylight spoke of early morning to her. Six. Maybe six-thirty.*

*She went to the bedroom to find clothes for herself. A t-shirt, some knit pants, and some socks to thaw the solid blocks of ice that were her toes and feet. After she dressed, she yanked the down comforter from the bed and returned to the living room. He still hadn't moved. When her feet*
padded onto the soft fuzz of the shag rug, she stopped. Her lip twitched. A smile overtook all else as she was reminded of the morning. Their first morning.

“Why don't you just come back down here, and we'll pick up where we left off?” he'd said.

He lay sprawled on his stomach, one arm parallel to his torso, the other draped in an arch over his head. Her eyes trailed from his broad shoulders, along the gentle slope of his spine. She followed the dip of his lower back, and then the gentle swell that followed, except this time, she didn't bother to cover him with a pillow, and he didn't wake up with a discombobulated grunt. The soft rasps of his even breathing filled the quiet space, and she watched her husband sleep. Just for a few, selfish moments.

“Meredith,” he'd said, his smile brilliant as he'd hopped over the back of the couch. He'd held her hand. “Nice meeting you.”

“Nice meeting you, too,” she whispered. He didn't stir.

She dragged the comforter to him and draped it over his prone form. His eyes slid open half way as the weight of the light down pressed on his naked back. He mumbled something incoherent, awake but not conscious. Thank you, maybe. Good morning. Scalpel, please. Something. She wasn't sure. His gaze was dull and unfocused with slumber.

“Hey,” she whispered. “It's just me.” She stroked his back through the comforter. “Go back to sleep.”

He didn't respond except to close his eyes. He relaxed again.

The living room lay in shambles. Black soot littered the fireplace. Wrappers, sticks covered with drying marshmallow goo, and other refuse lay on the rug in a heap by the coffee table. They'd pushed one couch against the back wall, and then the coffee table into that couch, leaving a wide open space on the rug. She quietly picked up the trash and took it to the kitchen, and then she fed herself a makeshift fluffernutter for breakfast.

The rest of the morning moved in a slow, pleasant crawl as she put coffee in the pot, took a long, hot shower, and eventually settled on the couch in the living room that hadn't been blocked by the coffee table. She curled up with her book under a rainbow-colored afghan that didn't match anything in the entire freaking cabin, and she read while she listened to him breathe.

Listening. To him. A pastime that, months ago, she'd hardly cared about, and now she couldn't ever stop. The sound of him wrapped around her like a security blanket, and she tugged it close, letting it soothe away the fears that always threatened. She rubbed her belly absenty, listening, and let herself fall into the vivid world painted by her book.

Distracted and soothed, her thoughts collected at the speed of snails.

It wasn't until her stomach rumbled and demanded lunch that she realized Derek hadn't woken up last night. Hadn't mumbled in her ear or shouted or shook with the disquiet of his nightmares. At all. He hadn't flinched awake in terror when she'd lain the comforter on top of him, and he hadn't tensed when she'd stroked his back through the covers, despite not being entirely awake.

After she'd eaten another fluffernutter for lunch, he began to shift like he might be waking up for real. His even breathing became subtly irregular. It wasn't until early afternoon, though, that he woke.

He rolled onto his back with a clipped moan. She couldn't differentiate the sound between pain,
disappointment, or simple mindless noise. She looked up from her book as he sat up, an indignant, why-am-I-awake look scrunching up his face a bit like a rabbit's. The comforter slipped down into his lap, revealing his pale chest, and the distant echoes of injury still pink and twisted against his skin. He pressed his palms against his face as if to shut the daylight out.

“What time is it?” he groaned more than said, his voice muffled through his hands.

“Uh...” Meredith frowned. She glanced at her watch. “It's 1:00.”

“PM?” he grumbled.

She smiled, amused. “I don't think the sun usually shines this brightly at 1:00 AM.”

He didn't respond to her quip, and her smile bled away. He sat there. With his face in his hands. Breathing as though the simple act of being alive, at that moment, was a laborious task. He seemed... almost hungover. Except that was a ludicrous idea, because even if he had fallen off the wagon already, the cabin wasn't stocked with any booze.

“You slept forever,” she said, her voice soft. “Are you okay?”

He dropped his hands and made a face like he'd tasted something awful, but he didn't speak. Watching him ratchet to a standing position made her frown. He made moving look... almost painful. Then again, maybe it was painful. His back was finicky following his heart surgery and all the stress he'd been forced to put on it, and, now, he'd spent the night on the floor.

He stood in the center of the room. Naked. Silent. Seconds passed, and she didn't even find herself enjoying the view. He didn't ham it up or show off with a quirky grin like he did when he was feeling well. His lack of affectation and his grogginess sucked all the fun out of voyeurism. Instead of ogling, she frowned.

“Derek?”

He twitched, and he looked at her as if this was the first time he'd heard her speak. “Huh?”

“Are you okay?”

“Tired,” he said.

“You're sure you're not getting sick?” she said. Tension curled her fingers around her book. The pages crinkled.

A yawn cracked his expression open wide, and he blinked tears from it. He wiped his eyes. “Jus' tired,” he said. And then he lumbered to the back of the cabin without saying anything else.

She heard the flush of the toilet. The shower turned on long minutes later. She fiddled with the page of her book, reading and rereading the same lines again. He'd slept more than twelve hours. This had to be the meds. Or the distinct absence of stress cashing in its 'heal while you can' gift card.

The azure sky peeked at them through the green, swaying tips of towering hemlock trees. Birds chattered in the mess of overhanging branches as she and Derek walked along a narrow dirt path that followed along the lake. Waves lapped at the shore to the left as they moved counterclockwise along the water. The weather had warmed a bit, and a cool, pleasant low seventies breeze ruffled her hair.
Derek walked beside her, closer to the water, not fast, but... not slow, either. Over the months since his injury, his long, graceful strides had returned. His pace wasn't driving, wasn't that of the rushing surgeon she knew, the man who ate hallways for breakfast when he had a patient in trouble. She didn't know if this slower pace was because he had no reason to hurry, or because he wasn't physically able to walk faster, yet, but at least he didn't shuffle anymore, didn't struggle with simple ambulation, and she didn't have to remind herself every two seconds to slow down so that he could keep up with her. She'd noticed that subtle return of his fitness during their first walk with Samantha, and this walk at the lake only served to reinforce her opinion.

Derek was healing well, physically, despite everything. His lingering challenges were mostly mental.

She pulled his hand into hers as they walked abreast. Their feet clomped on the soft, damp earth. His warm skin brushed against hers. She regarded him. Carefully. He breathed a little harder than he should have at their current pace, but he seemed okay, and the farther they plodded, the faster their blood pumped, and the more his gaze seemed to brighten.

He seemed more chipper. More intent on listening to and looking at things going on around him. Less groggy. More... alive. A pleased grin tugged at his lips. Not a wide one, but enough to tell her he enjoyed this. Walking. With her. Even with zero conversation.

Thirty minutes had passed in relative silence when he squeezed her hand. “How are you?” he said in a soft, concerned voice. “Nauseous?”

If she'd needed proof he was waking up and feeling better, there it was. She paused and turned to him. He stopped. Waited. Three days of stubble had gathered on his face, and he'd gone from sexy to scruffy and un-kissable, but he seemed so comfortable, standing there in holey, frayed, threadbare jeans, and a black t-shirt. Comfortable. Relaxed. At peace. If he kept the beard after Monday, she'd mention she kind of hated it. Until then, though, she didn't want to ruin their first – and so far only – real vacation with stupid, time-wasting nagging.

“I lost a bit of my breakfast,” she said, “but lunch stayed down, and I feel fine right now.”

His easy smile spread wider, and they kept walking. “I'm glad.”

She bumped his hip with hers as they moved along. “What about you? Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah,” he said, sounding almost surprised. He blinked. “I did.”

“No nightmares?”

“None that I remember.”

She leaned against his warm body, relished the feel of his hand in hers. “That's really good,” she said.

They moved through a diagonal shaft of sunlight. She glanced at the lake through the line of trees to her left. Water sparkled in the sunlight. They'd been blessed with two idyllic days without rain, though the air felt a bit damp.

A giant freaking crow... thing with a red head shrieked as it flew above them, darting between the trees. It landed maybe forty feet away. It made a repetitious call that reminded her of the shh-shh-shh-shh of a lawn sprinkler, except with a sharp, pleading tone. The noise was freaking loud.

“What is that thing?” she exclaimed, pointing at it.
He snickered. “It's a bird.”

“No, seriously.”

“A plane?”

“Derek...”

He kissed her cheek. His stubble tickled her skin but didn't grate. “I don't know,” he said.

“But you're nature-y.”

“I'm a surgeon who likes to camp and fish,” he said with a soft chuckle. “Not a birdwatcher.”

She blinked. She'd never seen a bird that big. Not like that one, anyway. Maybe an eagle or something at the zoo. The bird slammed its beak against the tree trunk, and chips of wood flew away in a dry shower to the forest floor.

“Clearly,” Meredith told him, “it's a woodpecker.”

He laughed. “It could be a very drunk crow, you know.”

She snorted as laughter burbled in her chest. The big bird hopped to another tree and made its jarring call again. She leaned against Derek’s warm body. They watched the forest, and it came alive. Little birds tittered in the highest branches. Squirrels played tag amongst the bracken. Derek rubbed her arms with his palms, warming her in the balmy breeze.

“I forgot how much I love it out here,” he said.

She leaned back against his chest and looked up at him. “You've never been here before, have you?”

“No.”

“Then, what is there to remember?”

“Oh, I don't mean here, here,” he said. “I just mean here. This kind of space. I can hear myself think. Get perspective.”

The woodpecker – or possibly drunk crow – flew off, and they started moving again, hand in hand. He pushed a low-hanging branch out of the way for her, and she ducked through the gap. “It does suit you,” she agreed as she straightened. Damp earth and leaves slipped under her shoes.

“There's no people,” he said. “Well, a few people. But not many.” The longing tone that gripped his voice made her throat thicken.

She swallowed. “Derek...”

“Yeah?”

“Do you feel safer out here than you do at my mother's house?”

He shrugged. The dark look on his face answered for him. Yes. Yes, he did feel safer out here. A lot safer.

He didn't go out very much anymore. Sometimes, but not much. Almost never by himself, and
never for fun. He had to have a reason. Like walking Samantha. When she prodded him to go for a walk with her, he did, but... he'd become very den-oriented. She couldn't remember the last time he'd walked simply to walk. Except...

Want to go for a walk? he'd said earlier. When he'd slogged back to the couch earlier, his hair a still-wet disaster, he hadn't looked much more awake than he had before he'd taken his shower.

She'd frowned as she'd assessed his listless countenance. You're sure?

I need to wake up, he'd said. It's our last day. I don't want to waste it.

It's our vacation, she'd said. If you need to sleep, sleep. That's not waste.

He'd blinked. No, I want to go for a walk, he'd said, his voice determined.

The world spaced and blurred for a long moment, until she realized he hadn't stopped. She found herself watching his back as he kept walking. She squeezed her fist, the one he'd been holding, and sprang forward to catch up. She tugged on the back of his t-shirt. The collar cut him in the neck, and he stopped moving. He turned.

“What?” he said. Not snapping or mean. Soft. Resigned. As if he'd assessed his new enclosed-space-loving persona at the same time she had, and he didn't like it, but... what was there to do about it except keep breathing?

I have a feeling.

I get those.

Yeah?

Yeah.

And?

If you wait long enough, it passes.

But there was something to do. If he could be here and sleep without nightmares and want to go out just to go out, then... there was something to do, and it was simple, and she wanted to kick herself for not suggesting it sooner.

“Do you want to move back into your trailer until the house is done?” she said.

He blinked. “No...” he said slowly. Where did that come from? said his gaze, and the strangest hint of... dread... gripped his expression. She narrowed her eyes. Since when was his trailer dread-worthy?

“It's just that this seems to suit you,” she rushed to explain. “And, yes, we've had some hitches here and there, but overall you seem so much better out here than you did back in Seattle. If you need some peace and privacy, away from roommates and stuff, I'd understand. I'd get it.”

He frowned. “Just to be clear, here, we are discussing you moving with me, right, and not just me going by myself?”

“Of course, I'd go with you,” she said. “Just... if it's what you need. I'd get it. I'm okay with it. We could, if you want.”
A distant whir of a boat drew his gaze to the water. He stared through the trees, and then he moved off the path, into the brush and bracken and ferns. She followed. Branches scraped at her. Sticky sap clung to her skin. She brushed her arms with her palms.

“Derek, what are you—” she began, only to stop when he stopped at the muddy bank of the lake.

He squinted at the shimmering water with an unreadable gaze. A bright bath of sunlight reflected off the water. A boat sped past, sending a churning white spray of water behind it. Water birds scattered.

“It’s not what I need right now, but thank you for offering,” he said.

“Are you sure?” she said. Her feet splurched in the mud as she stepped next to him and touched his arm. “Because you really do seem better here. A lot better.”

He shrugged. “Here, specifically, maybe, but...”

“We haven't been back to your trailer in a while,” she said. “You haven't even suggested it.”

“I... know,” he said. He glanced at her, and his expression made her heart squeeze. Like she'd pushed him into a confessional he didn't want to deal with right now, but he wouldn't avoid it, either. Because he knew. He knew she didn't trust him anymore, and he wanted to fix it. “It felt wrong.”

She frowned. “What do you mean, wrong? What felt wrong?”

“When I was sick, and we went there, it just felt...” His mouth opened and closed as he searched for the right word. “The trailer felt wrong.”

“Wrong, how?” she prodded.

“Mere, I really...” He sighed. “If I understood it, I'd explain it. I would. I had the trailer in my head before we went, and I wanted to visit so badly, but when we got there, it felt wrong, and I didn't like it. That's all I can say.”

She bit her lip as she stared at him and he stared at the water.

Where do you go?

The lake, sometimes. I like to sit on the dock.

She tried to think back to the day she'd taken him to his trailer. She'd meant for it to be a pleasant surprise, but he'd been sick. Very sick. He'd almost died that night, and she didn't like to remember the trip to the hospital or anything leading up to it.

Had he said something when she'd brought him to his land? She remembered helping him out of the car. He'd been hurting. Badly hurting. Like agony hurting. She'd gotten the distinct impression he'd been trying not to vomit he'd hurt so much, though he'd said nothing about the pain. He'd been so stoned at the time his feelings had been difficult for her to read, but he'd stumbled on the deck outside his trailer. Not like a clumsy stumble, now that she focused on that moment and, removed from the panic over how sick he might be, thought about his behavior. He'd been more... halting. Like he hadn't wanted to go inside. Except he'd been sick, and he hadn't said a single word to her after she'd gotten him out of the car except some half-coherent babbling about his lake. She'd passed off his reluctance as drug-induced poor coordination.
She swallowed. The one time since he'd been shot, and she'd taken him to his trailer, he'd been in so much pain he'd almost thrown up. He'd been stoned out of his mind because she'd forced him to take a third Percocet, and—

Wait.

She'd forced him to take a third Percocet, and he'd protested.

Will you take one more Percocet before we try the road to your land?

I already took two.

“I made you take an extra pill on the way to your trailer,” she said. “Derek, I—”

“You didn't make me take anything,” he said.

“But—”

He pressed against her. “It doesn't matter what you asked me to take that day.”

“It does, Derek. I gave you—”

“It doesn't matter. I was in pain,” he said. “Even with addicts, you still treat pain, and I was in pain, Meredith.”

“But, were you—”

“I hurt constantly for over a month.” He put his hand on his chest, pressing her palm underneath his. His shirt felt soft underneath her skin. The breeze ruffled his dark hair. “I still get bad twinges now and then. I was in pain. There's nothing wrong with treating that. You didn't know I had other reasons to take the Percocet, too.”

She swallowed against the lump in her throat. “When did you start taking the Percocet just for the other reasons?”

He shook his head. “I don't know.” A glassy film of tears slipped across his eyes. “I had a snowball, and then I had an avalanche. The between is a blur.”

“Oh,” she said.

He closed his eyes, and he pressed his forehead against hers. “I thought about you. In the car on the way up the hill to the trailer. And it was perfect. Then I woke up.”

How are you doing? she’d said.

He hadn't been able to speak to answer. He'd been ashen and clammy and unable to support his own weight on his own two feet. And he'd been stoned, so who knew what he'd seen or perceived, even awake.

“You woke up, and it wasn't perfect,” she said. “It felt wrong, you said.”

He nodded. Dots connected. Slowly. He'd created a safe place in his head. The lake. The trailer. An idealized place where nothing could hurt him. The reality didn't mesh with his ideal. He'd hurt to the point of nausea when he'd woken up in the car. The disharmony had hit him at a weak moment, and he didn't want to go back to that. Almost like... falling off a bike or a horse and not wanting to ride again. She could see that. She touched the small scar on his forehead. Another instance where
he'd lost his nerve. One day, maybe, he would explain that one, too.

“So, that's why you haven't suggested we go back since then?” she said.

He shrugged. “I don't like the trailer anymore. It's stupid, but I don't, and I just... I don't want to live there.”

Worry squeezed. She clutched his sleeves. “But what about our new house?”

He smiled. “I'm looking forward to living in our new house.”

“But you just said—”

“The trailer,” he said. “The trailer felt wrong. Just... I want to go back to my land, but I want to make new memories there with you in the new house, not be haunted by old ones in the trailer. I don't want to live in the trailer again.”

“We could go somewhere else,” she said. “If it helps you, we could—”

He gave her a pained smile. “I think I'm going to have enough going on my head with the baby and the one move. I'm barely floating as it is.”

“Do you still want Percocet?” she said.

His eyes slipped shut. “I always want it, Mere. It's like a constant... ache.”

He looked away. At the water. She searched his face. She saw shame. Guilt. Regret. Things she didn't want him to feel. Not on their vacation. They could deal with this later. They had a lot of later, and not a lot left of now. Their forty-eight hours were coming to a close.

She wrapped her arms around him, and she kissed him, annoying beard and all. His face scratched hers, but she didn't care. His eyes opened as they met, skin to skin. She tasted him, drank down the soft, delightful groan that rumbled against her. She lit a fire in his tired gaze as she raked her fingers through his hair. “Always?” she said when she pulled back.

He blinked, panting softly. “Maybe, not always.”

“Last night?”

His bewildered, adorably mussed look eased into a pleased smirk. “Definitely not last night,” he purred.

“It was good for you,” she said. She clutched a piece of his shirt and gave him a sly smile as she backed away from the water and from him.

He followed, a sexy gleam in his eyes that told her she wasn't wearing clothes right then. At least not in his head. “Oh, yes, it was good for me,” he said. “Very good.” The black of his shirt contrasted with his pale face, made him seem... almost nefarious. The sun sparkling on the water behind him gave him a sort of halo. His lip twitched. She backed away with the distinct impression she'd cut the wrong wire on a ticking bomb. Or, maybe cut the right one.

She giggled as adrenaline and other pleasant things spilled into her system. Heat licked her veins at the thought of a chase. She flushed with arousal. And then she darted to the path just as his arms snaked out to grab her.

She felt his hand brush the back pocket of her jeans. Felt his index finger hook onto the lip of the
pocket, only to slip away as she flew. His footsteps pounded behind her as he chased her back onto the path, which quashed her earlier speculation about whether he could run. Could he run? Emphatically, yes, and he was gaining on her.

The wind whipped her face as she sprinted into the forest, and he followed. She made it maybe a hundred feet before he caught her with a playful roar, spun her around, and kissed the world so thoroughly away she couldn't give a crap about his scratchy face. She couldn't think about anything.

They panted. She slipped her hands into his back pockets and squeezed. He pressed a palm between her thighs and slid along the denim seam. She ground against him, an interlocking puzzle piece, desperate to fit, and feeling like she'd come home when she did fit. Perfectly. He cupped her between her thighs, and the heat of his skin seeped into her through her jeans. She throbbed as she pictured him naked. Right here. Right now.

“Naughty forest sex against a tree?” he suggested with a low, rumbling laugh.

She made a face despite surging arousal. “Because sticky, sappy bark digging into my ass and pine needles up my hoo-hoo is so sexy and fun.” She almost hurt with desire despite her words.

He cocked his head to the side, a lecherous grin on his face. He moved the hand between her thighs. She gasped. “Well, this was fun, wasn't it?” he prodded.

“This was playing,” she said.

He winked and withdrew his hand. She moaned. “I'll wait,” he said.

“For what?”

“Naughty cabin sex on a comfy, tiny bed?”

She grinned. “Deal,” she said.

She took a moment to compose herself. To come down off her thrumming, pleasing high. She caught her breath as he watched with a sly expression that told her she hadn't fooled him. He knew she wanted it, now, now, now, even if the practicality wasn't, well, practical. She shook her head and chose to blame the pregnancy for the roaring sex drive. And him. She could definitely blame him.

It wasn't fair that he looked so delectable and mussed and, in that moment, radiated masculinity as though it were going out of style. His skin was damp with a sheen of sweat from the exertion. He had a healthy flush, and a dark, desirous look that spoke of intense hunger, darkened even more by his mask of weekend stubble and tussled, sweaty curls.

She leaned against his shoulder, leaving her right hand in his back pocket, and they kept walking. My first real walk after a gunshot wound, and you're feeling me up, he'd said what seemed like years ago. She smiled at the memory and gave him a squeeze.

He stared at her, his longing expression slipping into something more serious. “It was good for you, right? Last night? It's what you wanted?”

She nodded. “It was good for me.”

“Good,” he said with a definitive nod.
A jogger with a yellow lab trotted past. The dog yipped at them, a cheerful expression twinkling in its chocolate-colored eyes. Its dog tags jingled. It wanted to say hi. It pulled on the leash, its fat, otter-like tail wagging back and forth so fast Meredith couldn't see much more than a blur. The jogger smiled at them shyly as she ran by with the dog. Derek glanced at Meredith, a snicker on his face, as if to say, *Okay, I'm possibly glad we put off the naughty forest sex.*

“Sorry,” the jogger said as she yanked the lab away with a tug of its leash.

The dog almost seemed to frown, but grew distracted in moments as its owner plowed onward. The jingling sound of the tags waned. Meredith smiled as she watched over her shoulder at the departing pair, thinking of Samantha.

She and Derek had decided that tearing up Richard's cabin floor with claw marks and leaving a bunch of black dog hair behind probably wasn't the best way to repay him for loaning them the cabin. They'd opted to leave the dog behind so they wouldn't have to worry about her, but Samantha would have loved the long trails here and all the open space.

She was a big dog. She deserved space. Meredith's mother's house was mostly house, and not a ton of lawn. The new house would be better for Samantha.

Derek had enough space for almost anything he could want. Meredith supposed his space was hers, now, technically. Theirs. She'd never really thought about it in those terms before. He had his land and his trailer, which, though he'd technically given it to her, it'd never felt like hers. She had her mother's house. But...

This new house would be theirs from the beginning. *Their* house. They'd co-signed the loan and had the house built from scratch. It was a real fresh start. A square one. For them. Their family. The dog. Baby. Together.

“I hope our house will be done, soon,” she said.

Derek smiled, but his expression seemed apologetic. Not pleased. “You've never worked with contractors before, have you?”

“Well, no,”

“They said it'll be done by Christmas, but I'll believe it when I see it,” he said.

“I thought they said Columbus Day.”

He nodded. “They did. Months ago. They changed their projection.”

“Oh,” she said. “Has Bill talked to you lately?”

“Just to give me the weekly update,” he replied. “They're stalled right now because of some issue with the electrician, which is why I think they're going to bump the finish line back again.”

“Well, I hope it's done by Christmas,” she said. “I don't want to deal with moving and having a baby at the same time.” She pressed her free hand against her stomach. “I have to be due in May, right?”

“If you're right on the conception date,” he said, his voice dripping with nonchalance, except his sparkling gaze gave him away. He'd tried to slip that in there to see if she'd notice.

She had. “I am right on the conception date,” she said.
“Are not.”

Her lips parted. “Am, too!”

“Not,” he insisted.

She pushed against him. He stumbled, a chuff of laughter spilling from his lips as she said, “Too!”

He shook his head. “I got through birth control.”

“You're going to keep holding up a freak accident as evidence that you're flawlessly virile?”

His eyebrows raised. “Oh, we're calling my sperm freaks, now, in addition to squiggly bullies?”

She crinkled her knows. “Well, they are squiggly.”

“But not bullies,” he said, his voice low. “You let them in pretty enthusiastically.”

She snickered as they came to a stop. He panted. She brushed a flying bug away from her face. It buzzed away. “Are we really arguing about this?” she said.

He shrugged. His eyes gleamed. “We seem to be.”

They walked. A hiker dressed in a neon orange windbreaker strode past with a walking stick. The man, a slightly overweight guy in his fifties, gave them a nod as he passed, his silver hair gleaming.

She lowered her eyelids and let the verdant scenery roll by as she walked with him. In his space. Interlocked with him. He matched her hand in his pocket with his own in hers. He breathed hard. Sweat glistened at his brow. His pace had slowed a bit more. She wondered if the exertion he’d put forth to catch her earlier had tired him. Was that the first time he’d sprinted since before he’d been shot? She kissed his arm through his shirt, and she slowed to match his lagging pace. She didn't mention the drop in speed.

“They're bullies,” she said.

“I prefer to think of them as suave.”

“Suave sperm,” she said, her voice flat with amused disbelief.

“Yep,” he said. He kissed her cheek as they walked. “Suave. They probably seduced your egg.”

“So, now, your sperm are like Don Juan?”

“Your egg might have begged them for a good fertilizing with a single, smoldering look,” he said, a sly grin curling his lips. “They probably couldn't resist.”

“So, my egg was like Cindy Crawford in that Pepsi commercial?”

“It was beeyootiful,” he said with a cheerful expression.

She snickered. “Don Juan and Cindy Crawford happened in my uterus?”

He shrugged. “I'm not ruling anything out.”

“Except bullying, and the fact that I'm right,” she countered. “Conception date and sex. I'm totally
imbued with mother's intuition, now. I can feel it.”

He snorted. He stumbled, but he caught himself quickly, and he said nothing about tripping. She could see from the slump in his shoulders and his tired expression, he was flagging, but he'd said nothing about it. He hid behind a quirky grin.

“I think the intuition is probably intestinal distress,” he said, breathless.

Her mouth fell open. She glared. “Shut up. It is not!”

His eyebrows waggled. “Feeling sick, now?” he teased.

“Oh, my god, don't jinx me!” she said.

“Wouldn't want that,” he said. His haughty smirk made her snarl playfully. She pushed him, and he laughed again. Laughed at her.

“Well, fix it!” she said. “Fix it before you make me sick!”

He pulled her into his arms, wrapped himself around her. He pressed a quick kiss against her lips. “Better?” he whispered against her skin. His eyelids dipped, and his body seemed to tremble. He was pushing himself too hard, but he seemed happy tired. Not making himself sick tired.

“Um,” she said as she struggled for intelligent thought. “Yes. Yes, better. But I'm still right.”

He grinned and didn't comment. She rubbed her belly, looking down at her stomach with a frown. “Tangents aside,” she said, “what are we going to do if the house isn't ready until April or May?”

He stared at her. “We'll deal with it. I promise.”

“How?” she said. “I'll be carrying around a bowling ball that might pop out at any second by then.”

She stopped short when she realized what she'd said. A bowling ball...

*Time for the bowling ball to come out.*

The last patient Meredith had had on Friday had said that just before she'd screamed with the incoming crush of new contraction. The woman, Gina, had been wasted by the end. Sweaty. So spent she couldn't lift her head off the pillow and could barely push. Couldn't push. They'd wheeled her away for an emergency c-section after twenty hours of exhausting, agonizing labor that had gone precisely nowhere except infant distress, a wife who couldn't even talk anymore she was so hoarse from screaming, and a husband so sick with nerves he'd thrown up all over the delivery room. They'd all been fine and delighted in the end, but...

Meredith looked down at herself, her breaths quickening as she heard Gina's grating scream in her head.

A person was growing inside her body. Her body felt full enough with only her innards and a few extra cells, now. How would she fit a bowling ball?

And, in a while, she would have to give birth. To the bowling ball. She'd thought about Baby a lot in the past week and a half, but the idea of giving birth – the bloody part with pain and suffering where she would need to push the bowling ball out of a space that typically felt full with just a penis in it — had sort of been a blank. When Gina had given birth to baby Timothy, Meredith had managed to detach herself from logical, connecting thoughts. She'd held the woman's hand, and she
hadn't thought anything about Baby. The horrific birth aspect had been an un-relatable blank. A censored bleep. In nine months, you'll bleep. And bleeping was the pretty widely accepted as one of the most painful things a woman could experience.

Ever.

“That's a huge freaking deal by itself. A new house just makes it...” she said, but her voice sounded far away in her head. In nine-ish months, she'd bleep. The dull whine of oncoming panic throbbed behind her eyes like a heartbeat. Thu-thump. Thu-thump. She pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumb and index finger, and she squeezed. “How does it take a year to build a freaking house, anyway? I can build a person faster than that. You'd think a person would be more complicated than a house.”

The forest seemed to spin around her. His larger body eclipsed hers.

She'd lost their first baby. A stupid quirk of fate. A bad egg or a bad sperm had made defective magic together, and the result hadn't been viable. Her body had voided the result before it had ever become something threatening and ominous like a bowling ball. Before it had become a him or a her or anything but a fanciful idea about playing house with a real family in her head. She remembered the sharp, stinging pains that had nearly knocked her over they'd been so intense, and knew that pain would be nothing in comparison.

She rubbed her stomach, agitated.

He pulled her close, and he whispered in her ear, as if he'd sensed her panic. Or she'd screamed. Maybe, she'd screamed. That would be a reasonable thing to do, she decided, when realizing one would have to bleep. Screaming.

How was she going to do this?

“Derek, I'm building a person,” she whispered. She couldn't find air. There wasn't enough air.

He stroked her back. “You are.”

“It just hit me. Like really, really hit me, and I...” Words failed. She lost vocabulary in the din of crushing worry.

“Just take a deep breath,” he murmured.

Except how would that help with the bleeping? She clutched his shirt. “It's going to hurt at the end.”

He nodded. “It will,” he said, which, really, wasn't the most comforting thing he could have chosen to say, if she were allowed an opinion on the matter, and she was. She clenched her teeth. Her eyes watered.

“It'll really, really hurt, Derek.”

“I know, but it will be worth it,” he said. Which sounded exactly like what a man who didn't have to bleep would say. Because he didn't have to bleep. He just had to be the cheerleader and watch her do all the freaking work.

“Easy for you to say,” she snapped, like a fox gnawing at a trapped limb to escape. Derek was her claw trap as he tried to comfort her. Her face heated. Why was she terrified? She shouldn't be terrified. Bleeping was good. In the end, it was good. Right? They'd made life out of love.
Bleeping was—Really. Freaking. Painful. “You don't have to shove a bowling ball out your hoo-hoo.”

She was being mean. Her hormone roller coaster did an upside down loop. She blinked tears at his stricken look. She hadn't meant to yell. They'd made a person, and that was special, and why was she so—

“It's not easy for me to say,” he said, his voice quiet. His dark, understanding gaze made her stomach twist. He shook his head. “I know giving birth isn't the same at all, but...” She watched as he touched his chest. Over where his bullet wound had been. The fabric rasped underneath his palm. “I do understand what it's like to feel pain that you think might break you,” Derek said. “And I don't think lightly about the idea of you hurting like that.”

She swallowed against the inexplicable lump in her throat. “Oh,” she said.

She looked at the ground. Mud covered her black Chucks. She blinked as the ground bleached of color. She saw him sprawled at her feet on a shiny white floor, a pool of red spreading underneath his body in a crimson lake. Please, don't die, she'd begged him. The lapping water and the wind and the bird songs of the forest background splintered under the jarring memory of his unadulterated screams of pain. Screams she'd been helpless to fix or soothe, because they'd needed to move him. Needed to make him move. He would have died if they hadn't.

She didn't know if the prospect that he could commiserate with the physical aspects of giving birth made her feel better, or worse. Worse, she decided. A whole lot worse. She'd seen the cloud of suffering in his eyes. She felt like a coward, but going through that sort of agony for untold hours was not something she looked forward to. At all.

Her jaw clenched. The world swam before her eyes, and she swayed, nauseous. Terrified. A freak out to end all freak outs.

Breathe, that sometimes annoying voice in her head told her. Inhale. Keep going. Stiff upper lip, right? You can do it.

Derek held her close. Held her upright. “I know it's scary. I do,” he said in a soft, murmuring voice that made it hard to think about anything, let alone pain or something bad. “We both want this, though. And it's not a platitude when I say it will be worth it. I mean it, Meredith. It will be worth it.”

She pressed her nose against his chest. He smelled musky. Hers. She clutched him. Her eyes watered. The forest blurred as she blinked. A pair of tears slipped down her face and stained his shirt. She brushed her cheeks as she sniffed. First panic, then fury, and now blubbering. Great. This was just freaking—

He kissed her. “You'll do great. I can't say it won't hurt, but you'll do great. And I'll be there the whole time. I promise.”

“I know, but...” Her breaths hitched. She squeezed her eyes shut so hard she saw spots. “I'm still scared,” she said in a small, cracking voice.

The world shifted as he whispered in her ear, soft and shushing like a rush of water. He pulled her down to the ground with him. The damp earth soiled the back of her jeans. She felt wet cold creeping in through the seat of her pants, but he was so warm, she couldn't care. He shook, and the heat of exertion radiated from his skin. She curled against him and pressed her ear to his chest. His
pulse raced as he wrapped his arms around her.

She clutched her belly, and she sighed. Exhaustion swept over her like a crushing wave. Emotional whiplash apparently caused headaches. And, now, she really did feel sort of nauseated. Her fluffernutter lunch churned in her stomach. Or, maybe that was nerves. Big, huge nerves about bowling balls and—

She leaned over his elbow, out of the cocoon he provided her, and threw up into the ferns. Her throat and nose burned, and she couldn't breathe because of the stench. She scrambled away, out of Derek's arms, away from the horrible smell. She kept heaving as she retreated past a thick, overturned log covered in a carpet of moss by the side of the trail. The log was a bit too small to use as a chair. She stumbled to the next usable tree where the air didn't reek of vomit, and she collapsed next to it as she swallowed back the remnants of bile in her throat. Her eyes watered.

She watched Derek get up and shuffle toward her. He moved torpidly. She'd been so happy not to see shuffling before. She saw it, now. His entire demeanor seemed weighted down by an invisible anchor dragging behind him in the wet earth. He collapsed next to her, breathing hard, sweating.

“Sorry,” she croaked.

“Don't worry about it,” he said, his voice soft as he caught his breath. “It's okay.”

He pulled her against him, his back to the thick trunk of the towering hemlock tree she'd chosen, and she curled up. “Shh,” he breathed more than said against her ear. Her tense muscles loosened at the sound of his soothing voice. She had no idea how far they'd walked. She'd lost track of the time, but the sun hung low in the sky. The water in the far distance glittered. He rested, shushing her, his eyes half open and glassy.

He was tired. She was tired.

They made a banged up pair, marred with bad battle scars and damaged psyches.

But she was in his arms, and she found it hard to feel frightened of anything, then. Which, really? Ludicrous. If a hungry pack of bears popped out of the woods to eat them, she doubted he could save her. If another Gary Clark with a gun found them here, there wouldn't be much of a contest. If she started miscarrying, again, there wasn't much Derek could do for that, either. Fate held her steering wheel and made her course changes more than anything else. But...

He made her safe.

Despite all the reason and twisted logic her tired brain could throw at her.

She felt safe.

She let her eyelids creep shut as he whispered nonsensical things in her ear, meant only to soothe and not to tell her anything coherent. She swallowed as her burning eyes dried. Her septum bubbled as she inhaled noisily.

“It'll be okay,” he assured her, a bone deep weariness in his tone.

She sniffed. “You're going to let me squeeze your hand until it's broken, and call you all sorts of obscene names that I don't really mean?”

He grinned as he kissed her. His eyes were wet and red, too. “Absolutely,” he said, soft and low against her ear. “You have a carte blanche to call me whatever you want the day Baby is born.”
“And break your hand?”

“You can break both, as long as you explain it to my insurance company.”

She wiped her face and gave him a weak smile. “Will you give birth for me?”

He laughed. It was a soft, soothing sound. “I wish it worked that way,” he said.

She pressed her ear against his chest and listened. They didn't speak. The silver-haired hiker who'd passed them earlier returned, headed in the opposite direction. He stopped to ask them if they were all right. They assured him they were, that they were just resting, which was true. The hiker moved on, and the forest opened up again with sound and sights and smells. It was nice just to watch, for a while. Nice to watch and rest and not think about anything.

She could totally get why Derek liked it here.

She got the getting perspective thing.

“Are you really nervous?” Meredith said eventually.

He swallowed. “Yes.”

“We'll be okay, right?”

“We will.”

“What if I'm a bad mother?” she said.

Silence stretched. He looked down at her. He stroked her back. “You won't be.”

“How do you know?” she said. “I'm not working off the best blueprint.”

He shrugged. “Because I know you.”

“But—”

“Meredith,” he said, his tone admonishing. He smiled. The tree towering over them swayed in the balmy breeze. “Your mother's house is full of people right now.”

“So?”

“You say you're not good at families,” he said, “but I've never met a woman more tenacious about supporting her family than you.”

“Oh,” she said.

He held her tightly, and she liked it. Liked sitting with him. Doing nothing. Letting the world go by. Passive and at peace. She watched the distant water sparkle and shift, and she listened to the rustling leaves all around. She hadn't been able to tell him he was her best friend. That would have been a lie, semantically speaking.

_She's your person. I'm your arm. Got it_, he'd said with a stoned, goofy laugh.

She smiled as she rested against him, feeling warm and loved. He got it, at least, even if she didn't know how to say it with words that made any sense. She kissed his sternum through his soft shirt, but when she peered up at him, she saw turmoil coiling in his gaze.
“What is it?” she said.

He flinched as if torn from deep musing. “Hmm?”

She gave him a soft jab with her elbow. “Derek, c'mon, I showed you mine.”

His lip twitched. “Showed me your what?”

“Incredibly embarrassing, vomit-inducing fear.”

“Oh,” he said.

“Well?” she prodded. She stroked his arm.

He frowned and shook his head, his gaze distant. “What if I'm a bad father?”

“You won't be.”

“I am, mentally speaking, scrambled eggs right now,” he said.

“You're not, Derek, you're just...” She sighed. “You'll get better.”

“In eight months or less,” he said, not a question. His tone dripped with disbelief. “You're sure of that.”

“I'm sure.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Intuition?”

“No.”

“Intestinal distress?”

She shook her head as she chuckled. “No. Absolute fact.”

He kissed her. His stubble tickled. “If I can't be a bad father, you can't be a bad mother. It isn't allowed. Deal?”

She smiled at him. “Okay.”

He smiled back, and then with a grunt, he stood. He held out his hand to help her up. Their palms touched. Their fingers interlocked. His expression remained even as he supported her. He didn't flinch with discomfort, even when his elbow snapped straight, and she fought gravity in earnest, though she tried not to pull too hard, just in case. Damp earth kicked under her feet. She brushed off her dirty jeans once she gained her balance.

The sun hung very low over the horizon. The bright, sparkly saturation of the light hitting the water had turned darker. More orange. The stringy wisps of cirrus clouds that painted the sky had turned a subtle pinkish color.

They turned back in the direction they'd come. She wished she had a clue how far they'd come, and how far they still had to go to get back. Derek moved sluggishly, but not laboriously. He didn't seem to be in pain or suffering. Just... worn out. Worn out, but relaxed, happy, and not hurting. He wasn't as quick-tempered or as easily startled out here, either. Overall... better. So much better, she found herself regretting that they would have to go back to the roommates situation. To civilization. He clearly thrived without either, but...
“Derek?”

He looked at her with a hooded expression. “Hmm?”

“If everything gets messed up, and the baby comes before the house is finished, I can't kick Alex and Lexie out. I just can't. I know it'll be crowded, but... they're my family, and I can't do it. They don't have anywhere else to go.”

“That's okay,” he said.

She frowned. “But you hate them there.”

“Well, they're not following us when we move, are they?”

“No,” she said. “I'm going to rent my mother's house to them. My only goal is to break even on the monthly mortgage payment. If they move out, I'll sell it, but, until then, it's theirs.”

“So, we have a known time limit.”

She nodded. “We do.”

“And there will be no more strays after that, right?”


“What?”

“I sort of told Cristina she could have a room,” Meredith said. “At the new house.”

His stony expression was unreadable. “Oh,” he said.

She swallowed. “I didn't mention that, did I?”

“You didn't.”

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I'm really sorry, Derek.”

“Are you sorry that you offered her a room, or are you sorry that you didn't tell me?”

“Both,” Meredith insisted.

He stopped in the middle of the trail and closed his eyes with a sigh. “Would this be like a guest room?”

“Um. I guess,” Meredith said. She looked at the ground. She kicked a rock. It skittered into the forest and bounced off a rotting tree trunk. “A guest room with her name on it. So, I guess more of a Cristina room. That she wouldn't always occupy. Because she does her own thing with Dr. Hunt, and...”

Derek looked at her, eyes still unreadable and flat, which had to mean angry. Right? He hated Cristina. This would be the last straw, and he'd snap. Meredith knew it. She—

“What was the context of you offering?” he said, his voice soft.

“I told her that if she and Owen don't work out, and her life implodes, she could live with... us. In
her room.”

He didn't speak. His eyes narrowed. A sliver of some emotion Meredith couldn't identify crossed his face.

“I can tell her it won't work anymore,” Meredith said. “I can—”

He shook his head. “It's okay,” he said.

“I can tell her that... what? What's okay?”

He shrugged. “She's your family,” he said. He started walking again. Meredith followed. “You should spend time with her. I've... She's been knocking. Since I got shot, she's been knocking, and not barging in. I appreciate it.”

“I didn't tell her anything,” Meredith said.

He frowned. “I didn't say you had.”

“I wanted her to give you some space. I just told her to give you space. I didn't say why.”

He nodded. “Thank you. I needed...”

“I know,” Meredith said. “I know you needed it. That's why I told her to give it.”

“You shouldn't be sorry that you offered her a room.”

“But—”

“I'm not entirely happy you didn't discuss it with me first, but... she knocks,” he said. “And she only gets in my face when she thinks I'm killing myself.”

“She thinks if you die, I'd be upset.”

He laughed, but the utterance was a self-deprecating, soft sound. “That's kind of her.”

Meredith shrugged. “She's Cristina.”

“She is,” he said. “And she can have a room.”

“Really?”

“You've done a lot for me,” he said.

Meredith frowned. “That's not an answer.”

“It is,” he said. He rubbed her shoulder. He seemed... almost exasperated. “Meredith, you've done a lot for me. I don't like the idea of Cristina having a room at our new house, because I don't really like her, but she's essentially your sister. If one of my sisters needed a place to stay, I'd want to offer, and I know you'd let me, because you're you. Cristina's your family, so she's my family, and I'll live with it, if it happens, for you. Just like I live with the strays.”

“But—”

He kissed her. “It's a compromise,” he said as he pulled away. “Remember? We do those now that we're married.”
Meredith raised her eyebrows. “Oh, you're an expert on compromise, are you?”

He gave her a charming smile. “No, but I fake it well sometimes, don't I?”

She snickered. “You do. Sometimes.”

His eyes shone, and his voice was deep and apologetic when he continued, “I admit, in the past, I've utterly failed at compromise.”

She shook her head. “No more baggage crap, remember?” she said. “Clean slate. We decided.”

“I remember.”

“All the stuff I've done for you, I'd do it again,” she told him.

They stopped. His gaze searched her face. Thousands of thoughts danced on his face, encased in a blue, unblinking stare. She plucked them from the way his expression shifted. Read them like a primer book. He wanted to say thank you. That he loved her. That he'd take another bullet without hesitation as long as it was for her. He settled on the practical.

“And I...” He kissed her. “Can live...” He kissed her again, drank her down like a fine, exotic wine. “With Cristina.”

Meredith took his hand in hers. “I guess we have that settled then.”

He squeezed her palm. “I guess we do,” he said with a delighted grin, and they retreated down the path as the sun set over the mountains to the west.
“You disgust me,” Gary Clark said, a snarl in Derek's ear.

Derek's lip quivered as he stared into his cereal bowl. He picked at it with his spoon. Particles of shredded wheat tore away until he had nothing but swirling mush. His stomach twisted. He couldn't even consider eating.

“Derek?” Meredith said from somewhere far away.

He tore his gaze away from his uneaten breakfast to look at her. “Hmm?”

She sat across the small cafeteria table from him in her light blue scrubs, staring at him with worry in her gaze. She'd pulled her hair back, and she looked tired. The skin around her eyes pinched with need for sleep, and she seemed more pallid than normal. She rode the tail end of a thirty-six hour shift. She would be leaving at lunch to go home and recover and relax. He'd seen her briefly yesterday on his first day back to work since he'd benched himself, but he'd gone home after a short shift to an empty house, and he'd slept alone in their bed last night. He'd driven to the hospital a few hours early to eat with her, to say hello, and to get away from—

“Want to tell me what’s wrong?” she prodded.

“Oh, yes,” said Mr. Clark. “Tell her what happened this morning. I want to see her face when you explain. I'm sure she'll take it swimmingly.”

Derek shifted his gaze back to his cereal as his stomach churned. The thought of explaining made the sick feeling worse. He couldn't speak, and he certainly couldn't look at her.

“Hey...” Meredith said, her voice soft and low. Her chair squeaked as she stood. She moved to his side of the small table and sat next to him. When she touched him, tried to wrap around him, he stiffened, and she pulled away. Her concerned look deepened, which only made the lump in his throat expand to the size of a melon. He tried to swallow and couldn't. Bile collected in the back of his throat. Nauseating heat throbbed underneath his skin. “Seriously,” she said, “what's wrong?”

He imagined everybody in the cafeteria staring. Waiting for him to slip again. To go insane.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Liar,” Gary Clark said. “Everything is wrong with you.”

“Then why do you look like someone just kicked your favorite puppy?” Meredith said.

Derek's breaths tightened in his chest. He'd only been back to work for two days. The first day, he'd worked a six hour shift. Today and the rest of the week, his superiors expected him to be there for eight hours a day, but eight hours for a surgeon was like being stuck in the kiddie pool with little arm floaties attached.

His colleagues gave him extra consideration. Richard. Miranda. The neurosurgery department, Dr. Weller and Dr. Nelson included. Whether they knew Derek had noticed their intense scrutiny, he couldn't be sure, but they clearly didn't care either way, because they kept doing it. Kept supervising him. Unlike his last attempt at work, he wasn't left alone in his office to gouge his eyes out over budgetary work. They gave him menial, public tasks to do, and the kid glove treatment wore on his already thinning nerves.
Except they were justified, weren't they?

“Yes,” said Mr. Clark. And then he laughed.

Derek's innards squeezed. He stared at the table. He'd been back at work for six fucking hours, all told. He hadn't even started his second shift. People were staring. They had to be staring, knowing about this morning, and he couldn't let this—

“Derek?”

The table swam as something flesh-colored waved in front of his face. He blinked as Meredith pulled her hand away.

“I had to call your name four times just now to get your attention,” she said. She gestured at his cereal bowl. “You're not eating. You haven't spoken more than six syllables since you got here.”

“It's... nothing.”

Her agitated sigh buffeted his eardrums. “So, you're back to lying to me again?” she said.

“See?” Gary Clark said. “She thinks you're a liar just like I do. They all do.”

“Nothing is wrong with me,” Derek insisted.

Meredith rolled her eyes. “Right.”

“This is like television,” Mr. Clark said, his tone gleeful. “Poor you, drowning in denial.”

“Stop,” Derek whispered.

“No, you stop, Derek,” Meredith said. “Stop lying.”

“Nothing is wrong with me,” he said. He rocked in his seat. “Nothing.”

“I thought we were done with this.”

He bristled. “I'm sorry I'm not getting better fast enough for you,” he snapped as his last nerve frayed beyond repair.

Meredith's eyes narrowed. “Oh, come on,” she said. “You know that's not what I meant.”

“She won't love you when she finds out,” Mr. Clark taunted. “She'll leave you.”

Derek's stomach felt full of twisting snakes.

“Derek, you can't keep doing this,” Meredith said, softer, more pleading. “I thought you weren't shutting me out anymore.”

“You're sick,” Gary Clark said.

Derek slammed his hand on the table. The silverware shook. “STOP,” he roared, and everything stopped. The murmur of conversations. The clink of dishes. Movement. Dozens of eyes, a veritable sea of staring, shifted to him to watch the ticking time bomb explode for their gleeful, gossip-mongering entertainment.

Derek's face heated. The attention was awful. But worse was the stricken, watery look on
Meredith's face. The way his defective handling of this situation had taken the exhaustion spread across her features and stretched it as though it were on a rack. He'd done it. It was his fault.

His coworkers watched him like they would watch a movie. All they needed were buckets of popcorn dripping with butter. And Meredith... She looked as nauseated as he felt. He tried to open his mouth. To say something. Anything. To explain.

Shame wrapped its hands around his throat. His vocal cords wouldn't work.

*His eyes slipped open, and he stared at the ceiling overhead in silence, stuck in the muzzy halfway world. That place between dreaming and fully awake, when one could still remember the contents of a dream with clarity. He swallowed and blinked, resigned to it, waiting for the vivid phantasms of blood and gleeful laughter to fade back into his subconscious, where they would simmer until the next time he slept. When he rolled to face the red glow of the alarm clock, the familiar slide of sensation across his lower body made his muscles tighten.*

His gut churned, his fists clenched, and then he bolted out of the cafeteria. Away from her and them and Mr. Clark and the memory. All of it.

He managed to slip into a dimly lit side hallway before all the twisting snakes writhed their way out of his stomach. No foot traffic or stares watched him as he emptied himself into a trashcan, heaving, sick. He had nothing inside but acid and bile. His throat and nose burned, and his eyes watered. When he eased away from the can, the room swam. He blinked, but the room wouldn't stop moving. He wiped his face with his shaky hands. His stomach settled. Sort of.

He moved to the water fountain and rinsed out his mouth. The dim slant of dawn sunshine falling against the window made him feel pasty. Hot. He glanced at the vague pink and yellow pastels that would be azure in an hour or two. Wispy clouds drifted over the sprawl of green treetops. Cars and people wandered below in the hospital parking lot. The water fountain hummed. Footsteps and voices in the distant hallways thrummed at the back of his awareness.

He stared.

Work held no joy for him anymore. None. He didn't look forward to it. He dreaded it. Dreaded the people and the churning stress of dealing with them all. They'd all moved on from the shooting, leaving him behind to feel like a solitary emotional dunce amongst geniuses.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture himself somewhere else.

*I'm going to snap your fucking neck.*

The image scalded the space behind his eyelids. Derek flinched away from the water fountain. He couldn't find peace. Not without abusing chemistry to switch off his thoughts by force, and that wasn't an acceptable thing to wish for anymore. Unacceptable. That didn't mean he never wished, though. The thought loitered like an unwanted visitor on the stoop for a moment before he managed to slam shut the door.

He thought of Meredith, his tired, pale, pregnant wife, whom he'd *left*, and took a deep, slow breath. God, what she must think of him. He jammed his hands into his lab coat pockets and sighed.

He walked back to the cafeteria, shoulders curled, hunched over like some sort of defensive football player. The warm smell of food wafted in the air as he moved closer. The din quieted somewhat as he stood in the wide doorway. He felt surreptitious eyes on him, but nobody stopped.
Nobody made their observations obvious.

He shuffled back to the small table where Meredith sat. She'd finished her sausage links and her hash browns and her scrambled eggs, and she sipped on a carton of orange juice. His cereal bowl was gone. Everything on his side of the table was gone. She didn't look at him when he sat in the chair he'd vacated minutes earlier. Didn't speak.

The silence between them stretched, and the din surrounding them crashed against his ears. He put his face against his hands and rubbed his face. He felt raw. Cut open. Ill. And he had no idea what to say or how to say it. All of it would be wrong, anyway. He must have made a sound, though, some pathetic, mumbling pieces of syllabic flotsam, because she looked at him.

When her eyes met his, he didn't see love or understanding. He only saw anger. At him. Hurt. All justified.

“Priceless,” Mr. Clark said. “And you haven't even told her yet.”

She put her orange juice carton on her tray. “If you tell me you're sorry, I'm leaving,” she said.

His heart thudded in his ears. He gripped the edge of the table until his fingers hurt. A sinking feeling overwhelmed him. This was it. The final straw for her. He'd yelled at her for being concerned, and now she was done with him. “No,” he said, a pathetic, soft, begging whisper. He couldn't offer up any sort of defense for himself. He'd been an asshole. Again. End of story. And he could barely find his voice. Humiliating words he couldn't help dribbled from his lips. “Please, don't leave me.”

She stared at him for a long moment, her face pinched with irritated confusion. And then she rolled her eyes. “Leaving the room, Derek.” She glared at him and sighed a huffy sigh. “I've been here. We've yelled and screamed plenty of times. We're having a baby. When are you going to stop assuming I'll leave? If anyone should be assuming someone is leaving, it's me about you, given your checkered history with me on that front, don't you think?” The words had barely left her mouth when her eyes widened. “I'm sorry,” she added quickly. “I shouldn't have said that.”

“Why should she be sorry about that? It's true,” Mr. Clark said. “You're sick and a coward and a liar, and all you do is run away.”

Derek swallowed. “No. You're right,” he said. He couldn't look at her. His gaze found his lap and stayed there. He wore his navy scrubs and his black cross trainers. They felt wrong. A shameful masquerade. He wasn't much of a surgeon anymore. Or a husband. Or anything.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I said no more baggage, and I meant it. It's just...” She sighed. The anger thick in the air between them crumpled. Her shoulders bowed, and then she pushed her tray to the side. Her fork and knife clinked as she moved the tray. She leaned across the sticky table. Toward him. She grabbed his hands and kissed his knuckles while he stared, useless. “Why is it so hard for you to talk to me?” she said. “I don't expect you to be better already. I really don't. But I do expect the truth. After all the lying I've put up with, you owe that to me, at least. And, after Lake Cushman, I thought...” She sighed, her breath tinged with a frustrated growl. “I don't know what I think anymore.”

He opened his mouth to speak. Words wouldn't form, and the hurt look in her eyes stabbed him like a butcher knife. *I'm going to snap your fucking neck*, he'd said to Gary Clark. A phantom gunshot cracked in Derek's ears and the world flashed a nauseating, gory red.

*When he rolled to face the red glow of the alarm clock, the familiar slide of sensation across his*
lower body made his muscles tighten. Recognition arrived first in his sleep-daze. He grunted, deep and low, and he pressed his body against the bed in a mock thrust because it felt good. Horror supplanted recognition moments later.

“Tell her,” said Mr. Clark. “Tell her what happened this morning.”

“I don't know how to talk about this,” Derek said.

She squeezed his hands. “Try. Please.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mr. Clark. “Try. I want to see you flail around.”

Derek's lip twitched. “I'm... wrong.”

She glared at him. “That's almost as bad as telling me you're sorry again. Can you, please, just stop?”

“No, I... I...” He shook his head. “You asked me what's wrong. It's me,” he said, his voice soft. “I think I'm wrong.”

Her glare lost its sharp edges. “What are you talking about?”

“I lost a lot of blood,” he said. “I needed transfusions.”

She nodded. A glassy film spread across her eyes. “All eight units that we had, yes.”

“Maybe, something is just... broken.” He wiped his eyes. They hurt. His head hurt. “I hit the late stages of hypovolemic shock. I could have brain damage, or... something just...”

“What do you mean, brain damage?” she said. She leaned forward, gaze piercing, worried. More worried than she'd been before. More worried and a lot less accusing. His fault. “What makes you think you have brain damage? What's wrong?”

He shrugged. “I'm wrong,” he said, at a crippling loss for words.

“Derek, you said that already, and you're not making any freaking sense. Which is actually kind of scaring me, now. What feels wrong?”

The din of the surrounding room squeezed around him. He squirmed in his seat. His throat closed up, and he couldn't speak anymore. He couldn't do this. He couldn't tell her, and Gary Clark laughed at him.

“Idiot,” Mr. Clark said.

Meredith glanced around the cafeteria at their murmuring audience. “Let's go somewhere private,” she decided. Her voice sounded far away, behind a layer of water, as though he were drowning and she called to him from the surface. He blinked and looked at her. “Okay? Derek?” When he didn't respond, she stood up and came around to his side of the table. She took a piece of his lab coat's sleeve in her tiny fist and pulled. “Derek?”

He stood at her behest and followed her out of the cafeteria and down the hall like a zombie. She'd left her food tray behind, forgotten. He had no idea where she wanted to go. He let himself be pulled along the white hallway, wishing for numbness in the place of abraded rawness and not finding it. She found them an empty on-call room and turned off the lights. The uncomfortable buzz of the overhead fluorescent lights winked into silence. Dim sunlight fell through the slats in
the dingy blinds, giving the room a comforting, warm sort of darkness instead of cold pitch-black. She dragged him to the narrow cot along the wall.

He sat. The mattress squeaked and sank with his weight. She sat next to him. The scent of her conditioner, long since faded from the vividness of a recent shower, wafted against his nose, comforting. She didn't speak as she leaned close to him. He tensed as her warm palm met the slope of his spine. He flexed his fingers as the memory of sweaty skin and a throbbing, failing heart came alive underneath his palms. *How does it feel, now?* His hands shook as he cradled them against his body.

“She didn't speak as she leaned close to him. He tensed as her warm palm met the slope of his spine. He flexed his fingers as the memory of sweaty skin and a throbbing, failing heart came alive underneath his palms. *How does it feel, now?* His hands shook as he cradled them against his body.

“Please, don't touch me,” he said as his stomach roiled.

She backed off and hovered outside of his personal bubble. Close, but not painfully so. She held up her hands, palms out in surrender for him to see. “Okay, I'm not touching. I'm not,” she said. “But what do you mean, you're wrong? What's making you feel wrong? Tell me your symptoms.”

“I can't...” He swallowed. “I don't know how to talk about this.”

“Is it a physical problem?” she prodded. “Stress? Something else?”

*Horror supplanted recognition moments later. He tossed the sheets away from his body and sat up. His cotton pajama pants bulged at his groin. As he moved, the sensitive head of his penis, normally sheathed, rubbed against the soft cotton. He swallowed with disgust at the pleasant sensation, at the tempting, reflexive pull, the way it made his insides twitch with sexual readiness. Bile rose in his throat as his still-lurid dream spun dizzying, sickening circles inside his head. He kicked his feet over the side of the bed and stumbled to the master bathroom in the darkness.*

His breaths tightened, and he leaned over his knees to stare at the tiled floor. “I'm going to throw up.”

She darted from the bed to the wastepaper basket by the door. She dragged it back to him. He gripped the sides of the basket, shaking. Everything swam before his eyes, and he moaned, but nothing came up. After seconds or eons, he put the wastepaper basket by his feet and stared at it.

Meredith watched, anxiety in her posture, in her stare. “Derek what is this?” she said, her voice tight with worry. “Tell me why I shouldn't be dragging you to neurology or the ER right now.”

“If I healed wrong, maybe, this isn't my fault,” he said. Begged.

Needed.

She stared at him for a long, silent moment, her arms folded over her chest. Her eyes narrowed. She planted her back against the far wall with a thud and slid the floor. She wrapped her arms around her knees. The white tips of her black Chucks peeked out from the slight pile her body made on the floor. She looked over her kneecaps, across the narrow room, at him.

“What don't you want to be your fault?” she said.

*He kicked his feet over the side of the bed and stumbled to the master bathroom in the darkness. He'd been asleep for hours. He needed to pee, except his penis pressed against his belly, ready for sex. He leaned over the toilet, teeth clenched as he touched himself to point his salacious salute downward, and he emptied himself. The physical press of his hand against his groin to aim made him feel.*

He couldn't figure out how to answer her. Couldn't contemplate as his thoughts slowed, and his
brain replayed that moment over and over like a skipping record. He didn't want to be here. Or anywhere. He didn't want to die, but today, he wished he didn't have to deal with living. He swallowed as a new wave of nausea overtook him.

“You've been better the last few weeks,” Meredith said. “Since our vacation, you've been eating. Smiling more. You've only had the one panic attack. And you said you wanted to come back to work. You wanted it, Derek.”

“I know.”

“What's changed?” she demanded. “Are you getting too stressed? Do you need more time off?”

The physical press of his hand against his groin to aim made him feel. Feel... good. Good despite the pinwheel of gory images fluttering in his head. The dream wouldn't go away.

Blood rushed in his ears, and everything felt far away. “Work is... fine,” Derek said weakly.

“Liar,” Mr. Clark said, a snarl in the din.

“Should I get Dr. Wyatt?”

“No.”

She pushed off the wall and slid closer to him. She pushed the wastepaper basket away. “Come on, Derek,” she said. “Throw me a bone, here. I'm not Sherlock Holmes.”

“A bone,” Gary Clark said with a snort. “Oh, that's funny. She's getting warm to your perversions.”

The dream wouldn't go away. He thought of Gary Clark, sweaty and slick underneath his palms as Derek strangled him. Heard Gary Clark begging him not to shoot with the gun Derek had somehow stolen. Heard the crack of the gunshot, followed by Derek's own laughter as he watched Glary Clark slide from lucidity to panic to the empty, unblinking glaze of death. A lake of blood had slicked the floor underneath Derek's shoes, but he hadn't cared. He'd reveled.

She stared at him, her gray eyes a sharp contrast to the spreading puddle of wet, sticky red caught in his mind's eye. “Are you afraid of what I'll think?” Meredith said.

He swallowed. “I know you'll tell me I shouldn't be.”

“And you're right,” she said. She took a breath as if to steel herself. “Would it be easier for you to talk to Mark about this?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Clark. “Tell the juvenile manwhore about your deviancy.”

“No,” Derek said.

“Then what, Derek? Whatever you think is broken, we'll fix, but you have to start talking to me.”

He'd reveled. Awake, now, he loathed, and the conflict between the turmoil in his head and the physical clarity of the pleasing feelings in his lower body made him ill. As soon as he'd finished urinating, he dropped to his knees and threw up.

“Are you embarrassed about it?” she prodded.

He shook his head. “More like... appalled.”
“That's a mild term for it,” Mr. Clark said. “Appalling.”

“Have you broken the law?” Meredith said.

Derek looked at his knees. “No.”

“Taken more pills...?”

“No.”

“Lied to me?”

“No,” he said.

Dark shadows passed through the sliver of light under the threshold of the door, and the door rattled as passing bodies displaced the air. He tensed, staring at the doorknob. Murmuring voices seemed to fill the room as whoever stood outside conversed. Meredith followed his gaze to the door and then she looked back at him, her gaze pleading, as if to say, *Please, please ignore them,* and he was caught. Caught like a stretching rubber band between listening to them and the illusory destruction of his privacy, and watching her begging expression. He wasn't being fair to her. They couldn't hear.

And he was a fucking coward.

“I got hard,” he blurted. Somebody outside the door laughed, and he almost lost his voice again. “This morning. When I woke up, I was...”

She frowned. “You mean you had an erection?”

Mr. Clark snarled in Derek's head. “You had your hands around my throat, and you liked it, you sick fuck.”

“But... that's good. Right?” Meredith said. “You were worried about the Paxil...”

Derek squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't look at her, couldn't look at anything. His stomach churned. “I had the dream, Meredith,” he admitted to his lap.

“The one where you die?” she said.

“The one where I kill him instead.”

“Oh.”

Derek had tried to strangle Mr. Clark, and when that hadn't worked, the gun had appeared in his hands as if by magic. He remembered the cool feel of the metal stock against his palm. The give of the trigger as he'd consigned his tormenter to death. *Shut up,* Derek had said to silence Mr. Clark's pathetic begging. *No talking. You're not the man, here.*

A twisted role-reversal.

When Mr. Clark had wet his pants in abject terror, Derek had laughed, gleeful, omnipotent, remorseless. He'd found peace when he'd pulled the trigger. Bliss when he'd watched the spreading puddle of gore that spoke of murder. And then he'd woken up rock solid and ready for sex.
“I got off on killing another human being,” Derek said. “I got off on it, Meredith.”

“Sick bastard,” Mr. Clark said.

“Derek, that's...” Meredith began, only to stop. Silence stretched.

He'd clearly horrified her. Shame thickened inside him like a cancer, spreading. He couldn't do this. Any of this. He'd been a fool to think he could jump into the water and somehow stay afloat long enough to overcome the drowning grip of all his lingering trauma.

The mattress sank as she slid into the tiny bed with him. The warmth of her body pressed against him, and her soft breathing brushed his neck, as if she were less than the width of a paper from contact with his skin, but determined to respect his wish not to be touched. Her voice was soft against his ear when she said, “You can't control what your body does while you're sleeping. An erection doesn't mean you were sexually aroused. You know that just as well as I do.”

“But it's wrong...” he said.

“Well, did you jerk off to the image of murdering him or something after you woke up?”

“No.”

“Then what's so wrong?” she said.

“You shot me, and you laughed like it was Christmas morning,” Gary Clark said.

“I liked the killing in my dream,” Derek said. “I like my dream. I like it. It's not a nightmare.”

“Derek, it's totally normal for people who've been through what you've been through to fantasize about stuff like that,” she said. “Even the assault victimization for dummies pamphlet said that. We've been over this.”

Derek glowered. “Yeah, well, I never woke up with a boner from it before.”

“The male body does plumbing maintenance during REM cycles,” she said. “Your brain said 'give my owner an erection for a normal maintenance cycle', and you got one. That doesn't mean you wanted it. You were asleep. It's simple science.”

“It doesn't feel like simple science to me,” he said. The wall blurred as he blinked a pair of burning tears. “It feels sick.”

“Pathetic, disgusting coward,” Mr. Clark said.

“Stop it,” Meredith said, soft against his neck. “Stop trying to put a square peg in a round hole or whatever.”

Disturbed tears made sluggish tracks down Derek's face. He had no idea what was up or down anymore. He couldn't reconcile what his body had done with what he'd felt.

He could forget. He could forget all this. What he'd dreamed. What he'd woken up to. He worked in a hospital. It would be so fucking easy to hoodwink one of the pharmacists who knew him.

He winced, his breaths tightened, and he clenched his fists so hard his knuckles hurt. The unexpected wave of wanting made him... hurt, knocked him off his train of thought, disoriented him. Like he'd been mugged. The loiterer had broken in and beaten him up and left him wheezing on the floor.
Why couldn't he feel complete with what he already had? He'd nearly died, yes, but nearly dying meant he'd lived. His wife was pregnant. He had a wife. Meredith. His Meredith. The woman he'd met in his quest to reinvent himself. The woman he'd called his savior. A breath of fresh air.

Instead, he fantasized about killing a dead man. He'd made it into a sexual thrill. Or he hadn't. Maybe.

Tears oozed.

This could all go away.

“It'll pass,” Meredith said from somewhere beside him, as if his turmoil were an open book. “You can do it. Wait for it to pass.”

He shook his head, trying to think straight. “I'm...” he said. He blinked, trying to regain his bearings in reality. “This isn't...” He took a deep, cleansing breath. “Stop.”

“Take your time,” she said.

Frustration coiled as he rubbed his eyes. “I don't want to want this.” Not the killing. Not the drugs. “Not any of this!”

“I know.”

Derek turned toward her, his body sliding awkwardly when his scrubs and coat stuck to the sheets. His knee brushed her thigh. He dared to looked at her. Finally. Her sad, gray eyes met his. She didn't speak. Not for a long time. But her gaze told him things, anyway. I'm sorry you're hurting. I want to make it better. How do I make it better? Please, please, don't slip...

And not a single word of reproach or impatience or disgust loitered there. There was none of the hate or hurt from before.

Only, I love you.

The mattress shifted as she reached with her hand. She hovered with her hand in the inches of space over his face for a long moment, hesitant. When he didn't flinch, didn't say no, she pressed her palm flat against his temple and his cheek, and then she drew her fingers back into his hair. The soft pull on his scalp and the look in her eyes made the desperation seem less... desperate. Her warmth seeped into his skin, and the wave of mind-boggling need receded somewhat.

He couldn't help but relax a little. His pained, tight muscles loosened, and his breaths evened. His eyelids dipped as his body fell out of stress long enough for him to think straight and realize he'd told her. He'd told her everything, and she was there. Touching him. Not disgusted and not leaving despite having every right.

“Do you remember how you felt this weekend when we were making love?” she said. “You begged me to touch you.”

“I remember.”

“That was aroused,” she said. “Not whatever the hell you woke up with this morning.”

“I threw up.”

Her lip twitched. An almost smile. “Yeah,” she said. “That doesn't exactly jibe with getting off on
something unless you have a weird fetish you haven't mentioned.”

“I think you know all my proclivities,” he said as her hand wandered down his neck.

She rested her grip on his shoulder, not really gripping, just... there. Her gazed softened. “I had a feeling we'd probably covered that area of getting-to-know-you pretty well by now.”

“Hmm.”

“You're not a sadist,” she said. “So, stop thinking it.”

*And you're very, very bossy,* he'd told her once, years ago. *It keeps me in line.*

He took a shaky breath. “I wish all of this would just stop,” he said.

She played with a loose lock of hair over his forehead. “I know.”

“I had two good weeks,” he said.

“And that was a great step in the right direction,” she replied, soothing. “Soon, it'll be three weeks at a time. Maybe, a few months down the line, you'll notice you went for a month without a bad day. It'll just keep getting better.”

His eyes burned, and every time he blinked, the world sharpened and then blurred. Hopelessness danced on the sharp edges of his mind. Barbed breaths jabbed him under the ribs. “I can't do this, Mere,” he said. “I can't do the bad days.”

“Yes, you can,” she said.

“It hurts to want something this much.”

“I know,” she said. “But what if tomorrow is supposed to be a good day? Don't ruin it by slipping up today.”

“Meredith, I can't.”

“You can,” she said. “You *so* can. I know it sucks, but you can.”

His lower lip wouldn't stop quivering. She watched him through her eyelashes, unblinking. Believing. No ounce of pity or condemnation, just... conviction that befuddled him. Conviction he didn't deserve and certainly hadn't earned. Silence stretched as he lost his voice.

“Take your time,” she said, even, practiced.

She put her hand against his heaving side, hesitant, soft, and when he didn't flinch, she wrapped her arm over him and snuggled close. He pressed his nose into her soft hair. She took his palm and pressed it against her stomach, slipping his fingers underneath the waistband of her scrubs to rest against warm skin and the bump of her panties' waistline. He felt her navel underneath his palm, felt the subtle rise and fall of her belly as she breathed. He couldn't feel the baby yet, not without palpating invasively like a doctor instead of caressing like a husband. She was eight weeks pregnant, at most. Her first OB appointment wasn't for another two weeks.

But he could imagine.

“You can do this,” she encouraged, and she held him that way for... hours. Days. Unmoving. Just breathing. And in the passing moments, shaky, unfettered need became an annoying buzz in the
back of his head again. The unwanted loiterer he could close the door on instead of an armed burglar. Always there. Always present, but... surmountable.

Something he could tolerate again.

“When are you due for your shift?” she said, her voice soft in the muted darkness. She had his watch hand captive under her palm, warm against her belly. Her body pressed against him. His face rested in her hair. He couldn't look at his watch. The skin on his face felt raw and irritated. He had his eyes closed because they hurt. He didn't want to move. She shifted instead, saving him the trouble. “It's 6:30,” she said.

He swallowed. “An hour, I guess,” he said, his voice rough and croaking with recent grief.

Her palm slid to his waistline, to the drawstring of his navy scrubs. She unclipped his pager and took it from him. He didn't pay any attention to where she put it. “Take a little nap,” she said. “I'll let you know if there's an emergency.” His phone chose that moment to ring, loud and shrill in the silent space. He didn't want to talk to anyone. She reached into his pocket, switched it to vibrate, and took that away from him, too.

“I don't want to have the dream,” he said. “I can't deal with it right now.”

She kissed his chest through his scrubs. He couldn't see her face, but he could feel her smile. “Consider me your dreamcatcher or whatever.”

He could see her standing on a catcher's mound with a mask in a field of green. She would catch every bad thing that flew her way and crush it in her tiny fist with her tiny mitt, eyes blazing with adorable defiance. “Hmm,” he said at the thought.

“Seriously, Derek,” she said. “Close your eyes for a little bit. Relax. I'll wake you up in a few. You won't be late for work.”

Not that he cared much about being on time. “Mmm.”

He felt her, warm and solid against his body, her tiny arms wrapped around him, and some of his worries sloughed away. She made him feel safe. Safe and quiet and warm. Security bloomed like a flower around him. How did she do that? He didn't know and hurt too much to contemplate it. She pulled him to the mattress, and he didn't resist. She curled up against him, and he relished the warm slide of her small body against his. Safe. He was safe. Safe, frustrated, and tired. The perfect storm of good and bad felled him.

His awareness of the room beyond the sound of her breathing dimmed, but he didn't sleep. Didn't dream. He existed. Resting. Replenishing.

The intrusive bleat of her pager snapped him out of it. His breathing hitched, and he tensed as she cursed at the interruption and squirmed against him to see who'd dared to summon her. Her pager dangled in the air as she held it aloft over their prone bodies. His eyes wouldn't quite focus yet, and all he saw was a black blob waving in the air above him. Another curse fell from her lips after a moment. The mattress squeaked as she moved away, putting her legs over the side of the bed and standing up with a wobble. She wiped her eyes and blinked as she settled into standing and he realized, belatedly, that she'd taken a nap, too. Next to him. She'd been tired, and she'd needed it, and he felt better, somehow, knowing she'd taken a little comfort of her own from the situation despite his inability to offer any.

“It's an emergency,” she said with a sigh. “I have to run.”
He sat up, groggy and disheveled. He pulled his hands through his hair. He couldn't find many words yet, and most were single syllables. “Go,” he managed.

She gave him an apologetic look. “You'll be okay?”

He felt better. Not okay. The loiterer hung around on Derek's mental stoop, staring in through the glass panes at the top of his door.

Derek looked at Meredith and shrugged. He glanced pointedly at her pager. “I'm not dying,” he said. An honest but laconic assessment. He waved her off. “Go.”

She left after giving him an apologetic frown. As she opened the door to the on-call room, a triangle of fluorescent light flooded the room, making him squint. The sounds of conversation, of people and life and civilization, fell into the room, making him bristle. She closed the door softly behind her, but out of her eclipse, he heard the noises behind the door. A quiet murmur, but there. He had no bubble of nonexistence or safety anymore.

He wrapped his arms around his stomach and let loose a deep, irritated sound of pain as the loiterer knocked. Again. The subtle hum of wanting tugged on every sinew. Every bone. Every muscle.

This was beyond a bad day.

This was Hell.

But he had to work. He had to do this. As delightful as shutting himself away from civilization sounded on a knee jerk impulse, because he felt abraded and raw and undone, and as awful as the prospect of working all day made him feel, he knew conceptually that living the rest of his life as a fucking hermit wouldn't work. As the days of his stress leave had worn on, the somnolence caused by the Paxil had lessened. Passing the days by sleeping when he wasn't in therapy no longer worked. He'd found himself growing antsy. Bored. Desperate to do other things. Wishing to get back to the head space he'd been in before he'd been shot.

Except, to get back to how he'd been, he had to push himself over this horrible hump where doing too little drove him crazy and doing too much drove him crazy, and there was no middle ground that didn't drive him crazy. He had to push himself past loathing his job and interacting with new people. He knew he loved both, somewhere. Somehow. He just had to find that piece of himself again. It had to be there. Meredith saw it. And if he used her gaze like a mirror, he saw it, too.

“Maybe, you just want to see it,” Mr. Clark said, menacing. “Maybe, you're fantasizing again.”

Derek sighed. He'd been happy for the blessing of internal silence while it'd lasted. Everything, it seemed, was waking up.

Dr. Wyatt had encouraged him when he'd voiced his readiness to try working again. She'd smiled at him, eyes sparkling as she'd scribbled on her notepad.

What? he'd said.

I think we have a winner, she'd said.

A winner?

The Paxil.

What's winning about it?
You’re getting hungry. Literally. Figuratively. Your appetite seems like it’s on its way back.

Oh, he’d said, stunned. Dumbfounded. A small smile had stretched his lips.

Dr. Wyatt had written another letter to the Board for him, asking that he be allowed back for light duty. The Board had accommodated him in the space of days. Richard would stay as Interim Chief, for now, and Derek wouldn’t be performing any surgeries or offering anything even close to emergency care. He’d been bumped back to intern for all intents and purposes.

Derek ran his hands through his hair, agitated, as he glanced at his watch. He had ten minutes before his shift started. Ten minutes before he wouldn't have a moment of peace. Ten minutes before he had to be out there in the noise and the people, acting human and not like some beast slavering for a fix he couldn't have and didn't want to want anymore. The thought of enduring the chaos made the alternative seem so much more tantalizing. Attractive.

The knocking loiterer persisted. Louder. He tried to shake it off. To push it to the back of his mind. Nothing worked.

“Pushing yourself past this is a laughable endeavor,” said Mr. Clark. “There is no past this. You’re Humpty Dumpty in a thousand pieces, and there's no fixing you, you fucking coward.”

Derek clenched his hands together. “You're wrong,” he said.

“Am I?” said Mr. Clark. “I don't think so.”

“Stop,” Derek said. “Please.”

Mr. Clark laughed.

“I'm not listening to you today,” Derek snapped, teeth grinding in frustration. “I'm here because I'm ready.”

A long silence stretched. Derek clenched his fists, squeezing until his knuckles hurt. He was here because he'd said he was ready. The Board didn't want a cracked neurosurgeon flipping out with a scalpel. They wouldn't have forced him. Nobody had forced him. He'd had Dr. Wyatt write the letter announcing his competency for easy work. The constant cravings hurt. Dealing with people made him feel like he was receiving a bath in sandpaper. Being out of the house frightened him, made him nervous and sick to his stomach half the time. His entire life had become the painful experience of ripping off a band-aid, but he’d chosen this. He'd chosen it. He needed to do the ripping if he was ever going to get past any of the pain.

“Leave me alone,” he commanded.

“Fine,” said his tormentor. “We'll see how you do without me.”

Derek blinked as the punishing laughter he'd grown accustomed to left him. He heard the blood rush in his ears. Heard the murmur of life beyond the door. Nothing more. He shook his head. No comments. No judging. Nothing. He had a headache, and thinking hurt, but his partner in recrimination seemed absent. Derek Shepherd, mental party of two, had ditched one. How...?

The doorknob to the on-call room turned and the door opened, giving Derek little chance to contemplate it. He jerked, startled, and squinted muzzily at the person who’d broken into his sanctuary early. Before Derek had steeled himself to emerge.
“Hey, man,” Mark said, his voice gruff as he stood in the doorway, tall and imposing. “Debbie told me you were in here.”

“What do you want?” Derek snapped as he rubbed his eyes.

Mark held up his hands. “Whoa,” he said. “Aggressive much?”

“I'm not having a meltdown,” Derek said. He leaned over the edge of the mattress and picked up his cell phone and his beeper. He clipped his beeper on the waistband of his scrubs, and stuffed the cell phone in his lab coat pocket. “Tell Meredith I'm still not dying.”

“I didn't say you were dying, Mr. Paranoid,” Mark said. “And I didn't say she sent me, either, did I?”

“You don't need to say it. It's written all over your face.”

Mark closed the door behind himself and leaned against the wall, his thick arms folding over his chest. “Is not,” he said.

“Is, too.”

“Is not!” Mark said.

Derek rolled his eyes and glanced at his watch. Barely any time left. He stood and stretched out, reaching above his head and extending to his tiptoes. The collecting tension of anticipation released, somewhat.

“You're not thinking about doing something stupid, right?” Mark prodded.

Derek sighed. There it was. The scrutiny. Starting. He knew everybody meant well, but that didn’t stop the constant check-ins from irritating him. “I'm barely thinking at all,” he said.

Mark nodded. “You're going to Joe's with me tonight.”

“I am?”

“You'll have a club soda, and you'll play darts with me.”

“I will?”

“You will,” Mark said. “Because I asked you, and I know your dance card isn't exactly full lately.”

Derek sighed. Okay, there was ripping off a band-aid, and then their was jamming a scalpel into a healing bullet wound. Working for eight hours seemed like enough of a stretch of his capabilities. “Mark, I just want to go home to my dog and my pregnant wife.”

Mark shook his head, his expression impassive. “Not tonight.”

“Mark—”

“Not tonight, man,” Mark said. “You're getting out of the house.”

“I'm out of the house, now.”

“But not for fun,” Mark countered. “And your pregnant wife won't be there to go home to, anyway.”
Derek froze. He'd been looking forward to his reward for tolerating the day. Going home. Kissing his wife hello. Enjoying a long, relaxing bath with her. She liked to take bubble baths when she had the time, and she'd been taking them every chance she had since she'd gotten pregnant. Aches, maybe. Swelling? She hadn't said anything, and denied discomfort when he asked, but she always let him join her, even if it was just to keep her silent company while she read her latest book. He'd imagined they might have sex that night, too, given the rare but perfect mesh of their schedules. She had the entire evening off and wasn't expected back to work until Wednesday morning.

He frowned. She hadn't said a word about not being home that evening. Not that he was her keeper or anything. And not that he'd exactly been conversational that morning when she'd seen him for the first time in twelve hours. “She didn't say anything,” he said helplessly as his hopeful plans for a recuperative evening shattered before his eyes.

“I have it on good authority that Meredith will be hitting the bar with Yang tonight,” Mark said.

Derek raised his eyebrows. “The bar? But she's pregnant.”

“Non-alcoholically hitting it,” Mark clarified. “Just like you will be. With me.”

“But that's—”

“Not fair?” Mark said. He grinned and clapped Derek on the shoulder. “I know. See you there after your shift?”

Derek shrugged. “I guess.”

“I knew you'd come around.”

Derek's pager whined. Frowning, he picked it off his waistband and stared at it in the dimness. The sunlight filtering in through the blind slats had brightened as the morning advanced. 7:30AM the pager's clock proclaimed. His shift had officially started, and the small message on the screen told him he was needed in the ER, which was weird. He wasn't allowed to practice emergency medicine. In fact, the Board had expressly forbidden him from it. Simple care, conference room consults, and scut work. That was it.

“Duty calls?” Mark said, a twinkle in his eye.

Derek glared as he pushed past his friend out into the hallway. To work. The moment of engagement sank tension into his muscles almost reflexively. “Did you plan this so I couldn't argue with you anymore?” he said.

“Not me,” Mark said. “I swear.”

“Right,” Derek said.

“See you after your shift?”

Derek didn't dignify Mark's cheerful question with an answer as he jogged in the direction of the ER. Jogged. The page message said nothing about an emergency. He wasn't allowed to work on emergencies. That didn't mean it wasn't an emergency, though, and he would treat it like one until he knew otherwise. His phone rang, vibrating enthusiastically in his pocket as he trotted to the elevator, but he didn't answer it.

Emergency summed up the polar opposite of the scene Derek found in the bright, empty ER. A man sat on a gurney with a bloody nose, his head tipped forward into a crimson-stained cloth. He
wore a hospital gown and an intravenous line had been set into his wrist. Cancer, Derek decided from the man's bony figure and tired, bruised-looking countenance. Two parents fussed with a screaming baby, but he couldn't make any sort of assessment on sight for them. Every other gurney lay empty. The bright bay doors let a long shaft of morning sunlight in from the east. Nobody walked in or out. No ambulance sirens bleated or chirped to announce their presence. No frantic trauma team burst down the white hallway into the bay. A single brown-clothed trauma nurse moved through the room, and Dr. Bailey stood at the admitting desk, chewing on the end of a pen as she scrutinized a clipboard. The room, normally bustling and full of activity, seemed sedate.

Derek sidled to the desk, no longer rushing, and leaned against the countertop at a slant. Dr. Bailey's pen halted, and Derek watched her brown eyes as she gazed first at his shoes, and then trailed up his legs to the cursive Dr. Shepherd embroidered in blue at his left breast, close to where he'd been shot. She rolled her eyes without meeting his gaze before her pen resumed its scribbling, and he couldn't help but smile at her assessment. Or smirk, he decided. Dr. Bailey would definitely consider this a smirk.

Some things, he decided, still felt pretty good. Like knowing he could irritate her with a simple lean.

"Why was I paged?" Derek said.

"Because I paged you," Bailey said.

"That's informative."

She circled something with her pen in blue ink, and then she looked up. "There was a scheduling snafu when Dr. Keller called in sick. I'm trying to juggle my time between here and the clinic, which is also short-staffed."

He frowned. "What is there to juggle? This is a ghost town."

"Do you expect me to be able to warp time and space to be in both places at once?" she said.

"No..."

She shoved the clipboard and pen into his hands. "Then there's juggling."

He glanced at her notes. The parents with the fussy baby had already been seen and only waited on a prescription. For the mom, actually. Not the baby. The man with the bloody nose had been admitted, and an orderly would be there to transfer him soon to the oncology wing. Not only was the bay nearly empty, the few people in it didn't need any care.

"Not very urgent juggling," he said.

"Are you saying you can't help me in my desperate hour of need?"

"I didn't say that," he said.

"Then what's the problem?"

He sighed, exasperated. "Is this intervention day or something? What did Meredith say to you?"

"Nothing," Dr. Bailey said. Her eyes narrowed. "Do you need an intervention?"

"No..."
“All right, then,” she said. She took his hand in her own and shook it. She gave him a subtle squeeze that he wasn't sure if he'd imagined or not. “Thank you for helping me,” she said.

He flexed his fingers. “You're... welcome.”

She left him at the desk to do... nothing, really. He stood there, flummoxed. He'd never seen an ER this dead. Meredith had told him the ER had been a ghost town and had described it much like this in the weeks after he'd been shot, but the shooting had been more than three months ago, now. Curious, he checked the scanner on the desk for ambulance chatter. Nothing. Two paramedics discussed their breakfast choices – Wendy's or McDonald's – apparently forgetting the entire city could hear them, but other than that, no matter how he tuned the receiver, no matter what channel, he only received the hiss of static. Seattle seemed miraculously free of injury and sickness that morning.

He sat down at the desk in the black, rolling chair, letting his feet skid on the floor. He propped his elbows on the desk. He ached. His joints. Everything. His vision turned to blur and blear as he rubbed his eyes. Only Tuesday morning, after a short, six-hour shift on Monday, and he felt a bit like he'd been working an overnight shift at the end of a long week. Heart surgery, pneumonia, post-traumatic stress, and a still-lingering bout with depression had destroyed any semblance of stamina in his possession. Between needing Meredith to pull him through the weak spot that morning, Mark dictating Derek's social life in the evening, and Dr. Bailey leaving him with the menial task to end all menial tasks, he decided the only thing left that was needed to complete the boxed set of 'you can't handle life anymore' would be Richard showing up to supervise Derek's desk jockeying.

His phone rang again, vibrating in his pocket. Sighing, he pulled it out and glanced at the display. The two calls he'd ignored and this call were all from the same number. Kathy, read the pixelated display. She'd been calling since 6:00 AM. He rolled his eyes and dumped the call to voice mail. He wasn't in the mood for yet more pestering from the East Coast peanut gallery, not today. Not ever, but certainly not after this morning.

*It's totally normal,* Meredith had said.

He clenched his fingers. None of his twisted thoughts felt normal. No matter what Meredith said. No matter what pamphlet or guide he read. He closed his eyes and found his father there, waiting in his mind's eye, face pallid, eyes glassy.

*Derek, listen to me. This is very important.*

*Dad?*

*I'm sorry.*

*Sorry for what, Dad?*

Michael Shepherd had taken a breath. His gaze had lit like a glowing candle, as if he'd seen something miraculous hovering before his blue eyes. And then he'd died without ever answering Derek's question.

He'd died.

Derek rubbed his eyes, trying to scrape away the burning, aching sensation that told him he skated close to losing his composure to overactive tear ducts. He'd experienced too much violence to ever wish it on somebody else. Why, then, could he imagine six different ways in as many seconds to
kill Gary Clark? And why, the more personal and gruesome the method, did the thoughts not
twinge some sort of gag reflex? Some disgust? Anything to tell him his moral compass might still
be intact?

He clenchcd his fingers and closed his eyes, sitting stock still as that line of thinking dragged him
down the rabbit hole to a gory, awful place. A scalpel in his hand cut flesh it wasn't supposed to
cut. Blood and bits swam in a macabre, oozing river. Mr. Clark pleaded—

His eyes snapped open and he pushed back against his chair. “No,” he blurted. To no one. The
empty bay stared back at him. The man with the nosebleed had been taken away, and the couple
with the baby were too engrossed in conversation to care about his outburst.

When the desk phone rang, his heart caught in his throat, and he would have jumped out of his skin
if he weren't already so discombobulated he didn't have much balance. The chair rolled back a foot.
Derek clenched his teeth and took a deep, cleansing breath. His heart slowed in the space of
moments, but the burst of adrenaline made him feel shaky and a bit sick. He picked up the phone
from its cradle and propped it between his ear and shoulder as he readied his pen, trying to hold his
trembling fingers still in hopes of producing something legible.

“Seattle Grace Mercy West Emergency Room, this is Dr. Shepherd,” he said in a tone about ten
times more confident than he felt. “How may I help you?”

A bluster of breath hit the other end of the line. A sigh? “Derek,” said a familiar voice.
A familiar voice whose owner sang alto in the church choir, and even knowing his healthy eating
habits, even after he'd moved and had no private practice with no admin staff to feed and no clients
to woo, still guilted him for huge Girl Scout cookie orders by the caseload every winter for her
youngest daughter, Morgan. A voice he could still hear in his head, even after decades, telling him,
Derek, put that back! or Derek, stop it, that's mine! when he'd been the youngest instead of Amy,
and she'd been forced to babysit. Back when he'd been too little to care much about rules, and he
hadn't needed Mark to egg him into doing something mischievous. Derek, sweety, come on, she'd
said, her hand squeezing his shoulder as she'd tried to pull him back from his father's open grave.
He'd stared blankly at the coffin. They wouldn't bury it until everybody left. Those were the rules.
If he didn't leave... Let them work, she'd said, though, and she'd made him walk away.

He woke groggily to the sight of her beyond his gummy eyelashes. She flipped her curly black-and-
silver hair behind her ears. “Hey, sleepyhead,” Kathy said, smiling at him as she put down her
magazine. “How are you feeling?”

He rubbed the crust from his eyelashes and blinked. He didn't know what time it was. What day it
was. Breathing made his body feel bisected by a blade, and he didn't feel well enough or high
enough to fake any semblance of health. He winced instead of spoke, and then he let his eyes drift
shut for a moment.

“Nancy's getting more coffee,” Kathy said, her voice a soft whisper. “Meredith is in the shower.
Everybody else is out. Mom told us we needed to visit in smaller groups. I'm sorry we wore you out
yesterday. We all lost our heads, I guess.”

He clutched the thermal blanket covering his legs. He couldn't remember anything beyond
Meredith finding him in the dark after her ER visit. Telling him she was fine. That she didn't need a
D&C, and so she hadn't gotten one. “It's morning?” he croaked.

“Afternoon,” Kathy said. “You don't remember the nurse checking you earlier?”
He remembered coughing while the nurse encouraged him. Meredith had coached him through the agony, her small hand gripping his. Then nothing.

He tried opening his eyes again. Blur resolved into focus. Barely. Cloudy gray hovered outside the window. The blankets covering Meredith's cot were rumpled and displaced. The distant, metallic plink of water falling emanated from his private bathroom. Nobody other than Kathy was in the room.

“Do you want some water?” Kathy said, her crystal blue gaze creased with concern.

He nodded, and she disappeared for a moment. She returned with a plastic cup. He gripped it in his shaky hands and sipped. The cool water sliding down his throat felt like ambrosia.

“Hungry?” she said.

He felt too awful to think about eating. He shook his head. “Maybe later.”

He stared, dazed, at the foot of the bed, and he lost track of the moments as he listened to the distant roar of the shower and the bustle of the hospital outside his open door. Kathy hovered by the bed railing, but she seemed briefly content to let him find his sentience in gradual steps. He drifted in the silence, one hand resting over his bullet wound as he breathed. He felt the bandage through his shirt.

“Where’s Mom?” he said.

Kathy's odd expression made him realize she'd probably answered that question already, though he couldn't recall. “Out sightseeing,” Kathy said. “We've been trying to cut down on how many people are in the room with you at once.”

“Oh.”

Kathy gestured to the small reading chair by Meredith's cot. “Want help to the chair? You're supposed to be sitting up and walking a little today, if you can manage it.”

“Kathy,” he rasped. He closed his eyes. The fuzzy, flowing feeling in his head made it hard to think.

A hand gripped his and squeezed. “I know it feels really rotten,” Kathy said, closer, “But you need to try. Just a little to help yourself heal. You've slept all morning. I'll help you.”

He licked his lips and peered at her. “Have you been shot?”

She blinked. “What?”

“Then you don't know how it feels,” he said.

She frowned at him, but didn’t retort.

“You're going to stare at me and pester me until I try, aren't you?” he said.

Her lip twitched with the hint of a smile. “Just try,” she said. “It'll be good for you.”

He looked at the bathroom door. His eyes watered as melancholy swept over him like a wave. He would have been a father. He didn’t really know how to feel about that or how to comprehend what had been lost. Not when he could barely put two and two together and get four in his head. The thought of Meredith alone in the shower made a lump form in his throat. She would still be
bleeding, aching, and those were just the physical results. He wanted to be there. For her. But she'd had to hold him up in the shower, yesterday. She'd been forced to care for him.

His chest hurt. Though nature had performed the killing blow, Gary Clark had still stolen something profound from him. From them.

“Derek?” his sister prodded in the quiet.

He wiped his eyes with the backs of his knuckles. “M'okay,” he said.

“I think you're lying.”

A pair of tears splotched his face. He'd been shot, and his wife was finishing a miscarriage. The lump in his throat made it hard to speak, so he didn't bother to try.

He pushed his tray table backward, and he brushed his hand weakly along the bed railing. Kathy snapped upright from her chair and pushed the railing down for him. He untangled the nasal cannula and put it by his hip. Pushing away from the mattress to sit up under his own power brought pain lancing through his torso. He gripped Kathy's bony shoulder, trying to breathe, shaking, unable to stifle a long moan. She helped him bring his feet over the edge of the mattress, and she stood there, patient, a pillar of balance and support as he shifted and hobbled until he managed upright.

The room swam, and his chest felt like it might fall out of his body.

“Happy?” he said, panting. He brushed his wet face with his shaking palms.

She guided his feet into his flip-flops. “Walk a little,” she said. She rubbed the small of his back through his shirt with her warm hand. “You can do it.”

The IV pole squeaked as he gripped it and leaned. He shuffled to the foot of the bed. All of five feet. Everything swam behind his eyes, and his head spun.

“Come on,” she urged, and with glacial progress, he tottered to the doorway. The process of walking twelve feet took minutes. Not seconds.

His breasts escaped him in painful blusters, and his limbs felt like overcooked spaghetti. He rested his forehead against the doorjamb, his body half in the hallway, half in his room. His eyes burned. “Kathy, I—” he managed.

“Derek,” said Nancy, “you're up! Walking to the door is wonderful!”

He didn't feel wonderful.

Derek squinted muzzily down the hallway at his approaching sister. A fat mug steamed in her hand. She dodged a passing nurse he knew he knew, but couldn't remember beyond the barest recognition. Nancy smiled at him as she caught up to the clot of people hovering his doorway. He glanced at the bathroom door, which blocked him from Meredith. The rush of the water behind the wooden barrier continued. His lower lip quivered. She took long showers when she was upset. Or hurting. Or tired and trying to wake up. Or all three.

He took a step in the direction of the bathroom, only to blanch. The room blotted out for a sickening moment, where all he could do was hold onto his IV pole to keep from spilling to the floor. Everything hurt. Moving. Thinking. Feeling.
“Do you need to use the restroom?” Kathy said against his ear as she followed the direction of his wavering focus. She gripped his waist as Nancy dashed to set her coffee cup down on his tray table. Nancy flanked him and came to his other side.

His legs wobbled.

“No,” he managed.

Kathy rubbed his back, and she pulled on his arm as if to guide him to the reading chair. “You're doing great, Derek, just—”

“Stop telling me what to do,” he snapped. “You don't know what I need.”

Tense, ugly silence stretched between the three of them. He trembled. The doorknob twisted, and the bathroom door opened, revealing Meredith, her hair stringy and wet from her shower. She wore a ratty t-shirt and some knit pants, and tiny beads of water dotted her brow. Steam billowed out of the bathroom. Her expression seemed... haunted. Pained.

She stared at him. “Are you okay?” she said, and that was it. That was all. Nothing about her.

He swallowed as his decision coalesced. “I can make it to the end of the hall,” he told his riveted audience.

Kathy opened her mouth, but he glared at her, and she shut it. Meredith smiled at him. “That's really good,” she said, her voice tired. She sat heavily in the chair Kathy had been trying to push him toward. Her hunched posture told him without words that she hurt. But all she did was stare at him, a hopeful glint in her eyes, and he couldn't take it anymore. Couldn't take the lack of parity.

They'd lost a baby. This shouldn't be all about him, and yet it was, and all the things he'd normally do to flip the situation around were beyond his present capabilities. He could barely wobble to her. Holding up a toothbrush for more than a minute hurt. Sweeping her into his arms seemed like fantasy.

He turned on his heels and forced himself to move despite the mire of discomfort and the drugged feeling that spun thick webs inside his head. He hobbled over his threshold. Out of his room. He scaled along the hallway's edge, shaking, moving at the speed of a turtle with a pair of broken legs. Meredith didn't follow, and he couldn't decide whether that made him feel better that he wasn't the center of attention for her for a moment, that she could focus on herself, or worse that he'd left her alone and that maybe she hurt too much to chase after him, even when he moved this slowly. Panting breaths seared his sore throat. He felt pasty and dizzy and sick. Nancy cheered him on from behind, but Kathy...

“Derek, did something happen?” Kathy asked point-blank as he neared the first doorway after the one that opened into his room.

He stopped, panting, and closed his eyes. “I got shot, Kathy,” he said.

“Something else,” she said, eyebrows raised.

“I'm fine,” he insisted.

She stared at him for a long, penetrating moment. “Derek, you can talk to us,” she said.

“What's going on?” Nancy said.
“I got shot,” he said. “Isn't that enough going on?”

“It's something else,” said Kathy.

He turned to face his older sisters. Nancy looked confused more than anything else. The lines of many years of laughter creased Kathy's face, but she seemed somber, now, and more severe in that seriousness. He gripped his IV pole. “Please,” he said, “I need to walk to the corner.” He glanced over his shoulder. The bright hallway fuzzed and came back, a blur of bustling staff and endless white. Nurse Tyler gave him a thumbs up as he passed by, a clipboard in his hand. Derek stared at the corner, a junction about forty feet away, where Tyler turned to the right. Fifty feet total. Derek could walk that. He swallowed. “I need to do this. Stop being my shrink.”

Kathy’s mouth opened and closed and opened. “Derek, I’m not being—”

“Stop, anyway,” he said. “Please. I got shot. I need to walk to the corner for...”

“For...?” Nancy said.

He closed his mouth and didn't answer. He wiped his face. He turned and he grabbed the railing along the wall with one hand, and held his IV pole with his other. He slid one foot forward and pressed his weight into it. Pain sliced his middle with every clipped breath. He winced. One foot done. Thirty-nine more to go, and then he would ask for a wheelchair, but only then, when he reached the intersection.

He traveled another step alone. A third. Then a warm hand closed around his shoulder and squeezed when he took his fourth. “You're doing great, Derek,” Kathy said, her voice soft, encouraging, sure. Nancy joined in, coaching from behind.

They both stayed with him the entire way.

“Derek? Derek, hello?”

Derek blinked. The present returned, a slow slide of details coalescing with his memories. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. The bright well of natural light falling through the ER bay doors overwrote the memory of endless fluorescent bulbs in the hallway outside his hospital room.

Kathy, his oldest sister, older by six years, had already been out of the house and married by the time their dad had been killed, and had already had seven kids before he'd managed to have a single one. She'd always been the family vanguard. The referee. The supportive cheerleader or the voice of reason, whichever she felt fit the needs of the situation.

“Kathy, I can't really talk right now,” he said to the phone, expecting reasoning and refereeing more than cheerleading, this time. “I'm at work.”

“Well, you wouldn't pick up the phone anywhere else, and this is important.”

“Important enough to call me four times since 6:00 AM?”

“Um...” Silence stretched. He chuckled despite his tension at her predictable, colorful curse. She sighed, a bluster of breath on the line. “I'm sorry,” she said. “I added instead of subtracted for the time difference. I blame John. He's on a decaff kick, and it's left me addled.”

He smiled as he leaned back in his chair. Her blunder was caused by more than just decaf coffee, though he didn't feel inclined to argue or tease right now. Kathy couldn't organize her way out of an appointment book that had already been arranged by date and time. She failed to complete the
time zone conversion every few calls.

“It's okay,” he said, and though the question was superfluous, he added, “What do you need?”

He knew what she wanted to talk about. He'd already spent three hours deflecting both Nancy and Rachel on the very same subject that weekend, and his sisters, excluding Amelia, tended to act in tandem whenever they rained judgment.

“I want to talk about the wedding,” Kathy replied.

“Kath, I told Mom I can't handle a huge Shepherd family shindig right now,” he said. “Okay? I can't handle it.”

The line hissed with a long silence. “This just isn't like you,” Kathy said, her tone cautious.

He closed his eyes. The phone creaked as he gripped it tightly. “It's too much for me,” he said. “I've had months and months of too much for me, and I'm finally training myself to admit it when I'm in over my head. What more do you want me to say?”

“Derek...” she began.

“Look, Kathy, I have to go,” he lied, staring at the nearly empty bay. An ER nurse in brown scrubs spoke to the couple with the baby, the only occupants of the room. “If that's all you wanted to—”

“Derek, your wedding is in a matter of weeks,” Kathy said. “I wanted to make sure you're okay. That you're not making a mistake.”

He frowned. The other two conversations he'd had with his sisters hadn't gone like this. Not once had anybody intimated they were unhappy with his choice of bride. The complaints and needling had begun and ended on whether Rachel and Nancy could attend, and why he'd gone through Mom to bar them from the wedding instead of telling them himself. It had been his mother's idea to break the news gently to them in person instead of having him do it over the phone. Apparently, her plan hadn't worked so well, because within hours, his phone had been ringing off the hook. All fucking weekend. First his mother to warn him they hadn't taken it well, and then his stampede of upset sisters.

“I thought you wanted me to get married,” he said, his tone low and dangerous.

“I did,” Kathy said. “I mean, I do, but—”

He clenched his fingers around the phone. Meredith being suitable for him was not a fight he was prepared for today, or ever again. Nobody had argued with him on that point since he'd moved in with her, well over a year ago. Almost two, now, actually. “I love Meredith, and as far as I'm concerned, we're already married,” Derek said. “We've already had our first anniversary. This isn't anything new.”

“The Post-it thing is a sham, Derek,” Kathy said. “Meredith is just your girlfriend until you get a marriage license.”

“It's not a sham. What we have is not a sham.” He clenched his teeth. Tension pulled his muscles to the point of pain. “You don't get to call it that.”

“Derek, it's not real,” Kathy protested.

“It's real, Kath,” he said, bristling. “And I'm done talking to you. Don't call me about this again.”
“Derek, wait,” Kathy said, her voice a tinny, distant squawk as he moved to slam the phone back on the receiver. He sighed at her distressed, begging tone. He held the phone, his arm extended, an inch away from hanging up. “Wait, please, I just...”

He gave up and pressed the phone to his ear. “What?” he said tiredly.

“I like Meredith,” Kathy said. “I really do. She's very sweet, and she clearly loves you, and I want you to be happy. Both of you. I just want to make sure that, with all this other stuff going on, you're not making a rash decision. That's all.”

He glowered. “You mean you don't think I should get married because I might be crazy.”

“That's not what I said.”

“Stop being a shrink with me, for once in your life,” he snapped.

“Then stop twisting my words! I'm not being a shrink. I'm being your big sister who loves you!”

“Look,” he said evenly. “I've loved Meredith for a very long time. She is my wife already. In my heart, she is. It doesn't matter whether you believe the Post-it or not, because I believe it, I've believed it since I signed it, and it's my marriage. This isn't new or rash. This is just...”

“What, Derek?” Kathy demanded. “What is it, that it's suddenly so important to you and to her, when clearly it wasn't important enough before? That's all I want to know!”

He glared at nothing in particular. He focused on the pencil cup. “If I get shot again, I need to know she'll be able to make decisions, if it comes down to that, and she wants some goddamned peace of mind. Is that so wrong?”

A long silence stretched on the other end of the line. He listened to her breathing. “You won't get shot again,” she said, her voice quiet, quivering.

He couldn't stop the roll of hopeless, upset laughter that fell from his lips. “Pick a fucking catastrophe, then,” he said. His life sometimes felt like Russian roulette with five loaded chambers out of six instead of only one. He blinked, and the room blurred. God, damn it. Why couldn't he keep it together today? He wiped his face with a shaky hand.

“Okay,” she said, fight absent from her tone. “I believe you,” she said. “I hate your reasoning, but I believe you're doing what you need to do.”

“Why do you hate my reasoning?” he said.

“Because you're my little brother,” she said. Her voice thickened with hurting anger. “You shouldn't have been there when Dad died, and you shouldn't have nearly gotten killed in your own hospital, and you shouldn't be scared of your own family who loves you.”

“I'm not scared of you,” he said. His head hurt. “I'm just trying to be realistic.”

She sighed. “I know,” she said. “That doesn't mean I have to like it.”

“I love her very much, Kathy,” he added quietly. “This isn't rash or a mistake. I promise.”

“I believe you,” she said. “I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to upset you.”

He swallowed. “It's okay.” Though it wasn't. It wasn't okay. He blinked, trying to focus the blur in front of his face and failing. Why did he have to be such a hopeless mess?
“I want you to be happy, okay?” Kathy said. “I really do.”

“Thanks, Kathy.”

A sniffle fell through the line and hit his ear, discordant. He clutched the phone at the familiar sound. He’d heard it growing up. Her crying. A lot of it when Dad had died or when her latest boyfriend had broken her heart and he’d been too young to think of it as anything more than gross. His breaths tightened in his chest. Great. They were both a fucking mess. He hated fighting with his sisters, even when he felt well. I'm sorry, he wanted to say. He opened his mouth.

“Will you have somebody take pictures, please?” Kathy said, interrupting his plans.

He shook his head. “Of what?”

“The wedding, silly,” she said. He imagined her smiling as she wiped her bright blue eyes. “I want to see it, even if I can’t be there.”

“Of course, I’ll send you pictures, Kath,” he said, putting conviction in every word. “I’d already planned to do that. It’s not that I don’t want to share this with you or the others. I wanted...” He wanted to be better, and he wanted everybody to be there, except even after three weeks on the Paxil, the thought of so many people vying for space at the courthouse, or even at the house... His stomach fluttered, and he shoved the thought away before the butterflies exploded into fully bloomed anxiety. “I’ll send you pictures.”

He felt her smile through the line. “Thanks,” she said, her tone warm, understanding, and that made him feel better. A little.

“I really have to get back to work,” he said.

“I know,” she said. “Love you.”

He closed his eyes and breathed. “I love you, too, Kathy.”

He listened to the click of her hanging up against his ear. He pressed the phone against his forehead and swallowed, and then he placed it back in its cradle. A sheaf of papers hitting the desk made him flinch and look up.

Richard stood there, elbows perched on the high lip of the desk, his wire reading glasses perched on his nose as he stared down at Derek. Great. This was just great. Derek's stomach churned as the boxed set of 'you can't handle life' slid together, a complete matched set. He didn't need this today. He didn't need so many people crowding him.

“What's next?” Derek snapped. “Cristina dragging me off by my ear to explain why I can't kill myself?”

Richard's expression didn't waver. “Is everything okay?”

“It's fine,” Derek said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “That was just my sister.”

“Which one?”

“Kathy.”

Richard's eyebrows raised. “The psychiatrist?”

“Yeah,” Derek said. “She thinks me getting married right now is rash.”
“But you’ve been married to Meredith for over a year.”

“That’s what I tried to tell Kathy,” Derek said with a sigh. “Everybody still wants to weigh in.”

The couple with the baby approached the desk, and Derek waved them forward. Richard shifted to the side to give them space, but he didn't stop watching Derek, and the scrutiny was beyond blatant. Derek felt a hot flush spreading across his cheeks as the couple handed him a sheaf of discharge papers. He reviewed the papers and signed them, forcing himself to smile despite the way his gut churned. They thanked him, and then they left through the bay doors as the baby cooed in its mother's arms. The swishing sound of the automatic doors filled the silence, and then a blast of cool air unfurled into the bay. The drop in temperature made a shiver crawl through his body.

Richard stepped back to the center of the desk. “So, this isn't the first call?”

“Nancy tried earlier. And Rachel,” Derek said. “Kathy is usually the sister rally call when the first two calls don't work.”

At least Amy hadn't bucked her historical trend and jumped on the gavel-crashing sister solidarity bandwagon. She'd whined at him in the past about some of the decisions he'd made when she'd been younger and forced to live with him, but since he'd somehow graduated medical school despite nearly flunking out, her complaints had stopped. He'd moved out of the house, and he'd buried himself in his work. They'd drifted apart. Physically. Mentally. Honestly, getting away from her had been a relief. He'd tried to help her over and over, and he'd never been enough. Not once. Watching her self-destruct had been a slow form of torture.

Now, though... The relief he remembered felt more like a guilty brand.

Since their precarious truce after Amelia had visited Derek in the hospital, he and Amy had been talking more. Anything at all would have been more than before, but she called now and then. He called, too. Made the effort. Once every other week or so, maybe every three weeks, they spoke about small, pointless things like the weather. She talked about her job, sometimes, about working with Addison. He hadn't been working, much, so he mostly just listened. The conversations lasted five or ten minutes, at best, but it was better than before. Progress.

He'd barely managed to explain his PTSD to her. She didn't know about his addiction. None of them did. And none of them knew about the pregnancy, either. The fact that he would be a dad, finally, years after he knew they'd rightly suspected him of giving up hope. He and Meredith had decided to wait for Thanksgiving to tell them in person about the latter. She would be about four months along, give or take, by then. Showing a little, maybe. A happy, visible surprise for his family. But he wasn't sure how he would ever tell them about the former, none of them, but especially her. Amelia.

*Look,* she'd said. *I... I know this must have been really scary. For you. I mean... with what we went through with Dad. If you ever want to talk about it...*

*I know who to call.*

*Yeah,* she'd said. *Besides. I know you're not perfect, now, so it's not like it'll ruin your image.*

He clenched his fists. Of all his sisters, she would probably understand him the most, now. Maybe, she'd even be able to help him. Help him with... He closed his eyes against the burning feeling incinerating his eyeballs, and he wiped his face. Everything. She might be able to help him with everything.
Of all his sisters, though, none of them made him feel so much like a fucking hypocrite as she did. He'd called her a liar, and that had been one of the tamer things he'd said over the years. He'd called her a liar, and an addict, and accused her of throwing her life away, all true, but, now, years later, he'd fallen into the same abyss. He'd fallen, he lay broken and bloody at the bottom of the pit, and he couldn't seem to climb out.

She'd been there, too, and he'd left her.

He felt worse for ever judging. Pain, all kinds, did stupid things to people. All people. His lip quivered, and he shook his head.

"Why don't you sit down for a minute?" Richard said, tearing Derek from his spiraling, crushing musing. His voice was warm but stern as he continued, "I'll cover the desk."

Derek rubbed his eyes. "I'm fine. I just have a little headache."

Richard raised his eyebrows. "Did it sound like that was a suggestion?" he said. "Go sit down. Trauma room 2 is empty."

"The whole bay is empty," Derek snapped as he stood and slammed his hands against the desk. The loud sound cracked through the echoing, empty space. "This isn't stressful! What's stressful is being watched like a fucking guppy in a cup."

A hint of movement hit the corner of his eye, and he flinched to the side, startled. Dr. Bailey stood there, scribbling on a yellow outpatient chart, staring at her work more than him. She didn't look up as he recomposed himself. "I'm back for a few minutes," she said. "Why don't you sit down?"

"But—"

She looked up from her chart and glared. "Did you or did you not just tell your sister you can admit when you're in over your head?"

He gaped. "How did—"

"It's not my fault you brought your personal business to the front desk in the ER. Do I want to hear it? No. But that doesn't mean I can make myself blessedly deaf at choice moments."

"But you weren't even here," he said. Had she been? He swallowed, feeling lightheaded. Had he been so wrapped up in himself that he hadn't even seen her walk up to the fucking desk?

She rolled her eyes. She tapped her pen against her lab coat. "See all. Know all. We've covered this before." She stared at him, and she shifted her pen to point accusingly at him. Her gaze hardened like a diamond. "Sit. Down. And take a breather."

He clenched his teeth. "Meredith told you both to watch me for signs of nuclear meltdown, didn't she?"

Richard shook his head. "Of course, not," he said, overwritten by Dr. Bailey speaking at the same time, "She did no such thing."

Derek blinked. "Then why—"

"It's common sense, you fool," Dr. Bailey said. "Serve yourself a helping of reason and sit down. I swear, all the mousse you slather on is affecting your brain function."
“I don’t use mousse,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “Well, you use something. Your hair is shiny.”

“Look, I’m fine. I’m not glass. I can handle...” His voice trailed away, and he flushed under their intense, unblinking scrutiny. They stared, eyebrows raised, and he wanted to yell or stomp his feet or do all manner of childish things that would convince them he belonged in the daycare playpen they’d constructed for him with their constant supervision. “I can handle my sister who is three thousand miles away!” he said, irritated and flustered and embarrassed.

“I’m glad you can handle that,” Richard said, his tone patronizing. “You know what I can’t handle?”

Derek sighed. He rubbed and squeezed the painful tension in his shoulders. “What?”

“A lawsuit against this hospital while I’m still Interim Chief.”

“Great,” Derek said. “You think I’m a walking lawsuit? Both of you?”

Dr. Bailey shot a miffed glance at Richard. She took a deep breath and moved into Derek’s space, placing a warm hand on his shoulder. “Nobody is saying you're a walking lawsuit,” she said, her tone low and soothing, but it didn't soothe him. “We just want you to relax. Go with the flow. Ease back into things. It’s only been two days since you came back.”

“From stress leave,” Richard interjected.

Dr. Bailey turned to Richard, eyebrows raised. "You realize, sir, that you're not helping?"


“You know, if I really were insane, it's you guys and my sisters that would have driven me there,” Derek snapped.

Dr. Bailey tapped her watch. “Fifteen minutes. Relax. I'm timing you.”

“But—”

She fanned her chart at him, an exasperated look on her face. “Scoot!”

His chest felt full and painful. He wanted to yell at them, both of them, and the overwhelming urge to exhaust his frustration through vocalization turned his vision black and spotty, and his skin felt hot, but he paused in the well of dizziness, his teeth clenched. He realized he was just letting them prove themselves right. They were riling him with needling that wouldn't have been a blip on his radar before. He would have laughed at them. Come back with a witty retort. Before he'd been shot, and the control he had on his temper hadn't been worn from strong ropes to fraying threads. Back when he'd had a sense of humor.

His eyes watered. People walked on eggshells around him because it was a fucking necessity. His skin flamed with embarrassment as he shakily called his temper to heel. He wiped his eyes. His skin ached with irritation. He was sure, then, that his eyes looked bloodshot, and that he looked like a disaster case, overall. No wonder they wanted him to sit down for a bit. He hadn't looked in the mirror since that morning. In the bathroom. He'd thrown up, but he'd still been hard, though deflating, at least. Finally. He'd looked wretched and hating as he'd stared at himself in the mirror over the sink. He'd stared, half naked, until it'd gone away. His erection. All while Gary Clark had
laughed.

“I'm sorry,” Derek said, his voice quivering.

Dr. Bailey’s gaze softened, and she looked like she wanted to say something, but he turned around before she could, and he marched himself into the empty trauma room to take a breather. To unwind as commanded. He could do this. With practice, he could be a human being again. He could be himself, and he could prove he didn't need so many people working together to make sure he didn't fall flat on his fucking face.

He let himself collapse onto the rolling stool that sat by the paper-covered examination table, and he took a deep breath, willing himself to calm down and be rational, except his heart wouldn't stop thumping in his ears like the hoof beats of a racehorse, and the need to yell didn't seem to be subsiding. His shoulders slumped. The loiterer crossed his threshold, then, touting an easier path in his hands. It shined like a beacon, and Derek pulled his arms around his midsection with an unhappy moan.

“I don't want this,” he told himself. Told the loiterer.

Except he was lying. He wanted it. He wanted it more than anything, and it would be so fucking easy to get. He was a doctor with a prescription pad. The pharmacy kept controlled substances under lock and key, which was required by law, and he didn't have direct access, but that still didn't mean getting them would be more than a trifle. All he had to do was write a prescription for a post-op or pre-op patient in pain and then skim some pills off the top. A five-year-old could do it with a bit of precocious ingenuity. Or he could write a script for some random bum in the free clinic waiting room and pay him to pick up the pills. Or—

No. No, no, no. This was a despicable line of thinking. “I don't want this,” he announced to nobody. His words bounced off the cabinets and the metal sink. He swallowed, trembling. This was a bad day. He felt like he'd quit using yesterday, not a month ago.

The loiterer grinned an evil, toothy grin, filling space in his foyer. The front door yawned wide open, creaking on its hinges. An intense craving like a siren call made it hard to think beyond forcing the simple act of breathing.

Derek made himself count with no destination in mind. He started at one, and he moved into the tens, twenties, thirties, forties over the slow, painful crawl of needy seconds. He thought about Meredith. The baby. The upcoming wedding. About random bits and flotsam floating in his head. I want Daddy, Amelia had told him years ago, sobbing into his arms. She'd been so little, then. I want Daddy back. Please, make him come back. Why does he want to stay in heaven instead of be here?

I can't, was all he'd been able to say.

He had his hand on his cellphone before he was thinking straight, and he found her name in his contacts list. The soft, minor tone of the phone ringing caressed his racing brain. Help. He needed help, and she would know how to help with this. He would swallow his pride and ask, because he needed to fix what he'd broken if he ever hoped to be a functioning person again. He needed this all to stop.

“Hi,” she said against his ear, her tone neither excited nor irritated. Neutral. God, even grown up, he couldn't get over how cherubic she sounded. He clenched his phone. His knuckles hurt. She laughed. “Derek, you idiot, did you butt dial me?”
Amelia. The word caught on his tongue. Help. That word stuck, too.

When the trauma room door jolted open, he twitched, hanging up reflexively. He stood and jumped backward, the violent abruptness of his movement sending the stool rolling into the wall. The sharp corner of the counter slammed him in the waist and knocked his breath strangely in his healing chest. He blinked, upset as a new bath of adrenaline washed him head to toe, and his physical response meant shaking. Endless shaking. Nausea came next as a gurney roared into the room surrounded by paramedics and nurses in brown scrubs and Richard and Bailey.

“—GSWs to the chest, left thigh, and abdomen,” the paramedic at the patient's feet explained as they transferred the patient onto the steel examination table. Paper crinkled. “Patient is tachycardic with uneven breath sounds.”

Derek blinked at the sight on the table. A pile of limbs and bloody, mutilated meat. A man. His white shirt and light blue jeans had soaked through with shiny, bright red that mottled to a rusty brown toward the drying edges. A coiling snake tattoo wrapped the man's limb, pale arm from wrist to bicep. Ludicrously, all Derek could focus on was the man's right work boot. A tangled, tan-colored lace dangled over the side of the narrow table. Even the lace had been stained with red.

“Derek, get out,” Richard snapped, which would have been useful before the fucking gurney had been rolled into the room.

Instead, all Derek could do was stand there, shaking as he interpreted the devastation on the exam table. Gunshot wounds. Multiple holes. Multiple bullets. The chest, the leg, the abdomen. A mess. The nurses cut at the man's stained, wet clothes with disinfected, industrial shears.

No, Mr. Clark, Derek had begged, and Mr. Clark had listened, abandoned Derek for reasons that still baffled him.

Derek swallowed as he remembered the shivery, nauseating shock rolling through his body while his chest stabbed him with every heartbeat. Every breath. To the point that his own need for air had become a form of torture by itself. He'd lain on the floor on the catwalk on his back, panting, staring up at the white ceiling, unable to move as an ice bath had tunneled through his veins. Meredith wanted him to get up, but he didn't know why, and it hurt too much to think.

Derek. Please. Focus. Focus for me. It's me. It's Meredith.

Dr. Bailey tried to eclipse his view of the bloody man who would likely be nothing more than a body in a few moments, but she was too small. She gripped Derek's shoulders and shook him. He watched, unable to speak, as the nurses cut the man's jeans all the way to his hips.

Derek had lain on the operating room table, awake, shivery. They'd taken his clothes away with scissors and draped him with a thermal blanket that didn't feel warm. He couldn't remember when that had happened.

The operating room lights shined down on him like an oncoming train. He blinked woozily at the flaring brilliance, listening to the soft hum of Meredith's voice. She kept him attached to reality when all he wanted was to float away. He couldn't breathe. He felt lightheaded and sick. Something pricked his arm. The anesthesiologist apologized for a bad stick and tried again. Another prick. Another apology. He realized he had more than just Meredith in the room with him. When? Then he had a claustrophobic mask pressing down on his face that he was too weak to push away, and they asked Meredith if she was ready.
Dr. Bailey shook him hard, and the past flickered away. “Derek, come on,” she said. “Come on, snap out of it. Come with me. Let's go outside.” She glared at the frantic nurses. “Would somebody tell me why he wasn't kicked out of the room before we got here?”

“My fault,” said the nurse on the left with the scissors tersely, offering no explanation. She pulled the leftover pieces of the victim's bloody pants out from underneath his heavy body. A loud metal thunk hit the floor by Derek's feet. He looked down. Time slowed to a halting crawl. A gun rested on its side on the white floor tiles, spinning, and his throat closed up.

“Oh, he's packing,” the nurse said.

Derek couldn't breathe. He pawed at his throat, but there was no collar to loosen, no hands there, strangling him. Nothing solid to fight. His vision fuzzed around the edges.

“Stay away from it, people,” Richard said, his voice calm. “Someone call security to pick this up. Does he have anything else on him?”

“That's a Beretta 9mm,” the nurse said.

Derek choked on nothing at all. The idea of replacing his panic thoughts or counting seconds as he breathed escaped him. All of Dr. Wyatt's instructions dissolved in a whorl of hysterical fire. His knees gave out, and he slid the floor, a shaking, terrified pile of overstimulated muscle and bones. He would die this time. He would really die. He knew it.

“Derek!” Dr. Bailey said, right in his face, except all she was was a large pair of eyeballs. A dark, looming figure that would hurt him. Kill him. He curled away from her, but that only gave him an eyeful of the loose firearm as its spin came to a stop on the floor by his foot. The gun looked exactly like the one Mr. Clark had used. It had a black muzzle exactly like the one that Derek had stared into before the blinding firework of pain had burst open in his chest.

“Derek, look at me,” Dr. Bailey said. She shook him again. “Derek. The gun is on the floor. Nobody is holding it. It's not pointed at you. It's not pointed at anybody.”

“Cops like it for its stopping power,” Derek regurgitated uselessly.

Warm hands cupped the sides of his face. Directed his attention away from the metal pile of death on the floor. “Don't look at the gun; look at me,” Dr. Bailey said. “You're okay.” She shook him hard. “Do you hear me, Derek Shepherd? You are fine.”

The monitors went crazy in a whining assault of sound that made Derek flinch. “V-fib!” a nurse cried.

“Dr. Bailey, I need you,” Richard said.

Dr. Bailey cursed. She sprung from her crouch by Derek to help at the table, leaving him. Derek swallowed, nauseated as he stared at the gun. On a logical level, he knew he shouldn't be panicking. He knew he shouldn't be scared. It was a fucking gun. On the floor. Its wielder would likely be dead in five minutes, not on a rampage. That was all. But all he had left of logic was a teaspoon of disconnected thoughts. Primal panic had robbed him of everything else.

He flinched as a breathless nurse poked her head into the room. “Half of Seattle PD is in our lobby. They're demanding updates.”
It was too loud. Too loud and bright, and too many things were going on for him to focus.

“Is this guy a suspect?” Richard said.

The nurse shook her head. “No. Undercover cop.”

“Tell them we're doing our best, but they need to wait,” Dr. Bailey said, and the nurse scampered away. The door tapped shut behind her.

Derek clenched his fists. His throbbing heart wouldn't slow down. He shouldn't be panicking. Shouldn't be panicking. Shouldn't. Be. Panicking.

He climbed to his feet, barely able to control his trembling limbs.

“Derek?” Richard said. “Derek, how are you doing over there? Somebody page Dr. Hunt!”

Derek didn't answer. He couldn't speak. He wobbled out of the room. The bright, empty ER made him squint. Monitors squealed behind him. Another frantic call of, “V-fib!” nipped at his ankles. He flinched at the loud sound. Everything was too loud. And too bright. And too open. His limbs shook with chill as his body pulled blood out of his extremities to guarantee the safety of his heart and other vital innards. The room spun.

He stumbled blindly to the supply closet, dazed, unthinking, instinctual.

When he found the dark space, he closed the door behind him, shuffled to the corner, far away from the door, into the gap between two long rows of overstuffed shelving, and collapsed. He curled up, his back to the doorway, his soft parts facing the corner. He buried his face against his trembling knees, and he sat there in the dark. In the quiet. Breathing. Sick.

As the minutes passed, logic swept in like an oozing, molasses tide, leaving him tired. Still sick. But not panicking.

He blinked. His eyes pricked, and then the tears he'd been trying to hold onto all morning popped loose. He wiped his face. His torso jerked. He sucked in a breath. His futile resistance didn't stop the avalanche. Only delayed it for a teetering moment. Before he knew it, he was leaking like a fucking sieve as he sobbed and sniveled into his knees.

He hated people and work and guns. He hated them, and he couldn't do this. Couldn't push himself past this. Any of this.

A barbed breath filled his chest, and he made a grieving noise. Soft. Moaning. He pressed his hands against his mouth to muffle himself, humiliated. Breathing was a physical pain. Each gust of air tore his body. He closed his eyes and imagined Meredith hovering beside him in the darkness. *I'm not her, Derek,* his figment had said. *And you can't be a father if you stay in here.* Except for a long, needing moment, that was all he could think about. Staying in there. He wanted that safe place back, but he didn't have access anymore. Didn't have anything safe. Not without...

The door to the supply closet opened, and the lights flicked on. He blinked, squinting as his hurting eyes adjusted. A gasp hit his ears, and he cringed at the unmistakable sound of someone's pity.

“Dr. Shepherd?” said a familiar, feminine voice. A horrified voice.

He peered over his shoulder at her, dread coiling in his stomach, only to lose himself in the black
hole of memory like he always did when she was around. He sucked in a breath as his eyes rolled back and the wall rushed into him.

Gary Clark stared at him, the space between them separated by a sleek, black gun.

Words. Derek said words. He tried.

Adrenaline made his body quiver. Fight or flight? His body chose flight, but fear and logic made strange bedfellows, and they paralyzed him in a shivery, trembling pile. He swallowed. Flight just meant he’d get shot in the back.

His legs turned to jelly. Sweat dripped down the curve of his spine. His voice wavered, and he tried not to take a submissive stance. Tried. But he’d seen what guns did. Killed people. Killed his dad. He tried to convince the jabbering fear to shut up, but his thoughts kept coming back to that. To soft, wheezy, final words. To, “Derek, listen to me. This is very important.”

His hands moved in front of him. Please, they said for him when real words failed in his throat. Please, don’t.

Given dominance, Gary Clark advanced. Anger burbled in his tone. “No talking!” he said.

Derek’s legs drew him back one step. Two.

He tried. He tried to talk. He tried to break through and reach the man behind Gary Clark’s hating gaze, but fear burbled in Derek’s gut. He couldn’t even keep track of what he said. Couldn’t make it sound strong and commanding at all. The man who cheerfully announced that it was a beautiful day to save lives became submissive. Shivery. He couldn’t keep his breaths steady. He knew he looked terrified, and he knew that was probably a mistake. He radiated easy pickings like a tripping, sick gazelle for a lion.

Gary Clark’s gun shook. He stared at Derek with sharp, furious, hating eyes.

Derek tried to talk. The gun wavered, until it pointed at Derek’s feet. He made the mistake of thinking he’d made progress.

“Dr. Shepherd!” Dr. Kepner said behind him, clear as a bell. His stomach clenched. “Thank god, you’re back!”

He turned to see her running onto the catwalk. Toward him. Toward the fucking madman with a fucking loaded gun. Almost blasé about it. The sudden movements, the idiotic words, something, must have broken Mr. Clark out of his repentant spell, and when Derek refocused himself on the deadly problem at hand, he found himself staring down the barrel of a gun. Again. Mr. Clark stared at him with remorseless, hating eyes, and Derek knew he’d lost the battle in that moment. The moment when Dr. Kepner had stepped onto the fucking catwalk.

The loud crack of the shot broke his eardrums. The muzzle flash blinded him. For a moment, nothing hurt, and it made no sense, and then he was falling. He landed on his back. The breath knocked out of him and the back of his skull whacked into the hard floor. He lay there, bell rung and stupid. And then all his misfiring thoughts connected. Pain flared long before sound resolved in the roar.

He’d been shot. In the chest. And he couldn’t breathe.

He stared at the ceiling, breaths twisting in his torso while April panicked somewhere behind him. Sucking down air sent knives into his gut, but he needed air. He needed. The struggle became a
war. Needing air versus not wanting it. Eternity stretched into something longer and more torturous.

April abandoned him. Gary Clark pointed the gun, and Derek waited to die. “No, Mr. Clark,” Derek managed in a feeble attempt at... what? To save his own life? To flee?

Something drew Gary Clark's attention to his right. Derek looked, too, but he didn't see anything. Didn't see anything but a blur, and then he was alone, cast away like a cheap, expendable thing. He lay on his back, confused, unable to breathe or move or think. He didn't know why Mr. Clark had disappeared, or when he would come back.

When Derek blinked the past away, Dr. Kepner hovered right in front of him. The back of her hand rested on his forehead as if to check his temperature, and she stared at him as she leaned close. In his space. He could taste her exhalations on his tongue. The warmth of her skin radiated against the nervous, upset chill of his. Too close. She was too close.

She'd gotten him shot. He'd never remembered that before. He'd only remembered being abandoned to die on the floor.

“Get off me,” he snapped, his voice low, dangerous, strangled with embarrassment. She'd found him sobbing in the closet, and then he'd swooned. In front of her.

“Just like a eunuch,” Mr. Clark said, returning from his long silence.

April backed away from Derek, her concerned gaze glittering in the bright lights.

He struggled to stand. He felt like he'd been put through a garbage disposal. His muscles ached. His head hurt. His throat felt raw, the skin on his face, irritated. He wiped his tired eyes. The room wobbled as his balance faltered. He reached out for the shelf to steady himself at the same time she touched his arm to help.

“Dr. Shepherd, you—”

He stiffened. “Back off,” he told her, his voice a low growl, and she did. Her lower lip quivered like she might cry. He wished she would.

He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the ache of living.

It's safe, here, Mirror Meredith had said. You're safe. Please, don't be scared.

The pull between reality and fantasy tore him in two. He hadn't ever wanted anything like this. Escape. The beat of the desire drum throbbed in time with his racing heart, overruling every other half-formed thought in his head. It hurt. The wanting hurt, and his pathetic attempts at coping hadn't helped. Nothing had helped.

And Gary Clark laughed, and laughed, and laughed. “This is what you managed in my absence?” he said. “I should have shut up a long time ago, clearly.”

Derek stared at Dr. Kepner through his eyelashes, fighting to breathe. “I need a prescription,” he said.

She blinked and backed away a step. “Why? What for?”

“Oh, be still, my heart,” Mr. Clark said, cackling with glee. “Are you really doing what I think you're doing?”
Derek advanced. “I need you to write me a prescription for Percocet. I don't have time to see Dr. Altman.”

“Dr. Shepherd, I'm not sure that's appropri—”

He backed her into the wall, crowding her. Nothing mattered except the singsong call of Mirror Meredith's twisted voice in his head. *It's safe, here,* she said. He needed safe. He couldn't do this. He couldn't. “You did this to me,” he said.

Dr. Kepner swallowed. “Did what?”

“You got me shot,” he said.

“Oh, I think we both did that,” Mr. Clark said. “Don't you?”

Derek ignored his tormenter. He glared. “You got me shot, and then you left me bleeding out on the floor to save your own ass.”

“I didn't mean to leave you,” Dr. Kepner croaked. When she blinked, her eyes spilled over, and he felt bliss as he watched her misery stain her cheeks. She huddled in the corner by the door. He didn't give her any space. If she could feel even half the suffering he'd felt the last few months, it wouldn't be enough.

“I got you your job back, and I ended up in a lake of my own blood for my trouble,” he said.

“I... I...” she stammered. “I'm sorry.”

He leered. “You know what says sorry, Dr. Kepner?”

“Wh—”

He slammed his hand against the wall by her ear. She flinched. “A prescription. Write it.”

“But—”

She cowered, and he liked it. The black, dark twist of hatred coiled in his gut. “I'm still your boss, you know. I could easily take this 'job opportunity' away again.”

“But—”

“Write it!” he yelled. The room vibrated with his anger.

She snapped into motion. Her fingers shook as she withdrew her prescription pad from her pocket and scribbled something illegible on it, but he knew what it would say by heart. Percocet. Take 1-2 every four to six hours as needed for pain. He'd been on the 7.5mg/325mg pill. She'd probably write for the standard 2.5mg pill, but he didn't care. He'd just take more. It's not like the instructions meant anything.

“I'm sorry, Dr. Shepherd,” Dr. Kepner said. “I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to get you shot.”

She ripped the prescription from her pad and foisted it at him. He took it. The paper crumpled as he clenched his fist. “Dr. Kepner, I don't really care what you meant or didn't mean,” he said, his tone low and hating.

“But—”
“You did this to me,” he said. Fury like driving jackhammer throbbed with his heart. He thrilled at her terror as he hovered in her space. Too close. Larger than her. Scary. “You made me this person.”

“But—”

“Get out,” he said.

“Dr. Shepherd, I really—”

He slammed the wall with the flat of his palm again. The shelves along the wall wobbled, and packets of sterile bandages fell to the floor. “Get. Out.”

She made a shivery, upset sound that delighted him. He didn't move despite his words, which forced her to duck underneath his arm to get away. The door closed behind her, and he listened to her frantic footsteps as she fled from him.

Quiet followed.

He stared at the paper in his hands, and all his wrath and desperation shriveled. His hands shook. Overwhelming relief made his eyes water, and he sobbed once, not from pain or fear, but because it was over. All of it was over. He would go to the pharmacy, fill his prescription, take his pills, and feel safe. Not whatever ephemeral semblance of security he flailed for out here. It would be a long, lasting safe that would suck him down and require no thinking or effort. No thinking at all. And she would be there. Mirror Meredith. He shifted on his feet.

“Yes,” said Mr. Clark, “do it. Succumb. Show me how worthless you are.”

Derek folded the prescription, put it in his breast pocket, and stepped into the hallway.

“Derek,” said Dr. Bailey as she approached. Blood covered her scrubs, and she looked exhausted. “I've been looking for you everywhere.”

Derek licked his lips. “I'm fine, Miranda,” he said.

She frowned at him. He watched her gaze trace his shoes to his face. “Really? Because you look terrible,” she replied.

He laughed, feeling lighter than he'd felt in weeks. “No, really,” he said, smiling. He winked at her. “I'm fine.”

“You're sure?” she said.

“Absolutely,” he said, and he kept walking, leaving her behind to stare or follow or... whatever she wanted. He didn't care because none of it mattered.

Amy, he'd said. You need to stop doing this. You told me—

This-is-th'last-time, she'd slurred. I swear.

He stopped dead in the bright hallway as he thought of the time, long ago, when he'd watched her ride off into the rain in a blue Firebird, stoned out of her mind. He'd gotten the bright idea, in his subsequent frustration, to chase after her on his Harley. In the pouring rain. In the dark. Without a helmet or protective gear. He'd been lucky to walk away from that bout of idiocy with a concussion and an impaled thigh, and he'd only been a helpless bystander to Amelia's downward spiral.
He clenched his fists. Sense and reason returned with the scream of skidding tires in his head.

What would happen to Meredith? Or Mark? Or any of the countless people who'd stepped up to the plate to keep this jagged rock bottom from cutting him open again? They were all his helpless bystanders.

Best case scenario, he'd be leaving the woman he loved to raise a child alone. Their child. A woman who had an abandonment complex bigger than four Mount Rainiers stacked end to end. His lip quivered as he thought of all the promises he'd made her.

*I can't say it won't hurt, but you'll do great. And I'll be there the whole time.*

That would be a lie if he choked right now. He pulled the prescription from his pocket and stared at it. At the siren call toward deliverance.

*But I won't take it. I don't have any; I swear.*

He blinked. That would be a lie, too. Revulsion washed over him when he realized what he'd done, and before he suffered another attack of morality decay in the wake of desperation, he ripped the sheet of paper into illegible smithereens and stuffed the confetti into the nearest trashcan. He'd nearly turned every good thing that had happened in the last thirty days into a giant fucking lie.

Nausea crashed into him like a wave. He'd probably just gotten himself fired, too. He'd practically assaulted a coworker. Threatened her. Extorted her. All for a fucking prescription. And he'd liked it. He'd liked watching her snivel and shake.

“I told you,” Mr. Clark said, a snarl in Derek’s ear. “You are a sick. Depraved. *Fuck.*”

Indecision tore at him. He didn't know what to do. Find April? Apologize? She'd probably run the other direction the second she saw him, and he couldn't blame her for it, either. He'd acted reprehensible.

He closed his eyes for a minute, thinking. Panicking, really. What was he supposed to do, now?

“Ticktock, ticktock,” said Mr. Clark. Then he laughed and hummed the Jeopardy theme.

Derek stood in the middle of the hallway, frozen in that moment of realization and irresolution. What the fuck had he done? And what, now? Autopilot kicked in when gibbering upset wouldn't let him think beyond the sinking pull of dread. Instinct and nothing else yanked him through the searing, bright halls.

He didn't knock. Dr. Wyatt looked up as he stepped inside her office. She sat at her desk in front of a leafy salad piled high on a ceramic plate. Clumps of drippy, dressing-covered lettuce fell from her fork. Her temples pulsed underneath her skin as she chewed. She took a long look at him, frowned, and glanced at her watch.

She swallowed her bite of salad. “Derek, you're early,” she said.

He stood in the center of the room, a lost, lonely island. “I'm sorry,” he said. Or croaked. He blinked, and the room in front of his eyelashes shimmered. “Is this a bad time?”

He closed his eyes. *Please, please, don't be a bad time.* He didn't know where else to go.

“I'm eating my lunch,” she said.
He swallowed. "I'm sorry," he said.

He blinked, and he lost it. All over again. All semblance of dignity and poise and everything that made him the smallest bit human.

"You're a weak, sniveling wreck," said Mr. Clark.

Derek tried to glance at his watch, but the wall of tears veiled the time. He couldn't see more than blurry, bright shapes. He didn't know why he bothered to look, anyway. Meredith might not even be in the building anymore, and if she was gone, she would have just finished a thirty-six hour shift. He couldn't heap all of this on top of her. Not today. Not after how much he'd leaned on her already this morning. But who else was there? Who else was there that he could share everything with? He didn't know.

He turned toward the door, adrift.

"No, no," Dr. Wyatt rushed to say. "Stay. We can do your session early. What did you want to talk about?"

He opened his mouth, but he couldn't speak. All he did was leak.

"Why don't you sit?" Dr. Wyatt prodded. She pointed toward her couch with her fork. She took another mouthful of lettuce and brushed a wave of graying hair behind her ear while she chewed.

He sat on her couch in her tiny, cheerful, orange office. The rainbow of fish swam back and forth, and the water in the tank burbled. The room smelled flowery. Everything seemed bright and warm and too much when he felt cold and awful in comparison.

He wiped his face with the backs of his shaky hands. His skin felt raw. "I just extorted a coworker for a Percocet prescription," he admitted. It felt good to admit. To spill himself on the table for her and let her figure out how to approach this nightmare. Tiredness made his head ache.

"You really fucked up, this time," Mr. Clark said.

Dr. Wyatt wiped her mouth with a paper napkin, and she left her half-eaten salad behind on the desk as she picked up her notepad and settled into the chair across from the couch. She regarded him for a long, discerning moment. "Did you fill the prescription?"

"I tore it up and threw it out."

"That's a good sign."

"Extortion is a good sign?" he said. "I'll probably get fired."

"You didn't take drugs," she countered. "You came here, instead."

"So?"

"Derek, if it were easy to overcome addiction there wouldn't be such vast resources dedicated to it. You might not have overcome addiction, yet, but you just won a serious battle."

"By extorting my coworker?" he said, incredulous.

She gave him a sheepish grin. "Well, no. But the extortion created several paths for you, and you chose one that didn't end inevitably with drug use. That's a start."
“That's *not* a start,” he said, vehemence shaking his tone. “What I did was disgusting.”

She nodded, deep understanding in her eyes. “You're an ethical person,” she said. “Addictions counteract ethics, and that can be upsetting. You're making progress, whether you believe it or not.”

He put his elbows on his knees and pressed his face into his hands. He pulled his fingers through his tangled hair. “I don't feel like I've fixed anything.”

“And maybe you haven't, yet, but you've got your toolbox and a blueprint,” she said. “That's much better than before.”

“Why does it feel like this, then?”

She gave him a wry look. “Ever heard the expression the cure is worse than the disease?”

She scribbled on her notepad. He let the sound of it soothe him. He rubbed the soft knees of his scrubs with his palms.

“I think I like hurting people,” he said.

He looked up at Dr. Wyatt, who stared back at him with an even gaze that didn't judge. She didn't recoil or tell him how twisted he was. She shifted in her chair, recrossed her legs, and motioned for him to give her more. “Why do you think that?” she prodded.

“I have dreams,” he said. He closed his eyes, and he wiped his face. His skin felt sticky from crying. Hot. “About killing, and...”

“And, now, this?” Dr. Wyatt said. “The extortion?”

He nodded.

“You threatened this coworker?”

*I'm still your boss, you know,* he'd said. *I could easily take this 'job opportunity' away again.*

He nodded again.

“What about Meredith?” Dr. Wyatt said.

He looked up. “What about her?”

“Do you think about hurting her?”

Revulsion coursed through him. “No, of course not.”

“What about me?”

“No...”

She raised her eyebrows. “Anybody else specific?”

He didn't speak.

“Who did you extort for the prescription?” Dr. Wyatt said.

He looked back at his knees. “Dr. Kepner.”
“How did you feel when you did it?”

He shrugged. “I don't know.”

“Liar,” said Mr. Clark. “You felt good. You wanted to watch her cry.”

Derek put his head in his hands. “I... liked it,” he said.

Dr. Wyatt regarded him for a long, quiet moment. “You've told me that Dr. Kepner was involved in your shooting, yes?” she said.

Dr. Shepherd! Thank god, you're back!

His hands shook. Why had he remembered that, now? After so many months? He'd had the flashback of his shooting so many times he couldn't count the instances anymore, but he'd never remembered that little piece. The part where he'd felt the bullet pierce him. It'd been a blank in his head, but now, when he thought about it, he could recall everything.

From the way his ears seemed to pop, to the muffled sounds in the shot's wake. He hadn't been able to understand what April had been saying. He'd always assumed it was just the confusion of the moment. Now, he realized the loud sound of gunfire had shocked his ears into momentary dysfunction. He remembered the feel of the bullet as it incinerated a path inside of him. Remembered the explosive bloom of pain under his left breast, like a hot poker had been rammed underneath his nipple until the burning end touched his spine.

“Derek?” Dr. Wyatt said.

He blinked, realizing he'd been sitting there, fingering the remnant of his wound for who knew how long. His chest twinged. “Yes,” he said. “She was there.”

“Was the shooting her fault?”

“No,” Derek said.

“That's right,” said Mr. Clark. “It was your fault.”

“You don't sound convinced about that,” Dr. Wyatt said.

Derek blinked. You did this to me, he'd told Dr. Kepner. You made me this person.

He swallowed.

“Do you blame her, Derek? It's okay if you do.”

Something cold constricted in his chest. He clenched his fists until his hands ached. He opened his mouth and only a hiss of air popped loose. He took a slow, deep breath. “I got him to lower his gun, and then she came,” he said.

Dr. Wyatt nodded. More scribbling. “So, you do blame her.”

“It's my fault he was at the hospital,” Derek said. “Not hers.”

“Is it?”

“He came for me.”
“And we've talked a lot about your feelings of guilt over the people who were killed while Mr. Clark was looking for you,” Dr. Wyatt replied. “But what about you? What about when you got shot? You said you got Mr. Clark to lower his weapon.”

“I did,” Derek said. He ran his hands through his hair, agitated. “I never remembered the rest before...”

“But, now, you do?”

He shook his head as the moment replayed in his head, Dr. Shepherd! Thank god, you're back! “She ran up behind me while I was talking to a man holding a gun. What person does that? Why did she...?”

He blinked tears as he felt the bullet ram into him. Again, again, again. A burning echo. It hurt. It hurt so much, and he'd always thought Mr. Clark would have done it, regardless, because he'd been hellbent on exacting his judgments, but there'd been a moment when he hadn't been hellbent at all, and the ceasefire hadn't been broken by Derek.

_You stood up to him_, Meredith had said as though it were some sort of definitive thing. _You were brave. You got him to lower his gun_. As if it hadn't been a glitch on the way to bone-shattering inevitability. _I watched, Derek. I saw that._

He hadn't understood why Meredith would fixate on that moment, before. Now, he realized she'd watched April throw a grenade without the pin on a situation he'd almost had under control. The idea that he hadn't caused these crushing months of misery for himself with his own cowardice... Something lightened inside. Something small, but noticeable.

_Not your fault_, a hesitant voice said in his head. Not Gary Clark's rough growl. Something softer and forgiving. Perhaps his Mirror Meredith, giving him a respite. He didn't know. He rocked in his chair as unbearable despair became something... less. Not gone. Not hardly. But less. Like an ache had receded that he'd suffered for so long that he'd forgotten what it felt like to live without it. The absence allowed him to breathe through his discomfort instead of be squished by it, and it felt...

Better.

He wiped his eyes. He realized he wanted to ask Meredith about what she'd seen when he'd been shot. She'd asked him once what he remembered. He'd never asked her about her experience. Was there more he didn't remember? Some other set of dots he'd connected wrong because his head was a mess?

Maybe. Maybe not. But he wanted to know her version of events.

“Let's go back to the dreams you mentioned,” Dr. Wyatt said, her soft voice interrupting the watercolor memories blotched before his eyes. “Tell me about them.”

_I'm going to snap your fucking neck._

Derek shuddered as he remembered his hands. Squeezing.

“I dream about killing Mr. Clark,” he said. “I try to strangle him. Then I take his gun, and I shoot him.”

“Is there anybody else in this dream when you kill?”

Lawyers. At the beginning, there'd been lawyers. _So, she was alive, until you withdrew care, until_
you pulled the plug, one of them had said when he'd tried to explain. But then he'd leaped across the table at Mr. Clark, and everybody in the room had faded away like dispersing mist. There'd been only Derek and Mr. Clark, interlocked in a vicious, violent, bloody struggle. One that always ended with Derek staring down at Mr. Clark as Mr. Clark's life bled away on the catwalk. Alone.

“Not when I kill,” Derek said.

“Ever?” Dr. Wyatt prodded.

“No.”

“So, the only two people in this hemisphere of desired harm were involved with your shooting,” she replied.

He shrugged. “I guess.”

“Why do you guess and not know?”

“What if there's somebody else, and I just haven't run across him?” Derek frowned. “Her. Them. I don't know.”

“Somebody else you want to hurt?” Dr. Wyatt said.

“Yes.”

“I don't know.”

He glowered. “What do you mean, you don't know?”

She shrugged as if his worries didn't matter. “I mean I don't know what would happen if there's somebody else, but I think, based on your established pattern, that it's pretty safe to assume there's nobody else until there's somebody else. I don't think extrapolation is warranted here.”

“Why?” he demanded. “I dreamed about shooting somebody, and then I threatened a coworker.”

She leaned back in her chair. The wood creaked, and the cushion rustled. She tapped her pen on her notepad. “Derek, do you understand what targeted violence is?”

“I don't understand any of this,” he said, a sick feeling coiling in his stomach.

“It's the ultimate power exchange,” she said. “There's a winner and a loser. It's easy to feel mighty when your opponent is at your mercy.”

“You're saying I want to feel powerful?”

“I'm saying there are two people in this world who we know engendered deep, unshakeable feelings of helplessness and horror for you, feelings so unshakeable they caused you to develop a mental illness, and I don't think your reaction to either Gary Clark or Dr. Kepner has anything to do with loving violence,” she said.

“What does it have to do with, then?”

She leaned toward him. “What do you think it has to do with?” she asked.

“Taking control?” he hazarded.
“Of a sort,” she said with a nod. “I’d imagine enduring severe trauma is a bit like being stripped against your will. It can be dehumanizing, terrifying. I think of the actions you’ve described to me as an attempt at reestablishing a sense of self. Sort of... resetting the balance of power within yourself to a level you feel capable of enduring.”

He shook his head despite the hope welling in his gut. *You're not a sadist*, Meredith had said, and now, despite what he'd done, a second source, a more impartial one, seemed to be agreeing. He rocked in his seat at the twisting uncertainty. “I don't want to reestablish anything,” he said, blinking back tears he couldn't help. “I want to make all of this stop. I want to make the dreams stop. I don't kill people. I'm a doctor to save people.”

Dr. Wyatt smiled. “Well, that's the good news.”

“What’s even remotely good about this?”

“Consciously or subconsciously, you're reaching for equilibrium right now. One of the people who took your control away is dead. You can't reset the balance of power anywhere but in your subconscious, so, you dream. One is living, and you interacted with her in a way that set you up as the superior in the situation.”

“How the hell is that good?”

“I think these sessions will help you, in the long run, with finding a healthier outlet for all these feelings you have,” she said. “We can redirect your reaching for balance and control to somewhere more socially appropriate.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. It was a little too late for that, now that he'd done something so socially inappropriate he could get fired. “When?” he said. Painful breaths chuffed in his chest as he squeezed his fingers. “Soon?”

“I'd be lying if I tried to give you any specific answer,” she replied.

He put his head in his hands.

“Let's start with a little exercise,” she said. “I want you to start thinking about things in terms of what you're deciding for yourself.”

He rubbed his face. “What do you mean?”

“Have you been to lunch, yet?” she said.

He frowned. What did lunch have to do with anything? “No...” he said.

“When you go, and you pick what you're going to eat, I want you to tell yourself what you picked and why you picked it, and I want you to jot it down.”

His frowned deepened. “That's...”

“I know it sounds really silly, but it does add up,” she said. “When you go home today, I want you to tell yourself why you're choosing to leave work at that moment. Jot it down. When you change into your PJs, maybe stop and ask yourself why you picked those PJs. Jot that down.”

“But that's...”

“By drawing attention to the choices you make, even the small ones, you're going to start realizing
exactly how much power you do still have over your own life,” she said. “I mean, why did you come here early today?”

“I needed to talk to someone.”

“Why not Meredith?”

He shook his head. “I don’t...” he began, unable to finish.

He'd gotten used to this, he realized. Having Dr. Wyatt as a sounding board. A woman who was compensated monetarily to help him sort things out. He felt a lot less like he was unfairly burdening her than he did with Meredith, who, though she never said a word to the contrary, never told him to shut up or go away when he needed somebody, even at her own expense, had grown more and more tired of entertaining his insecurities as the weeks had dragged onward. Her slipping patience with him that morning when he'd been less than articulate only confirmed the heaps of strain he'd piled onto their relationship.

“It's okay if you don't know why,” Dr. Wyatt said with a warm smile, misinterpreting his churning silence. “What's important is that you realize you made a choice to come here.”

“I... did.”

She nodded. “You definitely did,” she said. “You make a lot of choices. Every day. I want you to start tabulating them. Just for a few days, until you're thinking about the choices you make by rote.”

“Okay.”

She smiled at him, her gaze bright, encouraging. “We'll get there, Derek. I don't know when, but we will. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

Dr. Wyatt glanced at her watch. “Unless you want to talk about something else, I think that's a good stopping point for today. Do you agree?”

He nodded mutely.

“How do I get you to work on my lunch before it gets too soggy.” She returned to her desk and picked at what was left of her salad, leaving him be to think and reassemble without scrutiny.

He stared at his knees, trying to gather the flayed remnants of all his thoughts. A tired headache had flared behind his eyes, throbbing, crushing. He didn't have any idea what he would do if Dr. Kepner filed a complaint with HR. He wasn't sure how he'd get through the rest of the workday, or how he would even begin to function socially at Joe's that night. He didn't know how he'd tell Meredith what he'd done that day, either. How close he'd come, but he needed to. He needed to tell her, if only to preserve the trust he was trying so hard to rebuild in the wake of squandering it.

He rubbed the remnant of his bullet wound through his lab coat and scrubs.

_Not your fault_, the small voice whispered again.

With his unlocked memories, a small piece of chaos in the disorder had corrected itself, at least. He wiped his irritated eyes, trying to compose himself enough to leave Dr. Wyatt's office and go to
lunch. *Not my fault*, he thought, echoing, testing out the words with his own voice and timbre as he remembered the bullet cleaving his insides. He would take it, he decided. The hope. He wanted it. Wanted to keep it. A small piece of hope that things were getting better despite how horrible he felt. Even a small piece of hope was a lot more than he'd had before, and Mr. Clark, for once, said nothing.

*Not your fault*, the little voice repeated in Mr. Clark's absence, and Derek listened.
Chapter 22

Derek had been living the last few hours in a shocked daze, drifting from one moment to the next without plan or forethought. He’d ended up in the cafeteria after his session with Dr. Wyatt, and he’d eaten alone at a small table in the farthest corner, seeing, hearing, but not really watching or listening. Eyes had been focused on him everywhere, but he’d been almost too numb to care. He’d had no plans about how to take his life back or to fix his fracturing future as a doctor or a husband or a father or anything. Plans required thinking, and... he couldn't really do that, yet. Couldn't think. He could only exist, pulled forward by a morsel of hope.

He wasn’t looking for April when he found her. By nothing more than cruel happenstance, he saw her in the bright hallway outside the cafeteria, first in haggard profile as she rounded the corner, and then face-to-face. Sunlight slanting through the windows made the ragged chunks of brown hair that had fallen down around her eyes shine. Deep, irritated red blotched her cheeks. Puffy skin hugged her bloodshot eyes, which widened as she caught sight of him. She stopped in her tracks. A moment passed in which she didn't move. Didn't breathe. Didn't speak. Then she turned on her heels and darted around the corner from which she'd first appeared.

A jagged spear of guilt stabbed him underneath the ribs. He’d done that. Made her cry. Him. He took one step, two steps, and then aimless ambling became a pointed jog. He didn't have any plans or answers, but he did need to do one thing. Apologize.

He rounded the corner and called after her retreating figure, “Dr. Kepner, wait.” He hadn't said much to anybody since leaving Dr. Wyatt's office, and the words stumbled from his throat, cracked and broken and dry. A soft request, not a command. April didn't stop. He cleared his throat, and tried again. “Please, wait,” he said, stronger, more hoping.

She stopped and sighed, a huffy, displeased sound, and then she turned to face him. She wiped her wet eyes, ruining the effect of her angry glare with her distress. “What do you want?” she said, her tone petulant.

They were alone in the short hallway. An empty, discarded gurney kept them separated. Her bloodshot gaze pierced him, and a quiver of nerves took residence in his gut. He had no plan. No answers. But remembering every word he'd said to her, how he'd threatened her, nauseated him. Disgusted him. He swallowed.

“I want to apologize for earlier,” he said. He took a breath. “I'm deeply, truly sorry for what I said, and for the position I put you in. I didn’t fill the script. I tore it up. I'm sorry.”

Her gaze didn't flicker or soften. “You meant it all,” she accused. “What you said to me. Didn’t you?”

“You did this to me,” he'd said. “You got me shot.”

He looked at his feet as vicious memories tumbled around in his head. Of Mr. Clark lowering his gun, and then of April jogging toward Derek like it was any other day, and there wasn't a man standing with a loaded firearm only feet away. Of the white ceiling rushing over Derek's field of view as he fell backward. Derek's lip quivered as, in his head, he hit the ground on the catwalk, shot and bleeding. He forced himself to take a long breath to save himself from losing his barely-managed composure.

“Do you blame her, Derek?” Dr. Wyatt had said. “It's okay if you do.”
“I’m... deeply sorry for saying it,” was all he could muster, his voice shaky and low and barely there. “My behavior was despicable.”

He couldn’t lie, even with her glaring at him, even knowing false words of repentance might mean he wouldn’t lose his job. He was sorry for what he’d said. Deeply. And he was sorry he’d threatened her. And sorry he’d let himself lose his figurative head so horrifically. But he’d meant every cold, hating word, and white lying himself out of the situation felt more wrong than saying those things in the first place.

A long silence followed. She sniffed, and nodded. To him or to herself, he didn’t know. Then her silence became blubbering.

“I didn’t mean for any of it to happen. I swear, I didn’t mean it,” she wailed, and he felt nothing. No sympathy. No relief that she suffered. Nothing but emptiness. “I saw my friend with her brains splattered on the floor that morning, and I... The whole day was scrambled. I never meant for you to be hurt. I lo—” Her words cut off abruptly, and her eyes widened, as if she’d almost let something slip that she didn’t want to say. She cleared her throat, almost choking on the gesture as she wiped her eyes once more. “I mean I’ve always been grateful to you for giving me a second chance.”

Derek shifted from foot to foot as his gut churned. She was fishing for something he couldn’t hope to offer right now, and the longer he spoke to her, the more he regretted approaching her without a plan or a clear head. Without anything other than the intrinsic knowledge that he needed to apologize.

“I know you didn’t mean it,” Derek said, “but I...” Can’t. Can’t forgive. He couldn’t say can’t. He got stuck on the word.

“You can’t do anything,” Mr. Clark said, a whisper in the din.

Derek was so sick of not being able to do things, and he couldn’t say the word to this woman who’d nearly gotten him killed and caused a whole mountain of can’ts. A better person would forgive, he knew, but he was apparently shit, and he couldn’t stop watching the white ceiling spill over his head as he tumbled backward. Couldn’t stop feeling the bullet cleave his chest with an incinerating blade of pain. All because of her blithe moment of negligence. Negligence with his life.

April blurred, and he clenched his teeth, blinking. He would not lose his composure in front of her. Not again.

“I’m sorry for what I said,” was all he could say, almost a whisper.

April bristled. “You said that already,” she snapped. “So, you won’t forgive me, but you expect me to forgive you?”

This was going horribly.

“What did you expect?” said Mr. Clark.

Derek swallowed as he shook his head. “I don’t expect anything,” he said, meaning it. Go. Get out. Everything in his body was screaming at him to remove himself from this conversation before he did something else he’d regret. “I just wanted you to know that I’m deeply sorry, and that you don’t have to worry about... your job.”

He didn’t give her a chance to reply. He turned on his heels and fled back the way he’d come.
“So, what is that?” Mark said.

The loud intrusion tore Derek from his troubled musing. He blinked as the sounds of the dim, noisy bar pressed against him. Voices. The crack of pool balls striking each other like distant gunfire in the back room where the pool tables were. Glasses clinking. Joe shuffling behind the counter of the bar. And Meredith.

Meredith was laughing again, a bright, cheerful, warm sound that reminded him of bells or birds or birds and bells all at once. The warm, recognizable timbre of her pleasure slid down his spine like she'd run her hand along his back, and his tense muscles loosened. She sat across the room with Alex, Cristina, and Lexie. Between them rested two beers, a fizzing soda, and something clear with a lemon garnish. Water, perhaps.

Alex said something Derek couldn't hear. Cristina made a face, Lexie blushed beet red, and Meredith smiled in that cute, coy way she did, with her incisors nipping into her pink, plush lower lip. She had a lot of different smiles. That one in particular, radiant and shy at the same time, warmed him. He didn't see it often enough anymore, and he found himself tempted to stare, except she was sitting in profile with her friends on the opposite side of the bar. All she had to do was turn her head, and she would see him staring, and he didn't want to intrude on her fun.

“What is what?” Derek said absently.

Mark pointed to the small spiral notebook Derek had procured earlier that day from the hospital gift shop after his horrific collision with April. Derek's fingers clenched around his pen reflexively at the scrutiny. The notebook, which had a dark blue cover, was the size of his palm, and he'd already filled the first several pages with his slipshod scrawl.

1. Ate an apple for lunch – easy to digest.
2. Apologized to April – right thing to do.
3. Found Miranda – wanted busywork.
4. Napped in Mark's office – tired, needed to wait anyway.
5. Came inside the bar –
6. Waited to tell Meredith the truth –
7. Ordered water, no lemon –

“That,” Mark said, frowning. “Please, don't tell me you've gone all Anne Frank on me.”

“It's not a diary,” Derek said. “It sure looks like a diary to me.”

“Nothing,” Mark said with a shrug. His gaze creased as his serious look deepened into a frown again. “It's just... not something a man does at a bar.”

Derek glared. “What the hell is it to you if I want to write a diary, anyway?”

Derek sighed as he stared at the notebook resting between his palms. Off in his own head space, he'd been playing catch up on his assignment for the last fifteen minutes, but he still had three choices listed with no reasons. Mark's scrutiny made it difficult to think, and all the noise made it
hard to think, and everything made it so fucking hard to think, and worse, Mark was sort of right.

Keeping a list like this was definitely not something a normal man did at a bar with his friends, but Derek was so desperate for something to work to counter his heaping plate of mental spaghetti that he thought he might consider donning a hula skirt and dancing on the table with a ukelele if Dr. Wyatt thought it would fucking help. *Something* had to help. Well, maybe not a hula skirt. But the ukelele... He imagined it would be similar to a guitar, at least.

The black gel pen he'd been using slipped from his grip and rolled an inch as he pushed the small pad of paper idly between his hands, back and forth across the smooth, polished surface. They'd ordered drinks from one of the wandering waitresses, but the drinks hadn't arrived yet, leaving lots of space on the lacquered wooden table for embarrassed, diversionary ping-pong. Mark's gaze darted back and forth, following the offending object.

Not normal.

A familiar, coiling snarl gathered in Derek's head. Not normal. “You're not—”

“It's homework,” Derek admitted before his thoughts could take a bad turn.

Mark's eyebrows raised. “Homework?”

“It's for Dr. Wyatt.”

“Dr. Wyatt wants you to write a diary?” Mark replied, a teasing smirk on his face.

“It's not a fucking diary, Mark.”

“You're writing your intimate, innermost feelings about what you had for lunch on it.”

Derek snorted as Mark drew his attention to the first item on the list, the apple for lunch. “You know, that explains a lot about you,” Derek said, a weak, wry grin slanting his lips.

“What does?” Mark said.

“The fact that you think what you had for lunch is diary material.”

“Oh? What exactly does it explain about me?”

Derek shrugged. “I think people usually save their diaries for more weighty things.”

“What exactly are you getting at?” Mark demanded.

Derek shrugged again, unable to keep the smirk off his face.

Mark's eyebrows raised as the pieces connected. “Are *you* implying *I'm* emotionally stunted?” he said, his tone incredulous.

A helter-skelter, scruffy group of four filed into the bar and sat at an adjacent table between Mark and Derek's table and the bar. One of the four was tall. Like six-foot-five, and bulky like a body-builder. He wore a scuffed leather biker jacket and he looked... dangerous. All four of them looked dangerous. The big one could probably crack Mark like an egg. Derek would be an afterthought in the omelet of pain.

Derek inched backward in his seat. The big man blocked Derek's line of sight to Meredith and her friends. An unsettled feeling crept along Derek's spine.
God, the room was so fucking crowded, stuffed full of shoulder-to-shoulder people looking for cheap beer and peanuts after a long day at work. All the social bombardment made Derek's ears itch with every sound, and he couldn't relax or sit still in his seat. Derek hoped happy hour would end soon, perhaps driving the bar back to a more tolerable level of occupancy.

The walls closed in, and Derek's shoulders hunched defensively.

The four dubious intruders wheeled their stools around to face the television over the bar, which was muted, but showed the Yankees slowly destroying the Mariners at Yankee Stadium. A fly ball popped up and was caught, resulting in an out against the Yankees, and the group of four clapped with bland enthusiasm, having only just tuned in. Mariners fans, then, Derek guessed. With their backs to him, he didn't feel quite as threatened, and he forced himself to look at Mark, to try and function despite the coil of nerves fluttering inside his gut.

“Wh...” he tried, but his voice faltered, and he swallowed.

Mark watched him, his incredulous look shifting to concerned.

Derek had gotten good at making himself deal with small social situations. One-on-one interaction. One-on-two. Even one-on-three or one-on-four. He could usually even pretend to be fine even when he wasn't. But this whole bar thing was more than a challenge. To a small degree, it hurt.

Derek rubbed the bridge of his nose with his shaky fingers. He rolled his shoulders to loosen up. “I'm sorry, what?” Derek said, his voice soft as he tried to force himself beyond his tremble-y, easily distracted weakness.

If Mark felt any irritation at Derek's space-out session, he didn't show it. “I said, are you saying I'm emotionally stunted?” Mark repeated, his tone innocuous, but something sharper hovered in his gaze.

For a moment, Derek couldn't remember what they'd been talking about. He blinked. He'd been joking, really, but Mark didn't seem amused. At all. A small caution flag waved in the back of Derek's mind, but he shoved it away. He and Mark always teased and needled each other. This was no different.

Derek gave Mark a wary grin. “I might be,” Derek said.

Mark laughed, but the sound wasn't a happy one. “Coming from you, that's kind of ironic.”

The last of Derek's cautious grin faded. He frowned. “How is that ironic?”

“Well, who's seeing a shrink?” Mark said.

Derek prickled. The big man in the biker jacket shifted on his stool, his leather coat creaking. There was a bulge in the rear pocket of the man's leather pants. Probably keys or... could be a weapon or... Derek shied backward another inch, his hands gripping the sides of the table as though it were his life preserver.

“And who stole whose wife?” Derek snapped.

Mark's wounded expression lashed Derek like a knife. Derek closed his eyes for a moment and took slow, deep breaths. He had to stop doing this. Letting his temper take him by the reins whenever he felt terrified. He was scared all the time, and it'd turned him into a nasty, despicable person. He'd come to Joe's to try and remember how to socialize. Not fight with his friend over a necrotic, beat-to-shit horse that would never heal.
Mark stared, silent, his expression unreadable for moment after passing moment. The group of four at the table next to them jeered at the television. “Low blow,” Mark said darkly, his gaze darker.

Derek's nerves fluttered as he tried to resist the billion different pulls on his injured attention span. The television. The dangerous people less than two strides away. All the noise. Mark. He would look at Mark. The person with whom Derek was trying to have a discussion. He wouldn't be frightened, and he wouldn't lash out like an ass. They could talk.

“So was yours,” Derek countered, forcing civility into his tone.

“Yours was lower,” Mark said.

Derek sighed. “Dr. Wyatt is helping me.”

“And I've apologized for the thing with Addison a thousand times.”

Derek glowered. “An apology doesn't make it go away.”

“And the reason you're seeing the shrink doesn't mean you're less emotionally stunted,” Mark said. He fiddled with an empty coaster, staring at his fingers like he was performing complicated, pinpoint surgery on a phantom only he could see. “Just... you know.” Mark shrugged and didn't look up, uncharacteristically cowed and quiet as his focus intensified on the coaster. “It's about different things.”

“What, my coping skills blow, and you stab your friends in the back with a ten-blade when they least expect it?” Derek said, incredulity dripping from his tone.

Mark wouldn't stop playing with the coaster. Wouldn't look up. His shoulders slumped, and he didn't speak, and Derek had no idea what to do or how to handle this situation. He hadn't wanted to have this fight again. Except the whole fucking disaster was like a bug bite on Derek's brain. Whenever he scratched, it itched more.

“You hurt me, Mark,” Derek said, not sure what else to say.

“I know I did,” Mark said. He swallowed. “But that doesn't give you the right to keep making me pay.”

“I’m not making you pay anymore,” Derek countered. “That doesn't mean you can cancel your fucking debts like it's bankruptcy court.” He ground his teeth together. This was edging away from civil.

“I loved her.”

Derek sighed. “You just don't get it, do you? It was never about Addison; it was about me.”

Mark slapped the coaster on the table. When he looked up, his melancholic expression had sharpened into something more volatile. Something angry. Churning. “That's all it's ever about. You.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You, Derek,” Mark said. “You ride around on your moral high horse like the fucking King of the Universe, judging everybody.”

Derek blinked.
You're not my dad, and you're not my doctor. Stay the fuck away from me. You don't understand anything, Derek.

Amy had said that to him, moments before running out into the pouring rain and getting into a car with her drunk friends. He'd pulled the tarp off his bike and gotten on without a helmet. He'd chased after her. He'd woken up with his bloody face jammed against the rough pavement, alone, shivering, wet, and stuck.

I'm done, he'd said after she'd overdosed a year later. She'd been propped up in her hospital bed, pale and almost lifeless. She had been lifeless, earlier. Amy, I won't do this with you, anymore.

Her eyes had been wet. She'd blinked. I never asked you to, she'd said, her voice bitter as she'd glared.

You're going to die if you keep this up, he'd said, trying to keep his voice cold. You're a liar, and an addict, and you're wasting your life.

And then he'd left her. He'd shut the door behind him before she could respond. It'd been one of the easiest and hardest things he'd ever done.

The group of four at the adjacent table broke into cheers, and Derek glanced wildly at the television. Loaded bases unloaded. Mariners gained four runs in a single at-bat. He dropped his head into his hands, rubbing the bridge of his nose. There was so much noise.

“I do not,” Derek said, his voice tired. But he was such a liar. He did. He did judge. All the time.

“You do, too,” Mark said, echoing Derek's inner thoughts. “Except, now, you don't even have a fucking high horse anymore, and you're still doing it.”

Derek couldn't speak.

“We all do stupid shit, Derek,” Mark snapped, “but in case you haven't noticed, I'm still here trying to help, despite all your unbelievable fuckery. And you? You always leave. So, who exactly are you trying to call emotionally stunted?”

Hypocrite. Hypocrite.

“You're a fucking hypocrite,” Mr. Clark snarled in his ears, and Derek closed his eyes, trying to shut the words out as his throat closed up.

“Fucking hypocrite,” Mark snapped like an echo. His stool squawked in protest as he pushed it backward along the wood floor and rose to his daunting, full height. He made a scathing visual appraisal of the table and of Derek, and he scoffed before he turned away, grabbing his wind breaker from the pile of their coats on the adjacent stool.

Do you hit all your patients? Derek had asked.

Derek swallowed. “I'm sorry,” he said, feeling nauseous.

Mark froze.

Derek's hands shook. “You've helped me a lot, too, and I'm sorry. Thank...” He took a deep, cleansing breath. “Thank you.” He'd never said thank you. He'd meant to, but he hadn't. So many times.
Bewilderment replaced fury. Mark stared, and Derek couldn't take the scrutiny, or the revelation of his own poor character. Derek had said thank you, and Mark looked like he'd been presented with some sort of miracle. Water into wine, or the parting seas before his feet, or some other impossibility. That wasn't the sort of reaction that was easy to see.

Derek looked at his lap. “You and Meredith have both stayed, and I...” *Don't know why I deserve it,* he didn't say.

“You don't deserve it,” said Mr. Clark.

“Thank you,” Derek said, choking hoarsely.

A rustle filled the space between them as Mark replaced his windbreaker and sat gracelessly on the stool he'd vacated moments earlier. He scooted back into his seat. He cleared his throat. “Whatever, man. It's not a big deal,” he said, sounding as awkward and uncomfortable as Derek felt.

Except it was a big deal. Mark had been there from the start of this whole pile of shit. Not necessarily vocal about it – quiet – but he'd been there.

He'd brought his PS3 and hooked it up to the television so Derek would have something to do at the house while he was healing. Mark had helped Meredith carry that hulking chair up the stairs to the bedroom, back when Derek had needed to sleep in a chair for part of the night. Mark had also helped her get Derek himself up the stairs after the return trip from Seattle Presbyterian, when Derek had been too shaky and sick and tired to walk more than a few feet, let alone climb steps. Mark had rearranged his entire schedule so that Derek would have somebody at home those first few weeks after the shooting, once Meredith had run out of leave. Mark had been there when Derek had been kicking the Percocet, too, doing things even a paid nurse might wince over, like cleaning up all the vomit and holding up a grown man in the shower. And then there was today. Mark had pushed him to do something social, and though it felt horrible, Derek was smart enough to realize it might be best for him in the long run. Just like he was trying to push through the badness at work, he could push through the devastated wasteland of his social life. Maybe, salvage something and start enjoying it again. Find some level of normalcy somewhere.

*Mark was drunk as a fucking skunk. His little car slammed into the barrier and caught fire. His thumbs jammed on his controller, and the clicks and clacks echoed over the roaring sound of engines and goofy music.*

*Derek blinked at the assault of color and sound. The drugs made all of the sensory bloom so hard to process. He swallowed, putting his controller down, his hands shaking. His car rolled to a stop while Mark fumbled through another lap with his own damaged vehicle. The lower part of the screen flashed some sort of message at Derek. Probably something like, “Press A to move your car forward, you dumb fuck.” But Derek couldn't read because everything was spinning.*

*When Mark noticed Derek wasn't participating, he pressed pause and looked at Derek, his gaze bright, his face flushed. “What'samatter?” he slurred.*

*The blankets rustled as Derek struggled to stand. He was so exhausted, the mere act of putting weight on his feet sucked all of his willpower away, and he stood by the couch, in the center of the room, swaying. The backs of his knees pressed against the cushions and threatened to buckle. His battered chest ached with every inhalation. The fullness in his bladder urged him onward, but the bathroom was... really far away.*
Mark lumbered oafishly to his feet.

“I'm fine,” Derek snapped, his voice hoarse. He looked toward the hallway forlornly. He'd barely made it to the couch from the bathroom with Meredith helping. He was so fucking tired of being helped.

Mark shuffled next to Derek and put an arm around Derek’s waist. “Bathrum?” he said.

“You're drunk,” Derek replied.

“And you’re shh... shtoned. We’ll be a shh... shircus act.”

Derek closed his eyes. He shifted one foot forward. Every muscle wailed. The room spun around his head. The bathroom was so far. “I can't,” he whispered, an echo of hours earlier, when he'd been hanging off the towel rack, an inch away from collapsing because he'd had nothing left inside. His eyes burned. He didn't think he could bear another accident. But he didn't think he could walk by himself, either. A lump formed in his throat, raw and hurting.

“Wanna glass?” Mark said, a loud breath more than speech, by Derek's ear.

“I'm not going to pee in a fucking cup!” Derek snapped as his face turned blistering red and his eyes spilled. He wiped the mess away with the backs of his palms. He was such a fucking piece of shit.

The hand at Derek's back pressed into him, urging him forward. “Then move,” Mark said.

“I can't,” Derek said, almost a growl. He hurt. “I can't do this. I'm tired.”

Mark moved instead. A wobbly step. The momentum pulled Derek forward. Derek gasped, and he clawed for Mark's shoulders. Mark said nothing. They rested.

“Move,” Mark commanded after a moment. They shuffled forward a step. The loose bedding and blankets fell away like gnarled vines slipping free. Derek rested, his fingers clutching tents of Mark’s shirt as though he thought them a life preserver. “Another,” Mark said, and they moved again. Again. Shuffling. Sliding. Swaying.

By the time they made it to the hallway, sweat slicked Derek's brow, and breathing wrought columns of fire in his chest. But he'd made it. He rested by the doorframe, panting. Mark grinned sloppily at Derek and smacked him on the shoulder.

“Thanksh, man,” Mark slurred. He grabbed the other side of the door frame and swung a drunken loop-de-loop around the frame, hanging by his extended arm, and slingshotted inside. Derek gaped as Mark shut the door. “Didn't think I could make it,” said Mark's rumbling, slurred voice through the door. “I'm fucking... dru... drunk.”

A familiar liquid sound filled the silence.

Derek pressed his forehead against the wall as he tried to catch his breath. A bead of sweat slipped down the tip of his nose. His limbs shook. He thought he might have to sit down or fall down. Or possibly throw up from exertion. For now, he leaned. A small smile tugged at his lips.

Derek looked down at his list of choices as all his memories of Mark whirled in his head.

I'm sure that looked ridiculous, Derek had said after waddling like a duck to get into Mark’s Mustang without hurting himself.
I'm sure I don't care, Mark had replied. Always there. Supporting.

Derek took a deep breath, eyes closed as he listened to the bedlam of the bar. People. Everywhere. Talking, drinking, playing. The Mariners fans at the next table whooped again with glee, but Derek watched Mark, who sat across the table from him, eyes averted, fiddling with his coaster again. Mark didn't do emotional talks like this. Certainly not prolonged ones. Mark was Mark. But he was the best friend Derek had ever had beside Meredith.

Derek stroked the small notebook with his index finger. “I'm recording my choices,” he said.

“More of a ledger.”

“A diary ledger.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “Fine, it's a diary ledger,” he said. “Whatever you want to call it.”

“So, what's it for?” Mark said.

“To help me.”

“Help you, how?”

Derek shrugged as he stared at his list, which was still left with three empty reasons. Why he'd come here. Why he'd chosen to lie to Meredith for a few hours despite the trust he was trying so hard to reestablish with her. Why he'd ordered a damned water without a lemon.

Derek walked into the bar with Mark around 5:30, right in the middle of happy hour. Or, well, stumbled. Stumbled in and stopped on the well-trodden welcome mat like a fucking idiot statue. The heavy press of bodies, the endless pulse of noise, and the frenetic activity hit Derek like he'd run smack into a wall. Mark plowed into Derek's back, and Derek's throat closed up as the jolt pressed him inches closer to the chaos. He barely caught himself from toppling to the ground, and the impulse to flee sank into every tendon he possessed.

His heart throbbed in his ears.

“Are you all right, man?” Mark said as though his voice were floating through a tunnel in Derek's general direction, echoing and distant. A strong hand clamped on Derek's shoulder.

“I can't,” Derek said, his voice hoarse, and he turned. A boisterous patron wandered past with a foaming pitcher of beer, his trajectory pointing him toward a crowded table full of chattering men and women Derek vaguely recognized from the hospital. The beer carrier bumped into Derek as he passed. A small slosh of alcohol dripped on Derek's shirt. Derek barely heard the apology despite how loudly it was uttered.

Derek curled away instinctively. “I'm sorry, I can't,” he said, his words breathy and barely there. “I can't do this. I can't.”

“It's okay, man,” said tunnel Mark. “You tried.”

Derek couldn't. Couldn't socialize like this. Not after the day he'd had. A craving crushed his healing heart, it was so intense and overwhelming. He panted. Percocet would make this better. He wouldn't be so anxious. He—
The hairs on the nape of his neck crackled with a peculiar sensation, and then her laugh cut through the terrifying din. He halted at the threshold, and Mark ran into him again with a curse, but Derek barely heard the foul word. His thoughts focused pinpoint on that sound. That laugh. He didn't hear that sound enough anymore. White-knuckled, he gripped the doorframe and looked for her.

Meredith sat at the back of the bar with her friends, her face flushed and happy and truly carefree for the first time in... what felt like years, and just the sight of her so relaxed helped him relax. Just a little. She laughed again at something somebody had said. Her eyes scanned the crowded room. And then her gaze stopped dead on him.

She blinked as if to double check reality. Incredulity spread across her face. Her eyes widened. Her lips parted. In that moment, witness to her shock, all of Derek's paranoid suspicions about her joining forces with Mark in an effort to get Derek out of the house died. This had been Mark's idea, and Mark's alone.

Derek watched her body twitch, but she didn't move from her seat, like she wanted to come over and say hi to him, but she couldn't bear to draw attention to the enormity of the moment and have him chicken out and leave as a result. The fact that the moment was enormous at all – Derek walks into a bar, breaking news at eleven! – started the slow creep of embarrassed flush across his face, a reddening in his cheeks that had nothing to do with alcohol.

She would move, he realized. If he turned on his heels and ran out like a pathetic idiot, now that she'd noticed his presence, she would chase after him to make sure he was okay. She would ditch her friends, because he'd had a terrible day, and she'd left him on a precarious note that morning. She'd left him on a precarious note, but had still felt okay enough to go out with her friends instead of wait at home for him. Probably because he hadn't called to tell her how much worse everything had gotten, and she'd convinced herself that radio silence was a good thing. For the first time since he'd been shot, she'd let herself be optimistic about his well-being, sight unseen. She hadn't needed to press her ear against his chest and listen to him breathe. Hadn't needed to touch him to confirm life. He hadn't called, and she'd assumed things were okay. If he walked out, now, all that self-convincing on her part would undo itself in an eye blink, and worse, would probably guarantee she'd be less adventurous for quite some time to come, and he couldn't bear that. Not after seeing that beautiful smile.

He swallowed. Lack of movement made him tremble, and he felt light-headed. Nausea coiled in his stomach.

“Derek?” Mark prodded.

“Can we find someplace in the corner out of the way?” Derek said, barely able to get his vocal cords to function.

“I thought you wanted to leave.”

“No,” Derek said, forcing himself two steps back into the chaos. “No, I want to try.”

Derek picked up his pen. He'd come inside the bar because... I wanted her to keep smiling, he wrote for number five. One reason down. Two to go.

He realized Mark watched him, unblinking, curious.

“Dr. Wyatt wants me to record all the choices I make and my reasons for making them,” Derek explained. “She thinks it will help draw my attention to the control I still have over my life.”
“To include what you ate for lunch?” Mark said, his tone wry.

Derek sighed as his face heated. “Look, I know it's fucking silly,” he said. “I feel ridiculous writing it. You don't need to rub it in.”

“Well, is it helping?”

“No, the needling is not helping,” Derek said.

Mark pointed at the notebook. “I meant the diary,” he said, drawing Derek's attention back to his two remaining choices on the list.

Meredith waved at him, her eyes sparkling, as he and Mark settled at the table in the far corner by the restrooms, as far away from the crush of the crowd as possible. She mouthed, “Are you okay?” across the noisy bar.

A fair question, given the state in which she'd been forced to leave him that morning, and given that he'd stopped dead on the fucking welcome mat and almost run back outside in terror. He debated then what to tell her. No was the most honest answer. No, I did a horrible thing earlier, and I think I might faint from nerves, now. But she was smiling and laughing and socializing, and he didn't want to wreck it for her. Not now. I love you, he mouthed at her with a wink in response. Not a lie, just... deferring the bad stuff until later.

He'd waited to tell Meredith the truth because... She deserves to have some fun with her friends, he wrote for his reason on number six. Whether he told her the truth about how he'd slipped now or five hours from now wouldn't matter in the grand scheme. This wasn't like concealing his marriage to Addison or hiding his addiction unless he let the lie perpetuate, and he wouldn't, but he could give Meredith a few happy hours with her friends.

Two reasons down. One to go. Why had he ordered water, no lemon? His pen hovered next to line seven, and he realized he'd sort of grown to look forward to this. Tabulating all the times he'd made a decision. Coming up with reasons.

“I like it,” Derek said, at last. “I feel less... lost.”

The waitress, a short woman, even more slender-boned and slight than Meredith, smiled at them as she arrived with their drinks on a tray full of dripping, foaming pints and other fare. Mark had ordered a club soda, not a beer, and Derek wondered if that had been a concession toward Derek's need for sobriety. Mark hadn't said anything about his drink choice, though, hadn't advertised it other than by his quiet order, and so Derek tried not to focus on it too much. Derek took his water with no lemon, tipped her $1, and thanked the woman as she brushed curly black hair out of her face. Sweat dotted her brow from the heat of so many bodies in the room.

She smiled. “Sorry this took so long,” she called over the din. “We're a bit busy tonight.”

The Mariners table booed. Loudly.

“I hadn't noticed,” Mark cracked with a charming wink as he tipped her as well, and the waitress laughed.

As she moved to another table, Mark picked up his fizzing, clear glass, and tipped it a smidgen toward Derek. “Being less lost is nice, even if it is a diary,” Mark said in a clear attempt at a toast, though his gaze kept darting down to Derek's notebook, as if he hadn't read it three times already and memorized the contents line-by-line.
Derek grinned as an idea struck him. He held out his hand, gesturing for Mark to wait a moment. Mark watched Derek expectantly as Derek picked up his gel pen. *Bucking Big Brother*, Derek wrote on the notepad, and then he clinked his water glass against Mark’s to complete the toast.

“*Bucking Big Brother*?” Mark said.

Derek smirked. Predictable as always. “Still reading over my shoulder?”

“If you don't want me to read it, you shouldn't leave it open,” Mark said. “Are you on a 1984 kick, or something?”

Derek shrugged. “You wanted me to get club soda.”

Mark blinked. “I did?”

“This morning, you told me I'd get a club soda,” Derek said. He tipped back his glass and took a sip of the cool water. The liquid spread across his tongue. He swallowed, glancing at the crowded room.

“What does that have to do with 1984?” Mark said.

“It doesn't have anything to do with 1984.”

Mark frowned. The ice in his glass clinked as he took a sip. “Then why'd you write about it?”

“I didn't write about 1984,” Derek said. He grinned slyly. “I wrote about you.”

Mark's eyebrows rose. “I'm 'Big Brother’?” he said, incredulous. He pressed his right palm flat against his chest in a classic gesture of, *Who, me?*

Derek nodded. “You're sure acting like it.”

“Unless you've recently hopped in a time machine, I'm clearly the dashing younger brother in this twisted equation,” Mark said, a haughty expression on his face.

Derek sighed, shaking his head. “I can see my attempt at witty humor has fallen flat on its face.”

“Now, you're saying I'm stupid in addition to emotionally stunted?” Mark said, though there was no bite in his tone this time. No anger. This was the teasing and needling that was normal.

Derek chuckled as a weight lifted. “Not stupid. Sometimes obtuse.”

“I think your fucked up sense of humor is obtuse,” Mark countered. He turned up his glass and took a sip that turned into a gulp. “That's what I think.”

“Who's being judge-y, now?” Derek said.

Mark chuckled. “Since when do you say words like judge-y?”

Derek sighed, unable to stop his gaze from wandering across the room, through the crowd, to Meredith. The big biker guy had moved enough to the side when he'd scooted his stool for Derek to see her. She wore her hair in a no-fuss, looped ponytail that sent loose ends of wispy blonde and brown jagging every which way. She'd worn jeans, her black Chucks, a lilac-colored blouse, and very little makeup, devoid of fashion, as though she'd been too tired to worry very much about her appearance. It didn't matter to Derek. To Derek, she looked beautiful, anyway. Her smile made her beautiful. Beautiful and pregnant and just... perfect. He pressed his chin against his hands, resting
as he watched her, not caring if he came off like a lovesick fool at this point. He needed her. The past few horrible months had proven it to him. He needed her, and he could admit that.

“Since I married a woman who makes them up so often, I can't even remember what's real,” Derek said.

“She does have that talent,” Mark said. Following the direction of Derek's gaze, he peered over the undulating crowd. He smiled when his gaze caught Meredith, too, and he shook his head. “It's kind of cute.”

“It's adorable,” Derek agreed, “but it sometimes prevents me from functioning without spell check.”

“So, how am I obtuse?” Mark said.

Derek blinked, tearing his gaze away from Meredith. “Hmm?” he said.

Mark rolled his eyes as if to say, good god, you're so fucking hopeless when it comes to that woman. “Obtuse, Derek,” he said, impatient. “How am I obtuse?”

“Oh,” Derek said. He took a long sip from his water, relishing the cool feel as it washed down his parched throat. “Well, you keep reading over my shoulder.”

“That's not obtuse,” Mark said. “That's me being a nosy bastard.”

“That doesn't seem 'Big Brother' to you?” Derek said, raising his eyebrows. “On multiple levels, both literal and metaphorical?”

“But you said it didn't have anything to do with 1984.”

Derek's mouth didn't have anything to do with 1984.

“Obtuse, my ass. You just don't know what you're talking about.”

“You told me to order a fucking club soda, and you keep reading over my shoulder,” Derek said, frowning. “That's totally 'Big Brother'.”

“You seriously got water because I suggested club soda?”


Mark snorted. “So, now, you're perpetrating revisionist history in your pansy diary just to fuck with my head. I think that's far more Orwellian.”

“It's not a damned diary, Mark.”

“You say tomato,” Mark said. His face lit with an evil grin. “I say it's a fucking diary.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “I'm not going to live this down, am I?”

“Nope,” Mark said. “It's like the time you broke my hand.”

“On my face!” Derek argued. “You broke your hand on my face.”

“I more meant it as a time I was offered scientific, painful proof, of your impossibly hard head,”
Mark countered.

Derek sighed. “Can we at least call it a map?”

“You've leaped from George Orwell to maps, and you're calling me obtuse?” Mark said.

“Because writing it makes me less lost!” Derek snapped. He took another sip from his drink. “I said that!”

Mark shook his head. “That's pathetic.”

“It sounds less pathetic than a diary,” Derek grumbled as he stared into his half-empty glass. The water flickered in the dim light.

“No offense, man, but that's completely cracked, less lost or not,” Mark said.

Derek frowned. “It's not cracked.”

“At least you're writing it on a spiral notepad,” Mark said. “That's better than one of those prissy bound books only a girl would buy.”

“Gee, thanks,” Derek said. He stared at his so-called diary and sighed.

“Look, man,” Mark said. “If it makes you feel better, do it. Keep the diary. I'll stop giving you a hard time.”

“It does make me feel better,” Derek said.

“How about we call it a journal?”

“That's... less bad than diary.”

Mark shrugged. “Darts?” he said. “Or are you going to buck 'Big Brother' in your journal some more?”

Derek stared across the crowded room at the dart board. It was closer to Meredith. Farther from the scary Mariners fans. But there was so much between. So many writhing bodies. So many unknowns. But he'd calmed down over the course of the conversation. He felt jittery. Nervous. The hairs on the nape of his neck still tingled. Still, that was a far cry above feeling like he would faint, or fighting the distinct urge to flee in a panic. He had no idea how or when that had happened. Somewhere in the journey from Addison to George Orwell.

“We can stay here,” Mark said.

Derek shook his head and stood, staring at the distant, nerve-wracking objective. He'd stayed on the outskirts of the room, avoiding the largest concentration of life at the center. He took a sip from his water. The glass clinked as he set it back on the table.

He picked up his little notepad and flipped the page to a new sheet. Mark watched him as Derek scribbled number eight. *Going to play darts*, Derek wrote, a sense of peace unfurling as he made his decision despite his nerves.

“I'm going to win,” Derek said.

“Are not.”
“Too.”

“Not.”

“I always win this game,” Derek said.

Mark smirked. “Not this time. Today's my lucky day.”

“Why so confident?”

“Your hands have been shaking since we got here. I figure I can milk it for a win.”

Derek turned to Mark and gaped. Mark met his eyes, unblinking, challenging, but twinkling, as if to say, Kid gloves are off, buddy.

“Well, they have been,” Mark said with a smirk.

Derek snorted as he turned back to his little notepad. “You don't find any shame in abusing someone's infirmity for your own hollow victory?” he said as he readied his pen.

Mark shook his head. “Not when you're the infirm.”

“Ass,” Derek said cheerfully, and Mark chuckled.

I want to win, Derek wrote for his reason on number eight.

He and Mark left their unfinished glasses on the table and their coats on the stool. Derek stuffed his notebook into the pocket of his windbreaker to keep it out of plain view, and then he walked across the room. Cautiously. Through the center. Moving bodies touched him. Words slammed against his ears. But the competitive zing in his chest, the throb of his heart, made it easier to force himself forward. He wanted to win and wipe Mark's smug grin right off his face. Derek wanted to play.

Mark made no comment about their successful journey. “601, double-in, double-out?” Mark queried, eyebrows raised as they approached the dart board.

Derek nodded. The scoreboard was a small dry-erase board off to the left. Both were well lit by bright lamps. Mark picked up a red dry-erase marker from the tray. He wrote “601” with a “DD” over the top of it on the scoreboard, and then he drew a line down the center of the board. He picked up the darts left out for play, and approached the throw line.

Mark handed Derek the darts. “Age before beauty?” he said, a playful gleam in his eye.

Derek snorted and sized up the board. “You only wish you were beautiful,” Derek said. He hadn't played in months and months, and Mark was right. Derek's hands were shaking a bit from adrenaline and nerves, which would make it fucking hard to aim, but that wasn't something he could help. He would have to deal with it. And he really needed Mark to stop smirking like that.

Derek raised the dart and tossed it with a flick of his wrist. The little dart sang as it sailed through the air. It hit the outer bull with a smack and stuck, and he tried not to hide his amazement that he'd managed to hit center. Not dead center, but pretty close.

“Beat that, Belle,” Derek said in the spirit of competition.

Mark rolled his eyes as Derek stepped away from the throw line. “Belle?” he said. “That's the best insult you can come up with?” He tossed a dart much like Derek, only his hit the double bull and stuck. “I guess that's Mr. Belle, to you, Geezer,” Mark said, his voice dripping with annoying cheer
as he went to pick the darts from the board.

Derek sighed and stepped away from the throw line to let Mark go for his first real turn. The back of Derek's neck tingled, and Derek turned, not paying attention to Mark as he threw his first dart. Only a few tables away, Meredith watched him, her bright gray eyes just visible over the lip of her glass as she took a sip – the clear liquid with the lemon. She set her glass down and wiped her lips with a napkin. She smiled at him as she saw him returning her look, and all at once the noisy bar bent away like petals falling from a flower, until there was only her, the bright colorful center, and nothing else.

*You're still here,* she mouthed, and he nodded.

A hand clamped on his shoulder, making him flinch. Derek found Mark grinning at him. “Okay, Cassanova. Your turn.”

“I thought I was Geezer,” Derek said.

Mark's gaze darted back and forth between Meredith and Derek. “I think Cassanova is far more accurate,” he decided. He appraised Derek with a smirk. “And pathetic.”

Derek turned back to the dart board and frowned when he read the scoreboard. “A ton sixty on your first turn? Are you serious?” A ton sixty would be nearly impossible for him with his shaky hands, and he knew it.

“I told you I'm going to win tonight,” Mark replied.

“I think you're messing with me,” Derek grumbled as he took his darts. He aimed for the double twenty, clenching his teeth. He needed a double to get his points to start accruing.

Mark shrugged. “You could have watched me throw.”

“Meredith is much prettier to watch than you.”

“See?” Mark said. “You're pathetic when you're in love.”

“Don't knock it until you've tried it,” Derek said.

Mark frowned. “I would try it.”

“Hmm,” Derek said. “Lexie?”

“I don't blame her,” Mark said, his tone glum.

“Still sucks, though.”

Mark nodded in agreement. “Yeah,” he said.

Derek flicked his wrist. The dart sailed. It hit the board with a smack. And it bounced right off.

“Be quiet,” Derek told Mark, who was snickering.

Mark held up his hands in playful surrender. “Hey, I'm not saying a word.”

“You're thinking it.”

“You're telling me not to think, now?”
“Yes. Blank everything out.”

Mark snorted, rolling his eyes. “Right,” he said.

Derek aimed for the double twenty again. This time, the little dart sank into its mark. It sagged, but it stuck, and tension Derek didn't know he'd had seeped out of him. With his third dart, he set his gaze on the triple twenty, trying to decide if that was wise. This early in the game, it was best to get as many triple twenties as possible, but those spaces were narrow and a lot harder to hit. Maybe, he should aim for the double bull, which was a bit easier to hit. Or... He sighed. No. Might as well go for broke. He tossed. His dart landed in the black single twenty space, and his shoulders slumped.

“Sixty,” Mark said, his voice neutral.

Derek sighed. Sixty to one-sixty on the first turn. Mark might win after all. And by a whole hell of a lot. He turned back to Meredith, deciding she was a lot more fun to watch than his impending demise on the dart board. He imagined himself writing number nine in his choice diary. Watched Meredith, he would write. Why? She's pretty, and I'm losing horribly already. He heard a dart smack into the board behind him, and he didn't even flinch, because he'd already lost himself in her eyes. She'd been watching him through his turn and still watched him, now, a tinge of watery disbelief clouding her gaze, as if she couldn't quite believe he'd stayed and played darts, of all things.

He hated how doubtful of him she'd become. Guilt at his own stagnant recovery loitered at the back of his throat. A huge lump formed. He swallowed.

Cristina, who sat beside Meredith, followed Meredith's gaze, landed on Derek, and rolled her eyes. Are you winning? Meredith mouthed.

I only wish, he mouthed back, and she giggled. He couldn't help but smile at her despite his misgivings. He found it hard to be unhappy when she seemed so much the opposite.

Mark pulled Derek out of his pleasant bubble. “You know, if you'd rather go sit over there with them—”

“No,” Derek said. He shook his head. Vehemently. “No, she's with her friends.”

“You're watching her like a stalker,” Mark said.

Derek snorted. “She was watching me like a stalker first!”

Mark rolled his eyes. “And I repeat. You two are pathetic. Take your turn.”

Derek glanced at the score board. The round hadn't been as kind to Mark this time. He'd only scored seventy. Derek aimed for the triple twenty. One triple twenty and he'd be almost even for the round with a single dart. He tossed, and the dart sank home between the thin wires surrounding the triple twenty. Triumph burbled in his chest, and he couldn't stop himself from pumping his fist.

“Hey, was that good?” a soft, familiar voice said to his left, and he turned.

Meredith stood next to him, and his tight, nervous muscles loosened into jelly as he met her curious, sparkling gaze. “My best throw of the night,” Derek said, unable to keep pride from dripping into his tone. His hands were shaking, and he was in a noisy, crowded bar that made him nervous, and he'd thrown a triple twenty.
Mark chuckled. “His only good throw of the night, if the gods are smiling on me.”

Derek elbowed Mark, watching Meredith with a grin. “What are you doing here?”

“Had to pee,” Meredith said. “Thought I'd say hi.”

Derek met her eyes. He stepped closer, into her space, leaning. He brushed his lips against the soft skin of her temple, breathing in the faint scent of lavender conditioner. Pleasant, sated lethargy sank into his body as her arms wrapped around his waist.

“Hi,” he said softly.

She leaned up on her tiptoes, looking into his eyes. Her hands slipped into the back pockets of his jeans, and she returned his hesitant hello with a kiss that had more to do with taking than searching. Her lips met his. Her hands squeezed.

“Hi,” she replied, panting as she pulled away. *You're really, really here,* said her gaze.

*I really am,* he didn't reply. “Mark thinks I'm staring at you like a stalker,” Derek said.

“I was staring first,” she said. “Turnabout is fair play.”

Derek grinned. “See?” he said to Mark.

“You know,” Mark interjected, his tone playful, “It's typically considered poor sportsmanship to distract the person throwing darts in the middle of his turn.”

“If I lose, this was worth it,” Derek countered, and Meredith giggled again. The sound slipped down his spine and soothed his trembling skin like a balm. He kissed her once more and stepped back onto the throw line. She watched.

He aimed for the triple twenty, where his first dart still stuck in place. If he could get another one without knocking his first dart out of the board, he'd be close to catching up to Mark's lucky first round. He tossed. The dart sailed. It sank into the triple twenty.

He raised his third dart, going for broke. Another triple twenty would be a lot to smirk about. That would max him out at a perfect ton eighty, the maximum possible score for the round, beating Mark's top first round score, and putting Derek ahead with a slight lead, which would make the rest of this game far more interesting. He let the dart sail, but it veered to the left in flight, and it sank into the triple five. Derek sighed as Mark clapped him on the back.

“Good darts, man,” Mark said.

Derek looked at Meredith. She frowned sympathetically at him. “Not so good?”

“Have you never played before?” he asked, which was a dumb question, he realized. If she didn't know the triple twenty was good and the triple five was, in most circumstances, bad, she probably hadn't played.

She shook her head, and even despite his idiocy, the fact that he'd learned something new about her made him happy, Meredith. Not a habitual dart player. That seemed to suit her. She'd always seemed like she used bars to get drunk and not much else. At least not before he'd met her. Since then, she'd turned Joe's into her social gathering away from home. *Want to join us?* he debated asking, but after moments of weighing the options, he didn't.
“I'll teach you, sometime, if you want,” he said.

“Okay,” she said in a soft voice. She danced from her left foot to her right.

He laughed. “Maybe, you should go take care of that?”

She blushed. “I'm sorry. I'd stay and watch more, but I'm kinda floating.” Her hand lowered to her belly, and she rubbed herself absently, as if the motion had already become so ingrained in her psyche, she didn't realize she was doing it.

Time halted as he watched her. Derek's lip twitched with a smile when he thought about the pregnancy. This sort of flight to the bathroom would happen more and more often as time went on, and the baby grew. She didn't show, yet, but dumbfounding moments of wondrous realization like this hit him with more and more regularity as the weeks passed. Her nipples had darkened. She didn't complain about back aches, but the baths she always took told him she might be hurting a bit. She'd started sliding out of bed in the middle of night to pee, something she'd rarely done before. In fact, the frequency was increasing, which made him speculate she was probably closer to eight weeks than six, as she thought she was. Eight weeks would mean he was right about the conception date, though he kept that hand of cards close to his chest instead of crowing about it. They would see for sure at her OB-GYN appointment in two weeks.

“Derek?” she said, her voice pulling him out of musing.


Without further hesitation, she turned on her heels, her sneakers squeaking on the wood floor. Her messy ponytail bobbed as she turned, and she left to use the bathroom. He couldn't help the flash of the future that fogged his brain. She would be rounder, her stride more waddling than lithe, and he would be tired from all the trips to the grocery store for pickles. The ludicrous image swirled in his head, and he grinned at nothing in particular.

Derek turned back to Mark with a pleased, relaxed sigh. Number ten, he imagined writing. Didn't ask Meredith to join us. Why? Despite his heady desire for her company, and the wonderment that left him slack-jawed, he stuck to the steadfast conclusion that, She should be with her friends.

The dart game continued. He watched with an increasing feeling of defeat as Mark threw the perfect ton eighty that Derek had been trying for earlier. The competition raged on, getting stiffer as the game progressed, because Derek's hands stopped shaking somewhere along the way, and he stopped thinking so hard about the noise or the bustle or the bodies in the room. Granted, lots of people filtered out of the bar as time wore on, and happy hour became early evening. The noise levels died down a bit, and the walls of the hot, stuffy room didn't feel like they pressed against him on every side. Even the heat itself began to cool. Or maybe he'd just stopped feeling nauseous.

He lost their first game, but not by much, and that felt... really good. Really...

Normal.

He felt normal for the first time in weeks. And he'd had fun. Fun.

“Best two out of three?” he said, unable to withhold the unadulterated hope from his tone. He was amazed at the knee jerk desire for his notepad. Chose to play another game. Why? Feeling great. Want it to continue.

Mark grinned at him. “If you want to keep losing, sure.”
“I won't lose this time,” Derek insisted as Mark handed him a dart.

“Age before beauty?” Mark said, echoing the beginning of their first game, but the experience didn't feel like an echo.

Derek felt altogether different. Relaxed. Happy. Not trying to force anything. He swallowed. Only a matter of hours had passed since he'd started keeping the choice journal, and he already felt a lot less like he was spinning out of control on a sheet of black ice. He'd been downgraded to speeding on a dry road. The choice journal. Such a small thing. But it felt a lot less silly, now. It felt... great.

Really great.

Derek raised the dart and made an effortless toss. The dart smacked into the double bull. Dead center.

“That's better,” he told the dart board. He gave Mark a haughty smirk.

“Feeling better, are we,” Mark said, not really a question, his voice flat, wry. He threw his dart, but the toss flew wide and hit the single seven near the tip instead of the bullseye. “Age before beauty this time, after all, I guess,” he conceded.

Derek took his first turn, scoring a ton sixty. Perfect for the first round. He lost himself in thought as Mark struggled to match that performance.

If Derek wanted to be really anal about things, he could be writing down minutiae. When he thought about it, he realized quite a bit of what he did involved choices. Split-second. Subconscious. But choices, nonetheless. Like moving his arm or shifting his feet. Though, if he wrote all of that down, every time he moved a muscle, he imagined he might spend more time writing than making choices. That idea was sort of a recursive problem, too, since writing involved moving more muscles.

He flexed his hand into a fist, staring at it as he thought. Basic body systems weren't at his command. His heartbeat, for instance. Digestion. Cell metabolism. To some extent, he couldn't control his breathing, either, in that if he tried to stop, he'd pass out and start again without his express consent. But everything else...

He glanced at Meredith, who'd returned to her table at some point. Cristina, Lexie, Alex, and Meredith all sat together. From Lexie's wild gesticulating, and the rush of urgent chanting, table-slapping, and encouragement emanating from their table, Derek thought they might be playing some sort of silly word game, but he couldn't hear anything specific enough to identify what game in particular.

He could kiss her, he thought. Kiss Meredith. The image popped into his mind without provocation. He could walk over there and choose to kiss her senseless. Why? Because he loved her, and he liked to kiss her, and she seemed to like being kissed by him. He almost took a step when niggling thoughts pulled him short. Truth. He still had to tell her the truth about how he'd nearly slipped and filled a Percocet prescription. He hadn't told her that truth so that she could spend time with her friends. Not so he could kiss her one more time. The former was acceptable. The latter was selfish. Shameful. Extremely.

He frowned as he imagined his notebook in his hands. What number had he been on? Eleven or something. No kissing, he imagined himself writing. Reason? Truth first.

He blinked as Mark threw a dart and hit the triple three. “Fuck!” Mark blurted. He aimed his final
Derek could dance in public if he wanted. He glanced wildly at the small empty space in the center of the bar. Some banal pop song he didn't know blared over the speakers, the bass throbbing in his chest like a living, breathing thing trapped inside and pounding to get out. The idea of standing there in the center of the crowd, his limbs jerking like he was an epileptic in the midst of a seizure, repulsed him. Twelve. *No dancing. Why? Still sane. Kind of.*

He could do something crazy. Something unexpected. But a real choice.

“Maybe, I should get a new bike,” Derek said before he pulled the reins on that wild, fleeting thought.

Mark's dart flew wide and bounced off the wall beside the dart board. He raised his eyes as his head snapped in Derek's direction. “Um,” Mark said. “You mean a new bike that you pedal?”

“No,” Derek said, shaking his head. “One that I put gas into and ride.”

Silence stretched. “Really?” Mark said, his tone tinged with amazement.

“I...” Derek began, and then he stopped. He swallowed. The rest of his choices had felt nice. This one didn't. He wasn't even sure where the thought had come from. He remembered the slow-motion sensation of his body leaving the seat. The cold air hitting his face. Rain poured, everywhere. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to blot out the sudden, intrusive image. The memory slipped away from him, a soft pastel in a loud, sprawling watercolor. “I don't know.”

“That sounds great,” Mark said with a grin, ignoring Derek's switchback into hesitance. Mark pulled his darts from the board, chased down the one that had bounced, and wrote his score, and handed the darts to Derek. “I was crushed when you sold your old one.”

Derek glowered as he stepped up to the throw line. “You *still* owe me for all the gas you used, you know.”

“No,” Mark said.

“Do, too.”

“Do not.”

“Do, too!” Derek snapped.

He tossed his first dart, which smacked into the triple twenty. He flexed his fingers. His muscle memory was returning. His hand-eye coordination. He'd always been good at darts, and the returning precision made him feel like a bona fide surgeon again, even though he wasn't cutting. “You never once paid me back,” he said. He tossed his second dart with a little flick. Smack into the triple twenty again. “I always filled her up, and you're the one who rode her *everywhere.*”

“Okay, maybe I borrowed it a few times,” Mark conceded.

Derek snorted. “A *few*?”

“You rode it more than I did!”

“More often, maybe,” Derek replied. He tossed his third dart, hoping for a third triple twenty. The dart hit the metal and bounced. He grimaced as he turned to Mark. “But you're the one who took
the damned thing to Canada.” He went to pick up the lost dart and the two still stuck on the board. He wrote his score with the marker. One-twenty from that round. One-sixty from the first. That put him at a nice two-eighty under 601 after only two rounds, and well ahead of Mark, who'd only scored fifty-two so far. If Derek kept that up his pace, he'd be strategizing the way to zero in only a few more turns.

“Only once,” Mark said as Derek relinquished the three darts. Mark aimed. “And Canada is next to New York. It's not that far.”

“Quebec City is over 500 miles away,” Derek said.

Mark tossed his first dart and hit the triple twenty. “She was really hot, Derek.”

“That's over 1000 miles in one trip without asking.”

“I told you afterward...” Mark protested. He tossed his second dart, which slammed into the triple twenty, but the impact made his first dart fall to the ground. “Fuck,” he said. “I think you rigged this game.”

“Did not,” Derek countered.

“Did, too!”

“Not.”

“Too!”

The third dart listed to the right mid-flight and hit the triple eighteen. Mark frowned, but he didn't seem too unhappy with it. He approached the dartboard to calculate his score, sighing when he stared at the dart on the floor. Anything that fell off the board didn't count. That was sixty points down the drain in a single dart, but he'd still made a ton fourteen for the round. Not bad.

“You didn't even fill up the tank when you returned it from that trip,” Derek said. The dry-erase marker squeaked on the board as Mark wrote his score. 166 to 280, Derek's favor. A large gap, but Mark could still catch up if Derek ran into problems trying to hit zero. Not busting on the last turn was the tricky part.

“Okay, maybe you have a point on the gas,” Mark said as he handed the darts to Derek.

Derek smirked. “Thank you!” he said, emphasizing his point with a dart smacking into the triple twenty. He aimed his second dart.

“But, really,” Mark said, "regardless of who rode it more or longer, I—”

“Rode what?” interjected a familiar voice. Derek's second dart flew low and wide and slammed into the single one. Derek winced. Mark and Derek turned.

For a moment, Cristina stood there, silent, looking distinctly uncomfortable. She brushed a flyaway strand of black hair out of her eyes, flattening it with the rest of her ponytail. Her lips parted.

“I haven't... seen you out in a while,” she offered.

Derek's eyes narrowed. He glanced at Meredith, but she seemed fine, so... what, then? He'd had enough trouble just being in this place, let alone socializing with someone who disliked him so immutably. Worse, her presence popped the bubble he'd been in. The happy one where he'd been
having fun. Noisy, suffocating reality pressed in. The reality full of people and discomfort. A glass crashed to the floor and shattered behind the bar, accented by the waitress's exasperated curse. He tensed.

“What do you want?” he said to Cristina. Or snapped, really. He couldn't help it, though he didn't mean to.

She smirked. “You're playing a symbolically phallic game, talking like a pair of chatty Cathys, and the subject matter is riding things?” Cristina said, her arms crossed over her chest in a haughty pose. “I think I want a tape recorder.”

Derek glared at the dartboard and readied his third dart. He let it fly. It hit the triple twenty. “You know, you're really very nosy.”

Cristina ignored him. “So, what were you riding in this conversation?”

“A motorcycle,” Mark said.

“Really?” Cristina said. Her gaze shifted. Almost as if her perception of the world had reorganized itself in light of revelation. A flicker of... almost respect... seemed to loiter there.

“More him than me,” Mark said, gesturing to Derek.

Cristina snorted, and surprise faded into faint derision. “Yeah, right. You?”

Derek sighed. He'd been having fun, but with every word she spoke, the relaxed feeling receded, slipping away like sand in the wind. “I used to ride,” he said.


Mark chuckled.

“Hah. Hah,” Derek said in unimpressed monotone. “Is there a reason you're here?”

She shrugged, gesturing to the empty glass clutched in her hand. A foamy ring of leftover beer circled the bottom. “Just getting another round.”

Derek rolled his eyes as he approached the board and pulled his three darts loose. He wrote his score for the round. 121. “I owned a motorcycle,” he said. “You don't have a monopoly on the idea.” Derek jabbed a thumb over his shoulder at the bar in the distance, where Joe moved back and forth, filling orders. “And the bar is that way.”

Cristina followed the line of Derek's gesture to the bar with her gaze. The big, scary six-foot-five Mariners fan chose that moment to sidle to the bar. His scuffed biker jacket looked like it had seen better days, as did his leather riding chaps and his cracked shit-kicker boots. He leaned over the bar to say something to Joe, moving so slowly Derek imagined the old leather creaking as he moved, but the big man's eyes didn't leave the television as he did so. Derek felt a sliver of disappointment. He'd moved away from New York City, but his loyalties with sports teams hadn't. The Yankees had been dominating when he'd sat down, but the Mariners had chipped away at the lead, particularly with that grand slam earlier. The big man clapped as somebody in a Yankee uniform struck out, though the television was too far away for Derek to identify the player.

“Thanks,” Cristina said. “Now, I'm imagining you in tight leather riding pants, and I don't want to. Stop. Now.”
Mark laughed. Derek turned to him.

“What's so funny?” Derek said.

“I'm trying to picture you in that getup,” Mark said, gesturing at the tall Mariners fan.

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” Derek snapped as his face blushed hot, bright red, his precarious hold on civility ruined by the repeated needling. He shoved the darts into Mark's grasp.

“Let me guess,” Cristina said. “You had a Moped. Or a Vespa. Not a real bike.”

Derek's chest tightened. “It was a Harley.”

“Such a fucking beast,” Mark said, his tone cheerful as he stepped to the throw line. “I should never have let you sell it.”

Cristina blinked. “Seriously?”

“Yes,” Derek said. “Seriously. Why is that so hard to believe?”

“Because your idea of the best kind of thrillseeking seems to be fishing,” Cristina said. She snickered. “For hours.”

Derek frowned. “Hey, I like fishing.”

“Right,” Cristina said. “That's sort of my point.”

“She does have a point,” Mark said. “Fishing is like——”

“Watching paint dry,” Derek said with a sigh as Mark's many-times-uttered assessment echoed in Derek's head. No, Mark had said. It's like watching invisible paint dry, which is even worse, because there's nothing to fucking watch. Mark tossed his first dart and hit the single one. Derek snickered. “Yes,” Derek said. “I get that fishing is too cerebral for certain people.”

Mark chuffed with indignant laughter. “Ouch, man,” he said.

Derek rolled his eyes. “I don't make fun of your hobbies, do I?”

“I distinctly remember you giving me a hard time about my PS3,” Mark countered.

“I wasn't making fun of it!”

Mark raised his eyebrows. “Well, what about sex?”

“You seriously consider sex a hobby?” Derek said.

Mark smirked. “You just made my point for me. Thank you.”

“What made you stop?” Cristina interjected.

Derek blinked. “Sex?”

“The bike,” she said impatiently.

Mark threw his second dart and it hit the triple twenty. The smack made Derek flinch as an image seared his mind's eye. The world. Tumbling in the dark. And then nothing. The concussion had robbed him of his memories. He'd never remembered the crash other than the fleeting, vague idea
of his body leaving the seat and then flying through the air. He did, however, remember waking up on the ground with a piece of rebar shoved through his thigh.

He swallowed. “Nothing,” he said. “I sold it.”

“Why?” Cristina said.

“Because I did,” he said.


“But why?” Cristina prodded.

“But I did!” Derek snapped, unwilling to let himself fall into the memories that threatened. Mark's third dart flew into the triple twenty.

Cristina rolled her eyes. “Whatever,” she said. “Don't get your panties in a twist.” She raised her empty glass. “And I need to get my refill, now.”

“Nothing is twisted,” Derek insisted as she left him.

“Right,” Cristina called over her shoulder.

“Liar,” Mr. Clark said, and Derek huffed with frustration.

Nasty, growling laughter echoed in his head, and Derek squeezed his eyes shut, trying to force it quiet, but it wouldn't stop, and Derek's hands began to shake again. The room pressed in, and nausea swept over him like a tide as he glanced at the room, more empty, not, but... people. Everywhere. Dissonance tickled his spine, the feeling like somebody had swept his hair in the wrong direction, or... something.

Not this again.

When Mark grabbed Derek's shoulder and said, “Your turn,” Derek flinched away from the touch, barely able to maintain his composure. He needed his composure. He didn't want to implode when he was stuck in a crowd. He didn't want to implode anywhere. His heart skipped as he blearily looked at the room. God, so many people.

_Did it sound like I was asking for opinions from the peanut gallery?_ Dr. Bailey said, a distant echo.

“I'm done, now,” Derek said, his voice even, low, but it sounded far away. Almost woozy.

Mark didn't argue. Didn't complain that they were in the middle of a game.

Derek turned. He stared at the doorway. The exit. But their coats were at the table. His notebook was in his coat pocket. He couldn't simply flee. He was better than his panic. He could do this. He worked on replacing his panic thoughts like he'd been taught. _Pickles, pickles, getting pickles for my pregnant wife_, he thought instead. He licked his dry lips and walked back to their empty table, but once he'd walked that far, his shaky legs gave out. It was sit down or fall down, and so he sank onto his stool, a heavy, shell-shocked weight.

“You okay?” Mark said as he caught up. He'd stayed behind to erase the scoreboard.

Derek nodded his head as he pressed his face against his hands and breathed. Slowly. Even with his eyes closed, it felt as though the room were spinning around him. A kaleidoscope of noise and heat and color and too much else to deal with. But it settled some. With every inhalation. And when he
looked up, he felt reset to where he'd began. Forcing himself to be there. Not enjoying it. But not feeling the intense need to flee, either. The bath of adrenaline receded from his limbs, leaving him achy. Thrashed. But, in the grand scheme of things, okay.

“I'm better,” Derek said, his voice soft. “I'm...” He swallowed and closed his eyes for a long moment. “I don't know what that was.”

Mark shrugged. “Hit your tolerance, maybe. Want to go?”

Derek blinked. Meredith was watching him from across the bar. He couldn't leave, now. He wanted to convince her that she could go out like this more often. If he left, that wouldn't be convincing.

“I'm okay,” he said, and he meant it.

He'd made it through this unsettling feeling before and managed to achieve normality, if only for a moment. Maybe, he could dip his toes into normal again, if he stayed. He wanted the feeling from the dart game to return.

He wanted that so much.

He could do this. Push through.

He glanced at his old water glass, which rested on the table by his hand, half-empty. All the ice cubes had melted. He raised the glass to his lips and took a long sip anyway. Though the fluid wasn't cold, it was cool, and it felt good on his tongue and in his throat. His muscles loosened. Just a bit.

He rifled through his coat pocket and sifted his notebook away from his cell phone and keys. He'd written past eleven in his head, but all the specifics fleeted from of his memory. He'd left off at eight on the page, and so he scribbled number nine. Staying. Why? *I need to push through this.*

Mark took a sip from his club soda but made a face. The glass wasn't fizzing anymore. Derek suspected it had gone flat, and Derek decided he wouldn't mind something with a bit more flavor than water. *Scotch, single-malt.* The whisper hit his brain, quiet, insidious. *It would be nice to let go after what you've put yourself through today, wouldn't it? You could get drunk.* Derek shook his head and forced himself to think about something else other than Gary Clark's harsh voice.

Root beer. Derek could get some root beer. Joe brewed his own, and it tasted pretty good. Derek shifted in his chair and gestured at the waitress who walked past the door toward the other side of the bar.

Her face turned toward the table next to Meredith's in response to somebody calling out to her, and she missed Derek's wave, but Dr. Hunt saw it as he entered the bar, and the little bell over the door dinged. He perked up at Derek's 'greeting', smiled, and waved at Mark and Derek. He went to the bar to get a drink, first, and Derek cringed as soon as the man's back was turned. Derek liked Dr. Hunt. On any other night, Derek wouldn't have minded the mistake, but Derek wasn't sure he could deal with another person, tonight.

“I can tell him to go away,” Mark offered.

Derek pushed air through his lips. Almost a laugh. Not quite. And more sardonic than humorous. “No offense, but your idea of tact is really just blunt. I'll live, somehow.”

Mark shrugged. “Don't say I didn't offer,” he said.
Owen approached and slumped into the stool across from Derek. He set a foaming pint of what looked like Guinness down on the table with a clink, and he shrugged off his windbreaker to add to the coat stack on the last stool.

“Hey, man,” Mark said.

“Sloan,” Owen said with a nod. He turned to Derek. “Shepherd.” He tipped back his frothy pint and chugged. And chugged. And chugged. The cloying scent of alcohol wafted across the table.

Derek raised his eyebrows and watched incredulously as Owen sucked back half the pint. “Rough day?” Derek said.

“You could say that,” Owen said. “I've been in surgery since...” He glanced at his watch. “Yesterday.” He glanced across the noisy room in Meredith's direction. “And I really don't get women.”

“Cristina, you mean?” Derek said.

Owen sighed. “You need to provide me with a translation dictionary. Twisted Sister to English. You seem to be good at it.”

Derek chuffed with laughter as Owen took another chug from his maybe-Guinness and wiped his mouth. “I'm no better than you,” Derek insisted, “with Cristina, in particular.” But Owen shook his head and waved him off.

“Enough of that. So, what are we talking about?” Owen said. “Please, say it's not anything to do with women or surgery.”

“Well, seeing as how I can't cut right now, and Mark already complained about Lexie over darts, I think you're safe,” Derek said with a smile. Across the bar, he watched Meredith, Cristina, Lexie, and Alex all stand up from their table. They gathered their coats.

Owen nodded. “Oh, good.” He frowned. “I mean not good that you can't cut,” he said, looking at Derek. His gaze shifted to Mark. “Or that you're having problems with...” His frown deepened. “I thought Grey was seeing Karev?”

“Oh, she is,” Derek said. Lexie leaned to kiss Alex on the lips, laughing as they walked out of the bar.

Owen's look of confusion only deepened. He took a deep breath. His lips parted. He looked ready to ask another question, probably about the whole relationship musical chairs, but on the apex of his inhalation, Mark interjected, “Derek's thinking about getting a new motorcycle. We were talking about that before.”

He shot a glare at Derek, who shrugged helplessly. The conversation seemed to be wrought with landmines no matter which way they turned. Derek rubbed the bridge of his nose. He didn't want to talk about this.

Meredith stopped on the threshold, her soft, gray gaze searching the crowd. She looked at Derek, eyes piercing, look expectant, as if she sensed his turmoil from across the room. Derek gave her a small smile and a wave. She smiled back at him. See you soon, she mouthed, and she left in Cristina's wake.

“Oh?” said Owen. He perked with interest. “I didn't know you rode. Cristina has a—”
“Bike,” Derek said, forcing his gaze away from the door with a sigh. “I know.”

The floating sensation wrapped around Derek's brain. The sensation of leaving the seat. Flipping. Free fall. Latent memories, agitated by continued prodding, came loose, and Derek could almost feel his body being propelled through the cold, misty air.

He woke up to the sound of the pounding water. Leached of all heat, his battered body shivered. He turned his head, half-drunk with dizziness. Something rough like sandpaper scraped his nose and forehead. His neck wouldn't support his head. Why was he on his stomach on the floor in a shower? He vomited before he had any time to assess the situation. The stench pressed into his nose, made his stomach churn and roil, and he tried to turn away, scraping his face on the wet, rough thing. The movement made him feel like somebody had jabbed a hot poker into his temples. Why couldn't he lift his head?

“Maybe not,” Derek said, his voice soft. “I...” The concussion had twisted his perceptions. Made something awful even worse. He rubbed the tendons in his neck with his fingertips, pressing deep into the coiling tension that loitered there.

Mark shook his head. “You should, man,” he said. “It'd be really great.”

“Why don't you buy one, then?” Derek said.

Mark shrugged. “It's more fun to steal yours,” he said. “And then there's the free gas.”

Derek stared into his water glass. “At least you're being honest, now,” he said, his voice soft, wry, as the memories threatened to steamroll him. He swallowed as a sick feeling churned in his stomach.

He cracked open his eyelids. The slanted, disorienting blare beyond his face hit him like an impressionistic painting. He lay under the dim prison of a flickering streetlamp. Water crashed down around him from the dark sky, hitting the side of his face and blotting his vision. The flat street had tipped like the hypotenuse of a triangle. Why was the world falling over? Had there been an earthquake? His bike lay on the edge where dim light became dark, wheels spinning in slow revolutions in the wind. A shiny fender gleamed in the light.

He tried to move. Pain exploded like a bomb through his body, outward from the epicenter at his thigh. He would have cried out, but his vocal cords didn't work. He threw up again instead, shivering, and he lay still, rebuked and cold.

“Help,” he whispered against the wet pavement.

He stared at his bike in the fuzzy distance. He'd been tossed thirty feet. At least. And something bad had happened to his leg. He needed help. He took a deep, sucking breath and tried once more to move. He ended his attempt on a silent, shaking shout of pain.

“Help,” he repeated, but there was no one.

“He used to have a Harley, but he sold it,” Mark said, and Derek blinked, trying to pull himself back to the present, but the past threatened to suck him back into memory. He remembered trying to wipe the rainwater out of his eyes, only to discover it was blood. He'd waited and waited for help. For hours. Dripping and cold and bloody.

Owen's eyebrows rose. “Why did you sell it?”

“Why is that so important to everybody right now?” Derek snapped.
“It... wasn't,” Owen said, his expression creasing with wariness. “I... thought this was our conversation topic?”

“He crashed,” Mark said, and Derek closed his eyes.

*His neck hurt. His head pounded. He couldn't look behind him, or move his body. Whenever he tried, he almost fainted with the pain, and so he’d stopped making attempts. He’d given up calling for help, too. He lay with his face pressed against the cold, wet concrete, battered by the ceaseless rain. His hair plastered his head. Everything smelled like vomit and blood, and he couldn't move. His teeth chattered. He was cold. He’d landed face down on a tipped slab. He couldn't tell much else. Hours passed.*

“A crash,” Derek echoed, and a wry, almost hating chuckle fell from his lips. He glowered at Mark. “That's putting it mildly.”

Owen took a sip from his pint glass. He brushed the foam away from his lips. “You quit because of a crash?” he said.

Derek’s hackles rose as he stared at Owen. What right did he have to judge? “I quit because I don't like waking up with my face stuck in a puddle of vomit, and a piece of rusty rebar jammed through my thigh.”

Mark took a deep breath. “Derek...”

“No,” Derek said. “No, I was stuck like that for hours in the rain, and I couldn't get help. *You* don't get to tell me it was stupid to quit.”

Owen frowned and shook his head. “I didn't say it was stupid.”

“Neither of us said that,” Mark said.

*Sombody covered him with a fuzzy blanket that didn't feel warm. Rain thundered overhead, endless drumbeats splotching the space above him, but the water had stopped hitting him. The sky had turned red and white. Something flapped in the wind. Flashing lights and the rumble of a big truck engine made it hard to focus.*

“Son, hang in there,” someone said over the din. A man. He sounded kind. Familiar. A hand pressed something against Derek's head. The spear of pain crashing through his skull made him flinch. “We're going to cut you loose, now. Can you tell me your name?”

A loud, metal shriek sent vibrations of pain through his battered body, and Derek yelled. Or, he tried. His voice had left him hours ago. Everything smelled like blood and vomit and old urine, and he couldn't move away from the stench or the pain. The metal shrieking wouldn't stop, and everything was a blur beyond his eyes. He thought he might die as the thing in his leg shifted. He clawed at the concrete with weak, pawing, raw fingertips. He didn't understand anymore.

A warm hand gripped his and stopped him from rubbing his skin away. The hand squeezed. “We'll get you out of here soon, son. What's his name?”

*Sombody said something beyond his hearing. A woman looking at a billfold. She wore a red windbreaker, red that was the same color as the sky over his head. Her hair was curly and colored like a candle flame.*

“Derek,” said the voice. The hand squeezed. “I want you to listen to me. This is very important, okay? Are you listening?”
“Dad,” Derek whispered, hoarse, almost delirious. He shivered.

“You're going to be fine, but you need to stop struggling,” the man said. “Okay? Derek, can you hold still for me? I know your leg hurts.”

The makeshift tent above him flapped in the wind. Derek looked at the man, who came into focus for the first time. The stranger had crouched over Derek, shielding Derek's face from the bitter wind. The man was old. Old and balding and unfamiliar.

The metal shrieking resumed. The thing in his leg juddered. Derek closed his eyes, too sick and tired to keep them open.

Time stood still in hell.

“It took them until morning to find me, and then it took them another hour just to get me off the rebar with a fucking hacksaw, so shut your mouth,” Derek said.

Owen held up his hands in surrender.

“Derek, I...” Mark began.

The piteous look on Mark's face made Derek want to strike something. His muscles tensed into rigid lines of steel. A scathing retort coiled on Derek's tongue, a serpent, waiting to strike. His jaw opened, and he almost snapped. Verbally. In two. Both. He'd lain there in agony, pinned like a bug for an entomologist in the rain for hours, and they made it sound like losing his nerve was frivolous.

“Pathetic,” said Mr. Clark in Derek's ear. “Letting yourself be ruled by fear.”

He stared at Owen and Mark, who both stared back at him, their eyes narrowing, like they thought Derek might leap into the deep end of the going postal pool at any second. Which was actually a justified assessment, given Derek's recent history. Wasn't it?

Back up. Give the man some damned space. Shoo!

Sense and reason returned in a rush, and Derek's jaw clacked shut. An embarrassed red flush ripped across Derek's face. He looked at his water glass to keep from having to look at them. He was being an idiot, freaking out about things long forgotten and passed into history. He'd let Cristina push his fucking buttons, and then he'd run a mile with the disquiet she'd caused.

Fuck his fucking temper and his fucking mental disease.

“Forget I said anything,” Derek replied, forcing himself to breathe slowly. “This was a stupid idea. I hate motorcycles.”

“Coward,” whispered Mr. Clark, insidious and cold.

Horrible silence stretched. Derek tried to calm down. Tried to force himself back into that place he'd been before. Hating every moment of being here, but struggling through. He fumbled for the notebook. Staying, he wrote. Number ten. I need to get back to normal.

But writing the choice didn't feel like an accomplishment or a badge of honor, and the messy jumble in his head didn't feel normal. He felt done. Like someone had scooped out all his brains with a spoon and left him hollow. Like he was running on the fumes of sentience.
He looked woozily at the room, which was now even less crowded. The clamor and crush of people had died to a more tolerable murmur, but he couldn't stop hearing the noise like endless, painful zaps of static on his over-sensitized brain. He'd found normal for a while. He tried to tell himself that was enough.

Please, please, don't push yourself today, he remembered Meredith telling him.

Promise you won't push too hard, she'd said.

Please, don't push yourself. Not today.

Over and over again, she echoed in his head. Same verse. Different day. Ever since he'd fractured himself on the catwalk, she'd been yanking on his reins. Trying to keep him from overextending himself into guaranteed failure.

He'd accomplished a lot. That should be enough. Why didn't it feel like enough? She'd left. Staying wasn't even for Meredith's benefit anymore. There was no reason to stay other than the fact that leaving like this felt like a loss in a long, humiliating stream of losing.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to ease the ache. This would be easier. It would all be easier if he could just take— He shook his head before that evil thought bloomed in full. He squeezed the side of the table until his grip turned his knuckles ashen-colored, and then he stood. He grabbed his choice journal as he rose from his chair.

Will not take drugs, he thought, too focused on forcing those words into his struggling-to-function brain to worry about writing a coherent plan in his choice journal. Will not take drugs. 

Will not take drugs. Will not take anything. Reason? Mental silence followed. He clenched his teeth. Reason? he prompted himself again. A nanosecond of no-fucking-clue became Meredith, and their baby, and his family, and Mark, and Derek's job, and a thousand other things in a tumbling waterfall of that's-why-not, but that horrible, twisting nanosecond of silence had been enough to coil terror in his gut.

He wasn't fucking safe. He was a goddamned time bomb. And he didn't know how to deal with this.

Owen said something. So did Mark. Both of them stared at Derek. Derek blinked. He felt like they'd spoken Greek or Gaelic or Swahili for all the sense they made. His mind had become a snarled mess of gobbledygook, and he couldn't straighten out the jumble. He swallowed against the lump in his throat. He was done. Tired, and raw, and done.

Eleven, he thought, too tired to write. Was he on eleven? Did it matter? Leaving. Why? Can't take it anymore. He thought vaguely of that morning, when he'd tried to call Amelia, tried to reach for help, only to have been scared witless and then forget about it in the meantime. God, he needed help. He should be able to go for more than a few hours without thinking about the sweet siren call of backsliding into oblivion.


Mark nodded and stood without hesitation, gathering their coats. “Okay, man,” he said.

“I can—”

“Not drive yourself,” Mark finished for him. “No way. Give me your keys.”
“But—”

Mark shook his head and held out his hand, palm flat, fingers splayed. “Keys. I'm not asking again.”

“In my coat,” Derek said, his voice soft.

Owen silently watched them gather their things. Whether he thought Derek's lack of explanation or sudden change in demeanor odd, he didn't say a word. He nodded at them, a knowing, deep quality to his stare. “See you tomorrow,” was all he said, and he turned to watch the Mariners game as he nursed the rest of his maybe-Guinness.

The fresh, wet air outside the bar suffused Derek with enough mental fuel to remember simple things like how to breathe and walk and look both ways before crossing the street. Mark followed behind him in the dark, hovering and close, as though he thought Derek might fall. They headed back to the Seattle Grace staff lot where both their cars were parked.

Derek swallowed. He felt shaky enough to fall if he let his thoughts go for a moment, so he didn't begrudge the supervision. Much. He felt like a ghost as he shuffled between the cones of light draping from each streetlamp. A splotch of darkness hit him as he wandered under the busted lamp on the corner where the hospital parking lot became the main drag to the highway. His heart squeezed, but relaxed again as he reentered the dim light and security of the next lamp.

Dropping himself into the passenger seat of Mark's Mustang sent the usual line of pain down his center where his sternum had been split, and Derek grimaced. The pain from the chest incision and the bullet wound had improved a lot, at least. It only appeared when glaringly provoked.

The car wobbled back and forth as Mark swung himself into the driver's seat and slammed shut the door. Mark checked the mirrors. He nudged the rear view mirror to the left a millimeter, and then turned the key in the ignition. The engine rumbled to life. He flipped on the headlights as Derek put on his seatbelt. The engine revved, and Mark backed the car out of its narrow space.

Nothing but the swish of passing cars and the plink of random raindrops filled the space between them. Derek let his eyelids hang low over his eyes. He lost sight of the road through his dark eyelashes in the dark cabin. The tick-ticking Snapple cap sound of the blinker as Mark pulled onto the highway soothed Derek, and he drifted.

“I'm sorry about the motorcycle stuff,” Mark said as he accelerated, and slowly departing reality snapped back into place.

Derek rested against the window. “It's fine.”

“You haven't talked about it in years,” Mark said. “I thought, since you brought it up—”

“It was stupid of me to consider it.”

“It's not stupid. You loved riding that bike.”

Derek shrugged, tired. Wasted. He watched the glowing red tail lights of dozens of cars in the dark. Yellow blinkers flicked on and off at random, like fireflies in the distance. “I lost my nerve,” he said. “Thinking about that after a day like this was pretty stupid.”

“What happened?” Mark said. He pressed the accelerator to pass a BMW tottering along in the slow lane. He used his blinker again, and he didn't speed, either. It was a relaxing switch from Meredith's chaotic, cursing impressions of Mario Andretti, which Derek didn't think he could have
handled tonight. Not after everything else.

“What do you mean what happened?” Derek said, careful to keep his tone neutral.

“You said 'a day like this', which implies something happened,” Mark said as he pulled back into the right lane.

*The gun is on the floor. Nobody is holding it. It's not pointed at you. It's not pointed at anybody.*

Derek rubbed his temples. “I just had a rough day. That's all.”

“What made it rough?” Mark prodded.

*I'm still your boss, you know. I could easily take this 'job opportunity' away again.*

“Look, can we drop this right now?” Derek said. “I'll tell you later.”

“Okay,” Mark said. No argument. Just quiet support.

Derek swallowed. He'd really been a fucking jackass with Mark the last few months. He made sure to say, “Thank you,” his words soft and enunciated, this time, instead of putting it off again. Putting it off meant he would never say it, and Mark needed to hear it. It was the least Derek could do.

Mark shrugged, and his shirt rustled with the movement, but he said nothing.

Derek turned his head and stared at Mark's shadowed profile. The lights of passing cars and the blur of speeding landscape made a bright kaleidoscope against the far window. When Mark had first appeared in Seattle, looking smarmy and full of himself as he'd chatted with an unsuspecting Meredith, Derek had been pissed that the man who'd betrayed him and stolen his wife would dare to follow, and had been even more incredulous when Mark had made it clear he hoped to reconcile. Who reconciled with the man who fucked your wife? That wasn't really a reconcilable thing. Or so he'd thought.

Time had proven his assessment false.

*Somehow.*

*I didn't come to Seattle for Addison. I didn't come to Seattle to get chief. I came to Seattle for you. Okay? I came to Seattle to get you back.*

The memory tickled him like a feather, and he guffawed in the quiet space.

“What?” Mark said.

Derek wiped tears from his eyes. “Nothing,” he said, “Nothing. Just something you said once.”

Mark frowned. “What the fuck did I say that was that funny?”

Which only made Derek roll with laughter again. “I'm sorry,” he said, panting. His stomach hurt. “I'm sorry, it's just...” He was fucking tired. And worn out. And everything seemed ludicrous anyway. He let himself laugh as he wiped his face.

“Glad I could amuse you,” Mark said, half-irritated, half-wry as the car tore through the dark. “You're not going crazy are you?”

Derek sniffed as he recovered his composure. “No,” he said.
He and Mark had been through a lot. Mark had been there before Addison. Before Dad had died. He'd been there since their lives had been defined by single digit ages. It was remarkable, really, in an age when most friendships were measured in months or years, not decades. They'd been through grade school. High school. College. Medical school. Private practice. All of it, together.

In his own way, Mark had always been there.

Derek stared into the rear view mirror. The splashing sea of white headlights behind him illuminated Derek's face. He stared at the telltale fleck on his forehead. A dent. He'd told Meredith that was why he didn't ride motorcycles anymore, but the scar wasn't really a why, so much as an echo. A reminder. Every day. A message in written blood. You're afraid of this, and you let it own you. He touched the rough skin, the shallow impression left where his skin had broken years ago. He remembered the topsy-turvy world when he'd woken up. The waiting. Feeling sick with dizziness. Feeling cold and hurting.

He grimaced. He had so many ugly scars that reminded him of so many ugly things. He closed his eyes as he dropped his hand and pressed his palm against his ribs, over the spot where the bullet had torn him apart. His choice journal jabbed him in the hip. He'd stuffed it in his jeans pocket at some point. He couldn't remember when.

“Can you fix my scars?” Derek said.

The rush of the moving car spread into the silence. Derek looked at Mark, who blinked. “What?” Mark said.

“The bullet wound and the sternal incision,” Derek said. “Can you fix them?”

“No scar repair would be perfect. Not even mine.”

“Reduce them, then?” Derek said, unable to curb the hope in his voice. “Can you do that?”

“Um...” Mark glanced at him for a moment before looking back at the dark road. “I'd have to look at them.”

“But you've seen them,” Derek said.

Mark snorted. “I'm not Meredith,” he said. “I don't make a habit of staring at your naked chest.”

Derek swallowed. “They're really bad.”

“I'm sure they're not that bad,” Mark said as he guided the car onto the exit ramp. A few more minutes, and they would be home.

“You just said you'd need to look at them.”

“I'm a plastic surgeon,” Mark said with a shrug. “I would have noticed them if they were bad, inappropriate staring or not.”

“Hypothetically speaking—”

“You should let the sternal incision heal for at least a year before you talk about surgical correction,” Mark said. “A lot of it will fade on its own if you just give it a chance.”

“But the bullet wound?”

A long pause followed. “You could get it fixed, now,” Mark said.
Derek clenched his fists. “What would the procedure be like?”

“I'd have to see the bullet wound.”

“Hypothetically,” he said.

“It'd be easy,” Mark replied. “Bullet wounds from handguns are tiny.”

“Would I need painkillers?” Derek said.

“You'd probably be fine with prescription strength ibuprofen.”

“So, not an opioid.”

“Nope,” Mark said. “No narcotics.”

“During?”

“Hmm. We'd use conscious sedation, probably,” Mark said. “You'd be supervised the entire time, and you likely wouldn't remember being high anyway. You'd wake up feeling groggy, and that might last a day or two, but that's it.”

The car bounced on its shocks as Mark pulled into the empty driveway. Neither Meredith's old Jeep nor Cristina's bike were parked at the house. No lights glowed in the windows, which meant Lexie and Alex were still out, too, or in bed. Maybe, they'd all gone somewhere else after they'd left the bar. Samantha barked in greeting, audible as a small, bass staccato underlying the nighttime rush of crickets. The Mustang's engine ticked as it settled in the dark.

“Will you fix it?” Derek said. He stared at Mark. “Please?”

Mark frowned. “Derek...”

Derek swallowed. “I'm choosing to fix it,” he said. His voice cracked. “I want it gone. Please, I need it gone.”

Mark stared at Derek in the dark. The streetlights caught his gaze. His eyes glittered. He didn't move, and Derek closed his eyes. Mark wouldn't do it. Why? Derek didn't know, but the crush of disappointment made a lump form in his throat. He didn't think he could stomach getting a consult from somebody else. He hated taking his shirt off for anybody but Meredith. Everything was so ugly. His eyes burned, and he turned away before he spilled, a victim of exhaustion and overspent hope.

“Okay, but not me,” Mark said. “One of my staff. And not until we've done a real consult instead of car hypotheticals in the dark.”

“Why not you?” Derek said.

“The horrendous ethics of me operating on you aside, I'd rather hold your hand through it.”

Derek blinked. A snicker tugged at his lips, but he forced his expression flat. “Hold my hand?”

“You know,” Mark said, his tone wry. He sighed. “I'm glad Yang's not here with that tape recorder.”

Derek chuckled as he popped his seatbelt loose. “Thank you,” Derek said as he slipped out of the car cabin to his feet. Mark pulled the key from the ignition, grumbling, broad shoulders curled
around him, and Derek had the wild image in his head of a disgruntled, ruffled owl. Mark slid out of the car, and the cabin light turned off as the door slammed shut.

Derek's achy muscles took his weight as he stood beside the car, and he sighed, breathing in the chilly, wet air. A raindrop plopped on his nose. Leaves rustled overhead. His body trembled with tiredness, and he leaned against the cool metal of the car. Breathing.

“Need help?” Mark said from somewhere in the darkness.

“No,” Derek said. “I'm okay.” He shuffled away from the metal island toward the house. They clomped over the damp earth. The porch loomed. His keys jingled in Mark's hands. “Are you staying?”

“Meredith's not here,” Mark said.

Derek's lip twitched with amusement. “Yes, then?”

“Couch okay?” Mark said.

“Yeah,” Derek said.

They walked up the steps, and Mark jabbed the key into the lock and twisted. Samantha barked on the other side, her paws scrabbling and thumping on the floor as she jumped excitedly. When Mark pushed through the doorway, Derek moved in behind him, and in moments, a hundred pound pile of fur accosted Derek with slobbering kisses all up and down his arms. Derek bent down, grinning faintly, to greet the dog. He stroked her soft, silky fur as Mark hung their light coats in the hall closet.

“Hey, Sam,” Derek said, a weary, lackluster greeting. “Are you hungry?”

The dog skipped on her feet, and Derek corralled her into the kitchen to feed her. She gobbled down her food and licked the bowl clean in less than ten minutes. When she finished, she looked up at him expectantly. Derek rubbed the bridge of his nose as he leaned against the counter. Samantha moved to sit by his feet. She stared at him with knowing, sad eyes. Derek ached with a familiar longing, despite all his horrific realizations, despite everything.

When he wasn't jamming his head full of thoughts and worries and other noise, the words always came back to him. If only he could take... If only. Just one. The if-onlys had been needling him all day. They'd nearly taken him under like a riptide, today. Whether he'd destroyed his career still remained to be seen.

Small social victories aside, he'd made a big mess today.

Samantha butted his thigh with her head, whining, and he sighed against the lump in his throat. He rubbed her fur, wishing this would just end. All of it.

He wanted normal back.

“Would you take her for a walk?” Derek said as Mark entered the kitchen, headed for the fridge.

Mark stopped. Shrugged. “Sure.”

Derek swallowed. “A long one?”

Mark's eyes narrowed. The subtle suspicion in Mark's gaze hurt, but it was deserved, and Derek
didn't refute it. “I need to make a phone call,” Derek said. He lost his focus on the room. “I need...”

Help. Derek needed help.

Mark stared at him for a long, discerning moment. Then he nodded. He grabbed Samantha's leash from its hook on the wall by the fridge. Samantha bounced into motion as soon as she saw the familiar leather lead, before Mark had a chance to say, “C'mon, Sam.” Derek barely heard the door open and close, or Samantha's happy yip as Mark led her off the porch into the night.

Derek took his cell phone out of his pocket and stared at it. For a long time. Silence stretched. He sat at the kitchen table and put the phone down in front of him, still staring.

He could do this. Call Amelia. He'd been flirting with the idea all day.

With a deep breath, he dialed, and he listened to the minor tone of the phone ringing with his eyes closed. He had no idea what he would say. Or how he would say it. Or anything. None. And the more the phone rang, the more doubt set down twisting, knotted roots. It was getting late. Maybe, she was asleep. Maybe, this wasn't a good time to talk. They'd gotten back on speaking terms again after years of estrangement. This would be too much. She'd laugh at him. She'd laugh, and ridicule him, and he'd deserve the disdain because he'd been such a fucking ass—

“Hey, what's up?” she said, her voice light, almost as though he'd caught her in the middle of a burst of laughter. He heard familiar, canned laughter in the background. Voices. Like a sitcom.

Shocked at the sudden change in circumstance, he didn't speak. Couldn't speak. Help. It was such a simple word. And yet so difficult to say. He'd almost hoped, toward the end of his wait, that she wouldn't pick up the phone. Then, at least, he could have said he'd tried. He licked his lips as they went dry.

What was he supposed to say? By the way, I got addicted to my pain medication, and I need your advice on how to deal with it. Seriously? He'd scared monsters out from her closet. He'd packed her lunches – he'd even cut the crusts off her peanut butter sandwiches. He'd held her little body against his to protect her from two evil men with a gun.

He heard her screaming, a distant memory.

Dad, she'd said as Michael Shepherd's life had left his body. Daddy?

“Derek, stop sitting on your damned phone,” Amelia said.

He shook his head. Swallowed. “H... Hi.”

“Not a butt dial, then?” she said.

He could feel her smile, and he smiled, too. Distant. Detached. Like he was watching his body, but his soul was floating nearby on the ceiling. “Not unless my ass is speaking,” his body said.

“I don't know, you do tend to talk out your ass a lot,” Amelia said, her tone playful.

“I knew I could count on you for a disturbing picture for my mind's eye,” his other self responded wryly.

The wet sound of an air kiss tumbled over the line. “I love you, too,” she said. “So, what's up?”

Reality snapped back, and the funny floating sensation shattered, leaving him in the seat at the
table with the phone at his ear, talking to his baby sister, with no more time left for stalling. He squeezed the phone until his knuckles hurt. Buttons bleeped under the mashing pressure of his cheek.

“Derek?”

“I need your advice,” he said, forcing himself to breathe evenly. He could do this if he could just... breathe. Crickets sang outside the window in the blackness. He thought he heard a familiar bark in the distance. The sink faucet dripped, and the refrigerator hummed.

“You called me for advice?”

He sat rigid in his chair. “Yes.”

He heard shuffling noises through the line. The blare of the television in the background flicked off. “Hang on,” she said, “I need to get a coat.”

“What?”

“It's hell, and there's ice everywhere,” she said.

“Very funny, Amy.”

She laughed. Noise cluttered the line. He imagined her settling on the sofa for a long chat. “So, what do you want my advice on?”

“I'm...” And addict. A hypocrite. Sorry. Shit. He swallowed. “I had a bad day,” he said, his voice creaking.

“Didn't you work today?”

“Yeah.”

“You need help with a work problem?” she said, her tone almost... hoping. Dreaming.

“No,” he said. He closed his eyes. “No, I...”

“Damn. I guess that would be more than just hell freezing over.”

“Amelia!” he snapped.

She rolled her eyes. He couldn't see her, but he knew she did, which only rose his hackles. “What?” she said.

“Can you be serious for a minute?” he said. “Please?”

She snorted. The bluster of air through the phone made him wince.

“I need... to know,” he said. He took a breath. “How you deal with constantly wanting something you can't have.”

Silence.

“It figures,” she said at the end of forever.

“What does?”
“You're asking me for advice, and you're still making me feel like a horrible failure,” she said.

He blinked. “I didn't—”

“I mean, really,” she snapped. “Maybe, from your godly perch, my goals might look like unattainable frivolities, but—”

He slammed his fist on the table and stood. His chair roared as he pushed it backward with his knees. He stalked toward the refrigerator. “I didn't mean it like that; god, damn it!”

“Well, what did you mean?” she demanded.

“Cravings!” he said, agitated. He turned and paced toward the doorway. When he reached it, he turned and moved back toward the fridge. “How do you deal with cravings?”

“You're going to compare some new funky health-kick diet craving to my drug addiction?” she said, her tone incredulous.

“No, I'm comparing my drug addiction to yours,” he said, trying to keep his voice even.

A muffled sound filtered through the line. “You?” she said. “Seriously? You?”

He stopped walking. “Yes.”

She burst out laughing, and it was an awful sound that made his ears tingle and his chest tighten and his jaw clench. His skin flamed.

He hung up and tossed his phone on the table, disgusted with himself. With her. With everything. And then he stood there. Still. But shaking. He blinked, and the world blurred with hot tears. He wiped his face. He stared at the wet, salty mess on his skin. Leaking like a fucking sieve. Again. His lip curled.

With a roar, he looked wildly for something to toss or kick or throw or... something. He swept all the magnets and coupons and menus and business cards from the fridge, sending everything flying. Magnets pinged on the floor, bounced, and scattered. Papers fluttered to the ground. His chest screamed in pain with the violence of his movement – too much too soon after his injuries — which only made the churning coil of ugliness feel worse. He grabbed the fridge handle and squeezed.

When the front door opened, at first he thought it was Mark, returning with Samantha. A giggle and a low-pitched murmur told him differently. Lexie, looking back over her shoulder, walked into the kitchen. “Want a beer?” she called.

“Sure,” Alex said from the living room.

Derek knew she'd spotted him and the mess of magnets from the gasp. “Derek?” she said.

His fingers clenched. “Please, just go away,” he said without looking.

“But—”

He slammed the flat of his palm against the fridge. “Go away. Go away. Please. Go away.” He shook his head back and forth like some sort of crazed animal. “I can't do this tonight.”

“Can't... do...” Lexie began, her soft voice turned up in question, and then she stopped. A pause followed. Derek clenched his jaws, pressing his weight into the fridge as he tried to vent tension. It
hurt. At last, she said, “Okay.”

The door closed. He heard the thump of her footsteps on the stairs, followed by a heavier set. He didn't care what they did, as long as it wasn't near him.

His cell phone rang, startling him. He glanced darkly at the display. Amelia. His teeth clenched, and he looked away. He loved her, but god, he hated her sometimes. When she tried to call again, he stalked to the table, denied the call, and stuck the phone on vibrate.

The house phone rang next. He let it go. The answering machine picked up after four rings.

“Derek, are you at home?” Amelia spoke through the void. She sounded upset. Frantic. Different on the land line. A lot less distorted. “I'm sorry, Derek. I'm sorry.” He stared at the phone. At the answering machine. A wet sniffle tore through the line, and his angry shell cracked around the edges. “I thought you were joking, or... or something. I don't know. Please, pick up. Are you there? Please?”

Please. The word hung in the air like a noose waiting to wrap around his neck. God, damn it. He snatched the phone off the hook. “Look, forget it,” he snapped.

She sniffed. “You're really not joking?”

“No, I'm not fucking joking,” he said. “Just forget it.”

“No, I won't forget it!” she snapped back at him. He imagined her stomping her foot. “You're not joking, and you called me, of all people.”

“So, what?”

“So, I know you wouldn't call me unless you're standing on a figurative bridge right now, and getting ready to jump, and maybe not even then,” she replied without hesitation. “Only an idiot would let this go, and contrary to your feelings on the matter, I'm not one.”

He clenched the receiver. “I don't think you're an idiot,” he said. “I've never said that!”


He didn't know how he made it back to the table. To his seat. He stared at the fridge. At all the magnets and papers he'd sent flying. The kitchen appeared as though a violent storm had blown through. He leaned onto the table, annoyed at the aching in his chest. He pressed his free hand against the fault line. The one Cristina had cut into him to save his life. Some days, he didn't feel saved. He moved to rub the bridge of his nose, trying to rid himself of the headache that hadn't loosed its grip since that morning.

When he'd fucked up.

“I...” he began, only to lose his voice. His lower lip quivered. He pressed the phone against his ear and squeezed his eyes shut. The popped-loose sensation returned, and he floated. Above. The pained, upset breath he heard, that wasn't him. He wasn't crying again, certainly not for his baby sister to hear. That was some guy sitting at the table who looked like him.

“Tell me what made your day really bad,” Amelia prodded. She didn't mention his sniveling. Didn't tease. “Tell me what happened.”
“How do you live like this?” the stranger said, his voice a harsh, grating whisper. He swallowed and clenched his fists, and tears slashed his cheeks. “I need...”

“How long have you been clean?”

“A month.”

“Derek, those first few months are hell,” Amelia said, her voice soft. Flowing. Calm. He drifted back into himself, listening. “They are the seventh level of hell, and there's no real way to make them not be hell. You have to slog through them one day at a time, one hour at a time, one minute at a time, one second at a time, and the effort involved makes you feel like you're climbing Mount Everest with no physical preparation or gear. Why do you think I kept slipping?”

He wiped his eyes. “I thought...”

“You thought I was weak, and I didn't care enough to stop using.”

He didn't reply. He couldn't. Because that was exactly what he'd thought, and now that he was here, in this place... he felt like shit for it.

“It's okay,” she said. “It's what most people who haven't been here think. I've made my peace with the stigma years ago.”

He rocked in his seat. “I need it to stop. Please, tell me it stops.”

“Tell you what stops?”

“This horrible wanting,” he said. “I don't want to want. I want to be like I was.”

“You won't ever stop wanting, and you won't ever be like you were,” she said. No hesitation.

Her surety raked him like claws. He shook his head. “No,” he snapped. “No, it can't be like that.”

“It is what it is, whether you want it to be or not,” she replied. She sounded almost... sad.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. “God, Amelia, I—”

“Look,” she said. “Dealing with an addiction sucks. To quote my favorite role-model, 'It's hard, and it's fighting, and it's every day.' You've had a taste, now. You will never stop wanting. But you can want a lot of things, Derek. Eventually, it'll be a small dab on your plate that you can push aside, 99.9% of the time. You won't always feel like you're in a famine by saying no. Just hang in there. I promise it does get better.”

“I can't,” he said. How could he have done this to himself?

“Weak,” said Mr. Clark. “Pathetic.”

“You can,” she responded. “You can do it. If I can do it, you certainly can.”

“How?” Derek said, his tone hopeless.

“You're a stubborn ass,” she said. “Use it. Be stubborn. Say no to yourself, and keep saying it, and if you can't say it, call me, anytime, day or night, and I'll yell at you until you can.”

He swallowed. “Amelia...”
“That's what you did this morning, isn't it?” she said. “That wasn't really a butt dial.”

“It wasn't.”

“You were listening.”

“Yes,” he said. “I got...” He pulled his hands through his hair and he sighed. “I got startled and hung up.”

“You don't have to talk when it happens, Derek,” Amelia said. “Just call, and I'll yell in your ear.”

He closed his eyes. *When it happens*, she'd said. As if she knew he'd have a bad day again with immutable certainty. He wondered how many bad days she'd weathered alone because he'd abandoned her. All of them had, except Mom, which meant the important stuff, like getting clean, she'd done primarily on her own, with her own strength of will. He needed people to hold him up, but she'd somehow managed without, and that was... illuminating. About her. About him.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I'm so sorry for what I did to you.”

“You didn't do anything.”

“That's my point,” he said. “I gave up. I gave up on you, and I'm sorry. I'm *so* sorry. I didn't know.”

Silence stretched across eternity, interminable, and he would have thought she'd hung up if he hadn't heard her breathing softly on the other end of the line. “Okay,” she said, her tone even.

Sadness squeezed his heart. He remembered that morning. When he'd spoken to Dr. Kepner and told her indirectly that he couldn't forgive her. The thought that he'd ruined something so thoroughly with his own blooded sister churned inside, a cold, hurting ball. She was his family, and this was wrong. You forgave your family. You loved your family. But it was his fault, not hers. He'd broken those rules first, and he wouldn't press the matter. He didn't deserve any better than what she offered him, now, anyway. He imagined he deserved worse.

*It's hard, and it's fighting, and it's every day*, she'd said. That assessment felt painfully real. Accurate. He had to believe her, at least, that this would get better. She'd done this. Been in this place. Been in a *worse* place, because she hadn't had Meredith, or Mark, or Miranda Bailey, or Richard, or anybody. Her friends had all been users. Coke heads. Alcoholics. He imagined when she'd quit, she'd found herself without any social structure at all.

Hard.

Fighting.

Every day.

He sighed. “Amy?”

“Yeah?”

“Who's the role-model you quoted?”

“Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” she said. “Why?”

He snickered. “Just curious.”

“That show was a serious commentary on a lot of social issues!”
“I'm sure,” he replied.

“Just watch it before you critique it, you ass.”

He raised his eyebrows, laughing incredulously. “Did I say a word?”

“No, but I heard you smile.”

“You heard me smile,” he said. He snorted. “Smiles are noisy?”

“You're, you smirky bastard,” she said.

“I love you, too, Amy,” he said. “Thank you for the advice.”

In that moment, he heard her smile, too. “You're welcome,” she said. “You'll be okay tonight?”

He closed his eyes for a moment, breathing as he listened to the hissing silence on the line.

“Derek?”

“I'm... not dying,” he answered, recalling what he'd said earlier that day to Meredith.

“It'll get better,” she said. “I swear, Derek.”

She sounded so sure. As sure as she'd sounded when she'd told him he'd likely slip again. Have another bad day. Or days. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. His headache made him bleary. Tired.

“I believe you,” he said.

She chuckled, the laugh a light sound against his dark exhaustion. “You're not convincing me hell isn't frozen,” she said, no derision in her tone.

He couldn't help the tired smile that creased his expression. “Good night, Amy,” he said.

“Good night,” she replied.

The line clicked as she disconnected, and after a long silence, the dial tone blared in his ear, endless, a siren. He lumbered to his feet to return the phone to its cradle. He stared at the mess he'd made. The magnets. The papers. He picked those up gingerly, mindful of his protesting chest and the ache in his skull. When he finished, he sat.

He leaned back in his chair, staring at nothing for the longest time as he listened to the crickets sing. Eventually, he gathered himself. He pulled out his notebook. The paper crinkled as he fiddled with the end of the 2nd page, reading his messy script. The page felt soft under his fingertips.

There was a lot there, and he hadn't even written everything that'd flown through his head. He'd made a lot of choices. More than he ever would have noticed without this little booklet, and that made him feel... better. Amelia had made him feel better, despite the harsh reality she delineated. Going to a bar and having fun playing darts, even for just little while... That made him feel better, too.

He picked up his pen. He recalled hitting eleven several times in his head, but he'd only written up to ten.

11, he wrote. Asked Mark about fixing my scars. Why?
He tapped the pen against the paper. Why? Reasons tumbled through his head. They were ugly. Every time he saw them in the mirror it happened again. Getting shot. Falling to the floor. I hate them, he wrote. That seemed simple enough.


That one was easy to come up with.

He heard voices outside the house. Familiar ones. His ears perked. Meredith and Mark. Talking on the front porch. The deep timbre of Mark's voice rumbled through the air, accentuated with Meredith's softer, lighter tones. A car rumbled past on the street far beyond, and the windows rattled briefly.

Derek took a breath. He didn't want to do this. He wanted to bury all of today and never think about any of it again, but Amelia echoed in his head. Hard. Fighting. Every day.

13, he scribbled. Telling the truth.

There were so many reasons for that one, he couldn't quantify anything in a sentence small enough to fit on the sheet, but he wanted Meredith to know what he'd done with the prescription that day. Even if the consequences meant he would be sleeping alone that night. He wanted Mark to know, too. Mark had been there. Always. He deserved to know.

Derek took another deep breath, steepled his fingers, and he waited for them to come inside. He didn't wait long.

“Hey,” Meredith said as she stepped into the kitchen. Her gaze flicked to the wall clock. “You're still up,” she added, sounding surprised, but in a good way, as if she considered the fact that he was still up at ten as wonderful as she'd thought his attempt to go out had been. She tucked a loose, wispy strand of hair behind her ear and smiled at him, warm and hopeful, almost bashful. Samantha trotted past to collapse in her crate in the dining room. Mark loomed behind Meredith in the doorway, leather leash in hand.

Derek swallowed. “Hi,” he responded, unable to stop his smile, lackluster and small though it was, at the reassuring sight of her. “Yeah, I'm still up.” He glanced at Mark. “Thank you for taking her.”

Mark shrugged. “No problem. Did you finish your phone call?”

“A minute ago,” Derek said. “Look, um...” He pulled his hands through his hair. He glanced at Meredith. “I need to tell you something.”

Mark snickered. “Should I take Samantha out for another lap around the block?”

“No, I...” Derek said. “No, you stay. I want to tell you, too.”

Meredith's smile slipped, which made his heart squeeze. Both of them watched him expectantly. He thought about asking them to sit down at the table. Or grab a drink. Or... something. Meredith hadn't even taken her coat off or slid onto the couch to relax for a moment, and... No. He shook his head. No. His number thirteen would be of the ripping-the-band-aid variety, he decided.

“It's sort of a confession,” he said, and Meredith's serious expression deepened. Mark's, too.

Meredith moved to the chair across from him and sank into it, folding her arms across her chest. Mark still hovered in the doorway. Silence stretched.
“A confession about what?” Meredith said.

Derek looked at her. Her soft, gray eyes pulled at him. He squeezed his fingers, clutching his notebook until the pages crinkled, and relaxed. “I did something awful today,” he began, and then he told them everything.

They listened.

Later, he would write more lines in his notebook by the midnight glow of his bedside lamp.

14. Took a hot bath with Mere – she wanted the company.

15. Going to sleep – tomorrow might be a good day.

He would slide against his sleeping wife, spooning her, marveling over the freedom of movement that, weeks before, he hadn't possessed. He would inhale the soft scent of her hair and stroke her arm and wonder at his luck that he'd found her years ago, just a girl in a bar. His girl.

He would close his eyes.

He would dream.
Chapter 23

The blare of the alarm pulled Derek out of a blank, sound sleep. He flinched and slapped at his nightstand, but the awful noise didn't stop. He tried again. His palm smashed into something lumpy and hard. Whatever it was crashed to the floor, followed by a thunk and the dripping sound of water. His dormant clock? A water bottle? He didn't know or care about anything other than the fact that the noise didn't stop.

“No,” whined the warm, soft body beside him. Blankets rustled. A hand squeezed his naked hip under the covers.

He gazed blearily across the bed, over the fuzzy lump of his wife. Blinking red numbers stared back at him from Meredith's nightstand. 4:30 AM. They had almost an hour before she needed to head for the shower or risk being late for pre-rounds. He flopped back onto the pillow with a groan.

He breathed heavily into his pillow. A full-of-cotton sensation throbbed behind his eyes. He didn't open them as the noise shredded his sensitive eardrums. “Mere,” he said into the pillowcase, muffled, trying to curl away from the sound.

“Shut up,” she said.

“Alarm.”

“Don't care.”

“Work?”

“No,” she moaned. “It's not Saturday, yet. It can't be.”

He sighed. “Mere...”

“Your fault. Shut up.”

“My fault?”

“Peeing. Puking.” She rolled over and slapped off her alarm as she grumbled. “All night. Stupid bully sperm.”

Too exhausted for argument, he didn't take her grumpy challenge.

They lay quiet in the darkness. Moonlight spilled through the window, and something in his brain rebelled. He breathed. The idea of being awake physically hurt. This was too early. Human beings should not be up when the moon was still out. He'd worked his first full week. It was his first day off. He was exhausted, and the sticky, cloudy feeling behind his eyelids persisted. He was a morning person, but he hit his limits with the sunrise. Earlier than sunrise wasn't morning. It was fucking night, still. He had no idea how he'd ever managed to get up to fish at 3:00 AM when he'd lived in his trailer. That Derek seemed like a lunatic, now.

He pulled his pillow over his head. His head swirled. The fitted sheet pressed against his nose. The mattress smelled like her. Them. He wanted to curl into it and lose himself back in the quiet blank he'd been wrenched from with the alarm. He didn't want to move.
Heavy footsteps plodded in the hall outside the bedroom, which made him tense. Alex, he tried to reason with himself. Alex, not a stranger. The door across the hall opened and closed. The water ran in the tub basin for a moment and then shifted into a plink, plink, plinkplinkplink as the shower turned on full blast. The hypnotic sound of the falling water pulled Derek away from alertness.

He relaxed and drifted.

The hairs on the nape of his neck prickled first. He sensed eyes on him. Benevolent. Meredith. He lay there and let her stare. He felt a bubble of body heat millimeters from his skin, as if she hovered just above him. The pillow lifted off his head, the motion gentle, and her fingers splayed against his shoulder, a light touch that she slowly pushed her weight into, as if to announce her presence before subjecting him to the full, heady truth of her body. The biting, cold air outside the sheets pressed into his skin, only to be eclipsed as she mashed herself against him, and they became one sleepy, melded lump of wishing-it-wasn't-Saturday.

“We did make a date,” she said eventually. Her breaths hit his neck, thick and heavy in that half-asleep way. Like she wanted to get that last hour of slumber, but wasn't letting herself.

“We could skip it.”

“But we're already up.”

He dragged his face across the sheets, turning toward her voice, but he didn't open his eyes. “The me that made that date last night was happily ensconced in 10:00 PM.”

“4:30 AM didn't seem that early last night,” she grumbled.

So fucking true, he thought. He searched for the pillow she'd stolen to pull it back over his head and blot out the approaching day, but he couldn't find it. He gave up, flopping flat on the bed.

“Mere, I'm really tired.”

Silence stretched. He felt her watching him. His skin twitched.

“No, we can't skip it,” she said. Her fingers ran through his hair. His scalp tickled. His body relaxed. She pressed against him, her tiny weight a solid, warm reassurance at his side. “We could do a quickie.”

“Meredith, it wouldn't be a quickie.”

She flipped onto her back next to him and sighed as she stared at the ceiling. The mattress jiggled as she shifted. “Whatever. A longie, then.”

“But a longie is long,” he said.

He felt her frowning. “First, it was your bad day,” she said. “And then I went shopping with Cristina and Lexie after my shift, and you were out cold before I even got home. Last night, we agreed to do it today so we could sleep. We made a date, and I won't see you again until tomorrow evening, and then some other reason will pop up, I'm sure, and we can't. We can't let ourselves be those people.”

“What people?”

“People who get pregnant and never have sex again.”

“Meredith, it's been one busy week. And we had sex on Thursday!”
Another set of footfalls thumped down the hallway. The bathroom door in the main hallway rattled on its hinges as Lexie pounded on it. “Alex!” Lexie said. “Alex, come on. Stop stealing all the hot water, you hog!”

Alex muttered something inaudible through all the water and two closed doors.

“Well, you're a selfish jerk!” Lexie replied, and she stalked away.

Derek listened to Meredith breathe. The shower ran. A car passed outside on the street. Birds had begun chirping, a precursor to the dawn that would legitimately bring the darkness into day.

Meredith sighed. “This is how it starts, isn't it?”

Derek frowned. “How what starts?”

“I'm going to have a beach ball in my freaking stomach, soon.”

“Mmm,” he murmured. “Our beach ball.”

“But it'll be in my stomach.”

“Typically, that's where unborn beach balls are, yes,” he said.

“It'll be in my stomach, Derek.”

“So?”

The blankets rustled. “You're not going to want to do quickies or longies or anything with a beach ball in the way. And you're probably going to hog all the hot water in the shower because you won't care about me anymore.”

“What?” he said.

“It's logical!”

He fought the urge to shake his head in wonderment. “Meredith, if you want me to have sex with you while you have a beach ball in the way, trust me,” he said. “The beach ball won't stop me. I'll find a way.”

“I want you to have sex with me, now, and you're not doing it, and this is already a rain check date,” she countered.

“Meredith, I'm really just tired,” he said. “Beach balls hadn't even crossed my mind.”

“You're never just tired. Not for sex.”

His eyes snapped open. He stared at the pale blur of her neck. A sticky, tired feeling stuck behind his eyes. The meds, probably. Stupid somnolence. “Mere—”

“And you didn't even wake up last night.”

“Mere—”

“So, you can't play the had-a-nightmare exhaustion card.”

“Meredith!” he said, trying to capture her attention.
“What!”

He squeezed her tiny hand and pulled it to his lips. He kissed her knuckles. Her skin smelled nice. A mix of the cocoa from her lotion, and the remains of lavender. “You really think I don't find you attractive anymore?”

“No,” she admitted, her tone begrudging. “Maybe. No.”

“Maybe?” he said, incredulous that she could have any doubts at all.

He pushed himself from his stomach to his left side. The world spilled blurrily over his eyes as he moved. He found her as he came to rest. A twinge shivered underneath his skin with the new pressure on his side, but he lost his brief thought of pain as his gaze came to a stop on the curve of blanket over her naked body. Time seemed stuck in her orbit, refusing to move forward. The bite of wanting stirred deep inside. His breath hitched.

She lay on her back, staring at him through hooded gray eyes, bathed in the soft glow of moonlight. The loose waves of her hair fell down around her shoulders, messy and unkempt from sleep. Her breasts had swollen with the growth of their baby, and her nipples perked in the chilly air. The blanket came to a stop at her navel.

She had a glow about her skin. The pregnancy. Her desire. He didn't know. Whatever it was, it became her and seduced him all at once, and he almost cursed himself for not looking at her sooner and avoiding this whole argument. She was all beautiful curves and feminine symmetry and softness that he would find thrilling and sexy until the end of his days. No matter what.

He pushed his fingers through her hair. She leaned into the touch, a soft smile on her face that made his heart quiver with a feeling of rightness. She made his world right, even if it was crashing down around him. “Meredith, you're the most beautiful person I've ever met,” he said.

She kissed his hand. “It's just hard, sometimes.”

“Why?” he said, a soft murmur as he tasted her.

“It's really hard to get you interested, sometimes.”

He snapped backward to peer at her. “What?”

She looked away. “It's not your fault.”

“It's not your fault, either,” he said, his tone dark. “It's the fucking Paxil.”

“I know,” she said. “This is stupid. Never mind.”

He frowned. “Is it really that bad?” He remembered needing to be encouraged on Thursday, too. Just like this morning. And it hadn't seemed wrong until she'd pointed it out, now. Which, he supposed, was sort of the tricky, slow poison of SSRIs. When you didn't really want sex all the time, it was hard to care or notice that you didn't really want sex all the time. “I didn't even notice,” he confessed. “I'm sorry.”

She shrugged. “Just takes some perseverance to get you interested, sometimes. It's not a big deal.”

“It's a big deal if you're noticing it. Meredith, I love you. You'll always be the most beautiful woman in the world to me.”
“Even with a beach ball?” she said, gray eyes wide as she looked up at him.

He dipped down to kiss her lips. “Even more with a beach ball,” he murmured against her skin. He slid his palm against her navel, pushing the blankets away as he leaned over her warm body.

“What are you doing?”

“Keeping our date,” he said.

She gave him a coy, small smile, her incisors pressing into the plush red of her lower lip. She reached across the void between them and brushed her palm against his arm. She squeezed. He swallowed.

“Awake, now?” she said, her voice low. Her body whispered across the sheets. She scooted closer, until there was no space between them, only touch. Connection.

He nodded, unable to stop staring. “Oh, yes,” he said.

She pushed the blankets away from his body. The chill air made his skin twitch, not quite a shiver. Her pupils dilated as she looked at his naked skin. She touched his chest, her palm against his thundering heartbeat. Hairs on his pectorals tickled and shifted as she toyed with them. He swallowed, fighting the sweet lethargy of pleasure, fighting the urge simply to lie there as she did what she wanted.

She deserved more than a toy. She deserved love in return. She deserved so many things. So many days, he didn't feel like he could give her even half of what she should have. But he could give her that.

Love.

He loved her.

She slid the length of her body against him. Her palm chased along his side. She dipped between them and touched him, her warm, soft skin sliding like silk along his foreskin. The feathery sensation as she retracted it robbed him of thoughts. He pressed against her hand with a deep, needy groan to let her know he liked it. The room fuzzed as his eyelids dipped. He liked all of it. This.

How could he have forgotten he liked sex?

He captured her lips, almost desperate to stamp out the memory of sexual numbness. She inhaled deeply against him, as if his scent comforted her as much as hers did him. She stroked him, and his lower body quivered as delicious tension coiled.

“You didn't wake up last night,” she murmured as he cupped her breasts.

He blinked, unable to stop the fluttery moan that burbled in his throat as she pressed her fingers between his legs and toiled his desire into a thick, heady thing that clogged his brain. He gasped. “I didn't,” he said, almost a hiccough.

She grinned. “We're not in the middle-of-nowhere wilderness, Derek,” she murmured. He watched her through hooded eyes. “We're here. And you didn't wake up. And you've only had one bad day in the entire month since you got clean. And you played darts in a crowded bar for a little while. I'd say that's a worthwhile trade for a little more effort to find the mood. Wouldn't you?”
As if she’d read his mind. His doubts. How did she do that? She gave him acceptance. And belonging. Peace. Respite.

He pressed his forehead against hers, so close that their noses mashed. The glitter of her deep stare sang to him in the dark. In the moonlight. He brought his hand to her temple and pushed his fingers through the strands of her hair. He loved it when she wore her hair down.

“I love you,” he said, his voice soft. He kissed her, tasting her as she did things to him. Things that made the space beyond his eyes waver and his wanting burn. Another groan stuck in his throat.

She returned his searching kiss. “I love you, too. And I want you to be happy.”

“I'm trying.”

“I know.” She brushed his lips with her free hand. “You still don't do that enough.”

“What?”

“Smile like this.”

He laughed. “I'm happy, now— Oh. Oh...” He arched backward as she touched him.

She gave him another sly smile. The expression crackled, almost as if it were made of electricity. He panted. “I know,” she said.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. Against him. Into him. “You make me so happy, Meredith.”

She sighed, content, and the sound of her satiation made him alive. Proud. Happy that he could give.

“I don't tell you enough how much you mean to me,” he said.

“You tell me a lot,” she murmured. “You're always here. Saying things.”

He shook his head. He squeezed her hip, motioning for her to roll over, away from him. “Let me show you, too.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“You drove on Thursday,” he said. And she'd had to get him into the mood. He wanted her to feel loved. Loved and cherished and adored and everything he felt about her to the point that it made him ache. He needed to stamp those horrible doubts she'd expressed into dust. “My turn.”

“But you're not—”

He pushed her hand away from his groin before he lost his willpower to say no. “I'll worry about it. You relax.”

She snickered. “Relax? Sex with you is a lot of nice things, but it's never relaxing until it's over.”

“Figure of speech,” he replied with a sly chuckle. “I'm going to coil you like a spring until you're screaming.” He kissed her ear.

“I had a feeling you would.”
“You're going to beg me,” he murmured against her ear.

Her eyes widened. “I could beg you, now, I'm so freaking ready.”

He laughed. “Roll over.”

She snorted. “Fine. But when I'm looking the other direction, there'd better be some sex,” she said, and a vague echo of his own words, years ago, tickled his mind.

*Fine, he'd said when she'd kicked him out for Cristina. But when I get back, there'd better be some sex.*

The sheets rustled as Meredith shifted, rolling away from him before he could respond. His breaths tightened as he stared at her milky, freckled skin and the sloping curve of her hip.

“Is that really what I sound like?” he murmured against her ear.

“Like how?”

“Haughty and demanding.”

She laughed. “It's actually one of the things I kind of love about you... oh. Oh.” He rubbed her, trying to pay her back for his own discombobulation, and she shuddered. “Ooh.”

“So, you think I'm haughty and demanding?” he said.

“That's a trick... oh. Trick question, right?”

He laughed. “I suppose so.”

He pressed his body against hers, spooning her as he wrapped his arms around her, one arm underneath her shoulder, one arm over top her waist, a warm cocoon just for her. They fit together, skin-to-skin, resting on their left sides, and the heat of desire billowed between them.

He kissed her ear as he moved one hand to stroke a pert nipple. His other arm stretched across the valley before the swell of her hip. He found her navel with his explorations, splayed his fingers, and dove into the coarse curls below. She moaned, and the song of it made everything twist inside of him. He slipped his hand between her legs, into the heat, and pulled her against him tightly. The pressure made her shiver, and it trapped his slowly gorging arousal between their bodies. He swallowed, anticipation carving out his thoughts like a drill.

He thrusted, driving himself along her spine. The slip slide of her hot skin along his sensitive head made him gasp for breath, but it wasn't the perfection he wanted. He felt himself filling all too slowly. Fuck. Now would be good. He wanted to feel her wet insides wrapped around him now.

“Derek,” she whispered, the word almost broken by a whine as he stroked her in slow, tantalizing circles. She pressed her hands against his, one at her chest, the other below her navel, and he squeezed his palm, telling him, *More. Right there. Please. Now.* “Mmm,” was all she managed aloud.

He kissed her sweat-spotted throat. Sweet salt spread against his tongue. His eyelashes dipped as he drank her down. The room fuzzed.

He hugged her as though she might slip away from him. His. She was his, and he needed her, and desire to fill her hollow center played tricks on his mind. Made him see all sorts of dirty, dirty
things before they happened. Himself driving into her like a piston. Her body shaking with every powerful thrust. The sweet, fluttery grip of her muscles as she descended into the abyss of orgasm, and the cock and release of his own drive into abandon.

The world wheeled over his eyes as pictures lit his imagination on fire. He couldn't do that sort of heavy athleticism with his innards still semi-broken, at least not for very long, but he thought of it, anyway. Hovering over her body as she looked up at him with a euphoric gaze. The sight of her flesh sang in his head, twisting with her moans in his ears like chords in a beautiful aria, and he burned inside. He thrusted against her, trying to get himself ready.

The feeling made him moan, and he couldn't help but laugh in his frustration.

“What is it?” she said.

“I'm going to tie myself in a billion knots before I even get one pretty bow made out of you.”

“Are you thinking of me?”

“Yes.”

“Of taking me?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Am I wet?”

He swallowed. “Yes.”

“Hot?”

“Mmm.”

“Tight?”

His muscles tightened like screws at the mere word. “Hey,” he said. “Don't you turn this around on me.”

She giggled. “But it's fun.”

“It's mean. You're ruining the effect.”

“Which is?”

“Well, I can't very well do this for you if I'm fucking you in my head, can I?”

She squirmed against him. “You could fuck me for real.”

“I'm working on it!”

“Yes, dear,” she replied, her voice low and throaty and strangely familiar, and though he couldn't see her face, he could almost sense her rolling her eyes.

“Is that really what I sound like?”

She laughed. “I like it.”

He kissed the back of her neck, and he closed his eyes, bathing himself in the soft sounds of her
desire. They curled down his spine and tightened his insides. She shivered against him. Beads of sweat slipped between them. She pressed his hand down.

“Harder,” she told him.

“I'll see your haughty and demanding, and I'll raise you a naughty, bossy vixen,” he told her, unable to stop the smile from spreading across his face as he followed her command and gave her exactly what she wanted. He pressed his thumb against her as he slipped his other fingers between her legs. Slick, soft, and wet greeted him.

She jammed her pelvic bone against him. Her hands left him, and she grabbed for the pillow in front of her and clutched clumps of the pillowcase in her straining fingers. “Oh,” she whined. “Please, Derek.”

“Not so bossy, now,” he murmured as he toiled. “I think that might be construed as begging.”

He knew her body. Every cell of it. Hours of exploration had shown him what made her moan. What made her whine. What made her shake. What made her crash into orgasm. He pressed his thumb, waiting for the endless pressure to turn her into putty. But she didn't reply, this time. Her panting chopped up the silence like the soft beat of a drum, and she didn't give him any sort of direction or feedback, either positive or negative, which was... Odd.

He frowned. “Is this okay?” he said.

She laughed between pants. “Not so haughty, now,” she replied. “I think that might be construed as ambivalence, Mr. Haughty Pants.”

He smirked. “You're enjoying this.”

She wriggled. Her ass pressed against him, and he thought he might lose his thoughts again. A groan wound around in circles in his throat. “Mmm, I'm definitely enjoying this,” she said, her voice a far away echo of his thoughts.

He cleared his throat. “I meant torturing me.”

“That, too.”

“Backseat driver,” he grumbled. Her happy giggle warmed him.

His lip twitched as he tried to assess himself. He wasn't quite sure he was ready, and that was a little frustrating. He didn't like how much attention he needed to get going, even when he was in the mood, but... She was more than good to go, and while he definitely didn't have anything perfect going on down below, he didn't think he could wait anymore, or he might burst.

“I'm still going to make you beg,” he said, his voice a throaty, torn whisper.

He withdrew his hand from her and pushed it between them to help guide himself. He shifted his hips, dipped low, and pushed up. The sheets whispered with his movement. She gasped as he pressed into the heat. He felt the familiar resistance, and then he slipped inside. Just enough to let her know he'd found the way. And then he hovered, pressed against the nerves at her opening, but not sheathed. He felt her flexing around his head, almost as if she thought she could pull him inside, and the sensation made him shudder.

A low, throaty groan wrecked his throat. He laughed despite the whine in his head that told him to push all the way. To bury himself. He blinked and shook his head. This was how she usually
tormented him. Waiting. Hovering. Flipping it around on her for once felt exquisite.

“Fuck,” she hissed.

“Something you wanted to say?” he said.

“Fuck,” she repeated, a staccato curse that made triumph burble in his chest, but then she took a deep breath. Another. She sucked slow breaths inside of her body, gathering herself, and she stilled. Quieted. As if he wasn't on his way to being submersed inside of her. As if she was reading a fucking newspaper for all the moaning and groaning and twitching she didn't do.

“Damn it,” he said as his limbs trembled. He would lose control. He couldn't—

“I like this game,” she said.

“Naughty,” he said as he let himself succumb. “Naughty vixen.” Her slick heat enveloped him as he sank inside to the hilt. The room spun around him, and for a moment he forgot the bed as he situated himself. She eclipsed everything around him. She squeezed him with her insides, and it was his turn to stop, pant, and scrabble at the sheets. “Meredith,” he said.

“Am I winning?” she said. “I think I'm winning.”

He laughed. “Is there really winning and losing, here?” he said. He kissed her throat.

She shook her head. “I guess not.”

For a moment, all he could do was rest his head on the pillow, breathing with his nose in her hair, relishing the feeling of her warm, small body tucked in his arms. Her heat wrapped around him. The inviting, cocoa scent of her skin wafted in the back of his throat. He pressed his nose against the damp nape of her neck and kissed her there.

The connection between them was affirming. Intoxicating. He felt thrillingly alive. Desired. Whole. He hoped she felt that, too.

“Thank you,” he said.

“For what?” she murmured.


Her fingers flexed as she clutched the pillow, breathing. “You deserve all of those things.”

The surety in her voice crushed him. The room blurred. He blinked.

“You do, Derek. You made some really stupid mistakes. That doesn't make you a bad person. That just makes you a person.”

He kissed her. “You're the best person I know.”

She snorted.

He squeezed her against him. “I mean it. You are.”

“I'm a freak,” she said.

“Hey,” he said, his voice low. Thready. He rose on his elbow and looked over her body.
She tipped her head up and met his eyes. Sweat stuck soft strands of blond hair to her forehead.
“What?”

“That's my wife,” he told her, millimeters away, a murmur. “Stop calling her names.”

The hesitant smile she gave him broke his heart. He cupped her face and pulled his fingers through her messy hair. He pressed his lips against hers. So soft. Her bleating moan hit the back of his throat, vibrating, quiet. His eyes creased with desire as he held her gaze. His spine hurt from twisting over her like this, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered in light of the damage he saw.

“I'm sorry I ever helped you think that,” he said.

“What?” she said.

“That you're a freak.”

“We weren't very nice to each other for a while,” she said, her tone glum.

He raised his eyebrows. “No more baggage, though. We decided. Remember?”

She gave him a relaxed smile, and then she lay back on the pillow. “I remember,” she said. “And do you remember what I told you?”

“When?” he said.

She reached for him. Dragged his hand from her hip. Pulled it over her body to her lips. He felt the soft brush of her sweet skin against his. Her insides squeezed around him, and he swallowed as the pressure built to move. He'd been holding his place like a bookmark for seconds. Minutes. Too long.

“You're the strongest person I know,” she told him. “I mean it, Derek. Stop selling yourself so short.”

“I want to.”

He could almost hear her smile as she squeezed his hand. “I know.”

He took a breath and thrust. The bed creaked. A quiet moan wound through her throat. He shivered at the desirous, needing sound. It amazed him, sometimes, that he could reduce another human being to such simple imperatives, but, really, it was a two way street, wasn't it? Her slick insides touched him like slippery, constricting silk, and he fought the heady desire to lose himself in the oblivion of her body.

“I love you very much,” he said, his voice a broken croak. If he'd said it to anyone else, the dissolution of his composure would have bothered him. Embarrassed him. With her, though, it felt right. Perfect. The world blurred, and he kissed her ear. “I do.”

“Me, too,” she said, the word soft against the pillow.

Her fingers clutched the pillowcase as he drove into her and pulled out, the friction heating them to glowing embers. This was a slow burn kind of sex. The most intimate kind, in that it wasn't about complicated bending or movement or excitement. It was just about touch. And being close. And living, for a few minutes, in the eclipse of another human being.

He kissed her, unable to stop the desirous groan that tore his throat. Not wanting to stop it. Tension
wound him like a screw, tighter, tighter, and tighter still, until he couldn't remember how to not need her, how to not need himself sheathed by her warmth and moving within it. She coiled around him, relaxing as he entered, squeezing as he left her, a clash of conflicting sensations that made him pant with exhilaration and arousal.

“Are you close?” he whispered.

She nodded, her head rustling against the pillow. He brought his hand between her legs and gave her a little push with the heel of his palm. She shuddered.


“Come for me,” he said.

“Believe me,” she said through gritted teeth. “I freaking want to.”

He grinned as he drove into her and stopped at the deepest part of her center. “Oh? Tell me more.”

She pushed a long, even breath through her lungs. He watched her clutch the pillowcase. Her body shuddered, and she rocked against him, as if she couldn't quite hold still.

“I know what you're doing,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

“I'm not... begging you.”

“Really?” he purred. He stroked her with his thumb. Her body tensed, and she drew out a long unintelligible syllable into a shuddering moan. “Because that seemed kind of beg-y,” he said.

She snorted. “Beg-y? You're reaching. And making up words. Ooh.”

“Don't they say imitation is the best form of flattery?” he said. He gyrated, shifting inside of her. “I'm flattering you.”

“I like...” Her voice popped into a strange, desperate high-pitch before resettling into its normal registers. “Flattering.”

He laughed. “More flattering, then, I say.”

He leaned over her, pushing her heaving breasts into the mattress. He brought his hand underneath her taut thigh and gripped to give himself leverage. With a gasp, she brought her knee up. He pushed deep. And deeper. He moved against her like a wave. Every thrust, she moaned, a soft, warbling sound of twisted pain and pleasure that shivered up and down his spine. Told him he was doing the right things, even if she couldn't verbalize the yes, yes, yes of it all. He embraced her with his free arm, pulling her against him.

He kept her stuck there. For ages. She lay in his arms, shaking, moaning with every thrust. Every touch. When she started to shudder and tense like she might release, he stopped, dragging his virtual feet against the persistent whine in his head that told him to submit to the friction and go.

“You're really mean,” she gasped. “You're a mean, mean man.”

He gasped. “Mean? Me?” he said, mock innocence dripping from his tone. “But I'm flattering you.” He pressed his hand against the soft, inviting flesh of the vee between her thighs. Her lips parted, and she whined at him, twitching in his arms. “How is this mean?” he said. “I'm devoting
my entire body and mind to your pleasure.” He stroked her slowly. She squirmed underneath him. Moaned. The sheets whispered with their movement. “That’s not mean.”

“I...”

“Yes?”

“Oh...”

He grinned as he kissed the back of her neck. “Does that feel good?”

She tensed in his arms. Moaned. He stopped. Again.

“Fuck,” she snapped. Her insides fluttered around him as she took out her delicious frustration on him. His lips parted as she drew a moan from him. “Fuck, just finish me.”

He regathered himself. “Are you begging?”

“Yes. God. Happy? Fuck!”

“I suppose,” he said, his tone nonchalant. He glided in and out of her, panting as he pressed his palm against her. She would have sensation beneath and above, and it usually—

All at once, her body tensed. She scrabbled at the sheets. The breaths froze in her chest. A tiny, relaxed moan dripped from her lips. Her insides squeezed him like a vise and began to flutter with rhythmic pulses that made his lips part and his eyes go glassy. Her toes and legs twitched with the uncontrolled firing of her nerves.

“Oh,” he couldn't stop himself from saying in his euphoric stupor.

He clutched her to his body and rode it out with her. The sound of her relaxed, finished sigh drowned him in lethargy despite his own state of incomplete disarray. He rested next to her, still sheathed inside, as he stroked her sweaty skin. He listened to the chirping birds. The moonlight had lightened into the gloomy white of predawn. The shower in the neighboring bathroom had stopped running.

“Oh, my god,” she said in the aftermath, and he smiled at the sound of her. Sated. Happy. He'd done that.

He grinned lazily. “Do I get a gold star?”

“You didn't finish,” she said.

He sighed. “It takes me forever.”

“I don't mind. Keep going. We have plenty of time.”

He glanced at the clock, frowning. Not that plentiful, anymore. “I'm okay,” he said.

“No, you're not.” She pulled away from him. A wet sound filled the space between them as she separated from him. The chill air hit him, and he sighed, bereft of their connection. She rolled over. She watched him with a hooded, beautiful stare that pulled at him. She reached across the space between them and pulled her fingers through his hair, now sweaty. Stringy. Damp. She kissed him. “Finish, Derek.”

He winked at her. “Bossy vixen,” he said.
“I'm not letting you throw the match for me,” she said. “I want my shot.”

He laughed as she pressed her body flush against him. She wrapped her hand around his base. He didn't need much more encouragement. He inched forward. She guided him into her. The slick warmth of her insides pressed around him, and for a moment, he wondered why he'd been dumb enough to decide he was fine with incompleteness.

“Really,” Meredith said with a laugh as she watched his expression. “I appreciated the whole stoic thing. It was cute.”

“Cute!” he scoffed.

“Mmm,” she said. She nodded. “Cute.”

“Well, don't say I didn't offer,” he quipped. The urge to move stripped him bare of his other thoughts, and he followed the burning impulse to thrust. Her insides stroked his sensitive head, and he chuffed with a broken moan. “You could be in the shower, now.”

“Hmm,” she said. “Somehow, I don't think I can compare a shower to being fucked senseless in a twisted game of orgasmic one-up-manship.”

He moved within her, and she bit her lip in that plush way he loved. “For senseless fucking, you seem to have a lot of sense,” he said.

Her hand chased the curve of his spine. She squeezed his ass as he drove into her center. “And you seem to be losing yours,” she said.

“I guess you're win... winning. After all.” He panted, desire tipping him into endless, fluid motion against her. When he'd been focused all on her, he'd avoided this frenzy. It would sweep him away in a conflagration. Soon. He simmered.

“You had an early lead,” she said. Her fingers raked through his hair. She moaned as he cleaved her. “But I like winning.”

“I could still turn this... around.”

She laughed. He captured her lips and kissed her. He relished the taste of her. The feel of her. This was one of the few instances he decided he'd be happy to lose. And lose. And lose again.

“Fuck me, Derek,” she chanted against his ear, and there was no more losing.

He was lost. A prisoner of friction. Her.

The inferno swelled, and he lost his mind somewhere between one thrust and the next. What had been calculated to please her became a desperate slip-and-slide that carved out his brain like a spoon scooping pumpkin seeds. He clutched her shoulders so hard he thought he might be hurting her a little, but she kept urging him onward, and the sentient considerations of flesh and bone and comfort left him. The headboard banged against the wall once. Twice.

“Mmm,” she moaned in his ears. “Fuck me. Harder, Derek. I want you.”

As if he needed encouragement.

He kept bumping into a wall that sent him stumbling just before the cliff, leaving him stuck in that fiery, frenzied pit of not-quite-enough. His limbs trembled as he worked for what he knew he
wanted – the end – but lost the presence of mind to define the feeling.

Where was it?

A rough, tortured moan coiled in his throat. Pain scraped his scalp as she yanked her fingers through his hair. Her nails raked his back. She squeezed around him.

“More,” she told him, feeding the fire.

“Fuck,” he blurted. Pleasure twisted inside him, dancing an exquisitely painful waltz that bled him dry of anything but desire. For her. To finish. To get that sweet release.

“Meredith,” he chanted. “Meredith.” In and out and in and out, he moved. “Meredith.”

Everything tensed and drilled into his center, until he could barely breathe and couldn’t speak anymore. Her fists clenched. She held him against her body in a fierce embrace. Everything stopped. He trembled against her, on the quivering razor edge, not moving forward, but not falling backward, and he had the ludicrous image of a seesaw, tottering on a fulcrum at the top of a tall mountain.

“Game. Set. Match,” she said. Her insides clenched.

A shout choked in his throat, and he lost the conscious ability to control his body. He couldn’t breathe. His eyes rolled back. Release throbbed through his muscles, and his body shook. He burst inside of her as though he were emptying his entire being, giving her everything and leaving none for him. He rode the brilliant wave for what felt like hours. Euphoria baked him long past well done.

He relaxed in a boneless heap against the mattress as he slipped out of her.

“Wow,” Meredith said as she flopped next to him. “Good one. Go me.”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice a rasp. “You win. I think.”

She rolled into him. She kissed him. “I don't know. Mine was pretty freaking good, too.”

“Are you conceding?”

She giggled. “I thought there really wasn't any winning or losing.”

He smiled, feeling like some sort of senseless fool. The world seemed fuzzy, and he felt... Blissed out. Sated. He couldn't care.

“A tie, then?” he said.

“Sure,” she said.

“I like a good tie. More tying, I say.”

She stroked his sweaty hair, a strange smile on her face.

Lethargy pulled on his body. His eyelids dipped. “I have to go to work,” she said sadly in the blur. “I don't want to go.”

“I know.”
She kissed him.

“I'll make you breakfast,” he croaked. “While you're in the shower.”

“Okay,” she said, her tone indulgent.

He couldn't understand why she sounded like she was merely humoring him. What was so strange about him wanting to make breakfast for her? Waffles, he thought. Cut strawberries. And maybe some bacon as a treat. He'd eat a slice, and she would goggle at him. He closed his eyes. He'd move in just a minute. He felt the cool sheets slip over his skin as she dragged the blankets over his sweaty body. He thought he even heard her say, “I'll see you tomorrow. I love you,” but he wasn't sure. He swore he would move in just a—

The brick wall around the dock and lake had evaporated in places. Green grass peeked through from the other side, and the shade beside the wall seemed more like the uneven rectangles of Manhattan's many skyscrapers cast in shadow, not a solid block absent of light. The water lapping at the dock supports sloshed and gurgled.

Derek blinked as he sat up in his lawn chair in the sunshine. The light beat his skin with a subtle, relaxing warmth that didn't burn. Derek II's fishing line whizzed as he cast into the sleepy lake from the adjacent lawn chair.

“It's happening,” Derek II said as his line thunked into the water.

Derek rubbed his bare shoulder. It felt so nice in here with more sun. “What's happening?”

“She's crumbling,” Derek II said. “This was overdue.”

Derek frowned. “Who's crumbling?”

“Meredith.”

Derek glanced at the interrupted, dissolving wall. He didn't mind the holes. He didn't need the wall so much, anymore. “But I'm getting better.”

Derek II peered at him. “Does that change what you've done?”

“No...” Derek said.

“You've kept her from her friends.” A flock of birds darted overhead against the backdrop of a cerulean sky.

“I want her to see her friends,” Derek protested.

Derek II shrugged. “Could have fooled me.”

Derek shook his head. “I don't understand...”

“Obviously,” Derek II said. He gave Derek a sad frown. “This week, she went out after work for the first time in months.”

“I know,” Derek said. He sighed. His eyes watered as he remembered the sound of her laughing. Only a memory, the sound still brought him peace. Warmth. He smiled. “I was so happy—”

“So, what was she doing the other months?” Derek II prodded. “Knitting?”
“She's been with me,” Derek said.

Derek II raised his eyebrows. “With you?”

“With me,” Derek said with a resolute nod. “Yes.”

Derek II shook his head as he reeled in his line and recast with a flick of his wrist. “And where have you been?” he said as the line thunked into the water.

Something wet and warm touched his fingers. Licking. He twitched.

“Meredith,” he muttered into the pillow, pulling his hand away. “Mmm. Don't think I can go again.”

The heat of sunlight slanted through the windows, baking his back through the bedspread. He grunted. The hairs on the back of his neck tingled. The feeling of being watched bloomed and burgeoned. He remembered he'd promised her breakfast. Waffles and strawberries and bacon.

He snapped awake, tossing the covers back. “Fuck, I'm sorry,” he said as he raked his fingers through his greasy hair. “I fell asleep.”

Samantha sat by his side of the bed in a lake of sunlight, staring at him with her big brown eyes. The sunshine made her glossy coat gleam. She barked a quick hello that sank into a whine as she rose to her feet and wagged her stumpy tail. He glanced at his hand where she'd been licking him and sighed.

“I guess you're not Meredith,” he said, his tone glum as he tried to blink the sleep out of his eyes with only marginal success. He'd crashed. He'd completely crashed after sex. In mid sentence, almost. And, now, he felt sort of like he'd been hit by a truck. His muscles ached, particularly his groin and arms, and his head felt fuzzy.

“You could try Percocet,” Mr. Clark whispered. “That would make it feel better.”

He sighed, and he shoved the thought away like a gnat.

He glanced at his nightstand. A trail of destruction made a path off of the flat surface. He followed a tipped water bottle that had dripped over the side, his squished watch, the bent top pages of his choice journal, and a pen that hung half on and half off the lip of the stand, to the plush rug on the floor. His clock was face-up on the floor. It said 12:00. Water droplets splotched the face. Must have been reset.

He squinted at Meredith's clock at the opposite side of the bed. Only to discover it was 12:00 for real. He'd slept almost another eight hours. It was lunch time. And he felt a little like he could go back to sleep. But he couldn't waste the entire day. Jesus.

He rubbed his eyes and dragged himself out of bed to the master bathroom. His muscles pulled and stretched. Samantha followed.

He relieved himself. Washed his face at the sink. Brushed his teeth. None of that was enough to make him feel clean. His hair was a greasy, tangled disaster. He reeked of sweat. From the disarray he saw in the mirror, he decided he looked a bit like he'd survived a tornado.

He pulled his pill bottle out of the medicine cabinet. The orange container jingled. He unscrewed the cap and dropped a pill into his palm. He sighed as he looked down at Samantha.
“I really hate these things,” he said.

Samantha pressed her big body against his legs, a warm, reassuring presence. He sighed.

Meredith was right. As annoying as the side-effects were, there were no game stoppers, and the benefits far outweighed the bad things. Being groggy and a bit less promiscuous in exchange for feeling like he could leave the house without getting murdered was an even enough exchange, he thought. He liked not living in constant fear. When he added the fact that he was sleeping better, he felt more on an even keel than he had in ages, and, though he still had a lot of things to fix, he wanted to try things like going back to work and spending time at Joe's with Mark...

He put his palm to his lips and tipped his head back. He swallowed. The pill slid down his throat.

“I know,” he said as he leaned over to scratch her ears. “They're helping, mostly. And I suppose you care more about a w-a-l-k than my pills, huh.”

Samantha animated in the blink of an eye. She barked excitedly. Her big brown eyes followed his every movement as if she expected her leash to appear out of thin air. She'd learned the spelling of the word walk as well as the spoken word itself. There was no hiding from her exuberance over the matter.

He laughed. “Right,” he said.

W-a-l-k it would be, then. He raked his fingers through his hair, trying to return some semblance of order to the afro thing he had going on at the top of his skull. For all the jealous commentary his hair got him at work, he didn't think people truly understood what a fucking pain in the ass it was to manage.

*Your head looks like it exploded,* Meredith had commented with a giggle the first time she'd been subjected to it. She'd stared over her bare knees at him from the bed as he'd frowned in her dresser's mirror.

*Now, you know my deepest darkest secret,* he'd said, smirking over his shoulder at her.

She'd stared at him for a long time. *I don't think that's your deepest darkest secret.*

*You're right,* he'd said as he'd prowled back to the bed. He'd kissed her, dropped his voice low. *By night, they call me The Batman.*

Her eyes had twinkled. *You are so freaking corny.*

*You love it.*

She'd wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Kissed him. *I do, though I would have thought you'd pick the Man of Steel...*

He sighed. She'd been right to doubt him. He closed his eyes. *Addison,* he wanted to tell his past self. *Tell her about that.* Things would have been so different if he had. Maybe.

He shook his head. Those sorts of things were useless to dwell on. He'd made his mistakes and done his damage like an earthquake. If he'd been with anybody else, said damage would be wedged into the corner labeled irreparable in permanent marker. Except Meredith was one of the most beautiful people he’d ever met. Inside. Outside. She was empathetic. Forgiving.

She stayed through things that would make anybody else run. She was still staying. With him.
Through everything.

“And where have you been?” Mr. Clark said, his voice the strangest echo Derek couldn't place.

Derek's lip quivered, and a lump formed in his throat as a sudden enormity of feeling swept through him. He grabbed the doorframe. He blinked. Samantha stood by his knees. He dropped to his haunches and gave her a slow, reassuring stroke as he found his center of gravity again. She pushed her wet, black nose against his, and he laughed as she licked the salt from his cheeks. He scratched her ears and sat in the doorframe for a long time, thinking. About everything and nothing all at once.

“I'm okay,” he told her.

She gave him an odd look. Like she didn't quite believe him. A small whine escaped her throat.

“Working on it, anyway,” he said. He wiped his face. “I want to be okay.”

She seemed more satisfied with that. He stroked her fur once more, and he hobbled to his feet, unfurling his aching back. He thought about a shower, but opted to take one after the walk. He would only sweat more.

He padded to the closet. The chilly air spread a rash of goosebumps across his pale, naked skin. Seattle weather had settled into a pleasant between – too hot for the heater, too cold for the air conditioning. September was his favorite month for the crisp air.

He grabbed some loose boxers, an old pair of sweatpants, a soft t-shirt, and some fuzzy socks, opting for comfort. The sticky feeling behind his eyes, the cloudiness... All he really wanted was to go back to bed. He figured walking around in the equivalent of pajamas might help him cope with sentience. He pulled everything on under Samantha's supervision, laced his cross trainers, and then he wandered back to his nightstand.

Lying down was a tempting idea, but he didn't let himself. He pulled his choice journal and the pen off his nightstand, and he added quick bullet points for getting up, taking pills, not taking a shower yet, and his choice of attire. Dr. Wyatt had told him yesterday afternoon that the journal had served its purpose by making him consider his choices as he made them, and he didn't need to keep it anymore, but... he sort of liked it. He added to it when he could.

He headed downstairs, followed by a plodding Samantha. He grabbed a banana for breakfast, or, well, lunch, he supposed, and Samantha's leash from the kitchen. Samantha's nails scrabbled on the floor as she moved around the center island in the kitchen, almost galloping. She reminded him of a small pony. A very happy small pony.

“Sit,” he commanded, trying to get her to calm down.

Her butt lowered for all of a nanosecond before she continued her happy rampage in circles.

“Sit!” he chided her in his most authoritative voice.

She listened, and her expression turned melancholy, as if to say, *Sorry, Dad.*

Though her tail wagged while he attached her leash, and she twitched like she had a serious case of too-much-caffeine, she didn't move from the floor. He gave her a pat. Her silky hair was so relaxing to touch.

“Good girl.”
He stopped with her at the hall closet for his windbreaker, and then he led her outside into the cool, damp air. The sun shone in splotches through a puffy mess of clouds overhead. Birds chirped and tittered in the trees. He inhaled, and he let the wet scents relax him. A car rumbled down the street, and he didn't tense, and that was... amazing. A smile tugged at his lips.

Samantha stared at him, a longing look in her eyes. *Can I go? Please, please, can I go? I want to run!* she seemed to be saying. He stroked her fur. He wished he was healthy enough to jog with her. She would have to settle for a walk. He still didn't do very well once he hit about three miles, but at least it was getting much easier to hit three.

“What do you think?” he asked the dog.

Samantha stared at him, perplexed.

“The park?” he said.

Samantha barked. She knew that word, too. The park would be a four mile round trip. But he wanted to push himself a little.

“Let's go,” he said, and they moved away from the porch.

Samantha, no matter how much she seemed to want to run around, didn't push him. Didn't tug on the leash. Didn't strain against his authority. It was almost as if she realized she was dealing with a slightly more fragile human than most and adjusted accordingly. He took it slow, unhurried, knowing that, if he did otherwise, the return trip for miles three and four was going to be miserable for him. They strolled down the sidewalk at a relaxing pace.

Meredith's street was long and on a slight incline. Random water droplets plinked from the leaves in the trees to the ground below. The spring and summer flowers had almost all died, but the remaining verdant green more than made up for it. The woody feel of it all, the Queen Anne architecture that characterized the houses, gave the entire neighborhood a rustic, quaint feel that he'd always loved. For as urban as it was, he still felt a bit removed from the world, and that was a nice change from the frenetic, driving activity of Manhattan that he'd left behind years ago.

When he reached the end of the street, he felt hot, and he swept his fingers back through his hair. He'd sweated a bit, but he only felt warmed up. Not straining. He looked back behind him as he stroked Samantha's fur. He remembered having so much trouble with that just a few months before.

The world had blotted black and tipped. *Whoa, man,* Mark had said as he'd caught Derek before Derek had hit the sidewalk.

Derek had felt like he was going to throw up, and the world had spun. Mark had lowered Derek to the ground. *Derek? he'd said. Derek, you awake?*

Derek had sniffed. He'd still been having trouble breathing. *Dizzy,* he'd said, his voice low. Thick. Like taffy.

Mark had felt his pulse. *Okay, man,* he'd said. *Just sit for a minute.*

*What happened?* Derek remembered asking woozily, his voice a rasp across his broken vocal cords. His limbs hadn't been working.

*I think you fainted,* Mark had replied. *It's okay. Take it easy.*
Derek sighed as he watched the memory of himself, stumbling home in Mark's arms at the speed of a busted turtle. He'd wanted to do what he'd done with Meredith before the pneumonia. A walk around the block. And he'd wanted to get away from Lexie and Alex and their constant reminders that he'd brought new meaning to the word relapse. He'd wanted all that, and he hadn't even made it to the end of the street.

Derek watched a family playing in the yard across the street in front of a red brick house with black trim and shutters. Two children and a frazzled mother. An older girl, probably nine or so, made structures in a small sandbox. The little boy was riding around in circles on a tricycle with fat, plastic wheels. The mother chased him, and despite her obvious exhaustion, she still grinned as she overtook him, swept him out of the tricycle’s seat, and tickled him. The tricycle kept going for a few feet before it came to a stop. The boy shrieked with glee.

The shrill sound crept down Derek's spine, squeezing, and he clenched his teeth as nerves coiled like spaghetti over a scene that should have been heartwarming. He kept moving. Samantha followed, and the minutes blurred as he lost himself in his own head, drifting from thought to thought.

Meredith. Being Chief. Surgery. The baby. His family. The new house, still in progress. Meredith had her first OB appointment in about a little more than a week. They would be getting married by law not long after that. His mother would be flying in to attend.

_Booked our tickets_, Meredith had said nonchalantly as she'd come home after her shift.

He'd looked up from his book as she stamped her feet on the welcome mat and put down her tote purse by the door. _What?_ he'd said.

_Our plane tickets._

_For what?_

She'd frowned. _Thanksgiving. Remember?_

_Oh._

_You did still want to go, right?_ she'd asked as she'd sat on the couch beside him. The cushions had sunk with her small weight.

He'd nodded. _I do._

_Then—_

He'd kissed her. _You really booked the tickets?_ he'd said as he'd pulled back, wonderment in his eyes.

She'd shrugged. _Yeah. First class. I splurged. And I made our rental car reservation._

_You did the planning?_

_I did,_ she said, offering him a beautiful smile that stopped his breath. _Spent my lunch break on the phone with your mother._

_But—_

She'd put her index finger to his lips, silencing him. _I don't mind. Don't worry about it._
Shh, she'd said. Her body had been a whisper of movement as she'd swung her legs up and straddled him. She'd wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. I wanted to do this for you. So, shut up.

He'd been intoxicated by her closeness. Her scent. Her skin. Yes, ma'am.

When he made it to the park, he felt as though only minutes had passed. He blinked the cobwebs of kissing Meredith out of head. When he glanced at his watch, he saw that two miles had taken him an hour. Not horrible. It took him only a few minutes to catch his breath, and though he felt like he'd expended a lot of energy, he didn't feel like he was scooping out the bottom of his reserves.

The park was a large one, and people congregated there during the weekends for picnics and barbecues, recreational sports leagues, and other things. There were basketball courts, tennis courts, a baseball diamond, two soccer fields, a fenced in area for dogs to run around, and a playground full of fun obstacles for little kids. Monkey bars. Slides. Tunnels. Sand.

The distant sound of cheering and screams made his ears curdle. He put a hand over his damp brow to block the intermittent flare of sun through the clouds as he peered in the direction of the chaos. Little bodies, kids who couldn't have been more than five, stampeded in a helter-skelter herd across the far soccer field. Parents and other bystanders sat on the bleachers, cheering and talking. Even at this distance, the noise made his teeth clench. Kids could be earsplitting.

Samantha nudged his knee. She stared at the fenced, green area on the other side of the park from where the kids played the soccer game. A man threw a Frisbee to his whippet, which zipped across the ground so fast, it was a gray blur of fur. A woman with a yellow lab conversed with another woman and a little white puffball with black eyes. A maltese or something. The dog park was Samantha's favorite section of the park, understandably. Derek tried to take her there at least once or twice a week so she could stretch her legs. She was a big dog, and she deserved space to run around at a full sprint. Meredith's backyard wasn't big enough for that.

“I know you want to go to the dog park,” he said with an apologetic frown. “But...”

He stared at the soccer field. Watching from this distance made his body tense. But something pulled him forward. One step. He licked his lips. The idea of walking over there to watch with so many people around made him feel queasy. The idea of not even trying made him angry. At himself. At Gary Clark. At everything. It'd been more than three months since he'd been shot. Derek Shepherd could spectate at a kids' soccer game.

Samantha watched him, her expression wary. “What do you think?” he said.

She barked.

“Try for ten minutes?”

She gave him a pensive look, and she barked again. Softer. She almost seemed to be saying, If you say so, Dad.

He stroked her fur. He jingled her leash. And they were off. Into the fray. He passed the playground. The baseball diamond. The trip across the entire park took him about five minutes. He stopped on the sidelines, as far away from the cheering crowd as he could manage while still being identifiable at the soccer field. That was... okay. A cool breeze sent its fingers through the trees and ruffled his hair. He took a deep breath.
The game was co-ed, and no single player came past the referee's waist in height. Derek focused on the soccer ball and followed it with his eyes. The ball was mostly white, but had red hexagonal splotches. The kids kicked the crap out of it. They swarmed like tiny bees, shrieking, giggling. Most of them, anyway. He had to smile at the one or two kids who were on the field in their little cleats and shin guards and uniforms, but picking clovers or chasing butterflies, instead.

He swallowed, and he inched toward the bleachers. His sneakers slogged through the wet grass. One step at a time. Until his shoulder hit the cold metal. He leaned, resting next to the top bleacher by a pile of coolers and soccer balls and other sports-related refuse, out of sight from the people watching unless they turned around and looked down. Samantha settled on her stomach on the wet ground at his feet with a big, lazy sigh. He closed his eyes and listened. Tried to keep his breaths even. Focused on getting himself to relax despite the jarring noises that made his ears hurt.

This might be him in five years. Sitting on the bleachers, watching his kid play soccer in cleats the size of his hand. He imagined kicking a ball in the backyard between little orange cones. He didn't know the first thing about soccer other than the basic idea, but he could learn enough to teach a five-year-old about it. The very idea of that kind of research brought a huge grin to his face.

“What kind of dog is that?” a small, dulcet voice demanded. He jerked, startled, and looked down.

A little girl, her platinum blonde hair tied up in a ponytail with a pink ribbon, stood there, her skinny arms crossed over her chest. She had eyes that were a shock of brilliant, sapphire blue. She was six, he guessed. Maybe, five. She wore a dirty, grass-stained soccer uniform – a green shirt and white shorts with two green stripes from the hips to the hemline. She had a big Snoopy band-aid stuck on her knobby knee, and a dark red splotch stained the underside of the bandage. She came up to his waist, and he imagined from her skinny stature he could have picked her up one-handed if his chest hadn't been damaged. This was the kind of stranger he could deal with. He lowered himself slowly to his knees to bring himself down to her level.

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“Samantha is a rottweiler,” he said with a grin. He gave Samantha a scratch, which sent her rolling onto her back with a happy, deep groan. Her russet-colored paws flopped in the air.

The kid bit her lip. “Is she mean?”

Derek shook his head. “No, she's very friendly.”

“How can I pet her?”

“Be careful,” he cautioned.

The little girl's eyes widened, but she approached the situation with due seriousness. She dropped onto her knees. She stretched out her hand, inched forward, and lowered her fingers to the black fur that covered Samantha's side. She stroked the space over Samantha's ribs. Samantha twisted backward to lick her. The girl giggled. A smile stretched across her face, revealing several missing teeth that made him think wildly of the Tooth Fairy.

Parents invariably had methods to remove jiggly, loose teeth. His mother had had a sadistic attachment to the door method. He remembered standing with one end of a long string wrapped around his tooth, and the other around a door knob of an open door... He wondered what Ellis Grey had used. What he and Meredith might decide on in the end. He couldn't imagine subjecting his kid to the nerve-wracking theatrics of a door slam to get rid of a tooth, but... he wasn't exactly an expert on teeth. Maybe there wasn't a better way. He'd never had to research before. There were a lot of things he would need to learn, soccer and tooth removal among them.
Another helpless grin breached his face.

“She's soft,” said the little girl, interrupting his thoughts.

“She is,” he agreed. He pointed to her knee with the Snoopy band-aid. “What happened there?”

“Cut my knee.”

“Is that why you're not playing?”

The girl shrugged. “I guess,” she said, the exuberance draining from her cherubic features.

“You guess?”

“Honey, leave the nice man alone,” a woman said. He looked up. Mom, then. She must have been. She was an older version of the little girl, worn by age lines and the passage of time, but she had the same platinum hair. Her blue eyes had a hint of the shocking sapphire of her daughter's, but they seemed more washed out. Older. She looked down at them, her arms crossed over her chest. She stood a foot away.

“But he wants to talk,” the little girl pouted.

The woman shook her head as she sized up Derek and the large, black dog. “I don't think he does.”

“But—”

“Come on, sweetie,” she said. “Sorry,” she said gruffly to Derek. She grabbed the girl's arm and dragged her back to the other side of the bleachers, where the rest of the parents sat.

Derek sighed as he rose from his haunches. He couldn't blame the woman. He imagined he wouldn't want his five-year-old daughter talking to any strangers, let alone an unknown, scruffy, scuzzy man with a big black dog that, thanks to stigma, was widely recognized as one of the most vicious breeds alive other than Pit Bulls. He brushed off his arms, pulled his fingers through his unruly hair, and pushed away from the bleachers.

He should head back, anyway. He'd given his nerves enough exercise, and he was starting to get a bit of a headache as a result. He jerked Samantha's leash. She stood and shook. Her dog tags jingled. “We'll do the dog park on Sunday,” he promised. “I'll drive if I'm too tired to walk you.” She whuffed at him, satisfied.

They headed home, leaving the miniature soccer game behind. He couldn't help but smile as they ambled along. He'd aimed for ten minutes of spectator-ship, and he'd managed something more like twenty. And he hadn't really left because the parents had been uncomfortable with him.

The last mile on the way home was rough, and slow, as he could barely lift his feet from the pavement, but he pushed, and he made it without feeling like he would throw up or die or collapse, which put him in an even better mood. He was exhausted as he stepped onto his porch with shaky limbs, panting, but it was a thorough, to-the-bone feeling of being spent. Not overspent.

He released Samantha from her leash, and she trotted off to her crate. He hobbled up the steps to the shower to hose himself off, but the warm, buffeting sheets of water only served to sap his remaining sentience. His heartbeat slowed. He collapsed onto the bed on top of the blankets with a wet towel wrapped around his waist, his hair still dripping. His breathing lengthened as he brought his hands underneath the cool pillowcase to support his head. He surrendered into a recuperative
Derek sat Indian style in the hallway to the kitchen. He tossed the baseball. It thunked against the wall and bounced back at him. He reached with the old leather baseball glove his father had given him, only to miss the ball. The thick ball whacked him in the knee and stung, but it didn’t matter. The world was already a blurry mess. He wiped his face and threw the ball again and again. He usually caught it.

Thunk. Bounce.

Thunk. Bounce.

Thunk. Bounce.

Thunk. Bounce.

Thunk. Bounce.

Thunk. Bounce.

He flinched backward as a big hand adorned with a thick gold wedding ring swept into his field of view and ferreted the ball away from him. The soothing scent of sawdust tickled his nose as his father sat next to him on the floor with a soft groan.

“I think you're driving your poor mother insane with that noise, Der,” he said.

Derek looked at the floor. “Sorry.”

His father touched Derek's shoulder. Derek wiped his face again. Eyes like azure steel stared at him from a tanned, worn face. “Want to tell me what this is about?” Dad said.

Derek sniffed. “I can't play,” he said.

His father frowned, and it set deep, worn lines into his face. “Who said that?”

Derek fiddled with the seam of his jeans by his knees. He didn't look up. “Everybody.”

“What do you mean, everybody?”

“I tried to play at school, and they said I couldn't.”

His father put his hand on Derek's chin and tipped back Derek's head, forcing him to look up. “Derek, why?”

Derek shrugged.

“Hey,” Dad said. He smiled as he ruffled Derek's frizzy hair. “It's me. You can tell me.”

“Dad, I really tried,” Derek said. “I couldn't catch anything.” His lower lip quivered, and a fresh pair of tears jagged down his cheeks. “I'm not good at baseball.”

His father sighed, running fingers through his curly black hair in an idle expression of frustration. “I really doubt that.” He rubbed Derek's shoulder, a steady, reassuring stroke. “Let's go outside.”

“Why?”
“We'll play catch.”

“I don't want to play anymore.”

His father climbed to his feet and held out his hand. Derek wiped his burning eyes and didn't move.

“Derek, come on,” Dad said.

“Why?”

“Because we're going to play,” Dad said. “It's not up for discussion.”

Derek sighed. He knew that tone. Begrudgingly, he lumbered to his feet and followed his father through the living room and out the front door onto their small lawn. The grass had died in patches. His mother kept trying to reseed it. Cars lined the street bumper to bumper beyond the sidewalk. His dad stood closer to the street, legs and arms spread, his leather loafers planted in dust that had once been a carpet of Zoysia.

“Put up your glove,” Dad said. He posed with his knees slightly bent, hand raised, as though he were ready to lunge for any projectiles that came his way. He gestured at himself, highlighting his long, lithe frame. “Remember how I showed you?”

Derek mirrored his father, watching him as he took the baseball he'd confiscated and drew his hand back in the ominous precursor to a throw. Derek swallowed. His dad threw a fastball that flew through the air so quickly Derek could barely keep track of the blur. Derek pounced. The ball smacked into his gloved hand so hard his palm stung, and he reflexively closed his fingers around the ball.

“That's not somebody who can't catch, Derek,” his dad said.

Derek frowned. He took the ball from his glove and lobbed it back. His dad caught it barehanded and returned the throw. Derek made a blistering catch that stung his hand, again, and he blinked. Dad gave him a pointed grin. “Have you thought that, maybe, the problem is that they can't throw?”

Derek threw the ball back, and his dad caught it. He wiped his face with his gloveless hand. They had been throwing balls at him like it was dodgeball. Not baseball. And then they'd laughed when he couldn't catch them. Told him if he couldn't catch, he shouldn't be playing. Told him he was probably too short to run bases anyway.

“I hate the kids at school,” he muttered.

“I know you do,” his dad said sadly. He moved his arm back. Readied a throw. The ball left his hand in a blur.

Derek raised his glove and dashed to the left. A zing and a catch.

Dad smiled. “You can't hate baseball, though. Those are the rules.”

Derek threw the ball back. “I don't want to play at school.”

“You don't have to,” Dad said. He tossed the ball. Derek leaned right and caught it. “But I have a request.”

“What, Dad?” Derek said. He returned the ball.
Dad tossed the ball back to Derek. Dad's messy hair fluttered in the breeze. “I have tickets to the Yankees game this Friday, right behind the dugout. And I'd like you to go with me.”

The ball stung in his glove, and Derek shook his hand as his mouth tumbled open. “Behind the dugout?”

“Yes,” Dad said. He grinned. “I wanted to surprise you for your birthday. Ten is a very important year, you know. Will you go with me?”

A wispy breath caught in Derek's throat. They usually watched games on the television. He could remember staring at the crowds in the stands, wishing that were him. “Can we get hot dogs?” Derek said.

“Hmm,” Dad said, a low, absent rumble as he considered the request. He nodded after a moment, his blue eyes twinkling. “That sounds like an excellent plan. And cotton candy, if you want.”

Derek raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

His dad frowned. “Well, it wouldn't be a good birthday present without cotton candy, would it?”

“Can I bring Mark?”

“I think that can be arranged. I might have bought three tickets.”

Derek blinked as excitement thundered through his body in a shivery, overwhelming rush. He pumped his fist. “This is so cool!” he blurted. “Can I go tell Mark?”

Dad nodded, and Derek barely paused to breathe before he scampered for his bike, a smile as wide as the Yankees' outfield plastered on his face.

His head snapped off the pillow. Samantha barked in sharp, deep, warning staccato downstairs. Her nails scrabbled on the floor as she paced by the front door. He fought the urge to clap his hands over his ears as his nerves coiled. He pushed himself up on his arms, ignoring the brief spear of pain. The rest of his muscles hurt so much, a little flare in his chest didn't make much difference.

He stumbled to his feet, blinking muzzily in the late afternoon sunshine, which made his calves join the chorus of ow, ow, ow in his groin and thighs and back. Dust motes swirled in the air. They scattered as he plodded to the master bathroom to deposit the damp towel he’d fallen asleep in and exchange it for the fuzzy blue bathrobe Meredith had given him their first Christmas together.

Somebody knocked at the front door, adding to Samantha's frenzy, and his own sense of bleeding ears.

“Sam, quiet!” he snapped.

She stopped. Immediately. Which unwound nauseating tension. His jaw unclenched. The sharp lines of pain in his sinews relaxed. He groaned. He didn't feel like talking to anybody, let alone anybody who didn't have a key to the house. But at least it was somebody Samantha recognized, and she considered her job done now that he was aware they had a visitor. That was reassuring. It could be Mark. Derek banked on that. Mark would at least get it when Derek wasn't very chatty.

The door knocked again. He squinted and scrubbed his eyes, trying to wipe the gauzy feeling of sleep away from his sticky eyelashes. It didn't help. He sighed.

“Coming,” he yelled, and he gingerly made his way downstairs.
Samantha sat on the welcome mat on her haunches, looking at the door with a pointed expression. “Please, tell me it’s Mark,” he grumbled as he wrapped his hand around the doorknob, but his dog didn’t offer him any hints, not that he really expected any.

He twisted and pulled, and the door swung back on its hinges with a light moan.

He blinked.

Well, fuck.

Cristina pulled open the glass door and met his eyes. She wore her hair tied back in a messy braid. Black strands fell down over the neck of her small leather coat and rested in a coil atop the red backpack she’d strapped over her shoulders. She held a huge bundle underneath her right arm.

Samantha’s stump tail wagged. She pushed her head across the threshold. Cristina reached with her free hand to stroke Samantha by the ears. Leather creaked.

“Meredith’s at work,” Derek said.

“I know,” Cristina said.

She pushed the bundle under her arm at him, and he had no choice but to take it or let it fall to the ground. The scent of leather wafted against his nose. A black glove fell free from the pile before he got a handle on everything. She pushed past him into the foyer. Samantha backed out of her way. Cristina turned around once inside and appraised him head to toe. He suddenly felt a little weird standing around in his bathrobe, his legs bare, his hair still damp and frizzy from his shower.

“Get dressed,” she said.

He blinked. “What?”

“I’m not here for Meredith; I’m here for you,” she said. She pointed at the leather-scented pile she’d given him. “Go get dressed.”

He untangled everything. It was a jacket. A leather jacket. And a set of leather gloves that terminated at the knuckles. He bent down to pick up the glove that had fallen, figuring if he left it there, Samantha might decide to make it a chew toy.

“What’s all this for?” he said.

Cristina shrugged. “Meredith might murder me if you get scuffed up.”

“Scuffed... what?”

“I’m taking you out,” she said.

He frowned. “Where?”

She shrugged. “Just out.”

“I don’t want to go out.”

She shrugged her red backpack off her shoulders and held it before him. “I’m going to pull my laptop out of this backpack if you don’t come with me.”
“So?” he said.

“All day. Watching every simpering, sappy chick-flick known to humanity. I have *Pretty Woman, The Notebook, Pride & Prejudice, Kate & Leopold*—”

He gaped. “Are you fucking serious?”

“Yep,” she said. She paced to the couch in the living room and collapsed in a heap. Her red backpack settled by her hip. She grabbed the television remote and inspected it. “I brought popcorn.”

“But... Why?” he said.

She shrugged. “Because popcorn goes with movies,” she said. “Go get dressed.” She flipped on the television. Anderson Cooper's voice broke the silence in the room. He reported some story about increasing crime rates. Samantha wandered to the couch and collapsed at Cristina's feet with a relaxed groan.

Derek frowned at the television. And at the dog. Traitor.

“You have fifteen minutes before Julia is markering the scuffs away on her hooker boots, and the deal is rescinded,” Cristina said as she leaned to pet the dog.

“But where are we even going?” he said.

“Be sure to wear jeans,” she said. “Thick ones.”

“But—”

She glanced at her watch. “Fourteen minutes,” she said without looking in his direction. CNN seemed to have her captivated.

He swallowed. “Will there be a lot of people?” he said, trying to ignore the red flame across his cheeks that he even had to ask. He didn't think he could do more people today. He shifted from his left foot to his right, cowed. He looked at the floor for a second before he forced himself to look at her instead.

She met his eyes for a long moment, but there was no bite in her unblinking expression. Nothing mean. “No, just me,” she replied.

Silence stretched. She watched the television, ignoring him as he stood like a lump in the middle of the rug. It was clear she’d give him no more clues or demands. But she did make a show out of tapping her watch as the moments passed, and he came closer and closer to being condemned to watching Julia Roberts fall for Richard Gere all day.

He sighed, shaking his head as he plodded up the stairs with the leather coat and gloves, more confused than anything else. Meredith's person, he told himself. This was Meredith's person. She'd saved his life at great peril to herself, and she'd been there for Meredith through thick and thin.

*She was there when you weren’t,* Meredith had said a long time ago.

Though Cristina was acting her normal, abrasive self, at least she hadn't gotten mean. She wasn't cornering him on his first openly social expedition since the shooting and making fun of him while a hundred eyes watched. She just wanted him to go out... somewhere. Where there were no people.
Which made no fucking sense. She hated him. Why would she want to take him anywhere? She'd made it clear in the past she didn't really like having anything to do with him.

I don't like you, she'd said.

He'd thought he'd understood. You don't like me because of Meredith?

I don't like you because you're you, she'd replied, which had flummoxed him.

Why was he even entertaining this fucking idea?

Meredith's person, he told himself again. Meredith's person. Almost a sister-in-law. He would have to live with her for a long time. Meredith deserved a family that wasn't comprised of enemies. If he and Cristina could establish some sort of friendly truce... fuck.

It was curiosity. Plain and simple.

Where did she want to go? Why did she want to take him? And why the hell did it require a leather jacket and gloves? His thoughts raced, and he realized with a chuckle, at least this situation had broken through the grogginess he'd been fighting all day. He felt awake for the first time.

Maybe, this was her twisted version of an olive branch.

He pulled a clean pair of jeans and boxer-briefs from his dresser, and he slipped them on as he thought of all the possibilities. He grabbed a faded blue t-shirt from the closet and put that on. Socks and cross trainers were next.

He forced a comb through the damp, curly tangles in his hair, though that mostly felt like he was ripping off his scalp, and it didn't help much with the knots. Ten minutes wasn't enough time to deal with that disaster, so he raked his hair against his head with his fingers and decided to leave it. He took some ibuprofen for his muscle aches, brushed his teeth, and called himself done.

He inspected the leather coat she'd given him. The coat would be large enough for him. Age had scuffed discolored lines into the black, particularly at the elbows. A single short red hair rested on the shoulder near a buckle, which he brushed away. Owen's coat, then. He hoped Cristina had at least asked before she'd walked out with Owen's stuff tucked under her arm. He'd thank Owen for the loan, later, once he found out what was going on. He stuffed the gloves in the pockets of the coat and then folded the coat over his arm.

"Ready?" Cristina said as he thudded onto the landing downstairs.

He shrugged. "I guess."

She stood up, brushing a fluttering cloud of black dog hair from her jeans. She left her backpack on the couch in a pile with the pillows, and she thudded out the door without further word. He frowned, following her with his gaze, first, and then with his feet. He didn't bother to set the alarm on the house, but he did lock the door. She waited for him at the foot of the porch. Her Ducati was parked on the street underneath an oak tree that billowed in the breeze. His keys jingled as he headed across the wet grass toward his Cayenne.

"Not there," Cristina said. She pointed to her Ducati as she moved toward the street. "Here."

He stopped in the middle of his yard, planting his feet. His upper lip twitched as he stared at Cristina's bike. She threw her leg over the bike and straddled the seat. Two helmets hung off the bike, one black, one red. His fingers clenched the leather coat as everything made sudden, painful
sense. Why did she keep doing shit like this to him?

“No,” he said.

She pointed at the coat in his arms. “Put on the jacket and gloves.”

He shook his head. Breaths tightened in his chest. “No.”

She sighed. “Look, I know you crashed,” she said. “We’ll start slow. I promise.”

“Who told you about—”

“You do know Owen is my boyfriend, right?” she said. “And it was easy enough to infer, even without the info-dump. I’m not a moron.”

He gritted his teeth as fury coiled in his gut. “I won't let you humiliate me,” he said.

She sighed. “I'm not here to humiliate you.”

“The hell you aren't,” he snapped. “I don't know why you think this is funny, but I don't.” He dropped the coat and gloves where he stood, wheeled around on the balls of his feet, and he stalked back to the front door.

“Hey, stop,” she said.

Footsteps pounded behind him. Cristina grabbed his sleeve. He shrugged her off, though it was more of an upset flinch. A thrill of embarrassing fear at being touched unexpectedly clutched his brain and squeezed, and squeezed, and squeezed.

“Leave me alone,” he snapped.

She held up her hands in a gesture of surrender. “God, you are so irritating, sometimes.”

“I'm irritating?” he said, pausing to glare at her. His heart thudded like a jackhammer. The acid bath of adrenaline made his limbs tremble. He fished for his keys, but he couldn't quite get his hands to work.

“I'm not here to mess with you,” she insisted. “I'm trying to help you.”

“Why?” he said.

“What do you mean, why?” Cristina replied. “Meredith loves you.”

He ground his molars. “You hate me.”

She snorted. “You really are full of yourself.”

“And you really are a snotty little girl,” he countered.

“Ooh. I'm shaking,” she said. “McDreamy hates me.”

“You hated me first,” he said. “And don't call me that.”

“That's mature,” she said. “Hypocrite much? Pretty Woman it is, I guess.”

“I want you off my property,” he said.
She frowned. “It's Meredith's.”

Samantha barked on the other side of the door. The headache he'd been fighting earlier roared into existence. “Sam, quiet!” he snarled. He tried to get his key into the lock. His hands shook. He missed three times before sinking the key into the hole. The familiar, metal grinding sound of the lock's teeth falling into place relieved him.

“It's ours,” he said. “And I'm calling the police if you try to come in.” He pushed open the door, pushing Samantha out of the way and blocking Cristina's path with his body. He reached for Samantha's collar and gripped it. She licked his hand, whining at him.

“Wait,” Cristina said, her tone almost begging, as if she'd finally realized she'd bitten off more than she could chew. “Wait, please.”

He didn't know what it was that made him stop his intended beeline for the phone in the kitchen. Her pleading tone. The reassurance of his dog underneath his palm, a silky calming mountain of canine support. The fact that this would create an absolute mess for Meredith to deal with if he really did make the call to the police. He leaned against the doorframe and rubbed his tired eyes. He didn't want to make another mess for Meredith. He didn't want to call the police. But he didn't want to be tormented by this woman, either. He felt like he might throw up.

“Cristina, what?” he said.

“If you try the bike, I'll sneak you into a surgery at work,” Cristina said. “Anything you want. Nobody has to know.”

He shook his head and stared at her. “I don't want to cut.”

She goggled like a fish at him, her expression lacking all comprehension. “But... why?”

“I just don't,” he said.

Silence stretched as she stared at him, and she shifted from foot to foot, a distinctly uncomfortable, set-adrift look on her face. He realized he had her at a loss. That had been her trump card. Offering him a surgery. She didn't know he'd backed out of that responsibility on his own recognizance because he thought he might kill somebody with the state he was in.

He pointed at her bike. “Would you, please, leave?”

She searched his face with her gaze. “I don't have any movies in my backpack,” she said. “I don't have my laptop, either.”

He blinked. “Then, why—”

“I didn't think you'd listen to me if—”

“If you acted like a human being?”

“Look, I'm bad at people,” she said. “Okay?”

He swiped his hand across his face. “No shit.”

“I was trying to be nice at the bar.”

His eyes widened. “That was nice?”
“I said I'm bad at people,” she said.

“I...” He sighed as he closed his eyes. The scene at the dart board with Mark replayed in his head. She'd approached him almost neutrally, but he hadn't wanted to talk to anyone, then, least of all her. A glass had crashed, and he'd jumped down her throat. “I snapped.”

“I know you're sick,” she said, her voice softer.

“What are you talking about?”

She shrugged. “PTSD. I know.”

His fingers tightened around Samantha's collar. His lower lip quivered, and on top of all the other awful things, his sight blurred. Fucking god damn it. Did he not have any privacy at all anymore? None?

She touched his forearm. He flinched back against the door, which rattled on its hinges. She backed off. Immediately. Held up her hands so that he could see both of them, splayed, empty.

“Owen, remember?” she said. “I can add two plus two and get PTSD. Meredith didn't say a word, I swear.”

“I don't—” His voice cracked. He cleared his throat.

“Look, if you don't want to admit it to me, fine. We don't have to talk about that,” she said. She pointed to her Ducati. “But I know you want to do this, and I know you're not letting yourself.”

“You know?”

She nodded.

He wiped his eyes. “I was impaled.”

She nodded. “And shot,” she said. “Crappy things happen. You can't just shell up every time life slaps you in the face.”

Cristina turned and left him on the porch. She walked to the foot of the steps and then into the yard. She picked up the leather coat and gloves he'd dropped in the wet grass, brushed them off, and bundled them in her arms. She continued to the curb, folded her arms over her chest, and leaned against her bike, watching him expectantly.

He looked at the bike. His gut quailed. Just from looking at it.

“Percocet would make you braver,” Mr. Clark said.

Derek took slow, deep breaths, trying to shove the thought out of his head, but other bad things tumbled into the gap in its place. The memory of the saw cutting him loose from the rebar raked his eardrums. He remembered when they'd finally split him free from the concrete. He'd still had a piece of rebar almost bisecting leg. They'd taken him in an ambulance to the hospital with the bar still plunged through muscle and skin. But the experience more than the injury had been what had terrified him. He'd been pinned. He'd gone hoarse calling for help. He'd waited for hours for another human being to happen across him.

Was that something he really wanted to do again?

It's not stupid, Mark had said. You loved riding that bike.
Derek closed his eyes. Samantha pressed against his hip, and he splayed a hand against her ribs. She licked him.

*I can't*, he wanted to say. *I can't do this.*

“Do I really need to comment?” said Mr. Clark. “I'm getting fucking tired of it.”

“Please,” Derek said, cringing against the door. Samantha whined. “Stop doing this to me.”

“You know how to make me stop,” Mr. Clark said, his voice low. Taunting.

Derek took another deep breath. His fists clenched. He pushed Samantha back inside. He closed the door and stuffed his keys in his pocket. His legs felt like they were turning to spaghetti, but he walked toward Cristina. She stuffed the jacket and gloves in his hands. He couldn't help but clutch them. They were to prevent his skin from shredding if he slid on the pavement after a spill.

Was that something he *really* wanted to do again?

“Why exactly do you think this will help me?” he said.

She shrugged. “I have some experience.”

He raised his eyebrows. “With crashing?”

“No.”

“There—”

She straddled the bike and released the kickstand. “Look, would you just put on the jacket, and get on the damned bike?” she said.

He stepped closer. His teeth chattered with nerves.

“You're not going to throttle it the second I sit?” he said, still not quite willing to believe she was being entirely benevolent.

She put on her helmet. “I'm not.”

The black surfaces of the bike gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight. He read the Ducati logo, which was sprawled on the pommel near where she sat. He licked his dry lips as he put on the leather jacket, zipped it, and pulled the leather gloves over his palms. He flexed his fingers. The leather jacket was a bit too large for him, but it would do its job. Same with the gloves.

Cristina looked at him through the visor of her helmet, her expression... strange. Like she felt she was flying blind and didn't like it. “This won't go anywhere,” she said.

“The bike?”

She gestured around them. “This. It's a cone of silence.”

He frowned. “The cone of silence never works.”

“Mine does,” she said.

For a long moment, he couldn't bring himself to move. He imagined his knees might knock together if he tried. And this was Cristina. Cristina, of all people, witness to this. Why the fuck was
he even considering this?

I'm not entirely happy you didn't discuss it with me first, but... she knocks, he'd told Meredith weeks ago. And she only gets in my face when she thinks I'm killing myself.

Cristina's your family, so she's my family, and I'll live with it, if it happens, for you, he'd said. Just like I live with the strays.

Aside from a few days ago at the bar... she hadn't really been that bad. Lately.

She's my person, you know, a soft, familiar voice whispered in his ear. She's not going to hurt you. Give her a chance.

He nodded once. Twice for resolve.

Then he swung his leg over the bike and sank into the seat behind Cristina. She handed him the red helmet. Another march of moments passed where he could only hold it in his hands and stare at it.

Cristina didn't needle him as he ran his hands along the smooth outside face. He hadn't worn one of these the night of his accident. Hadn't worn gloves or a coat or anything protective. He'd been a fucking fool.

He pulled the helmet over his head, and his perception of the world narrowed, claustrophobic and limited by the hole in the helmet for his face. He put his feet up on the rests. He blinked. He remembered this feeling. The feeling of the seat beneath him. And also the feeling of leaving it.

“Why are you doing this?” he said.

She turned on the engine and revved it. The bike rumbled underneath him. He remembered that feeling. That and the wind blowing in his face. He wrapped his arms around her waist, reflexively.

“Ready?” she said. “I'll go really slow.”

Nerves dissolved his resolve. He shook his head. “No. No, I'm—”

“On three,” she said, not listening. “Two.”

She zipped away from the curb before she hit one. The movement made it feel like the bottom was dropping out from the world through his stomach, and he made an embarrassing sound of sheer terror. His eyes snapped shut, and he gripped her so hard she grunted, but he couldn't make himself loosen up. Wind buffeted his face and his neck and his body. He plastered himself against her, too terrified for shame or humiliation or anything other than his own self-preservation.

And then it was over.

“Try this one with your eyes open,” she said over the rumble of the bike's engine, no bite or ridicule in her tone.

His head snapped up. He opened his eyes. They were against the curb in front of the house, exactly where they'd started, almost as if they'd never left. “We already went around—”

“Yep,” Cristina said. “Around the block. Ready?”

“Cristina—” he managed.

“Three. Two.” She zipped away from the curb, and the same thing happened again.
His eyes snapped shut, and he plastered himself to her smaller frame. When she drove them back to the curb where they'd started in front of the house, it took him a full minute to unwind from her, and it was humiliating and awful and he really did think he might throw up. He swallowed and swallowed and swallowed again before he managed to loosen his arms.

“I don't like this,” he said, his voice a bare whisper. He couldn't move.

“I've got an idea,” Cristina said. “Give me your keys.”

“My po... pocket,” he said. He didn't have his thoughts together enough to wonder what she was up to. Or to focus on anything other than not falling apart at the seams.

She didn't make any jokes about fishing in his pants for keys. She didn't make any jokes at all. She wormed into his jeans pocket. He felt her hands. His keys jingled. He sat on the bike in a shivery daze.

“Stay here,” she said, as if he could walk, anyway. She left the bike idling underneath him.

The rumbling pressed against his brain. Made him want to curl up in a dark, quiet corner. He couldn't do this. She was wrong. There was no point to suffering like this, not when so little would be accomplished. He'd lost his nerve, and it clearly wasn't coming back. He'd gotten more mature, and he knew too much about the ways his brain could be made into a fine paste because he'd spent the last two decades of his life fixing those kinds of injuries.

He looked toward his front door when he heard the familiar jingle of Samantha's dog tags. Cristina led Samantha out of the house on her leather leash. Samantha seemed overjoyed at the prospect of another walk so soon after the last one, and she trotted, a joyous look on her face.

“What are you doing with my dog?” Derek demanded as Cristina approached.

Samantha sniffed the motorcycle, inspecting the seat and the handlebars and the vibrating tailpipe and him, unperturbed by the sound of the noisy engine. She was a big enough dog that the bike and her shoulders were almost even, the bike having a slight height advantage. She sat beside him on the pavement and looked at him, her tongue dangling from her mouth in what he could only describe as a smile.

Cristina resettled onto the bike in front of him. It sank on its tires underneath her weight. Cristina reached behind herself, holding out Samantha's lead.

“Hold her leash,” Cristina said, and she dropped the leash in his lap.

He had no choice but to pick up the leash, or he'd have a loose rottweiler that could get into a lot of mischief, no matter how well-trained she was. She liked to chase cats and squirrels, for one. He glanced at Samantha, who seemed as perplexed with this situation as he did, but not nearly as nervous. This couldn't be safe. Could it? “But—” he managed.

“We'll go on three, two...”

The bike kicked away from the curb. Samantha leaped into motion. Derek grabbed Cristina with his free hand, and he made a sick, upset sound as his eyes snapped shut. He gripped the leash so hard it hurt his palm even through the thick glove. He tried to feel for any sign of pull on the line, ready to let it go to save his dog from getting decapitated. He swallowed. He couldn't feel anything, but... He heard Samantha moving. Her tags jingled.

He cracked open his eyelids. Through the blur of his dark eyelashes, he saw Samantha moving
along at a relaxed trot, her coat glossy and gleaming in the dimming sunlight. She panted, her
tongue dangling from her mouth, and she seemed happy as could be to get some more exercise at a
faster pace than the slow walk he'd managed that morning on foot. Beyond her, he saw nothing but
a verdant blur, but...

He closed his eyes. Squeezed. And then forced them back open to look. Really look. Without his
eyelashes in the way, distorting things.

He clutched the leash in his lap. His lower lip trembled as he watched houses crawl past. They
couldn't have been going more than five miles an hour. The wind fluttered against his face and
body.

When they reached Meredith's house after a lap, Cristina didn't stop at the curb this time. She kept
going. A little faster. Samantha's trot became a bit of a lope, but she kept up fine and seemed to be
having the time of her life. Her tongue lolled out of her open mouth. She barked as they moved
along as though she imagined she was in pursuit of juicy prey.

Derek blinked, watching her. And then he laughed. It was a small laugh. But a laugh.

When they came to a stop at the curb, Cristina looked back at him. “You kept your head up, that
time, and you didn't crush me, either,” she said over the growling engine.

“I...” he said. He swallowed. “I guess.”

“One more?”

He glanced at Samantha. She stared back at him, happy brown eyes wide in an excited, exhilarated
expression. She panted, but she stood beside the bike. She didn't sit. She seemed like she could do
another lap.

He nodded. “Yeah,” he said.

Cristina pulled away from the curb, and they went around again, around the hilly block that had
given Derek so much fucking trouble right after his surgery, and more than that after the
pneumonia. They moved a bit faster than before. The bike rumbled underneath him. Samantha
galloped beside him to keep up, but she seemed more than happy to do so, and he laughed,
watching her gleefully get the exercise she deserved but had never demanded on their many
glacially slow walks.

When they pulled up to the curb again, Samantha slid to her stomach on the pavement, panting.
Cristina gestured at the handlebars. “Do you want to try it?”

The warmth leached from his skin, and he tensed. He shook his head. Vehemently. “No.”

“Stop?” she said.

He surprised himself when he answered, “No...”

Cristina nodded. She turned off the bike, set down the kickstand, and removed her helmet. He did
the same. She stared at him, assessing. “Small break, then,” she decided.

“Okay,” he said. He leaned off the bike to pet Samantha. Her coat gleamed in the sunshine.

They rested. Birds chirped. A few cars rumbled past. He was content to sit on the bike, just
listening. Feeling the breeze blow. He swiped his hands through his messy hair. Sweat had started
to collect again. Sweat from fear. But it was starting to dry, now that he'd removed his helmet.

Cristina played with the strap of one of her gloves. “I lied,” she said, inspecting the Velcro.

“Lied about what?”

“My dad died when I was nine,” she said. “Car accident. He died in front of me. I do have experience with crashing.”

She didn't look at him. He blinked, staring at the back of her head. Amelia had been eight when it'd happened. Only a year younger.

_Dad? Daddy_?

A visceral flash hit his mind. His baby sister's small, bony body in his arms as he'd held her behind a shelf. She'd bit him and squirmed, trying to get free. And then the gun had cracked. Amelia had lost her dad.

_He'd lost his dad._

He shook his head, shocked to find such a tragic point of similarity between him and Cristina, a woman who he'd always viewed as someone with whom he had nothing in common.

“I'm sorry,” he said, his voice soft.

She bristled and turned to glare at him. “I didn't tell you for sympathy points.”

“Then why did you tell me?”

She shrugged. “I wouldn't ride in a car for a while,” she said.

He gestured at the bike. “Did somebody do this with you?”

She shook her head. “Not this.”

“Like this?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“I didn't know,” he said.

She shrugged. “Not many do,” she said. She sighed. She gestured to Samantha. “She looks tired. I'll put her back.” She held out her hand. He gave her the leash. Samantha followed her back to the house at a slow, spent walk.

When Cristina returned, she handed Derek his keys, which he stuffed back into his front pocket. She climbed back on the bike, in front of him. She put her helmet back on, released the kickstand, and revved the engine. The bike rumbled.

“Why are you doing this?” he said over the roar.

She ignored him. “Ready for another?”

He put his helmet on as well. “Why?”

“Going in three. Two.”
They kicked away from the curb and flew around the block. Faster, this time, now that they didn't have to worry about Samantha keeping up. The wind buffeted his skin through the open face of the helmet. He held Cristina's waist, but not too hard, and he kept his head up, watching the scenery shift slowly past. The woman he'd seen playing in the yard with her kids when he'd been out for his walk had gone inside with them a long time ago, but he could see the skeletal remains of their playtime. A discarded tricycle. Crumbling piles of sand creations in the sandbox. Cristina turned the corner. A smile twitched at his lips, and all at once the road peeled away like a flower petal in the wind, and he was somewhere else.

The shifting, vibrant reds, rusts, oranges, and yellows of fall foliage churned past his field of view. Water spread beside him, a flat plane of sparkling gray glass as he zipped along the coast. The fresh scent of salt and ocean coiled in his nose, and he inhaled. The engine beneath him rumbled as seagulls split the air overhead with razor wings.

He yelled into the wind. Not because he was scared. Because it felt fucking good.

Another yell mirrored his own. Behind him. “This is fucking awesome!” Mark said against the wind.

“Still think I should have gotten a car?”

“Fuck, no!”

Derek grinned, the whites of his teeth showing. He passed a car, and then he accelerated. They tore into the sunset as it painted the sky.

“Better that time?” Cristina said as she pulled them up to the curb.

He shook his head, almost amazed to find himself back at the curb by Meredith's house, instead of pounding down Route 1 with Mark. He flexed his fingers, remembering the feel of the handlebars. The way the wind shearing past him had made him feel like he was flying. Opening up on an empty road with beautiful scenery was such an exhilarating, godlike rush. He had yet to discover another experience quite like it. Road bicycles didn't go fast enough to achieve the sensation, roller coasters were too brief, and cars were too... enclosed. Even convertibles.

“Yeah,” he said. “It was better.”

“Want to try, yet?”

He glanced at Cristina. Where she sat. At the handlebars. In front of him. For the first time, the idea of that being him sitting there didn't plunge ice water through his veins.

“Will you tell me why you're doing this if I try?” he said.

She shrugged. “If that's the carrot on a stick you need.”

She gestured at the handlebars once more, and she slid off the bike as she looked at him expectantly. He licked his lips and swallowed. The hypothetical idea of sitting in front and actually driving, versus being presented with it as something to do now, as in right now... That was a lot more daunting.

He slid forward to the front and wrapped his hands around the handlebars. The leather gloves squeaked as he clenched his hands. Shivery, nervous energy settled into his legs and arms. He didn't think he could.
No, he couldn't.

Could he?

Cristina settled behind him. The bike shifted as put her feet up. Her delicate hands pressed against his waist. She tapped his hip to let him know she was ready.

He swallowed. Closed his eyes.

*Do it, he told himself. Just fucking do it. Rip the band-aid.*

He kicked them away from the curb, throttling the engine. The bike jerked forward. His body whipped back at the waist and then lurched forward to the handlebars as it overcame inertia. His stomach churned as the unexpected seesaw filled him with nausea. He clutched the handlebars, breathing tightly.

"Sorry. I'm sorry," he muttered as they wobbled forward at a laughable pace that forced him to weave back and forth to keep the bike from tipping. Except the idea of speeding up terrified him. He resigned himself to the frustrating war of keeping the bike upright. His face heated like a wildfire had exploded in his helmet. He clenched his jaw and his hands, and his limbs started to shake with upset nerves.

They rolled around the block more slowly than Cristina had been going when they'd had Samantha to worry about. Three or four miles an hour. They were fucking speed demons. Cristina didn't comment. Her hands remained at his waist, steady, calm, the entire way.

When he arrived at their spot at the curb by Meredith's house and put his feet down on the pavement, he shook his wrists, trying to relieve tension he'd jammed into his muscles. A funnel of embarrassed fury burned him from the inside out. He took a breath. He glared at the handlebars. He could do better than that. *Fuck* that.

"Can we go farther?" he said through gritted teeth.

Leather creaked as Cristina shrugged behind him. "Whatever you want."

He pulled away from the curb once more. He made sure to keep the bike traveling in a smooth, straight line. His muscle memory was returning, making it a lot easier to balance and steer. The bike rumbled beneath him.

Cristina remained a solid, silent presence at his back. She was a skilled rider, and she didn't make any movements that made balancing the bike difficult. She may have even been helping him a little, subtly leaning left or right as the situation dictated. He imagined the first couple laps they'd taken when he'd been plastered to her back and squeezing her stomach like the middle of a toothpaste tube, he'd made it very difficult for her, but she hadn't commented then, either.

He accelerated to the speed limit smoothly, and he rode them around the block once. Twice. Three times without stopping.

The fourth lap, he didn't turn left to go around again. He continued in a straight line. Quaint houses and green lawns peeled past his view. A woman walking her cocker spaniel flew backward in the corner of his eye. He pulled to a stop at a stop sign to let a man on a blue bicycle cross the street in front of him. As soon as the man had crossed, Derek gunned the engine and pushed off again.

*You spent your entire savings on a fucking motorbike? Why not get a car, man? We could pick up chicks in a car.*
You don't understand. You gotta try this, Mark.

Try what?

Riding it!

Cars sped back and forth at the cross section at the end of the street. The main road. A twisted coil of nerves in his center told him to stop before he got stuck in the middle of a bunch of other vehicles with no escape but to bear it through to the end. But he was so sick of stopping. And so sick of being frightened. And so sick of listening to Gary Fucking Clark tell him he couldn't do anything or go anywhere or talk to anybody new because it was scary.

But helmets look stupid.

Just put one on, Mark.

But—

Fuck all of it.

He waited for a gap in the oncoming churn of cars, and he turned onto the main drag where the speed limit was a bit higher. There was a yellow double stripe line in the center of the road. There was traffic in the way, but not as much as it'd seemed from the side street looking on. A red Scion roared past him on his left, buffeting his smaller bike, but he corrected for the sideswipe of air that would have sent a beginner rider tipping to the ground or swerving off the road. It all came back so easily.

Trust me. We'll take a spin on Route 1.

That's miles away.

It's worth it.

He opened up and zipped forward, quickly catching the Scion that had passed him. He laughed. Really laughed. A belly laugh that made him hurt with its ferocity.

He was flying. And it wasn't scary. It was a rush. Exactly like he remembered. The scenery tore past his eyes in a blur, and he felt... happier than he could remember, ever, except for when Meredith had told him she was pregnant, and when she'd said she'd try a relationship again, and later when he'd married her.

The thingy, she'd said. It's a plus, Derek. Look.

His vision blurred. He had to pull them off the road or risk crashing. He turned back into Meredith's quiet neighborhood, though he wasn't quite sure what street they'd ended up on. He could barely read the sign. The sound of traffic muffled behind them, and the world again became a cavern formed by trees.

“What's wrong?” Cristina said, frustrated confusion audible in her tone.

The setting sun warmed his skin as he peeled off his helmet. The bike idled underneath them. Derek wiped his face with the backs of his leather gloves. The leather scraped against his cheeks, and he imagined he would look like a stoplight with how red and irritated his skin felt, but...
didn't think it mattered. He blinked.

“Nothing,” he said, his voice low, shaky. And then he laughed. Another belly laugh that hurt. He smiled, and he couldn't stop it. He didn't want to stop it.

Cristina stared at him. Her jaw opened. Closed. “Oh,” was all she said.

He turned off the bike. They rested in front of a two-story house with chipping white paint. Manicured holly made a makeshift fence around the property. He glanced at the flowerbeds, all greenery at this point, and no flowers. Breaths slipped in and out of him as he stared. His eyes burned, but it was a good burn. He felt... really fucking good.

“Break time,” he said, his voice cracking as he put down the kickstand.

“Okay,” Cristina said, again, no ridicule. No comments on his emotional disarray. She slipped off the bike, stood, and stretched. She pulled off her helmet and shook out her hair. Sweat dotted her brow. She brushed a loose strand of black frizz out of the way.

He wiped his eyes again. “So, why are you doing this?”

Cristina shrugged. “Meredith is my person.”

“That can't be the only reason.”

“I operated on you at gunpoint,” she said. “I saved your life.”

He nodded. “You did.” He touched her arm. “Thank you.”

She stared at his gloved hand on her leather sleeve. “Most people...” she said. She looked up at him and sighed. “We do the surgery, and they leave.”

“They do.”

“But you live here,” she said. “I know you.”

“So?”

“It doesn't feel finished.”

“Because you think I have PTSD?”

“I know you have it,” she said.

He looked at his lap. Didn't speak.

She sighed. “I don't like this aftermath,” she said.

He swallowed. “Neither do I.”

“I'm supposed to feel finished after I close a wound,” she said. “I operated on you at gunpoint, and you're a mess, and Meredith's a mess, and Owen's a mess.”

His head snapped up. “Meredith's still a mess?” he said.

Cristina shook her head. “She's better, but she's pregnant, and she still has you to worry about.”

“Oh,” Derek said.
A moment passed before he realized Cristina had included another name. Owen. Owen seemed so put together, externally. But... Derek blinked. He supposed that was the insidious nature of a mental illness. Somebody could look fine on the outside, and on the inside be craving Percocet every other minute. Owen had survived combat and had already been battling PTSD before Gary Clark had come along. He would be more susceptible to stressful situations in the future, Derek imagined. Like being shot. Owen had been shot. It hadn't been a serious injury, and Derek hadn't thought much more of it at the time. He'd been wrapped up in his own problems.

And where have you been?

“Owen?” he said.

Cristina ignored him. “I was waiting for Meredith not to be a mess,” she said. “I need her to not be a mess.”

“Why were you waiting?”

Cristina blinked. A pair of tears jagged down her face. She scrubbed her face as he stared, stunned. “I operated on you at gunpoint.”

He didn't know what to say. He hadn't thought she would cry. Ever. “I'm sorry.”

“Shut up,” she snapped. She diverted her gaze. Tears plopped onto the pavement. “I don't want a pity party.” She curled in on herself, like she didn't want to admit to anybody she was crying, least of all him. Her shoulders shook, but she didn't make any noise.

He stared, wide-eyed, lips parted. He had no idea what to do. None.

Whenever Meredith got upset like this, he wrapped his arms around her and let her cry. He would whisper at her, and his heart would splinter with every beat, because he'd want to take it all away, and he wouldn't be able to. A grieving ghost, he could feel her hands grabbing tents of his shirt as she curled against his chest, even then. She liked to burrow against him. Surely, Cristina couldn't need that. She was a fucking human cactus. She...

Was crying. And it hit every uncomfortable button he possessed. He didn't know anything else to do.

He shifted, inching closer to her, and then he hugged her. She leaned into him awkwardly. Her shoulder rested against his chest, and she stayed in his arms, stiff, unyielding, a jagged, bony knife jammed against his sternum. He thought she would pull away. She didn't. He rubbed her back, and over gradual seconds, her butt came to rest on the pommel of the bike in front of him, and she melted against him. The leather of her coat moaned as she sank into his arms. She pressed her nose against his lapel. He imagined it might smell like Owen, if this really was Owen's coat.

“Shh,” he said, “deep breaths,” because there was nothing else for him to say.

He watched over her shoulder as a woman jogged on the opposite sidewalk. The fading sun set the glass windows on all the houses alight. Wind sifted through the leaves of the trees, and the sound billowed around them, a soft, wet rustle. The scent of wet earth wafted against his nose.

“Thank you for saving my life,” he told her.

She shifted in his arms. “You've said that.”

“I know,” he said. He smiled at her. “It bears repeating.”
She wiped her nose with the back of her wrist and pulled away. He let her go. Her face looked puffy and red, but she wasn’t leaking anymore. They didn’t discuss the tears. She rubbed her eyes and sighed as she looked at him.

“I don’t hate you,” she said.

He snorted. “Really.”

She nodded, her expression flat. Serious. “Really.”

“But you said—”

“When it was my job to hate you, I hated you,” she said. “I support my person.”

“Now?”

She shrugged. “I support my person.”

“I don’t ever want to hurt her again,” he said.

He’d never meant anything more resolutely. He would take a bullet for Meredith if he had to. Even knowing he might die. Even knowing the hellish months to follow if he lived would be something like what he’d already experienced the last few months. She meant more to him than anything else.

And where have you been?

“I figured that out,” Cristina said. She fingered her helmet. “Home, now?” she said.

Derek nodded, clearing his throat of the lump that had formed. “Yeah,” he said, the word breathy. He pulled on his helmet as she did the same. He released the kickstand.

He turned on the bike and revved the engine. The vibrations underneath him didn’t scare him anymore. He wasn’t ready for a cross country trip or anything. But he could see spending more time on this. He smiled. Cristina gripped his waist. He throttled the bike.

“By the way,” Cristina said over his shoulder as he pulled away from the curb, “just in case you’ve gotten the wrong idea, I wouldn’t really say I like you.”

He laughed. It felt good. “Cristina, I can honestly say the feeling is mutual.”

“Just making sure.”

He nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Does this make us frenemies?” she asked.

He snorted. “Perish the thought,” he said. He glanced at the street sign. They were on Warren.

He took them home.
Chapter 24

Meredith trudged up the sidewalk to the house, so tired she didn't think she could remember what not feeling tired actually felt like. Thirty-six hour shifts had been murder before she'd gotten pregnant. Now that she was trucking around a future beach ball in her uterus, feeling tired sort of seemed like a second skin she couldn't remove.

Nausea lingered in her gut, though it had subsided somewhat as soon as she’d left Seattle Grace’s maelstrom of horrible smells. Disgusting scents seemed to be abundant in hospitals. Blood, vomit, guts, crap, old urine, pus... All it took was a whiff, and she was done for, desperately holding off gagging paroxysms until she raced to a toilet or a sink or a trashcan. Other than a sewage plant manager, or a trash collector, she thought she might have the worst possible job to do while pregnant.

Everything in her body ached. The cool, darkening air hovering in front of her face seemed to waver as her eyes refused to focus full time. She sighed. Great. Even her freaking eyeballs hurt, and all they had to do all day was sit there in her skull.

She wanted to drop herself into the bathtub and sleep forever.

She pushed through the doorway, surprised when nobody greeted her. Usually, Samantha came to say hello, tongue lolling out of her mouth. And Derek. No Derek? When he had the day off and Meredith didn't, he almost always had dinner ready when she got home. He didn't wait by the door with bated breath or anything, but he often showed up within minutes of her opening it to give her a kiss or... something.

She sniffed the air. Nothing. No dinner. At least not anything that smelled.

She frowned as she placed her purse on the table in the foyer. She tiptoed forward, egged into stealth by the eerie silence. Derek lay in a quietly breathing lump on the couch underneath an afghan, nothing but a dark mop of curly hair and the crooked point of his nose peeking out from the rainbow-colored pile. Samantha lay parallel to him on her back on the floor between him and the coffee table, snoring, paws twitching in the air as she dreamed dog dreams.

Meredith licked her lips and glanced at her watch. Derek went to bed early since he'd been shot, but it was only seven. He'd been staying up past seven regularly within six weeks. Come to think if it, he'd been asleep when she'd gotten home on Wednesday, and that had only been seven-thirty. And they'd skipped sex on Friday because he'd been too tired. And Saturday morning, he'd been exhausted. She'd been tired, too, and then they'd had some pretty great sex, so she hadn't really thought about it.

She frowned. He'd been sleeping a lot since Tuesday. His bad day.

Stress?

She didn't know, but whatever the reason, he clearly needed the rest. She didn't want to wake him, so she padded down the hall to the kitchen. Somebody had left the windows open a crack, and the curtains billowed in the cool breeze. The last remnants of sunlight glittered on the glass panes. Lexie sat at the kitchen table, shoulders curled as she hunched over a carton of rocky road ice cream, looking woeful.

“Hey,” Meredith said as she collapsed into the chair across from Lexie.
Lexie looked up. Hanks of dark, brown hair hooded her gaze. Her cheeks bulged as she spoke around a mouthful. “Hi.”

Meredith raised her eyebrows as she folded her hands over her chest. “Something bugging you?”

Lexie frowned. “Nothing’s bugging me,” she said, a little too quickly. “Why does something have to be bugging me?”

“You're eating out of the carton,” Meredith said, gesturing at the tub of ice cream.

Lexie looked down and sighed. “It looked good.”

“Okay,” Meredith said, too tired to press it.

She felt better sitting. She debated dinner, but... that would require effort to make. She didn't think she could manage effort at the moment. And she wasn't sure she wouldn't barf, yet, either. She was at that annoying twilight period after sickness, where hunger sank in claws, but anything more complicated to digest than Jell-O felt like pushing it.

She stared at Lexie, who spooned another heaping portion of ice cream into her mouth. Ice cream seemed safe. Not smelly or hard to digest. And she was getting hungry... It all came back to effort. Getting up to grab a spoon? Effort. She glanced at the utensil drawer. Miles away. And sitting felt so freaking nice.

Meredith sighed. Maybe, a nausea-safe dinner would hop out of the fridge and scuttle toward her on a plate if she hoped hard enough.

“I miss Mark,” Lexie said.

Meredith blinked. “What?”

“I miss Mark.”

“I heard that part,” Meredith said.

She didn't quite know how to handle this. Lexie was her half-sister, but Alex was her friend. And Mark. Her fellow dirty mistress. Mark was her friend, too. How had that happened? She resisted the urge to chuckle in her tiredness. Being tired and being drunk were a bit similar. Ugh. She leaned forward. The chair creaked. She rubbed her eyes. She felt a bit like she might be poking a hornet's nest with a chainsaw or something, but...

“What about Alex?” she said.

Lexie stabbed her spoon into the rocky road and pulled loose a huge chocolate chunk. She shoved it into her mouth, withdrew the spoon, and crunched with a vengeance. “It hasn't been the same since he got shot.”

“What hasn't been the same?” Meredith said.

“Anything,” Lexie said, her words muffled around ice cream. “He called me Izzie when he was delirious.”

“Lexie, you can't hold him responsible for what he said when he was suffering hypovolemic shock. People see things. They say things.” Derek hadn't exactly been articulate for a lot of it, when he'd spoken at all.
Lexie shook her head. “I don't hold him responsible,” she said. She gave Meredith a hopeless look. “It's just... I don't feel like a person when I'm with him.”

“What do you mean?”

Lexie shrugged. “I'm just rebound girl,” she said. “I told him I loved him—”

“When he was shot!” Meredith said. “Does he even remember?”

“I didn't say it was reasonable!” Lexie snapped. She jabbed her spoon into the carton as though she found it cathartic. “But he doesn't... He's just not...”

“He's Alex, Lexie,” Meredith said softly. “He's not touchy-feely.”

“I know that,” Lexie said. “It's not that.” She twisted the spoon. “I expected that.” The ice cream in the container had become malleable with the heat of being out of the freezer and repeated friction of the spoon. “I'm not special to him. I'm just filling a space. But what kind of jerk leaves a relationship right after...?” Her voice trailed away. Her eyes were red when she looked up. She swallowed as she gave Meredith a pointed, haunted look. Right after somebody gets shot, she seemed to not be saying.

“Oh,” Meredith said.

Lexie sighed, a frustrated sound. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does, Lexie.”

“It's just...” She took another heaping spoonful of ice cream. “You've been so strong,” she said, envy squeezing her words.

Lexie took another bite of ice cream. She seemed... almost as though she were placing Meredith on a pedestal. Or... Well, she was the little sister, technically. God. Lexie was little-sistering Meredith.

How had that happened?

Meredith swallowed. She wasn't sure she was a good role-model to be following in the first place. Her past wasn't exactly stellar. Her win in the relationship department had been the result of a lucky crap shoot, really. Not any sort of intelligent planning. But... Her palms wandered to her belly button. Slightly lower. She rubbed in a slow circle, her palms pressing against the soft knit of her shirt. When she realized what she was doing, she froze. Lexie watched her, too, a quirky grin on her face, as if she were happy for the distraction.

And that, Meredith thought pointedly at her pending beach ball.

How had that happened?

Well, you see, said the Derek of her imagination. As we've already discussed, it was clearly Cindy Crawford and Don Juan making some magic.

Meredith sighed, shaking her head. Tired and drunk. Synonymous.

If she were to leap backward in time to tell her past self of five years ago that she'd soon be pregnant, married to her boss, and giving her little half-sister relationship advice, her past self would have laughed her ass off and probably chalked up the weirdness to bad Tequila.

“Lexie, I'm married,” Meredith said. “And Derek and I have a lot of history. And a really big...
I don't think I have that.

Do you think you could have that?” Meredith said, eyebrows raised.

Lexie took a long time to decide. “I don't know.”

“Do you want to have that?”

“Yes!” Lexie said.

“With Alex?” Meredith prodded.

Lexie didn't answer. She stared at Meredith for a moment, brown doe-ish eyes wide. Then she looked at the tub of ice cream and jammed her spoon into it as though she were trying to kill it deader than dead. She dragged a huge chunk of marshmallow-y, chocolate-y goop out of the carton. The spoon clinked against her teeth. She closed her lips around it, sighing as she chewed with bulging cheeks.

“Lexie—” Meredith began, only to stop when Derek lumbered through the kitchen door wearing gray sweatpants, white socks, and a blue t-shirt.

His hair was a scraggly mess, and he looked like he'd left his sentience behind in the other room. He ran his fingers over his ear and squinted at them, as if his eyes wouldn't quite focus. He paused on Lexie, his expression neutral, but when he looked at Meredith, everything softened. His gaze. Posture. A relaxed smile tugged at his lips. His path toward the fridge veered into a path toward the table.

“I want that!” Lexie blurted around the spoon dangling from her mouth.

“Huh?” Derek said.

“I want somebody to look at me like that,” Lexie said. She sighed. “And Mark... did.”

Gears seemed to grind behind Derek's eyes as he thought about this new development. “Oh,” Derek replied.

“Sorry,” Lexie said. “Sorry, just ignore me. I babble. A lot. I babble a lot. And I seem to be babbling, now. Despite my knowledge that I should be shutting up and leaving and not babbling.” She took another spoonful of ice cream and chomped, eyes wide.

Derek's gaze shifted back and forth between Lexie and Meredith. He looked at the ice cream. The serious expressions on their faces. The dour atmosphere. Girl talk. Meredith smirked as she watched the conclusion break apart the tired haze in his eyes. He blinked.

“Should I go back into the living room?” he said.

“No,” Lexie said.

Meredith shrugged.

He frowned, a slightly befuddled look on his face. After some consideration, he didn't leave. His chair creaked. He leaned into her, a sleek, long line of muscle that, despite her tiredness, made her
heart patter faster. The soft, musky scent of his skin wafted against her as he kissed her by the ear. She felt him smiling against her.

“Thanks for the blanket,” he said.

Meredith, discombobulated by the intimate hello, didn't have any idea what he was talking about. “I...”

“I did it,” Lexie said, solving the mystery. Derek pulled away and looked across the table at her. She blushed. “You were out cold. Sorry.”

“Thank you,” he said, his tone sincere.

“No problem,” Lexie said. She grabbed the tub of ice cream and her spoon. Her chair squawked across the floor as she pushed it back and stood. “Shutting up and leaving, now.”

She departed as though she were fleeing from a fire. The blare of the television banged through the door moments later, and Meredith bit her lip as she watched Derek flinch in his chair. The volume adjusted to a whisper easily ignored. Derek relaxed in moments. He blinked at Meredith and scrubbed his fingers through his hair as he pulled in a long sigh of air. He smiled at her, and then he stood.

He went to the fridge and rummaged. Meredith watched the way his arms flexed. Watched the shift of his weight from his right leg to his left and back again. He looked good. Really good. Months ago, he'd barely avoided classification as a skeleton. Whatever he'd been doing in and out of physical therapy had caught up with the fact that he was eating again, though. Really eating. Without any harassment from her. His toned physique had gradually renewed itself.

She smiled as a tub of fruit salad and a glass of water appeared in front of her as if by magic. Fruit would be easy to digest if she avoided the citrus-y stuff. Had he read her freaking mind?

She ate while he moved behind her. The sink rushed. Dishes clinked. Lexie or Alex had probably left something out again. He was meticulous about keeping the sink clear.

Minutes passed. He sat down beside her, munching quietly on an apple. He still wasn't quite all there. He blinked sluggishly. Like he wanted to go back to bed or something. In fact, the only reason he was sitting there at all seemed to be the magnetic pull factor. He hadn't seen her in nearly two days. He wanted to spend some time in her general orbit, even if they didn't talk.

A smile tugged at her lips. That was a nice feeling. The orbit thing. One she reciprocated. He had reassuring presence to him. He made her feel safe. And, really, she just liked him. When the world wasn't falling apart around them, he was chatty and cheerful. A fun person to hang out with. Except he wasn't chatting at the moment. She attributed his quiet behavior to tiredness. They were both tired.

At least she had an explanation for hers, though. He'd had the weekend off. She swallowed a banana slice. “Derek, are you okay?” she said.

He stopped chewing and looked at her. “Sure,” he said. “Why?”

She picked up her fork and snuck a plump strawberry between words. “You've been sleeping a lot.”

“I jogged today,” he said. “With Samantha. It wore me out.”
She gaped. “You... what?”

“Jogged,” he repeated with a wink. “It’s a form of ambulation that’s slightly faster than walking.”

She pushed him in the shoulder playfully, fruit salad forgotten as a thrilled smile grabbed her lips and wouldn’t let go. “Shut up. Really? How far?”

“Only a mile.”

“That’s great,” she exclaimed, unwilling to allow his self-deprecating tone to stand.

He stared at her for a long moment, as if soaking in her happy reaction. Instead of celebrating with her, though, he seemed... upset. His expression splintered when he blinked. “I really messed up, didn’t I?”

“What do you mean?” she said, frowning. “You jogged. That’s great.”

He looked at his hands. His wrists rested against the lip of the table. “I wasted so much time doing stupid things.”

She sighed. She pinched the bridge of her nose. She was too tired for this crap tonight. Too tired to play cheerleader. “Derek...”

“Cristina stopped by yesterday,” he said.

That threw her off balance. “She what?”

“I’ve kept you from all your friends.”

“No, you haven’t,” she insisted.

“Yes, I—”

“Derek!” she said. She touched his shoulder. His gaze shifted to her hand. She took the opening, put her palms against his rough cheeks, and pulled him into an unblinking stare. “You don’t have me on a leash,” she said while he watched her, hoping this would get through. She didn’t know how much of this she could muster before she snapped in two tonight. “I do what I choose. Either I’m bossy, or I’m not. Which is it?”

He stayed quiet for a long time. She stared. His eyes twinkled. “Maybe, a little bossy,” he conceded.

She grinned, relief making her shake. Disaster averted. “You love it.”

He leaned into her hand and kissed the inside of her palm. “Maybe, a little bossy,” he conceded.

She leaned into her hand and kissed the inside of her palm. “I do,” he said, deep affection hugging his words, and then he pulled her against him.

She pressed her cheek against the soft cotton of his shirt, and the warmth of his body pushed back at her, wrapped her up like a blanket. He rubbed her back. She pushed her arms underneath his and wrapped behind his waist. He breathed softly against her. They sat there, silent, for what seemed like hours. Her eyes burned with exhaustion when she closed them. She might have fallen asleep to the rhythmic reassurance of his hands moving in circles against her skin. Maybe. Not quite asleep asleep. The room remained a blurry object stuck in her awareness, as did the comfort of his hard body.

She’d needed this. All day. All yesterday. She thought of the fruit salad she’d abandoned on the
It was as if he were reading her mind. About everything.

She loved that connection, not that she could explain it. Its existence soothed her physical aches. Her mental ones. It reminded her why being a cheerleader was so important, even when the cheering sucked, and she felt so tired she couldn’t contemplate lifting her pompoms. She basked in it, the feeling provided by that tether. He took and took right now, but when he was healthy, his capacity for giving was astronomical. He’d taken care of her after the liver transplant. After she’d drowned. When she’d fought with Cristina. The balance would tip back toward the center, soon. That was how it worked.

“You could tell Cristina,” he said, his voice quiet against her ear. “If you need to.”

She flinched, surprised at the sudden noise. His grip around her tightened, reassuring, and the soft squeeze of his hand apologized for him without words from his lips. She blinked muzzily and looked up at him. She squinted, tempted to ignore him and snuggle back into the cocoon he’d made for her.

“What the hell did Cristina say to you?” she snapped.

“Nothing that didn’t need to be said,” he replied, his tone calm. “She doesn’t have her person. You don’t have yours. And it’s my fault.”

“Saying what wrong?” she said.

“I love you, Meredith. I want you to be happy.”

She chuckled acerbically as she picked up her fork and took another bite of her salad. The tines speared a peach this time. The sugar infusion from the salad woke her up a little, at least. “Okay... You definitely said that wrong, since I had no idea that was what you were freaking saying.”

“I love you, Meredith. I want you to be happy.”

She jabbed a grape. It exploded between her teeth. “I’m happy, damn it!”

He kissed her, his lips brushing her temple. He squeezed her shoulder, and his warm hand slid up
and down her spine with hypnotic reassurance. Her shirt rustled in the silence as he touched her. “I want you to have your person because you love her, not because I feel guilty,” he said.

“But—”

“I didn't mean to take you from your friends with my problems,” he said.

Somebody coughed. Meredith and Derek looked up. Lexie stood in the doorway, wilting spoon hanging from her lips, ice cream carton balanced on her biceps like a log or something. She swallowed and pulled the spoon away from her mouth. She peered at them over the carton.

“I... Uh...” she stammered. “I was going to put this back before I turn into a fat cow. Sorry.”

Meredith glanced at Derek, waiting for the inevitable explosion. The one about privacy. Or, maybe, he would just stalk off in a huff. He stared at Lexie for a long moment, and Meredith waited. And waited. And waited. Nothing happened.

Derek took a deep breath. He glanced at Meredith. Something shifted behind his gaze. Like he'd made a decision. He swallowed.

“Lexie,” he said, turning back to his sister-in-law. “I have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.”

Meredith's mouth fell open.

“And I'm addicted to painkillers,” he added.

Lexie stared. Like she had no idea what to say. Who would know what to say to that when something like that was dropped in your lap like a freaking bomb. Silence stretched. Meredith glanced from Lexie to Derek to Lexie to Derek. The skin at the tips of Derek's ears reddened. Blush spread to his face. He cleared his throat when Lexie still didn't say anything. Then he stood, and he calmly left the room without another word, leaving his half-eaten apple on the table behind him.

He'd just...

“What just happened?” Lexie said.

“I...” Meredith began, amazed as she stared at the empty space where he'd been, only moments before. “I have no freaking idea,” she said, but she found herself suspecting that, though he'd failed once again with the whole articulate thing, he'd been using that magical tether to read her mind the whole freaking time, after all.

In retrospect, he hadn't taken a thing that night. He'd only given.

The dressing on her garden salad made her nose crinkle and her stomach roil as soon as she pulled off the plastic wrapping. It was ranch dressing. Ranch! Ranch dressing should be safe. Right? It was the most generic dressing on the planet, damn it.

Salads in general should be safe. Salads were healthy and nutritious and they said good things like, “Here, Baby. I'm feeding you plants and stuff instead of pizza. Please, don't make me hurl.”

That's why she'd picked the freaking thing from the refrigerator in the cafeteria line. Certainly not because she wanted a salad. She wasn't a freaking rabbit. Besides, the pizza from lunch hadn't stayed down, anyway. Trying pizza for the second meal in a row seemed, karmically, like a bad idea. Like she was just asking for another porcelain prayer session.
She'd lost a bit here that day. A bit there. She couldn't count the number of times she'd fled to the bathroom, if not to puke, to pee.

Meredith made a face and stalked to the trashcan by the door to throw out the offending salad. Dinner was an official failure, not that it mattered. She wasn't even hungry anymore. She just felt sick. She couldn't imagine trying to eat anything when she felt like she had a top spinning in her innards. She wondered how she could possibly be consuming enough to feed Baby at this rate, but... at least at home her stomach seemed safe. Well, safer. Not blanket safe. But good freaking god, she hated being at work with a passion at this point.

She glanced at her watch. 6:45 PM. At least the suspense would be over soon, and she could go home.

Honestly, if Derek was serious about elevator sex tonight, she didn't know whether she'd punch him or not. Him wanting sex when she felt like this seemed like a punch-worthy offense. Just a little tiny punch. With no oomph. He'd probably catch it and laugh like the smirky bastard he was, but it'd make her feel better.

Maybe.

She glanced at the far wall. The dim remnants of the day had become dusk outside the window. Lexie, Alex, and Cristina sat in a row on the gurney like a line of pigeons on a wire or something. Lexie doodled in a black spiral notebook. Alex ate potato chips. Cristina read a book on congenital murmurs. None of them looked up or seemed to care about Meredith's misery, which, to Meredith, clearly meant Meredith had suffered far too much misery too often already.

They'd been desensitized to her suffering. And she still had seven months to go. How unfair was that?

She'd felt like crap all day.

She flopped down onto the gurney into the small gap between Alex and Cristina. Her body sank into the mattress. She wanted to lie down, but everybody sat in the way, so she huddled, pressing her knees to her chest, and leaned against the wall behind her. She stared over her knees at the white tips of her Converse sneakers.

“This sucks,” she said, wishing her stomach would settle.

Cristina's pink highlighter squeaked over an emboldened term on page 192. Meredith squinted, but she couldn't read the word. Cristina didn't even look up. “Oh?” Cristina said dryly. “Tell us more.”

Meredith hugged her knees. “I still can't eat anything. The surgeries that don't make me puke make my back hurt from standing so long. My bladder feels like it's the size of a walnut. I'm turning into bloated walrus. How am I supposed to do this for... like seven more months?”

“At least you can still fit into your pants,” Alex said. His potato chip bag crinkled.

Meredith glared. “You're not helping.”

He waved a chip at her and gave her an impressed, smirky, eye-twinkling nod. “Your boobs really do look good, you know.”

“Really not helping.”

Lexie stopped scribbling. “Is Derek...?” she began. She didn't finish the question.
Meredith could fill in the end with phrases like drug addict and post-traumatic stress. Lexie had been handling the idea of Derek's problems well, though she seemed to get hit with occasional moments of gobsmacked amazement, which waffled between disbelief and, *Ooh, now it all makes sense!*

Within a day of Derek's confession, Meredith had found a pile of books stacked on the coffee table pertaining to PTSD, addiction, trauma psychology, and all sorts of other tangentially-related crap. Lexie had swept them away and hidden them in her room within minutes of Meredith finding the collection. Meredith didn't know if Derek had seen the books. Meredith hoped Lexie's “holy crap, this is big” of it all would settle down. Derek seemed to thrive when people treated him like they always had, barring some minor allowances regarding his startle response. He didn't do as well when people treated him like his presence was an event.

She shook her head. “Derek is Derek,” she said meaningfully.

“Is that good or bad?” Lexie said.

Cristina snorted.

“You, shut up,” Meredith said to Cristina. “I'm still trying to figure out what you did to him.”

Cristina finally looked up from her book. “I didn't do anything.”

“He was really weird this morning,” Meredith said.

Lexie's brow creased with concern. “Define weird.”

“Smirky and... irritating,” Meredith said. “He brought me pancakes. In bed.” He'd given her apple juice, which was easier for her to keep down, instead of orange juice. And he'd put a little flower on the freaking tray. Just a dandelion he'd gotten from the grass outside, but still...

Alex munched on a potato chip. “So, he fed you your favorite breakfast, and you're calling that irritating?”

Meredith shook her head. “No, the pancakes were really good.”

“And you're blaming that on me?” Cristina said.

“No, I'm not blaming the pancakes on you!” Meredith said.

Lexie frowned. “I'm not getting the problem.”

“You did know he smirked a lot when you married him,” Cristina said.

Meredith sighed. “I know he freaking smirks!”

Lexie nodded. “Smirking is very Derek.”

“So is the being irritating part,” Cristina said.

Meredith glanced at her watch again. The moment of truth was getting closer. “He said he was cashing in a rain check today, and he wanted to make sure I'd still be here at 7:00...”

Silence stretched. When she looked up she realized all three of them were staring at her, puzzled expressions loitering on their faces. They just didn't get it.
Ever since his bad day, but particularly since last Sunday, Derek had been... odd with her. Not odd odd, like strange. Odd... Derek-y, which, given recent events, was odd.

He'd told Lexie about his problems, and, within a day, much to Meredith's spluttering surprise, he'd worked his way around to Cristina and Alex. Like he'd felt if he waited for Meredith to get around to doing the telling, she might never do it, so he'd done it for her.

This was an adjustment. People knowing. She couldn't imagine what it felt like for Derek, who'd shifted from relative privacy to figuratively standing on a stage with glaring lights shined in his eyes.

He didn't seem to have any idea how to handle having his mental health so transparent to her social circle. While he'd been antisocial since he'd been shot, the antisocial aspects of his PTSD had tended to manifest in avoidance, not social ineptitude. Around her and around Mark, he seemed fine. But around Alex and Lexie, and, mindbogglingly less so with Cristina, he seemed almost... unnerved by the prospect of finding the right things to say. He'd become scarily shy around them. To the point that conversing with him in their presence seemed like a pointless endeavor, because he hardly spoke.

She appreciated what he'd done for her, giving her her friends back, but on some level, he'd clearly not been ready for it. Clearly pushed himself. He still hadn't told any of his friends. Chief. Bailey. Dr. Hunt. And not his family, either, other than Amelia, who he talked with on the phone every other night.

On top of that, he'd been nothing but nice to her for a week. He hadn't snapped at her once. Hadn't lost his temper. He'd been sweet and considerate, and he smiled at her all the time, and it was just... weird. He'd even started getting inquisitive about what had happened to him when he'd been shot. He acted like somebody had flipped a switch inside his head, and the lights were on.

Like he was him again.

But it couldn't be that simple. Last time he'd been having a good stretch like this, after their vacation to Lake Cushman, he'd ended the streak with a cataclysmic burnout that had ended in a bad panic attack and extorting April for a prescription. He'd rescued himself at the last moment, but...

She bit her lip as her stomach flip-flopped.

She didn't have any idea what to do. She imagined a little screw inside his brain. Tightening and twisting, the pressure building and building as he forced himself to stand under the scrutiny of others and forced himself to be nice to her all the time and forced himself to seem Derek-y around her no matter how horrid he felt. Maybe she was fabricating the whole thing, and he really did feel that much better, but she couldn't help the awful image. And she couldn't help wondering how badly Cristina had messed with his head to cause the paradigm shift in his behavior.

“Look, you just...” she began. She waved her arms. As if that would help explain. It didn't. “You know when things have been really, really crappy? I mean like really crappy. And then there's a lull. And it's like the Jaws theme is playing. And you're all... is it safe to go back in the water? But you don't know. You don't know if the water is safe. It's warm, and it feels so nice, and you want to like it and enjoy it. But you know your foot might get chomped off if you dip your toe into the waves, and that just creates this... buzz.”

“A buzz...” Lexie said, a blank look on her face.
Meredith nodded. “In the back of your head. A buzz. Like a warning. Be careful. Or else.”

Cristina’s expression creased. “This isn’t like with the bomb, is it?”

“In case your memory is failing, there was a freaking bomb,” Meredith said. She blew out a frustrated breath, and bits and pieces of loose hair went flying. “It wasn’t needless worry.”

Cristina rolled her eyes. “You were complaining about faulty conditioner and split ends. Not bombs.”

“Wait,” Lexie said. “Derek is Jaws?”

“Ever since I got home on Sunday after my shift, he’s been sweet and considerate, and it makes me feel like crap,” Meredith said. She turned to Cristina. “Ever since you visited.”

“Sweet and considerate is crappy?” Lexie said.

Meredith sighed. “I can’t even yell at him for the buzz-y thing.”

“I don’t see why him being nice precludes you yelling at him,” Cristina said.

“I didn’t say it was logical,” Meredith grumbled.

Alex shook his head. “Pregnancy rarely is.”

Meredith bumped her shoulder into him and shoved. Hard. “You’re not scoring points today,” she said.

Alex snickered. “Hey, you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“I’m not happy right now,” Meredith said as she resettled. All this neurotic, stupid worrying made her feel worse. Her innards ran in circles. She hoped she wouldn’t puke up what little caloric content she had left in her stomach.

“I still don’t understand what’s wrong,” said Lexie.

“What’s wrong?” Meredith said. She took a deep breath. “What’s wrong is that I’m Richard Dreyfuss waiting for a freaking shark the size of my house to eat me. That’s what's wrong. I should have just stayed in bed today and waited for the crisis in relative comfort. My back hurts.”

She sighed, crossing her arms over her chest, and pushed backward. Her breath knocked in her chest as her back met cold window glass, and she glowered at the far wall where the snack machine rested. Not that glaring or flopping around dramatically did much to soothe any of the yucky anxiety prancing around in her head. Mostly, it just made her back ache.

She glanced at her watch. The universe, as if it had sensed her impatience, sent a wiry, brown-haired intern through the double doors ahead to distract her, but all the coincidence did was make her glare harder at the back of his head as he walked away.

Derek needed to cash his freaking check. Now.

“We should have a baby shower,” Lexie said in the tense lull.

“A baby shower,” Meredith said, narrowing her eyes as she turned her head. “That’s your solution?”
Lexie nodded. “Baby showers are happy.”

“I haven't even had my first appointment with the OB, and you want to have a baby shower? Isn't that premature? Or, like... taunting Jaws with a bloody stump?” Meredith said.

Lexie shook her head. “It's not taunting,” she said. “You're nearly out of the first trimester.”

“We don't know that,” Meredith said. “We don't know anything. Because I haven't had an appointment yet.”

Cristina glanced at her. “Why have you waited this long, anyway?”

“An eight week first appointment is normal!” Meredith said. “This was the first slot they had.”

“You could have waved the professional courtesy flag,” Cristina replied. “They would have gotten you in.”

“Yeah, and bumped somebody else who's just as anxious,” Meredith said. “Plus, I...” Her voice trailed away.

She looked down at her stomach. Rubbed her hands along the waistline of her baby blue scrubs. She couldn't tell, still. There wasn't a bump there. She'd stood naked at home in the master bathroom, staring at herself in the mirror for a long time just a few days ago, and hadn't been able to find the slightest hint that her belly had expanded. She hadn't noticed her pants getting tighter, either.

That didn't mean she didn't know something was there, though. Something huge. Something she wanted to be perfect, this time, for a billion different reasons. Except...

Cristina raised her eyebrows.

Meredith sighed. “It's been nice. The happy denial bubble. I'm...”

Lexie looked like she wanted to perpetrate a hug. “I'm sure there's nothing to be in denial about,” she said.

“I'm a demonstrably bad incubator,” Meredith said, frowning. “And Derek won't even consider the possibility that something might be wrong.”

_You're pregnant_, he'd said forcefully when she'd tried to delineate the possibilities of catastrophe. And, lately, he seemed to be using fatherhood as a carrot-on-a-stick to get better. At the same time, she'd gotten to know this carrot. Gotten used to the physical aspects of having it inside her. She'd started talking to it, sometimes, when nobody was looking. She and Derek had discussed names. It seemed so much less amorphous than the first baby she'd lost, which she'd only known about for a few hours before it had been gone. Hell, Meredith was already convinced that the “it” was actually a she. A little person. A baby girl. Maybe, a baby girl named Anne.

Meredith bit her lip as she stared at herself. This time, everything seemed so much more... real.

She didn't know what she'd do if the carrot was defective again.

She didn't know what _he_ would do.

She didn't want to know.

And as long as she didn't have an ultrasound, and she didn't start cramping and bleeding like she
had last time... she didn't have to know, defective or not.

“Hey,” Alex interjected. “It was just shit luck. I'm sure mini-Meredith is fine.”

“I hope so,” Meredith said.

“What kind of baby shower would you like?” Lexie said.

Meredith sighed. “None?”

“You need a baby shower,” Lexie said.

“I need to not be Richard Dreyfuss,” Meredith countered.

Lexie ignored her. She flipped to a new page in her spiral notebook and readied her pen. “What kinds of activities would you want?”

Meredith raised her eyebrows. “Activities?”

Lexie shrugged. “You know,” she said. She drew a squiggle absently on the paper. “At the baby shower. Like painting onesies. Or guessing the birth weight.” Her eyes widened as ideas churned behind her gaze. She gasped. “Oh! How about pin the sperm on the egg?”

Meredith's nose crinkled. “That's...”

“Horrifying?” Cristina offered.

Meredith nodded. “In a word.”

“Oh, come on,” Lexie protested. “Let me plan a baby shower.”

“If you have one, do I have to come?” Meredith asked.

Lexie grinned. “Yep!”

“Don't let her do it,” Alex said. “If you let her do it, I have to help plan.”

“Men don't plan baby showers,” Lexie said.

“Oh,” said Alex. He seemed satisfied. “Okay, then.”

Lexie glanced from Alex to Cristina to Meredith, a look of frustrated bewilderment on her face. She dropped her notebook onto the gurney beside her with her pen and sighed dramatically. “What is wrong with you people, anyway?”

Cristina shrugged. “We're not snuggles and hearts.”

“I don't know if you've noticed, but we're in all the clubs,” Meredith added.

Lexie frowned. “What clubs?”

“Dysfunctional families,” Meredith said.

Cristina nodded. “Dark-and-twisty.”

“Abandonment complexes,” said Meredith.
“One dead parent,” Cristina said.

“Addict spouses,” Meredith said.

Everybody stared at her. Meredith wiped her face with her hands to cover the rapid spread of blush. She sighed. Being honest was so freaking weird. “What, you all know, now,” she said, more a grumble than anything else.

Cristina's lip twitched. “I think that one's all yours.”

“Drunk dads,” Alex offered helpfully. “Close enough.”

“My dad is dead,” Cristina said. “He wasn't a drunk.”

“And let's not forget Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” Meredith said.

Cristina nodded. “That's definitely a club.”

“Oh, my god, you guys are so depressing!” Lexie said, her expression horrified.

“We're not really a bed of optimism,” Cristina replied.

Lexie shook her head. “This is why you need a baby shower!”

Meredith frowned. “I'm still not following.”

Lexie opened her mouth. Closed it. Waved her hands. Made a face. She eventually settled on calm, even words. “You're going to be a mom. With Derek. A man who you love and fought hard to get. You've both lived through thick and thin together, despite all odds to the contrary,” Lexie said, her tone patient. Accommodating. As if she thought she might be speaking to morons. Meredith stared at her. Lexie stared back, only to groan in frustration, moments later, when Meredith still hadn't offered any sign she comprehended. “Those are reasons to be optimistic!” Lexie said. “Stop looking at half-empty glasses.”

“My glass isn't half-empty,” Meredith said. She sighed when she recognized a familiar pressure down below. She shifted, trying to alleviate it, but nothing helped. Hadn't she just gone to the bathroom an hour ago? “It's full, and I have to pee. Again.”

“I promise not to make it too fluffy-hearts,” Lexie said.

Alex snorted. “Right.”

Lexie smacked him in the shoulder. He feigned pain and brushed her arm away with a smirk.

Meredith slid off the gurney. She had to pee, damn it. “Fine,” she said, glancing down the hall. There was a bathroom just around the corner. “Fine, whatever, I—”

The double doors opened, and Meredith squeaked with absent, startled feeling. Her heart thumped at the unexpected intrusion, and for a bitter flash, she wondered if this was how Derek felt all the time at every moment instead of just occasionally like a normal person. She glanced at her watch as she turned. Seven. On the nose. Check cashing? She looked at the man who walked through the doors, and everything inside her body crumpled before the looming silhouette defined itself.


Mark held a cream-colored piece of paper in his hand, and he wore a bland look on his face that
Meredith had seen too many times to misinterpret. He used that expression with patients who were goners and with the families of loved-ones when he had to deliver bad news. He used it as a buffer to keep himself detached. Most doctors had a face like that. A face like that was a survival tool in a stressful profession.

Her heart sank. Derek. Something horrible had happened. She'd been right. All along.

“Oh, god, what is it?” she said.

She expected a horrific tale. Maybe, Derek had had another public panic attack and gotten stuck somewhere in a crush of people. Or, maybe he'd been found stoned in the living room. Or...

“I don't know,” Mark said. He held out the cream-colored paper, and Meredith realized that it was an envelope embossed with flowery stenciling. She didn't take it. He jiggled it. “I'm supposed to give you this.”

“What is it?” she said, staring.

He frowned. “A letter.”

“I know it's a freaking letter,” she snapped. She couldn't help it. This had to be what Derek felt like all the time, and it was horrible. Her stomach churned. She hovered inches from Mark's outstretched hand, refusing to move closer, as though the letter's mere touch might burn her. “Is it from Derek? What's in it?” And why wasn't Derek here?

“I don't know,” Mark said.

She raised her eyebrows incredulously. “You don't know if it's from Derek?”

Mark shrugged. “It's from Derek,” he said, his tone flat. Neutral. “I don't know what's in it.”

“You mean you won't tell me,” Meredith accused.

“No, I mean I literally can't tell you, Grey,” said Mark. “I have no idea what he was thinking.”

“Is it bad?” Meredith demanded.

Another shrug. “No, it's...” An odd look crossed Mark's face. The first glimmer of emotion. His lip twitched, like he was fighting an explosion of feeling. “It's Derek.”

“That sounds pretty bad to me,” Cristina said from the gurney as she flipped a page in her book.

Meredith stiffened as a thud followed by footsteps resolved in a hand squeezing her shoulder. “I'm sure it's not bad,” Lexie said, her voice soft. Big-eyed and full of ooey-gooey sympathy that Meredith wanted about as much as oil wanted water.

Meredith clenched her jaw. The backs of her eyes pricked.

“Why didn't he just send you an email?” Alex said uselessly.

None of them understood.

Lexie took the envelope from Mark's outstretched fingers. She stroked the embossed flowers with a tiny smile. She sighed. “The envelope looks pretty,” she said, her tone envious. “Maybe, it's something romantic. You said he's been really sweet lately.”
Or, maybe it was an apology for something else horrible.

What had he done, now?

Meredith tried to breathe. She couldn't muster any more cheerleading or forgiveness tonight. She couldn't do it. There was too much other… stuff.

“I have my first OB appointment in less than twenty-four hours,” she said, blinking as a flash flood of tears drowned her face. They slid down her cheeks in burning, jagged lines. “His mother is flying in tomorrow just a few hours before my first freaking sonogram, and she doesn't know I'm pregnant or that he's a drug addict. We're getting married in a few days. The house is a mess. He's been back at work for all of two weeks. He comes home exhausted, and stressed, and he keeps pushing himself to do stuff anyway, like socialize after work or jog with the damned dog or cash a freaking rain check that I would have been happy to postpone a bit longer. It doesn't matter that he's been sweet. There's a lot going on, and he... he's sick. He's sick, and he can't handle this crap forever before he breaks, and he'll... He's sick, and I can't...”

Her voice died with a warble as a lump the size of an orange filled her throat. Horrified silence filled her wake. Cristina and Alex... they seemed less blandly observant, now. More concerned. Mark seemed stupefied. Lexie's eyes had gotten wet, too, like she wanted to hop into a good sympathy cry and bawl it out with Meredith for solidarity.

Meredith couldn't deal with this. Her lower body burned like her bladder had set fire to itself. She held up her hand before any of them could speak.

“Excuse me,” she managed, a bare, cracking collection of syllables.

They all gaped at her.

And then she ran. To the bathroom. In an embarrassing, blurry flood of tears. She plopped onto the toilet and let herself go, only to hear a tiny trickle. She couldn't empty herself of the burning urge that told her she needed to go. She dragged her hand to her mouth and tried to breathe. This wasn't a full bladder. This was nerves. Horrible, sick, twisting nerves.

“You're freaking out,” she told herself as she bent over her knees and stared at the floor tiles. “Stop freaking out. You need to calm down. He's fine. Baby is fine. His mom is all mommish, and it'll work out. Everything is fine. This is stupid.”

That didn't help.

It didn't feel stupid.

Her stomach churned, knotting and twisting. She felt like she would throw up, though she hadn't eaten anything since the stupid pizza at lunch. Her stomach didn't seem to care that it was empty. She had a chance to flip her body around before she spilled awful, acrid-smelling bile into the toilet.

When she stopped heaving, she felt... better. Out of breath. Exhausted. But better, despite the leaking deluge of hormone-y, nerve-wracked, stupid tears. She cleaned up after herself, sniffling, and then she flushed the toilet. She wandered out of the stall. She looked at herself in the mirror as she washed her hands. The fluorescent lights overhead made her look ghastly. The skin that wasn't wan was red and irritated and scary.

God, she hoped this wasn't what Derek felt like all the time.
Replacing the panic thought helps, he'd said. And he had a breathing thing he did, too.

Holding a retractor, she thought wildly as she forced herself to mimic what she'd seen him do with the breathing. Inhale. Count to three. Exhale over three. She wouldn't think about babies or miscarriages or drugs or moms or PTSD or panic attacks or anything. She fixated on bringing her pickles. She fixated on... holding a retractor for Derek in surgery, who was smiling behind his scrub mask. Holding a retractor for Derek in surgery, who was wearing his ferryboat scrub cap and smiling behind his scrub mask because he'd fixed a spinal tumor.

That thought calmed her. It calmed her on many levels. She liked to see Derek smile. The way his eyes crinkled when he was happy or aroused made her heart skip, particularly when he directed the look at her, but even when it was just idle happiness about anything. And if he was saving lives in surgery, that meant he was better. Really better.

He smiled at her, a crinkle-y ghost in her head.

That picture helped.

She almost couldn’t help smiling back at him.

She wiped her face with the backs of her palms, and she exited the bathroom. Mark, Lexie, Alex, and Cristina stood in a heap where she'd left them. They argued about whether to chase after her. She joined them. At first, they kept arguing. They clearly didn't have any idea what to do with blubbery, stupid, hormonal Meredith. They only knew about the one who closed down on problems. Went catatonic.

When they noticed her, they shut up. They appraised her haggard appearance in tense, is-she-going-bonkers silence. She brushed a loose bang out of her eyes and sighed.

“Stop looking at me like I'm going to snap in two,” she said. She didn't add that she had snapped in two. Already. They could do the math. “I'm fine,” she said. The addition felt obligatory. A required Meredith-ism.

Normality.

Cristina's stiff frame relaxed at Meredith's return to form.

Lexie inched forward, the cream-colored envelope clutched in her lithe fingers. “I'm positive it's not shark stuff,” she said, her tone low and soothing. “Look at the pretty envelope! You should open it.”

Mark frowned, confusion glazing his sharp features. “Shark stuff?”

Everybody ignored him.

Meredith wiped her face with her hands again. Just to be sure she hadn't left any glistening remnants of leakage. “You know something?” she said to Lexie.

Lexie shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Liar,” Cristina said.

“I'm not lying,” Lexie insisted.

“You know she sucks at lying,” Alex said, tilting his head toward Lexie. “She blushes like a fire
hydrant.”

Cristina seemed appeased. She nodded. “That's true.”

“Shut up,” Lexie said, affronted.

“Everybody shut up!” Meredith snapped.

She sighed and took the envelope from Lexie. She ripped it open despite Lexie's look of you're- killing-the-romance horror. Meredith didn't care if she wrecked the pretty paper. She just wanted this whole ordeal with the freaking rain check to be over.

She pulled loose a card from the torn remnants of the shredded envelope. The card was folded in two. A glossy, overhead photograph of a ferryboat gliding across blue water covered the front. Behind the boat, frothy white carved a triangle into the stark blue. She flipped open the card. Derek's familiar, messy writing sprawled before her eyes, but it was... oddly neater. As if he'd taken immense time to keep his usual slipshod quality out of the lopsided loops and squiggles of each written letter. She got the feeling that if she'd met him twenty-five years ago, before the medical profession had corrupted his script, his handwriting would have looked like this. She stared, and after a moment, the untidy scribbles became words.

Dear Meredith,

I'm sorry.

She looked away before she could read the next sentence. Her eyes threatened to burn up all over again with tears, and everything she'd stuffed away in boxes for later popped out again. Her Derek-is-smiling-in-surgery picture splintered and evaporated out of her mind's eye.

“God, damn it,” she said. “Freaking... I knew it was bad. I hate rain checks.”

Lexie gently extracted the card from Meredith's clenching fist while Meredith tried to force herself to do the breathing thing. Again. The smiley-Derek thought replacement wouldn't solidify, so she focused on only the breathing. That was enough to make her tired brain hurt, anyway.

Lexie flipped open the card. She squinted. Frowned. Shook the paper, as if that would make the words easier to read. She blinked, shook her head, visibly steeled herself, and stared. Hard. Seriously. Like she'd been given a bomb threat to decipher. Her eyeballs began to move back and forth and back and forth as she skimmed.

“Meredith, you really should read the rest of it,” Lexie said as she reached the end of it.

Meredith squeezed her eyes shut to keep from crying all over again. “I don't want to hear another one of his freaking apologies. I'm so tired of—”

“Meredith!” Lexie snapped. Meredith opened her eyes, stunned, and Lexie continued, “Shut the hell up, stop whining, and read it!”

Meredith's jaw dropped open. “I...” She wiped her eyes with the backs of her palms. Swallowed. She glared at Lexie, but she took back the letter with a sigh. “Fine.”

Dear Meredith,

I'm sorry. I know you've never been big on corny romantic gestures. I tried to think of something you'd like, something more subdued than this, but I didn't want to ask anybody else for suggestions,
because I wanted this to be from me alone. I've run this idea in circles around my head, and I keep coming back to it.

I've been having a hard time the past few months. I broke your trust in my struggle for equilibrium, and I want to earn that trust back. I feel like expressing myself this way is just another truth to tell.

What can I say? You married a corny guy.

Meredith snorted. Not quite a laugh. Aware that everybody watched her, she put her hand to her lips, covering them. Warmth spread into her body, and remembering to breathe, three seconds in, three seconds out, seemed less important. She kept reading.

I know how much you've been struggling lately. Struggling to deal with me and my endless anxieties in addition to your own. I've wanted to cash this rain check for a while. Not sex in the elevator, per se, because I don't think I could manage it with the medication I'm on – we'd be tying up the elevator for an hour in the best case scenario.

She laughed again. A real laugh. God. How did he do that? He wasn't even there. He was words on a freaking page. Messy words that were hard to read. That was all. And, yet... Her fingers tightened against the thick paper. Why was he only messy words? Why wasn't he here? She kept reading.

Rather, it's the idea that I can do something for you, for once, instead of the other way around. So, here I am. I'm cashing the check. Tonight is about you. I hope you'll take this game in the spirit I mean it and have some fun, even if it's only to laugh at my expense. You deserve a night off, and you deserve to laugh.

With love,

Derek

She reread the last paragraph about fifty times. It didn't make more sense the fiftieth time.

“Well?” Lexie demanded.

“I don't get it,” Meredith said, her voice low and throaty and... wrecked. She looked up at her riveted audience, wiping fresh tears away from her face that she hoped they wouldn't ask about. She didn't want to think about them anymore. She felt better. A game. A night off. Laughing at Derek's expense. Those things weren't scary or bad, and they said things about Derek's state-of-mind that made her want to wilt with relief. Ticking-time-bomb Derek wouldn't say, Hey, laugh at me! But... also? She felt damned confused. “What game?”

None of them seemed to have any more context than she did, except Mark, whose eyes twinkled in the dim hallway like lit firecrackers. He seemed to have some idea. Some juicy idea. But he'd been so freaking serious before—

Or you were freaking out and misreading everything, a tiny voice told her. The annoying one she preferred to shut up more often than not. This time, she listened, and the quivering remnants of her panic unraveled. Whatever this was, it wasn't bad.

But what was it, then?

Cristina grabbed the note from Meredith's lax fingers to read it to herself before Meredith could read the final paragraph a fifty-first time. Cristina seemed to have less trouble interpreting the words than Lexie, and she finished scanning quickly. Her lip curled with disgust, and she handed the note to Alex, who started skimming it.
“He really promised you sex in the elevator?” Cristina said while Alex read. “I thought he was making stuff up because he was stoned.”

“Yeah,” Meredith said, her tone soft.

“So, he was stoned?” Cristina prompted.

_It makes you eu-euphoric, you know_, Derek had said about the extra morphine Bailey had given him for the pain. He'd been out of it. That had been one of the few times he'd been given enough to feel giddy, instead of just miserable with a side of spacey. Dr. Bailey would never admit it aloud to anyone, but the woman was a soft touch when it came to suffering, and Derek had been freaking unnerving, crying after surgery, because it was so... _so not_ Derek.

Too many u's, he'd said, addled.

Meredith didn't know how to feel about that moment anymore. It'd been funny at the time. _I don't think I can have sex in the elevator tonight_. Funny. She'd laughed. But, now, she only saw the beginning of the end. He'd gotten a taste for how good the morphine made him feel in contrast to how horrible he'd felt without it, and... She shook her head. She couldn't keep doing this. Thinking about moments she'd missed the meaning of until it was far too late to do anything about them.

She focused on good things, instead. That rain check had carried them through a lot of bad stuff. She put her hand on her flat belly.

_God, you'd make such a perfect dad_, she'd said.

They'd gotten here, hadn't they? Alive, together, and pending as parents. And Derek _was_ getting better. A little here. A little there. Positive, she told herself. Think positive. Derek had created a mysterious game that he thought she would consider corny. There were no sharks or other things with big, slice-y teeth the size of her hand. No madmen with guns.

“Yes,” Meredith said. “But not making stuff up.”

“Dude,” Alex said, clear admiration in his voice.

Cristina made a face. “It's less funny and more gross, now.”

“He was shot and having trouble breathing,” Meredith said. “I was trying to keep him talking, so we made a rain check.”

“With sex,” Cristina said.

“Just talking about it, not having it!” Meredith said.

“While he was shot,” Alex said. He folded Derek's card, ferryboat facing up, with the crumpled envelope resting underneath, and held it out for Meredith. She took it.

“Yeah,” Meredith said as she ran her index finger along the card. The glossy paint of the ferryboat picture felt smooth and cold against her fingertips. She put the card in her lab coat pocket. Throwing it out seemed strangely criminal. “While he was shot.”

“That's... impressive,” Mark said.

“I really didn't feel like sex when I was shot,” Alex said. “Talking about it or otherwise.”

Cristina snorted. “And that's saying something.”
“That wasn't the point at all,” Meredith said. “Just...” When she blinked she saw Derek behind her eyelids. He lay on the operating table, shivery, panting, his lips the color of chalk. A bloody hole the size of her pinky carved a tunnel through his chest wall. He was dying, and she didn't know what to do except talk to him, but what could she say? She shook her head, kicking the image back into her mental pantry before it overwhelmed her with another flood of stupid hormone tears. She wiped her face with her hands. “What game?” she said.

“Maybe, that's part of the fun,” Lexie said. “Figuring it out.”

Meredith glanced at all of them. Alex. Lexie. Cristina. They'd all read the note, now, but nobody seemed to have any idea. She turned to Mark, who stood off to the side, set apart from the group, and, yet, still loitered with a little smile slathered on his smug face.

“You really have no idea what this is?” Meredith said to Mark.

Her words seemed to drag him out of a trance. The smile disappeared, replaced by the flat, emotionless mask she'd seen earlier. When he'd delivered the letter. The I'm-sorry-we-did-everything-we-could expression of detachment. He shrugged.

“No clue,” he said smoothly as he switched gears. “Sorry.”

Meredith didn't believe him. She narrowed her eyes, preparing an interrogation in her head. Cristina would help. They could good cop, bad cop it, probably. Mark was too guileless to lie for very long. She opened her mouth—

“Maybe, the letter is a clue,” Lexie said, interrupting.

Meredith's brow creased. She looked at her half-sister. “A clue to what?”

“The elevator?” Lexie said.

“Maybe, the operating room where you came up with the rain check,” Cristina said.

Everybody turned to stare at Cristina, who frowned. “What,” Cristina said. “I can't play?”

“The ATM in the lobby,” Alex suggested.

Lexie frowned. “Why the ATM?”

Alex shrugged. “Cashing a check, right?”

“Did you read the back?” Mark interjected.

“What back?” Meredith said.

“There's a P.S.,” Mark said. He pointed to her lab-coat pocket. “On the back.”

Meredith narrowed her eyes at Mark. She'd been so busy figuring out the words on the inside, she hadn't looked at the back. Nobody had. How would Mark know? He'd delivered the letter sealed in an envelope.

She pulled the card out of her pocket and flipped it on its back. Sure enough, more of Derek's messy writing sprawled across the cream-colored surface. She shifted her gaze back to Mark with the sneaking suspicion Derek had appointed him referee, for some reason. Maybe, some sort of secret guide. Mark blushed under the scrutiny and looked away, but said nothing.
“They say the first cut is deepest,” Meredith read aloud from the card. “In my case, it's true. I saw your inner fire, and your enthusiasm, too.”

“Dude... a poem?” Alex said.

Cristina made a face. “Sappy.”

Lexie sighed. “I think it's adorable.”

“That seems more like a clue,” Mark said helpfully.

Meredith peered at him, dubious. “You're going to play, too?”

Mark shrugged. “Why the hell not? He dragged me into this. I want to see how it unfolds. Besides, it's great material.”

He seemed... Maybe he really didn't know what this corn-fest was going to be. “Material for what?” Meredith said.

Mark smirked. “To make fun of him.”

“So, what's it mean?” Lexie said.

Everyone pondered for a long stretch of silent moments. Meredith read the poem aloud once more. She felt a bit like a Jeopardy contestant or something. Corny romanticism for $800, Alex. But she hadn't seen the fun, happy-go-lucky side of Derek in what felt like eons. His absence had begun to hurt so much that seeing him again, even in a letter, soothed a lot of dark-and-twisty things inside her head. All of her friends hovered around her. Her family. Bittersweet amusement broke up the perpetual steps-away-from-panic lump in her throat, and she swallowed as her eyes watered yet again with stupid, hormone-y tears. Except they were good tears, this time. Not ones that made her want to take a pickaxe to whoever had invented pregnancy. She wiped her face.

She would play.

“Isn't the first cut thing from a song?” she said.

Lexie lit up at the suggestion. She looked like she wanted to start humming the freaking song, or at least whistle it, which would only cap this crappy day with more crap.

“He's talking about surgery,” Cristina said before Lexie could torture them all.

That didn't stop Meredith's brain from running away with the chorus. The first cut is the deeee— Stop. Crap, crap. Stop! Meredith blinked away the song before it could hook its claws into her brain enough to repeat and repeat and repeat like “It's A Small World After All”, only worse.

“But it's a poem,” Lexie said, oblivious to Meredith's internal battle. “He wouldn't be that literal.”

“He's a guy,” Alex said, his expression placid. “He could be that literal.”

Cristina shook her head. “First cut is the deepest?” she said. I still want you by my side. “He's a surgeon. That's so about surgery. I'd bet money.”

“You would think that,” Lexie said.

Meredith tried to think. First cut. Baby, I know. First cut is the deeee— STOP. She ground her molars. “His first surgery?”
Mark shook his head. “That was in Manhattan,” he said. “I don't think he wants you to fly three thousand miles to find—”

“What?” Meredith prodded. “To find what?”

Mark swallowed and shut his mouth. Meredith imagined him wielding a little stick, poking at them to keep them on the right path. Stay on the yellow brick road, or else! She narrowed her eyes and peered at him, but he didn't crumble under scrutiny. He returned her gaze, all knowing-eyed and annoying and unhelpful.

“He so knows something,” Lexie decided.

“Do not,” Mark replied.

“It's okay,” Lexie said. “It wouldn't be as fun if you spilled.”

Meredith wasn't quite sure she agreed, but she let the comment slide.

“What about your first solo surgery?” Alex suggested.

“Maybe,” Meredith said.

“The first surgery he did with you?” Lexie said.

“Yeah,” Alex said, nodding. “Yeah. That gymnastics chick, right?”

Meredith smiled, snapping her fingers. “Katie Bryce!” First cut is the deeeeeeeeeee
—

“Who's that?” said Mark.

“She had an aneurysm. First cut.” Is the deepest. “Literally my first shift. Derek held a contest. He rewarded the intern who could diagnose the problem. She...” Just to help me dry the tears I've cried. “That was OR five. Maybe there's something there?”

“Can't hurt to check,” Lexie said, her eyes gleaming with excitement. “I wonder what it is?”

“Maybe another craptastic poem,” Cristina said, her tone wry, as they began moving as a group down the hall.

Meredith frowned as they approached the operating room in question in a small cluster. The little white and red plaque by the door had been slid to cover the word “available” and instead showed the phrase “in use”. She didn't want to interrupt a surgery in progress based only on her and her peanut gallery’s wild guess about not only what the clue-poem meant, but that they were, in fact, supposed to be looking for something in the first place. She pushed herself onto her tiptoes and peered through the small glass window, trying to see what was going on inside the big room.

Dr. Bailey performed some sort of abdominal procedure, though Meredith couldn't tell the specifics with so many other bodies wearing blue scrubs surrounding the table, the patient buried in pile of sterile drapes, and the door being situated so far away from the table. Derek could have set something up before the surgical team had arrived.

What if, whatever he'd planned, required Meredith to be in the middle of the room? She couldn't wander into a procedure based on whimsy. That wasn't sterile or safe or... No. Derek would have looked at the OR board. Right? He wouldn't have planned this corny, romantic thing – whatever it
was — without making sure he wouldn't be foiled, which meant... whatever he wanted her to find, it had to be accessible.

If he wanted her to find something, that was.

She shook her head. The twisty, logical circles she ran in her head made her brain hurt. She backed up from the glass only to plow into Lexie, who thudded onto her heels from her tiptoes with a grunt and hopped backward two steps. Cristina rolled her eyes, and Alex snickered.

“Sorry!” Lexie blurted. “I was trying to see.”

Meredith ignored her half-sister and studied the door. Around the frame. Everywhere. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary.

“Should I go in?” she said. Lexie, Alex, and Cristina all shrugged in a row. Meredith bit her lip. “I shouldn't go in.”

Something compelled her to look at Mark. She gave him a pleading look, but he only shrugged, too, damn it. On the other hand, he didn't dissuade her, and that stupid, knowing twinkle had returned to his eyes. She kind of wanted to take his lab coat into her fists and shake him silly to see if some details fell out of his mouth.

“Oh, just go in,” Cristina said, her tone impatient.

Meredith sighed. “Fine.”

She covered her face with a sterile surgical mask from the dispensing bin outside, and she pushed through the door into the OR. She squinted as the bright lights of the operating room slammed into her pupils. A wave of cool air washed over her. Then the awful scent of bowel coiled around her body, and her stomach roiled in response. She swallowed, forcing down her gag reflex through sheer will as she glanced around. Frustration compounded everything. Of course she'd walk into a freaking bowel resection or something. And what was she even looking for?

Dr. Bailey looked up from her patient, her eyebrows raised expectantly. “Something I can help you with, Dr. Grey?”

Meredith swallowed. Vomiting in an OR where she wasn't even supposed to be present would be a perfect end to a perfect freaking day of perfect perfectness and stupid songs. Songs that were now thoroughly stuck in her head. *That's how I know, the first cut is the deepest...* Damn it. She tried not to sound sick or ready to hurl. “I don't know...” she managed before she clamped her jaws shut.

No barfing. No barfing. No barfing. Or singing.

“Then close the door,” Dr. Bailey said. “You're wrecking my sterile field.”

“Sorry,” Meredith said. Back to square one, but at least outside the door, out of the smell, she might be able to think.

“It's by your head,” Dr. Bailey said just as Meredith let the door go.

Meredith shoved it back open. “What?”

“The envelope,” Dr. Bailey said. “Turn your head.”

Dr. Bailey raised a gloved, bloody hand to point at the wall to Meredith's left, and Meredith
followed the motion with her gaze. Right by her freaking ear, a mere three inches away, a small piece of surgical tape precariously held another embossed envelope, identical to the first one Mark had given her, against the wall. Derek had labeled it “For Meredith” in messy, black ink. Meredith blinked at it for two seconds, nonplussed, before she grabbed it off the wall.

Realization sank in that she'd been successful. She'd found the thing Derek had wanted her to find. She smiled despite her quivering stomach and the stupid song that wouldn't shut up in her head. “Thanks, Dr. Bailey,” Meredith said.

Dr. Bailey shook her head, but her eyes crinkled with a hint mirth as she said, “You're all a bunch of lovesick fools, if you ask me.”

Because when it comes to being lucky, she's cursed...

Meredith let the door shut, and she breathed a sigh of relief, now immersed in safe-to-breathe air, and feeling rather pleased to boot.

“Well, what is it?” Cristina demanded.

Meredith leaned against the wall, shaking her head as she dropped the surgical mask from her face. Alex backed away, his expression apprehensive. She assumed that meant she looked pasty enough to be fighting the urge to hurl without having to warn them about getting out of spew distance. She closed her eyes and breathed in and out to give her stomach a moment to settle from the smelly disruption.

Nobody said a word.

She clutched the second cream-colored envelope while she rested her eyes. Her fingers ran along the raised flowers. The tape at the top stuck to her hand. Surgical tape. Not scotch tape. Not masking tape. Derek had used surgical tape to tape the freaking thing to the wall.

That was so Derek.

He kept rolls of it at home in his desk. He wrapped his freaking Christmas presents with it before he boxed them to ship to New York. She'd watched his wrapping ritual with a weird combination of fascination and disturbed horror before their first Post-it Christmas together.

The sound of wrapping paper being sliced is an unmistakable, unique noise, but she didn't recognize it when she heard it coming from behind their closed bedroom door. She hadn't grown up around it. Her family had been tiny. Her mother hadn't shopped for nieces and nephews and sisters and cousins and every other possible label on the family tree. Not like Derek, who had everything but a brother. And a father.

Meredith frowned, standing in the dim hallway as cold needles of rain cut the air outside. Her hand rested on the doorknob as the shearing sound repeated once and again. “Derek?” she said as curiosity overwhelmed her.

“No,” he said, his voice muffled through the door. “Don't come in.”

His vehemence made her blink. She jiggled the doorknob. It wouldn't turn. He'd actually locked it. What the hell?

“Don't,” he said. “One sec.”

The slicing paper sounds stopped. Something thumped. Shuffled. Moments passed. Then the lock
He opened the door, his eyes sparkling, hair disheveled. He had slivers and bits of colored paper stuck all over his blue t-shirt. And he looked... giddy.

“Okay, now it’s safe,” he said. He backed away from the door, and her jaw fell open.

A pile of wrapped presents, listing and taller than the bed, leaned against his nightstand. The blankets and pillows and top sheet had been torn off their bed and discarded in a rumpled heap by the rain-spattered window. Rolls and rolls of shiny wrapping paper, a big enough stack of colorful boxes to stock a small toy store, two rolls of white surgical tape, and a glinting set of pocket scalpels rested on top of their mattress. He’d turned their bed into a giant fire and sharps hazard.

“This is safe?” she said, incredulous.

He nodded. “Items unapproved for your viewing have been appropriately hidden.”

“What?”

“I hid your presents,” he clarified with a wink.

“Oh,” she said.

Derek climbed back onto the bed and took the top box off the giant stack on the bed. The cover of the box was made of a thick, clear plastic, like the kind on Anatomy Jane boxes, and inside, shackled with thick plastic clips like a prisoner, was a red... Muppet creature of some sort.

“Wait,” she said. “My presents?”

“Hmm,” he agreed absently, nodding. “The ones I bought for you.”

“What presents?” she said. “Presents as in plural?”

Derek eyeballed the box, ignoring her. The Muppet’s googly eyes stared back at him. He shifted his scrutiny to the pile of wrapping paper. He selected a roll covered with little kittens dressed as Santa Clauses and unfurled it so that a section three feet long flattened against the fitted sheet on the bed, plain side facing the ceiling.

“It is Christmas, you know,” was his eventual answer, for all that helped her make sense of the sparkly paper mayhem sprawled on the bed.

He placed the Muppet box on top of the wrapping paper and proceeded to shift it back and forth like he was measuring something. The paper crinkled. He wore the most intent frown she’d ever seen on him outside of surgery. No, scratch that. It was exactly like the frown he wore in surgery, at least the part that reached his eyes.

She imagined him clipping off an aneurysm. Right then. Except the object of his concentration was an oblong plastic box with a Muppet in it, not a human brain, and as far as she knew, Muppets didn’t get aneurysms.

She took a step into the room. The floor creaked.

“What on earth are you doing?” she said, trying to keep her tone neutral.

He looked up at her, his expression lit like a firecracker. “Wrapping!” he said cheerfully. As if that explained everything.
She raised her eyebrows. “With Santa kittens, surgical tape, and a scalpel?”

He nodded as she sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress dipped. She watched him deftly cut off the three foot piece of wrapping paper. He folded the paper with all the laser precision of a neurosurgeon, encasing the strange Muppet as though it wore a glove that fit perfectly, despite the box’s odd shape.

“Finger here, please,” he said.

She bit her lip and placed her index finger along the seam at the top to hold down the fold. She flinched as he unrolled the surgical tape with a loud zip. He chased the line of tape with his scalpel. He flicked his wrist, and the tape roll fell to the bed, leaving him with a sticky, curling strip. He taped the center seam on the wrapped Muppet box with a third of the strip, taped the seam by her finger with the second, then flipped the box and taped the bottom seam with the last piece.

The finished product was gorgeous. His wrapping job eclipsed stuff she’d seen done by professionals. You know. Not counting the surgical tape, which stuck out like a beater Buick in Bellevue.

“A,” he said as he looked up from his finished masterpiece. He held up his thumb. “Mary likes kittens.” His index finger went up. “B,” he said, glancing at his pile of tape, “surgical tape sticks better than scotch, and it’s way more durable.” His middle finger made three as his gaze shifted to his little pile of different-sized pocket scalpels. “C, those things are a godsend. They’re so much more maneuverable than scissors.”

She stared at him, bewildered. “If you say so,” she said as he put Mary's wrapped Muppet on top of the pretty stack by his nightstand, and pressed onward to the next box in the still ginormous stack on the bed. There were a lot of presents. Derek apparently took Christmas lessons from Izzie. Or vice versa. She swallowed. “Derek...”

“I don’t care,” he said.

“About what?”

He shrugged. “It’s Christmas. You’re getting presents. You can’t say no.”

“But I didn’t—”

He leaned across the bed and touched her hand before she could finish. Before she could tell him she hadn't thought about buying a present for him, let alone pluralizing it to presents. If it hadn't been for the fact that he’d set up a freaking tree in their living room, and the Christmas carols and wreaths and candles and Santa Clauses ringing bells at every street corner, she wouldn’t have known or cared that it was Christmas in the first place. Plus, they hadn't even been married a year, yet. What was the protocol for— His warm skin brushed hers, and his palm drifted to her cheek before she could finish the thought.

“I get that Christmas is my thing and not yours,” he said, his voice low. Murmuring. Understanding. He looked at her, the deep, endless blue of his eyes piercing her doubts. His navy t-shirt matched the hypnotizing shade of his gaze in the dim light. “Don’t worry about it.”

“But Derek,” she said.

He kissed her before she could protest any more.
A stupid, embarrassing lump formed in her throat. She'd bought him a blue bathrobe a few days later. She'd been in the department store shopping for herself, and she'd seen it on the rack. She'd imagined how it would bring out his eyes, just like the blue shirt he'd worn when he'd been wrapping stuff, and the idea to buy it had clicked into place.

She'd wrapped it badly that night with some of the leftover paper from his wrapping extravaganza. Only the Santa kittens roll hadn't been used up. She'd felt idiotic and dumb and all sorts of silly, wrapping a stupid present for him in stupid Santa kitten paper. Plus, a bathrobe didn't exactly scream, “I love you.” It said, “I had no idea what to get you and felt guilty because you got me unknown amounts of unknown stuff.” Or maybe it didn't. She didn't know. She wasn't a Christmas expert.

She'd handed him the Santa kitten box later that night. *It's progress, right?* she'd said

He hadn't said a word about the Santa kittens or the shoddy wrap job. In fact, she'd gotten the impression that Santa kittens were the last thing on his mind. His whole face had creased with happiness, and his eyes had gotten misty. *Yeah,* he'd said, his voice rough as he'd looked at it. *I love it.*

She'd frowned. *You haven't opened it.*

He'd shrugged and smiled wider. *I know. But I love you, and you gave it to me.*

She opened her eyes, and the present day bled back into her view.

Alex, Lexie, Cristina, and Mark all stared at her.

Meredith wiped her face with her hands, unable to stop herself from both blushing and smiling. That would be a good replacement thought if she ever started panicking again, she decided. Derek's smile when he'd figured out she'd gotten him something, after all. He wore that bathrobe all the time.

She shook her head, blinking away the sudden flash flood. God, she missed that Derek.

The envelope in her hand crinkled as she squeezed her fingers absently. She looked down with a small sigh. She slipped her finger underneath the glued lip, more gentle with it than she'd been with the first one. Another gliding ferryboat card rested inside. She slipped it out of the flowery envelope and flipped open the card.

He'd written another poem.

*If I could have loaned you a marker, It would have been red, For passion, and daring, and all things unsaid. But then your arms wrapped around me, and mine around you. All lines were forgotten, And we kissed, instead.*

“Wow,” Cristina said in the silence that followed when Meredith repeated the poem aloud for the group.

Meredith grinned faintly. She wiped her face. Her leaky eyes had begun to dry. She was such a freaking hormonal yo-yo of emotions right now, it was exhausting.

This clue, at least, she knew without provocation, in the space between one heartbeat and the next. Thump-thump. The memory slipped in like the tide, unstoppable, indomitable. He'd started talking about ferryboats while they'd been waiting for the elevator near oncology.
Again with the lame pickup lines. Nobody could live in Seattle for six weeks and not notice ferryboats. But she'd thought it cute, anyway, and her heart had sped up. Except... cute? No. Stop.

She'd tried to remain vehemently in the land of no as they'd stepped inside the elevator. The land that was all about not dating. No, no, no dating her boss. I'm your boss's boss, he'd said, as if that would help. But they'd been alone in the elevator, and he'd smelled so nice, and then she'd thought about when they'd had sex.

Drunk sex. Even drunk on copious scotch and clumsy, he'd been the best kisser on the planet. She'd tried to steer her brain away from thoughts like those. Tried!

So, this line, he'd purred as he'd turned around. Is it imaginary? Or do I need to get you a marker?

And then all she'd been able to think about was the way he'd purred his words while they'd been drunk and fooling around in the taxi on the way home from Joe's, and...

If all kisses ever kissed had been graded on a bell curve, people would hate this man, she decided as his lips trailed against her skin, because he would have wrecked it for everybody else. She might grade him a half-a-point off perfect, but only because he stopped to breathe now and then. He was a really. Good. Kisser. An undiscovered diamond in the rough.

She was glad she hadn't ignored him, though she wouldn't ever tell him that.

Shadows slipped over them as the taxi cab sliced the darkness. The leather seats creaked, muffled by the hum of the radio up front. The scent of liquor and sweat coiled in the hot air between them. She inhaled. He smelled musky. Masculine. Hers.

Hers? She stomped out the thought like an unwanted fire.

Tequila did things. Funny things. Like make her feel hot. And bubbly. And bright.

She blinked at the happy smear beyond her face.

The taxi driver in the front seat stared through the windshield, either oblivious to what was going on in the back seat, or... intentionally ignoring it. She suspected he might tell them to stop if kissing turned into something... else. For now, the driver stared, unblinking, at the dark road ahead, and he made no comment.

“You're not going to tell me, are you?” Good Kisser murmured as he pressed against her, his words stretched and fuzzy with inebriation.

She realized she had no idea what he'd asked. What he thought she wasn't telling him. “Where we're going?” she guessed. Her hands slid along his smooth red shirt. He felt good against her. Strong. Solid. “Didn't you hear me tell the driver the address?”

They'd stayed at the bar for hours, talking about nothing important, and it'd been... nice. He had a quality about him. He listened. With his eyes and the rest of his body as much as with his ears. When she'd spoken, he'd never looked away. Never once appeared distracted. Never interrupted. No matter how inane the subject matter. She wasn't used to that kind of devotion from anybody. Particularly not from a stranger.

He snickered. “I meant your name.”

“Does it matter?” she said.
“I told you mine.”

And she’d forgotten already. “Why is it important?”

He shrugged. “Because it’s your name,” he said.

A thought struck her, unbidden in the alcoholic haze. She frowned. Pulled away. Licked her lips. They tasted like him. Heady. She wanted to keep going. Bad, sexy thoughts wouldn’t stop tumbling in her head despite dangerous logic.

“You’ve never done this before,” she said, catching her breath. She didn’t make the words a question.

“I’ve had sex,” he replied with a haughty, bewildered laugh. “Trust me. I’m very good at sex.” Almost as though he were trying to convince himself. It was the oddest thing.

She blinked. Alarm bells rung in her head. “I don’t care about that,” she said. Almost snapped. “I mean this.” She gestured awkwardly between them. Her limbs felt loose and not quite cooperative. “Gone home with a girl you don’t know.”

His mouth opened. Closed. Good Kisser stared at her, his eyes hooded in the darkness. “Is that a problem?” he said instead of denying it.

The alarm bells became shrieking sirens.

“You get that this isn’t anything, right?” she said. Almost demanded. “I don’t want...”

The skin around his eyes twitched. As though the question offended him. But the upset was gone in a flicker. So fast, she thought she may have imagined it.

“I get it,” he said, his tone low. Quiet.

She blinked. “But...”

The leather seat moaned as he pressed against her, closing the gap once again. He pressed his lips against hers. “You want some fun, right?” he said. God, he had such a sexy voice.

“Mmm,” she moaned. “Yes.”

“Well, I’m very fun,” he told her. His hand slipped under her skirt, and she gasped when he touched her. “And I learn fast.”

She couldn’t find words as he cupped her lower body. She squirmed in the seat, trying not to do something that would clue in the driver and get them kicked to the curb. Good Kisser smirked. He looked good in shadow. His almost-black hair framed his pale face, and, in that moment, he seemed a lot less goofy than he had in the bar. More darkly handsome. Suave. Which was a ludicrous idea. Tequila did funny things to attractiveness. Funny things that made it easy to enjoy just about anybody who was willing. But, still...

Bad, bad, bad idea, said her brain. The smart part. But then he touched her again. Kissed her. And the drunken, hedonist part took over. Telling him no just because he didn’t have the one-night stand code-of-conduct memorized seemed a bit like turning down a winning lottery ticket because it didn’t quite understand the lottery. Who turned down winning lottery tickets, no matter how clueless the ticket was? Lotteries could be explained.

“Yes,” she moaned, the letter s stretching into a long hiss.

Nobody turned down winning lottery tickets. That's who.

“Thought so,” he replied happily.

The taxi came to a stop in front of her mother's dark house under the buzzing glare of a street light. He wasn't as drunk as she was. He helped her stumble out of the cab. He even paid the driver without hesitation. She crinkled her nose at the unexpected, unwanted chivalry, but... He bumped into her on the front walk. Almost fell. Okay, maybe he was a lot drunk, too.

There was definitely drunkenness.

He chuckled, and the rich, lovely sound made her insides tighten like screws. She imagined him making that sound in bed. Imagined him naked.

She laughed as unparalleled debauchery unfolded in her mind’s eye. “I have more liquor in the cabinet.”

“Scotch?” he said.

“Sure.” She took a deep, sloppy breath. The sidewalk kept moving. “I think.”

“You think?”

“It's not really my liquor cabinet.”

He was definitely drunk. Because he didn't even ask what that meant. She struggled to put the key into the lock, sealing her fate, and he followed her inside without question.

She swallowed before that memory took her to places too sexy for scavenger hunts when one was surrounded by friends. She'd broken so many rules. She never should have taken him home that night, but she had, and it'd been the start. The beginning of the end of her single life.

We'll talk later? he'd called after her as she'd fled from the oncology elevator.

Yes, damn it, she'd thought. Because she'd known right then she was done for and only buying time.

Even after everything that had happened in the last few months. Even after Addison, and Rose, and every other stupid thing. Derek Shepherd was a mistake she was glad she'd made. There was chemistry not even she could explain, but it worked.

They worked.

She loved him.

“This is the elevator,” Meredith said as she folded the card, slipped it back into the envelope, and put it into her breast pocket with the first card, whose envelope she'd mangled.

Cristina's incredulous expression was almost comical. “If I could have loaned you a marker?”

“I tried to draw a line,” Meredith explained. “Him, boss. Me, not boss. No kissing across the line.”
Cristina frowned. “A literal line.”

“Yes,” Meredith nodded. She couldn’t stop the grin that overwhelmed her. “He offered me a marker.”

“To draw your line.”

“Yep.”

“This is reaching new levels of corn,” Cristina said. “Even for him.”

Meredith shrugged. “It’s not really a new level.”

“Really, really not new,” Mark added, his tone wry.

Cristina scowled. “Why did you marry him again?”

“I think it’s sweet,” Lexie said.

Alex snorted. “You would.”

Lexie glared. “You should take notes.”

“With the marker?” Alex said with a smirk.

Lexie jabbed Alex in the shoulder. He rubbed his white lab coat absently as they moved down the hall, toward the oncology elevator, which was in another wing of the hospital. The walk was a relatively long one. Meredith couldn’t help but notice looks from people as she walked. Lots of looks. Lots of smiles. Why? The scrutiny was a bit unnerving, to say the least.

When they reached the elevator, Meredith glanced around the door frame and at the button panel that would summon the car. Nothing. Disappointment pinged.

“Maybe it’s inside,” Mark said.

Cristina nodded. “Or on another floor.”

Alex stepped forward and jabbed the elevator button with his index finger. They waited. When the doors pulled apart, Nurse Debbie, the gossip kingpin of the entire hospital stood there, poring over a chart. She’d tucked her short, brown hair behind her ears and seemed lost in thought. She looked up, and for a moment, her expression remained blank. Then she must have registered who she was looking at, because her gaze shifted to Meredith, the tiny center of the human cluster outside the elevator doors, and Debbie’s lips curled into a secretive, sly smile. She didn’t say a word, only nodded, but her eyes gleamed as the crowd of them split apart to let her through.

She disappeared around the corner, shoes squeaking on the pristine floor tiles, only to reappear within moments, as if she’d changed her mind. “I have $50 down on you finding Dr. Shepherd in two hours or less,” she said. “Don’t disappoint me.”

“Does the whole freaking hospital know about this game thing?” Meredith said, but Nurse Debbie only shrugged, grinned, and walked away. Meredith turned to Mark with an interrogating glare. “Did Derek recruit the entire hospital to make this run smoothly?” Not that she minded. Not really. Not...

“Wait,” Meredith said as she processed Nurse Debbie’s words. “Finding Derek? Is Derek hiding somewhere?”
“I wouldn't exactly call it hiding,” Mark said in that irritating, I-know-something tone of his.

“Is that what this is?” Meredith said. “A bad poetry scavenger hunt to find Derek?”

Cristina shook her head. “He wouldn't do something so egotistical,” she said in perfect deadpan.

“Shut up,” Meredith said. She glared at Mark. “Well?”

Mark only gave her a Gallic shrug. “I'm just the messenger,” he said. “Don't shoot me.”

Lexie pointed at the back wall of the elevator. “Maybe, he didn't get the whole hospital involved.” The doors trundled shut, but she leaped forward to block them from closing. They split apart once more. “There are clues all over the place. I'm sure people have seen the envelopes. This is so romantic!”

“Oh, look, our broken record is skipping,” Cristina said, rolling her eyes.

Lexie frowned.

Meredith marched across the elevator's metal threshold. She grabbed the envelope hanging on the back wall from a single strip of surgical tape and pulled it down. She opened the envelope gently and pulled out ferryboat card number three.

Another poem.

She burst into a single, paralyzing explosion of laughter before she could read it aloud to the group. Before she could think about reading it aloud to the group. Everybody piled into the elevator. Nobody pressed a button. The doors slid shut, but the elevator car didn't go anywhere.

*It's not the chase,* Derek had said.

“What's it say?” Alex said.

Meredith opened her mouth, but nothing came out. “I...” She glanced at the letter. “He...” Words didn't want to form. She tried again, only to let loose a light chuff of air that wasn't really a syllable and wasn't really a laugh, more a snort of disbelief. Only somebody like Derek could come up with a rhyme like this. Somebody horny and five. She guessed this would be the laughter at his expense part of the equation he'd laid out for her in the first note.

She smiled. Really smiled. Derek being corny and romantic and horny and five... Something burbled inside at the thought. Something nice. Something warm. The picture of him that way stretched, a perfect, soothing moment where nothing bad intruded.

She loved, and life, in that moment, was unadulterated simplicity. The last few months, she hadn't had flash pan thoughts like that as much. She relished the one she had, now. Even though it meant grinning like a freaking fool.

This was one of the wonderful bits of being in love. Smiling just because she'd thought of him happy. Happiness, she decided, was the best kind of infectious disease.

Cristina grabbed the note out of Meredith's hands. Her eyes darted back and forth as she read the card. “Oh, for crap's sake. Seriously? He said that? With words?”

“Said what!” Lexie said.

Lexie pushed between Cristina and Alex to see, but didn't have the chance before Mark, of all
people, forced his way into the people cluster and grabbed the note. Lexie clawed at it, but he was way too strong for her, and way too tall. He had the note in moments, held high above her head. His face dissolved into a comical expression as he read the card. Lexie tried to grab it once more, but he smirked and kept it out of her reach as though he were playing keep away.

Mark cleared his throat as Lexie backed him into the corner of the elevator. She gave up. He raised a fist as though he were reciting Shakespeare or something, maybe Hamlet's ode to his father's skull. “Your fists, I described as tiny, ineffectual,” he said, barely able to keep the laughter out of his deep tone. “And I said that this thing we have is more than just sexual.” His face turned bright red, and he shook his head. “Oh, man. That's...”

“The intern locker room,” Meredith said. She turned to Alex. “After I slammed you into the lockers.”

Alex looked at her blankly for a moment, which almost made her want to laugh all over again. Alex had clearly had his share of locker slams for bad behavior. As much as she loved him, that didn't surprise her. At all.


Meredith blinked. “Really?”

Alex's ponderous expression shifted into a haughty smirk. “No,” he said. “But your fists didn't seem that ineffectual at the time.”

“Definitely tiny, though,” Mark interjected. He handed Meredith the card.

“How would you know?” Meredith said. “You weren't there.”

He shrugged. “Watched you in surgery plenty of times.”

Meredith put the card into her pocket with the other two. She squeezed her fist once, staring at her slender knuckles and fingers. The nail on her index finger had broken, and her skin was dry from so much repeated abuse via soap, from scrubbing in for surgeries.

*I'm still not going out with you,* she'd said. For all the good that had done.

Derek had smirked at her in return, his expression infuriatingly knowing. *You say that, now.*

The locker room was on the next floor. Another warm smile crossed her face as she slid forward and pressed the button for the second floor. This was sort of fun. Not that she'd ever admit it aloud.

The elevator lifted them up, and they stepped out into the hallway as a group. This late on a Sunday evening, the hallways had a skeletal crew wandering through them. A few nurses. Custodial staff. The doctors unlucky enough to be on call. Overall, they didn't pass many people. The intern locker room was empty and silent, and they found the next envelope taped with surgical tape to the locker where she'd shoved Alex years ago. She pulled the note off the locker and read the next poem to herself.

The words Derek had written were an unexpected sucker punch.

*Pick me, choose me, A moment I'll always regret, Because I knew in my heart, Though not in my head, That I loved you then, And I should have said yes.*
She blinked, and she read it again. Her heart squeezed, and she swallowed.

*Pick me,* she'd begged.

*Choose me.*

*Love me.*

She'd begged.

The begging had sucked to begin with, but the lack of reciprocation he'd demonstrated when she'd confessed that she loved him... That had been the worst sort of humiliation. She'd loved him in an end-of-the-road sort of way, and she'd told him, and all he'd done was stare at her. She'd had to flee. And then he'd picked Addison and brushed Meredith aside like she'd meant nothing. In the space of a single night, the act of breathing had become a labor that had felt like knives had been slipping underneath her ribs.

“Well?” Alex said.

Meredith blinked. The sound of the paper envelope crinkling skipped off the walls, echoing in the quiet. She realized the note was now in Cristina's lithe hands. She couldn't even remember handing it to her. Couldn't remember Cristina grabbing it. Cristina rolled her eyes as she read.

“Shut up,” Meredith snapped before Cristina could say a word. “I really loved him. It makes you do stupid, stupid things. I acknowledge the stupidity.”

“Love, right?” Lexie said, her tone gentle. “Not loved?”

“Present tense,” Meredith said. She sighed. “Yes.” A lump formed in her throat as her mind's eye moved her body into the scrub room. He stood in front of her, not speaking. “In a big, share the last piece of cheesecake, pretend to like his taste in music, hold a radio over my head way.”

“Wait, you said *that,* too?” Cristina said as she looked up from the card. Alex and Lexie moved closer to read over her shoulders. “About the cheesecake and the radio? You never told me that.”

“He picked her, even after I said it,” Meredith said. She wiped her eyes. The emotional yo-yo seemed to have decided to swing back toward catastrophic, *stupid* crying. “I was practically begging. It was one of the most humiliating experiences of my life.”

Mark cleared his throat awkwardly and looked at the floor.

“Why's he bringing this up, now?” Lexie said, frowning. “This isn't romantic.”

“I knew he thought he'd picked wrong,” Meredith said. Her voice warbled, and she wanted to strangle herself for the amount of pathetic emotionalism she was showing tonight.

She and Derek didn't talk about the Addison stuff very often. He'd apologized for choosing wrong. And for lying by omission. And for any number of other things. He'd apologized *profusely.* But he'd never once said he'd wanted to pick her the first time around. Only that he'd regretted not picking her in hindsight. It was a subtle distinction that she'd danced around for years. She knew without any doubts that he loved her, now. But, in his own words, she'd known he'd been a little late.

“So, why rub in the moment?” Lexie said. “Isn't this game supposed to be fun?”
“He's not rubbing it in,” Meredith said, her voice soft as she worked out the subtle math. She sounded wrecked. “You don't get it.”

She'd always preferred to allow that horrible moment to sit in the denial section of her brain. Bringing the memory back to the active-consideration section made her hurt like the wound had gone septic in the time she'd left it sitting alone in the corner. Except... Now, she had antibiotics.

He'd given her that in the space of six silly lines that only sort of rhymed.

“I'm confused,” said Alex.

Lexie stomped her foot. “He's wrecking this! I thought it wasn't shark-y!” Her words ricocheted off the barren walls, echoing shrilly once before bouncing into silence.

“I get it,” Mark said in the tense lull that followed.

Lexie looked at him incredulously. “You do?”

Mark shrugged. “He'll break his own back to follow the rules,” he said. “He always has.”

“What does this have to do with the rules?” Lexie demanded.

Mark sighed. “Addison showed up and waved a wedding ring and divorce papers at him.”

“He wanted to pick me,” Meredith said. It was so weird to say. So weird to... She thought back to that moment. The pick me, choose me one. Her entire memory realigned. Her lip quivered as she watched her past. I love you, she'd said. She'd surprised the hell out of him, cornered him in a scrub room. He'd already been a conflicted mess. Her timing couldn't have been worse. His gaze had said, oh, god, me, too, not, gack, I'm in sticky wickets! like she'd thought before. He hadn't been able to verbalize the fact that he'd felt love, but he'd felt it. I know I'm a little late in telling you that, he'd said many torturous months later. Late telling her. Not late feeling it. “It wasn't hindsight that changed his mind about it,” she said.

The old wound stopped burning.

Six silly lines.

Lexie frowned. “Still...”

“He's never told me he wanted to pick me,” Meredith said. “We don't really talk about it.”

“I'm sorry,” Derek said. He stared across the small, round table at her, absently running his index finger around the lip of his empty scotch glass. His only glass. He'd never gotten a refill. She'd lost count of how many shots she'd gone through. Pool balls cracked in the background over the bustling murmur of inebriated voices. His gaze was dark and deep in the dim light.

She blinked, trying to remember the conversation track that had gotten them here. Tequila made her brain fuzzy like a peach. “Sorry for what?” she said.

“Not signing the papers,” he said. “I'm sorry, Meredith.”

She clenched her fingers. “I thought we were starting fresh,” she said.

“We are, I just... I'm sorry. I chose wrong.”

“You said that before. About choosing wrong.”
“I know, I…” He blinked. “I just wanted to…” A haunted look crossed his face, but he buried it with a soft smile. “I feel like I’m waking up after a long bout of flu.”

“Being with me is like having the flu?” she said, incredulous.

He shook his head vehemently. “No. Being without you. I just… I’m so tired, Mere. This last year has… I’m glad you’re here.”

“Oh.”

“I’m glad I’m here,” he added. She barely heard him over the pulse of life at the bar.

She kicked back her newest shot of tequila. Number five-hundred fifty-two. Maybe. She might be exaggerating. The room swam. She raised her hand, signaling for another shot. The passing waitress nodded.

“I don’t think we should have sex,” Meredith said as she returned to looking at him.

He blinked, looking befuddled. But, to his credit, he didn’t protest. “Um…” He frowned. “Okay.”

“If we’re starting fresh, we should do it like normal people.”

He leaned forward in his chair. The space between them closed to inches. “And how do normal people do it?” He made the words “do it” sound incredibly dirty. He always did that. Made her think bad, naughty, hedonist thoughts. She licked her lips and body-slammed the sexy thought to the ground in her head.

“They have dates and get to know each other first,” she said. “Don’t they?”

“But we’ve dated already,” he said.

“That was before. And I still don’t know you like you said I should. We only started over like an hour ago. An hour of discussion is not knowing you.”

He grinned. “You might want to stop drinking, then.”

“I can know you when I’m drunk!” she insisted.

“Yes,” he said. He leaned closer, and inches became less. He picked up her hand. Drew it to his lips. Kissed it. His lips felt soft against her skin. “But we have a bad track record with sex and alcohol.”

“Oh,” she said. She pulled her hand away. “Good point.”

He tilted his head. Stared at her, unblinking. Forever. His whole expression softened with adoration. “I love you,” he said. He smiled over the words as though the mere act of saying them made him giddy. Thrilled. As though, now that he’d said them once, the floodgates had opened, and the newness hadn’t yet worn off, resulting in countless repetition.

She bit her lip. A icy flicker of fear carved a space between her ribs like a sword. “That’s definitely not starting fresh.”


The cold got colder. “You’re breaking the rules.”
“We have rules already? We’ve been a couple for fifty-three minutes.”

She ignored him as she wavered in her chair. The waitress approached with a full shot glass, as requested, and set it down in front of Meredith on the table. Meredith stared at it, trying to ignore how the room had gotten all spinny and fun, and how freaking delectable he looked, and failing dismally. Derek was right. This crap would totally make her have sex. She picked up the glass and pushed it across the table. Toward Derek.

He smirked. “What, you want me drunk, too? I figured I was the designated driver.”

“In addition to making me have sex, tequila’s been known for its truth-serum properties,” she explained. “And I’m interrogating you.”

“But I hate tequila,” he said.

She narrowed her eyes. “But I’m interrogating you.”

He clutched his empty scotch glass. “Meredith,” he said, the word soft, and just the sound of it made her relax more than the alcohol gushing through her bloodstream had.

She sighed noisily. “I like it when you say that.” Which was making it hard to think. Or be smart.

He raised his eyebrows. “Meredith?”

She pointed loosely at the shot glass. “You don’t have any more secret wives, do you?”

The mirth bled from his expression.

“I’m interrogating you,” she repeated. She blinked. Everything felt cold inside, which was wrong. Alcohol should make her feel hot. “I’m not having sex with you until you tell me everything. I can’t...” She swallowed. “Don’t you dare tell me what I’ve earned and what I haven't, this time. If you really mean it when you say you’re sorry.”

He stared at her for a long, interminable moment, his expression unreadable. Or, maybe, readable but too subtle for her to figure out while her head was swimming and her thoughts were slow and plodding.

“And if you’re not sorry,” she said, babbling, unable to stop herself. Her eyes watered. “If you’re not sorry, I want you to leave, now. And we won’t start. Fresh or otherwise. I can't do it again. You broke me, you know. I’m a broke... broke.... broken.” The words tangled on her tongue.

He looked appalled, or... Like she’d taken her tiny, ineffectual fist, equipped herself with a shiny set of brass knuckles, and slammed him in the gut with it. He didn’t say a word. For a long moment, she couldn’t breathe. And then her stomach started twisting. He was waffling, she decided. God, she didn’t want to do this again. Any of it. The waffling or the secret wife or anything. And how did he always make her feel like the villain whenever he’d done something horrible? It was like his entire defense relied on making the aggressor feel like she’d kicked a puppy. She swallowed.

“I’m kinda drunk,” she confessed.

He nodded. “You are,” he said. He looked away from her, down at the shot glass with her tequila, a regretful expression on his face. “Truth serum,” he said, resigned.

Then he wrapped his fingers around the glass. His chair squawked as he pulled closer to her, until
they weren't across from each other anymore, and he didn't have to lean to be close to her. They were next to each other. Inside each other's space. Their arms touched. He slammed back the contents of the glass in one gulp and gestured to the waitress for another as he finished his grimace.

When he returned his gaze to her, she felt naked. Not lusty naked, just... He peeled away all her layers. “I really meant it, Meredith,” he said. “I chose wrong, and I love you, and I'm sorry.”

She swallowed against the lump in her throat. Fear burbled. She'd bathed herself in ice. “Let's not talk about that anymore, then.”

“Okay,” he said softly. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Go back to the part about Columbia,” she said. That was safer.

“What about it?”

“You got your medical degree there. And your bachelor's,” she said. “In biochemistry.”

He nodded.

“Then why do you wear Bowdoin shirts so often?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I went there my Freshman year. I transferred out after.”

“Why?”

His expression shifted briefly to something distant. “To be closer to home,” he said.

She was drunk. She missed the relevance of his odd tone of voice. She swallowed. “I went to Dartmouth.”

His smile returned. “I guessed that.”

“Really?”

“Your shirt. Remember?”

“Oh,” she said. Stupid alcohol. “Right.”

The waitress arrived with another full shot glass. He took the glass and tipped it back immediately. He grimaced and blinked, eyes watering as he set the empty glass down on the table next to the others as though it were a statement. He gestured at the waitress for another. When he looked at Meredith, his stare had that thousand-mile quality that told her he and sobriety were already having a minor tiff.

“What else do you want to know?” he said.

“I'd still say this failed on the scale of one to romance,” Alex said.

“Still, it's... nice to know. It's just...” Meredith said, her voice trailing away. The whole humiliating lot of it didn't feel nearly so humiliating, now, knowing he'd reciprocated. “It's nice to know.”

Her fingers clenched. She had no idea what had spurred this. Any of this.

He'd lobbed so many empty apologies at her the last few months that she'd gotten used to hating
the words, “I'm sorry.” He said them over and over and over again, and he clearly hated what he did and did feel sorry about it, but then he kept repeating the same behavior over and over. Snapping at her when his temper got loose from his precarious hold on it. Taking the blame for things that weren't his fault. Acting moody and dour and hard to live with. This poem, those six, cute-ish lines, felt more real than anything he'd uttered recently, even without a literal apology contained within them. These words meant more. They redefined an entire moment in her life, a moment she'd despised.

How had he even known that moment needed to be fixed in her head?

Knowing that would require an enormous amount of personal reflection, particularly so many years after the fact. Wouldn't it? Except sick Derek didn't reflect. He wallowed. He wallowed and moped and hid away from everything bad while he played his victim cards left and right.

I don't tell you enough how much you mean to me, he'd said, a little more than a week ago.

Was this more of that?

I'm a freak, she'd said.

I'm sorry I ever helped you think that.

Maybe, that apology hadn't been empty, either. And this game was all about Derek driving home a point. The point that he loved her and found her desirable.

He'd planned this out meticulously. He'd dragged the whole hospital into it. He clearly wanted her to get the message. So, he repeated it. Over and over again as he moved through their life together from ORs, to elevators, to locker rooms, to scrub rooms, and who knew where else?

Her hands shook as she brushed her face with her palms. Everybody was staring at her, doubtful, horrified expressions plastered on their faces, like they expected her to panic, or sob. Or barf. Or all of the above.

“Shut up,” Meredith said when she realized they were still dwelling on her horrible begging. “Just shut up.”

“We didn't say anything,” Cristina said.

“You're thinking it,” Meredith said, blinking with wet eyes. She grabbed the card from Cristina, jerking it out of Cristina's grip, not that Meredith had to try very hard, but the violence of the maneuver felt good. She stuffed the card with the others in her breast pocket. “It was humiliating, and I know I was pathetic, and shut up. You don't get it. None of you do.”

Tonight is about you, he'd said in the first letter.

“You really want to know what I'm thinking?” Cristina said.

Meredith rubbed her brow tiredly. “Not really.”

Cristina ignored her. “At least you got through the crap,” she said.

Meredith let loose an acerbic chuckle. “He got shot. He has PTSD. He's an addict. You don't call what's going on right now crap?”

“It's external crap,” Cristina said.
Meredith wiped her face. “I really do love him.”

Cristina nodded. “And he loves you,” she said. “And there's no more crap. Internally.”

“It sounds like you're describing an enema,” Alex said with a smirk.

Meredith ignored him. “I thought you were mad at him,” she said to Cristina.

“For making you say whiny drivel with no self-respect?” Cristina said. She shrugged. “Yes.”

“He didn't make me say it,” Meredith countered. “He never made me do or say anything.”

Cristina only shrugged again.

“Owen hurt you,” Meredith said. “You didn't have a problem forgiving that.”

“I didn't say anything about forgiveness,” Cristina said.

Hope burgeoned. “Or lack thereof?”

“He's a bit like a fungus,” Cristina admitted as though it pained her to say the words.

Meredith raised her eyebrows. “Owen?”

“Derek,” Cristina said.

“So, instead of an enema, he's mold,” Alex interjected.

Cristina shifted from foot to foot, her expression irritated, though, Meredith couldn't tell the direction of the irritation. At Alex, for his comments, or at Meredith, for making Cristina talk... mushy. “Look,” Cristina said. Or snapped. Sort of. “He grows on you. Okay? That's all.” She made a face like she'd sniffed something horrible.

Meredith stared at Cristina for a long stretch of moments. There was no way this couldn't all be connected. Derek's sudden shift in behavior. Cristina's sudden... support. Not blinding support, but, with Cristina, just having her liken Derek to mold was pretty freaking supportive.

“Really, what did you do to him last weekend?” Meredith said.

“I didn't do anything to him.”

“You did something,” Meredith countered. “Something that spurred this whole sincere mea culpa, flowers-and-hearts game thing.”

“I said it would be a cone of silence,” Cristina replied.

“Oh,” Meredith said. She sighed, glum. She couldn't counter that. She'd withheld novels of information from Cristina the last few months on Derek's behalf. Though, that stung, a little. Knowing there was something Derek didn't feel like he could tell her, even after everything. “That's fair, I guess.”

Cristina raised her eyebrows. “With them, Mere.” She glanced pointedly from Lexie to Alex to Mark, reminding Meredith about their rapt audience.

“Oh,” Meredith said, swallowing. “Later?”
Cristina nodded slightly. “If he doesn’t tell you tonight.” Her lip twitched as though she were fighting not to snicker. “He seems to be in a spilling mood.”

“I guess we’re not part of the dark-and-twisty club,” Lexie said.

Cristina glared at her. “Look, he needed a bit of a push.”

“And you pushed him,” Meredith said.

The last time she’d really pushed him, he’d had a panic attack on the catwalk, and he’d stoned himself on his Percocet, and she’d had to leave work early to drive him home. He’d barely been coherent.

Stupid. She’d been stupid to let that slide. She’d chalked the fact that he’d taken so many pills up to him hurting himself when he’d fallen by the railing.

She’d had to help him get into the car, and even through the numbing haze of drugs in his body, she’d watched an expression of pain slice across his face. Breakthrough pain. Bad pain. He’d paled to the color of flour and cried out. Just from trying to get into the car. She’d pushed him to go to the hospital before he was ready, and that had been the result. Him stoned and still in horrible pain.

She clenched her fists. She had to stop doing that. Had to stop pulling up moments where she could have intervened sooner, or at least not contributed to the problem, if she’d only been less stupid.

“That could have been a disaster,” Meredith said. “Pushing him.”

“It wasn’t,” Cristina said simply.

“And now he’s playing romantic scavenger hunt with extremely bad poetry,” Meredith said.

Cristina nodded. “He is.”

“Did you know anything about this?” Meredith said.

Cristina shook her head. “Really didn’t.”


Cristina bristled. “I do not.”

“He is sweet,” Lexie said.

“And hypocritical,” Cristina said.

“And considerate,” Lexie countered.

“And egotistical,” Cristina replied.

“And gregarious,” Lexie said.

“And vengeful!” Cristina said.

“Well, so are you!” Lexie said, snickering.

“I’m...” Cristina blinked. Swallowed. “Not hypocritical.”

Alex laughed.
“Points for Little Grey,” Mark observed.

Meredith shook her head. “Could we possibly move on? Please?” She left the locker room, forcing them to follow her request or get left behind.

“To where?” Lexie said.

“The scrub room,” Meredith said.

Cristina scowled. “You said the cheesecake stuff in the scrub room?”

Meredith sighed as they churned through the empty hallways. “Just shut up. All of you. Derek is a bouquet of stupid flaws, and he screws up a lot. I get it. I got it a long time ago. That doesn't mean I want him any less. Sometimes, you just love. Okay? You'd shut up if you understood it.”

They crawled out of the idling taxi cab in front of her mother's house, into the nippy, wet air. The taxi drove away after Derek sloppily tossed a fifty dollar bill at the driver. That was like a 200% tip, but Derek didn't seem to care or notice that the driver had pocketed the bill without offering change.

“This situation seems... fam... familiar, somehow,” Derek slurred, his tone mirthful.

Meredith stumbled, but he caught her. She pressed against his hard body. She felt hot with alcohol, but freezing with icky fear. And dizzy. And his soft, gray fleecy coat felt so nice against her cheek. He smelled nice, and she wanted...

She leaned on her tiptoes and kissed him in the flickering light. The streetlamp overhead buzzed. A deep, lilting groan coat in his throat as she explored him. The peat taste of his scotch and the remnant burn of tequila wafted in her mouth. No, she told herself. This was bad, and she was very, very drunk.

He was the one who pushed her away. “I thought you said no se... sex.”

“Right,” she said. “I knew that. Cuz I'm broken, and we're starting fresh. Or... whatever.”

“Hmm,” he agreed.

They'd talked at Joe's for three hours, and she'd drunk more shots than she could count. She wasn't sure she'd spent the time asking the right questions. Wasn't sure about anything. She'd started on the tequila again when she grilled him about Addison. She'd needed it like anesthetic to hear why and how and where and when everything had fallen apart for them. She'd figured having a forensic breakdown of the process, both before and after his move to Seattle, might be handy in the future, might prevent further secrets from popping out of the woodwork. He'd talked about his former marriage baldly, and she'd listened as he'd described a loving couple dissolve over the years into something loveless, dejected, and hurting.

They zigged and zagged toward the front door. She searched for her keys. If she hadn't been drunk to the point of muscle retardation, she thought her hands might be shaking. Why had she taken him home again? He hadn't held the taxi for himself, she realized. Only bad things could come from this. She wasn't ready to let him in again. Not yet.

When she found her keys, she opened the door, and they stepped inside the quiet house. George and Izzie were either sleeping or out or... She lost her train of thought.

“May I stay?” Derek said.
“Why?” she said, the word a harsh knife. Sudden fear made her shiver.

“I know it's not fresh,” he said. He wavered on his feet. “But I love... love you, and I'm ti...” He swallowed, as though the word had caught on his tongue. “Tired, and I just want to be here tonight. No sss... sex. Promise.”

He gave her a stupid, puppy dog look that made it hard to say no, but she couldn't say yes, either, not when he waved scary words like that at her.

She swallowed.

He stared at her for a long moment. He seemed spacey. And having trouble connecting glacially moving thoughts. He shook his head. “Never mind. I'll call... another ca... cab.”

Her body stiffened as the thought of him leaving seemed almost as bad as him staying. “Why never mind?” she demanded.

“Because I...” He looked around at her dark foyer as though it were new and strange to him. Took a stumbling step forward. Placed a hand against the wall to steady himself. “Well, do you want me here?”

“Yes,” she said. That was an unloaded question she could answer. She wanted him. She just couldn't get past that point in the equation to anything of substance, yet. Wanting him didn't mean sex or relationships or serious, scary stuff.

He stilled. “Okay.”

“No sex.”

He nodded. “No sex.”

She glanced down the hallway, and then back to him. “Stairs are complicat... cate... cated.”

“Hmm,” he said with another loose nod. “They are.”

She shucked off her coat and shoes and purse in the dark foyer and let them all fall to the ground in a heap by the welcome mat. He frowned at the messy pile. He looked like he wanted to pick up the coat and hang it in the closet. She snorted and left him behind to figure out how to do that while he was too drunk to walk straight, let alone bend down without falling over. She shuffled into the living room and collapsed onto the couch. She leaned her head backward to stare blankly at the ceiling.

What the hell was she doing, having him stay?

Minutes or hours later, he found her. He sank onto the cushions beside her. “This defin... definitely seems familiar.”

She flopped her head to the right to stare at him.

He gave her a hopeful grin. “At least there's no toilet... toilet brush,” he said, stumbling on the words. “On your man. Mantle.”

She laughed. She couldn't help it. “What are you talking about?”

“When you first moved in,” he said. He pointed sloppily at the mantle. “It was sit... sitting right there.”
She gazed at the fireplace and the mantle over top, trying to remember anything beyond the sight of him buttoning up his red shirt. She couldn't picture the mantle behind him, but she remembered him calling the house odd. A toilet brush on the mantle would most certainly be... odd. She smiled stupidly as she tried to picture it. Tried to picture him trying to ignore it.

“Seriously? A toilet brush?” she said.

He shook his head. “Why would I lie about a toilet... brush?”

Why would I lie? The words hit her like a bath of ice water, unexpected, freezing. “You've lied before,” she said, the words bald and cold and hurtful, freshly ejected from a still open wound.

For a moment, he stared at her like she'd sucker-punched him again, and she felt even worse. She felt worse, damn it, for telling him he lied. But he was. He was a lying liar who lied, and she... He’d broken her. Her trust. Her idea of true love. Everything. It was all broke, and coming back from that would take a while.

“You still don't... believe me?” he said, slivers of hurt cutting his gaze.

“I do,” she said. “I mean I don't. I mean...” She wiped her face sloppily. Her eyes watered. She couldn't muster much more than cracking syllables as she added, near tears, “I really, really want to, but...”

You broke me. She left those words unspoken. She blinked in the silence, heady exhaustion pulling at her. He didn't retort. About the lying. Didn't offer hollow excuses.

“Thank you for letting me... st... stay,” was all he said in a deep, low murmur that made it hard not to relax. Hard to remember why she was so twisted up inside.

She watched him through her eyelashes. He'd taken off the gray fleece thing, leaving only the open blue button-down and the black t-shirt underneath. His two best colors. He did seem pale. Tired. He stared back at her, his expression somewhat glassy. Anesthetized by alcohol, her heart didn't patter at his closeness, but something else coiled tightly in the pit of her stomach. Need. Need for...

“No sex,” she said again.

He nodded. “I promise.”

She awkwardly scooted closer, across the sofa cushions. He watched her, quiet, unblinking, his stare dusky with alcoholic haze. Their hips touched. He didn't move, as if he didn't want to spook her. He felt warm against her. Warm and solid and soft all at once. Safe. The denim of her jeans whispered in the silence as she brushed against the cushions and pushed closer still, melding against him.

She just wanted him.

She snuggled against his body with a needy sigh. Clutched his shirt between her fingers. Breathed him in. The scent of tequila and male wafted against the back of her throat. Without a word, he pressed his face against her hair. Wrapped his arms around her. Held her as tightly as he could with misbehaving, drunken muscles.

Him.

Like she wanted. The him that she could manage right now.
She fell asleep in moments, wrapped in the familiar scent of his body and listening to the soft sound of his slow, even breathing. She imagined he did the same with her.

Lexie sighed, her expression peaceful. “I miss that.”

“Miss what?” Alex said with a frown.

Lexie glared at him.

“I do,” Cristina said.

Meredith glanced at her. “Do what?”

Cristina shrugged. “Understand it. Loving idiot mold.”

“But—”

“I don’t intervene on stuff I don’t get,” Cristina said.

“Oh,” Meredith replied.

They reached the dark scrub room. Meredith pushed through the door. She glanced through the glass into the empty operating room beyond. This was the same OR that Cristina and April and Meredith had wheeled Derek when he’d been shot. The same OR where Gary Clark had pointed a gun at Cristina while she’d struggled to save Derek’s life. The same OR where she’d watched Derek, for thirty seconds, be dead. So much had happened here. She watched the ghost of Derek Shepherd scrub his wrists and palms and knuckles under the water in the sink.

Pick me, she’d said as she’d shoved the door closed behind her, plunging them into privacy.

Choose me.

Love me.

She watched the ghost of Derek Shepherd say it, too, with his eyes. She felt almost numb with the relief of it. A horrible moment in her life expunged. Replaced by something better.

She swallowed against the lump that had solidified in her throat. He'd taped the note onto the lip of the sink. “For Meredith,” it said in messy black ink. Just like the others. The soft patter of water dripped from the faucet, perhaps due to a surgeon's or a nurse's hasty exit. She turned off the water, and then she grabbed the letter. Opened it. Read it.

“You know what says thank you like nothing else?” she told her peanut gallery as she read. Her family. “I'll give you a hint. When you say please, I am helpless, and in this game: You win.”

You know what says thank you like nothing else? Derek had said. Sex, he hadn't said, but he'd mouthed it, cutting off the word with his teeth in a way that had seemed both vaguely and blatantly dirty all at once. He'd been kidding. Mostly. And she'd found it amusing. Mostly. And horribly distracting.

“This was the MRI room,” Meredith said as she stared at the note.

“What?” Alex said. “How did you get MRI room from that?”

She shrugged. She added the newest clue to the growing stack in her breast pocket, which bulged with too much stuff. The paper envelope crinkled, and she had to jam it to get it to fit, not that
jamming constituted fitting so much as, well, jamming. She frowned as she brushed her breast pocket smooth, only to have it bow outward with a cardboard-sounding pop when she removed her palm.

“Context,” she said.

Alex raised his eyebrows. “Which is?”

A grin tugged at her lips. “Not telling,” Meredith said, and with that, she exited the scrub room.

“Mean,” Lexie said. “How are we supposed to play along and help you figure out the clues without details?”

“You don't need the details,” Meredith said. “Other than that he said this in the MRI room.”

“Said what!” Lexie said, huffing a frustrated sigh.

The hallways of the surgical wing were empty to the point of lethargy this late on a Sunday. The surgeries scheduled late at night were typically emergencies, which always seemed to come in a flood or not come at all. Some Sunday nights were a zoo in the pit. Others, like this one, well, the whole day had been slow.

The fluorescent, overhead lights shined off the immaculate floor tiles, giving the halls a ghostly feel to them in their emptiness. An abandoned gurney covered in rumpled blankets rested next to the wall on the right side of the hallway. A solitary nurse finished late night paperwork at the nearby station underneath the soft glow of a desk lamp. A radio played soft rock quietly as she clacked away on the keyboard of her computer. Sophie or Sadie or Sylvia or something. Meredith couldn't remember the blond woman's name.

“I bet the thing that says thank you is sex,” Alex decided.

Lexie's lip curled with disgust. “That's crass.”

The clacking slowed, and Meredith rolled her eyes when she saw SophieSadieSylvia look up from the glowing computer screen. As soon as Meredith met the nurse's eyes, the nurse's gaze darted back to her work, but not before the woman grinned a silly, annoying, obvious grin.

Everyone, Meredith decided. Everyone in the freaking hospital had helped set up this game. Or knew about it. Or...

Really, is that so bad? said the soft voice of Derek in her head. I do love you, you know. I don't do this for just anyone.

She grinned at the thought. She couldn't help it.

“He's a dude,” Alex said, his tone even.

“So?” Lexie said.

“He's a dude, and we've already discussed elevator rain checks, so sex in the workplace is clearly not below him,” Alex said. He gave Meredith a once over, head to toe, finishing with a brief, self-assured nod. “They've probably done it everywhere else already. Why not in the MRI room?”

Meredith glanced at the OR board as they passed it. There were two cells filled with scribbles and the rest, all blank. She didn't read them, instead turning right to head out of the wing. They passed
through the double doors.

“Not in the MRI room,” Meredith said absently.

“So, where?” Alex said.

Meredith opened her mouth to reply, but Lexie interrupted.

“On second thought, you're right,” Lexie said, a look of disgust crinkling her face. She pulled her fingers through her brown hair, smoothing her ponytail. “You don't need to tell us.”

“Sadly,” Cristina said, rolling her eyes, “I know already. In vivid detail.”

“You ask me!” Meredith said.

“No, I don't,” Cristina said with a sigh. “You tell me anyway.”

“I... You...” Meredith frowned. “I distinctly remember you wanting to know if he was good.”

“Back when I didn't think he was idiot mold married to my person, and I wasn't getting any.”

“Oh,” Meredith said.

“We really don't need to know any of this,” Lexie said.

“Which is why I'm not telling!” Meredith said.

“You're telling by not telling,” Lexie said. “Telling that you're not telling is telling!”

Alex tilted his head in inquiry. “But you've done it somewhere else, right?” he said, ignoring Cristina and Lexie. “The lounge is near the MRI room. Did you 'say thank you' in there?”

“I'll have you know we made it home in this particular instance,” Meredith said.

Cristina and Lexie groaned.

“Meaning there are instances where you didn't?” Alex said, his expression gleeful.

“Um...” Meredith swallowed, stopped. She blinked as she realized the trap she'd walked right into. “No comment.”

Her gaze bounced from Alex to Mark, who were both grinning like the unrepentant letches they were, to Cristina and Lexie, who wore scrunched-up “yuck” faces that made them look like rabbits. Irritated, ruffled rabbits. Like the mean one in Monty Python.

Meredith rolled her eyes. “What! I'm not telling! I haven't told you anything. I haven't even said it was about sex.” She jabbed her thumb at Alex. “He went there all by his porny, dirty-minded, Uncle Sal self.”

“Oh, let's see.” Cristina held up her thumb. “It's about Derek.” Her index finger was next. “There is no number two. It's obviously about sex already.”

Mark snorted.

“Who's Uncle Sal?” said Alex.

“You,” Meredith said to Alex's look of confusion.
“I don't get it,” Lexie said.

Meredith rolled her eyes. “Never mind.”

They stepped around a janitor mopping the floor with a scuzzy, gray-colored mop.

“This whole clue hunt is painting a slightly different picture than I'd imagined,” Mark said.

Cristina glowered. “You picture McDreamy's sordid sex life? Am I seriously the only one here who doesn't?”

Lexie raised her hand. “I don't,” she said. Then she lowered her hand haltingly. “Or... I didn't. Before today. This is...” She made another disgusted face. “Eidetic memory sucks.”

“Well, I participate in it,” Meredith said. “I have an excuse.”

Alex smirked. “What about in Shepherd's office?”

Lexie shook her head. “They wouldn't. There are windows in there,” she said. “Everybody can see. And I've taken this to a logical place, where it shouldn't be, and I'll just be quiet now before I say something else.” She cleared her throat.

“Well...” Meredith said. Granted, she wasn't sure if they meant the Chief's office, which was technically Derek's, or Derek's old office. They both had windows. Chief's office remained sacrosanct, so far. Derek's, however...

She felt his hand on her thigh.

No. No, no, no. No, she did not feel anything. She wasn't thinking about that, now.

_I like where this is headed_, said phantom Derek with a smirk so smirky she could feel it. Even in her head. Even made up. Made up Derek was a freaking horny bastard. Just like the real one. She bit her lip.

Silence stretched as Lexie did the math. The shifting look from puzzlement back to disgust was comical. “Oh, ew,” Lexie said. “Ew, I've touched that desk.”

“See?” Alex said with a pleased grin. He looked at Meredith. “How about the supply closets?”

She'd yanked him through the door. He'd been flustered.

_Meredith, I have a page._ She'd moaned as she'd pushed him against the door to close it behind him. _It's an emergency._

Meredith grinned before she could help it. Damn it.

_Oh, this is priceless_, said the Derek in her head.

Lexie's face devolved into horror. “With the sterile supplies?”

“They were wrapped!” Meredith countered. “They were still sterile after!”

“Riiight,” Alex said haughtily. “Elevator?”

“No,” Meredith said.
Alex looked like she'd just told him she'd rode a unicorn to work yesterday. “Seriously?” he said.

“Yes!” Meredith said. “Why do you think the rain check was so special?”

She realized everybody was staring at her.

“Anywhere else?” Alex said.

Meredith opened her mouth. Then she thought better of it and closed it.

“Oh, ew,” Lexie said. “Ew, ew, ew. I don't want to know.”

“Good,” Meredith said. “Because I don't want to tell you.” She glared at Alex, who only snickered, infuriating ass that he was.

“And yet we still know,” Cristina said. She glowered. “Everything.”

*They do*, said imaginary Derek. *You're a crappy liar, Mere.*

“Shut up!” she said.

*I love you, anyway.*

When they arrived at the MRI room, they all filed through the doorway into the small room adjacent to the imaging room. The machine worked to scan a pale woman who looked like she'd just gotten out of brain surgery earlier in the day, or perhaps yesterday. Her skull was swathed in white bandages, and she lay peaceful and still, eyes closed, while the machine worked.

Meredith wondered who'd done the surgery. Perhaps Dr. Weller or Shadow Shepherd. A brief pang hit the back of mind when she thought of Derek. Real Derek. Derek should be doing that. Saving lives. Dr. Weller and Dr. Nelson were both great surgeons, but the neurosurgery department wasn't the same without Derek at the masthead.

*Derek sat on the porch swing, sipping from the long neck of a brown beer bottle as he stared into the chilly night. She stopped at the end of the walk. Blinked. She hadn't expected to find him here. Or anywhere, really. She'd made her house of candles, and he'd broken up with Rose, and he'd come back after. Just like he'd promised. And then he'd backed off the last few days. If she invited him somewhere, he came, but otherwise, he didn't push. Didn't even hint, let alone show up unannounced, which was weird. She'd gotten so used to him pushing...*

*She clenched her teeth as she walked forward. So, he'd made it a few days. Maybe, this would be the pressure bombshell. He sure looked broody enough; just like when he'd started bolting after the ferry thing. She shook her head. No. She'd said she would try to trust him. All he was doing right now was sitting on her freaking porch swing. That was hardly a crime. Was it?*

*He was so engrossed in thought, he didn't even look at her until she stiffly sat beside him, and the swing swayed and creaked under the new weight.*

“Hey,” she said. *What are you doing here? she didn't add. Forced herself not to. People who trusted each other didn't ask that sort of thing. Did they?*

*He stared into the street. A smile tugged vaguely at his lips and then slipped away, as though his feelings were at war. “I watched Beth walk today,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “She made it down the hall and back.”*
“That’s really great,” Meredith said.

Derek didn’t respond. He took a frothy swig from his bottle. The hint of the smile she’d seen didn’t make a reappearance. His gaze was dark and dour.

She frowned. “That’s not really great?”

“Beth is fine,” he said. He gave himself a little shake. Like he didn’t quite believe it.

Meredith nodded. “She is. I talked to her an hour ago.”

“She is really fine.”

“She really is.” She put her hand on his knee because it felt like the right thing to do. “So, what’s wrong?”

“It’s just...” He swallowed, ceasing the quiver in his voice. “Wrapping my head around it.”

“Around what?”

“That she lived,” he said. He looked at her, finally. “She lived, and she’s walking.” He glanced down at his beer bottle. “This is going to sound selfish.”

“What is?”

He took a swig. The weird twitch that wanted to be a smile reappeared and slipped away, like he was trying to force it to stay on his face and failing dismally. A dark, thick sound caught in his throat. “I really needed her to live.”

“Oh,” she said. Awkward. It was the only thing she could think of.

A car drove past, wet tires swooshing across the pavement. The nighttime silence stretched. He hadn’t come to pressure her, she realized. He was upset. Fighting some sort of pervasive melancholy that he knew shouldn’t be there. His disquiet gripped her and scared her all at once, because he’d come here to do it. To be upset. Which meant... what? What did it mean? That he wanted her to suffer with him for her part in his misery? Was the other shoe dropping? Or...

She swallowed. “Did you mean what you said to me, earlier?”

“What did I say?” he said.

“That I make you feel like a murderer.”

He looked at her, his lips parted like he wanted to say something, but the words had gotten stuck. His mouth closed. The stricken look in his eyes only confused her. He stared at the dark, wet street. Wind rustled through the wet leaves overhead, and the random splatter of rain drops accented the quiet with their drum beats. He pulled his fingers through his mussy hair and sighed.

“I snapped at you,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” she said.

“It wasn’t you.”

“But you did,” she said. “Feel like a murderer.”
He took a swig. “It's so hard to remember why I do this, sometimes.”

“You do it because you have a gift.”

He shrugged. “I don't feel like I have a gift, lately,” he said. “I feel like a butcher. Even Beth called me a butcher. I became a surgeon to save people. Not...” His voice cracked. He looked away and wiped his face with his free hand. He stared darkly at nothing. Away from her.

His body language was prickly. Hard to read. But he was there. She frowned. He was there, and not dumping blame on her. Just... seeking comfort? Was that what this was? He made her feel safe. Was it so ludicrous to think she did the same for him?

Yes, a tiny, insecure voice said. You're worthless at this whole relationship thing. How could you make anybody feel safe when you're such a mess, yourself?

She shook the words in her head away. Fight through the fear, Dr. Wyatt had told her. Could she do that?

“We saved Beth,” she said. She leaned against his shoulder. He wrapped his arm over her like a coat, like her blatant invitation was all he'd been waiting for. “And we saved countless other people in the future because of the work we did.”

He sighed. “It's hard to wrap my mind around the theoretical when I'm presented with the real every day.”

“But Beth is real,” she said. “And she walked.”

“So were the other twelve who died,” he said, the words dark and lost. “But...”

Liquid sloshed in the beer bottle as he tilted it back and took a sip. He smelled malty. And his body was warm, a sharp contrast to the nippy air outside. She pressed her cheek against the soft, gray fleece of his coat, snuggling closer. The weird, amazing part was that she felt him relaxing underneath her. Settling into the swing instead of fighting it tooth and nail. He squeezed her arm with his hand and ran his palm up and down her sleeve, warming her even further, and she couldn't help but relax with him.

This wasn't bad, she decided. Him being here unexpectedly. Even upset.

It was actually... nice.

He was nice to come home to.

“Why did you become a surgeon?” he said.

She frowned. “I don't know... It just... seemed like what I should do.”

“Your mother?” he said.

“I guess some of it had to do with that. Or... Okay, a lot of it.”

He tilted his beer bottle at her in a clear offer to share, but she'd never been much of a beer person. Not like him, or like Alex, or Izzie. She waved off his offer. He shrugged and took a swig. His Adam's apple bobbed along his skin, and a wet, mushy sound echoed as he swallowed, his throat close to her ear.

“What do you do when you lose too many people?” he said.
An acerbic chuckle skipped from her lips. “I hyperventilate in the closet until my knight in shining whatever comes to help me with a paper bag,” she said.

His grip tightened around her. He looked down at her with a soft smile. “Meredith.”

She stroked the soft lapel of his coat. “You helped.”

“I’m glad.”

“I’m... here, too,” she said. Awkwardly. Hesitantly. Stupidly. But... “I can help you.”

He kissed her forehead. “You already do,” he said.

“But you said—”

“I know what I said. But Beth is alive. I’m wrapping my head around that instead of another tombstone. And that’s because of you.”

She didn’t know what to say, couldn’t even think of something awkward, and so she said nothing. He leaned forward to set his bottle on the porch floor. Then he pulled her close and buried his face in her hair, sighing.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “Thanks for pushing me.”

The swing creaked as they swayed in the breeze.

Derek needed to cut. He had a rare talent for it. A gift. It was part of who he was. What made him tick. The fact that he’d twisted himself up inside so badly that he was afraid to pick up a scalpel, lest he hurt somebody, was a constant burn. A reminder that no matter how happy he looked or how well he seemed day-to-day, something still wasn’t right. A reminder that Jaws was lurking.

At least she understood it. His reluctance. He’d always been too sensitive to the losses. They took him longer to deal with and to sort through, and when they mounted too far into a pile, he tended to fall to pieces. Now, he had even less emotional fortitude than he’d had before, both to cope with mounting stress during surgery, and to cope with unfavorable outcomes.

Soon, she hoped, he’d be in a place where he could do what he loved again.

Save people.

Even if it meant he would be doing simple stuff for the rest of his career.

At least he would be saving lives.

He needed that to be whole.

The lab tech, Reza, glanced up from his computer screen and grinned when they entered. He was a short, stocky man of middle eastern descent, with bronzed skin and short, black hair. “Dr. Grey,” he said in a cheerful tone. He leaned forward, and he ripped something off the side of the computer monitor. A cream-colored, embossed envelope just like all the others.

Meredith reached for it and took the envelope into her hands.

“Thank you,” she said as she wormed her finger underneath the seal and tore open the top. “When did Derek put this here?”
Reza's brown eyes twinkled. “Dr. Shepherd was here? I thought he wasn’t working today.”

Meredith sighed. “You're not going to tell me anything, are you?”

Reza's lips curled into a grin. He glanced at the computer screen and then back at her. “Only that Mrs. Fitzgerald seems to be done with her MRI.” He brushed his hands on his pants as he stood.

“Thanks,” Meredith said with a sigh. “That's helpful.”

Reza shrugged and left them in the tiny room while he went to help the woman in the other room back onto the gurney on which she'd arrived. Meredith pulled the next clue out of the envelope.

“You're dark and twisty; but I like it, I said,” she read. “It makes you strong and so fearless, and I want us to wed.”

She didn't give the others a chance to digest the poem. “Elevator,” she said.

“But we've already been to the elevator,” Lexie said. She frowned. “You're answering these too fast!”

Meredith shrugged. “No, another elevator,” she said as she glanced at her breast pocket. No more of the envelopes or cards would fit, but she didn't want to throw any of them out. They were... special. She stepped out into the hallway, and all of them followed like a blind herd of sheep.

“That was when he proposed, right?” Cristina said.

“Right,” Meredith said.

She pulled her stethoscope out of the pocket at her hip and wrapped it around her neck as they walked through the empty halls. She hoped Derek didn't have too many more of these planned before the payoff. He seemed to be stepping forward in sequential order, and he'd gotten to his proposal already. There wasn't that much left between then and now. Was there? She shoved the envelope and the card into her newly emptied pocket. She could fit a few more in there.

“Wait,” Mark said. “He ended up proposing in an elevator?”

“Yeah,” Meredith said. “He did.”

“Do you do everything in elevators?” Lexie said.

“Not sex, apparently,” Alex said.

Mark snickered. “He proposed in the elevator, and you thought the teddy bear was dumb?”

“What teddy bear?” Cristina said.

“I never said the bear was dumb,” Meredith said.

Really, she hadn't said much of anything about the bear. Mark had been trying to save her from answering questions lobbed like bricks at her by Derek's pushy sisters, and in the spur of the moment, Mark had picked that as the subject switcheroo. She'd been too shocked to do much more than stutter, and then the conversation had taken a left turn, away from bears. So, when are you getting married for real, anyway?

“And the thing in the elevator was really sweet,” Meredith said. “He tacked up all my old case histories with him on the walls, and he—”
“Wait,” Cristina said. “I want to hear about the teddy bear.”

“His first proposal involved flowers and candles and a teddy bear,” Mark said.

Cristina smirked. “That must have been when he was trolling for ideas.”

The familiar ding of the elevator’s arrival in the distance made her gaze sharpen. “He asked you for ideas?” Meredith said as they turned the corner.

“I tried to steer him away from the stupidly maudlin,” Cristina said. She glanced at Mark. “I specifically told him no house of candles.”

“What house of candles?” Lexie said.

“Nothing,” Meredith said.

“You seriously swear you’ve never had sex in an elevator?” Alex said as they arrived at their destination, just in time for the elevator doors on the left to slide shut.

Meredith bit her lip as the familiar envelope taped on the far wall of the elevator disappeared from view. She raced to the elevator to jam the buttons, both down and up, but it was too late. The following hum told her the elevator had been summoned to another floor already and wouldn't be coming back for a few minutes.

Meredith sighed. “No, just—”

“Everywhere else in the hospital,” Alex said with a nod. “Right.”

Lexie elbowed him in the ribs. “You're such a pig,” she said before she turned to Meredith. “What house of candles?”

“Do you want the next clue or not?” Meredith said. There was no way in hell she would cop to the candles thing to Lexie. Meredith would never hear the freaking end of it.

The elevator dinged, and Meredith twitched, but it was the doors on the right, not the left that slid open. Her shoulders slumped. The doors slid shut.

“This seems to happen to us a lot,” she said. Everybody stared at her with blank looks of confusion. She jammed the up button again, once, twice, again, in rapid succession while she glared at them, picturing the Chief, instead.

*That won't make it come faster*, said the Derek in her head. *It comes faster when I push it.* She couldn't help but snort.

Cristina frowned. “You're not going to freak out again, are you?”

“No, I'm just laughing,” Meredith said.

“At?” Mark said.

“All of you,” she said. And Derek. Who she was making up in her head in his mysterious absence. McPhantom, she decided, which only made her snort again. “You're just...”

“Us?” Lexie said.

*Me,* McPhantom said.
“Something like that,” Meredith said.

The correct elevator came this time. Meredith stepped over the threshold, a small smile tugging at her lips as she remembered how Derek had looked, standing there surrounded by case files. Files she'd helped him with or done the large part of the work herself. The sweet smell of his cologne tickled her nose, almost too vivid to be only a memory.

Had he been there recently, taping the envelope to the wall? Wearing a bucket of cologne? Curiosity wound with excitement, her lingering exhaustion, and the whispering remnants of her headache. What kind of night did he have planned at the end of this, exactly? She wasn't quite sure she had the stamina to deal with corny, romantic, Derek-y Derek until the wee hours, but as far as worries were concerned, worrying that she couldn't keep up with a happy, cologne-y Derek seemed like a nice worry to be having.

See? said McPhantom. I'm getting better. No Jaws. I want you to enjoy this.

She grabbed the envelope from the back of the elevator and stepped back into the hallway, into the people cluster that followed her. The paper crinkled in her hands as she pulled out the next clue. The elevator doors trundled shut and hummed away behind them. “We were ready then, as we're ready, now,” she said as she read from the card. She glanced at her family. They stared back, intent. “So, we took out a Post-it, and we wrote our vows.” She knew this one immediately, too, but she waited to speak so that Lexie could have her fun.

Lexie didn't disappoint. She bounced on her feet, excitement in her gaze. “Oh! Oh! I know!” she said. “The Post-it wedding!”

Alex shook his head. “I still don't get that,” he said.

“Get what?” Meredith said.

“Why a Post-it?”

“It was a thing,” Meredith said. “A Post-it thing. We didn't have time for city hall.”

There isn't any time, she'd said, and he'd understood. Supported her.

She could feel the pen in her hand. He'd asked her for a piece of paper, and all she'd had were Post-its. She'd signed her life into his keeping. He'd signed his life into hers.

They'd fumbled toward that moment for years.

Taken missteps left and right.

She tried to put her finger on when it had all begun to come together. When they'd broken the vicious cycle of him pushing because he thought she would run, and her running because he pushed. When he'd thrown off his mantle of impatience and self-entitlement. When she'd forced herself to fight through her fears, both the ones he'd propagated and the ones of which he'd been a hapless victim.

Her first thought... The cliff. With the candles. She'd told him she wanted to trust him. He'd kissed her.

But the more she considered, the more she decided, no. The moment where they'd really lain down their swords had snuck up on them. It'd come and gone without fanfare in the night on the edge of dreams.
She lay in the bed, staring at the ceiling. She clutched the lip of the blanket. Darkness muted the world, made the shadows seem frothy and... bigger, somehow. Clouds had covered the moon outside in a thick, puffy, gray carpet turned purple by the city's light pollution, and the only light that filtered through the window was the soft, distant white of a buzzing streetlamp outside.

She tilted her head. She listened to his soft, even breathing beside her. Inches. He lay on his stomach inches away from her, his face tipped toward her as though he sought her even in dreams. She couldn't see any of his features. Just the muzzy, naked lump that was him. The breathing, there lump.

She'd promised that she would try to trust him, which meant she had to believe him until proven otherwise, or her promise meant diddly. Which meant he wasn't leaving. That he was going to be there tomorrow night, and the night after, and the night after that.

Which made this whole thing... really. Really...

“Derek?” she whispered.

His body twitched under the covers, and his even breathing skipped as he snuffled. Then he resettled and didn't move anymore.

“Derek?” she repeated.

Another snuffle. “Mmm?” he muttered into the pillow, his voice thick with sleep and dreams.

“Are you awake?”

“No,” he said, though it sounded more like “nurgh”, as he turned away from her and jammed his face into his pillow.

She stared at him, biting her lip. Seconds dragged as though time had been dipped in molasses. She worried at the hem of the blanket with her fingers.

“You have to be awake if you're answering me,” she decided.

He twitched. “No, I don’.”

“You do!”

“Talkin' in my sleep,” he mumbled.

“You don't sound asleep.”

He didn't answer. The silence filled with the thick, even sound of his breathing as he fell back into slumber, and she frowned. He was a light sleeper. Getting him to wake up was usually as simple as saying his name. This was... He was tired, and this was futile, and stupid. Being extraordinary was not being afraid of the dark or being afraid of him. Of them. Except...

“You don't think this feels weird?” she said before she could stop herself.

Something in her tone must have broken through. He flopped onto his back and wiped his face with his hands. The rustle of his palms across his stubbly skin soothed her, somehow. He sighed. Not a bothered sigh. Just... recouping some oxygen to be awake and functional.

“What's weird?” he said, and for the first time that night, his tone was fully awake and listening.
She looked at him. “Our first night together,” she said.

“But I’ve slept here dozens of times,” he said, his words soft and cautious.

“But not in a continuous sense,” she said, unable to stop the quiver in her tone. “This is really... This is it. You’re here. You’re totally here. Forever. You moved in.”

“You asked me to,” he said slowly.

“I know, but... now, it's... real. It's really real.”

A long, maddening silence followed. He didn't move or speak, but he was awake and staring at her. She could tell he watched her from the glisten of the dim light striking his eyeballs. Her heart skipped in the darkness. Forever was a scary word. Particularly when it came to him. She'd trusted him before, more than once, and it'd never gone well. And, now, here she was, in the middle of the night, dragging them into another confrontation, practically daring him to contradict her. To tell her he was walking away because he couldn't take waiting for her to work out the horrific pile of skittishness he'd helped to create. She'd told herself she'd try to trust him, but that didn't stop junk like this from twisting up in knots inside her head. Her feelings about Derek didn't mix well with logic. Logic made her scared. Which, honestly, didn't seem logical.

Was that a bad sign? Surely, that was a bad sign.

Panic coiled.

“Do you want me to leave?” he said, his tone soft. Calm. Resigned.

“No!” she said.

Silence followed when he didn't respond further. Damn it. She sighed. Derek, I'm scared. That's all she'd meant by any of this. Derek, I'm scared, and you inexplicably make me feel safe. I need you to make me feel safe right now. Except fear was a lot harder to explain than it was to feel. Explaining it was admitting it, and...

The mattress creaked as he slid closer. He wrapped his arms around her.

“I've never done this before,” she said, curling against him.

“I haven't either,” he admitted.

“But you...” She swallowed. “There was her.”

“She wasn't you, Mere.” His lips pressed against her forehead. He didn't pull away. He inhaled instead, as though her scent comforted him. As though he had words he couldn't say, either. Meredith, I'm scared, and I have no idea what you want from me.

“I want you here,” she said, her tone definitive. “You can ignore the rest of my screwy, messed up signals.”

“But I like the screwy and messed up,” he said.

“Liar,” she said. He tensed, which only confirmed her suspicions about her behavior. She added woefully against his chest, “I feel like a freaking yo-yo, Derek.”

“A yo-yo.”
“Yeah.”

For a moment, she wondered at his odd, tense silence. He didn't wear a t-shirt to clutch, so she curled her fingers against his warm skin. She'd called him a liar. Not the best choice of word, considering she was trying to figure out how to trust him again, and he knew it. Except...

His body hitched, and a soft chuff swept over the top of her head. She blinked, flummoxed. Was that...?

“Oh, Meredith,” he said, barely put together before he lost it again.

It was. It was that.

Mirth.

Her eyes narrowed. “What's funny?”

He rubbed his eyes. “You don't trust me,” he replied.

She gaped. “And that's funny?”

“I admit, you're confusing the hell out of me, but I don't really have room to complain about it,” he said.

All the pieces slid into place as she stared at him.

A giggle popped loose from her lips. She couldn't help it.

And then he laughed. The sound of it was delightful. It slid down her spine and made her feel warm inside.

She laughed again.

And then they were both stuck in paroxysms of noisy, gasping guffaws that probably woke Izzie and Alex from a sound sleep.

She hadn't heard Derek laugh this hard in a long time. She hadn't laughed this hard, either. It felt good. Liberating.

Perfect.

“Okay, so,” she managed, panting. “Maybe, yo-yo applies to us both.”

“We traded places,” Derek said.

She snickered as she kissed him. “I'm in, coach. Am I doing you proud?”

“At least we're a team,” he said affectionately.

She nodded. “We are,” she said, smiling in the dark. She settled against him as he rubbed her back in slow, soothing circles. “I want you here,” she repeated, and this time there was no doubt or panic or anything clotting the sleepy spaces in her head. She yawned.

“I want to be here,” he replied against her ear. He held her.

Whether he'd meant to do it or not, she felt safe. Just like she'd wanted. For now, she decided,
despite damaged trust and yo-yos and everything, safety was more than enough to get through the night.

Baby steps, she told herself as she drifted to sleep.

Baby steps, and they would win the match.

“City hall takes twenty minutes if you're in a hurry,” Alex countered, unaware that she'd slipped deep once more into memory.

Meredith blinked and looked up from the note. “We didn't have twenty minutes,” she said.

The elevator dinged, and a harried, tired-looking nurse stepped through the doors. She glanced at them. Smiled despite the paleness of exhaustion crimping her features. And continued on her way.

“You clearly had twenty minutes somewhere if you were having sex in Derek's office,” Alex said.

Lexie's nose scrunched up, and her forehead wrinkled. “Ew.”

“Evil Spawn makes a decent point,” Cristina said. “You could drive a truck through that logic.”

Alex nodded. “It's crap logic.”

“It's not crap,” Lexie countered. “I thought it was cute. They should do what they want.”

“And we wanted a Post-it,” Meredith said.

“So, where was it?” Mark interjected.

“Derek's office,” Alex said.

“Not the raunchy sex,” Mark said. “The Post-it.”

“It's hanging on the wall in their bedroom,” Lexie said.

“I know. But where did they sign it?” Mark said.

Meredith stuffed the latest envelope into her side pocket with the other and led them to the residents' lounge. Derek had taped the envelope to her alcove. Her clothes, a blouse and some khakis, were folded and stacked on the bottom of the alcove underneath her shoes. She grabbed the envelope and opened it.

“Chief Shepherd, you said, a teasing purr. You strode to the table. The rest... a blur,” she recited, only to sigh.

“Oh,” Lexie said. “Oh, god. How much sex do you people have?”

Alex glanced at her. “I guess you wear earplugs.”

Lexie jabbed her thumb toward Meredith. “She snores. It makes the whole house vibrate.”

“Does not!” Meredith said.

Cristina sighed. “This game is TMI.”

“Derek's office, then?” Alex said.
Meredith's face heated. There was no way she could get out of this one without talking about sex. Derek had made it rather blatant. “Um. No.”

The gleam in Mark's eyes was positively lecherous as he said, “Where, this time?”

Meredith bit her lip. “Derek was in the conference room, and—”

“That has windows, too!” Lexie said.

“With blinds...” Meredith countered.

“I don't want to know!” Lexie said.

“I've sat on that table...” Cristina said.

“Dude,” Alex said with a smirk. “Mad props.”

“Next time he calls me a manwhore, I'm going to punch him in his fucked up nose,” said Mark.

“It's clearly a hypocritical nose,” Cristina said.

“It was my idea!” Meredith said. “He was working!”

“So, he did you on the table,” Mark said.

“Or, did you do him?” Alex said.

Meredith sighed. “This game was clearly not meant for an audience.”

You're enjoying it anyway, said McPhantom.

“No, no,” Alex said. “This is great.”

Mark nodded. “I'm getting tons of ammunition.”

“I hate you guys,” Meredith said.

Mark's eyes twinkled as he squeezed her shoulder. “I think you kind of love us.”

And me, McPhantom said. Do I count double?

Meredith didn't argue. Instead, she turned to hide her grin as she led them to the conference room, which, at this time of night on a Sunday evening, was empty, as expected. Derek had taped the note right on the table where she'd been sitting. She remembered the squeak as her naked skin had slid across the table. As he'd pulled her closer. She'd gasped as he'd—

Crap.

Without words, without being there at all, he'd made it dirty. Porny. She closed her eyes, trying to tell the pervasive, sexy memories to go away. There was no way in hell she was going to relive naughty table sex in the middle of a crowd of her closest friends. While pregnant.

Really? McPhantom purred in her ear. You seem to be reliving it already.

Real Derek wrote that clue, McPhantom said gleefully. I'd say he's porny, porny, too.

Lexie looked at the glossy, lacquered wood table. “I'm going to barf,” Lexie said.

Alex followed her gaze. “We should do that more.”

Lexie's eyebrows rose. “Barf?”

“Have sex in inappropriate places,” he said.

Meredith ignored them and picked up the envelope. She pulled out the next clue. Lexie, ignoring Alex, leaned forward, “What's it say? Not more sex. Please. He's my boss. And my brother-in-law. And my roommate. Wasn't it enough for me to catch you on the kitchen counter with him that one time?”

“The kitchen counter?” Mark said. “Really? I didn't think he had it in him.” His gaze traced the outline of the shiny table, and then he grinned at Meredith. “You're a good influence, Grey.”

“That's not good,” Lexie said. “It's dirty. And wrong. And... dirty!”

Alex smirked. “Mad props.”

“I eat in there,” Cristina said.

“Shut up,” Meredith said as she glanced at the card. “Where Derek and I choose to be intimate is —”

“ Everywhere,” Alex said.

Lexie and Cristina both sighed.

My work here is done, said McPhantom.

Meredith frowned at the card. This one was different. A veritable wall of scribble-y, hard-to-read text jumped out at her. She swallowed, squinting at it to piece it together.

Dear Meredith,

I can't write a poem about this. I tried, but...

I don't remember very much, but I remember you there. It was your strength that pulled me through. I would not be here today if it weren't for you. You always try to shrug it off like it was nothing, or like Cristina did more, because that's the kind of person you are. You give and give and rarely take. But I want you to take this, Mere. Please, take credit. You're an amazing woman. I was dying, and this is where you saved my life.

With love,

Derek

The air sucked out of the room as she reached the end of the card, and she lost all thoughts of porny Derek, imaginary or otherwise. She clutched the paper in her hands, breathing softly, trying to recuperate from the unexpected blow. Of all the places she'd expected this scavenger hunt to go, she hadn't thought Derek would take it to the shooting. That day and the following weeks didn't fit with the theme of the night. Sexy fun. Nostalgia. None of the memories from that day were sexy or fun or nostalgic at all, but...
A hand touched her shoulder. Meredith looked to the left, following the arm to its owner. Cristina. “The catwalk?” her person said softly, a concerned look on her face. She must have read over Meredith's shoulder, or...

“Yeah, I...” Meredith swallowed. “Yeah.”

Lexie took the card from Meredith's lax fingers to read it herself, and then she passed it to Alex, who passed it to Mark. Meredith put the clue card into her pocket with the envelope when it came back around to her.

“You're sure it's not the OR?” Lexie said.

“I don't know.” Meredith said. A lump formed in her throat. “I didn't do much in the OR. That was all Cristina.”

Cristina snorted.

“What?” Meredith said.

“You jumped in the line of fire for him. Does he know you did that?” Cristina said, her tone acerbic.

“Wait,” Mark said. “Wait, you did what?”

Meredith swallowed. “Yes,” she said. “He knows.”

“Meredith,” Derek said, staring across the expanse of soapy bubbles at her. Candles glowed around them, setting the dim room alight with flickering warmth. His pale skin glistened.

“What?” she said tiredly as she rubbed the bridge of her nose. Her fingers felt rough. They were starting to prune.

This had been such a long day.

After hitting Joe's, she and Cristina had gone to Cristina's apartment for a while. When Meredith had left and come home, she'd expected to find Derek asleep. He rarely stayed up late anymore. She'd read it could take a year before he felt 100 percent after injuries and surgery like he'd received, so she didn't worry, much, that he seemed so tired all the time. He'd had a bad morning, and, on top of that, he'd gone out for the first time in... forever. He'd even looked like he'd been having a little fun. He'd been smiling. Like her Derek. Not the moody stranger who'd been wearing his face since he'd been shot.

Instead of finding him asleep, though, she'd found him sitting at the kitchen table, waiting with a serious look on his face.

Then he'd confessed what he'd nearly done, and she'd forgiven him.

Again.

Water shifted as he moved his leg, and his slick skin brushed her thigh, reassuring her. His pale kneecap popped above the water, and small, soapy bubbles slid left and right and down over the dark, wet hair that peppered his shin. He resettled. He felt good against her. Solid.

“I want to ask you a question,” he said. His dark eyes watched her, unblinking. “You don't have to answer.”

A long pause followed. He searched for words. She watched questions forming. Dissolving. Wandering across his expression like lost lambs.

“What is it?” she prodded, more concerned. More tired.

“What happened when I got shot?” he said.

She blinked. Her mouth opened and closed. Her eyes pricked with tears at the unexpected question. “What do you mean?” she said.

“You saw it.”

“I did, but I still don’t—”

“I was scared,” he said.

She reached under the water and slid her hand along his calf, lower. His toes flexed as she wrapped her hands around the arch of his foot. “I know you were,” she said. “Me, too.”

His lip quivered, and he broke eye contact for a moment. “I didn't remember it right.”

“That's not surprising,” she said.

“Could you tell me?” he said. Looking back at her. “What happened? What you went through?”

She swallowed. He'd never asked her. Not once.

“Why do you care, now?” she said.

She didn’t mean to snap. She really didn’t. But she was at wit's end dealing with the whiplash of... him. His changing moods. Everything. She could forgive him for walking away that morning. For not being more articulate. She could forgive him for what he'd done with April. She could forgive him for the almost-backslide. She could. But it wasn’t easy or simple. It was exhausting. She was exhausted. She rubbed her temples.

“I always thought what I saw was what you saw, but... I didn't remember it right, and I...” He met her gaze. Whatever he saw made him swallow. Put on the brakes. He shook his head. “It's okay. We don't have to talk about this.”

But he wanted to. Despite the tremor in his tone. She could see it in his eyes. And he'd never wanted to before. The distinct, ludicrous picture of an ostrich pulling its head out of the sand slammed into her mind's eye.

She squeezed his foot. Something in his demeanor shifted. Water sloshed as he moved from his side of the tub to hers, and then his slippery body pressed against her. She shifted to give him room. His arms wrapped around her, and he kissed her chastely. Simple reassurance. She let him slide behind her, and he wrapped her in a cocoon of wet limbs.

She fell back against his chest by instinct, and his embrace tightened. “You really want to know?” she said as she gripped his arms, unable to stop her voice from cracking. Disbelief clung to every dark crevice in her mind.

A soft sigh brushed against her skin. Goosebumps chased the sensation along her shoulder. “I really want to know,” he said, his words soft. Disturbed, but... curious.
She leaned against him. She took a deep breath. Candles flickered as she exhaled. “I know you told us to stay put, but we didn't,” she began.

He laughed. Actually laughed. “Somehow, I don't think you'd be you if you had.”

Her nose crinkled. A grin tugged at her lips. “Is that a compliment or a complaint?”

“Yes,” he said, simply. The low, soft tone of his words slipped down her spine like a drip of cool water.

She giggled. She couldn't help it. “You're not so hot at following directions, either, you know, Mr. Stubborn Pants.”

He squeezed her. “I'm not wearing pants right now.”

Another giggle pierced her lips, and her body relaxed as she imagined the hesitant twinkle in his eyes, though she couldn't see his face with him behind her. She shifted her lower body. Skin slid against skin. “No pants,” she agreed.

“What happened next?” he asked, nervous energy gone.

She told him.

It had been the first time he'd ever broached the subject of what had happened. In the aftermath, she'd been forced to stuff all the bad things inside herself and deal with them on her own. She lost their baby, and she'd nearly lost him, and she'd done it 

alone.

Because he hadn't had the emotional capability to deal with any of it. He'd had a panic attack in her arms when she'd tried to get him to talk about what he'd gone through when Gary Clark had found him. It wasn't until they'd gotten Samantha that she'd even dared to try and ascertain how much he remembered after Gary Clark had left him bloody and dying on the catwalk floor. Not much had been her answer. He could recall the thirty minutes or so in the OR where they'd talked about the rain check and other things, and the rest was blurry, disconnected flotsam for him. She'd managed to give him the recount of it without falling into a blubbering mess, at least. He'd gotten very quiet when she'd talked about Gary Clark in the OR, and she'd been afraid she'd gone too far, but after long, painful silence, he'd given her a wavering smile, and held her close.

I asked, he'd said. Thank you.

But... “I'm not sure he'd want to commemorate that part,” Meredith said.

“I guess that leaves the catwalk,” Cristina said.

“What did she mean, throwing yourself in the line of fire for him?” Lexie said.

“It doesn't matter,” Meredith said.

“I think it does,” Lexie said.

“Look, can we just go to the catwalk?” Meredith snapped. The piercing wail of Derek flatlining echoed in her head despite her best efforts to shut it out. She remembered screaming and collapsing to the floor in hysterics. Derek had been dead for thirty seconds, and those had been the worst thirty seconds of her life. “In the grand scheme, it really doesn't matter, and I don't want to think about it.”

Lexie huffed a deep breath. “Fine,” she said.
Meredith clenched her fingers. This was definitely not fun. Or sexy. Or nostalgic.

They all walked in icy silence to the catwalk.

Maybe, sexy fun wasn't the entire point. Most of the point, but not the entire point. Remembering their history seemed to be a more apt fit with this clue and the pick me, choose me junk thrown in. Acknowledging the past and where it'd gotten them, eventually.

Disappointment twinged when they reached the catwalk, and he wasn't standing there. The catwalk was devoid of activity except for the occasional passerby. Pitch black carpeted the world outside the huge windows, contrasting with the endless, immaculate white inside the hospital. She spotted the envelope taped to the railing in the distance, closer to the Chief's office, closer to where Derek had fallen to the floor, and twinging disappointment at his absence widened into an ache.

She remembered running across this floor.

She remembered her knees skidding as she slid beside him. The vague sensation of a thin layer of her skin separating from her knees in her haste to get to him. She remembered her shoes slipping on the tiles. Not because she'd lost her balance. Because the tiles were wet with bright arterial blood.

His blood.

No, he'd gurgled, terrified. Terrified of her.

She glanced at her hands. His shirt had been sticky, and it'd gotten all over her palms.

It.

His blood.

She didn't walk here very often anymore. When she had to, she rushed. There were nothing but bad memories here.

Derek on the floor.

Blood.

The gun clapped. Her ears rung as she watched the scene in horror. Derek fell. He hit the back of his skull on the floor. Then he lay still, either bell rung, unconscious, or dead. Meredith screamed. She wanted to run toward him, to help him, to save him, but Cristina dragged her away before she could.

What convinced Meredith to move forward was the fact that he'd done so himself. Walked onto the catwalk. The envelope, which fluttered in the soft currents of air circulating in the room, proved he'd braved the past when she knew he typically avoided the catwalk like it was the gun that had shot him. He used to go here all the time to ponder things. To lean against the railing and watch the scenery. She'd never once caught him there since he'd returned from his medical leave of absence, and the one time she knew he'd gone there during his leave, he'd had a panic attack. A bad one.

But the envelope was there. Taped on the railing like a beacon.

I'm telling you, Meredith, said her phantom Derek. There is no Jaws. I'm better. See?

Was that the point of this?
To show her he could do, now, what he couldn't have done before?

When she reached the railing where he'd taped the envelope, she stretched out her grasp for it.

But Mark touched her hand, pulling her away. “No,” he said. He cleared his throat. “Wait.”

Mark was looking at the stain in the grout on the floor between the tiles, which themselves had been restored to their former pristine state. His face was white, and his clenching jaw danced underneath his temples. His unsettlement made her follow his gaze to the telltale discoloration, and a chill swept through her body. She looked back at the envelope, gritting her teeth.

“What?” Meredith said.

“He told you to take credit.”

She bristled. “So?”

“You didn't take credit,” Mark said.

“I do take credit.”

Mark stared at her, disbelief marring his expression.

Meredith glowered. “Just because I don’t shout it through a bullhorn, or crow about it from the rooftops, or...”

Her gaze wandered back to the stain.

An echo.

Derek's blood.

He'd gotten blood on his face. How had he gotten blood on his—

“Derek,” Meredith snapped as she slapped his cheek with a bloody hand. The wet sound of his wound as she pressed the heel of her palm into it filled the silence between her words. That and his choppy, labored breathing. “Derek, Derek. Come on. Stay awake.”

His eyelids fluttered, and he looked at her. Sort of. He swallowed. “‘Kay,” he told her drunkenly.

“That’s good. Hang on. You'll be okay.”

Meredith glanced in the direction Cristina had run. Why wasn't she back yet? Meredith couldn't do this by herself. She couldn't. Derek's head was tilting to the side again when she looked down.

“Derek!” she hissed, and she shook him.

His eyes opened. Another swallow. His lips moved. She couldn't hear him. She pulled her fingers through his sweaty hair and leaned down. Closer. “What?” she said.

“Did I fall?” he said, the words elongated and stretched and slurried.

Her throat closed, and she blinked tears as she tried not to let the panic burbling inside overwhelm her. “Yes, you fell,” she said. “Please, hang on. Stay awake. Please, Derek. Help is coming.”

He blinked. “‘Kay,” he said.
She bit her lip and squeezed his hand. He felt like a cold dishrag against her skin. He shivered.

“Hang on,” she said. “Please.”

When she came back to the present, a sheet of water covered her view. She wiped her eyes. He'd been so far into shock at that point, he hadn't even known he'd been shot. He'd descended even further, after that. To the point that what little he said, when she managed to drag words out of him, was gibberish.

“I threw Cristina against a shelf to get to him.” She'd been so scared.

“I know,” Cristina said.

Meredith sniffed. “I'm sorry I threw you against a shelf.”

Cristina snorted. “No, you're not.” Meredith clenched her fingers.

Dr. Wyatt had been trying to pry Meredith's experience out of her, but Meredith had been fine. She'd repeated that chorus to herself so many times it felt like a law. Derek had lived. They could always make more babies. Derek was too sick to handle Meredith not being fine. Therefore, Meredith was fine. Simple. Right?

Except, now, she felt like a spool unraveling.

“It's okay,” Cristina said with a shrug that told Meredith she considered the matter over and done with. Hadn't even considered it a matter at all.

“I stopped the bleeding with my hand,” Meredith said. “He's a surgeon, and he didn't even try to... He was so out of it, he was just lying there with a gushing wound.” She wiped her face and squeezed her eyes shut. She'd never talked to any of them about this. Any of it. They'd all had their own crap to deal with after the shooting. She hadn't wanted to add to it. She still didn't. “I want to read the next clue.”

“You did a good job, Mere,” Cristina said.

Fine.

Which only made Meredith's efforts at re-centering herself futile. She didn't feel like she'd done a good job. She'd ceased to be a surgeon in that moment.

The first time they tried to move him, he yelled like they were branding him with a hot iron, and she fell apart.

“Stop. Stop it,” she said, her heart pounding as she dropped his feet. “We're hurting him. Stop,” she pleaded, wrecked. His blood was all over her. All over the floor. All over him. It was everywhere, and— “Stop, stop. Please.”

“Meredith, he's got a bullet in his chest,” Cristina snapped. “He's going to hurt no matter what the hell we do, and we need to get off this catwalk. Now. Pick up his feet, and deal with it.”

“Meredith,” he slurred, staring at nothing.

Her stomach roiled.

She clenched her fingers. She could still feel his sweaty, bloody hand in hers. His sticky shirt. Could hear him slurring nonsensical, horrifying things that told her light. Tunnel. End. A slow
pulse of tears leaked as she looked at the floor. She'd been holding it all in. For months. And now she was pregnant, and tired, and full of stupid hormones, and she didn't know what she was doing.

His blood had stained the freaking grout.

A warm pair of arms wrapped around her and held her tightly. In the blur, she didn't know whose.

“I wanted a blanket,” Meredith said, sniffling into someone's soft scrub shirt. “To keep him warm. I didn't have anything. There was so much blood. It was a la... lake. On the floor.”

She couldn't think beyond death.

“You did a good job,” Cristina repeated.

“I don't want him to leave me,” Meredith said. She knew she sounded pathetic. And whiny. And...

“Everybody leaves me, and he promised I could trust him this time. I trusted him.”

“He's still here,” Lexie said. “We're here.”

“I know!” Meredith said. “Which is why this is stupid.”

“It's not stupid,” Mark said, but he sounded far away, like an echo, or through babbling water. Somebody rubbed her back in slow, soothing circles, just like Derek did when he hugged her, and she lost track of the words as she closed her eyes. She could pretend the person wrapped around her was him.

*The world flashed white, and the catwalk was replaced by endless nothingness. He wore his navy scrubs, and he looked younger. Less world-weary. His eyes glinted blue like an endless sea. He folded his arms across his chest and stood three feet away, facing her with a serious look.*

“Oh, Derek said, his voice a familiar soft murmur that slid down her spine. “Time out. Take a deep breath. Just breathe.”

“I can't.”

“You can. You can do this.”

“I lost a baby. And now I'm pregnant, and tired, and I can't—”

He stepped closer and wrapped his strong arms around her. “I know. Shh.”

*His whisper soothed her shattered mind, and she closed her eyes. The white turned mushy dark. His grip tightened around her, and she rested there. Breathing. Silent. His palms were warm, and he said the softest, nicest things that made her never want to move. Her muscles loosened.*

“Just let it out,” he said.

“I can't let it out,” she said.

*Chagrin overwhelmed his expression. “I think you need to.”*

“I can't,” she insisted.

The image of him snapped away.

Meredith stood by the glass guard, wrapped in warmth, her eyes burning. She felt nauseous. And
tired. He'd nearly died here, and she'd been alone since then. She'd been alone, and she hated it. Hated him a little for it. Or a lot. She hated him a lot. Loved him.

A lot.

The conflicting dichotomy made her head spin.

Her breaths hitched.

“Well, this backfired,” Mark said as the dizzy rush subsided.

“I'm fine,” Meredith croaked.

“Right,” Alex said, frowning. “You look fine.”

She rubbed her tired eyes and stepped out of Mark's sturdy grasp. He let her go, but he looked stricken. He didn't know what to do with a blubbering Meredith. None of them did.

She sure didn't. She looked at them. All of them. Cristina. Lexie. Alex. Mark. She was as far from alone, now, as she could be. Derek had broken down all the walls she'd erected between herself and her friends for his sake. He'd swooped in and fixed it on his terms. Like that was supposed to make it better, because that's what he did. When he was ready, he rode in on his freaking horse and saved the day.

“I should have told him this was a stupid idea,” Mark said.

She clenched the railing and kicked the glass guard. Hard. Pain tore through her toes and resounded up her shin like a cymbal clash. “I hate him,” Meredith said as her eyes leaked.

“Derek?” Cristina said.

Meredith shook her head. “Gary Clark.”

A familiar, masculine set of hands wrapped around the railing next to hers. “Me, too,” Alex said.

Meredith swallowed and looked at him. She wiped her eyes. “Alex...”

He met her gaze and shrugged. “What?” he said. “I can't hate him?”

“You said you were okay,” Meredith said, almost an accusation. She couldn't help it. “I thought you were okay.”

“I am okay,” he said, his tone calm. “Doesn't mean I can't call him a dickwad.”

He grinned at her, eyes twinkling, and that made her feel a little better. Her lip quivered. She sniffed. Snot stuck to the back of her hand. She felt disgusting. And tired.

“Solidarity?” she said, her voice wavering.

His grin widened. “Something like that.”

Meredith took two deep breaths. Slow ones. In and out and in and out. By the second release, her insides didn't tremble, and the image of Derek, bleeding, dead, didn't seem so sharp anymore.
“Read the next one so we can get out of here,” Alex said, bumping her shoulder playfully with his own.

She nodded and wiped her eyes before she reached for the clue. Getting out of here sounded like a great plan. The paper felt cold when she grasped it. She pulled the clue from the envelope. She crinkled the envelope between her fingers, unable to help venting tension, and it collapsed into a tight, crumpled ball.

She sniffed once more and began to read the newest poem aloud. **“The Sun Also Rises. Your voice lit a spark. The words are a blur to me, but they helped in the dark.”**

“What does that have to do with anything?” Cristina said.

“That doesn't sound like sex, at least,” Lexie said.

“Good point,” Cristina said.

“It's Hemingway,” Mark said. “They made us read it in high school, and for some inexplicable reason, he liked it.”

Meredith stared at the poem.

The Sun Also Rises. **Voice lit a spark.**

A **spark.**

**Helped in the dark.**

She'd felt so stupid reading that first chapter, but she'd wanted to do something. Needed to do something. To distract herself from the sharp aches squeezing her lower body as her uterus voided itself. To make the time go when he'd been too sick and hurt to do anything but lie there, and she'd felt helpless to help.

He'd been awake when she'd started the first chapter, but awake in a doped stupid sense. His eyes had been open halfway, but nobody had been home for a long while, and it'd been easy to read when he'd been staring at nothing. Easy to pretend he hadn't been listening, and thus easier to permit making a fool of herself.

I can't believe I'm doing this, she'd told the old, yellowing pages after a chapter or two. He'll think it's totally stupid. And then she'd looked up at him from the swirl of printed text, only to realize he was looking back at her. Or he's awake right now, and he's getting a kick out of watching me humiliate myself or whatever.

He'd been upset about something. She'd wanted to stop reading, but he'd told her not to. She hadn't been able to fathom why.

When she'd started chapter one, she'd only meant to pass an hour or two. He'll think it's totally stupid. And then she'd looked up at him from the swirl of printed text, only to realize he was looking back at her. Or he's awake right now, and he's getting a kick out of watching me humiliate myself or whatever.

He'd been upset about something. She'd wanted to stop reading, but he'd told her not to. She hadn't been able to fathom why.

When she'd started chapter one, she'd only meant to pass an hour or two. She hadn't realized at the time she would be creating a ritual of comfort that would carry them well into the middle of the book. He hadn't talked about the book since he'd left the hospital. She'd never thought reading it to him was a poem-worthy thing.

Apparently, though, he did, and a whole host of ho-hum memories loitering in her head from his hospital stays slid into a special category. She'd done something that had felt like nothing to her, but it'd meant a lot to him, and that... meant a lot to her.
Thank you, Mere, said McPhantom warmly as she stared at the clue. Her eyes watered with a much better kind of tears.

“I read the book to him,” Meredith said, wiping her eyes once more. “When he was in the ICU, I read it.”

Meredith sat by his little bed in his little ICU stall, a lump stuck in her throat. The dim fluorescent strip over his bed illuminated the space around him and cast the small room in a soft, white glow. He didn’t move.

His mother had shown up. His sisters. The four of them, sans Amelia, had stuffed themselves into his tiny ICU cubicle to announce that they’d made it across the country to see him, and in the space of fifty minutes, they’d exhausted him, peppering him with questions and regaling him with woeful stories about how scared they’d been when they’d seen the ticker tape fly past on CNN about a shooting in a Seattle hospital.

The orderly had served him dinner while they’d been there, and he’d eaten his first real meal under scrutiny. Probably only because of scrutiny. A slab of chicken. Rice. Some anemic-looking broccoli. A green Jell-O cup. He looked like he wanted to puke it all up again.

At least his stupid family had left him alone so they could get some sleep.

“Can I get you anything?” Meredith said.

He looked at her with bloodshot, wet eyes, and her heart splintered. He’d rallied earlier in the day. Tried to insist on having the catheter removed. On walking. But that resurgence had faded. He was exhausted, and he hurt, and he felt sick, and it showed.

“No,” he said, his voice a raspy whisper, as though speaking hurt. “Please, don’t leave.”

She reached through the railing, took his hand and squeezed. His fingers trembled, and his limbs still weren’t as warm as they should be.

“I’m here,” she said, her voice soft. “I won’t leave.”

“Mom.”

“They went to their hotel. She said she’d be back in the morning. Remember?”

From the blank look on his face, he didn’t. “Okay,” he said.

His shivering concerned her. “Do you need another blanket?”

He didn’t respond. She covered him with a third thermal blanket, just in case, while he lay there, passive. She squeezed his bare toes through the blankets. She leaned over the railing and brushed his temple. Touched the soft, lank hair that framed his haggard face.

What little color pinked his skin blanched from his cheeks and lips, and she tensed, ready to reach for the basin resting beside the bed. Nothing happened. He closed his eyes. His heart monitor beeped steadily.

“Mom.”

Meredith frowned. “Derek, do you want me to call her? I’m sure she’d come back.”

“She left.”
“That’s right.”

“Sorry, I’m... spacey.”

Meredith glanced at the morphine drip and then back at him. “It’s okay.”

“I got shot.”

“I know,” she said.

His dark eyes fluttered open, and he stared at her. The stark sickness in his gaze made the lump in her throat mutate. Grow. She swallowed.

“Will you read more?” he said, his tone... strange.

Like he didn't want to think.

She couldn't blame him.

She wiped her eyes. “Sure,” she said, no hesitation. “What's the last part you remember?”

“Doesn't matter,” he said. “Pick a chapter.”

She picked up his well-worn copy of The Sun Also Rises from where she’d stashed it in the compartment below the bed. They hadn't gotten very far the night before, when he hadn't been able to stay awake more than a few minutes at a time. She couldn't remember exactly where in chapter three he’d fallen asleep the night before, but it had been somewhere in that area.

She flipped ahead to chapter four, happy for the excuse to skip some of it. She ran her fingertips along the old, yellowing page. He’d read this book a lot. She didn’t know why.

Her first impressions of the novel hadn't been all that great. Hemingway's writing style grated, and this particular story seemed... almost as depressing as thinking about her childhood. Which... yeah. Depressing. That was why she tended to avoid anything put onto typical English class syllabuses when she looked for reading material. She’d discovered over the years that, if there was some sort of literary point to the story, it was usually depressing.

She read another chapter aloud, silencing herself only while the floor nurse came to check on him, before she scrunched her nose and looked over the bed railing at him. He rested, staring through his lowered eyelashes at a distant point on the ceiling, and he seemed... a bit more relaxed than before. And a lot less like he was going to hurl any second. The pulse of tears had slowed as well.

“Derek?” she said, keeping her voice low. Soft.

He shifted his gaze lackadaisically toward her.

“Why on earth do you like this story?” she said, horror tingeing her voice. And then she blushed. She hadn't meant to sound so critical. “I mean...” She swallowed, trying to suck the judgment out of her tone. She didn't want to be judge-y. She traded judge-y for what she prayed sounded hopeful. “Does it get better later?”

His lip twitched. A small smile overcame the glazed look on his face. “Mmm,” he said, an idle noise as his eyelids lowered. He breathed once. Twice. Like he was gathering himself for the discomfort of speaking. He’d been poked and prodded by doctors and nurses all day. “It’s a... literary... classic, you know.”
She blinked, and for a moment, she tried to picture the shelves in his office at home, which he’d commandeered to keep his books. Medical texts and journals. But also pleasure reading. She’d never examined what he’d put there beyond a cursory glance. She realized she had no idea what he liked to read. She’d rarely paid attention, and she hadn’t asked him.

“You’re one of those weird people who enjoyed being forced to read Animal Farm, and 1984, and As I Lay Dying in school,” she said. “Weren’t you?”

Another almost smile tugged at his lips. “Maybe,” he said. His eyes seemed glassy and galaxies away, but... She liked the smile. He had a great smile. He swallowed. “They make me... think.”

“Don’t you have a favorite bubblegum book, though?” she said. “Something where the goal is not to think too hard?” Something more appropriate for cheering up after a serious injury, she didn’t add.

“Sure,” he croaked.

“Well, what is it?” she said.

“Um...” He closed his eyes, swallowing, and she wondered if she’d given him too much of a mental cracker, considering how drugged he was.

“I could get you something happier from the gift shop,” she offered. She glanced at her watch. Visiting hours were over, which meant the gift shop would be closed, but it wasn’t too late for mainstream commercial ventures to be open. “On second thought, I’ll go to the bookstore across the street. They’re still open. It’ll take thirty minutes. I’ll just pick something.”

His eyes snapped open. “No,” he said. Croaked. Desperately. “Please, don’t leave.” Like he categorically didn’t want to be alone.

“I won’t,” she rushed to say, horrified at the rapid shift in his demeanor. “I’m sorry.”

“Please, stay,” he rasped.

“I will,” she said.

“Mere.”

She leaned over the railing and pressed her finger to his lips, encouraging him to rest his throat. Her aching insides tightened with stress. God, he was so freaking fragile. And hurt. And buried in a sea of monitors and wires and... The room swam before her eyes as the ghostly echo of shrieking EKG monitors filled her head. He’d been a millimeter away from checking out on her yesterday, and she was grilling him to the point of pain today, all to find his personal Robin Cook or Diana Gabaldon or whoever.

She didn’t mean to keep him awake. Or talking when it hurt him. Just engaging him in normal, everyday, stupid conversation had felt so nice, she’d forgotten all the bad stuff. Everything. For a moment.

She resettled in her chair, which seemed to console him somewhat. She gripped his trembling hand through the railing, mindful of the intravenous line, and stroked his thumb. His fingers clasped around hers. He was alive, she told herself. He was alive, and they would be okay, and they could have stupid conversations about bubblegum books later, when he was feeling better.

For now, this dismal book would have to do. She licked her lips and prepared to read more, despite
her misgivings about whether this was appropriate post-shooting reading material, but before she had a chance to say the first word, he interrupted.

“You could read... the phone book,” he said.

Her gaze snapped to him. She blinked. “What?” She clenched the book with her right hand to keep it from falling off her lap. “I mean... not what. Forget I asked. You, shut up and heal.”

He laughed. Just a weak, short syllable of sound that cut off with a wince. He looked at her, his blue eyes a fathomless, spacey sea.

“I like your voice,” he rasped. He swallowed.

“Stop it!” she scolded. “You're not allowed to talk.”

“Okay,” he said.

She couldn’t help but laugh. Almost a cackle in the quiet, ICU ward. The sound bounced off the walls, and she blushed and flinched when she remembered where they were. She swatted at his hand.

“You,” she said. “Zip it. Or no Hemingway.”

He didn't speak, but his lips moved. Bossy, he mouthed. She let it slide. She stroked his thumb with hers, and she started chapter five.

Cristina made a face. “That's...”

“Sappy and stupid. I know,” Meredith said.


Meredith and Cristina rolled their eyes. “Romantic,” they said together.

“We know,” Meredith added.


_They make me... think_, Derek had said.

“I think it might be more of an academic sort of appreciation or whatever,” Meredith said.

“He likes _1984_, too,” Mark said.

Meredith pumped her fist. “I _knew_ it!”

_I never said no when you asked_, said McPhantom with another smirk she could feel

Everyone stared at her for a long moment, and she sighed as old melancholy overwhelmed her brief feeling of triumph. But she was breaking through, at least. Breaking through felt much better than drowning.

“Whatever floats his boat, I guess,” Mark said with a shrug. “I prefer my PSP to stuffy literature.”

“And I like surgical annals,” Cristina said. “Can we move on, please?”

Lexie raised her eyebrows. “Impatient much?” she scoffed.
“He likes literature and writes crap poems,” Cristina said. “The sensitivity two-by-fours that keep hitting me are starting to hurt.”

Lexie stared at Cristina, eyes narrowing with what looked like suspicion. Then she folded her arms over her chest and smirked. “You do like him,” she said. “You totally like him! You’re way past calling him idiot mold.”

“Just don't tell me he reads sonnets in his spare time, too,” Cristina said. “That's too much.”

“So, you don't deny it!” Lexie said.

“No,” Cristina said, a bland look on her face, “because I'm ignoring you.”

“You answered me that time,” Lexie pointed out.

Cristina's bland expression became a stony glare.

Lexie looked away from a potentially cataclysmic confrontation. “Okay,” she muttered, cowed. “Shutting up, now.”

“So, where are we going?” Alex prodded.

Meredith shrugged as she wiped the remnant ache from her eyes. “The CICU, I guess,” she said, her voice a little dull. “That's where I read to him, unless he means Seattle Presbyterian, but...”

“So far, they've all been at Seattle Grace,” Lexie said.

“Yeah,” Meredith said.

She looked at the grout once more. Shards of panicked memories didn't jab at her awareness. It hurt. Thinking of him, here, lying at her feet. Bloody and dying. It hurt, but the pain felt a bit like the surgery was done, and nobody was cutting into her skin with a scalpel anymore. She was definitely breaking through.

You got some of it out, McPhantom said. That's a good start.

She rubbed her tired eyes, too exhausted to tell his hypocritical self to shut the hell up.

With a definitive nod, she pulled away from the railing. They headed to the CICU, leaving the stained grout and painful memories behind.

Maybe, this clue would lead her to Derek. Real Derek. The one who'd been absent since... Months. Real Derek, who could wrap his arms around her. Despite her simmering, distant anger at his white knight complex and the complementary sliver of hope that kept her thinking, maybe, just maybe, this was really it. He'd come riding back on his stupid horse, and all the stress of the last few months would wane.

This is the happily-ever-after, he'd said. Years ago.

Meredith's fingers clenched when she saw the empty stall where Derek had lain after surgery for two days. Empty. She couldn't take much more of this. These clues. Searching with no payoff.

Crisp, sterile white sheets marked by square-shaped crease patterns, an echo of how they'd been folded in the closet, covered the small bed. The embossed, flowery envelope Meredith had grown to expect rested by the empty pillow. Everyone gathered around the bed, and she bit her lip as she grabbed the the next clue and tore it open. Sequentially speaking, there couldn't be much more.
There just couldn't. Could there?

She supposed she would find out.

“You had your Tequila straight up,” she said, reading Derek's scrawl. “You wore a black, slinky
dress. You were just a girl in a bar, and, me, in a mess. I said something stupid, and you tried to
ignore me, but I wanted you to know me, and I said it, imploring. You took me home, and we had
a good time. It was supposed to be empty, but instead was sublime.”

When she finished reading to them, she looked up at them. “When Derek and I first met,” she said.
“It was at Joe's after the intern mixer.”

*If I know you, I'll love you,* she'd said with a chuckle, incredulous.

“I didn't want him to talk to me, but he wouldn't go away,” Meredith said.

*Hey! McPhantom* said.

“We went home together,” Meredith said with a hesitent smile, feeling a bit like sunshine had
poked its head through the clouds as she put the envelope and the card with the crumpled stack in
her side pocket. Her hand lingered on the smooth surface of the card before she let it go. A wistful
sigh escaped her lips. “Best mistake of my life,” she added in a smaller voice.

Lexie stilled. “The girl in the bar,” she said, a look of blushing mortification encroaching on her
face. “Crap. I get it, now.”

“It's okay,” Meredith said.

“Are we supposed to go across the street, then?” Mark said as he glanced at his watch, and
Meredith couldn't help a spike of excitement.

“I don't know,” Meredith said, eyes narrowing. “Are we?”

This wasn't sequential anymore. Derek had changed up the order. Rewound. Surely, this had to be
the final clue. He would be across the street, waiting for her. He could handle Joe's, now. She'd
seen him handle it. Maybe, he would be wearing his red shirt, a not-a-scotch-because-he-was-a-
recovering-addict cradled between his hands as he waited against the back wall for her to sidle to
the bar and ask Joe for not-a-tequila-because-she-was-pregnant.

Hot chocolate, she decided. Well, in Derek's cup, anyway. The idea of anything other than water
still made her stomach tremble.

She stared at Mark, waiting for an affirmative on their destination. He cleared his throat roughly
and didn't answer.

“I think we should go,” Lexie said.

Cristina nodded. “Captain Obvious thinks we should.”

“I didn't say anything,” Mark said.

“Because Captain Obvious is obvious,” Cristina said.

“Let's check it out,” Alex agreed. “We're all off shift, now, anyway, aren't we?”

Mark glanced at his watch again. “I'm not, but I don't have surgery for another forty minutes.”
As a group, they moved out of the CICU toward the front doors of the hospital through the skeletal halls. Meredith walked in front, thinking, barely listening, as the others chattered behind her.

“What surgery are you doing?” Cristina said. “The ER's been empty.”

“Deviated septum,” Mark said.

“On Sunday?” Cristina said. “At...” She glanced at her watch. “Now?”

Mark shrugged. “She asked nicely.”

“She?” Lexie said, as though the sex of the surgery candidate were important.

“Fifty percent of the population is female, you know,” Mark said.

“Actually, 50.7% if you go by the 2000 census,” Lexie said, correcting him.

Cristina shook her head. “You really disturb me, sometimes.”

The words fell into the background letter by letter, and Meredith lost track of what they said as they stepped out into the chilly, dark air. Meredith shivered. She thought about halting pursuit to run back inside to the locker room for her coat, but Derek would be at the bar, waiting for her in the warmth and bustle. Just across the street.

Her Derek.

Excitement hummed. Need sang a chorus in her bone marrow.

Need for a lot of things.

To touch and be touched.

To comfort and be comforted.

To love and be loved.

And behind all that, to yell and cry and spit and scream.

The bright bouquet of memories that he'd given her, the good, the bad, and all the rest, had stirred up all sorts of things, good and bad and all the rest. Maybe, that had been the point. That there could be good and bad and all the rest, now. She could stop refusing herself things she didn't think he could handle. She could love him and hate him and all the rest in tandem.

They were returning to normalcy.

Maybe.

Her Derek would be waiting at the bar.

No Jaws, no Jaws, no Jaws, a little voice chanted in her head.

Maybe, damn it! she wanted to insist.

Her pace became brisker as a walk became a trot. The footsteps and chatter of her friends, her family, chased after her as a trot became a run became a heedless gallop. The cold air whipped her face. At least it hadn't rained. She watched the neon green bar sign grow and grow. Emerald City
Bar.

Her Derek.

Waiting.

MaybeMaybeMaybe.

She slammed the flat of her palms against the door and shoved into the warmth and chatter and boisterous cheer. The little bell dinged over the entrance, but she lost the sound to the bedlam of life around her. Pool balls cracked. Voices simmered. Her eyes searched the crowd.

Red shirt, she thought. Red, shirt. Red... *I had my red shirt on. My good-looking red shirt. You took advantage.*

She glanced at the small, circular table she remembered sitting at with him for hours to chat when they'd first met. No red. A young, twenty-something boy wearing a Seahawks shirt.

Joe saw her standing, searching, on the welcome mat. His face brightened. He wiped his hands on a white towel and pointed with a wink to a stool by the bar. The stool where she'd sat the night she'd met Her Derek. There, taped with surgical tape to the vinyl-covered sponge of the seat, rested another envelope. She pressed forward through the crowd, relentless, and she snatched it, waiting to read the words she needed to read. The words she'd waited for this whole exhausting night.

*I'm here, Mere,* it should say. *Just turn around.*

He should be waiting in his red shirt.

But it didn't, and he wasn't.

Her friends caught up with her in moments and gathered around as she clutched the card so hard the stiff paper crumpled.

“I went to find you, and you went to find me,” she read around the disappointed lump in her throat. Her voice barely carried over the boisterous crowd, and everybody leaned closer into a tight huddle. She cleared her throat and continued, “We never crossed paths as we searched, desperately. I moped home in defeat, only to smile. From the lights on my cliff, my defeat? Worthwhile.”

“Is that the house of candles?” Lexie said. A large man with a beer belly bumped into her as he passed, and she lurched forward, blurting, “That sounds candle-y.” The man, oblivious, continued onward to a noisy group by the bar that waved at him. Mark reached to steady Lexie.

“Okay?” said Mark as she recovered her footing.

“Yeah, thanks,” Lexie said, and Mark let go. She brushed her hair out of her face. Her gaze lingered on Mark before she looked back at the group. “So, is it the candles thing?”

“But that was at his trailer,” Cristina said. “That's a long way to go to check a guess.”

Meredith turned to Mark. “Okay, enough. Where is he?”

“Derek?” Mark said. He took his palm from Lexie's shoulder like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“You came with the first envelope,” Meredith said. “You've dropped hints left and right. You clearly talked to him and planned this out. Where is he?”

Mark's mouth opened as though he intended to protest. His teeth clicked as he closed his mouth...
again. He heaved a defeated sigh. “I was really that obvious?” Mark said. “I was going for subtle.”

“Captain Obvious,” Cristina said with a definitive nod.

“Not Stealthy Tour Guide?” Mark said.

Alex clapped him on the back. “I don’t think stealthy is your strong suit, man.”

“Can I get anyone a drink?” Joe said as walked to their end of the bar. He filled a glass with a spritzer while he watched them, eyebrows raised in inquiry.

“Not tonight, Joe,” Lexie said. “Thank you.”

“Still following clues?” Joe said.

“Do you know where Derek is?” Meredith said.

Joe shook his head. “Sorry,” he said. “He came in. He taped the envelope to the stool, tipped me enough to buy a small island, and told me to make sure nobody took it but you or Mark. Then he left.”

“When?” Meredith demanded, but Joe gave her a helpless shrug. He was the first person to give solid confirmation that Derek even existed. “No idea?”

Joe shrugged. “It’s been so busy today, I didn’t even look at the time.” He picked up the glass he’d filled. “Sorry,” he said again, and he moved on to paying customers as Meredith slumped with a sigh.

This didn’t make any sense.

“He has to be here.” Meredith said. “He gave you the first note, right?”

Mark nodded. “He did.”

“So...?” Meredith prodded, an expectant look on her face.

“He wanted to get a head start,” Mark said.

“To his trailer?” Cristina said.

I don’t like the trailer anymore, Derek had said.

Meredith shook her head. “He wouldn’t go to the trailer. And the rest of the game has been here.”

“Why wouldn’t he go to his trailer?” Lexie said.

Meredith sighed. “Because he just wouldn’t.”

“But why not?” Lexie said.

“He doesn’t like his trailer anymore,” Meredith said.

Confused frowns spread like wildfire, but Meredith didn’t make any attempt to explain. For all the avenues of communication Derek had opened for her with her friends, for all he’d laid himself bare, there were some things she imagined he would still want kept private. Like the fact that he’d made the trailer into his idyllic mental escape from the real, and when she’d taken him there while he
was sick with pneumonia, it'd struck a bad chord.

_The trailer felt wrong._

“Weren't the lights on the cliff?” Cristina said.

“Yeah,” Meredith said impatiently. “So?”

“So, the trailer is not the cliff,” Cristina said.

“But it's still an hour away!” Meredith countered.

“What's your point?” Cristina said.

“It's not my point,” Meredith said. “It was your point. You said it was a long way to check a guess.”

“But I didn't say you shouldn't go if it's the right answer,” Cristina said.

Meredith threw up her hands in frustration. “Would you people make up your minds?”

“Let's take a group vote,” Lexie said.

“ Seriously?” Meredith said.

“Seriously,” Lexie said with a nod. “Raise your hand if you think it's the cliff.”

Everybody's hands shot up. Alex's. Mark's. Cristina's. Lexie's. Meredith glowered, arms folded over her chest.

“So, we have a consensus,” Lexie said.

“So, now, I'm just supposed to go to the cliff on a whim,” Meredith said.

A redhead woman wearing a micro-mini skirt, a festively red sweater with a neckline that plunged so far south it touched Antarctica, and heels that put Mount Everest to shame passed their huddle on her way to the bar. Her feet plinked against the floor, and a thick, noxious cloud of overdone perfume followed her as she leaned suggestively onto the bar and called Joe over to order a Cosmopolitan. Meredith wrinkled her nose, unable to hide her reaction as the stench made her eyes water.

“You drove your Jeep today, right?” Cristina said.

Meredith tried to answer, only to cough. Her stomach churned.

“Dude,” Alex said. “Road trip. I call shotgun.”

“It's not a whim,” Lexie said. “He said it's the cliff in his poem.”

“His _crap_ poem,” Cristina added.

“We are _not_ taking a road trip to the trailer,” Meredith managed. She pressed the back of her palm against her lips and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Why?” Alex said. “What's wrong?”

“Throwing up, now,” Meredith blurted, and before anybody could react, she darted to the
bathroom, past the reeking redhead just as she picked up her Cosmopolitan from the bar. The woman looked at Meredith, batting thick, long lashes that had to be fake, a quizzical expression on her face as though she had no idea she smelled like a freaking trash heap.

The small women's bathroom at Joe's only had a few stalls, and it didn't smell the freshest, which only made things worse. Luckily, there wasn't a line despite how busy the bar was outside. Meredith surged past the woman fixing her makeup at the mirror and into the first empty stall. She skidded to her knees on the gross floor before she lost what very little was left in her stomach.

Nobody else had reacted to Skunk Woman. Meredith supposed it was Baby's fault, and that Skunk Woman wasn't, in reality, that skunk-y. She groaned as a spasm wracked her stomach, and she puked again.

A soft knock on the side of the stall preceded a quiet, “Are you all right?”

Meredith wiped her lips with the back of her palm and looked up with watery eyes. The woman who'd been fixing her makeup stood by the open stall door, which Meredith had been in too much of a rush to close.

“I'm pregnant,” Meredith grumbled.

The woman's expression bled with solidarity. “That bastard,” she seemed to want to say, but she didn't have a chance, because Cristina pushed past her.

“I've got it,” Cristina said. She looked at Meredith. “Are you done?”

“I feel like crap,” Meredith said.

Cristina nodded. “But are you done?”

“If I throw up anymore, I'll throw up my stomach,” Meredith said with a deep, shuddering sigh. “Is that medically possible?” She rested her forehead against the cool sidewall of the stall, breathing. Her stomach kept flip-flopping, and her limbs shook.

“I don't think you can throw up your stomach,” Cristina said.

“They'll name it after me,” Meredith said. “Meredith's Expelling Innards Syndrome.”

Cristina squatted on the floor, and she wrapped an arm around Meredith's waist. They stood together, but Meredith had to stop and lean against the wall for a moment, because the room revolved around her head. Once. Twice. Lazy revolutions that made her want to toss her cookies all over again.

Through sheer stubbornness and with Cristina's help, she moved out of the bathroom stall. The woman who'd been doing her makeup stood by the open stall door, which Meredith had been in too much of a rush to close.

“Rinse and spit,” Cristina instructed.

“Wait,” Meredith said. Her stomach squeezed, and she leaned against the sink. Nothing. She shook her head. The throbbing bass of the music outside pounded against her brain almost in time with her heart. Her tongue felt thick. But... “False alarm,” she croaked. “I can't do this for seven more months. I can't. Nothing is worth all this vomit.” She took the cup, tipped it back, and swished the cool water between her teeth.
Cristina squeezed her shoulder. “You can. It is. Stop whining.”

Meredith spat the water into the sink. “I'm not whin—”

“You're whining. You get a baby out of this with the man you love.”

“But you hate babies,” Meredith said. “And Derek is mold. You said he's mold.”

Cristina shrugged. “You want a baby. You want Derek. I'm your person.”

“Can't you be supportive right now?” Meredith said wearily.

Cristina shook her head. “Letting you wallow wouldn't be supportive.”

“I don't know if I have Derek,” Meredith said. The words made her stomach quiver again. Her lower lip trembled. “I...” She blinked.

_Time out_, said McPhantom, an echo. _Take a deep breath. Just breathe._

“That's crap,” Cristina said. “You have him.”

“But he's—”

“Sick,” Cristina said. “That doesn't mean you don't have him. He's so yours it's disgusting.”

“I can't count on him. He makes me _so_ tired,” Meredith said, her voice thick with emotion. She stared at herself in the mirror. Her makeup was a mess. The shirt she wore underneath her scrubs had a funny stain on the neck from god knew what. She looked like a pasty, disgusting freak.

“So, he's not McDreamy Msaves the Day anymore,” Cristina said.

“No,” Meredith said.

Cristina looked at her in the mirror, her unblinking brown stare peeling everything away. “You're Meredith Grey. You take crap from no one. You don't need saving.”

“No,” Meredith snapped. “And it's not just that. It's...”

A lump formed in her throat. This whole freaking scavenger hunt epitomized her problem. She wanted Her Derek back, and no matter how hard she tried to find him, he just wasn't there. He wasn't able because he was sick, and she couldn't let herself hope he'd gotten better, because it would only end in heartrending disappointment. Worse, she felt like her damning assessment wasn't at all fair to him, either. He was trying.

Anger tightened underneath her skin. Her lungs squeezed all the air out, and she clenched her teeth. If he'd tried harder, though, none of this would have happened, and she wouldn't be so tired. He would have freaking asked for help, and he wouldn't have tried to fix it with pills. Fixing it with pills wasn't trying at all. It was giving up.

He'd freaking given up, and she couldn't even yell at him without risking what little traction he had...

Trapped. She was trapped, but hoping. She was loving, but hating, and it freaking. _Sucked._

Cristina nodded as though Meredith had spoken aloud, a reflective look on her face.
“Fighting sucks,” Cristina said.

“We're not fighting,” Meredith said.

“You're mad at him,” Cristina said.

“I'm not mad! I've been vomiting all day, and I'm tired, and I just want to be done with all these clues, so I can go home and sleep, assuming I can go a few hours without needing to hurl or pee.”

Cristina rolled her eyes, as if she were sick of the self-pity. “I took him on my bike,” she said. Meredith blinked. “You have a bicycle?” she said stupidly.

“No,” Cristina said. “My bike, Mere.”

Meredith gaped. “He rode your motorcycle?”

“That's what I 'did to him','” Cristina said, putting the last few words in air quotes.

“But he won't even talk about—”

“I didn't say we talked about it.”

Meredith swallowed. “How did you—”

“I insulted him. And cajoled him. We yelled at each other. He threatened to call the police to get me off the property.”

“What?” Meredith said.

Cristina shrugged. “He's still in one piece,” she said. “And he rode the bike. He was grinning like an idiot when I dropped him off in the end.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Meredith said.

“You've been pestering me all night,” Cristina said. “And I thought it might be relevant.”

Meredith sighed. Relevant how, exactly? She rubbed her eyes. She was too tired to think about this right now. Too tired for anything. If she ever found Derek, she imagined she might faint on him. Or vomit. Or... just... She blinked away the fuzzy spots her rubbing had caused. Her eyes burned.

“Can we get out of here?” Meredith said. “I need fresh air.”

Cristina nodded. Meredith wiped her eyes once more, and they exited the stuffy bathroom into the warm, energy-charged air of the outside bar. The noise made her ears tingle. She didn't head back to the bar, where she saw Lexie and Alex and Mark chatting together. She went straight outside into the dark, fresh air, which soothed her sick stomach. Cars swooshed back and forth on the road by the bar. A beige sedan idled by the curb, its tailpipe sending curly tendrils of exhaust into the chilly air.

“It's kind of amazing how much you upchuck,” Alex commented as he caught up outside.

“Thanks,” Meredith said, her voice dull.

“I really didn't think you ate that much,” he said.
“I don’t,” Meredith replied. “Courtesy of the barfing.”

“Still—”

“Alex?” Meredith said, interrupting.

His head cocked to the side as he peered at her. “Yeah?”

“Shut up,” she said tiredly, and he did.

Lexie and Mark joined Meredith on her left. They formed a line on the sidewalk.

“Well, now what?” Lexie said.

“We were discussing a road trip,” Alex said.

“A road trip that I vetoed,” Meredith said. The idea of driving for over an hour to get to Derek's land, only to discover she'd guessed wrong... Her head throbbed just thinking about it.

A quiet honk drew her gaze to the left. Meredith blinked against the glare of the headlights. Maybe, somebody needed directions. She didn't feel like giving anybody directions. Or talking at all. But the good Samaritan in her veins wouldn't let her leave somebody stranded. She sidestepped and peered into the car.

Chief Webber peered back from behind the steering wheel. The window rolled down, and a blast of warm air laved her face.

“Well?” Chief said. “Hop in.”

“Hop in?” Meredith said.

Chief nodded. “Into the car,” he said reasonably.

“You need a ride, don't you?”

“You do?” she said.

Chief nodded. “To Derek's land.”

Her head spun. Derek had gotten Chief Webber to play chauffeur for this? He'd... Was he really at the cliff like everybody insisted?

_I told you I wanted to make new memories there with you_, McPhantom said. _With you. Please, go._

“You owe us details when you get back,” Lexie said softly beside her.

“What if it's more sex?” Alex interjected.

Lexie shook her head. “Not those details.”

“Yes,” Cristina said. “Spare us the McSex illustrations.”

A looming shadow stepped in front of Meredith while her tired brain failed to process. Mark. He reached for the rear door handle and yanked. The cabin light in the car popped on, bathing the inside of the vehicle in dim light. A warm, cushy leather seat revealed itself. For a moment, all
thoughts of Derek and the scavenger hunt aside, Meredith saw “chair” and wanted to sit. That was the only complete thought that entered her head until Mark squeezed her shoulder and rubbed her arm. Just like Derek when he wanted to make her feel better.

“I think you should go,” Mark said, eyes twinkling.

She swallowed. “He's really there?”

“Really there,” Mark said, nodding.

“This is the last one?”

Mark smiled. “Last one.”

“And you knew all along,” Meredith said.

“In case you got stuck,” Mark said.

“Stuck?” Meredith said. “On his crappy poems?”

“He's a doctor, Jim,” Mark said. “Not a poet.”

“You did not just Star Trek me,” Meredith said.

“Why don't you go see what he has in mind?” Mark said. He handed her the final envelope with the card neatly tucked inside. She hadn't even realized she'd dropped it on her mad dash to the bathroom, courtesy of the mad dashing.

“But—” Meredith said as her fingers closed instinctively around the envelope.

“Group vote!” Lexie said, clapping her hands. “Who thinks Meredith should go see what Derek has in mind?”

As if there needed to be a vote. The seat called to Meredith like a siren. She inched forward.

Everybody raised their hands around her. Including the Chief.

Sit down, Meredith, said McPhantom. Relax. It's okay. No Jaws. I rode a motorcycle, you know.

“The majority has spoken,” Lexie said definitively.

I'll be with you soon, he said.

Her Derek.

Maybe.

Yes.

“But I'm still in my dirty scrubs, I look like a scarecrow, and I feel like crap,” Meredith said. To him. Them. No one.

“I think he gets the potential conditions of your arrival,” Mark said.

Lexie gave her a little push. “Go on, Mere,” her half-sister said. “Let me live vicariously. Please?”

Meredith collapsed into the back seat with a sigh. Her lab coat slid across the leather. She pulled her seatbelt over her shoulder and across her lap. The door slammed shut beside her, and the cabin
light winked out. She frowned at the Chief, who sat up front at the steering wheel, diagonal from her.

“I feel like Miss Daisy or something,” Meredith grumbled.

“I don't think Miss Daisy had as much awesome sex in inappropriate places,” Alex said, leaning against the open window.

The Chief cleared his throat.

Alex shrugged.

“Well then,” Chief said.

Cristina turned to Mark as the Chief rolled up his window. “Hey, can I get in on your deviated septum?” was the last thing Meredith heard from the outside world, and then everything collapsed into a relaxing hush. Everybody waved at her until they disappeared around the corner as the car moved, and then she was alone with Chief Webber. Meredith could barely resist the urge to close her eyes and let herself finally, for once in the past five months, be taken care of. The Chief was more of a father to her than Thatcher had ever been.

“Shall we?” Chief said, looking into the rear-view mirror at her.

“I guess,” Meredith said. She closed her eyes. “Do you know what Derek has planned?”

“I'm supposed to drive you to his land,” the Chief said.

“And that's it?” Meredith said.

“That's it,” the Chief replied.

“You don't even have a teensy tiny hint?” Meredith said.

Chief shook his head. “Not one.”

“Damn it,” Meredith said. She sighed as she felt the car rumble and move into the night, leaving her friends behind. She cradled her stomach in her arms. At least the Chief's car didn't smell. It was the first not-smelly place she'd been since she'd gotten to work, and she breathed deeply. Her body ached, and her brain felt like cotton, but at least she was sitting, and that was simply...

Nirvana.

The air burst in a warm rush around her as Chief fiddled with the blowers. “Comfy?”

“You've clearly never been pregnant,” Meredith grumbled.

Silence became static became smooth jazz. “Is this good?” Chief said.

Meredith glanced through her eyelashes in him. He had his hand on the radio dial. She didn't want music at all, or conversing in general, but he was trying hard, and he was taking about three hours out of his night to drive out to Derek's and back. “I guess,” she said.

“There's water in the cooler in the back seat if you're thirsty.”

“Chief?” she said, sitting up. She rubbed her eyes. “I'm really not Miss Daisy.”
“Sorry,” he rushed to say. “I was playing roles.”

“Role-playing,” Meredith said.

He nodded. “Yes.”

“No, I mean...” She shook her head. The car pulled up to a stop light she didn't recognize in the dark. “Never mind.”

Silence stretched. The car turned right.

“I uh...” He cleared his throat. “I'm proud of you.”

“Proud...” Meredith blinked. “What?”

“The way you've been holding things together,” he said. The car sliced through the darkness. “With work, and with Derek, and with the baby. I never could manage that with Adele, even without a baby.”

“Oh.” She didn't know what to say to that. She settled on an awkward, “Thanks.”

More silence.

“Derek seems to be doing better,” Chief said after a long while.

Meredith frowned. She wasn't sure how much he knew. How much Derek had told him.

“Um. He is,” she decided on saying.

More silence. More darkness. She began to wonder how wise this had been, subjecting herself to over an hour of being an awkward fake-daughter, no matter how comfortable the seat, no matter the prospect of seeing Derek at the end of this.

“Have you picked a name?” Chief said, oblivious to her concerns.

“We've talked about it a little,” Meredith said, unable to stop a hesitant smile. “Anne was the last thing we agreed on. For a girl.”

“Is it a girl?” Chief said.

Meredith rubbed her lower abdomen, staring down at herself. “I think so, but we don't know, yet. First appointment is tomorrow.”

“You should drink lots,” Chief said.

Meredith blinked. “Um.”

“Water. Drink lots of water.” His fingers squeaked against the steering wheel as he wrung it, and he stared straight ahead at the dark road. “Before your appointment. I heard they need your... that to see... so they can see... so it's better.” He stumbled all over his attempt to avoid mentioning specific parts of her anatomy, such as bladder or uterus. A full bladder meant a good picture of her uterus. He finally settled on, “If you're full down there, the picture is better. I think.”

“Thanks,” Meredith said as a soft, wry grin snuck up on her. “I'll keep that in mind.”

The Chief seemed to run out of things to say, then. Her exhaustion, the soft thrum of the engine,
the darkness, and the intervening verbal silence joined forces. She closed her eyes again.

The night became a labyrinth of dreams.

_Meredith realized she'd gotten used to minor, habitual jealousy whenever she stepped across the threshold of her house and once again found Derek absent despite his SUV parked outside. When he didn't come to greet her, it usually meant he was sleeping, which was what she'd wanted to be doing for the last several hours. Pregnancy didn't mix well with residency. The long shifts were slowly killing her, and she wasn't even showing yet._

_Lexie and Alex were both still working._

“Hello?” Meredith called quietly enough that it wouldn’t carry upstairs through a closed door as she set her purse down on the table by the door. Jealousy aside, he did need the sleep. Which frustrated her a little. She felt a bit like a bad person for being jealous of something he needed, and feeling like a bad person made her grumpy. Well, grumpier.

“In here,” Derek called, and, pleasantly surprised, she followed his voice to the right. To his office.

_He sat in the big leather recliner in the corner of his office next to a floor lamp, wrapped in an orange thermal blanket. Samantha slept on the floor by his feet. He held a long, brownish-greenish box that looked like it’d been built for cataloging index cards or something, and it rested cupped in its larger lid. A long line of cards – photos, she realized as she moved closer – filled the box’s innards._

“You're still up,” she said as she glanced at the wall clock, which read 11:00 PM. She'd had a long shift.

_He looked up from his bounty and stared at her with half-lidded eyes that spoke of encroaching lethargy. A lazy smile stretched across his face._

“I wanted to see you before I went to bed,” he said, his warm, affectionate expression so infectious she found herself relaxing just by looking at him.

_She loved it when he smiled like that. She'd missed it a lot until recently, when he'd started taking the Paxil. She'd first started noticing the smiles returning on their vacation to the lake two weeks before. His burgeoning good cheer was difficult to get used to again, and still very hard to trust, given his rampant mood swings._

_Still..._  

_Just seeing you makes me happy, said his gaze._

_Maybe it was the soft lamplight giving him an extra touch of... whatever had been missing._

_He looked..._  

_He just looked better._

_No dark circles hugged the skin underneath his eyes. No strange tension held him stiff and alert for danger. He didn’t fidget or tremble. His pallor was a rich, ripe peach color, rather than chalk from fear or nerves._

“You look so good,” she blurted before she had a chance to rein herself in.
She didn’t want to jinx it. That was the last thing she wanted. But the way the world went these days, the way he went with his dizzying yo-yos from one extreme to the next, happy one moment, freaking out the next, or having some new crisis, saying anything could jinx it. Would jinx it. She thought of their vacation to Lake Cushman, when he’d been fine in the car, and then ferociously staving off a panic attack a few minutes later because he’d heard a twig snap in the dark outside. Her fingers clenched. Anything could set him off, really. Worse, though, was the fact that she couldn’t predict what would or wouldn’t.

If he noticed her sudden trepidation, he didn’t speak of it. His smile narrowed into something sly.

“I’m working the new blanket fashion,” he said. “Tell me, is orange my color?”

She giggled, and her bad mood faded somewhat. “You’re such a goof.”

A month ago, he wouldn’t have made a joke. A month ago, he would have taken that and turned it into moping over the fact that he’d looked bad before, if she was noticing he looked good, now.

He winked. “Does it pop? Or should I go with blue next time?”

She regarded him for a moment, hardly able to keep a straight face. The burnt orange color of the blanket was a bit of a clashing disaster with his maroon t-shirt. He could make a lot of things look good, but that wasn’t one of them.

“Always go with blue,” she said.

The thermal blanket rustled as he shifted in the chair, set the photo box on the end table, and motioned her closer. She took his invitation and collapsed into his warm embrace. Her lower body slid into the gap he made between his hip and the arm of the chair. It was a tight fit, but they did fit nonetheless. The ghastly thermal blanket wrapped around her, and then he cradled her in her arms. She pressed her ear against the soft cotton of his t-shirt, sighing, and pressed her nose against the blanket. She felt a bit like a burrito. He kissed her. But a very loved burrito, at least.

“How are you?” he said.


“I’m sorry this is so rough for you.”

“I’d say it’s not your fault, but...” She grinned tiredly. “It kind of is.”

He snickered, and he kissed her, but he didn’t argue. Samantha, mid-dream, moaned and rolled over, displaying her russet-colored underbelly to the ceiling. Derek squeezed Meredith’s shoulder and rubbed her arm lengthwise. She couldn’t help but relax further.

“Can I get you anything?” he said. “Pancakes? Pickles? Pickles and pancakes?”

She laughed. “Just stay,” she said, drifting. “S’nice.”

“Okay,” he said.

Silence stretched, and she listened to the slow rasp of his warm hand sliding along her arm. This was unreal. She’d missed it...

Minutes passed. Samantha snored a little, but Meredith focused on Derek’s heartbeat through his chest wall, and she got lost in that. The thump of his heart was slow and healthy and soothing,
caught in the deep rush of his breathing. Her fingers scrunched up some of his shirt, and she inhaled, lost in the quiet warmth, listening to him be alive.

“What were you looking at when I walked in?” she murmured sleepily against him.

“I found a picture of my dad for you,” he said. Though he spoke quietly, with her ear to his chest, he sounded booming. “I knew I had one somewhere. I found it in the closet in here.”

She snapped awake from his hypnotic soothing and stared at him. He didn't touch the subject of his dad without prodding, and usually when he did, the discussion was rife with scary memories of watching a gruesome murder. Just the mention of his dad lately was enough to send him down the rabbit hole of some bad memory, and she'd learned to stay far, far away. Except... Stark blue stared back at her without a hint of moping, wallowing, or otherwise negativity.

He sure didn't seem upset...

“What prompted that?” she said, unable to hold back suspicion from her tone.

He shrugged, and if he heard her concern, he didn't seem to pay it any mind. “You asked what he looked like a while ago. I was just thinking about it today and thought you might like to see a picture.”

“You were just thinking about it,” she said flatly. She couldn't hold back disbelief. She just couldn't.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Why were you 'just thinking about it’?”

He shrugged. “I saw one of the neighbors out walking with his kids. It made me think of Dad. That's all.”

Her eyes narrowed. “That's all?”

His happy look began to crack around the edges. Tension washed into her frame like the crash of a wave. This was it. The part where he would freak out.

Except he didn't. He didn't freak out.

“Meredith,” he said, the word soft, “I'm really okay right now.”

“But—”

“Did you want to see the picture?” he said, interrupting her before she had a chance to spiral further into worries and doubts.

“I do,” she said. “I mean I do,” she said more forcefully. She sat up and brushed scraggles of hair out of her face. “I'm sorry.”

His hand squeezed around her shoulder, firm, reassuring. He reached for the picture box and drew it into their laps. He pulled out the first photograph from the entire stack, several hundred photos in all. The photo was sepia-toned. Slightly faded.

Meredith gasped. She was looking at a younger Derek. Other than the straight nose and a slightly fuller face, she could have sworn it.
“He does look like you,” she exclaimed as she took the picture from his hand and leaned closer to inspect it.

Michael Shepherd had a killer smile. Just like Derek’s. He stood with his foot propped against the shiny bumper of some old car. Meredith didn’t know enough about cars to identify the vehicle, but the way he preened for the camera, she imagined it might be a sports car of some sort. An old Mustang or something. Who knew? His dark hair was cropped short, but she could identify enough wave to it that she imagined it would curl explosively just like Derek’s if it were longer.

“What’s he doing in this picture?” Meredith said.

Derek looked at it. His expression grew distant. “I don’t know. I think that was from before I was born.”

“He liked this car a lot,” Meredith said.

“He didn’t have it when I was growing up,” Derek said. “At least not that I remember.”

Meredith glanced at him. “You should ask your mom. I bet she’d know.”

“Maybe, when she visits for the wedding,” Derek said.

Meredith sighed and leaned against him. She held the picture up to the light, above them, and she stared. Her heart squeezed, just over the fact that he’d dug it out for her. That he was sharing it with her. Despite all the badness it could have roiled up.

“I wish I remembered more,” he said, musing. “It’s just been so long.”

She splayed a palm against his stomach and rubbed up to his chest and back down to his navel. He shifted, and he held her closer. “Tell me something you haven’t told me about him,” she said.

“He took me to see the Yankees play every year on my birthday starting when I was ten.”

“So, you’re a Yankees fan,” Meredith said. “I was trying to figure it out.”

He grinned. “Yes. I remember sitting behind the dugout. Me and Mark and Dad. Dad would buy us cotton candy and hotdogs and Mom would hate it when we got home because we’d be hyper.”

She touched the picture box with her fingertips. It was old and worn, and in the soft lamplight, seemed an odd between of brown and green. She imagined it might have been vibrant green years ago, and the color had faded over time and heavy use.

“Can I look at the rest of these?” Meredith said, her tone soft, almost reverent, at being presented with such a thorough treasure trove of memories. He answered questions when she asked, but this was like having an open book, waiting to be read. No questions were necessary when there were so many answers sitting right there.

“Sure,” he said with a small nod.

She started at the back and pulled a small section of photographs loose from the stack.

For a brief moment, unexpected surprise overruled all else. Addison. In her wedding gown. A slender white thing with lace and stuff Meredith wouldn’t be caught dead wearing. Ever. Except when Izzie had forced her, anyway. He kept pictures of Addison. For a moment, Meredith didn’t know what to say.
“I’m sorry,” he said quickly, bristling, as if he’d read her mind. “I forgot those were in there.”

But she shook her head. He was alive. Alive and hers. He’d lived over eleven years of his life with another woman. Divorcing Addison didn’t mean he wanted to obliterate her existence. He’d loved her once. Of course, he would keep pictures. It wasn’t remotely fair to expect him not to.

“I’m okay,” she said with a sincere smile.

Derek raised no further protest. With his tacit approval, even with Addison staring her in the face, she didn’t feel like she was intruding. She kept looking.

She skipped through the wedding photos, past Addison, and then Derek and Addison, and other photos of people she didn’t recognize at all – probably Addison’s family – until she found Derek smiling back at her, removed from Addison’s orbit. He and Mark stood side by side in black tuxes and snappy-looking maroon cummerbunds. They stood on the steps of a church she didn’t recognize. She grinned, remembering the sight of him in his morning coat, courtesy of Izzie’s wedding planning. Derek really could work a suit like a model, even though he didn’t like them.

“Oh, you looked pretty dapper or whatever,” she said, as she flicked the edge of the photo with her thumb. “So did Mark.”

Derek didn’t speak. She leaned against his warm body, and she kissed him on the side of the cheek. His bewildered expression didn’t leave him. Like he didn’t know what to do with this Meredith, who felt secure enough to be staring at his old photos of a wedding to another woman without jealousy or feelings of inadequacy.

It’d all come together for her recently. On the way home from the hospital after he’d been shot. Human life was so freaking ephemeral. His life was ephemeral. She didn’t want to waste what she had with him or ignore part of his history. Not anymore. Never again. If she ignored eleven years of his life, she would be ignoring a lot of him, and she wanted the whole package.

“I love you,” she said.

He looked at her. He looked like he wanted to say a thousand things right then, but couldn’t find the presence of mind to separate his babbling thoughts and create verbal coherence. “You know I love you, too,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

She nodded. “I do.”

Mental disease or no, that was one thing he’d always done well. Let her know of his adoration. All the time.

She settled into his warm arms, sighing. She put the wedding photos back into the box with care, and she looked through the rest of the photos in front of them. There were pictures of his mother. His aunts and uncles. His sisters. His nieces. His nephews. His grandparents. A whole buffet of his extended family. A few more of Addison. And Mark. Derek patiently stepped her through the whole pile, until it got to the point that all she had to do was hold up a photo for him, and he would enter into a narrative to explain who was in the photo, where it’d been taken, and what was going on in it.

When she reached the end, she felt both sated and disappointed. Sated that she’d learned so much. Disappointed that there wasn’t more. She set the box on the end table, and then she kissed him, and he kissed her, and the dog on the floor continued to snore. He held her close, and a lump formed in her throat. Maybe, he really was getting better. Really, really, if he could go through three-
hundred photos of his past life and be fine about it.

“We should take more photos,” he said as he stared into space.

“Why?” she said.

They'd never been much for smiling for cameras. Or, maybe, that was her fault. She wasn't Queen Polaroid or anything. Why create memories of things she didn't want to remember? Except lately, that hadn't been as true. She'd been happier. Since she'd gotten her job at Seattle Grace and found him and Cristina and everybody else.

“They're nice to have,” he said. “I wish I had more of Dad.” He looked at her starkly. “You should have at least one of me. Just in case.”

She frowned, looking back at him. He still seemed fine. Maybe, a little morbid. But... reflective. Reflective was good. Wasn't it? It meant he'd started processing things without a heaping portion of terror. He'd started to assimilate what had happened to him in a healthy way. Right?

For some reason, telling herself what he'd said was good didn't quite make her believe it. The subject matter was too freaking dicey, and with him... she just didn't know for sure if he couldn't do dicey until he couldn't do it. She swallowed, wishing she had Dr. Wyatt coaching her over her shoulder.

“I'd like one of you,” he said softly.

She swallowed. “I'm not photogenic.”

“You're beautiful,” he said. “Anytime, anywhere, anyplace. In any lighting.”

She grinned cautiously. “Smooth,” she said.

He met her grin with one of his own, and she relaxed. Skirting around morbidity, and still smiling. That had to be good. Despite her niggling doubts, she couldn't help but acknowledge that.

“We'll get pictures at city hall,” she said. “For our not-wedding wedding.”

He kissed her. “Okay,” he said.

And that was that. It didn't seem like it should be that, but it was. She stayed in his arms for a long while, cuddling. Well past bedtime. He seemed better today, but she couldn't help but think of storm clouds, looming black and ominous on the horizon, rumbling with distant thunder. He seemed better today, but she wasn't willing to believe it would last until tomorrow. He seemed better today, and she took comfort in that while she could.

It wasn't perfect, because she knew what could happen. What would happen, eventually, when he had a bad morning or something.

But it was better than nothing.

The world shifted, and dreams of Derek's arms wrapped around her as they cuddled in his recliner became a seatbelt stretched across her lap and shoulder. She woke up with her face pasted against the cold glass of the window. Gravel crunched under the tires of the car. Pocks and pits in the road made them jounce and bounce back and forth on the car's shocks. Pitch black blanketed the outside world, though she thought she saw the blur of bushes. Or trees. Some type of plant life.
She blinked. The last comforts of her wonderful dream dispersed, leaving her wanting. Needing.

She needed Derek. More than anything.

But despite that positive swell in her heart, the negative swirled in her gut. She had no idea what she would say to him. Or how this would go. Somewhere between the first clue and the last one, she'd found her path on the edge of a razor, and she felt like she was a hair's width away from slipping off into... something. She didn't know what.

Something bad, a voice whispered. You can't stuff it all in anymore.

“Where are we?” Meredith said, trying not to sound too desperate or anxious as she shoved her tumultuous thoughts away. With sleep still raspy in her throat, she sounded a bit like she'd just overcome a cold. She swallowed and blinked as she wiped away the drool that had collected on her lip. She surreptitiously wiped the spit spot off the upholstery with the arm of her lab coat. The thing was scuzzy and stained, anyway. Drool wouldn't matter.

“Almost there,” Chief Webber said over the rumble of earth underneath them.

True to his word, the bleak black tunnel opened up as the overhanging eves of some-type-of-plant became empty space, and she recognized the clearing and the last stretch of driveway toward Derek's trailer. A blanket of stars speckled the sky overhead as though someone had scattered chips of glass on black pavement. What caught her attention, though, wasn't that or the curving sliver of silver moon hanging overhead. She'd been to Derek's land enough that the amazing natural lights, this far removed from the city's light pollution, didn't catch her eye unless she had a mind to stargaze, and she didn't tonight.

There was something wrong ahead. Or, well, not wrong. New. Strange. A rainbow of color made a bright spot on the distant horizon. Reds, greens, blues, yellows, all compacted into a nuclear pinprick of brilliance.

She squinted at it. What on earth was that?

A UFO was her first wild thought. A UFO had landed on the cliff. The universe knew she needed Derek soon – now! now, now, now – and so it'd sent a UFO to abduct him. She'd never finish the freaking scavenger hunt, and she'd never find Derek, and she'd be all alone, hopeless, abandoned, while Derek would suffer life as a lab rat on the planet Shazbot or whatever.

She shook her head. Exhaustion made her brain do funny, illogical, anxious things. She searched her mind for a more terrestrial explanation, but her tired neurons were running on empty, and she couldn't think of anything. More thoughts made her think she might break her brain, anyway.

She rubbed the bridge of her nose.

Derek's trailer slid past in the murky darkness on the left, and she tensed. Would he be there? No, she thought, not with his recently developed aversion to it. He'd be somewhere else on the land. Maybe, by the lake next to a roaring campfire, or... Her gaze snapped back to the trailer, and she made an anxious appraisal of the hulking vehicle anyway. The windows were dark, and there was no telltale black SUV parked out front.

Okay, then.

She swallowed against the lump in her throat as she thought of the last time she'd been here. The day had been idyllic, weather-wise, but Derek had been sick, and enduring the bumpy gravel drive of the hill had hurt him. Badly. He hadn't been able to enjoy the lake. He'd barely been able to
The car kept moving past the trailer, and the nuclear pinprick she’d spotted on the horizon became a bigger dot became a small box. The gravel underneath them became a smooth, paved road that hadn't been there before. Why was there a random paved road on Derek's land? Where had that come from?

They couldn't have been going more than five or ten miles an hour as they crept along. She unlatched the seatbelt and slid across the warm leather to the center of the seat. She leaned forward, staring through the front windshield as the Chief continued down the narrow black road.

Her breaths shortened as the bright thing got even bigger, becoming a hefty-sized landmark, and the colors separated into distinct points of light. Her fingers clenched as her thoughts worked through molasses. That was not a UFO. She could have kicked herself for not thinking of it sooner, but... Neurons. Limping, tired souls, they were.

“When,” was all she managed, her voice barely escaping her throat. “When... when.”

The car rolled to a stop, and all she could do was gape. The car's engine idled for a moment, and then the Chief turned his key in the ignition. Silence gripped her as the engine cut off.

“That looks really classy,” said Chief Webber.

“And...” Meredith swallowed. “Done.”

The house.

Her and Derek's house.

Their house.

The one that had been a pile of plywood back in June when Derek had been so sick.

At the end of a curving sidewalk, next to a closed, three car garage, two stories of cheerful red brick loomed. Black shutters hugged each of the nine front windows, five across the top floor, and four across the bottom, divided by the door, which had a shiny brass knocker. Something hung from the doorknob, and a tiny white square had been stuck to the door next to the knocker. Another ferryboat card in an envelope?

And there were lights. Red and green and blue and yellow. Christmas lights, though it wasn't Christmas. Wasn't even close. But did it matter? The lights crept up the gutter spouts. They hung from the gutter like colored icicles. Smaller sets wrapped over the doorway and the garage and framed each window with bright color.

The metaphorical razor edge underneath her seemed to shake, and she almost tripped into the abyss. Her chest squeezed like it would crush her. She inhaled and exhaled, but it didn't help the unsettled mix of euphoria and swirling... bad things. But this wasn't bad. This was... What was wrong with her?

“When?” Meredith said once again. It was the only word she could find as she blinked at the spectacle.

Though the lights were beautiful, she couldn't help but notice that the house had no interior light. No warm yellow glow beyond the glass panes that told her Derek would be waiting inside, sipping hot chocolate by the fireplace or something. Trepidation coiled in her stomach underneath the
frantic pounding of her heart as she looked back at the little white square on the door.

Please, please, please, not another freaking clue to solve.

She couldn't take anymore thinking tonight.

She couldn't take anymore anything tonight.

“Houses go up pretty fast,” the Chief said. “It's the guts that are complicated.”

“It's not done?” Meredith said.

Chief shook his head. “Not the inside.”

But if the inside wasn't done... where was Derek?

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to refuse herself any worry until it was warranted, but she'd been deprived of him all day. Led down miles of hallways, chasing after memories and phantoms. Exhaustion clogged every pore. And then there was the whole thing with the razor edge. She was rubbed raw. Questions played bumper cars in her head. They all hopped out of her mouth, unbidden, the moment her brain unclogged.

“Is this really the end of the game? Where is Derek, exactly? Why is there another envelope taped on the door if it's the end? What's that other thing there on the doorknob? What's not done inside, yet? Are they going to pave the rest of the road so it's less horrible for recent gunshot victims? We need plants or something to decorate the front walk. I thought we had a landscaper hired. When did Derek do this? How did he do this? He can't climb ladders or reach—”

Fuzzy spots began to form in her vision. Endless words ceased as she sucked in a breath.

The leather seat squeaked as Chief Webber shifted to peer at her. His gaze twinkled with Christmas light colors, as though he were somehow amused by Meredith's litany. Did you even take a breath? Derek, grinning, asked her that all the time when she got on a babbling tear. Her heart throbbed in her ears like a nervous drumbeat.

“Derek would be a better person to ask,” the Chief said.

“But where is he?” Meredith snapped, at her wit's end.

“I guess you'll just have to see,” Chief said.

She couldn't take it anymore. She scrabbled across the seat, grabbed the door handle, pushed, and launched into the crisp, damp air like a rocket. She made it about twenty feet down the brick walkway before she halted, spun on the balls of her feet, and ran back to the car.

The Chief rolled down his window, a quizzical look on his face as she barreled toward him.

“Thank you very much for the ride,” she blurted.

He opened his mouth, but before he had a chance to respond, she whirled around again and galloped toward the door. The white square got bigger and bigger. This one wasn't an envelope or a card. Just a Post-it. She yanked open the storm door and pulled the note from the front door.

“Turn me on,” the Post-it said.

“I'd love to, Derek, but you're not here,” she snarked at nobody in particular as she grabbed the
thing hanging from the doorknob. A plastic Safeway bag containing a...? Plastic crinkled as she rifled frantically through the bag. A flashlight rested within. A big one that probably took D batteries. She flicked the switch, turned the doorknob, and plowed over the threshold, her breath caught in her throat.

She sighed at what she saw, both irritated and touched all at once – how was that possible? – when she saw a trail of LED lanterns leading out of the dark maw of their unfinished foyer and up a wide staircase. She swept the beam of the flashlight across the big entryway. The floor wasn't done. It was supposed to be tiled, but it was solid white, and big stacks of 12x12 travertine tiles rested by the wall. An uncovered electrical outlet left a bump on the unpainted wall. A coat closet with no door installed formed a dark alcove on the right, but what she saw in the glow of her flashlight made a giant soccer ball lump form in her throat, so big she couldn't even swallow as her eyes pricked.

Derek's black wool trench coat hung from a single hanger on the unpainted dowel rod, and his black Nike duffel bag rested on the floor. Some other things rested in a pile. Boxes. Empty boxes of Christmas lights, she realized, among other miscellaneous refuse.

“Derek?” she called into the darkness. God, her voice sounded broken. *She* sounded broken.

Her voice echoed in the cold, still air.

No answer echoed back.

“You'd better freaking *be* here,” she said more softly, her voice cracking. “Please.”

She closed the door behind her and followed the trail of LED lanterns into the guts of the house, careful to watch her step. She gripped the wooden banister and climbed the staircase, wishing she could run and rush, but forcing herself to take her time as she picked her way through the lantern-dotted dark. She passed by the upstairs hallway bathroom which, when she flicked the flashlight beam into it, showed more unfinished tiles. What she hadn't expected to see, though, were the two towels that hung from the rack on the wall. Derek's razor, a bottle of aftershave, a tube of toothpaste, and a toothbrush rested on the lip of the sink.

The puzzle over why he'd chosen this bathroom instead of the one in the master bedroom, where the lanterns appeared to lead, became lost in a swell of joy and relief. He was here. He was here, he was here. She began to chant the words in her head.

His Cayenne must have been parked in the garage, hidden from plain view.

When she made it to the bedroom, she couldn't force herself to move slowly or pay attention to the setup inside. There was a mattress laid out. Some other things. Details flew past, and she ceased interpretation of anything inside the house.

What caught her eye was the wide set of open sliding glass doors at the end of the large room. The doors led out onto a big balcony. Next to a small wicker table with another glowing LED lantern, sat a scoop chair. In that scoop chair, wrapped in a fluffy down comforter, was Derek, staring at the scattered glass stars overhead as a cool breeze ruffled his hair.

She must have made noise. Her feet. Shuffling. Something.

He turned.

Their eyes met.
All of his features crinkled into a big, bright smile that gripped his eyes and turned up his lips, and her heart fell into jagged pieces, because she didn't think she'd seen him smile like that in forever plus eternity, and because it was him, finally him, and because all the stress of trying to find him when she needed him so badly imploded into nothing, and because of a thousand other bits and pieces of emotions and dreams and hopes and thoughts and worries jabbed into her like splinters.

“Hey,” he said, his voice soft and purring and happy and just... Her Derek. “You made it.”

The everything-falling-apart feeling of her heart overwhelmed her. What had been pricking, watering eyes became a blinding deluge. She dropped the flashlight. She ran to him through a blur of everything's-too-much tears, and she collapsed into his arms.


The fluffy comforter folded over her shaking limbs. It was already toasty, because he'd been heating it with his own skin. She pressed her nose against the black wool fuzz of his sweater, and she cried. Like a freak. All over him. In his arms. Dressed in a scuzzy, stained lab coat and dirty scrubs. After he'd planned a cheesy romantic evening all for her. And he'd smiled like Her Derek. Like he was better. Like he was...

“Shh,” he said against her ear, like Her Derek, and the brilliant overhead world of open sky and the beautiful below of world valley lights beyond the balcony shrunk to a pinprick and disappeared behind a wall of stupid, hormonal tears.

He was there. She was there. Nobody else was there.

“It's okay,” he said in that soft, lilting voice that forced all but the most hysterical people to believe him deep into the marrow of their bones. He was there, said his tone. Her Derek. It would be okay. Her knight in shining whatever.

She wanted to believe him. She wanted it so much. She could almost pretend he wasn't sick when he did things like this. When he was strong and supportive and calm. Except he was sick. He was.

And believing him would only make the moment this illusion shattered even worse if she didn't get a freaking grip. Except she'd waited so long for even a hint of this. And they had a house. And he'd planned, and...

“Shh,” he soothed.

The interior of the comforter smelled like his spicy aftershave. The nice stuff he wore when they did romantic things. The bottle had been sitting on the sink in the bathroom.

She couldn't. Stop. Crying.

“Meredith, what on earth is wrong?” he said, his tone concerned. Concerned for her. Not stuck in his own little world of hurt and stress and Gary Clark and his stupid gun. In that moment, Derek was all about her, and there was no Gary Clark.

She couldn't remember the last time he'd been all about her without the flash of gunfire haunting the back of his psyche.

Tears streaked down her face. She shook her head, unable to do much else as his firm hands ran up and down her arms in a soothing wash of sensation. “Nothing,” she managed. Her nose ran. Snot pooled. On his freaking sweater. She wiped her face and held her hands there, unwilling to look at him and see him staring at her with fathomless, concerned eyes that didn't care about snot. Only her.
Her Derek.

She couldn't do this. Her chest quivered, and she fell apart all over again.

“Meredith...” he said.

She scrunched some of his sweater in her fingertips. “I can't find the shark.”

Silence pressed against her. For a heartbeat. And then he kissed the top of her head. The comforter crinkled. He stopped with the soothing rubbing, and he pulled her tightly into his arms. Like he didn't really care about the fact that she'd been completely nonsensical. Only that what she'd said was important to her, and it'd obviously made her upset.

“They're usually not this far inland,” he said. Calm. Rational. Soothing.

Her lower lip quivered. She liked it. Liked the unyielding feeling of him wrapped around her like a shield from the world. She hated that she liked it so much. Hated how much she wanted to believe that she would come out of this in one piece. That she wouldn't end up being slowly digested in the stomach of a giant Stephen Spielberg nightmare.

“You decorated our house, which is kind of done but not really,” she said. Babbled. And he listened. “And you wrote crappy poems. And planned a romantic game for me. And you're here. And smiling. And you look perfect. And I can't find the shark. Where's the freaking shark, Derek?”

“Mere, I...” He sighed, and she looked up at him. Confusion. Slathered all across his face like shaving cream or something. He frowned. “I want to help,” he said, “but isn't that all good?”

“No!” Meredith said without thinking as her fatigued restraint broke entirely. “It's horrible!”

He flinched like she'd slapped him. The movement was barely noticeable. She wouldn't have noticed at all, if he hadn't been wrapped around her, body to body as though they were one. He blinked and swallowed and looked away for a moment, like she'd hurt his feelings. She'd only meant the shark. Not the scavenger hunt. She hadn't meant to... Regret squeezed.

And that was when she slipped off the razor edge.

The pile of me, me, me, what about me? she'd shoved away for months bowled her over. God, she was so tired. And tired of worrying about everything she said and how he would take it, and everything that happened, and how he would take that. She stuck her foot in her mouth all the time, and it'd never been a problem before he'd gotten shot. Before he'd started lying, and he'd left her. He'd always just laughed, before.

“I'm sorry,” he said, his voice thick with... some emotion. Something bad. Something that inexplicably irritated her. “I thought it would be fun for you. I thought...”

His voice trailed away, leaving them with strained silence. The Jaws theme wouldn't stop playing in her head. He was upset. She'd hurt him. Knocked him out of his happy, shiny, fake Her Derek pattern.

There was a freaking shark. She only had to prove it.

“You sent me to the catwalk,” she snapped.

He looked like he didn't know what to do with that. At all. “I wanted to thank you...” he said, his tone helpless.
"I don't want your thanks," she said nastily. "I didn't want to be on the catwalk." She'd watched him get shot. And he'd nearly died. Right in front of her. And she'd— "I don't want to remember you nearly dying. I don't want it, Derek! Do you want to remember me in the water?"

She watched the metaphorical blade of her words slide under his ribs. His breaths shortened.

"I didn't mean it like that," he said. Barely said. He sounded sick. Like she felt. Sick. But she'd been rubbed raw, and only horrible, bad, I've-reached-critical-mass-on-suffering things seemed to want to leap out of her mouth.

She watched him, horrified and satisfied all at once. Because he wasn't fine. She'd been right. She'd been right all along, and—

He swallowed. He took a few shaky, slow breaths. Nodded resolutely. And then his grip around her tightened once more. He pulled her back into his arms.

"How can I help make it better?" he said, once more returning to the soft Her Derek lilt that usually calmed her down. Just a tiny quiver remained, enough to tell her he was expending gargantuan effort to do what she couldn't seem to tonight. To stuff all the bad things back inside. Her heart clenched, and then everything felt like it was dropping out from underneath her. "I wanted this night to be for you," he continued with a smile, "and I'd like to fix it if I can."

It was the last straw.

She clawed her way out of the comforter. A loose feather escaped into the breeze in the struggle and blew away. He grunted when she pushed on his sternum to get away from him, and a flash of pain spread across his face. Another thing she should regret. Wanted to regret. She hadn't meant to hurt him. Instead, the fire inside burned even brighter as she rose to her feet.

"Stop doing that," she said. "You've been doing it all week. Just stop it, Derek."

"Stop doing what, Mere?" he said, his look bewildered. He rubbed his chest, and he didn't get up. "Being you," she said. "You're acting like you again! All Derek-y and perfect, and I can't..."

She stood on the balcony, looking down at him, lost as the words died on her tongue.

She couldn't.

Couldn't hold it all in anymore.

Couldn't hold any of it in anymore.

"How am I supposed to act?" he said.

"Like..." She struggled to explain the jumble in her head. The shark. The part about razors. The edge she'd fallen from. She'd spilled her careful months of reticence all over the floor like she was bleeding from a mortal wound. Maybe, she was. Something had broken inside. "You're supposed to be sick."

He raised his eyebrows. "You... want me to be... sick..." he said, not even a question as he repeated her words, his tone dripping with confused, halting disbelief. He made it sound so freaking stupid when he said it like that.

She clenched her jaw. "I can't do this when you're not sick!" she said, stomping her foot for
emphasis.

“Can't do what?”

She glared. “You,” she said, almost a hiss as hatred cracked her open from her vulnerable wound. “Your next bad day. Or your next crave-a-thon. Or the next time you need your perfect cheerleader to get you out of bed. I can't do it.” She blinked as tears crawled down her face. Her head was starting to hurt. “I need you to be sick so I can do it. I can't deal with half-and-half.”

“Oh,” was all he said. He swiped his hands over his eyes, and his gaze shifted to somewhere else. Not her. Not the mountains or the valley or the sky. Not anything. He sniffed, but he didn't say anything else, didn't move from the chair, and the silence stretched to the point that it became unbearable.

Sense caught up with her like a train, and the regret she'd shoved away earlier overwhelmed her. She'd really hurt his feelings. And she'd picked a freaking crap time to do it.

“God. I'm so sorry,” she blurted, shaking her head. Tears began to spill again in earnest. She wiped her face and turned away to face the dark, open valley full of twinkling fireflies below from all the houses. Everything blurred. Their view would be beautiful. Every night. They had a house. Her lower lip quivered and wouldn't stop. “I'm tired and full of stupid hormones. I shouldn't...”

A chilly wind ruffled her hair in the long silence that followed. She stopped panting and cried. Just cried. How had this night gone so horribly wrong?

Something scraped on the wood floor behind her. She heard his clipped breath of pain that told her sitting in the scoop chair might have been comfy, but getting out of it wasn't. Slow, soft footsteps hit the floor behind her. His hands materialized on the railing beside her, and he watched the valley view with a dark, upset glower and red eyes.

She tensed, expecting some sort of snapping retort. One of Derek-y Derek's less dreamy qualities was his temper. Fighting with him was a lesson in masochism. He went for the throat with horrible remarks that were meant to kill a discussion, not just wound the recipient. That, or he turned things into a gloomy, judge-y superiority session where she left the argument feeling like crap, even though he didn't really yell. She felt too tired for either Derek-y option tonight.

“It's okay to be angry at me,” he said softly.

He blinked and swiped his hands over his face again. The chilly breeze made his hair flutter in the darkness. No snapping. No judging. No anything. Just quiet acceptance.

“I don't want to be angry at you,” she said, frustrated.

“That doesn't mean you're not,” he said. He shook his head as he stared into the valley. “I've walked all over your feelings with my own.”

She couldn't even counter him. Couldn't tell him he was wrong. Because he had. He'd been doing that for months. He'd treated her like crap. Yelling and snapping whenever he got frustrated. Being too stubborn and proud to ask for help when he needed it, to the point that it made her teeth hurt. Lying. Taking drugs. She clenched her hands around the balcony railing. Her stomach roiled. These last few months had been abominable.

“I wanted to start doing things for you again,” Derek said, his voice thick with emotion. “I wanted to start fixing it.”
He'd shaved and dressed in a nice sweater and slacks. He would look handsome and perfect, were it not for the wrecked look on his face. He'd decorated their new house. He'd planned a romantic evening for them. The first time he'd really come out of his hurting-island shell in... forever. And they were fighting. And she felt sick. And tired. And horrible.

“What you did today with the crappy poems was really sweet,” she said, “You obviously spent a lot of time on it, and I shouldn't have—”

“Mere, please stop,” he said with a tired sigh, interrupting her. He met her eyes. His stare was onyx in the dim light of the lantern. His head tilted, and he didn't blink as he touched her face. His hand felt warm. Vibrant. His fingers slid back into her messy hair. “You've been so patient with me.”

She snorted. “You call this patient?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I think I'd call you a saint, Mere.”

A wry laugh fell from her lips. “I don't think saints yell this much.”

He pulled his hand back, but he didn't look away. “I'm sorry I've made life so hellish. I'm sorry I've made stupid choices. I'm sorry I...” His voice cracked, and he shrugged. “Everything. I'm sorry.”

“Stop saying that,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows. “That I'm sorry?”

“Yes,” she said. “You say it all the time, but you're just—”

“I should have asked for help sooner. I made the wrong choice. I was selfish.”

This was the first time he'd ever said it so baldly. Ever owned up to where he'd gone wrong in the aftermath. Where he'd shifted from being a victim of misery to being the perpetrator of misery. They'd been existing. Ignoring his piling debt and stupidity to get through the now. She'd been stuck just getting through the now for... months, because she'd been so certain he wouldn't be able to deal with anything else. Except, now they had a house, and he'd decorated it. And he was wearing his romantic aftershave. And he'd planned a game for her. And...

“What the hell were you thinking?” she said.

He shook his head. His mouth opened, but it was as if he couldn't find the words to explain. Couldn't find anything anymore. He turned back to the endless, firefly view. His hands worried at the balcony railing. And then he shrugged.

“I wasn't thinking much of anything, Mere. That was the point.”

“Well, I needed you!” she snapped. “And you took all those freaking pills instead.”

“I know.”

“I was waiting and waiting for you, and you didn't show up,” she said.

“I know,” he said, the words low and miserable and regretting. “I know I didn't.”

The horrible deluge began again. Her insides squeezed, and she couldn't breathe as a waterfall covered the world. Her stomach hurt from all the crying. Her head hurt. She wiped her tired, achy, burning eyes. Her hands came away wet.
“Cristina saved your life. And I saved your life. And all you did with the second chance was stupid fucking things.”

“I’m... I know.”

“You’ve been such an asshole to me,” she said.

He didn't say anything. He just stared. At the freaking valley. No judging. No Derek-y nasty retorts. No anything at all.

“You could have killed yourself. You really would have left me,” she yelled into the tense, crushing silence.

“I...” He had to stop. Take a breath. He inhaled thickly, shivery, like he was a sliver away from falling apart. He leaned against the railing, shoulders hunched, twelve inches away, his own face covered in a salty water slick that shimmered in the dim light. She watched him breathe for long, stretching seconds before he managed, so twisted with grief she barely heard it, “I wasn't thinking.”

“Well, I hate you,” Meredith said, her voice low and grating and raw. He flinched, and she hated him more. Hated him for making her feel like this. She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I'm so tired, and I hate you. I hate you so much.”

And there it was. Everything. Out on the table. The whole big ugly clot of it.

Derek didn't speak. She wouldn't have heard it anyway.

For a long time, all she saw was a red blur. Heat licked her body like flames. The blood rushed in her ears, an endless stream of fury. She clenched the railing because if she didn't, she would kick something. Or throw something. Or scream. Oh, how she hated him.

Slowly, as the moments passed, and she came back to herself, she heard his and her breathing beyond the rush. She panted, recovering from her tantrum. He panted, too. Her head hurt. Her eyes burned with hot tears. She was exhausted.

She wiped her eyes. Swallowed.

And then she was just tired.

She felt him in profile, still standing beside her, close but not intruding in her space. He'd rested his elbows on the railing, and pressed his face into his hands. His body swayed with upset energy, but he didn't move from his spot beside her.

She blinked with confusion as everything caught up with her.

Derek ran. That's what he did. Sick Derek or Her Derek. Even when there wasn't a freaking shark. It was another one of his not-so-dreamy flaws. If there was a confrontation, he ran. Something he didn't like, he ran. He ran as a form of punishment. He ran because he was scared. He ran because he didn't have a clue how to handle things, or because he didn't want to know an answer. It didn't matter. He ran.

He was, in his own way, as bad as she was, or had been, but for different reasons.

He always ran.

“Why are you still here?” she said, the words low and cracking. She sniffed and turned to him
tiredly.

He slid his face forward and peeked over the tips of his fingers at her. From his expression, she’d taken what jagged bits were left of him after her last outburst and eviscerated them. His eyes were red and wet.

Her lower lip quivered. She didn’t mean to push him out the door on his way out. She felt like crying all over again. Stupid foot in her stupid freaking mouth. “I mean, I...” She swallowed, and she turned away to look at the lights in the distant valley. “I don't even know what I mean.”

The silence stretched. The awful, twisted sound of his upset breathing stabbed her like knives. Her muscles began to hurt in time with the throb of her heart. She held herself too stiffly. She couldn't relax. Couldn't speak. She couldn't think of words anymore.

Maybe, he was waiting until he was in good enough shape to drive himself home. He couldn't drive while he was this upset.

That made sense.

She waited for him to collect himself and to leave. To punish her for her angry words and go, just like he always did. She wondered how she would get home if he drove off in his car and left her there. She didn’t have her purse or money or her keys. They were all in her locker back at work. She supposed she could call someone to pick her up. She still had her cell phone in her pocket.

Minutes and minutes passed, and his abandonment didn't happen.

He didn't move.

She wiped her runny nose with the back of her hand. “Why are you still here?” she repeated hoarsely. She sounded so confused she doubted he could misinterpret her meaning this time. She hoped he wouldn't.

He took a deep, shaky breath. “Because I don't want to go,” he said, his voice as raw as she felt.

She blinked. “You're not leaving.” Not a question. But... a question all the same.

“No, I'm not leaving.”

“But you're upset, and I...” She rubbed her eyes. “I said I hated you.”

He swiped his hands over his face. They shook like he'd been hooked to a live wire. He looked sick. Heartsick. PTSD sick. He’d been brilliantly happy and smiling before, but now he just looked sick.

She'd found her stupid shark. She didn't feel triumphant. Only horrible. And she couldn't even apologize. She hadn't lied about any of it.

He took a deep, shaky breath and turned to her. “You're upset because I was a jackass, and an idiot, and there's nothing happening right now that I don't deserve tenfold. I chose to take those pills, and that was wrong. I was wrong and selfish to do it, and I don't blame you for hating me.”

“You were,” she said. “You were wrong and selfish.”

He nodded. Took another breath. “I got shot, and I almost died, and I couldn't control any of that, and I followed it up with wrong choices that made it all worse.” His fingers tightened against the
railing. “But I want to make good choices. I can control what I do right now. I can stay.”

“Derek...”

He shook his head. “No,” he said. “You can be mad at me, but I’m staying. I choose to stay.” He paused to take a choppy breath, and he looked her in the eye. “I pick you. I choose you. I love you. And I'm not moving. You can leave if you don't want to be near me right now, but that's your choice, and staying is mine.”

She stared at him. For a long time, that was all she could do.

“I don't want to leave,” she whispered.

His tense posture deflated with a relieved sigh she hadn't realized he'd been holding inside. He nodded at nothing in particular. He pulled a shaky hand through his hair, and then, as if he didn't know what else to do with them, he shoved his fists into his pockets.

“Well, then we're both staying,” he said, and then he turned back to the valley. Gave her space to do what she wanted. Or because he simply didn't know what else to say or do other than plant his feet.

The wind whistled, and all the rest was silence. It was too cold for crickets. Too late at night for birds. Too far away from the rest of civilization for traffic.

She felt empty. Bowled over. Emotionally bankrupt.

She stepped an inch closer. His gaze ticked to the side, tracking her movement, and then went back to the valley. She stared at his profile. The LED lantern gave his face a soft glow. Her heart squeezed. She baby-stepped closer.

Maybe, not bankrupt, she decided. She could make one last transaction.

She moved. Breached his personal space. Slid up against his shaking, warm body. Slipped one hand behind his back, the other in front of his chest, and she pressed her face into the softness of his sweater.

“I pick you, choose you, love you, too,” she said, and she leaned on her tiptoes to kiss him.

He blinked as their lips met. Made a surprised grunt that vibrated in the back of her throat. He tasted like the mint of his toothpaste. His clear befuddlement fell victim to sense as the moments passed. His hands slipped out of his pockets, and he pulled her against him and didn't let go.

“Post-it?” he rasped.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

He shuddered. “I'm here,” he said with a shaky, low voice. He pressed his nose against her hair and sighed. “I mean it, Meredith. I'm not all better. But I'm here, and I'm not leaving if I can choose it.”

She sniffed. Started crying in his arms again. He held her tighter. She reached. Ran her fingers through his hair. Touched his chin. His cheek. There was no stubble this time. No ventilator to avoid or EKG monitors to dodge or anything. He hadn't just been shot. He was vibrant. Alive. She ran her fingers over the cartilage of his ear, an echoed motion from the past. She felt the pulse at his neck. It throbbed underneath her fingertips.
Her Derek.

“Hi,” she said, barely able to keep her voice from breaking into a thousand pieces.

“I'm here,” he said.

She believed him.

“Oh, god, hi,” she said, sobbing all over again.

His arms tightened around her. As if that were possible.

“I love you,” he said, a murmur against her ear. His body was warm and solid against her, and she believed him. “I'm so sorry, Meredith.” Derek-y Derek. Her Derek. Hers. And she believed him to the marrow of her bones.

“I missed you,” she said.

He nodded. Blinked. Two fat tears rolled down his face. “I know.”

She squeezed him against her, so hard her arms hurt, like he was some sort of toothpaste tube and she had to get every last bit of him into her arms. He shook. Shock or nerves or an overwhelming roll of emotions... She could relate as a swell of elation crushed her like a freaking bug, and she could barely breathe.

“I missed you so much,” she said.

“I know.”

“Please, don't leave me again,” she said.

“I won't if I can choose it,” he said. “I promise.”

She nodded. “I forgive you.”

She took a deep breath and let it out. Her knees almost knocked. Her legs felt like jelly. He stepped backward, pulling her with him, and she stumbled in time with his shambling. They collapsed into the scoop chair in a spent heap, into the warmth of the down comforter. Her eyes burned, and he shook like an upset leaf.

“I'm not fine,” she said as she curled against him tiredly. “You almost died, and I lost a baby, and the last few months have sucked, and I'm pregnant, and I'm really, really not fine.”

“It's okay,” he said, the words shaky whisper. “Just let it out. I'm here.”

He was upset, but not broken, and she believed him. She believed every word. He rubbed her back through the bundle of down. Held her tightly. She settled in his arms. Pressed her ear against his chest and listened to the calming thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump that she'd fallen desperately in love with since he'd gotten shot. He kissed her.

She cried. He caught every last drop of her grief in his arms, and he was clearly upset, but not broken.

Sink or swim. He swam. Gasping and choking and flailing, but he swam.

Her Derek. Jaws and all.
She cried like a sniveling wreck in his arms, and she didn't feel guilty, and that was the most liberating gift he ever could have given her that night.

Her Derek.

Over the passing minutes, the emotional roller coaster arrived back in the station. The jets whooshed as it cooled on the tracks. She sighed, long and deep, and the tears stopped streaking down her face. They slowed to a trickle, and then they ceased, leaving her eyes sticky and red. He'd stilled. Relaxed. His arms had loosened around her torso. He was still there. Reassuring with his solid warmth. But she didn't feel like she wore him as a coat anymore. He was just him. Quietly him.

“We have a sort of house,” she said, her voice scratchy with the leftovers of grief. She cleared her throat.

“Mmm.”

She wiped her eyes and took a deep, slow breath. The spicy scent of him relaxed her. She looked up. The comforter crinkled with her movement. Derek rested against her, eyes closed, body relaxed. He'd calmed in the long stretch of silence they'd shared, and she wondered if he'd succumbed to sleep. Her Derek. He'd been there for her in the face of everything. But he was still sick, and, deserving or not, she'd put him through the ringer that night. He tended to collapse after escaping from stress.

“Are you asleep?” she whispered.

He jerked awake and blinked. His eyes still glassy with dreams, he said, “Mmm? No.”

She snickered. “Right.”

He ignored her playful jab. He still seemed too groggy to counter with a wink or twinkling eyes. Instead, he swallowed, and he said, “Can I get you anything?”

She shook her head. “You got me a sort of house. I think that's enough.”

That got her a halting smile, and her body warmed. He rubbed his eyes, and some of the vibrancy returned to his expression.

“How did you get me a sort of house?” she said. “You told me it wasn't going to be done by Columbus Day.”

“It's not going to be done by Columbus Day,” he said.

“But—”

He winked. “I never said there was no house. Only that it wouldn't be done.”

“You've been planning this since Lake Cushman?”

He kissed her ear. “No. A week. Since Cristina visited. I really only meant for the lights to be the surprise. I figured you knew we had a house. I only knew you hadn't seen it, yet.”

“How'd you do the lights?” she said. “When?”
He sighed. “Today while you were at work. Very slowly.”

“I like them,” she said.

His earlier grin widened. “Worth the pain and suffering, then.”

The way he seemed to be bouncing back from this screaming ordeal made her feel a bit rejuvenated. He'd gotten so much better. He really could take it. Really was there for her like he said. Everything she'd tried to spare him, she'd ended up dishing onto him in a heaping, dump-truck portion of all-at-once, and he was smiling, albeit tired, less than an hour later.

Her Derek.

Hers.

Her lower lip quivered, and her tired eyes pricked all over again. She sniffed and wiped it away.

She cleared her throat, breaking up the clot of emotion. “So, when do I get a tour?” she said.

“This is the balcony,” he offered helpfully, an evil smirk on his face.

She elbowed him in the ribs. “Thanks, I got that.”

“No problem,” he said.

Still. She'd been so emotionally tunnel-visioned before, she hadn't looked around much. She peered over the warm lip of the down comforter, past the blur of his shoulder and the edge of the scoop chair. He'd piled Safeway bags in the dark corner by the wall of the house, just beyond the reach of the lantern's glow, along with a contraption she didn't recognize in the darkness, and a microwave. A fat orange cord greeted the end of the microwave's white cord, and it spilled like a piece of spaghetti over the edge of the balcony. If she hadn't been so tired, she would have been tempted to get up. To peer over the edge of the railing and see what lay below, other than an endless drop into the valley.

“Why is there a microwave over there?” she said.

“I thought we could make s'mores for dinner. I jury-rigged the trailer's generator because the house doesn't have electricity yet.”

She blinked. Frowned. Pulled back from his body and looked at him. “You can't make s'mores in a microwave. It's against the laws of nature.”

He snorted. “Because microwaves are nature's gift to humanity.”

“Exactly!” she said. “A fire is nature-y. There has to be a fire.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh? Who says that?”

“Everybody does,” she said.

“I don't.”

“Well, you don't count,” she said. “You were a s'more virgin until I taught you.”

“A s'more virgin.”
“Well, I don't want to burn our house down before it's even done. I didn't even want to use the space heater. I only brought it up to prevent us from becoming human popsicles when it gets colder tonight.”

“What space heater?”

He pointed at the junk pile. At the contraption she'd spotted but hadn't recognized. “That space heater,” he said. “I dragged it here from my trailer.” He made an annoyed face at it. Like it had gotten heavier since the last time he'd luged it or something, or maybe he'd dropped it in the mud a few times by accident. But he didn't comment further, and she didn't feel the need to press him.

“Oh,” she said.

He turned to grin at her like he'd been plugged into a light socket or something. “So, can we break the laws of nature just this once?”

Her lip twitched. Though the very idea of consuming anything at this point made her stomach roil, his delighted excitement over the possibility of something so simple – graham crackers, marshmallows, chocolate – was contagious, particularly in light of the emotional low they were coming back from that night. She couldn't help but smile back at him.

“You can make some if you want,” she replied. “I'd love to watch.”

His kilowatt expression faded a little. “Just me?”

She sighed. “I haven't been able to keep anything down.”

His brow creased with concern. His hands slipped underneath the comforter to find her stomach. His hands were a shock of heat through her lab coat and scrubs. She relaxed into his arms as he rubbed her, soft and slow and soothing. “Nothing at all?”

She shook her head. “I don't feel very well today.”

He hugged her. “Can I do anything?”

She shook her head again. “I don't think so.”

“May I try?” he said, and she slumped in his arms.

She really didn't feel like doing much of anything, now that they'd found some emotional respite, other than maybe talking. Which sucked. If he had any romantic plans left despite being raked over the coals, her lack of participation would certainly sabotage every last one of them unless they only required her to sit there like a log, which... she doubted. Romance and non-participatory logs went together like silk and mud.

“Do I have to move?” she said.

“Nope,” he said. “But I need to set up first.”

She peered at him. “Set up?”

“I was going to do it later,” he said. “I had it planned.”

“You planned on me being a sick, pregnant bump on a log?” she said.
He laughed. “Tonight was for you. I was going to do all the work, anyway.”

“Really?” she said, intrigued.

“Really,” he said with a nod. “I drew a flow chart, you know.”

She snorted. “Did it include me freaking out?”

A shadow of a grin crossed his face, but he didn't answer as he shuffled underneath her. The comforter was flung away, and she shivered as he worked his way out from underneath her. He grunted getting out of the scoop chair, and she winced, watching him strain to do something that would have been easy for him before he'd gotten shot. She regretted pushing him so hard when she'd been trying to get away from him. He didn't comment on his difficulties, though. He stood, brushed off his slacks with his hands, and resettled the comforter over her body. She snuggled and closed her eyes.

His footsteps creaked on the balcony floor, like he tiptoed and didn't want to disturb her. He rifled through the pile in the corner. Plastic bags crinkled. Something thunked. He moved again. Then the glass door slid shut with a whisper.

She drifted. Moments slipped past her awareness like water.

“Mere,” he whispered what felt like nanoseconds later. He rubbed her shoulder through the blanket.

She squinted at him and rubbed her eyes.

“I'm going to pick you up,” he said.

She didn't have time to protest before his arms slipped underneath her body, and he lifted her from the chair. A soft groan breached his lips, and his face creased with stress lines, but she didn't have the heart to protest. He'd written crappy poems and lugged a space heater and decorated the house and clearly Had A Plan™.

He carried her inside the house, back into the bedroom. A soft murmur of sound drew her attention to the foot of the airbed. The orange extension cord trailed through the balcony door, crawled across the floor boards, and stopped at the space heater, which burgeoned with heat that made her relax and sigh. She hadn't realized how chilled she'd gotten until the chill had been taken away. He'd set up what looked like a yoga mat and a pillow on the floor next to several of his LED lanterns. More Safeway bags lined the wall by the huge window. Had he bought the entire grocery store?

“This is our bedroom,” he informed her.

She snorted. “Thanks, McTourGuide.”

He set her down. Her feet came to rest on the floor by the mat. Her scuzzy lab coat came away with a skillful brush of his hands, collar to shoulders to wrists. He kissed her bare neck. The warmth of his body and the warmth of the space heater laved her tense, tired muscles, and she resisted the urge to be swept away.

“Derek,” she said, swallowing. “Please, no sex. I feel like crap.”

“I'm sorry you feel like crap,” he said sympathetically. Like she hadn't just busted his plans to smithereens. “Would you lie on the mat?”
“Um,” she said, frowning. “Okay.”

She dropped to her knees.

“On your stomach,” he said, the words soft like a wave, and she found herself following his directions without much more thought. She was tired enough that lying down seemed idyllic anyway, though she thought, at this point, she might prefer the comfy-looking air mattress that rested a few feet away.

He knelt beside her. Something rustled. His dark sweater landed in a heap on the floor beside one of the softly glowing lanterns. She peered at him. He wore a white button down shirt beneath the sweater, cuffs unbuttoned and rolled up to his elbows. He smiled at her, and then he straddled her legs.

“Derek, what are you doing?” she said. “This seems kind of sexy.”

He smirked, but he didn't say anything. He reached into one of the Safeway bags that he'd pulled closer to the mat. The bag crinkled. The hollow pop of a plastic bottle opening broke the silence. The oily scent of lavender wafted against her nose. Her nostrils flickered.

“Massage oil?” she said.

“Stop asking so many questions,” he admonished her, though his eyes twinkled. He slipped his hands underneath the back of her shirt. Wet and warm spread across her skin by her waistband. He pressed his palms into her tense body, and he rubbed the curve of her spine from her waist to her shoulder blades.

“Oh,” she managed. Her head flopped against the soft pillow, and she let loose a sigh she hadn't even known she'd been holding prisoner. “That feels good.”

“Mmm,” was his only comment.

He pushed up her shirt, and she let him pull the stained garment over her head with a bit of shuffling. With an open canvas of skin, he had more room to work, and she slowly relaxed into a puddle of gooey organs and muscles on the mat. No bones. Nothing. He had nice hands. Perfect hands.

“Mere?” he said as he worked.

“Yeah?”

“Were my poems really that crappy?”

She laughed at the unexpected question. “Um. Maybe, only a little crappy.”

She felt the warmth of his smile. “Did you laugh?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I liked the one about the ineffectual fists.”

He chased tense, ugly knots out of her shoulders. Oil slicked her skin. Delicious friction warmed her sinew to sinew. “Tell me about it,” he said.

“Cristina, Alex, and Lexie were there when Mark gave me the first letter.”

“Oh?” he said.
“They all tagged along,” she said. “Even Mark. I felt like I had a peanut gallery chasing me through *The Joy Of Sex* or something.”

His hands stopped as he pondered that for a moment. “That wasn't... exactly how I'd planned it,” he said, his tone wry. Not exactly happy. Not unhappy, either.

“Well, I would hope not,” she said. She crinkled her nose. She'd been a little uncomfortable listening to Alex and Mark pick apart her sex life, among other things, but it wasn't the end of the world that they knew. She'd mostly enjoyed herself as Derek had pulled her through their history with his clues. Mostly. “You're lucky I'm not a prude or whatever.”

“I'll take event planner off my list of alternative careers, I guess,” he said.

She snorted, the barest hint of a chuckle. She turned her head so she could peer at him. He rested in that colorless spot in the corner of her eye. She couldn't see his eyes. His face. His hands resumed their work. Movement flickered in her peripheral vision.

Her naked breasts mashed into the mat as he touched her, palms sliding across her skin. Her eyelids drooped. The heady smell of lavender and the spice of him made her brain feel fuzzy. The soft shh, shh, shh of his hands was hypnotizing. Her body swayed as he applied pressure. He kneaded every worry away, if only for a few moments.

She sighed, relaxed.

“Still, I'm glad,” he said after a while.

“You're glad everybody knows we've had sex on the conference room table?”

The weight of his hands dug into her slightly, as though he lost his careful measure. Just for a moment. “Glad you spent time with your friends,” he corrected, the words cracking. “I don't want to keep you from them.”

She swallowed. Her eyes pricked again, and her throat felt full. She reached up to wipe her face. “Oh,” she said, her voice deep. Touched. And then she realized his hands had stopped moving.

She twisted onto her side, semi-trapped with him sitting over her legs.

His skin glowed in the soft lantern light. He watched her through his dark eyelashes. A dark, shamed expression had spread across his face. The uncapped bottle of massage oil rested by his knee. A soft, choppy breath bisected the air, and then he pushed a pair of long, slow exhalations out after. Like he'd barely dodged falling apart in that moment, under her scrutiny.

“Mere, I'm... still sick,” he said. As if he somehow thought she could have missed his shaky turmoil earlier, when they'd been fighting, and later when they'd been wrapped in each other's arms, or the thing just now. He looked away. “I'm...”

She twisted out from underneath him and sat up. “I know.”

“I'm trying,” he said. He wrung his oily hands together. “I'm trying so hard, but...”

The frustration in his tone was a solid mass she could cut with a scalpel. A malignant thing. She shook her head. “I know you're trying,” she said. “I didn't mean it before.”

He sighed. “You meant it. You meant every word.”
“No,” she said. “No, I mean about...” She sighed. Leaned across the void to touch his smooth, shaven face. He swallowed. “I don't want you to be sick. I'm glad you feel better.”

“But it's half-and-half,” he said. “Like you said. I can't give you perfect right now.”

But he wanted to. Everything about his demeanor spoke the words for him.

He wanted to give her perfect.

He couldn't.

He hated that.

“I want what you can give me,” she said. “Nothing more. Nothing less. And I don't want you to hide it if you're not okay just because I got irrational and whiny about sharks. Okay?”

For a long stretch of moments, he didn't answer. She scooted forward. The mat squeaked as her shoes skidded on the smooth surface. She touched his knee through the soft weave of his pants. She gave him a squeeze.

His gaze rested on her hand for a lingering moment, and then he met her eyes. His eyelashes had gotten wet. He wiped his face. They seemed to have an abundance of tears tonight, and it made her heart hurt. She was mad at him for the drugs. For treating her like crap. For lying and leaving. Not because he couldn't make himself heal. If she could have taken back a solitary piece of her tantrum, that would have been it.

“Oh okay?” she said once more, hoping her words would sink in for him.

He quirked a hesitant, watery grin. “This is getting complicated.”

She shoved him playfully. “You know what I mean,” she said.

“So, I have your permission to be Derek-y, even if it's not perfect?” he said.

“That sounds so stupid when you say it,” she said.

He shrugged. “I like the made up words,” he said. “It makes life interesting. It's not every day you discover your name has become an adjective.”

She bit her lip. “I wonder what Meredith-y would be.”


She looked away. “I want to be those things.”

“You are, Mere,” he said. “I wish you could see it.”

She swallowed as blush licked red flames down her skin. She crossed her arms over her naked chest, feeling inexplicably self-conscious under the weight of his words. He didn't comment on her sudden bashfulness, other than to tilt his head and look at her like she redefined the meaning of life for him. Even when she was blushing, flustered, sick, pregnant, and gross with emotional ruin.

“Please, let me do this for you,” he said.

She didn't respond. Couldn't.
He leaned forward, gripped her bare shoulders, and guided her back to the mat. She relaxed against the pillow and the mat like a collapsing wave. The oil bottle squirted. He resumed his steady stroking, and her thoughts slowed as he pampered her. She wondered if he'd been a masseuse in one of his former lives or something. Or taken some classes on it for fun. That'd be a good question to ask in their next game of truth.

“You don't have to be a perfect cheerleader for me,” he said.

At first, she didn't even realize he'd spoken. She blinked slowly. Then his words sank in. She scrunched some of the pillowcase between her fingertips. “But I don't know what else to do,” she said.

“Just having you here is nice.”

She gave him a watery smile. “I... know the feeling.”

“I'm here, now,” he said. “I am, Meredith.”

She really believed him. It felt good. He massaged her trapezius muscles. Her deltoids. He shifted his attention to her back. The rhythmic, rasping sound of skin-to-skin tugged on her consciousness. Her eyelids drifted shut in the relaxing onslaught.

“I'll try and get myself out of bed from now on,” he said.

“It's okay if you can't,” she said.

He stopped. His fingers tightened into fists, and his knuckles rested lightly on the curve of her lower back. She heard him swallow wetly. “Are we okay?” he said, the words cut jagged with blades of hope.

A loaded question. He wasn't okay. And she knew it. And she wasn't okay. And he knew it.

But them. Were they okay?

They'd had a crap night, despite what he'd done to redeem it for them.

She reached behind her body. Found his hand. Oil slicked between them as she wrapped her fingers around his. She squeezed his hand. He squeezed back.

They stayed like that for moments, hands clasped.

“Big day tomorrow,” he said, hand in hers.

“Yeah,” she said. Her awareness of the room faded like somebody was shoving cotton balls in her head to replace her brain. “What are we telling your mother when she gets here, anyway?” she said. Regurgitated from the countless worries on the surface of her brain. Not that she felt particularly bothered in that moment.

In that moment, she felt quite nice. Spread out like a Meredith puddle of Meredith-y bits. Lax.

“We could just start with hello and work from there,” he said beyond the soothing rush of blood in her ears.

“Mmm,” she said. Not agreeing. Not disagreeing. She couldn't muster much else. She'd run out of gas.
She felt him smiling. Or, maybe, she was dreaming already. She couldn't seem to open her eyes to check. The cap on the bottle popped. Something rustled, and then he rubbed her down with a soft towel and wrapped her up. His arms wrapped around her bundled body. She and gravity parted ways. He placed her on the soft air mattress. She felt his fingers at her shoelaces, and then felt her shoes slide off her feet. Two thuds followed. He pulled down her dirty scrubs. Warm blankets slid over her body.

"Where'd you get the airbed?" she murmured as she listened to him shuffle around the room. "Don't remember it."

"Wal-Mart."

"Mmm," she said. "Were they still out of candles?"

"I'm sorry?"

"S'where I bought our house," she said.

He laughed. Maybe.

The lantern flicked out, and the fleshy orange of her eyelids became black. The mattress sagged underneath a heavy weight. His body slid against her underneath the flannel blankets. Instinctively, she rolled to her side, and he wrapped himself around her. His arm slipped over her waist. His nose pressed into her neck. He kissed her.

And that was the last thing she remembered before her mind swept her to a different place, a subconscious place deep in the seat of hope.

She didn't know what made her turn off the water. She put the syrup-encrusted plate in the sink, she wiped her hands on the kitchen towel, and then she stilled, listening. A breeze ruffled the curtains. Birds chirped.

She bit her lip.

She almost returned to her task, but then she heard it. Something high-pitched on the wind. Something like a shriek, but not a scared one. A happy one.

She left the pile of dirty pancake dishes behind. That had been their bargain. He made pancakes every Sunday morning they weren't on-call. She cleaned up the mess afterward. It'd been a system they'd developed shortly after Anne had been born.

Meredith looked out the front door. Her Jeep sat on the road in front of the house. She hadn't bothered to park it in the garage when she'd gotten home the night before. She'd been so tired, she hadn't trusted herself not to hit something in the tight space.

Beyond the curving brick walk, the gray above and the vibrant green below created surreal bi-color split of sky and earth. Blades of grass fluttered in the breeze. The distant trees on the horizon swayed, their leaves rustling.

She heard the sound again, this time more clearly. A scream of exhilaration. Behind the house.

She walked back through the house. Their house. As she approached the backdoor, she saw her daughter through the windowpanes. The little girl flew over the lip of the windowsill in a surreal, blurry burst of speeding color, and then disappeared again.
“Higher!” Anne shrieked, giggling.

Meredith moved outside, and she watched as she leaned against the little dinette set on their deck.

He stood behind the swing set, slightly to the side, presumably so he wouldn't get hit by their daughter, who was impersonating a speeding projectile at the moment. The breeze sent fingers through his raven-brown hair. His face had a ruddy blush to it, and he looked good. Happy. He looked peaceful and happy, standing there in his gray fleece vest and his frayed jeans, pushing their daughter in the swing set he'd built for her.

Anne kicked with her little feet as she whooshed through the air. Her baby teeth flashed as she grinned ear to ear. The view from their backyard was spectacular beyond the fence, and Meredith imagined Anne would squint at the valley beyond and pretend she was really flying.

“He looked up as if he'd sensed her scrutiny. She met his stark blue gaze. The skin around his eyes crinkled. Her lip curved upward in a smile. He waved with his free hand, and her smile deepened. They shared a long look across the verdant space.

“Higher, Daddy! Higher!” Anne said, and Derek pushed her higher.
Derek flinched awake, a muffled gurgle of terror caught in his throat.

“—ake up.” A hand waved sloppily in his face. “Drk.” The fingers hit his nose, not hard, but it was a blur of flesh that was too close. “Nghtmre.”

His heart thundered in his ears. Something confined his tangled limbs. He couldn't escape. Or breathe. A phantom snap of pain ripped through his torso. He couldn't breathe, and then he fell.

He hit the cold catwalk with a thud that made him wheeze. He lay on the floor, dazed, panting. Gasping. He'd been shot. He fingered the bullet wound. He'd been shot, and Gary Clark hovered over him like...

Derek held up his hands to the light. No liquid, shiny red covered his fingers.

Gary Clark hovered... somewhere...

Derek blinked. No pain. Nothing hurt, save for a faint echo deep in his torso when he inhaled.

Gary Clark...

Not there.

None of it was real.

“Ugh,” Derek croaked as he looked at the ceiling, and the last fleeting visions of his nightmare faded.

The gentle slope of the roof hovered above his body. He lay on the floor in their new house. He'd fallen. A hand dangled over the edge of the air mattress, grasping at nothing, as though it had tried to capture him, and the sight of it made him startle all over again. He tried to crab walk backward, but his left foot was stuck in the blankets, and he ended up falling on his ass.

“No!” he said.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” said a familiar voice. “It's just me! It's Meredith.”

The bed beside him jiggled, and the hand disappeared, only to be replaced by scraggly tangles of brown hair, and then a pale forehead, a familiar nose, and the rest of her pale, sleep-hazy face. Her face. Meredith. She squinted at him over the edge of the mattress, a worried countenance still made muzzy by sleep.

His breaths evened out into slow rasps. “Meredith,” he said, a whisper.

She nodded. “Yes. You awake now?”

Her gray eyes glinted.

He looked away, and his heartbeat slowed.

Birds chirped, greeting the hazy beginnings of morning.

Nothing was wrong.
He swallowed and swiped his shaking hands over his face and through his hair.

“Are you okay?” she said. “You haven't had one of those in a while.”

His left foot remained tangled in the comforter. He pulled. His quad trembled. But he was good and stuck. Worse, his traitorous penis saluted the ceiling, an irritating bulge caught in the grip of his boxer-briefs.

“Pathetic,” said a familiar voice that Derek shoved away.

He rolled into a sitting position, blinking. He yanked his foot free of the tangles of blankets. The uneasy sense of disquiet that laved his unprotected back made him tense. He clenched his jaw. He couldn't help but glance over his shoulder. Their house. Their home. The dim morning light slanted through the windows, making the long hallway out of the bedroom seem ominous. There were no locks on the front door. Nothing to stop someone from walking in with a gun in hand. Nothing to stop his dream from turning real except the fact that the perpetrator was dead.

“Derek, are you okay?” Meredith repeated, more awake this time.

“I'm fine,” he said, though even to his own ears, he sounded grumbling. Snapping. A bah humbug Scrooge of the morning.

“Derek,” Meredith said, her voice thickening with disappointment he didn't want to hear. Disappointment that told him he'd already failed in his endeavor to be better.

He closed his eyes for a long moment. Stop, he told himself. Just stop it. Wallowing wouldn't do anything except make him grumpier, and she didn't deserve such ill treatment. She didn't deserve any of the horrible things he'd heaped on her. That's what last night had been all about, and he would be god damned if he only made it twelve hours before ruining everything again. Agitated, he pulled his hands through his hair once more and took a deep, long breath.

Stop it, he repeated to himself.

Hold your temper.

Do not treat her like shit because you're scared.

She doesn't deserve that.

Nobody deserves that.

He counted slowly to ten.

Breathing calmly helped vent all the ugly things stuck in his head. Like how stupid he felt for being scared after spending a night in a strange place. And how he hated that dreams of violence aroused him. And how angry he was at himself for waking her up with his yelling after she'd been so tired the night before, or the fact that his cheeks turned crimson like a damned mood ring whenever he got upset, or the fact that months later, the same dreams still haunted him without abatement. All of that boiling negativity slowed to a simmer the longer he forced himself not to snap, and he let his breaths carry the negativity away from him.

She seemed to sense his internal struggle, and she didn't interrupt. Didn't ask what he was doing.
In a few moments, the simmer seeped away, and he gave her the best smile he could manage. A
busted, watery one, but a smile. “I did promise I'd get out of bed on my own from now on,” he said.
“Didn't I?”

She didn't seem quite convinced by the change in his demeanor, but she didn't pick at it either. A
hesitant grin spread across her sleepy face. “A for effort,” she said.

He sighed. “E for execution?”

Her smile widened. “Something like that.”

She lifted the comforter and awkwardly scooted away from the edge of the bed, a clear invitation.
The mattress wobbled as she shifted. He crawled back into the shaky bed, and as soon as the soft
flannel covered his exposed skin, as soon as he felt her warm body settle against his like his last
missing puzzle piece, he relaxed a little, and then a lot. His fear abated as she rolled into his
embrace. Her nose rested against his shirt just over the scar where his chest had been opened in
surgery. His innards thrrobbed with each breath. Just a little. Enough to remind him he wasn't
perfect, that frayed nerves still roughed the edges of his mind, but...

“I'm not used to this house, yet,” he admitted. “I'm sorry.”

She put her small hand over the curve of his side, squeezed, and roamed down to his hip in a long,
soothing stroke. She didn't comment about the erection he'd neither wanted, nor had encouraged.
The blankets crinkled as she shifted next to him.

“It's kind of mind boggling,” she said. She kissed him. “We have a house. A real house.”

“With no electricity or hot water.”

She shrugged against him. “You're toasty enough for me. Just don't fall out of bed again.”

He grinned. “So, that's my lot in life. To be your personal toaster.”

“Mmm,” she said, and she settled closer. Her grip loosened. He kissed the top of her head. “Does
this mean I get credit for camping, finally?” she murmured.

“Nope,” he decided. “We're in a bed. Beds and camping are mutually exclusive.”

She didn't respond, and her breaths became deep and even. He let his eyelids drift shut, and he
rested against the warmth of her skin, convinced she'd gone back to sleep, now that he'd stopped
yelling, no longer caught in a web of dreams. Aside from good-natured humor, she hadn't
mentioned how he'd fallen out of bed. Hadn't drawn attention to any of it. Like it was normal and
didn't warrant commenting.

That helped him. A lot. Being around her helped him. Barring the occasional mishap, she pushed
him when he needed it. Backed off when he needed it. Was there being her unjudging, beautiful
self when he needed it.

Being with her was so unlike working at the hospital, where everybody treated him with kid
gloves, gave him menial work, and tended to tiptoe around him like he might implode at any
moment – behavior he couldn't call unjustified, but he could definitely call frustrating.

She made things so much better for him.

She was his best friend.
“I love you,” he whispered, hoping, if nothing else, he'd make her dreams a little better.

“I don't want to get out of bed today,” she said, almost a whine, surprising him. She burrowed closer. He squeezed her shoulder.

“Why not?” he said.

“Because it's warm in here,” she said.

He grinned. “Your personal toaster. Reporting for duty.”

When she didn't tell him how corny he was, didn't snicker, didn't comment, his grin dripped away. A splat of rain hit one of the window panes, and then another, and she stiffened. Pulled the covers over her body until nothing but the top of her head peeked out.

He frowned at the lump of blankets in his arms. “What's wrong?”

“Your mom is coming.”

“You don't have to worry about her,” Derek said. “I'll talk to her. You don't even have to be in the room when I do it.”

Not that he had any idea what he himself would say. How to even broach the subject. His mother knew about the PTSD. His whole family knew. But talking over the phone with them versus being in their presence were two different things. Hell, they'd already impugned his capacity for good judgment, asked him if marrying Meredith right now was a good idea. Not only that, but he'd skipped the part about the drugs whenever he talked to them. He couldn't think of a casual conversational segue for that.

He didn't want to be Derek the Addict.

Or Derek the Time Bomb.

Or Derek the Screw Up.

He just wanted to be Derek.

Every new person he told about his PTSD or his addiction who changed around him chipped away at his ability to do that. His family had changed. Being around Meredith's friends was nerve wracking. Terrifying. Embarrassing. Lexie watched him like a science experiment. Whenever he did something she found puzzling, she consulted books on PTSD and addiction that she didn't know he knew she had.

“Skip it all,” Mr. Clark said, taunting and guttural. “Take some pills. Slip away. What you can't remember can't hurt.”

He stared at the ceiling.

“We find out about the baby today,” Meredith said, ripping Derek from his stressful musing.

“We do,” he said.

“Something is wrong,” she said. As though she were certain.

Something was wrong.
Not with the baby, just...

He couldn't find a single thing reassuring to say. He was still in tatters. From last night's fight. From the nightmare that had driven him out of bed and onto the cold, hard floor. From worrying about his mom's impending reaction. He doubted Meredith would believe anything he said right then, even if he did muster something appropriately comforting.

He sighed.

She shifted. Her face came free of the warm blankets, and she stared at him, gray eyes glinting through her long eyelashes. Their eyes met, and they shared a long look. The patter of rainfall became a gushing storm against the windows, and the glass panes shimmered in the dim light. She rose onto her elbow and brushed her fingers through his hair.

“I need you,” she whispered, and everything inside unraveled.

“I need you, too,” he confessed. His chest squeezed as he pulled in a huge, anxious breath.

Her fingers found the hem of his t-shirt and slipped underneath. Her fingertips formed the points of a star against his stomach. She brushed slowly up to his pecs, and his eyelids drooped. Then she roamed south. Found the waistline of his boxer briefs. Slipped underneath the elastic band, into the warmth below. Cupped him. Something wet touched his throat. Her tongue. She kissed him.

His flagging erection began to renew.

He couldn't stifle a low, throaty groan at her blatant invitation.

She remained flush with him, her naked skin hot against his body. All she wore were the panties he'd put her to bed in last night. Her thumb and index finger circled the base of his balls, and she pulled. Just a little.

His toes twitched, and a breath stuttered in his throat. He blinked, for a moment discombobulated. Chill air spread goosebumps down his arms. Her nose crinkled at the interruption. She squinted at him, blinking in the light. Her soft gray eyes wore a shroud of concern.

*Is this okay?* she said without saying.

*Yes. Yes, it is,* he answered without answering, on the eaves of a skipping sigh.

She dragged her thumb around the edge of his corona. His lips parted. He grimaced as every muscle tensed, and his nerve endings sent pleasure up his spine. She moved. Her lips met his, and she kissed him. Breathed his air. Tasted his soul. She moaned, and he drank the sound.

“I love you,” she said, the words almost desperate. “I just have this feeling...”

“I get those,” he said as a lump formed in his throat. He didn't have anything to say this morning. Couldn't find comforting words or pearls of wisdom for her. But he could do this. He could be with her.

They would *always* have that.

Rain pattered on the roof. The covers rustled. She touched him. Stroked his erection. She rested against him, breathing softly. “I don't think I can wait for it to pass,” she said.
“Me either,” he said.

Moving on the airbed was a challenge, and anything complicated made him feel like he was balancing on a boat about to capsize, but he rolled over her, straddling her hips, and kissed her deeply. He dug his palms and fingers into the vinyl below the flannel sheets to keep his balance. He nipped at her lower lip. Tasted her.

The bed wobbled when she moved, nearly sending him sprawling on his face on top of her, and she laughed.

“This is a little...” He swallowed.

“Unstable?” she suggested.

“Um,” he said, taking a short breath. He nodded. “Yes.” And then he leered with all the gusto he could manage. “But, hey. Let's rock the boat.”

She slapped his hip. Not hard. She didn't laugh. Not really. But her lip twitched with a weak smile. “You're such a dork.”

“I'm your dork.”

She bit her lip. “My dork,” she agreed. Her hands came to rest at the elastic waistband gripping his hips. She pulled. An inch. Two. “My dork in underpants.”

“Hi, pot,” he murmured as he dipped to kiss her cleavage. “I'm kettle.”

She laughed, and the warm sound of it vibrated through her chest.

He followed the swell of her breast left to a pert nipple. The journey had gotten longer in the last few weeks. She'd swollen with her pregnancy. He sucked when he reached the pinnacle. The breath skipped in her chest, and she gasped, pushing into him. He roamed the opposite direction, laving both swells with attention.

She moved his briefs down his legs until he was able to kick them away. He had to shakily sit up in order to assist her with hers. The bed below his kneecaps seemed to shiver under his weight, and he straddled her precariously.

She watched him as he hooked his fingers underneath the tiny slivers of fabric over her hips and pulled down.

She wriggled, which nearly sent him sprawling. He landed on his elbow and completed the roll to the side as though he'd meant to fall. They rested side by side, staring at the ceiling, naked from the waist down, flushed and breathing hard.

“I think this bed needs more air,” she said. “It wasn't like this last night. Does it have a leak?”

“Maybe, it's just not meant for sex.”

“Who invents a bed without sex in mind?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. Monks?”

“You're saying monks invented our air mattress.”

“They could have,” he said.
He tilted his head to the side. Stared at her. She stared back at him. Grabbed his hand. Guided him to the soft, warm space between her thighs. He cupped her. Pressed his middle finger into the soft flesh. He knew when he hit the right spot because her eyelids dipped, and her breaths shortened. She didn't need to say stop, or go, or anything at all. Her lower body rose to meet his touch, and that was all he needed to know.

She reached across his body and wrapped her fingers around his length. “Oh,” he said, and he had to stop for a moment. Adjust to focusing while she did... that. Did... His insides tightened, and he pressed against her hand. He imagined she read his signals like he read hers.

They were open books, but only for each other.

“Don't they take a vow of poverty or something?” she said.

He closed his eyes. Inhaled. Opened them. “Hmm?”

“Monks.”

“So?”

“So, they wouldn't sell a bed they invented. Would they?”

“I don't know.”

“Unless it was at cost. Would that count if they broke even?”

He grinned as he leaned against her ear and kissed her. “Why are we talking about this?”

“You brought it up!” she said. And she laughed.

She laughed, and for an short moment everything made sense. He forgot the rain, and his mother, and the OB appointment, and everything else. He lay in bed, half naked beside his best friend, having a stupid, pointless conversation because he was alive, and he could still have as many stupid, pointless conversations with Meredith as he wanted. He loved her. And there was nothing wrong in the world.

He moved his hand from her core and splayed his palm against her womb, just below her navel. There was nothing he could feel yet without pressing, but he imagined it in there somewhere. A little collection of his and her cells, mingled and growing together to make a single person. Her free hand came to rest over his palm.

“What are you thinking?” she said.

“Zygotes.”

She stared at him. “Plural?”

“Well, I think just one, but it's probably an extremely good one.” He kissed her, and he moved his hand to her cleft again.

“Extremely good?” she said, eyes dancing.

He winked. “I hate to throw words like perfect around.”

She snorted. “You do not.” But then her happy gaze evaporated, and his moment of nothing wrong evaporated with it. “What if it's not perfect?”
“It will be,” he said.

“But what if it's not?”

“It will be, Meredith.”

Her temples danced. She clenched her jaw. “But what if it's not, Derek? I messed up on the last one.”

“It depends on your definition of perfect,” he said. “And you didn't mess up. You did not mess up.”

“Well, what's your definition of perfect?”

He swallowed. “I think the baby we lost was perfect, too.”

She blinked. “What?”

“I made it with you,” he said. “Didn't I? I think that's perfect by definition.”

“But it died,” she said, her voice cracking. “That baby died, and I…”

“It did,” he said. “But that's not your fault.”

His heart squeezed at the sound of her sniffling beside him. He didn't know what to say that would make this better. Didn't have words. Anything he could think of seemed like a platitude. He kissed her. She let him. He rolled on top of her, straddling her in the clumsy beginnings of missionary position. She let him do that, too. The blankets crinkled as he adjusted himself. She opened her legs. He pushed inside to the hilt without any further encouragement, and he let her warmth settle around him. Heaven. He didn't move.

“I'm here,” he said.

She nodded. Wiped her face. She squeezed around him, and he shuddered.

“Me, too,” she said.

Those words seemed to be the only ones they needed. He made love to her languorously as the rain pattered on the roof, and the world outside the windows brightened. Minutes and minutes passed, and no more words were said between them.

The airport was scary.

He hadn't thought about the fact that the airport was scary when he'd offered to pick up his mother. He supposed, on the one hand, that was a good sign. That, though the airport was scary, he hadn't thought about it being scary until he'd actually set foot in it. It hadn't been an Event like the first time he'd taken a walk outside, or the first few times he'd gone back to Seattle Grace, or the first time he'd gone back to Joe's to play darts with Mark. With everything else going on, like planning for Meredith's treasure hunt, the upcoming trip to City Hall that week for their wedding, and the fact that today would be the first day they saw their baby, well, he just hadn't thought about the scariness. He suspected Meredith hadn't either, which had to have been why she hadn't protested when he'd volunteered to play chauffeur.

Now, though, the airport felt like an Event. A Big Event. He was keenly aware of his heart
thumping in his chest. Keenly aware of all the bodies moving to and fro. Keenly aware of the way his eardrums curled when a car honked or somebody shouted or a whistle blew. Keenly aware of the fact that, though it was unintentional, he kept finding himself gravitating closer to walls and barriers and things that would protect at least one side, so he didn't have to focus so hard on 360-degree awareness.

Terrorists gravitated toward population centers like this. People with guns who wanted to create mass mayhem gravitated toward population centers like this. There was a lot of mass here to create mayhem in.

And, then, pushing all that aside, there was his mother, whom he hadn't seen in any capacity since the first few days after he'd been shot, before he'd wet his pants because he'd been so scared. Before he'd had pneumonia. Before the fevered killing dreams had started and had stuck perpetually after in his head. Before he'd started having panic attacks. Before he'd turned to drugs like a pathetic, worthless fool.

His head hurt, and his jaw ached from clenching, and his limbs felt shaky, and this was An Event.

Whether he wanted it to be or not.

A sky captain threw a pile of luggage on a metal cart right in front of him. The thunk and the sudden motion made everything inside Derek seize like an engine without oil. Meredith plowed into his back with an indignant, “Oops!” sound that was sort of a word but not really, and the sudden impact made his heart skip.

Derek's lower lip quivered. They stood outside in the terminal where all the kiss-and-ride traffic barreled through. They'd parked in the hourly parking and walked this far, except now he couldn't budge.

He just couldn't.

“Derek?” Meredith said, concern dripping from her tone as she came around to his front.

“I, um.” He swallowed. “Um.” That was all he could say. Words crammed themselves into his throat, but he couldn't get his body to cooperate, and they tangled in an unspoken clot near his Adam's Apple, where they thickened until he couldn't breathe. He pawed at his throat. A whistle pierced his eardrums, and he winced. The repeated message about leaving baggage unattended bled out of the intercom on repeat. People could keep guns in luggage. That's where they would hide—

“Derek, look at me!” Meredith said, and he did. He did. He looked right at her, and things relaxed. Just a little bit. “Is this too much for you?”

He closed his eyes. He took a deep breath and forced himself to stop focusing on all the noise and badness around him. He thought about the OB appointment today. They might even hear a heartbeat if the baby was far enough along, if he was right on the conception date bet he had with Meredith. He'd heard lots of prenatal heartbeats over the years, but none of them had belonged to his baby. His child. With Meredith.

There was no greater gift.

None.

Hearing it would be... perfect.

Just imagining the sound made him smile. He couldn't relax. He couldn't forget about the awful
airport and the awful noise. But he got himself out of the bad place he'd almost fallen into, got himself back to a point where he could at least function. When he felt a little better, he looked through his eyelashes at her. She'd bit her lip in that cute, pensive way she did, and she stared back at him.

“What replacement thought was that?” she asked, her tone amazed.

He pulled her hands into his palms and gave her a shaky grin. “Just thinking about later.”

She blinked. “Picking your mom up from the airport is that tranquil?”

“The baby, Meredith. Seeing the baby. It's a good carrot on a stick to get through this part of the day.”

Her bright gaze darkened. “You could wait in the car.”

“I don't want to wait in the car,” he said, though a not so small part of him really did want to. Then he wouldn't have to deal with the bedlam around them. Or with figuring out what to say to his mom. But he knew how nervous Meredith was. He didn't want to leave her by herself to do this, especially since he was the one who'd volunteered.

“Fine,” she said, and she started to walk.

“Meredith, wait,” he said, and he chased after her, easily slipping past the sky captain who had frightened him into inaction moments earlier. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you.” Though he had no idea what he'd said that would have done so.

“You didn't upset me,” she said as they walked through the sliding doors into the main building.

A man wearing a pinstripe business suit bumped into Derek, and Derek bristled as the man's suitcase fell to the floor with a smack. “Sorry,” said the man absentmindedly as he adjusted his cellular phone and continued his conversation with the person on the other end of the line. He scrabbled for his suitcase handle with his free hand, wrenched it upright, and then he continued on his way.

Meredith hadn't stopped. Derek clenched and unclenched his teeth. His head hurt. He shook his head, feeling a bit like he had nothing but jelly in his skull for a moment. He rubbed his temples. Took a deep breath. And he kept going down the wide open hall toward the flashing arrival board where she'd stopped.

Meredith stared blankly at the spew of incoming flights and their corresponding gates.

“What flight is your mom on?” she said as he came to a stop beside her.

“Meredith—”

“Should we meet her at security or at baggage claim?” Meredith said.

“Meredith—”

“What if it's dead, Derek?” she said, her voice shrill with the onset of panic. “Or sick? And your mom will be here. I don't want to do this while she's here.”

She stared at the arrival board. Wouldn't look at him. Tears streaked down her face. She frantically brushed them away with the palms of her hands, but they renewed in an eye blink.
He stood frozen for a march of moments, unsure of what to do. He hated it when she cried. Hated watching her hurt. It made him feel like somebody had taken his heart and stomped on it, and worse, there was the crushing helplessness of being unable to do much but be there while she did it.

He closed the short distance between them. Wrapped his arms around her. The contact made the airport bleed away from his awareness. She was upset. He had enough to worry about in this small microcosm.

“Meredith, please don't worry about my mother,” he murmured against her hair. His nostrils flared. She smelled like lavender. “The baby is absolutely fine, okay? And even if it's not, I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere, and if I have to, I will put my mom on the first plane out of here if that's what you need. I'm not kidding. Let me worry about my mother.”

She shivered in his arms and took a deep, long breath that made him sigh in tandem, because it meant some reassurance he'd thrown in that mess had stuck, and she felt a little better. He'd helped.

“I missed this so much,” she said.

He closed his eyes and swallowed. A fresh wound. Through his chest. Like a new bullet. Incinerating. She hadn't meant it that way, he knew, but that didn't stop it from meaning what it did.

“If only you'd gotten help sooner,” Mr. Clark said.

Derek took a short breath. He couldn't do this now. Couldn't play games with a figment.

“Worthless,” said his tormentor.

Not now.

“What will your mother say when she finds out about you?” Mr. Clark said.

Not now. Not now, not now, not now.

And Derek pushed his tormentor away.

Meredith was far more important.

“I love you,” he said, and then he repeated, “Let me worry about my mother. You just be you, and we'll get through the day, no matter what happens, no matter what I have to do to make it happen. I promise.”

She rested in his arms, breathing. She wrapped her arms around his waist, slipped her hands into the back pockets of his jeans. He rubbed her back and crooned at her. Not words really, just soft vocalizations meant to soothe both himself and her.

“Are you?” she said, breaking her long silence. She swallowed and looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes.

“Am I what?” he said.

“Worried about your mother,” she said. “You seem...” She shrugged. “Worried or whatever.”

He blinked. “I don't... I just don't know what I'll say to her.”
Meredith stared at him for a long, discerning second. She pulled her hands from his pockets and looped her arms around the back of his neck instead. He smiled and brushed a loose strand of her hair out of her face. He would never tire of looking at her.

“I wish I could suggest something,” she said. “I feel like a dunce when it comes to moms.”

He nuzzled her. “You're not a dunce. And you don't need to suggest anything.”

“I feel like I do,” she said. “She's your mother, and I'm...”

“My wife.” He pressed his lips against hers and breathed her in. The scent of lavender was so calming. He let it waft against the back of his throat.

Someone behind them cleared his throat, and Derek looked up for the first time in minutes. Remembered they weren't in a bubble. They were in a stressful airport. A crowd of people stood behind them, most looking at the arrival board, some surreptitiously trying to watch the show he and Meredith had provided.

Meredith, as if reading his mind, grabbed his hand, pulled him to the side, toward a bench that rested in one of the side hallways out of the way of most foot traffic. They sat down on the bench in a tired heap. She leaned against his body. He wrapped his arm around her. They sat, interlocked. A whole piece. Together.

“Why are you worried about your mother?” Meredith said.

“I'm just...” He sighed.

“Just?”

“Kathy called me. A few weeks ago. On my... bad day.”

“About?”

His jaw clenched. He ran his fingers through his hair.

“Derek, what did she say to you?” Meredith prodded.

He shrugged. “None of them think I'm in my right mind right now.”

“Well, they're jerks.”

“They're my family, Mere.”

“And they're jerks!” she said.

“They're partially right,” he said glumly.

“You had trouble,” Meredith said, a fiery look on her face. “I had trouble.” She inched closer. “People have trouble when bad things happen.” She kissed him. “That doesn't mean you're nuts. Or that I'm nuts. It just means we had trouble.”

He swallowed. A lump formed in his throat, and he stared at his lap. “Trouble was what I had four months ago when I got shot. Now, it's...” His voice trailed away, and he shrugged. “I don't know.”

“Derek...”
He couldn't speak for a long moment. He'd had trouble, yes. But he'd dug himself further into the hole instead of climbing out. He'd done things so fucking badly, made wrong choices left and right while he'd flailed around, which only made the upcoming mess of explaining it all to his mother feel worse, because he'd done most of it to himself, and wasn't that the very definition of not being in one's right mind? God, what would she say to him when he told her who was responsible for all of this misery?

“She'll be so disappointed in you,” said Mr. Clark, and Derek quailed.

Meredith squeezed his shoulder. “Hey,” she said softly.

He closed his eyes. All the stuff he'd pent up inside roiled.

“I don't know how to have PTSD around them,” he said. He ran his fingers through his hair. “And somehow, I have to tell them about...” He reddened. “I don't know how to tell them about the drugs. I'm so ashamed, Meredith, I...”

His lip quivered, and he almost fell apart. Right there. In the airport. In front of hundreds of fucking people.

Almost.

“Hey,” she said against the raging din in his head. “Hey, stop it.” She rubbed his arm. “You don't have to know any of that, yet,” she said. “You don't have to tell them anything. It's not their business. It's ours.”

He took a short breath. Another. Blew it out slowly. Let her words sink in. Calmed down. Dealing with this disease was like being trussed to a roller coaster, and he hated it. But at least the dips and twists had gotten less wrenching since he'd gone to Dr. Wyatt. And at least he felt like he could apply the brakes with enough concentration. And at least he had Meredith.

She waited patiently for him to collect himself once more without comment. She rubbed his arm, and that was all. She was simply... there.

And that was what he needed.

He gave her a weak smile. “I think if we omit the part about the baby my mother will kill me at Thanksgiving when it's too obvious to miss.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Not me?”

“No.”

“Why not?” she said, an indignant look scrunching up her face like a rabbit. “Am I not important enough to kill? What's up with that?”

Derek winked. “You've got the baby,” he said, and he glanced pointedly at her stomach. “All bets are off once it's born.”

“Oh. Right. There's that.” She looked down and rubbed her stomach. “Do you think I'll show that much by Thanksgiving? I'm not showing at all right now.”

He nodded. “I know, but you're very busty.”

“Now, you tell me that without being prodded?”
“I figured you'd ask again,” he said. “I learn.”

She sighed. Stared at her waistline. “What if it means something is wrong?”

“That you're not showing?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I still have that feeling.”

Derek kissed her. “I think it means you're in your first trimester, and every woman is different.”

She sighed like she didn't believe him. “Let's just go to the baggage claim,” she said. “Your mother will be here soon.”

But when she started moving, he didn't move with her. “Hey,” he said, a soothing murmur, but it didn't quite seem to register, and she didn't stop right away. When their arms snapped, she halted. Looked back at him. He winked at her in a last ditch effort to make her feel better. “That was some great makeup sex this morning, don't you think?” he said.

She raised her eyebrows at him. “Oh, is that what that was?”

“Well, we fought, didn't we? Last night?”

“We made up last night, too,” she said.

He shrugged. “Think of this morning as the exclamation point.” He gently pulled her back a few steps. Into his arms. He wrapped her up and rocked her side to side like they were slow dancing.

“I love you,” he said against her ear. “And I'm here.”

She sighed, and she relaxed in his arms. That felt good. A goal accomplished.

“I've got your back, too, you know,” she said.

He lifted his head from her shoulder. “Hmm?”

She grinned. “With your mom. The drugs. If you need it. I'm your wingman.”

“Woman,” he said.

“Whatever,” she replied, rolling her eyes. “All that stuff you said about putting her on a plane? I don't exactly know what I'm doing. I'm not good with families. But I'd do that, too, if you needed it.”

“My poor, poor mother,” he said, shaking his head.

She frowned. “What? I can't—”

“DEFCON 1 for either of us, and we're stuffing her in coach,” he rushed to say before she finished taking him too seriously.

She laughed and bumped his hip with hers. “Shut up, dork.”

“Yes, dear,” he murmured.

They walked to the baggage claim together.
Meredith watched Derek slide by degrees from calm into upset. He made a valiant effort to keep himself from slipping into freefall, tried replacement thoughts and counting and breathing steadily to a rhythm and everything else in the book of tools Dr. Wyatt had given him to help cope with his nerves. Meredith began to wonder if, maybe, once again, he might be pushing himself too hard.

Clusters of people had already begun to form around the baggage claim when she and Derek arrived, and Derek planted his feet about two yards back from the crowd with a nervous look on his face. He stood with his back facing a thick support pylon that went from floor to ceiling. She watched his gaze twitch from person to person, focusing on purses and suitcases and bags and big coats with big pockets. Assessing. Calculating risk.

She hated that.

Hated watching an optimistic person like Derek Shepherd reduced so thoroughly to the pessimism of searching each stranger for weapons. But the fact that he had approached so many people at all, let alone managed to get within ten feet, well, that was almost miraculous improvement.

She liked that.

Even better, he seemed to relax a bit once he'd looked everybody over to his satisfaction. His grip on her shoulder, though it remained chilly with nerves, became a supportive, comforting weight instead of a desperate cling.

She liked that, too.

His expression crumpled a little when the display board flashed a five minute tarmac delay for his mother's flight, and the healthy blush bleached out of his pallor. Sweat collected at his brow, but he seemed so freaking determined to be there with Meredith despite what his body was telling him, though she'd snapped about it earlier when she'd been upset, she couldn't bear to suggest that he go back to the car, now, couldn't get the words to form in her mouth. Not after everything.

Not when his mother would be arriving in a matter of minutes. Not when Meredith had her first OB appointment later in the day, not when she had this horrible feeling that something would go wrong, something with the baby, and not when whenever she thought about that, she just wanted to tug on Derek's shirt, crawl back into that ridiculous airbed with him in their done-but-not-really house, and forget the world.

She loved him. She was having a crappy day.

She didn't want him to go if he could help it.

He wanted to stay if he could help it.

So, she asked him about surgery. She had a tumor resection on Tuesday with Dr. Weller. A ten-hour procedure on some eleven-year-old's spine. She had no idea how she would get through it without having to puke or pee, but she wanted to be ready, and who better to help her study for it than Derek? As soon as she explained what she had scheduled, he peppered her with interested questions. He gave her tips, too. She waited patiently through interruptions when he looked up to investigate the sources of sounds he heard or of movements he witnessed out of the corner of his eye.

The last minute cram session was a halting, tripping process, but it was a process, and the minutes passed in an unsteady march. More people stacked up in thick, chatterbox clots around the baggage
claim, but Derek seemed okay with it. Mostly. His jitters grew more pronounced. But he didn't retreat. Didn't freeze up.

She thought they would make it through this whole airport ordeal without any serious incidents.

Then everything fell apart.

The buzzer that warned everybody to step back from the baggage claim because the conveyor belt would start moving in a moment went off, and it was loud. Like fire alarm loud, to the point that, unprepared for it, even Meredith flinched. Derek stopped talking mid-word. He twitched backward like he would bolt if he could. His back hit the pylon he'd been using as surreptitious protection. The air popped out of his chest all at once in a disturbed, vocalized rush.

“Derek,” Meredith said, hoping to ground him a little, but her voice barely carried over the racket. She reached for his arm, but he snapped his wrist away from her. He'd hit that nonsensical point where no touch would be comforting. She showed him her palms and backed up a step to show him he wasn't being threatened, least of all by her.

He looked at her, and the panic stirring in his expression cooled from boiling to simmering.

She thought maybe he could recover if he had a freaking chance.

Then the conveyor belt started to move, and that was loud, too.

And in all that chaos, they missed his mother, who appeared from the side he wasn't looking at, as she approached and put her hand on his shoulder. She held her other arm outstretched, and from Meredith's perspective, it looked like the older woman wanted a hug. From Derek's perspective, though, a corner of the eye sort of thing, Meredith imagined it looked like he was about to get struck.

Derek made a terrible keening noise that chilled Meredith to the core, because she'd only heard it once before, uttered by Derek months ago when he'd wet himself, he'd been that terrified. He crumpled. Right there. Against the pylon. Slid to the ground like he'd fainted. But he couldn't have fainted, because he pulled his arms over his head when he landed, and he curled away from anything that might hurt him. He didn't say no or stop like he sometimes did. Beyond his initial outburst, he didn't make any noise at all.

Everybody in the surrounding crowd looked at them to examine the commotion.

His mother looked horrified. “What on earth did I do?” she said.

“Nothing, just——” Meredith began, but then she gave up as priorities lined up in her head. She could deal with Carolyn in a minute.

Meredith dropped to her knees next to Derek. Terror radiated from him in waves like a thick, palpable thing. Her own body shook with stress in response.

“Derek, it's okay,” Meredith said, trying to soothe him, and by extension, herself, even as a lump the size of Mount Rainier formed in her throat. She didn't dare touch him, yet, though she wanted to. She wanted to wrap herself around him and crawl back into bed like she'd been fantasizing about since they'd gotten up. They could go back to their nice little denial bubble, not hear about the probably-dead baby, not be scared by phantasms and ghosts, not have his mother hovering, and... “It's okay. You're okay. You're okay.”

The crowd billowed around them, rubbernecking and yammering like idiots. They were too close.
She saw feet shifting closer in her peripheral vision, which meant Derek could see it, too, if he was paying any attention at all anymore. It was hard to tell.

“What’s going on, here?” said a new voice, and Meredith looked up to find a rather stern looking policeman with a black mustache staring down at her.

Great. This was freaking great.

“He's sick, okay?” she snapped.

“Does he need a doctor?” said the officer. “I can call for assistance.”

Meredith sighed. “I am a doctor. He's having a panic attack. He just needs some freaking space.”

And quiet. “I—” She ground her molars. “Would you people please back up?” she implored the crowd.

Miraculously, they listened, and the five foot bubble around her and Derek became wider.

“I'm okay,” Derek said, his voice wasted and dull and quiet.

Meredith froze. Blinked. Looked at him. He was white like flour, covered with sweat, and shaking. But he was talking. And that was... That was... “Derek, you're—”

“Okay,” he said. He took a shallow breath and let it out. He didn't smile at her. Didn't wink. Looked like he'd been hit by a freaking truck. But he was talking.

Talking!

“Is there a water fountain?” he asked, his voice wispy. He pulled a shaky hand through his hair. He rubbed his eyes and his face. Wouldn't look at his mother.

“Just down the hall by the restrooms,” said the police officer. He pointed behind the pylon where Derek sat. Meredith had a chance to assess him. His gaze behind the mustache was a sympathetic one, not an accusing it's-a-terrorist! one like she'd originally thought. His nametag declared him Lieutenant Willoughby. “Do you need any assistance?” the man asked.

Derek stumbled to his feet. “I'm okay, thank you,” he said softly to the officer, who seemed satisfied once Derek was off the ground.

When the officer turned away, Derek closed his eyes. He slumped against the pylon. He rubbed the sides of his nose sluggishly with his trembling thumb and index finger. His rumpled black t-shirt and hair made him look like he'd spent a long night on a red-eye flight. Not like he'd just had a panic attack. Onlookers whispered and dispersed.

“Derek,” Meredith said. She couldn't ask him how he was feeling. That was obvious, and she doubted she'd get an honest answer out of him in front of his mother, anyway. The same went for asking him if he needed anything. Not in front of his mother. Telling him how amazed she was by his improvement seemed horribly insensitive, given how crappy he looked. She settled on, “I love you.”

He didn't say it back. His lower lip quivered and then settled into stillness. He cleared his throat. He still wouldn't look at his mother, and a scarlet mottle began to spread down his face and throat and along the tips of his ears. “I'm going to get a drink,” he said. His vocal cords didn't quite seem to be working right yet, and she could barely hear him.
“Okay,” Meredith rushed to say. “Okay, take your time.”

He didn't ask for help, didn't say anything else, not that she imagined he would with his mother staring at them, and she could glean enough from the horrible vibes in the air not to offer assistance no matter how much she wanted to. He hobbled away from the pylon. Gravitated to the wall. Slunk toward the restrooms like a shadow of the man she knew he was.

“Oh, dear,” said Carolyn as she watched her son retreat.

Meredith took a short breath and blew it out. She felt wasted, too. Like somebody had hit her with a baseball bat or something. She hated watching that. Hated watching him in pain. And she hated Gary Clark. Wished she could rewind and make sure neither she nor Derek nor anybody she loved went to work on that horrible day, but that was a useless wish.

She wanted to get through today.

That was, at least, a wish that might work.

“Oh, dear,” said Carolyn once more.

The heart wrenching look on Derek's mother's face made Meredith want to fall apart. That was probably what most mothers felt like when their kids were suffering. Mothers who weren't Ellis. Meredith put her hand on her belly. She didn't need to hear bad news and feel like that on top of everything else today. The lump in her throat got bigger.

Just get through the day, she decided. Get through it.

She coughed. Just a little. At least the repeated thunk of heavy suitcases hitting the conveyor belt gave her a convenient subject change.

“Is your bag on the belt, yet?” Meredith said. “What does it look like?” She didn't want to talk about Derek. Or about the baby. Or about anything.

Carolyn gaped at her for a long moment. Didn't speak.

Meredith waited for the harangue about disappointment. The one where Carolyn asked why she hadn't been called sooner. The one where Carolyn called Meredith a failure and a screw up for letting all of this happen to her son, and for not doing a better job at fixing it.

The harangue never happened.

“Tell me what I did wrong,” Carolyn said calmly. “I won't do it again.”

Meredith swallowed. “You're not going to yell at me?”

Carolyn looked even more horrified, if that were possible. “Sweetheart, why on earth would I do that?”

Meredith shrugged. “Personal experience, I guess.”

Carolyn shook her head. Made a clucking noise of disappointment, just like Meredith had originally expected. What Meredith hadn't expected was being pulled into a warm, firm embrace. She stood there awkwardly for a long moment, stiff and surprised and thoroughly unsure of what to do. And then she sniffled. Sank into it. Closed her eyes. She was so freaking tired, and this felt so nice. She stood there for a long, long time, breathing softly, not speaking. She couldn't muster
much of anything for several minutes. Her eyelids felt heavy, and she didn't want to lift them.

“You can't sneak up on him,” Meredith said as Carolyn rubbed her back. “And you can't touch him until you're sure he knows you're there. He doesn't like loud noises or sudden movements. He gets upset or off-kilter really easily. If you startle him or... something, don't draw attention to it. You just have to give him a few minutes to work it out in his head. Unless you get...” She swallowed. Wiped her watering eyes. “If it turns into a panic attack, and you're already touching him when it happens, sometimes you can hug him, and that helps ground him. If he's coherent enough, you can ask him, and he'll tell you whether it's okay. If you're not sure, just don't touch him. Give him plenty of space. Reassure him in a calm voice.” No matter that you felt like your heart was getting ripped out.

“Okay,” said Carolyn.

“He's really a lot better,” Meredith said. “I swear he is.” Babbled. “He recovered from that panic attack really fast. And I haven't seen him have a real panic attack like that in...” Two whole weeks. His bad day. She hadn't seen that one, but he'd told her about it during his confessional. She shook her head. “He had a bad morning because we stayed in a strange place last night. He's not very good with crowds. The airport was new for him, and then that awful buzzer went off, and... that was sort of a perfect storm, except, well, not perfect, because it caused that. It wasn't really your fault. Why do they have to make that buzzer so loud? I forgot all about it until it went off, or I never would have let us stand so—“

“Meredith,” Carolyn said, interrupting softly. “Meredith, shh. I'm more concerned about you at this point. How are you?”

Meredith's lip quivered. This hugging thing was... It was nice. She could see where Derek had gotten his touchy-feely gene, and it was... nice. “I'm sorry. I babble sometimes when I don't know what the hell to say. I'm...” Pregnant. “I'm...” Pregnant. Say it. Get it done with.

She blinked. The tears she'd been holding back fell and spoke for her, two salty jags down her face.

“I'm really tired,” she said as she wiped her face. “All the time.”

Derek's mother considered her for a moment. “When we get back to the house, why don't you take a nap with Derek?” Carolyn suggested. “He looked like he's going to want one, too.”

Meredith pulled away. Blinded. “But don't you want to go out to lunch or something? Or...” She waved her hands. “Be touristy?” She'd moved her whole freaking schedule around so today would be free for the OB appointment and whatever else was on the docket. Like Space Needle visits or lunch at Pike Place or maybe a ferryboat ride. Meredith had expected the woman to want to want to explore. After all, Carolyn had been to Seattle twice, and both times, she'd barely left Seattle Grace.

But Carolyn shook her head. “How about you take a nap, and I'll figure out what to make you two for lunch.”

“But—” Meredith said.

“That's assuming you don't mind me using your kitchen,” Carolyn said.

“Of course, not,” Meredith said.

“What about laundry?” Carolyn said.
“What about it?”

“Does it need to be done?”

“Um... I don't know. Probably,” Meredith said with a shrug. And then she frowned. They'd been so busy the last few weeks. “Our house is a mess right now.”

Carolyn brightened. “Well, I can fix that.”

“You can't do that,” Meredith protested. “You're our guest!”

Carolyn stared at her, eyes serious. Determined. “Nonsense, Meredith. I want to help.”

“But—”

“You're my family,” Carolyn said. “You make Derek very happy, and I want to help. It makes me feel useful. Now, let's see if my suitcase has arrived.” And with that, she turned away, nipping the possibility of any arguments from Meredith in the bud.

Meredith goggled for a moment. This just wasn't how moms worked in her experience.

Carolyn, oblivious, or maybe pointedly ignoring Meredith's amazement, adjusted her leather purse strap over the shoulder of her knee-length coat, approached the conveyor belt and pulled off a green roller board suitcase with a neon-colored tag. Her mission accomplished, she looked in the direction Derek had departed and ran her fingers through her silver hair. Another habit Derek seemed to have inherited. The hair thing.

Meredith followed her gaze. No sign of Derek returning, yet. Not that that was much of a surprise. It'd only been about ten minutes since he'd left, and she imagined he would need a bit more time to collect himself. Not to mention the crowd around the baggage claim was still pretty thick, and she thought he might not be enamored with the idea of returning to a huge group of people who'd seen him collapse.

That was when she saw him.

Leaning against the opposite wall by the men's bathroom, staring at his shoes. His shoulders were hunched, and he had his hands stuffed in his jeans pockets. Anyone looking for the Derek they'd known before the shooting would have passed right over him and kept looking, which was probably why her mother had missed him.

“Wait here,” Meredith said, and Carolyn nodded.

Meredith trotted toward her husband. He didn't look up at her as she approached.

“Derek,” she said softly as she closed the distance between them.

He didn't speak, didn't lift his gaze, but she knew he'd heard her. His attention shifted to her feet instead of his.

Moving very slowly, she reached to touch his forearm. He didn't stop her. Her fingertips brushed his soft skin, and she gave him a squeeze. He'd gotten some of his color back, and he wasn't trembling. He was warm and solid. Only his pride still lay in bloody shambles.

“Why don't you come back and say hi to your mother?” Meredith said.

He swallowed. Was silent for a long moment. “I don't know what to say,” he said quietly.
“What was it you said last night?” Meredith said. “Start with hello, and work from there?”

His lip twitched. Almost like she'd made him laugh, albeit in a muted sense. He looked at her. “I'm sorry I left you to deal with her.”

“She hugged me, Derek. And she wants to clean.”

That got her a real laugh. A soft, beautiful chuckle. “She does that,” he said.

“So, this isn't like sitting shiva for her, is it?”

Another real laugh. He pushed away from the wall, and his hands came out of his pockets. He hugged her. Ran his hands up and down her arms, and she couldn't help but relax. How did he do that? “No, Meredith,” he said, a soft, soothing murmur against her ear. “She's usually like that.”

Derek followed Meredith back to where his mother stood waiting without further hesitation, though when they arrived, he got all hyper-awkward again, stared at his shoes, and stuffed his hands back into his pockets. Carolyn left her hulking suitcase leaning against the pylon where Derek had collapsed. She inched closer.

“Derek,” Carolyn said softly, and Meredith watched with quiet respect as the older woman planted herself in front of him in plain view, a very comfortable two feet away, and announced, “Sweetheart, I'd really like to hug you. Is that okay?”

He looked up. Blinked once. His shiny eyes spilled over. “Mom,” he said in a soft, choked voice.

“I'm so sorry I scared you,” she said, and then she pulled him tightly into her arms.

“It's okay,” he said, syllables wobbling. “It hap... happens a lot.”

“Not a lot,” Meredith said firmly. “Sometimes.”

Derek stood stiffly in his mother's arms at first, but the tension drained away in a matter of eye blinks, and then he closed his eyes and didn't open them again. His breathing slowed, and the wet pulse of tears against his cheeks slowed and stopped. Meredith watched the shame slide off his face as he took comfort in the embrace.

Carolyn Shepherd was a very good hugger, Meredith decided.

Derek's peaceful face said he agreed.

Derek couldn't sleep, though he tried for a while. He stared at the bedroom ceiling. The soft sound of Meredith's breathing beside him was relaxing. She'd collapsed into sleep within seconds of her head hitting the pillow, hadn't budged in an hour, and she wasn't snoring. She didn't snore when she was exhausted. His heart twisted a little at how hard this pregnancy was hitting her already.

“And you,” Mr. Clark said. “Dealing with you is doing this to her, too.”

Derek sighed. Kissed her shoulder. The blankets crinkled. She curled closer. Made a little squeaky sound deep in her throat, though she remained asleep and breathing thickly against his skin. She needed the rest. Needed it. She worked hard, and she came home to hard work.

Him.
“Great job at the airport,” Mr. Clark said snidely.

Derek gave up on sleeping. He was tired, and his body hurt from the stress of constant, fear-born adrenaline baths, hitting him and receding, hitting him and receding like the crash of waves against the shore. With the day he was having, though, if he did fall asleep, he'd probably just wake up yelling, and he'd disturb Meredith, and Mr. Clark's punishing commentary was already making it impossible to rest, anyway.

“You could take something for that,” said Mr. Clark said. “Just a little pill...”

Aaching swell of wanting burgeoned, and Derek sat up. Moved to the lip of the bed. Stood. Stretched. Closed his eyes. Counted to ten in a long, agonizing crawl.

“I don't want pills,” he whispered.

Mr. Clark laughed. “Liar.”

“I choose not to take them,” Derek clarified.

He snatched his notebook from the nightstand to make his point, flipped to the latest page, and wrote his choice down, the latest in a long, long list of choices. He didn't write the little choices down anymore, like what he ate or what color shirt he'd decided to wear that day, and he didn't carry the journal around with him, but the big choices, he still cataloged at the end of the day before he went to bed. It helped. Reading the list every night made him feel less like life was crushing him to a pulp.

Gary Clark had nothing to add as Derek underlined this particular entry three times for emphasis. That done, Derek put his journal back on his nightstand, sighed, and headed downstairs. He heard his mother making noise in the kitchen as she moved around. The faucet turned on and off. She hummed some tune that sparked a warm sense of nostalgia deep in his chest.

He thought about sitting in the living room and reading a book. Staying away from her. His tongue felt like lead whenever he got near her. After she'd hugged him in the airport, his worry and tension had died to an acceptable level around her, but he still hadn't been able to muster anything in the way of conversation, which had made him feel more and more moronic as the moments had passed. He'd been able to talk to his mom just fine on the phone. Why did proximity matter so much?

Meredith had babbled to fill the silence as they'd walked to the car. He'd felt recovered enough from his panic attack that he'd driven them home. Meredith had sat in the back seat. His mother had sat in the front with him, but had ended up craning her head around to make small talk with Meredith instead of with him.

He barely offered a syllable to the whole embarrassing affair. He'd tried. A few times. But he'd open his mouth and nothing would come out. His mother hadn't pestered him about it, maybe, because she thought him barely speaking to her was part of the Derek-with-PTSD package.

He looked longingly at the couch in the living room. But he couldn't. Meredith had her OB appointment in all of two hours. They still hadn't explained to his mother that Meredith was pregnant. He knew without a doubt Meredith was too scared to bring it up herself. He would need to be the one to elucidate the why of the “sudden” doctor's appointment that couldn't be rescheduled and required both of them to be there, if only to save her some worry.

*I choose to talk to my mother,* he thought.
No sudden rush of courage hit him. The act of choosing what he had to do, in this instance, didn’t really help make his path any easier. He still wanted to sit on the couch more than he wanted to walk into the kitchen.

“For, god's sake,” Mr. Clark said. “Buck up, you pathetic idiot.”

Derek closed his eyes. Counted to ten once more. Then he made himself walk into the kitchen.

The scene that greeted him made him smile despite himself. Samantha sat patiently on the floor, looking up with unblinking, mocha-colored eyes at his mother, who was slicing strawberries on the cutting board with a fat knife. His mother looked dispassionately at the dog. “I don't think dogs like strawberries,” she explained to Samantha, who didn't seem to agree, licked her lips, and kept staring like his mother was cutting steak and not fruit.

Samantha *did* like strawberries. Loved them, actually. Almost as much as Meredith loved them. Every time he went to the grocery store, he made sure to buy at least two pounds of them, one for his wife, and one for his dog. But he couldn't get himself to offer that tidbit of conversation.

His smile bled away.

The swish of the door closing behind him made his mother look up at him. A smile curled her lips. “Hello, sweetheart. Did you have a good nap?”

He swallowed. “I couldn't sleep,” he said roughly, and then his throat closed up, and he couldn't say anymore. He sat down at the table and stared at his hands.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

All he could do was shake his head.

His mother brushed the strawberries off the cutting board with the back of the knife into a ceramic bowl. She covered the top in plastic wrap, and she put the bowl into the refrigerator. She left the knife sitting on the cutting board, scratched Samantha's ears kindly, and came to the table to sit with him.

“I can't help but think you're giving me the cold shoulder, whether you're sick or not,” she said softly. “Do you not want me here?”

His lip quivered. “I want you to see my wedding,” he managed.

She reached across the table, paused inches from his hands for a long moment, and then continued her approach slowly to cover the last bit of distance. She gave him every chance to say no. To pull away. Her warm, weathered fingers brushed his. He felt comforted and sick all at once.

“What is it?” she said when he offered nothing more. “You're not still upset about the airport, are you?”

Shame caused emotional gridlock, and for too long, he couldn't bring himself to speak.

“I...” Emotion choked his voice when he managed to cough up a word. Words. “I haven't been doing so well. Since the shooting.”

He stared at his hands. Couldn't look up. His mother probably felt like she was pulling teeth.

“That's nothing to be ashamed of,” she said, as if she could sense the reason for the gravity pulling
his gaze to the table. “I'm not a stranger to this, Derek. I've spent a lot of time with soldiers who've had trouble after receiving combat wounds.” She squeezed his hands so firmly his finger bones wobbled and collided under his skin. “Won't you look at me, sweetheart?”

His heart constricted. His lip quivered. The lump in his throat expanded. He looked up at his mother, but only for a second, and in that second, all he could see was a wet blur that was vaguely Mom-shaped. She was comparing him to people who'd been hurt in the line of duty. Him. She had no fucking idea.

Samantha's dog tags jingled. Her big feet padded on the floor. She put her head in his lap and whined.

The dog's affectionate concern only made him fall apart faster.

He didn't deserve unconditional love.

Didn't deserve support.

Didn't deserve his mother comparing him to soldiers who'd had courage and gotten limbs blown off for their trouble.

Didn't deserve Meredith, who lay upstairs trying to recoup the energy he'd sapped from her with his sickness.

“You don't deserve anything you've been given,” Mr. Clark snarled.

Derek split open at the seams.

“I messed up,” he said. His eyes spilled. He couldn't stop them. His breaths shuddered in his chest. “I really messed up, Mom.”

He couldn't look at her.

“That's okay,” his mother said.

“You don't even know what I did!” he snapped, wiping his face.

“It doesn't matter to me what you did,” she said.

“I took drugs, Mom,” he said darkly, practically daring her to hate him. A flash of hurt exploded across her face like a brush fire, and then it was gone. Seared from existence. Her face became enigmatic. “It's my fault,” he continued. “I'm an addict, and I took drugs, and it's my fault. Just like Amelia.”

Silence stretched. His mother didn't let go of his hands like he expected. Her grip stayed firm and solid. She didn't budge, and she looked far from hateful.

Just speechless and unreadable.

He wondered if he'd imagined the hurt he'd seen. Manufactured it because he expected it, or...

He wasn't sure.

“I'm trying to get better,” he felt compelled to add in the damning silence. “I'm in therapy. I go five days a week, except this week because I took today off for Meredith's doctor's appointment. Dr. Wyatt has me on antidepressants that I hate, but I need them. I'm really trying. I'm trying so hard to
fix it, every day, all the time, so much it hurts me, and I'm always tired, but even then I don't know how I'll ever be better in seven months, and I need to be better in seven months.”

It all felt so hopeless.

He pulled his hands from his mother's grasp and wiped his face to get the wet, awful blur to sharpen back into focus, but it wouldn't. Nothing would focus, and he felt awful. Hot, embarrassed blush bloomed across his skin like a spate of wildflowers, and he buried his face in his hands.

“I'm really trying,” he said, the words hoarse.

“Now,” said Mr. Clark. “Now, you're trying. You wasted the first three months on Percocet.”

Derek cringed.

“Why do you think there's a time limit on getting better?” his mother said slowly. “There's no time limit for that. You do what you can manage, when you can manage it. That's all you can do.”

This wasn't how he'd imagined telling her about the drugs or about the baby or about anything.

He took a shivery breath. “Meredith is pregnant,” he said into his hands. “She's pregnant, and I'm like this.”

Silence stretched. He breathed into his hands.

How had this gone so wrong so quickly?

His mother's chair squawked across the floor as she stood. And then he felt her in his space. Warm body heat. Radiating. Heard her breathing close to him.

“I'm going to touch you,” she warned, and then she waited a long five seconds that only made him feel worse, because she had to warn him.

He'd been trying so hard, all the time, constantly, and he hadn't had a panic attack in two weeks, not even the night before when Meredith had been yelling and screaming at him. He'd tried so hard to stay upright for her. To let her get her licks in, because he deserved them, and she'd needed to stop pulling her punches to stay sane. He'd made it through all of that, and he'd thought he'd been doing a little better.

Just a little.

He didn't expect miracles. Didn't even believe in them anymore.

But he'd hoped for just a little after so much effort.

Then the airport had snapped him like a twig. Proved him wrong like a shit math problem in front of his mother, of all people.

2 + 2 = Derek falls apart.

His mother squeezed his shoulder with one hand. Her palm felt warm through his shirt. With the other, she rubbed his back in a slow, soothing circle, but she said nothing. Not about the impending baby or the drugs or anything.

“Aren't you going to say something about the drugs?” he said, a wretched croak of syllables.
“What are you looking for from me, exactly?” she said. “Absolution? Advice?”

The question brought him up short. He sniffed. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Do you expect me to fix it?”

He shook his head. “Nothing can fix it.”

She clucked at him in that way that told him she was disappointed, except he’d expected her to express disappointment well before now, which meant... he didn’t know what it meant.

“I messed up, Mom.”

“You did,” she said. “It happens.”

“It happens?” he countered incredulously. “I didn’t hit a squirrel in my car on the way to work. I’m an addict, Mom.”

She shrugged. “So, what?”

“What do you mean, so what?” he snapped.

“Explain to me why this should change how we talk, or the fact that I love you,” she said, the words warm and even and sincere, and he didn’t know how to respond to that at all. This wasn’t going how he’d planned. Not that he’d planned much. He’d mostly just worried. “If you want judgments, I can judge,” she continued, “but it seems to me you’re judging yourself quite enough already.”

He looked up at her. Blinked. “Mom...”

“I judged Amelia,” his mother said, and she lost some composure. Only for a moment. He saw a flash of pain slip across her eyes again. She lifted her left hand and brushed the corner of her eyes as though she thought she might be crying, though she wasn't. Then all evidence was gone, and he wondered again if he’d imagined it. If he might be even more out of his right mind than he’d thought. “That was my mess up,” she said.

He swallowed. “I thought you helped—”

“Not immediately.”

“Oh.” He had no idea what else to do with that revelation.

She took a short breath and then blew it out. Then she raised her eyebrows. “So, you said you’re already getting help?”

He nodded, speechless.

“Then hush about it,” she said in that soft, reserved-but-scolding tone he’d grown up with. The one she’d used when he’d made a grievous but understandable error. He was getting his hands metaphorically slapped like he’d expected, but for none of the reasons he’d expected, and it was just...

“But what if I mess up again?” he said.

“Then you mess up, dear,” she said. “And you work from there. That’s what we all do when we make mistakes.” Her earlier confession gave her words so much weight. Still, his mistake felt...
worse. Worse, somehow. The gravity was... bigger.

“I did this to myself and to everybody around me,” he said.

He clenched his jaw. A softball gathered in his throat, and he blinked. In his bewilderment, he’d stopped crying, but it started easily once he thought about that. How he’d hurt Meredith. How she gave him endless, undying support, and how he repaid that support with nothing. Literally nothing. No miracles. No progress at all. Nothing. Just more of the same sick, broken, burdensome creature he’d become. He rubbed his tired eyes.

“I feel so worthless,” Derek confessed quietly, and he looked at the table.

“Derek Shepherd, you are not worthless,” his mother said without pause. She stopped rubbing his back. Stopped squeezing his shoulder. Shifted her entire body and pulled him against her. Samantha lifted her head from his thigh in surprise and backed away, her dog tags jingling. His mother held his head with his ear pressed against her belly, and she hugged him so tightly he couldn't move his torso. “You're not worthless,” she repeated, and he heard the words low and deep through her skin, rumbling in his ear. “You're not. I don't want to hear you say that anymore.”

He leaned into her. Long-buried instinct made him grab a piece of her shirt and squeeze it in his shaking palm a bit like a security blanket. His mother pulled her fingers through his hair and made little shushing noises. She rocked him in her arms like she'd done when he'd been little. Before he'd turned fifteen and become an instantaneous adult in the wake of a bloody, violent murder.

“Hush, now,” she said, a soft, soothing whisper. “I'm here.” An echo, and yet in the now. A collision of past and present. In that moment, he found what he needed.

His eyelids dipped. He stared through the blur at the kitchen. Samantha watched him mournfully from several feet away. He closed his eyes and pressed his face into the folds of her mother's shirt. Inhaled the old, rosy scent of her perfume that spoke of so many years long past.

The tumultuous, crushing act of living seemed to unconstrict a bit in that embrace, and he took his comfort greedily. Wished he could stay like this for a while. An hour. A day.

But he couldn't.

“I'm such a mess, Mom,” he said, shame lacing his voice.

“Something terrible was done to you,” she said, a soothing, soft murmur. He sighed at the feeling of his hair moving against his scalp as she stroked it. “I was an army nurse. I've seen far worse caused by far less.”

“But those men and women were heroes,” he said. “I'm not anything.”

She paused. Looked down at him. “You save lives every day you go to work,” she said. “How are you any different from the people I've cared for?”

He swallowed. “They put their own lives on the line. I didn't.”

She looked at him sadly. Tipped his chin toward her face with her palm. “But you did, sweetheart,” she said, a watery look in her eyes. “You knew there was a shooter loose. You could have locked yourself in your office and barricaded the door, but you didn't. Your priority was trying to make sure everybody was safe, and so that's what you did. How is that not heroism?”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. His immediate instinct was to counter her. A dragging sense of
depression pulled at him like an undertow. He thought about Paul Wandell, the security guard who'd died before seeing his kids at that dance recital. About Noah Cunningham, the man he'd found with a chunk of his neck blown off near the admissions desk, the man who'd died stepping in front of a bullet for Ben Forks, another security guard. Noah had been a hero. Not Derek.

“You didn't save anybody, and you still got shot,” whispered Gary Clark.

Derek looked at his lap, tired. Beaten. “I didn't help anyone, and I'm not making any progress.”

“Derek,” his mother said. “You helped Meredith, didn't you? And her friend? You made them hide. And how many other people did you get to safety? It's quiet heroism. You'll never know for sure if things would have gone differently had you not intervened. People might not cheer on your behalf. But it's heroism all the same.”

His lower lip quivered. He'd never told her any of that. None of it. Which meant... somebody had spoken up for him. Somebody. Meredith, maybe. Or... He blinked against the blur. He felt tears crawling down his face. He really wanted to believe his mother. He did. He wanted that so much, but the undertow kept pulling and pulling...

“When I last saw you, you could barely walk. You've been shot, and you'd just lost a baby. Today, you picked me up from the airport. You've quit drugs. You're starting a beautiful family. Tell me, how is that not progress? Can you tell me that?”

He broke in the wake of all that pulling. He wanted to believe her so badly, but today just felt... awful. Like the day he'd snapped and threatened Dr. Kepner for a prescription he'd only just barely not filled. “I think I'm having a bad day,” he said. “I'm...”

And he couldn't speak again.

“But you have good days,” said his mother. She brushed his face with the back of her palm. “You do have good days, right?”

He nodded. He'd had two bad days in a month, and he'd gone about two weeks between them. Two days out of twenty-eight had been bad. 7% bad. That was all.

“Usually,” he said. “Usually, I'm good.”

He'd gone two weeks without one, this time, and he'd been pushing and pushing. Planning Meredith's surprise had taken it out of him. Hanging the lights on the house had taken it out of him. Meredith yelling and screaming at him had taken it out of him. Seeing all the pain he'd helped cause when Meredith had been crying in his arms had taken it out of him. Nightmares and no sleep had taken it out of him. Waking up in a strange house had taken it out of him. Trying to stay sane in that horrible airport had taken it out of him.

His lip wouldn't stop quivering. “Usually,” he repeated. He wiped frantically at his face with his palms. His skin hurt. His eyes hurt. “I'm usually good. I'm usually good.” He latched onto that. He had to. He needed it.

His mother smiled at him. “Usually is progress, isn't it?”

He nodded mutely.

A warm hand splayed against his back. “I know it's really hard to see positive things when you're feeling so down,” she said.
He nodded again, and he curled back into her arms. She held him.

“I know,” she whispered in his ears, and the undertow didn't feel so terrible anymore. He took a deep, quivering breath. “I know,” she said once more, her voice like a soothing balm, and things almost felt bearable again. She pulled her fingers through his hair, and it felt... nice. So safe. He craved safe.

He clutched her shirt.

Samantha perked, lifted her head off her paws, and wagged her stumpy tail as she stared at the door. Derek followed her brown gaze. Meredith stood in the doorway to the kitchen, her tiny body blocking the door from swinging shut. Sleep had rumpled her hair and hazed her eyes. She looked less pale. A lot more rested.

Mortified. But rested.

He squinted at her tiredly over his mother's arm.

“I'm so sorry,” she said. She made a weird motion with her hand. Like she couldn't quite figure out what gesture was appropriate. “I didn't mean to eavesdrop on private mother/son whatever stuff. I heard... Crap!” She opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it. “I'm sorry.” And then she turned like she would leave. The door slipped closed an inch as she twitched in the direction of the living room, but his mother moved to stop her.

The warm cocoon his mother had made around his torso disappeared. Derek closed his eyes. Pressed his face against his hands. His elbows slid on the table. He slumped.

“Congratulations, sweetheart,” he heard his mother say. The soft rustle of fabric and Meredith's awkward squeak told him Meredith was getting another hug. And only then, outside his selfish well of needing reassurance, did his mother finally let loose her enthusiasm. “I hear I'm going to be a grandmother again! How fantastic! Have you picked out any names?”

“Um,” Meredith said. “Um... When? We... Anne. Anne for a girl.”

The tension in her voice called him. He should get up. He should get up and rescue her. He knew it. He hadn't meant for her to walk into this conversation without preparing her first. Letting her know his mother knew about the baby.

The adrenaline receding from his veins had other plans for him, though. He'd told his mother. Everything. And he usually had good days. The stress-born ache in his muscles remained, but the stress itself slipped out of him like water from a sieve. He became a puddle of limbs in desperate need of rest, and he just couldn't bring himself to intervene, not knowing full well that, while Meredith might be flustered, his mother was entirely benign.

“Anne is very pretty,” Carolyn said.

“We don't know anything yet,” Meredith said, stress constricting her voice. “The first appointment is... it's today.” A pause. “In an hour and a half.”

They exchanged some other words, but the longer Derek kept his eyes closed, the more it all seemed to blur against the buzz of exhaustion in his head. He rubbed the bridge of his nose while they chattered back and forth. Well, more his mother chattered. Meredith replied in monosyllabic, ruffled bleats.

By the time Meredith sat down in the chair beside him, he'd begun to doze. He snapped awake
when she said his name. He blinked and looked around. His mother had left the room. Samantha had left, as well. Muzzily, he glanced at his watch and was shocked to discover ten minutes had slipped away while he'd been in oblivion. Ten minutes in only a second. Ten minutes that had done nothing for him. He found himself wishing he'd taken that nap earlier. He rubbed his eyes.

“Hey,” he said tiredly.

She gave him a soft, watery smile. “Hi,” she said. And then she touched his arm. Fixated on a tiny swirl of hair on his forearm and twisted it around her nail. Her touch relaxed him, and he sighed.

She stayed silent for a long while. “So, you told her.”

“Yeah,” Derek said.

She took a short breath and let it loose. “Thank you. I'm glad it's over with.” She scooted her chair closer to him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, locking her palms in front of his chest. She rested her chin against him. Her grip tightened. She kissed him. “For your bad day,” she murmured. “I'm really sorry you're not feeling well.”

He swallowed. So, she'd heard that part. “I'm usually good,” he said, unable to keep his frustration from clamping like a vise around each syllable. He squeezed his fists together. “I'm usually good. I am, Mere.”

She kissed him again. “I know you are. I know it.”

He sighed. “Sometimes, I don't.”

“It's good you have a wingman, then, isn't it?” she said.

“Woman,” he said, his voice rough.

“Whatever,” she whispered.

He took a long, silent moment of comfort in her embrace, and then he turned in her grasp. Splayed his palm against her womb. Warmth seeped into his fingertips. She breathed, and he closed his eyes, imagining what she carried beneath her skin. Magic. “Are you worried about the baby, still?” he said.

She nodded. “I don't think I'll ever stop until it's out of me.”

He kissed her. Gave her a small smile. “Mere, I think parents don't ever stop worrying about their kids, ever, at least a little.”

“Shut up,” she said. “You knew what I meant.”


They sit interlocked for a long while.

“She put her hand over her stomach, over his palm. “To see the baby. I'm sick of waiting. And you need something good today.”
“You believe me, now?” he said.

She nodded jerkily. “Really, really trying to,” she said, and she gave him a brave face that melted his heart. He couldn't help but kiss her.

“I'll get my keys,” he said, and then he stood. Excitement burgeoned, and all that remained of the undertow stopped pulling, at least for a little while.

When Meredith stepped onto the front porch and found Carolyn crying as she petted the dog, Meredith froze. Samantha whuffed softly, blowing Meredith's cover, which made two times in all of twenty minutes Meredith had been foiled by her lacks-comprehension-of-stealth dog. The silver-haired woman swiped at her eyes with the backs of her palms and looked up before Meredith could even think about a tactful retreat.

Meredith lowered the water bottle she’d been chugging from her lips. What was with her walking in on private moments, today? It was like Carolyn had a Meredith magnet hidden somewhere in her pockets.

“Oh, hello, dear,” Carolyn said, her voice thick with emotion. Her eyes were slightly red and watery, and the space below her eyelids glistened. The wet breeze ruffled her short hair. Drizzle made the air seem misty. The swing creaked as it swayed back and forth.

“I'm so sorry,” Meredith said. “I didn't mean to intrude. I'll just...” She turned toward the door. “I'll...”

Her water bottle crinkled as she squeezed it. She'd started drinking frantically to make sure she'd be full by her appointment. Luckily, she hadn't used the bathroom after her nap, so she was well on her way to floating already.

“No, no,” Carolyn said. She waved Meredith forward. “Please, sit.”

Meredith blinked. She twitched indecisively toward the bench. Then away. Then toward.

“I promise I don't bite,” Carolyn said with a soft smile.

Meredith sighed a short little sigh. And then she sat. She petted the dog awkwardly, not really looking at Carolyn. Are you okay? The obvious question sat on her tongue, a thick, clogged bunch of words that refused to budge into spoken syllables. She didn't think she was supposed to have seen the crying and didn't know what to say about it. Or if anything should be said at all.

“I'm sorry,” Meredith said. “I'm... I don't mean to keep intruding.”

Carolyn shook her head. “You're not intruding at all,” she said. She ran her old, worn fingers through her silver hair. She gestured at Meredith's purse. “Going to your appointment?”

Meredith nodded, her stomach sinking at the subject change. “Yes, I'm...”

She swallowed, unable to finish. She could put on a brave smile for Derek in light of how badly he needed to see one that day. It wasn't really a lie – her world of worries tended to fall away whenever he wrapped his arms around her. But Derek wasn't there, now. She looked down at her abdomen, her flat abdomen that didn't look pregnant at all, frowning, and she couldn't think of what to say. Couldn't think of anything to say about anything. So, she tipped back her water bottle
and chugged to save herself from having to communicate by smiling or frowning or babbling or otherwise. She dared a glance at Carolyn as she gulped, only to find the woman gazing knowingly at her.

“It's very hard after a miscarriage,” Carolyn said.

Meredith brought her water down from her lips and swallowed. “You mean you—”

Carolyn nodded. “The gap between Derek and Amelia.”

“Oh,” Meredith said. “Oh, I'm...” Awkward, awkward, awkward. She gulped. “I'm sorry.”

But Carolyn gave her another soft, kind smile. Touched Meredith's shoulder and squeezed it. “The waiting gave me Amelia.”

Samantha rose to her feet as the front door opened, and Derek strode onto the porch. He looked a bit shaky and unkempt, but so much better. Bright-eyed. Excited. His keys jingled as he let Samantha back inside. “Ready to go?” he said.

Meredith stood. The swing creaked. She glanced at Derek's car. Then at him. “Yeah,” she said, the word a bare gasp. His smiles and excitement weren't helping much, anymore.

As if he'd read her freaking mind, he walked over, draped his arms over her shoulders, and leaned in to kiss her. To replenish her. She took comfort in his larger body, breathing and alive beside her. When she pulled away, things seemed better. At least, for a moment.

She glanced at Carolyn. Her eyes were still a bit red, but Meredith doubted anybody who hadn't caught the woman crying would assume tears had been involved. Carolyn gave her another kind smile.

“Show me pictures when you get back,” the older woman said.

“You'll be the very first one to see them,” Derek said with a kilowatt smile that made Meredith want to melt all over again. Melt in the wake of his absolute surety.

Meredith swallowed. Bit her lip. Looked at Derek, who was smiling and happy, and then back at Carolyn. The woman had been upset. Leaving her alone just seemed... mean. Mean and inconsiderate, and Derek would never offer, wouldn't presume in a million years that Meredith wanted his mother around for something like this. Meredith wasn't even sure she wanted his mother around for something like this, but...

Derek squeezed her shoulders. The mom prospect didn't seem so scary, in light of him standing there.

“Do you want to come along?” Meredith said, taking the plunge into the ice cold water of family.

Meredith stared at the fleshy orange backs of her eyelids, unwilling to open them as Derek's babbling brook of words washed over her. Doctors' offices were too bright and cold and miserable and austere and they reeked of antiseptic, she decided. Well, this one reeked. They used some stupid pine solution, and she'd barely gotten used to the lemony crap they used at Seattle Grace.

Her stomach roiled at the sharp smells, and she clenched her teeth, trying to think of something else. Something else that didn't stink or otherwise make her want to vomit. Like a birdbath. Or the beach. Or a stiff margarita. Or naked Derek melting ice cubes on his hot, sweaty skin.
Damn it.

She had to pee. Really, really had to pee. Like... couldn't stop thinking of waterfalls and sprinklers and faucets and metaphors that involved sailing or melting wet things on her sexy husband had to pee.

The gel on her abdomen felt slippery and cold, and she bit her lip as she felt the gentle press of the ultrasound wand against her skin. She tightened her fingers around Derek's. He held her hand and hadn't let go from the moment that he, Carolyn, and Meredith had entered the waiting room, except when Meredith had needed said hand to change into her hospital gown. Then, he'd let go, but he'd found her palm again as she'd climbed onto the examination table. The warmth of his skin at her fingertips was the only thing keeping her sailing down the dark and twisty river of Not At All Calm instead of stopping at Port Unadulterated Panic.

She waited for the news.

Bad news.

Your baby is sick. Defective. Dead.

Your uterus is broken.

You're a crap incubator.

Why did you even try to get pregnant?

What a stupid idea!

She knew it was coming. The frown and the looks and the lecture.

“Can she get some Zofran?” Derek said. “Just for when her nausea is really bad. She can't do her job, and she gets home feeling awful. She wouldn't even eat s'mores last night.”

“I'm sure the doctor can write a prescription to help with that,” said the ultrasound technician, who had introduced herself as Betty or Bessie or Nessie or something.

Derek hadn't let go of Meredith's hand since they'd gotten there, but he also hadn't shut up, either.

Meredith scrunched her frozen toes. Her socks felt a little wet from sweat. Her limbs had a nervous tremor to them, almost like her knees would knock if they could. Her hospital gown stuck to her spine, and her legs stuck to the stupid paper covering the examination table. Every time she tried to move, a crinkle, crinkle, crinkle noise obliterated the relative quiet, though Derek didn't seem to notice her nervous shifting.

He just kept talking.

“She said no to s'mores last night,” Derek said beside her. “She never says no to chocolate, anyway, but I've since learned not to get between her and her marshmallows, either. I was flabbergasted. Flabbergasted. And I was thinking maybe Phenergan would help, but that causes a lot of drowsiness, and she needs to be good for surgery. I remember reading something about using Zofran inst—”

“Let's see,” said Betty/Bessy/Nessie, her tone quiet as she politely interrupted Derek's motorboat mouth. The wand stopped moving against Meredith's abdomen. “Ma'am, are you all right?”
His behavior didn't make any sense, Meredith decided. When Derek got nervous or scared, he got quiet. He turned inward, and he gravitated toward sitting in the dark, alone, curled up in a ball in a blanket. This babbling brook of words was weird for him, and it was driving her freaking batty, not knowing the why of it.

“Ma'am?” said the technician.

Meredith shook her head. “Fine,” she said, her teeth almost chattering with excess nerves. The wand moved again. Why couldn't the technician find the damned baby? “I'm fine.” Not. “I'm listening.” Not. “I'm just...”

Not.

Not ready.

Not ready for this.

Her bladder ached, and she wondered if any of this was even worth it anymore.

“It'll be okay, Mere,” Derek said too quickly. “It'll be perfect, just like I told you.” He paused for a nanosecond to take a breath. “I'm just really worried about the vomiting. How can she possibly be eating enough to feed the baby, let alone herself? She can't eat at work, and she works long shifts. It's—”

And then Derek got quiet. All at once. The words stopped, and his hand went lax, and his breathing hitched like he'd been smacked stupid by a battering ram, which was more like what she was used to when he was scared.

“There we go,” said the ultrasound tech, her voice soft.

Meredith swallowed. Maybe, Derek had never been nervous. Just so excited he couldn't shut up. But, now, whatever he'd seen had driven him back into silence.

Derek regained his wits and his hand tightened so much around hers that his grip made her finger bones hurt. His breathing resumed, each inhalation a quiet but deep, messy, wrecked sound that spoke of emotion. She'd heard it before in the midst of his panic attacks. Or when he was crying. When he was crying, he made little sounds like that.

She couldn't look.

Couldn't breathe.

This was bad.

“I, uh...” Derek managed before his words constricted into tight, upset silence. She had the innate sense of him standing next to her, his hip pressed against the examination table. His shoes shifted on the tiled floor. The space between them lessened. She felt the heat radiating from his skin as his cheek neared hers. Like he needed to be closer. “That's...”

When he lost his words again, she snapped in two. “Oh, god,” Meredith said as her eyes pricked with tears. “What's wrong with it?”

“Nothing,” Derek said, the word rough like it'd been dragged over gravel.

“What do you mean, nothing?” Meredith said.
She cracked open her eyelids to peer at him dubiously. At first, she saw nothing but a messy blur wrought by her preemptive tears. She blinked, and her gaze sharpened. She focused on her hand, wrapped in Derek's larger one. Her heart squeezed at the connection, now more than ever. Derek stood beside her, hunched to be as close to her level on the table as he could. He stared at the tiny display with unblinking wet eyes that were leaking just a little, leaking that he wasn't even trying to hide, and didn't seem embarrassed about in the slightest. His lips had parted, and his pupils were dancing with a sort of dumbstruck, pleased amazement that was infectious.

He wasn't upset. Or he was, but he wasn't. Not in a bad way.

She had to look, too.

Had to.

She had to see why he was so amazed.

“Just look, Mere,” he said as if he'd followed her thought process. His tone was quiet. Reverent. Awed.

She shifted her scrutiny to her other side. The paper crinkled loudly, but she barely noticed as her gaze came to rest on the ultrasound tech, who looked... happy. The woman looked happy like she'd just had a piece of Izzie's cake. She held the wand to Meredith's belly with blue hands. Not blue hands. Blue nitrile gloves. Beyond the blue and the wand and the technician's opposite shoulder rested the monitor for the ultrasound machine, and on that monitor was a grainy black and white blob that—

“Everything looks perfect so far,” said the technician. “Just perfect.”

Meredith swallowed, not quite ready to believe. “Really?” she said.

The technician nodded. “Really,” she said with another cake smile.

“Really?” Meredith said. Her chest constricted, and her breaths shortened to match Derek's. “Really perfect?”

“Yes, really,” said the technician with a soft laugh. “It's a little too early to tell the sex, yet, though.”

“That's okay,” Meredith said. She yanked her hand from Derek's and scrubbed her face hard, still not quite sure she could trust her eyes. She propped herself on her elbows and looked. Meredith was no expert, but she'd read enough ultrasounds to stare at their blob and think tiny human.

“It's not sick?” she said, leaning forward.

“Not sick,” said Derek.

“Not defective?”

“Just look,” he said.

And Meredith looked.

Really looked.

Saw Baby for the first time.
Their Baby, whom she'd talked to on occasion the past few weeks.

Their Baby, who was not sick or defective or dead, in her uterus that apparently wasn't broken.

Their Baby, who looked strong and perfect.

Their Baby, whom she and Derek had made together.

Their Baby.

She couldn’t tear her eyes away from it. The thing on the monitor was inside her. She felt the heat of Derek pulling closer, if that were possible. He came behind her and put his chin at the juncture of her neck and shoulder. He put his warm hands over hers and looked down the length of her body toward the machine. His soft-but-full-of-too-much-everything breathing beside her ear was so reassuring.

“Can we hear the heartbeat?” Derek said, his words barely put together.

The technician nodded. She paused with the wand, pressed a button on the machine, and then in addition to Derek's breathing, Meredith heard the unmistakable, rapid flutter of Baby's tiny heart plugging along for all it was worth like any healthy, tiny heart should.

“That's really...” Meredith swallowed, overwhelmed to the point that she couldn't articulate the bursting feeling inside. She laughed, and the feeling took flight into the air. “It's loud!”

Euphoria.

That was the feeling.

She wanted to put her hands on her belly and feel with her fingers what she was seeing with her eyes, but the cold goop and the stupid wand and the technician's blue nitrile gloves were in the way.

“Looks like it's ten weeks along,” said the technician in the blur.

Not eight like Meredith had thought. Which meant Derek was right and had been right all along. When he was trying to get her pregnant, he didn't kid around. He’d knocked her up the first night they’d started trying, or soon after. Which was, probability-speaking... mind boggling. She found it nearly impossible to believe the universe had gone so right for them that it had actually defied the odds, even just this once, but there it was. On the monitor. The evidence.

“Seriously?” Meredith said.

The technician frowned at the display and leaned closer to the monitor. She paused for several seconds, and then she shrugged. “Well, the doctor will probably be able to be more specific as far as your due date, but... yeah. I’d say ten weeks or so.”

“Told you so,” Derek whispered against Meredith's ear, and then he kissed her there and along her jawline in a trail. He swallowed. “God, it's perfect. I told you it's perfect. It's so perfect.”

Which was when Meredith realized Derek was too befuddled to care about their bet or the fact that he'd been right and wouldn't have to eat a fluffernutter. Hell, she was too befuddled. By everything.

“We need to buy a crib,” she said, blinking back tears. “And a high chair.” It'd been real, but it hadn't been real before, and now it was... “And stuffed animals.” It just was. “And... baby stuff.”
With him. “We don't have any baby stuff.” It was with him, and it was real, and— “I don't know what stuff to get.”

“We'll figure it out,” Derek said. “My mom can help. She has a bit of experience, you know.”

He sounded so sure.

How could he sound so sure, even when he sounded so freaking wrecked?

And this was a wrecking sort of thing. This was huge.

They'd made a baby.

Really made one.

The long deferred promise of her first pregnancy had finally been fulfilled.

Her legs started to shake again when it sank in. Everything shook. She leaned into him. Pressed her nose against his throat and inhaled. He smelled good. Soothing.

The ultrasound tech took the wand away and wiped Meredith’s belly off with a towel. As soon as it was okay, Meredith sat up, and she curled into his arms as tightly as she could go without toppling off the exam table. She pressed her ear against his chest and listened to him breathing. To his heartbeat, which was so much slower and more distinct than their baby's. Their baby's.

She slipped her hand between him and her, pressed her palm flat against her abdomen, which still had no bump, but she'd seen it, now. Seen the blob that was their baby. Their baby. Derek placed his hand against hers. His skin was a blast of warmth.

She couldn't pay attention to the technician, who puttered about, putting things away. Couldn't pay attention to anything but the picture in her head of the blob she'd just seen. Of the night Baby had likely been conceived. Of Derek, naked in her arms. It had been so awkward at first, that first night they'd started having sex again, but now, in her head, it just felt magical.

_I forgot how nice... You feel nice, Meredith._

_Only nice?

_I'm not exactly a thesaurus when I'm inside you._

“Are you okay?” Derek said.

_No condom, and no birth control. We've never done this before with nothing at all. Just you and me._

“We really made a baby,” she said against his soft t-shirt. Just him and her.

They'd done that.

He hiccupped with emotion. “Yeah.” The rumble of his voice tickled the side of her ear. “We did.”

“Something went right.”

Another hiccup. “Yeah,” he said. “It did. It's perfect.”
But so many things had gone wrong on the way to here. So many terrible things. And so many things weren't perfect, even then, after so much. And now they had a Baby.

“Let's go early,” Meredith said.

He frowned. “Go where?”

She scrunched his shirt between her fingers. “City Hall. Let's go, now.”

“What?”

“Let's get married.”

He pulled back. Wiped his eyes. Blinked at her. “You mean, now? Like right now?”

“Why not?” she said. “Your mother's in the waiting room. We already have our marriage license. I could call Cristina and Mark really quick...”

A soft knock on the door interrupted her. The doctor strode into the room carrying a chart, a bright smile on her face. She looked a bit like Princess Leia, sans earmuff buns. Her blondish hair was cropped into a pixie cut, and she wore a pink stethoscope and a white lab coat over pink scrubs.

“Hello, I'm Dr. Charlton,” she said.

“Hello,” Derek said to her.

“Hi,” said Meredith, her voice still warble-y as she thought of Baby.

As Dr. Charlton shut the door behind herself and approached, Derek looked at Meredith and smiled. He pulled her fidgety hand into his and squeezed it. “I do have my keys this time,” he said.

They stood in a tight clot of bodies that barely fit into the room. Hulking bookshelves lined the dingy white walls of the windowless office, making the room seem even tighter around them than it should have been. Opposite the door rested a mahogany executive desk that gleamed under the overhead lights. Behind the opposing desk sat a man. A short, heavyset man, no taller than Dr. Bailey, with a bulbous nose, nostrils exploding with bushy salt-and-pepper-colored hair, and a poof-y dead raccoon, or something, sitting on his head. Maybe, not a dead raccoon. But it was... something. Something seemed to be an apt description. And Meredith couldn't tear her eyes away from it for the longest stretch of silence.

The little man glared back at them with a disinterested sniff. He brushed his sleek black robes with his hands as if to primp like a cat. His desk was stacked high with papers and books and other official-looking things. Even a fancy gavel and a round striker plate. Like, perhaps, in his spare time, he whacked the thing on the desk for fun.

Did judges even use gavels in weddings?

“Crap, I'm sorry,” Meredith said. She glanced at Derek, but he said nothing to help her. He seemed more focused on his shoes than anything else. Ever since he'd told Alex, Lexie, and Cristina about his drug problem, he'd acted like a shrinking violet who didn't know English around them, which was neutral at best, but at times like this, extremely. Freaking. Irritating.

Damn it.
She sighed, frustration making her teeth clench. “Can't we just—?” She waved her hands in a useless gesture. “Forgo the party limit this time? I mean we're all already here...” The butterflies playing tag in her stomach – why were butterflies playing tag in her stomach?? – and the shiver of excitement and last minute nerves compounded her frustration. Made it hard to think.

She was getting married. Really legally married. They would need a lawyer to undo it. Not that they would ever undo it. But... yeah.

It was a Big Thing.

The judge shook his head and looked down his nose imperiously at them. “Rules are rules,” he said in a booming bass that belied his tiny frame. Meredith glanced at the shiny nameplate sitting on his desk. Honorable Ian Cobblebodum. She couldn't help snorting despite her irritation as he continued, “Only six people in the wedding party are allowed in the room.”

Meredith turned to face said wedding party. Owen, Chief Webber, Mark, Lexie, Alex, Cristina, and Derek's mother fanned around her. Meredith felt squished between them and the desk.

“Well, what should we do?” Meredith said.

“You can start by removing three people,” said the judge behind her.

“How did you get this job?” Lexie said. “You're upholding an institution of love, a culmination of romance and happiness, and you're being a crotchety old fussbudget.” And then her face flushed bright red, her eyes widened, and her hand flew to her mouth, like she couldn't believe what she'd said. “I mean...”

And then she gave up trying to explain what she meant.

Judge Cobblebodum peered imperiously down his nose at Lexie. “Young lady, I am what you get when you sign up to get married at the last moment in the last appointment slot of the day. All the happy judges are done for the day, and I got pulled out of an office birthday party for this.”

“Oh,” said Lexie.

“I'm missing chocolate cake,” said the judge. He crinkled his nose and gestured between Meredith and Derek. “They'll just divorce in a few years, and I'll probably miss chocolate cake for that, too.”

Lexie stared, mouth agape. Meredith frowned.

“And I thought I was cynical,” Cristina said.

“Try not to be when you've done this for fifty years,” said Judge Cobblebodum, grumbling as he shifted in his chair. “Can we get on with this, please?”

“Um,” Meredith said, swallowing. “Well...”

She couldn't ask one of them to leave, let alone three. How was she supposed to pick something like that? Especially after she'd dragged all of them there on a last minute phone call, and they'd waited with her for an hour in the waiting room downstairs while the frazzled clerk had penciled them into the only open slot of the day. And she was really getting married. Right the hell now. This was...

“I'll wait outside,” Owen said before she could resort to eenie-meanie.
Meredith glanced at Cristina, who shrugged. “But—” Meredith began.

“It's fine; trust me,” Owen said. He smiled and reached forward to shake Derek's hand. Derek flinched. Not much. Enough for Meredith to feel his body twitch beside her. Owen didn't call attention to the movement. He shifted his smile smoothly to Meredith. “Congratulations,” he said while Derek collected himself. Owen shuffled back one step, two. The doorknob clicked as he pulled on the heavy door. Noise from the outside hallway rushed in. Voices. Bustle. And then he slipped out of the room.

“That was very nice of him,” Carolyn said as the door slid shut. Quiet covered them once more like a soft blanket.

The Chief nodded. “It was.”

“Sorry,” Derek muttered. The first word he'd spoken in an hour, almost.

“Whatever. We've all got stuff,” Alex said.

Meredith looked at Derek. Really looked at him for the first time since this chaos had begun. Derek had been quietly following her lead since she'd decided the wedding must proceed early. He'd made phone calls when she'd asked him to. Gotten directions when she'd asked him to. Driven when she'd asked him to, so she could worry about planning. He'd seemed excited and sedately pleased with the situation, but then everybody had started to arrive, and he'd melted into the chaos, forgotten.

From the tight, straight line of his lips, to the small dots of sweat on his pale brow, perhaps his reticent behavior didn't have so much to do with shyness after all. Or maybe shyness was dancing hand-in-hand with another problem. He was having a bad day, and the press of the crowd couldn't be doing him and his peace-of-mind any favors.

“There are still too many people in this room,” Judge Cobblebodum said as if to echo her thoughts.

Alex nodded. “I'll wait outside, too.”

“Alex...” Meredith said.

“I'm just here for you,” he said with a shrug. “I can be here for you in the hallway with Hunt.”

He gave her a pointed look. The world seemed to spin on that moment, and Meredith swallowed.

“We're not hopeful, Dr. Weston had said.

What do you mean, you're not hopeful? she'd practically growled into the phone.

I truly very sorry, but I mean you might want to come and say your goodbyes.

He can't die.

Dr. Grey—

My husband has spaghetti for insides, and he can't even sit up. Alex can't die right now.

Dr. Grey, I'm—

He can't! she'd snapped. She'd hung up the phone, unable to think about Alex when she'd barely been processing the very real possibility of Derek's death. She hadn't gone to visit Alex until over a
week later. Lexie had stayed with him. Day and night for weeks. To the point that their house had seemed like a ghost town when Meredith had brought Derek home from the hospital.

The room seemed to blur.

People had always left her. Always.

Except they hadn't left her this time. Nobody had left her. And, now, she was getting married. And it was...

Big.

It was really. Really. Big.

And permanent.

“Alex,” she said around the sudden lump in her throat. “I'm getting married.” The words were a bare, cracking whisper she could barely hear.

Alex grinned at her. “Is that why we're at the courthouse?” he teased.

“Shut up,” she muttered softly, blinking through the wet blur filming her eyes.

“Please, please don't go crazy hormonal right now,” Cristina said. “I'm still recuperating from yesterday.”

“Leave her alone,” Lexie said.

“Are you okay?” Derek said softly beside her.

“Yeah,” Meredith said. She wiped her face, and the backs of her hands came away sticky. “I'm not crazy,” she added.

“But definitely hormonal,” Cristina said.

“Only I'm allowed to say that,” Meredith said. “If you say it, it's mean and judge-y.”

“Seriously?”

Meredith nodded, sniffing. “Yes.”

“You realize how ridiculous that sounds,” Cristina said, in a tone that was not a question.

“Yes,” Meredith said. “If you ever have a baby, you'll understand.”

“I'll never have a baby,” Cristina said.

“Well, join me in the land of the hypothetical!”

Cristina crossed her arms. “Fine,” she said. “I'm hypothetically pregnant. Solidarity. Can we get on with this?”

“Shut up,” Meredith said once more.

Cristina rolled her eyes.

Meredith turned to Alex. “Are you sure you don't mind?” she said.
Alex gave her a cheerful wink. “Don't worry about it,” he said. “I'll be right outside with Hunt.”

“Me, too,” said Chief Webber.

Meredith's jaw dropped. “But, Chief!”

The Chief glanced at Lexie and Cristina. “Family is important,” he said, his voice honey rich and soft. He squeezed Meredith on the shoulder. His gaze lasted long enough to make her blush and look awkwardly to the threadbare, orange carpet. “I'm very proud of you,” he added. He glanced at Derek. “Both of you.” Then he followed Alex out the door.

The fan of people around her and Derek loosened, and along with the lower people density, Derek loosened up, too. He took a deep, cleansing breath and exhaled beside her as if he'd just been removed from agony. Perhaps he had been. She felt a bit claustrophobic in this tiny room herself. She could only imagine how he felt, and all at once, she was glad they'd opted for a small Big Gigantic Permanent wedding. She couldn't imagine the Shepherd family zoo in addition to this. This was cramped, and Dr. Bailey hadn't even arrived yet.

“Thank you,” Judge Cobblebodum said. “That was most irregular. A party of nine. Hmph.”

“I should have read the stupid website,” Meredith said. “Stupid, stupid spontaneity.”

“It's not stupid,” Derek said.

“I dragged a ton of people out of surgery to not be my witnesses,” Meredith said. “How is that not stupid?”

Lexie rifled through her purse. “I can record it with my iPhone, so they can still see it.”

Meredith frowned, looking pointedly at the black camera dangling from Lexie's neck by a thick strap that had turned some of her skin a blushing, irritated red. “I thought you were taking pictures,” she said.

“I can take pictures,” Mark offered.

“But you're my best man,” Derek said.

“I'll take pictures,” Carolyn interjected. She stretched out her hand toward Lexie. “Hand me the camera, please. You can do your phone... thing.”

Lexie handed her iPhone to Mark and attempted to twist out from the camera. One of the thick buckles caught on her purse strap, which then stuck to her loose hair. “Ow,” she said, the camera in one hand. She didn't move, as if she thought she might disturb equilibrium and rip off her scalp if she did. Mark shuffled closer and tried to disentangle the disaster, a look of consternation crossing his face as he did so.

“This is like juggling,” Cristina said.

Mark snickered as he extracted Lexie's hair from the mess. “With fewer broken plates,” he said. “Ow!” Lexie snarled. “And more pain!”

He flinched and squeezed her shoulder gently. “Sorry.”

“I didn't break any plates,” Derek said as Mark struggled with the camera. “Only you did.”
“Wait a minute...” Cristina said.

“You two juggle?” Lexie said.

Mark nodded. “For hand-eye coordination. In college.”

“Seriously?” Lexie said. Liberated, she spun free of the camera. Mark passed it to Carolyn and handed the iPhone back to Lexie in a one-two shot of motion.

Meredith raised her eyebrows. “Do you knit, too?”

“Derek knits?” Cristina said.

Meredith frowned. “I didn't say that.”

“You implied it by association,” Cristina said.

Lexie sniggered.

“Also,” Cristina said as she swept her judging gaze over Mark and Derek, “neither of them is saying no.”

Derek reddened. “Mom...”

“Sorry,” Carolyn said, grinning. “I couldn't resist.”

“When on earth did you have time to tell Meredith I used to knit?” Derek said.

Carolyn shrugged. “You slept a lot after you were shot, dear.”

“Shot?” said Judge Cobblebodum.

Derek bristled and then relaxed, as if the reminder of his ordeal had slid off of him like water. He gave his mother a wavering smile that lasted for a nanosecond, but it was better than what he would have been able to muster for her only a few weeks before. Without thinking, Meredith touched his shoulder. His soft shirt slid underneath her fingertips as she moved her palm down his bicep, past his elbow, along the soft hairs of his forearm, and interlocked her fingers with his. His larger hand closed around hers. She squeezed his hand, and he squeezed her hand in return.

They shared a look. Had a conversation in silence.

I'm okay, he said but didn't say.

I'm glad, she replied. This is really big. Like hugely gigantic big.

It is. Are you sure you're okay with this?

Yes, she said.

The world fell away as she peered at his eyes and lost herself in the deep blue. He had an older expression than the one he'd worn in the days preceding his injuries. She hated that Gary Clark had taken what little had remained of Derek's innocence. Hated the bloody, open wound Gary Clark had left behind in Derek's optimism. But Derek was doing better. So much better. She saw so many glimmers where she hadn't seen them before, and she felt hope.

He said he was here, now. Not okay, but here. She believed him.
And she did like that.

Mark cleared his throat, breaking the moment. Meredith had no idea how long she and Derek had been staring at each other all freakishly moon-eyed. Her stomach fluttered with nerves, and she swallowed. Maybe, she'd made a mistake, pushing this along. Derek had only just started to iron himself out, and she didn't want that to get messed up. His family thought he was rushing things to the point of mental incompetence. *Were* they rushing things? Except they were already married. This was no different. Other than needing lawyers to undo it if things went entirely to crap.

Why did this feel *different*?

“So, should we start without her?” Mark said.

The judge raised his eyebrows. “Without who?” he said, sudden alarm tingeing his tone.

“Derek?” Meredith said, ignoring Cobblebodum. She took a short breath and exhaled, trying to relax. “What do you think?” She wasn't sure whether she was asking for his opinion about Dr. Bailey, or something bigger.

The judge slapped his desk before Derek could answer. The man's robes rustled as he shifted. Meredith still had to look down, even though he'd stood up. “There can be *no* more people in this room!” he said. “We only allow parties of six, to include the bride and groom!”

Cristina glanced at her watch. “I have surgery in two hours,” she said. “Can we move this along?”

“Did she say she was coming when you called her on the phone?” Lexie said.

Meredith sighed. “She mostly just yelled at me for interrupting an appendectomy.”

“Well, an appendectomy is short,” Lexie said, her tone hopeful.

“I don't think it was laparoscopic.”

“Well, it's... it's less long than lots of long things!”

“Oh, god,” Meredith said. “She's going to *kill* me if she comes. She'll find a way to get me stuck on scut work for a week.”

“She can't do that,” Lexie said.

“She's Bailey,” Meredith said. “She'd find a way.”

“But why?”

Meredith jabbed her thumb at Cobblebodum. “Because McJudge only wants six people in the room!”

The judge looked most affronted. “Those are the *rules,*” he said. He brushed his sleeves and sniffed.

Mark clapped Derek on the back. “I'm sure she'll make it, man.”

Meredith swallowed as nerves became nausea. This was bad. This was bad, bad, bad. “I kind of hope she's too busy,” she muttered faintly. She didn't want to have to explain that she'd been too stupid to read the rules on the website before calling everybody under the sun. Not to Dr. Bailey. Not after the woman dropped everything, including a man's appendix, to witness this very Big
Gigantic Huge Monstrously Permanent event.

“The cake is probably gone by now. No need to hurry on my account,” the judge said with withering look.

“We're really sorry,” Meredith said. She rubbed her temples. She was wearing a t-shirt and jeans. So was Derek. She'd dragged him here with no forewarning straight from the OB-GYN appointment. This was a Big Gigantic Huge Monstrously Permanent event, and they'd shown up dressed for the beach. A cold beach, at least. Her bikini would have been a bit much. Well, a bit little, literally speaking. Not that she wanted a gown or anything. But she could have worn a dress. Or spent some time on her hair. Or anything. “We just wanted—”

“I'll call her,” Mark said. “Maybe, she's on her way.” Mark stepped out of the room, and the outside noise blasted Meredith's ears before the door slid shut. She felt a bit lightheaded.

“Is there a chair?” she asked. Somebody pushed one against her knees, and she dropped like a brick into it.

“Dr. Bailey will be here,” Lexie said. “I'm sure. This was just so last minute.”

Definitely last minute.

And possibly rash.

Was this rash?

“Why did you bump this up, anyway?” Cristina said, as if reading Meredith's conscience like a novel.

“Weren't you just criticizing them last night for the fact that they hadn't done it already?” Lexie said.

“I only pointed out that Evil Spawn's logic was logical.”

“I wanted to do it now,” Meredith said, her voice faint. Her hand wandered to her bellybutton and lower, and she rubbed in a slow, soothing circle to calm herself down. She didn't realize what she was doing until half-a-rotation into the motion, and by then it was too late.

“Oh, no,” Cristina said. “You saw the blob squirm on the ultrasound and got all goopy, didn't you?”

“It's not goopy.”

“It's kind of goopy,” Cristina countered.

“I'll have you know I'm still very dark and twisty!” Meredith responded.

Cristina sighed. “I think you lost the dark and twisty handbook.”

“There's a handbook?” Lexie said.

“If there is,” Derek muttered, “I haven't found it.”

Meredith's stomach flip-flopped again. This wasn't a mistake. Derek was feeling better, and they had a baby on the way, and she loved him more than her own life, and he loved her, and what was mistake-y about that? They'd only bumped things up by a few days, anyway.
Nothing was mistake-y, she told herself angrily.

This was just jitters.

Wedding jitters.

Oh, god. Cristina was right.

How had Meredith gotten to a point in her life where she could have wedding jitters? Men were merely bed warmers until a few years ago. But, now, she was marrying one in a Big Gigantic Huge Monstrously Permanent sense. She was pregnant and thinking goopy thoughts about babies.

Babies!

And why did she have to freak out at such inopportune times?

Mark stepped back into the room, cellphone in hand. “She’s—”

Dr. Bailey stepped into the room behind him, her arms folded across her chest. She looked like she’d just stepped out of surgery. Literally. Her swept back hairdo had a dent from her surgical mask ties. She wore her scrubs and her white lab coat, which had a red stain on the sleeve that could only be dried blood. She looked at the room's occupants, gazing from Mark, to Lexie, to Cristina, to Carolyn, to Derek, to Meredith, and then to Judge Cobblebodum in the space of an eye blink. Her gaze didn't betray any reaction to the raccoon thing on Cobblebodum's head. She was tough as stone. “Well?” she said.

“She's already,” Mark finished as he pocketed his cellphone.

“You made it,” Derek said, a curious blend of relief and disbelief wrapped around his tone.

“Of course I made it,” Dr. Bailey said with a dismissive shake of her head. “Why wouldn't I make it?”


She glowered, as if to say, Don't get mushy, you big mousse head.

Judge Cobblebodum made an irritated clucking sound. “I cannot abide by having a seven person party in this room!”

“Well, that's a stupid rule,” Dr. Bailey said, turning to the judge. She pushed through the crowd, deftly dodging Meredith's char as she marched toward the desk, her arms still folded. The judge’s gaze paused when he spotted the blood on her sleeve.

“It's a fire hazard to—”

Dr. Bailey's eyes narrowed. “We all survived a shooting four months ago by keeping clear heads. Do we look like people who panic?”

Cobblebodum blinked. “Well, no.” His gaze shifted to Dr. Bailey's state of dress, to her lab coat, where it said Seattle Grace Mercy West in blue embroidery, and then back to her face. “A shooting?”

“Yes, a shooting. Do you really expect us to trample each other if your waste paper basket suddenly catches on fire?”
Judge Cobblebodum reddened. “I—”

Dr. Bailey glared and leaned closer. “I know you didn't make me come all the way down here to kick me out of the room.”

“I most certainly did not,” Judge Cobblebodum said.

“Good,” said Dr. Bailey with a pert nod. “I'm glad we have that settled.”

“I didn't mean—”

“Didn't mean what?” Dr. Bailey said.

Judge Cobblebodum stuttered. Opened his mouth and closed it. With a slight sigh, he pulled an embroidered hanky from his robes and wiped his round face. The raccoon something on his head shifted to reveal a hairline that had retreated to the point of surrender.

Lexie's bubbly laugh made the little judge freeze.

Dr. Bailey peered at Lexie. “Do you have something to add?”

“No, ma'am,” Lexie said. She looked at her shoes as her face turned stoplight red.

Judge Cobblebodum sighed. “Let's just continue,” he said, the fight in his tone lost to resignation as he hid the hanky somewhere in his robes. “Do you two have rings to exchange?”

Meredith froze in her seat. “Um,” she said. Great. “We never really talked about rings.”

The judge frowned. “Vows, then?”

“Crap,” Meredith said. “Vows. I didn't do those, yet.” She looked at Derek helplessly.

Derek shrugged. “I wasn't going to write mine until tonight.”

The butterflies in her stomach picked up mallets, and suddenly she felt herself fighting back tears again. This was huge. Big Gigantic Huge Monstrously Permanent. They'd shown up in t-shirts after she'd gotten goopy and hormonal about a freaking baby. They didn't have rings. They didn't have vows.

Judge Cobblebodum sighed. “I assume this means we're just repeating the canned vows, signing the paperwork, and then I can go back to my empty plate?”

“No, we should totally have real vows,” Meredith said. She struggled to her feet. Her teeth chattered with nerves, and she wiped her face, conscious of free-flowing tears. “It's not real if there aren't any real vows.”

“Who on earth told you that?” Derek said, a touch of horror in his tone.

“Nobody,” Meredith said. “I just...”

She didn't have a chance to finish her thought because he pulled her into his arms. He pressed his forehead against hers. Kissed her. It was easy to forget she was standing in a room with a crotchety old judge and all of her friends.

The things in her orbit went dark around her except for him.
Just him.

She could pretend they had privacy.

“Maybe, we should wait,” he said, the words soft against her face.

“No!” she blurted, her fingers tightening like talons against his shoulders. “I want to marry you. Right the hell freaking now. I don't care if it's Big. You were shot in the chest while I watched, and then you almost died again from complications that arose from fixing that. You were so sick, and they treated me like your neighbor, and I don't want to do it again. If you die on me, I don't want it to be like that, and if I die on you, I want to know you can do the things I couldn't when you were sick. I don't care if it's rash or that we need lawyers if this all goes wrong; I need this. I love our Post-it. I love what it means, and that, in our little denial bubble, it was enough. But the Post-it isn't enough in real life. Real life freaking sucks.”

And there it was.

Silence stretched.

“What Post-it?” Cobblebodum said curiously.

Derek stared at her, gaze searching her face. His thumb brushed her skin. The side of her face. His lip twitched. Like he wanted to say something, but didn't know what it should be, yet. He settled on rubbing her back.

She panted, fighting off dissolution into completely crying all over him. She felt better, now. Calmer. All those jumbles of nerves had exploded out of her mouth. Jitter vomit. The butterflies had died. Her panting became longer breaths became deep, even inhalations and exhalations.

“Real life does suck,” he said. “Doesn't it?”

“I hate it,” she admitted miserably.

“Me, too.”

The bald honesty in his tone slayed her. Derek Shepherd shouldn't be dark and twisty. She closed her eyes and rested against him. “It sucks less like this.”

“It does,” he agreed.

“You're sure this counts with canned vows?”

“My fifty cynical years of experience say it counts,” Judge Cobblebodum assured them with, for once, no sarcastic bite in his tone.

Meredith sighed as their surroundings intruded, and the bubble she'd built popped. Derek's arms tightened like a cocoon around her briefly, and then he let her go. She wiped her face and clawed her messy hair out of her eyes.

“We could just repeat what we have on the Post-it,” Derek said, ignoring the judge.

“What Post-it?” said Cobblebodum. There was something different hovering in his eyes. Something less... bored.

“It was a thing,” Lexie said when no one else leaped to explain. “They planned to come here last year, but George died, and Izzie was sick with cancer, so they signed their vows on a Post-it note
instead.”

“A literal Post-it,” Cobblebodum said.

“Yes,” Lexie said. “And don't you dare comment. They're finally here, and you're ruining it!”

“I was only curious,” the judge said indignantly. He glanced at Meredith and Derek. “Please, continue.”

“But I don't know what to say,” Meredith said, feeling helpless.

“You don't need to write paragraphs,” Carolyn said. “Why not just say something simple?”

Meredith frowned. “Like what?”

“Well, Derek, sweetheart,” his mother began, “what's the one thing you really want Meredith to know before you sign the paper?”

Derek blinked, as if the question had caught him by surprise. “I—”

“Wait!” Lexie snapped. She raised her iPhone and hit the record button. “Okay. Action!”

Derek stared at Meredith, an unreadable look on his face.

“Something you maybe haven't told her that you think she should know,” Carolyn prodded.

“I... only knitted the one scarf,” Derek said. “It wasn't an actual hobby.”

Meredith laughed and she felt herself loosen like an uncoiling spring. Derek's eyes twinkled. He'd done that on purpose. To put her at ease. Make her feel better despite how self-conscious she felt. He'd known to do that, and she hadn't asked.

She loved him. She really, really loved him. In a big, share the last piece of cheesecake way.

“Did you really not break any plates?” she said, staring at him.

“I juggled apples,” he said. “Bruised them all to hell, but didn't break anything. It's what you should know about me, I guess.” He winked. “I'm an undercover clown.”

“Not Batman?”

“Oh, I'm him, too,” Derek said.

Meredith laughed.

“I have got to hear this story later,” Cristina said.

“It really does help with hand-eye coordination,” Derek said.

Meredith smiled. “Being Batman?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

The judge cleared his throat. “Must we?” he said.

“Meredith,” Carolyn began, “what would you like Derek to—?”
“Wait,” Derek said, interrupting her. Mark, Cristina, and Lexie stared in a way that made Meredith think they should be shoveling popcorn.

Carolyn's eyebrows rose. “Yes?”

He shook his head, and he swallowed. “What I really want Meredith to know is... is...”

“What?” Meredith said.

“What I haven't told you that I think you should know is...”

“Yes?” she said, exasperated when he couldn't seem to find the words. He tilted his head to the side in that way he did when he considered her. He took in her face with his gaze as though he were memorizing every feature, which seemed weird, because she knew he already had it all memorized. He cupped her chin. His lower lip quivered.

“I'd do it again,” he blurted.

She frowned. “Do what again?”

“Get shot,” he said. “If it meant you would be okay, that you would be safe, I would do it.” His voice got thick and low, like he was fighting a deep swell of emotion. He swallowed. “Without hesitation. No matter what future it meant for me.”

“Oh,” she said, and gravity swept in. She didn't think she'd ever meant that much to anyone. Ever. “But—”

He took a deep breath. “Thank you for being patient with me,” he said. He pressed closer, eyes watery, but never breaking his stare. “It means more than anything to me that you're still here, and you still believe in me, even though I can't figure out how to believe in myself most of the time. Every day we're together, I find more to love about you. You're like a lightning strike. Whatever happens between now and the day I die, I'll never find another you, and I wouldn't want to. You're the love of my life, and I'm really looking forward to spending my future with you.” He swallowed and took a short, hitching breath. “That's what I want you to know.”

“Oh,” she said as her innards sank into her shoes. She blinked at him. "Crap."

“Crap?” Derek said, eyebrows creeping upward. His voice was thick and hard to hear. Like he'd almost been swept away in the emotional sea that had already capsized her.

She shook her head. “I can't match that...”

He smiled. Cleared his throat. “You don't have to match anything. You don't have to say anything if you don't want to.”

“I want to,” she said. She took a breath.

“One moment,” said Judge Cobblebodum.

Everybody turned toward him.

“Do you all know Detective Wolff?” he said.

For a moment, Meredith couldn't place the name, though it sounded familiar.

“Yes,” Derek said, the word soft.
And that was when it hit her. Detective Wolff had tried to interview her after the shooting, but she'd been less than helpful. She'd been too wrapped up in Derek nearly dying to deal with Alex nearly dying, and there'd been way too much nearly dying in general for her to want to recount her experience to a third party. She'd just... snapped in two when he'd called. The Detective had been warm with her, though, warm and understanding, and had never bothered her again.

“He tried to interview us,” Meredith said.

Cobblebodum nodded. “My son-in-law,” he said. And then he fell silent for a long time. He fiddled with his embroidered hanky, which, at some point, he'd pulled out of his robes again. He twisted it in his hands until it wrinkled.

“Sir,” Derek said. “I—”

“Shh!” said Cobblebodum. “I am deliberating.”

And the silence stretched. And stretched. Meredith glanced at Derek, who looked back at her and shrugged, a curious frown on his face. The gavel crashing on the striker plate was a loud sound in a small space, and the thunder of the motion made him flinch and bump into her. He reached for her shoulder with a shaky palm to steady himself.

“I've decided,” the judge announced, oblivious to Derek's discombobulation, though Derek seemed to unwind in moments. Meredith ran her palm against Derek's spine. The warmth of his skin seeped through his shirt into her palm, and he relaxed against her. The judge turned to Lexie. “Young lady,” he said. “Why don't you show the three gentlemen back into the room?”

Lexie gaped. “But I thought it was a fire hazard,” she said.

The judge peered at her. “Would you like me to change my mind?”

Lexie shifted toward the door, no further encouragement needed.

“Ray would be really happy to hear you're doing well,” Cobblebodum said simply after she'd stepped out. “He worked... very hard on that case.”

Meredith stared at Coddlebodum. “Thank you,” she said, the words thick and low. “Thank you, I...” She could barely contain the ready-to-cry that had lodged itself in her throat like a giant melon. And then a thought bounced in her skull. She looked at Derek. “Will you be okay?”

He looked at her with his bright blue eyes and winked.

She watched him as Owen, Richard, and Alex filed back into the sardine can behind Lexie. Derek stiffened. She felt it in his muscles. Saw it in his frame. But he kept staring at Meredith as though she were his life boat, as though he'd taken her existence and made that, alone, his replacement thought to carry him through the moment. He inched closer to her, as if he were trying to preserve a small bubble of untouched space around his body. Nobody in the room begrudged him that bubble. In fact, people seemed to be squeezing against the bookshelves and the furniture and each other, just to give him space, like they knew, even if they didn't know, what he needed. When the door whispered shut once more, he seemed mostly on an even keel.

Just by looking intently at her.

This man who would die for her.

She wasn't used to feeling like she was worth so much.
“The faith you put in me is freaking terrifying,” Meredith whispered. She reached for his face. Twisted a soft, curly lock around her index finger.

They shared another endless look.

I don't want you to be scared, he said but didn't say.

I'm trying not to be, she replied.

He winked at her. I'll be patient.

She laughed aloud, breaking the spell. Everybody stared at her. “Sorry,” she said. “It's nothing.”

“Meredith,” Carolyn said, prodding. “Is there something you'd like Derek to know before you sign the papers?”

“Um.” She struggled for a thought. Any thought. Anything half as nice as what he'd said about her. “I really hope our baby has your hair. That gene would be a shame to waste.”

Derek chuckled, and she blushed. She needed something better. Something that would mean something. This was their wedding. Their Big Gigantic Huge Monstrously Permanent wedding.

“You make me want to be better at all this goop stuff,” she said. “But I'm not. I'm dark and twisty and me, and it means a lot to me that that's okay with you.”

His gaze softened.

“You're worth it to me, Derek. But if you ever get shot for me, I'll kill you.”

His eyes sparkled when he said softly, “I'll try to do that sparingly then.”

“Good,” Meredith said.

He picked up a pen off the desk. “Should we sign, now?”

Judge Cobblebodum gestured mutely at the paperwork.

“I love you,” Derek said as he signed. He handed her the pen he'd used.

Meredith gripped it. Felt its weight in her hands. And then she signed the paper, too, relishing the whisper sound of the ballpoint sliding on the paper. “I love you,” Meredith said, an echo of him. She leaned into his arms after she relinquished the pen and watched the next few moments stuck in a haze of pleased lethargy.

This was really it.

Mark signed the document next. “I don't love either of you,” he said. “I'm just the witness.”

Cristina followed. “Yeah,” she said as she scribbled her name. “What he said.”


“Do you ever take a break from ruling the Land of Sickening and Sweet?” Cristina said.

“You'll find out if you keep snarking, you big pessimist,” Lexie replied.
“It's good that we all love each other,” said Judge Cobblebodum, only a hint of sarcasm riding on his voice as he signed on the last line. “I now pronounce you man and wife.”

Meredith looked up. Met Derek's eyes. He smiled at her. Their fingers intertwined. He leaned closer. They kissed, and the flash of the camera captured the first moment of the rest of their lives.
Paint it, black

Derek was tired. He was tired, and he didn't want to be there today. In therapy. Didn't want to recount the last twenty-four hours for this woman as though his life were a novel for her to read a new chapter wrought with drama every day. Didn't want to give her the normal update.

He usually liked it. Talking. Letting it all out. His frustrations. His thoughts. His successes and failures. He liked it because it was a guiltless release, like yelling at the top of his lungs while he was driving alone, or throwing ice cubes at the big tree in the back yard, or folding a pillow in half and pummeling it – all venting methods Dr. Wyatt had suggested that had helped him keep himself on a more even keel over time. He paid her to listen and to help, and he didn't ever have to worry about heaping too much on her like he did with Meredith. He usually liked it to the point that he wondered why he'd ever put it off so long.

Today, though, his exhaustion far outweighed the feeling of any benefits. He sat on Dr. Wyatt's orange couch, and all he wanted to do was collapse onto his side and take a long nap. Dr. Wyatt scribbled on her notepad in the chair across from him, and he was grateful for the break in talking, however momentary. Dr. Wyatt liked to collect her thoughts quickly. He knew her ticks. Her nuances.

That was a given when you saw somebody for an hour a day every weekday for weeks on end. Eight weeks.

Had it really been eight weeks since he'd first seen her?

Around that, at least. Maybe, a little more or less.

He rubbed his eyes, which were burning he was so tired. He'd made it two weeks again. Two weeks of relative normality before his body went kaput, the stress overwhelmed him, and he'd snapped, figuratively, in two. He couldn't seem to handle his life in bigger chunks yet. He'd gotten next to zero sleep the night before as awful nightmares had filled him to the brim like a beer mug, and it sucked. Sucked doubly, because Meredith didn't get any sleep when he was yelling and tossing and turning, either.

He closed his eyes. Swallowed. His throat hurt. He'd yelled himself nearly hoarse.

His head tipped forward.

The room began to fuzz out from his awareness.

“I think we may have been approaching this the wrong way,” Dr. Wyatt said, and he snapped awake.

Derek frowned as he rubbed his eyes again. Rubbed the bridge of his nose. Dr. Wyatt sat across from him, her pen still against her notepad. She'd crossed her ankles, and she sat poised in that familiar way that told him she was ready to continue. His bleariness would have to wait. “What do you mean?” he said.
“I think we're confusing two separate issues as one issue.”

“How?” Derek said.

“Well, when you actually see Gary Clark, you can't tell he's not real until he's gone,” Dr. Wyatt said. “He's usually threatening you, usually with a gun, and it makes you scared. He mimics the actions of the real Gary Clark, sometimes with slight exaggeration.”

Derek blinked. “Exaggeration?”

“You told me he held a gun literally to your head this morning, for instance, but we know the real Gary Clark never actually got that close to you,” Dr. Wyatt explained.

Derek jammed his elbows into his thighs and pressed his face into his hands. This was why he didn't want to do this today. He was too tired to deal with remembering and analyzing, not when the morning had been so bad. But he had to. He had to keep going. He had to get better.

“So, what about this morning?” he said, the words tired.

“You said you woke up, and he was standing beside the bed with a gun pointed at you, and you didn't want to get up,” Dr. Wyatt said. “You absolutely feared for your life, and even though you realize now he wasn't actually there, you didn't know it then.”

The last hour of darkness, he'd managed to fall asleep and stay that way, but then his alarm had rung. He'd been lying on his stomach, cheek mashed into pillow, a wet collection of drool on the pillowcase underneath his lip. His eyes had slid open, and he'd found himself staring at a shiny belt buckle. Meredith had already left for work for pre-rounds. The person standing next to the bed hadn't been Meredith.

Then the gun had pressed against Derek's temple.

And Derek hadn't been able to move.

*I'll kill you, Gary Clark had said. I'll pull the trigger. You'll splatter like a ripe tomato.*

Derek stiffened at the memory.

“I didn't want him to shoot me,” Derek said. And then his eyes watered. He stopped to take a short breath. He hadn't been able to move. He'd almost peed on himself all over again. It'd felt so fucking real at the time. He'd been so terrified he hadn't been able to speak, and so humiliated when he'd regained his senses after the phantom Gary Clark had faded. Derek ran a shaky palm through his hair. “I... I... I'm...”

“Stuttering, pathetic fool,” Mr. Clark said, and Derek's shoulders slumped.

“Do you need a break?” Dr. Wyatt said.

“No,” he said vehemently, forcing himself through the memory. “No.” It wasn't real. It hadn't been real. He hadn't wet himself. The vision had dissipated, and he was safe. He was safe, he didn't see that shit very often anymore, and he just... needed to get better. *Wanted* to get better. “I want to know what you mean.”

“What you experienced this morning was a hallucination.”

“I know that,” Derek snapped tiredly. He rocked in his seat, and a deep, black, burbling well of
emotion that he couldn't tamp squeezed his heart. “I *know* I'm hallucinating. Do you have any idea what it's like to *know* you're hallucinating? I just want it to stop!”

“But, see, I don't think you're hallucinating all the time,” Dr. Wyatt said, her tone calm. “Sometimes, yes, like this morning. But not *all* the time.”

Preposterous.

He was a volcano. Ready to explode. He launched to his feet. “But—”

“Bear with me,” Dr. Wyatt said, holding up her hand. “Let's think about how Gary Clark talks to you when you can't see him.”

Derek nodded, frustrated. He ground his teeth. “Okay,” he said through his clenched jaw, the word long and drawn out and ending on an exhale that made his chest hurt he was trying so hard to keep a lid on his temper. He would not yell at Dr. Wyatt. Dr. Wyatt was trying to help. Just like Meredith tried to help. He vented frustration into pacing the length of the sofa instead of yelling.

“When you can't see Gary Clark, when he's only talking, you can identify that he's not real in the moment,” Dr. Wyatt said. “You don't fear for your safety. He derides you, and he says things not even remotely related to when you were shot. Your primary focus is in getting him to be quiet. Does that summarize it well enough?”

“I guess,” Derek said. The office was a pinwheel of color as he walked back and forth. He wouldn't yell just because he didn't like her conclusion, he told himself. He was tired, and things always seemed worse when he was exhausted and on bad days.

He would *not* yell.

“Okay, let's try something,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Name me something that you hate about yourself.”

“Really,” Gary Clark said. “Do you have to choose just one thing?”

That brought Derek up short. He stopped, mid-pace, right in front of the fish tank. The fish tank burbled. An orange fish with gleaming scales drifted past his view. He turned to look at Dr. Wyatt. Blinked. His eyelids felt heavy, even when his blood was running hot, and that stupid, awful voice in his ear... Crippling. It was crippling.

“Maybe you were right all along,” said Mr. Clark. “Maybe all the blood transfusions made you heal wrong. Maybe there *is* no cure, and you're just *broken*.”

“Is he talking to you, now?” Dr. Wyatt said, the words soft.

Derek nodded mutely. He moved back a few paces and let himself fall onto the couch. The cushions squeaked under his weight. How could she not think this was a hallucination? Hallucinations could be auditory. He gathered up tents of his loose scrubs in his fists. Clenched his jaw.

“Tell me something you hate about yourself,” Dr. Wyatt prodded.

A lump formed in his throat. A huge lump that made him want to choke. He looked at her carpet. At the magazines on the coffee table. At the basket full of stress balls in a rainbow of colors from violet to red.

“Just tell her, you piece of shit,” Gary Clark said, almost a growl. “Pick any one thing from your
“I'm afraid.” The word died in his hurting throat, and Gary Clark laughed at him. Derek crunched.

Swallowed. “I'm afraid.”

“Afraid to name something?” said Dr. Wyatt gently.

“No, I hate...” His fingers clenched. He cleared his throat. “I hate that I'm afraid.”

Dr. Wyatt leaned forward in her seat. He'd interested her with his confession. Derek felt the fire of

blush creeping across his skin as embarrassment supplanted the remnants of his fury.

“I want to talk about that in a minute, but for now, close your eyes,” she said, and he did as she

commanded. It was easier not to look at her anyway. The room swam with his exhaustion. “Think

in your head what you just told me, and keep repeating it to yourself.”

“I...” He cleared his throat again. The lump wouldn't obliterate. “Word for word?”

“Whatever comes naturally,” Dr. Wyatt said.

This felt wrong. Wrong for her to be asking him to think awful things about himself. Wrong after

weeks and weeks of her encouraging him and helping him sort through his demons. Still, though it

felt wrong, he had no trouble, for once, following her directive. I'm a coward, he thought without

reservation, though the damning label was something he hadn't been able to say out loud. Coward.

I'm a coward. I'm a coward.

“You're such a fucking coward,” Mr. Clark said in his ear.

Derek flinched. His heart throbbed in his chest, and the world felt like it was pouring out through

his shoes.

“I don't want to do this anymore,” he said faintly.

He heard her chair scoot forward. “Does the voice you just used in your head to repeat that thought

sound a little like Gary Clark?” Dr. Wyatt said.

“Yes...” he managed.

“I thought it might,” she said. “Derek, I think you've managed inadvertently to link your experience

of being shot with anything negative you feel about yourself,” she said. “Whenever you have a

self-criticism, you frame it with Gary Clark's voice, but it's your criticism, not his.”

Silence stretched.

For a moment, Derek saw the math equation sitting there, but the numbers didn't connect.

“Well, look at that,” Mr. Clark said after a pause. “I'm the darker, shittier you.”

Derek's lower lip quivered. He opened his eyes to a blur. He wiped his face, but tears renewed.

“You're saying this is all my fault,” he said thickly. “That all this shit he says is really just me. That

I'm torturing myself.”

“I'm certainly not saying it's your fault,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Your experiences shape how you

perceive the world. I'm saying your perception is very skewed right now, and it's affecting your

quality of life.”
“Of course it's fucking skewed,” Derek snapped in a last ditch attempt at denial. His eyes leaked, and he wiped at them frantically. He wasn't doing this shit with Gary Clark on purpose. He wasn't. “I'm fucking hallucinating.”

“You absolutely are hallucinating, and I know it's very frightening,” Dr. Wyatt agreed. “But you're not hallucinating all the time. Not even most of the time. I think we should back off the hallucinations for a while. What I'm seeing now is what we need to work on the most.”

What are you seeing, now?

The question loitered in his skull, unspoken, and he had no desire to speak it.

“You already know it's masochism,” Mr. Clark said. “You've brought this misery to yourself.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and stared at his lap. He wanted to stop. He wanted to get up and leave. Not because he was mad anymore. Because he was bone-tired, and he didn't think he could deal with more terrible self-discovery today. The overwhelming urge to crawl into bed and curl up into a ball latched onto his sinews like a bird of prey and wouldn't go.

Except...

Get your freaking tumor fixed, Meredith had told him.

He took a deep breath. Counted to three. Let it out over three. He didn't feel panicky. Just tired. Upset. But the breathing helped anyway.

If Dr. Wyatt thought she saw something he needed to work on, that meant she thought it wasn't hopeless, he told himself. And if it wasn't hopeless, he owed it to Meredith to at least try. Owed it to himself. No matter how tired he was.

He glanced blearily at his watch.

Still time left.

He needed to get better, and they still had time left in this session.

He could go home and curl up afterward.

“If...” He swallowed when his whisper-soft voice died on him. “If I did this, how do I undo it?”

“Derek, this is not your fault,” Dr. Wyatt said. “You didn't do this. It's not like a gun you fired. I'm saying your experiences have misshaped how you perceive the world. You've had a lot of heartache in your life that you haven't quite bounced back from. It's like...” She shook her head as she tried to think of a way to describe what she meant. “It's like somebody put sunglasses on your face somewhere along the way and didn't tell you. Of course things look dark as a result, and every time something bad happens to you, a thicker shade gets added, and things look darker.”

He clenched his fingers. “I don't understand,” he said.

“Let's see if I can paint this a better way,” Dr. Wyatt responded. She looked up at the ceiling for a moment, thinking. Then her gaze shifted back to him, and she sat poised with her pen. “Tell me something good about you.”

He blinked.

“I don't know what you mean,” Derek said, despite the sinking feeling in his stomach.
“Oh, come on,” said Gary Clark. “It's an easy enough question.”

“If you could brag about one thing, what would it be?” Dr. Wyatt prodded. “What do you like about yourself?”

*I just need it to stop,* Derek had said.

Meredith had stroked his face as the rain had pattered on the roof of the car. *Need what to stop?*

*This feeling.*

*What feeling, Derek?*

*That I'm nothing.*

He rubbed his cheek. He could still feel her touching him. Could still hear her words in his head, her voice tired and sad. She'd gotten quiet after that for a long moment, only to return with appalled certainty. Told him all the things he'd wanted to hear. That he'd wanted to believe so badly but could never quite convince himself were true in the long term.

That he was, indeed, something.

“Are you smart?” Dr. Wyatt said, pulling him back into the room. “A good surgeon? Why do you think Meredith should love you?”

He swallowed. The blur of tired tears renewed. He wiped his face with his hands. Once, again. His skin was starting to hurt. “I don't know.”

“Why do you think you're not smart?” Dr. Wyatt said.

“I'm still here, aren't I?” he said, the words quiet. Eight weeks of constant coaching, and he was still there. In Dr. Wyatt's cheerful, floral-vomit office. Needing his hand held. Training himself, with her assistance, to cope.

Dr. Wyatt stared at him for a long moment. “Would you call somebody with ataxia stupid for having trouble walking, even with practice?”

“No,” said Derek.

“So, why should you, somebody with PTSD, feel stupid for having trouble finding emotional stability, even with practice?” Dr. Wyatt countered.

“I...” His voice trailed away, and all he could do was shake his head.

“What about your surgical skills?” Dr. Wyatt said. “You're world-renowned. You must be a good surgeon.”

He stared at his hands. They'd healed. After years and years of dry, irritated skin from all the hand washing, they'd healed. A vague thrum of disquiet ran through him when he realized he hadn't done anything of import for nearly a year, first because of his stifling job as Chief, and then because of his stifling disease.
“Not anymore,” he said darkly.

“Why not?”

“I can't cut like this...” Derek said, anger leaking back into his tone. “I'd kill someone.”

“But people still come to you for advice,” she said. “You do consults, don't you?”

Dr. Langly, Dr. Fisk, and I were discussing how to proceed, and we were wondering if you could take a look, Dr. Weller had said while Derek had stood frozen at the threshold of OR 2.

Derek had done several consults since then, and they'd been fine.

Felt fine.

Outside the OR, anyway. Whenever he tried to go inside the ORs themselves, all he could think about was lying on the table. The overhead lights had looked like the headlights of an oncoming train. He'd been cold and shivery and naked and hurting and suffocating with every breath. The anesthesiologist had been jabbing his arm over and over with needles. Meredith had held his hand, and that was the only part he remembered with any firm clarity. She'd said she loved him, and he hadn't been able to say it back.

It'll be over soon, Meredith had told him.

He stared at Dr. Wyatt for a long moment, his tongue thick in his mouth. “I still do consults,” he admitted.

“So your skill set is still there,” Dr. Wyatt said.

“I...” He swallowed. “I guess.”

Dr. Wyatt nodded. She scribbled something on her pad. “Do you think you're good-looking?”

You really don't have any idea how sexy you are, do you?

He shrugged. “Meredith says I am.”

“But you don't believe her?” Dr. Wyatt said.

I see the man I married. Scars or not. And he's a very, very sexy man.

“It's so ugly,” Derek said softly.

More scribbling. She didn't look up from her pad, as if she somehow sensed he didn't want her looking at him right now. Didn't want her judging the embarrassed red mottle creeping along his skin. “What's ugly?” she said, writing god knew what.

He touched his shirt. Felt the marble-sized lump at the top of his chest. It'd gone down a little, but he could still see it through a thin t-shirt when he checked himself in the mirror. When he pressed, he could feel the raised, jagged line down his center. When he wandered below his left nipple, there was a discolored pock that looked a little like somebody had taken a teaspoon and scooped out the muscle and bone underneath the skin. That's essentially what a bullet did. Obliterated things. Meredith insisted none of it mattered, but it mattered.

It mattered to him.
“The scars?” Dr. Wyatt said.

He nodded, unable to speak.

“Do you think Meredith is a liar?” Dr. Wyatt said.

He looked at Dr. Wyatt, appalled. “No, of course not.”

“So, is she lying about you being good-looking?”

“Maybe, she's saying it to make me feel better,” Derek said.

“So, you think she is lying.”

“I didn't say that,” Derek said, irritated.

“But it is what you're saying. A white lie is still a lie,” Dr. Wyatt said, shooting down any potential uproar before it could burble further to the surface. “Has Meredith told you why she loves you?”

He picked up a stress ball – a violet-colored one – out of the basket and squeezed and squeezed and squeezed.

“She says I make her laugh,” he said.

“So, you're funny.”

“Wastes of space can't be funny,” Mr. Clark said.

He rocked in his seat. “I don't know. I don't know.”

“All right,” Dr. Wyatt said. “All right. It's okay.” And she backed off. As if she sensed he'd nearly hit critical mass. But then she took a conversational turn into something even worse. “Let's focus on when you were shot, instead.”

He took a shivery breath. He didn't think he could think about this right now. Didn't want to remember being shot again in Technicolor horror. He could usually step through it at will, now. Usually. But he was tired, and starting to feel nauseous. Gary Clark flashed in front of him with a loaded gun. His teeth gleamed as he spoke. Derek clamped down on the image. Filled his head with other things.

Ultrasound pictures, for instance. He and Meredith flipped through them all the time. He had them memorized.

He held those in front of his mind's eye, and he wouldn't look away.

*Get your freaking tumor fixed.*

“Do you need a break, Derek?” Dr. Wyatt asked.

“No,” he said flatly. “I'm okay.”

Not.

Not okay.

“Let's pretend Meredith is the one on the catwalk instead of you, then,” Dr. Wyatt said with a nod.
She was intuitive and really good at her job, but not infallible, and he was grateful, in that moment, for that. “She's shaking. She can't speak straight. She keeps backing up. All the things you've told me you hated about how you responded in that situation. Gary Clark has a loaded gun pointed at Meredith. Do you blame Meredith for acting the way she's acting?”

Derek squeezed the violet stress ball. “No,” he said, not willing to pretend anything of the sort. He wouldn't wish his hell on anybody he loved, least of all Meredith. He could never blame Meredith for being scared or upset over something like this. Never. And putting her in his place, even only in his head, seemed like the worst kind of treason to his marriage he could imagine. The mere idea that she had placed herself in front a bullet for him while he'd been unconscious in the OR had been enough horror for him to process, let alone imagining an additional, fake moment where she did it again.

He kept the ultrasound in his head, and he watched it, unblinking. The Meredith of his imagination remained unharmed and safe, just like the real one.

“Having a loaded gun pointed at you by someone with a clear intent to harm you is pretty scary,” Dr. Wyatt said.

He squeezed the ball into a little pulp. Didn't give the memory foam a chance to bounce back. Reduced it from the size of an orange to the size of a grape. His knuckles lost all color as he squeezed, and squeezed, and squeezed. “Yes,” he said.

“So, why is it okay for Meredith to be scared, but your number one dislike about yourself is that you were scared in the same circumstance?” Dr. Wyatt said.

He had no answer.

Silence burgeoned in the room.

He had no answer.

None.

He listened to the fish tank. Let his gaze wander to it. The fish floated back and forth in lazy, sedate, colorful paths. They gave his eyes something to fixate on other than empty space. The fish split in two, doubling in number as he let his focus drift.

*Get your freaking tumor fixed,* Meredith had said.

“Why are you showing this to me?” Derek said, though he didn't want the answer almost as much as he wanted it.

“You push yourself hard,” Dr. Wyatt said. “You judge yourself at a higher standard than you judge everybody else.”

“I... don't,” Derek said. He dropped the stress ball into the basket. His shoulders slumped. “I don't mean to.” He pulled shaky hands through his hair. Hunched over his knees. Breathed thickly. “I don't *mean* to do this to myself.”

“Derek, pushing yourself can be a really good thing. It can be a *great* thing. It helps you be a better surgeon. It helped you write poems and plan something romantic for Meredith. It helped you come see me for the first time. It's helping you right now to get through this session even though you're hearing things you don't really want to hear. It's helped you with any number of things.”
He swallowed. She'd made him after all. He thought he'd been so stealthy with his disquiet, for once. “Then what...”

“Pushing yourself is a good thing, but pushing yourself too far is what we need to work on with you,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Your self-image is extremely poor, and it's conflicting with the fact that you hold yourself to this...” She held her palms face out to him, gesturing for emphasis. “This impossible standard that you don't expect anybody else to meet.”

“So, you are saying it's my fault,” Derek said. “I'm screwing myself because—”

“Derek,” Dr. Wyatt said, the word measured, even, patient. “This is not your fault. I can't emphasize that enough. If you don't even know you're wearing sunglasses, you're not going to know to take them off.” Her chair creaked as she shifted in her seat and recrossed her legs. The shoulder of her pantsuit stuck up unevenly. Her blond hair caught on her blouse collar. “But now you do know those sunglasses are on. You know it. I just showed you the illogical effects of it in detail.” He looked at his lap as she gave him the whole damning list. “You think you're not a good surgeon. You think you're stupid. You think you're unattractive. You think you're craven. You're not sure why Meredith loves you, even though she's told you at least one reason. What we need to do is give you some tools to start taking those sunglasses off so you can get a more accurate picture of yourself, one that isn't driven by unrealistic expectations.”

He stared at her for a long time. She was patient. She let him think. Didn't slam him with another question while he picked at his scrubs and slowly processed things.

She... made sense. Derek was shocked when he realized it, that Dr. Wyatt made sense. He reviewed the conversation they'd had slowly in his head, and she... made sense.

You've had a lot of heartache in your life that you haven't quite bounced back from.

She made sense.

Grief threatened to overwhelm him, but he kept it down like Poseidon controlling a tide. He let the ultrasound picture sit in his mind's eye. Just for a little bit longer. He needed it.

She made sense.

All the things he wanted to believe so badly but couldn't seem to force himself to take to heart, particularly on bad days like today — they were true. All the nice, reassuring things Meredith told him were true. All the things his mother told had him were true. They were true, but he'd gotten himself so twisted up inside over the years with catastrophe after catastrophe, he couldn't see those truths anymore. Couldn't see the good things.

It was the opposite of rose-colored glasses.

And it... made sense.

“How can I make him stop?” Derek said quietly. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I just want him to stop.”

“I think you can definitely reduce his appearances with some work,” Dr. Wyatt said.

“How?”

“Anytime you hear his voice in your head, I want you to pause, and I want you to think. Would I blame Mark for the same thing? Would I blame Meredith for the same thing? Would I blame my
mother for the same thing? Cascade through a list of your friends and family. If you're hearing a lot of nos, there's a very good chance you're wearing your sunglasses. Keep a journal again. Every time it happens, take some time and write down why Gary Clark's assertion can't be true. Write about all the people you wouldn't blame."

“What if what he says is true?” Derek said.

“Then you've found something you might want to improve about yourself, and I'm happy to help you with that,” Dr Wyatt said. “Self-improvement is a great goal, and success at it can only help to improve your self-image. But my guess is you'll find a lot of untrue assertions.”

“Okay,” he said.

He sniffed. And then he couldn't hold anything in anymore. The ultrasound had worked as a stopgap to get him through the important moment, to help him hear the things he needed to hear, but now he was through with it, and he felt even more exhausted than he had before this awful session. His hands shook and wouldn't stop shaking, and he thought for a moment that he might throw up from stress.

Not his fault, she'd said. Multiple times. Not something he'd done to himself, at least not on purpose.

But he was the one who had the responsibility of fixing it, somehow. His father had been murdered in front of him. He'd crashed his motorcycle. Amelia had overdosed. Addison had cheated on him. Meredith had drowned. Jen had died, another fatality in a long line of fatalities wrought by his scalpel. Gary Clark had shot him. Bad thing after bad, catastrophic thing had reorganized Derek's psyche like fruit in a blender, telling him he'd failed, that he wasn't worth loving, that he was a waste of space. And Derek had to break his back picking up the mess left behind afterward.

Him.

Frustration over lack of progress became something worse.

It became fear as he stood before a mountain he wasn't sure he could climb.

That was a lot of bad things to overcome. Years' worth.

“You know you can't,” said Mr. Clark.

Derek was so tired.

“Are you all right?” Dr. Wyatt said.

He blinked. “No,” he said. He glanced at his watch, but he couldn't read the face of it. Couldn't tell how much time was left on this session, still. “I want... want to stop, now,” he said. He couldn't take any more of this today.

“We can stop,” Dr. Wyatt said. “We did a lot today. This is a lot to process.”

“I need a minute,” he said. Barely. The room felt like it was closing in. He reached for a replacement thought. Any replacement thought. The ultrasound picture he'd used before. He flailed for it.

“Take your time,” she said.
He sat on Dr. Wyatt's couch, replaying that image of his baby behind his eyelids for a long time.

Get off my cloud

The murmur of voices downstairs crawled through the floorboards into the silence of his bedroom like little cockroaches. Derek stared at the ceiling, unblinking, but he didn't see it. Didn't see anything real in the darkness with the shades drawn. He only saw phantasms. Memories. Ghosts of violence.

“No child deserves this, ” his Aunt Sally had whispered to his Aunt Mel, both of whom had stood in the corner of the kitchen by the fridge, unaware that he'd come in to get a fresh pitcher of lemonade. “ He's too young to be the man of the house. ”

Aunt Mel had sniffed. “ I can't believe Mikey's gone. It's wrong. ”

“What is Carol going to do? ”

“I don't know, ” Aunt Mel had replied.

They'd shut up when they'd seen him. Offered platitudes. He'd set the pitcher down in the kitchen on the counter without word. He hadn't said goodbye to any of the people crammed on the first floor of their small house. He'd fled out of the kitchen, through the dining room, past the dining room table, which was covered in cakes and pies and breads and casseroles and all manner of other desserts, pastries, and dinners. Everyone had brought something. Everyone. As though they all thought homemade pudding or a macaroni salad would make everything okay.

His lower-lip quivered. He wiped his face.

He'd seen Dad today. He'd been still and cold and clean. Wearing a nice black suit like the ones he wore to church. Not like when he'd been shot. Derek had stared at the open casket, unblinking, just like he stared at the ceiling, now, until someone had pulled him away. Someone he didn't know in the blur. Maybe Mom. Maybe Kathy.

“Derek, listen to me, ” his dad had said. “ This is very important. ”

A soft knock on the door made Derek flinch.

“Derek, sweetheart, may I come in? ” Mom said through the door, her voice soft and barely put together.

He shook his head. Not that Mom could hear it.

The door knob turned slowly. The voices from downstairs flooded inside the room until she closed the door behind her. The soft shh shh shh of her feet moving across the carpet preceded the mattress dipping.

“I don't want to go back downstairs, ” Derek said.

His mother squeezed his shoulder. Ran her fingers through his hair. “ You don't have to. I just wanted to see you. ”

He rolled over. Away from her. Pulled the covers up to his shoulders. Buried his nose in the dirty
undershirt he'd pulled out of the laundry because it smelled like Dad. Because it helped erase the acrid memory of gunpowder still loitering in Derek's head.

“I don't want to talk,” he said.

“I don't either,” his mother replied. “But I'd like to stay here for a bit, if that's okay.”

He didn't tell her to stay or go. He didn't tell her anything. She stayed for several minutes while he stared at nothing. He inhaled and exhaled in the dark, filling his nose with the soft remnants of cedar and spice that had been uniquely Dad. He saw his dad die again, and he wondered if there was something he could have done differently to make that not happen. He heard his sister screaming, and the teeth marks on his hand where she'd bitten him throbbed with remembered pain.

Breathing hurt. Living hurt.

His dad kept dying. Or was dead.

At least when he slept, the moments didn't take as long to pass.

He closed his eyes.

“Derek,” called a familiar voice, pulling him up from the lethargy of dreaming. “Derek, Derek, Derek, guess wha— oh.”

Meredith.

His eyes slipped open as she bounded through the doorway in a pile of bubbles and limbs and excitement, and then came to a dead halt when she saw him curled up in bed clinging to his dog. Waning daylight slanted through the window panes, laving his back with heat. Dust motes wandered lazily in the air currents. The blankets rustled as he shifted. Let go of Samantha's collar. He rolled onto his stomach, pulling the comforter over his shoulders. The physical tiredness had waned with his nap, but the mental tiredness... He just wanted to hibernate today. The dog licked his ear, whined, and resettled, a reassuring, solid weight beside him.

“Hey,” Meredith said in a softer, more moderated voice as she walked to the bed. She shooed the dog away. Samantha whuffed, a disgruntled sound, and plodded out of the room, stretching her hind legs as she went. The dog hadn't moved since he'd lain down.

“Sorry, I woke you up,” Meredith said as she plopped down beside him in the warm space Samantha had left behind. “It's early. I figured you were reading or something.”

“It's okay,” he said softly. He let his eyes drift shut again.

“What's wrong?” she said as she scooted closer. Curled up next to him. The warmth of her body heat soaked through the comforter. Her hand ran along his spine through the blankets. “Are you just tired?”

He looked at her. Her gray eyes glistened in the dim light. She looked bright and blonde and bubbly and happy, tamped to a simmer because she'd realized he was upset, he supposed. She looked happier than he'd seen her in a long time. He wanted to match that for her. Or at least be some semblance of okay. He wanted to be curious about why she was so happy. Wanted to share that happiness with her. Anything normal.

Instead, he blinked, and the world blurred, and something twisted inside his chest. He couldn't
speak. Felt the wet crawl of grief down his face as he thought of the mountain once more. The mountain he had to climb when he was so mentally tired. So done. With all of this. Instead of climbing, he felt as though he were sliding off a cliff.

“Oh,” she said, the word soft, and the last of her bubbling excitement popped and dispersed. A sliver of frustration crossed her gaze, pinched the skin around her eyes. Just a sliver before a wave of empathy washed it away.

He couldn't blame her, but he was too tired to apologize. Too wasted. And he couldn't just shut all of this off, either. He had no idea how to get to the next minute awake, which made the idea of sleep even more intoxicating.

“You'll never make it,” said Mr. Clark. “Pills would help.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” she said.

Derek shook his head.

“Do you want me to go away for a while?” she said next.

He shook his head once more.

“Okay,” she said. She moved away in a fluid motion, but only to slip underneath the covers. She lay parallel with him, skin flush against his, pulled the comforter over both of them like a cocoon, and she hugged him, and she kissed him, and she pulled her fingers through his hair. “I'm sorry you're having a bad day today,” she said.

He swallowed against the lump in his throat. Let himself take comfort in her embrace. He closed his eyes, though he didn't sleep, forehead to forehead with her, and the minutes passed in a glacial march. He felt the hairs on his head shift as she stroked him.

“I love you,” she said softly after ages. “I really do, Derek.”

He stared at her. “Why?” he said.

She blinked at the question. “Because I just do,” she said.

He took a short breath and released it. “Tell me why. Please.”

She toyed with a loose curly lock over his forehead as she pondered his request, like she wanted to give it due and weighted consideration. “I like to talk to you,” she said. “You can make me laugh, even when I'm freaking out. You don't judge me even when I say something stupid or freaky. You make me feel loved. You get me. Not many people get me. You're the first person I want to tell when something exciting happens. I just... like to be around you.”

He stared at her. At her unblinking eyes. Her gaze searched his face, like she wasn't quite sure she'd given him what he wanted.

He recounted her words. Turned them over in his head. Every time he wanted to insert a but, he started over until he could get through the whole thing without arguing. Without Gary Clark commenting from the fucking peanut gallery seats in his head.

“Oh,” he said when he'd slowly processed all of that.

His heart pounded.
“My chest...”

“What about it?” she said.

He swallowed. “The scars really don't bother you?”

“No,” she said without hesitation. She splayed a palm against his pectorals and traced the line down his center. Then she wandered to the pockmark left by the bullet. “If anything, they remind me you stayed when you didn't have to.”

“What a laugh,” Mr. Clark said.

Derek flinched. “But—”

She put her fingers to his lips, shushing him. “You lived, Derek. I told you before, and I'll tell you a thousand times more if you need to hear it, but no one, not even you, will ever convince me that wasn't at least a little bit on you. You're the strongest person I know. You could have died, and you didn't.”

He took a short, clipped breath, and he mulled over that, next. Kept saying it over and over and over to himself. It felt foreign and wrong, and he didn't agree, like he was trying to convince himself green was red or up was down, because Gary Clark had shot him, and had been planning to shoot again, and only a quirk of fate had deemed it not so. Luck had made Derek not die more than anything else. There was no magic light bulb moment to mend his perspective. But he could convince himself not to argue with it if he thought hard enough about it, and maybe, if he could make the lack of arguments stick for longer than a few moments, he might be able to incorporate those statements into his worldview. A new set of truths. Eventually. Maybe, he could help undo the sunglasses with repetition in addition to Dr. Wyatt's suggested journaling.

Maybe.

“Okay,” he said, forcing himself to agree out loud with her. “Okay.”

It still felt so wrong.

He closed his eyes to regather himself for a long moment. His eyes were burning, he realized. He sniffed, and he wiped his face, but Meredith didn't pester him about it, didn't ask him to explain any of this, though she had to be confused.

With the choice journal, as soon as he'd started writing everything down, the world had realigned for him. Seeing his choices on paper in a big list, that was all he'd needed to remake the truth. That he made his own way and wasn't a continuous victim of pure happenstance, being battered from one moment to the next by cruel, sadistic fate. He'd tried writing a little when he'd gotten home earlier, but that hadn't helped much.

He groaned and rolled into a sitting position, pulling away from her. She watched him with curiosity. He grabbed his choice journal from the side of the bed because he hadn't had a chance to buy a new notebook. He flipped it to the first open page.

Meredith is not a liar, he wrote.

Meredith is not a liar, ergo Gary Clark cannot be telling the truth, he wrote.

It was a choice, really, anyway, wasn't it? Choosing to believe it?
He blinked at the paper. His eyes watered in earnest. Meredith was not a liar. Gary Clark was telling the truth. The two couldn't exist together, and yet, they did. They did, and he couldn't make it stop, even knowing that. Choosing felt fake because he knew he didn't believe it.

“Pathetic,” Mr. Clark said.

Derek started to shake as he thought of the mountain.

The more he thought about it, the bigger the mountain seemed. He'd lost his perspective. He didn't think he could get it back. No matter what Dr. Wyatt said about sunglasses.

He wanted to crawl back into bed and never get out again.

“Or take a pill,” Mr. Clark said.

Derek heard the blankets rustle behind him. Meredith touched his shoulders very lightly, and when he didn't tense, she leaned into the motion. Wrapped her arms around his torso. Looked over his shoulder at his notebook. He didn't think she'd ever read his choice journal, though she knew he kept it. He'd explained it the first night she'd caught him filling it in before bed. He couldn't imagine what she might think, reading that first line where he was—

“Why would you think I'm a liar?” Meredith said as she froze.

Regret plunged deep at the hurt in her tone. He shouldn't have bothered to try writing this out. Not with her sitting right there. Not when he knew it hadn't helped earlier, anyway. But turning to this fucking thing had become comforting habit. The paper pages crinkled as he jammed the journal shut and tossed it away. It hit the rug with a thud.

“I don't,” he said. “I don't think you're a liar.”

“Then why would you write that?” she said.

“It's just... that was the point. That you're not a liar, so when you and Gary Clark contradict each other, Gary Clark is lying, but...” Derek shook his head. “Tell me again,” he said. “Tell me why you love me.”

“Derek, what is this about?” Meredith said.

“Dr. Wyatt,” he said. “She thinks I can't see the truth about myself anymore. I'm... I need to find it. I need to find my perspective.”

For all the sense that made.

“Please, just tell me,” he said softly, begging, which only made him feel worse. He hated begging. “I want to believe you so badly. I want it. I want to remember what it was like to understand why my wife loves me.”

Her palms rubbed his chest. She kissed the nape of his neck. “You don't understand why I love you?”

He blinked. “No,” he said.

He'd thought he'd known why with Addison. Then Addison had cheated on him. Mark had considered Addison more important than Derek. Mark, Derek's supposed best friend. Then Meredith had drowned twenty feet from the dock. She hadn't swum; hadn't wanted to stay with him
enough to swim. And then Mr. Clark had thought Derek was so repugnant he deserved to die. So many strikes.

Derek Shepherd was out.

You've had a lot of heartache in your life that you haven't quite bounced back from.

“I want to believe you,” Derek said. “I just don't know how anymore. So, tell me again.”

“I love you because you're you, Derek,” Meredith said.

He pushed away from the bed. “But I don't know who I am!”

He stood in the center of the room, feeling like he'd slammed into a brick wall. He didn't know anything about who he was anymore. That was the crux of it. He didn't know what was real and what was fake. What was sickness and what was, in reality, loathsome bits of the real him. What was fucking sunglasses, and what was just...

“All of you,” Gary Clark said. “All of you is loathsome.”

But that couldn't be real because Meredith loved him for some fucking reason. She may have sympathy for loathsome people, like William Dunn, because that was who she was. She was empathetic, and she responded in kind to almost anybody in pain. But empathy wasn't love.

Meredith Grey did not give her love to loathsome people.

She did give her love to Derek Shepherd, though. He didn't fucking know why, but she did.

Who was Derek Shepherd?

I don't want this to be a special circumstance, he'd said. I want it to be like it was. I want me to be like I was. I don't know what's wrong with me.

“I just want to understand this!” he said.

Meredith looked up at him from the bed, her hair mussed, her face blushing and alive. She bit her lip. That flash of frustration was back, pinching the skin around her eyes and lighting a fire in her gaze. For a long moment, he clenched his teeth, frustrated right along with her, and she stared at him like she didn't fucking know what to say, and he wanted to fucking yell. Yell, and yell, and yell. Not at her. Or at anybody. Just... to yell. To let out all the shit that boiled inside.

He hated how volatile he was.

“Derek...” she said, hesitantly through gritted teeth, and he bristled. She stood. Hugged her arms self-consciously, like she was preparing to take the brunt of something. Like him. Take the brunt of him. His temper. “Cut it out,” she said evenly. “Seriously.”

“Cut what out?” he snapped before he could stop himself. His heart squeezed. He took a deep breath. This was like watching a fucking train wreck where he was the train. “I'm sorry.” He paced. Counted to ten in his head. “I'm sorry I snapped. I'm sorry.” Pulled his fingers through his hair in frustration. “I don't want to snap at you. I don't want to snap at anybody.”

“It's a bad day,” she said flatly.

Like that was any sort of excuse to be a rotten person to her or anybody. He was so tired of this. He stopped dead center in the open space by the bed. He took another deep breath and another and
another, and he resolved himself to be calm.

“Cut what out?” he said more reasonably.

“Being dark and broody-faced,” she said.

Dark and broody-faced. He snorted with irritation, and his temper burbled once more. “I'm not dark and broody-faced,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “You always do it, Derek. You want to know who you are? Well, that's one thing. It has nothing to do with PTSD. You've done it since I met you. You do it whenever a problem you don't know how to solve blows up in your face.”

He stared at her. Blinked. “I...”

“You did it after I drowned. You did it when Jen died. You get all hyper-negative, you bottle everything up, and you hide in your freaking trailer.”

“I'm not in my trailer, now,” he said.

She shrugged. “Cursed up in bed, then. Whatever. It has to stop, Derek.” Her head tilted to the side as she regarded him. “At least for today. Please.”

He stared at her, and then he was back in the elevator, over a year ago.

*You got me into the OR. If there's a crisis, you don't freeze. You move forward. You get the rest of us to move forward.*

He swallowed as a lump formed in his throat. “What would you suggest I do?”

“You remember calculus?”

“What does calculus have to do with anything?” he said.

“You remember how, every once in a while, there was a problem you didn't get, or, well, at least that happened with me. There was a problem I didn't get, so I had to let it sit for a while. I had to walk away and not think about it and come back with a fresh mind, because no matter how many times I read the problem over and over and over again, I didn't get it. Did that ever happen to you?”

“I guess,” he said.

“Dr. Wyatt just told you this brain-breaking stuff today, right?” Meredith said.

He swallowed. “Yes.”

“So, stop thinking about it for a bit. Sleep it off. Worry about it in the morning. You're not going to come to a freaking epiphany when you're this frustrated. It never works that way, believe me.”

He took a deep breath and blew it out.

“She told me stuff I didn't know how to deal with, once,” Meredith added softly. “I stalked out of her office. But it made sense later.”

The last of his temper slipped away on cat feet.

“What was it?” he said.
She wiped her eyes and smiled. “How to be extraordinary.”

The flash of candles lit his memory. The feel of her lips against his after months apart. The cool breeze on the cliff ruffling his hair and whispering against his skin.

She was right.

He knew she was right.

She stared at him with one eye narrowed for a moment, as if she were considering something. As if she thought he might be ready to protest, thought she hadn't talked him off the ledge. She plodded across the carpet to him. Grabbed his t-shirt. Pulled.

“What?” he had a chance to say.

“We're going shopping,” she said. “Your attendance is not an option.”

“But—”

“You're not allowed to think about this anymore today,” she said. “I had a long shift. I'm tired. You're frustrated. It's not worth it. I can tell you I love you until I'm blue in the freaking face, and you can write that I'm not a liar in your journal until your hand hurts, but I doubt either will give you any sudden realizations if they haven't given you any already. I was looking forward to this all day and the whole way home until I found you. I'm not letting your stubbornness or your wallowing or your need to mull everything to death sabotage my freaking evening. Not tonight. I can't handle it. Got it?”

“But—”

She rolled her eyes and turned to face him. “All day and the whole way home, Derek. You're not ruining it, even if I have to staple your freaking mopey mouth shut.”

“But, Meredith,” he managed.

“What, Derek?”

“Can I at least change, first?” he said, gesturing down at himself.

Her mouth opened. Closed. Her face turned red. She seemed to realize he was wearing boxer-briefs and a t-shirt, and nothing else. “Oh,” she said.

He gave her a small grin. “I won't protest, Mere. I just want pants.”

She bit her lip. “Oops.”

He shook his head at her. “You're really very bossy, you know,” he said.

“You love it,” she murmured.

He let his grin widen and stepped closer. Closed the space between them. “I do,” he said softly. He kissed her breath away. And then he went to the dresser to grab a clean pair of jeans.

“So, where are we going that you looked forward to all day?” he said as he pulled out an old, stonewashed pair that had seen better days. He wasn't in love with the idea of going shopping, but he could live with doing it if it meant that much to her, and she was right. He needed to drop this for a while. “Do I get to be your awesome fashion adviser? I could fake a French accent to make it
sound more authentic.”

She snorted. “Seriously?”

“Oui, mon petit chou,” he said with a discerning eye directed at her blouse. “Très chic.”

She giggled. “That's one of the other things I do not love you for,” she said. “Your fashion sense.”

“But you like my French?” he said, drawing out the words, not even intending authenticity at this point. French sounded more like Fraunch.

“Only the kissing,” she muttered, but he heard it.

“I like the French kissing, too,” he said. “More French kissing, I say. Want to French kiss, now, instead of shop?”

She rolled her eyes at him.

“Seriously, then,” Derek said, snickering as he dropped his inner Pierre in exchange for reason. “Where?” He stepped into the jeans and pulled them up his thighs. Buttoned them.

She shrugged. “A baby store or something,” she said.

His hands paused at the top button of his jeans. He looked up at her. “A baby store?”

“I thought we could look at...” She blushed. She touched her womb. Rubbed. “You know. Stuff. Lexie insists on having a baby shower, and apparently that means we have to put a list of baby junk in a registry. I don't know why, and I can't stop her. About the baby shower, I mean. I tried. I really tried, but she's hellbent on cuteness and bows and pin the sperm on the egg and other horrors.” Her palm circled her lower torso in repeated motions. The excitement and bubbling he'd seen before simmered back into existence. “I figured we could... go. Because I don't have any idea about any of the stuff we need, and I think I'll probably need to take a few trips to whittle things down, and she won't shut up until we have a list. Or something.” And then she grinned. Full of teeth and cheer, and she almost bounced. “Plus, you can see it, and I just... wanted to do something today.”

“See what?” he said, excited by the mere virtue of her being excited.

She lifted her shirt, and his eyes widened. A roll of skin hung over the waistline of her pants. Like she'd gained a few pounds and gotten pudgy or something, but was still trying to wear the same size she'd worn before, except he knew she wasn't pudgy in the slightest. “You can see Baby,” she said. “I had trouble zipping up my pants this morning, so I looked in the mirror and, well, there it was.” She gestured at the line of skin. “Finally.”

Derek, Derek, Derek, guess wha— oh.

He blinked. “That's what you were excited about. When you came in earlier. What you were going to show me. That's...”

She nodded.

He blinked again. The world blurred and disintegrated, but in a good way. A spectacular way. He laughed as he closed the space between them, the last button on his jeans momentarily forgotten. He laughed, and it felt great. An amazing, uproarious high compared to how low he'd been feeling earlier.
“That's amazing,” he said with a breathless, awe-filled voice.

She grinned. “I thought so, too.”

He met the hand she held at her stomach with his own. They stood there, silent, feeling, for a long, stretching second. He closed his eyes and let the moment collect underneath his fingertips. His baby. With Meredith. That he could feel with his own two hands.

His heart squeezed when he opened his eyes and saw her staring at him, her eyes sparkling and beautiful and happy like they'd been when she'd first walked in.

He cleared his throat. He had a late start, and he'd needed some prodding to get out of his funk, but he could share her happiness and excitement, now. He could salvage the moment with some effort.

“Why don't we go to a maternity clothes store tonight?” he said. “My fashion sense might suck, but I can ooh and ahh on cue. I won't even impose a garment limit. My tolerance knows no bounds, tonight.”

She shook her head, though she grinned. “I think I'd rather save that for this weekend with Lexie or something, since I doubt Cristina would be caught dead anywhere near maternity clothes.”

He nodded. “I get it,” he said, giving her a mock hurt frown. “She's a more qualified adviser. No love for Monsieur Shepherd.”

“No really,” Meredith said, “but I do love Dr. Shepherd a whole bunch.”

“Je t'aime aussi,” he said softly. He nuzzled her. “So, what would you like to do with me instead, then?”

She shrugged. “I just want to do something baby-ish.”

“Baby-ish,” he echoed.

She nodded.

He kissed her on the nose. “Baby-ish it is, then. Let me get my shoes.” He paused. “And Meredith?”

“Yeah?”

He stared, unblinking. “Thank you. For keeping me going.”

“You do the same for me,” she said.

“No, you don't,” Gary Clark said, but Derek pushed the comment away with ferocious repetition.

Meredith Grey was not a liar.

He knew that much.

Wild Horses

As soon as they arrived at Babies “R” Us, which was chock full of aisle after aisle full of baby-
oriented things, Meredith’s determined charge into a night of potential registry content exploration seemed to falter. They’d talked in the car about where to go, but Meredith hadn't known much about baby stores. He hadn't either. They’d opted for ubiquitous, assuming they could switch to specialized when they had a more specific shopping list in mind. But Babies “R” Us was a big store, and the sight of so many aisles seemed to overwhelm her. She stopped only a few feet beyond the threshold and the line of theft detectors, her blonde-kissed hair damp with drizzle from the late afternoon sun shower that had visited them in the parking lot.

“Can I help you with anything?” a perky store clerk called from a nearby register.

Meredith shook her head, silent and barely noticeable. “Not yet,” Derek called, because he doubted the clerk could see Meredith's head move a millimeter. “We're just looking for now.”

The clerk smiled. “Okay,” she said. “Let me know if you have any questions.”

Derek looked at Meredith in profile as she stood beside him. His eyes darted to her waistline. He couldn't help the reflexive gesture, now that he knew he could see evidence of her pregnancy with his naked eye if he tried.

She'd doggedly stayed in the same pair of jeans despite how they didn't quite fit, but her blouse was too loose and hung down too low for him to see the overflow at her waistline without lifting up the blouse, which he wouldn't dare do in a public place without invitation. He settled for wrapping his arms around her. Letting his palms settle over her belly button, where he could feel the subtle shift in her stomach from flat to slightly rounded. The feeling gave him a zing from the tips of his toes to his lips, which curved into a grin before he could stop them.

She was pregnant with their baby, and he could see it. Feel it.

He kissed her ear and her throat and her shoulder. When he saw blush, blush he read as something other than arousal when he considered her stiff body language, he stepped away. He loved her. He wanted her to know it. He wanted her to know he thought she was attractive, because he suspected she might feel a bit self-conscious about the now visible weight gain. But he didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

“So sorry,” he said, his voice low and throaty. “It's just...”

“Neat?” she said hesitantly.

He nodded. Laughed. God, what an amazing feeling. That laugh. She was pregnant, and she showed, and when he thought about it, he laughed. “Yeah,” he said. “A bit.” He swallowed. “Or a lot. A lot.”

She bit her lip, and he saw the cute flash of her incisors. She rested her palms over the space where his hands had been. “I think it's pretty neat, too,” she said, though her tone was more restrained. She didn't laugh. Not like him. But her gaze lit like a firecracker, and he wanted to drown himself in it. In that expression of glee. He loved seeing her so happy, even if she didn't exactly know what to do with that happiness. Even if it made her blush and bristle nervously, like she wasn't sure she deserved to be that happy.

“So, what's first?” he prodded, directing her attention to the store and away from her doubts.

Or, maybe, not. She looked back at him. “Derek, I have no idea. I mean I knew I wanted to do something baby-ish tonight. I just don't... know. I didn't... think this far in advance.”

“So, this is a knee-jerk shopping spree,” he said, nodding understandingly.
She shrugged. She glanced at all the daunting aisles littered with cribs and swings and toys and diapers and god knew what, and she didn't budge. Didn't dart off in any particular direction of whimsy. Didn't seem so excited anymore as those doubts he'd seen earlier piled on higher and higher.

He understood the doubting.

He'd been in stores like this before to buy gifts for his newborn nieces and nephews, but he'd never once been there in this capacity. As a pending father. The prospect was a little daunting to him, particularly with the shooting in mind. His PTSD threw a wrench into things. He only had six months to get himself straightened out at this point. Six months seemed like such a short time...

“You'll never make it,” Mr. Clark said.

Derek clenched his jaws, unwilling to entertain that shit right now. No more Mr. Clark. No more mountain climbing. Not today, god, damn it.

His head remained silent in the moments that followed.

He took a short, tight breath and let it loose. He was a mess, and fatherhood was daunting. He couldn't imagine how daunting motherhood was to Meredith, who'd taken years just to come around to the idea of being ready to have a baby in the first place. He'd resigned himself to the idea that he wouldn't ever have children with her. She was working from bad examples. Thatcher and Ellis. Meredith had convinced herself she wouldn't ever be a good enough mother to make having a baby worthwhile.

I want to try again, Derek, she'd said after she'd told him about the miscarriage, and his world had realigned.

Except, now, Meredith had frozen on her feet, looking wide-eyed at the giant store, and he wanted to help. Wanted to make it better.

Stuffed animals littered the shelves of the rack closest to the door, and inspiration hit. He moved to the rack. Pushed aside a plush horse and a turtle and a bear. A fluffy lamb fell to the floor by his feet. He grabbed a fuzzy lion the size of a house cat. The thing had a turquoise-colored mane and purple fur and big, plush, saber teeth like small, pointy carrots. It smiled, as all ferocious lions were wont to do.

“We're explorers,” he said playfully. “Ready to brave our first safari into the cruel, unforgiving wilds of Babies ’R’ Us.”

She stared at him, one eyebrow raised. She chuckled. Sort of. A single, snorting syllable that could have been an incredulous laugh. “Derek, what are you doing?” she said.

“I didn't bring anything to fend off the wildlife! Will we make it out alive?” he said. He held up the lion in front of his face, facing Meredith. “Roar!” he gurgled in his best, most awful imitation of his favorite zoo animal while he jiggled it in the air.

“Derek, stop, seriously,” she said, giggling, and the sound relaxed him, let him know he'd done something right, no matter how silly. He peeked at her from behind the lion and gave her his biggest grin.

She'd tilted her head to the side to regard him. Her hands had wandered to her stomach. Pressed her shirt against her waistline. He could see the bump, now, with her hands like that. She smiled at him, gaze twinkling, like, though she thought him the corniest man imaginable, she couldn't help
but wonder what he'd be like roaring playfully at their baby. Clowning around. Being a dad.

_God, you'd make such a perfect dad,_ she'd said when he'd been shot.

He kissed her before he put the lion back on the shelf. He kissed her again before he bent down to pick up the fallen lamb. When he stood straight, he found her staring at the bear he'd shoved aside to get to the lion. The bear was a soft, squishy thing with brown fur and limbs that had been exaggerated in length to make them dangle-y and cute, and it reminded him vaguely of the bear he'd had when he'd been little, before he'd declared himself too old and responsible for stuffed animals at the tender age of seven.

She picked the bear off the shelf. Rubbed her thumbs along the soft feel of its fur. And she stared. For the longest time. With the strangest look on her face. A sort of wistful something twisted with sadness.

“What is it?” he said as he put the lamb back on the shelf.

“I wanted one of these when I was a kid,” she said, staring at the bear.

His mouth tumbled open before he could stop it. Just a little. “You didn't have one?”

She shrugged. “My mother wouldn't let me. She said stuffed animals made you soft. She got me Anatomy Jane instead. Told me to learn something useful with it.”

“I thought you loved Anatomy Jane,” he said. “With the jelly pouch and the... the twash. And the chubble.”

She looked at him. “You remember all those?”

He shrugged. “Hey, I listen.”

She smiled. “I know. It's one of the many things I love about you. And I loved Anatomy Jane. But I still wanted a bear.”

He stared at her. “So, you didn't have any stuffed animals?”

She stared at the bear. “I think I did when I was really little. Thatcher. He got me...” Her gaze shifted to the lamb he'd left on the shelf before sliding back to the bear. “He got me a rabbit. That was my only one. It was packed in the box next to Anatomy Jane, wasn't it? I remember taking it out...”

“That rabbit was your only stuffed animal?” he said, still incredulous, particularly that she could sound so blasé about how her mother had treated her.

Meredith shrugged. “It's just... how it was.”

For a moment, he had no idea what to say. Couldn't imagine what her childhood had been like. Every time she gave him a glimpse of it, he hated Ellis more. And Thatcher. Hated them both for giving Meredith such a lousy start in life when she'd been innocent and couldn't speak up for herself. None of that was right.

Her hand on his shoulder made him flinch. “Hey,” she said, her tone concerned.

He realized he'd clenched the shelf with a white-knuckled grip and lost himself in brooding again. He shook his head. Pasted a reassuring smile on his face. “That's the great thing about having your
own baby, you know,” Derek said, recovering from his trip to badness. He pulled her hand from his shoulder and kissed the back of her palm.

She looked up at him. “What is?”

“You can do all the things you wanted your own mother and father to do that they didn't. And you can skip all the things you didn't want them to do.” He pointed at the bear. “Our baby should definitely have a bear, I think.”

She blinked. “Derek...”

“It’s true!” he said before she could finish. “For instance, I have some opinions on how to deal with loose teeth. We will not be using doors to do our dirty work.”

“Doors?” she said.

He shrugged. “It was a thing. With string. And a door. And I don't like remembering it.”

She shook her head. “Traumatized youth.”

He nodded. “Exactly.”

“Even if I made a list of all the things I don't want to do because my mother did them, I don't think I'd know what I'm doing,” she said. She squeezed the bear. “I'm a feeling little lost.” She swallowed. Sniffed. “I don't think I'll be a good mother. I might even be a rotten one.”

He stared at her without responding for a long moment. Long enough for her to give him an odd, curious look.

“What?” she said.

I wonder what Meredith-y would be, she'd said.

Strong, he'd answered. Compassionate. Beautiful.

She'd looked away. I want to be those things.

You are, Mere, he'd said. I wish you could see it.

Some realizations didn't hit like crashing trucks. They slid into their parking spaces, unannounced, and dared one to notice them. Derek's fingers clenched, and he blinked at the parked, sleek, metaphorical Porsche he'd just noticed. How long had that been there?

“You're like me,” he blurted.

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

You’ve had a lot of heartache in your life that you haven't quite bounced back from.

Derek's head swam as he pulled Meredith into his arms. “Never mind,” he said. She let him envelop her with no resistance, almost like she'd been expected him to do it sooner. His throat felt like it was closing as a lump formed behind his Adam's apple.

Dr. Wyatt's observations...

They were true for the both of them. Meredith wore sunglasses about herself sometimes, too. Not
uncategorically about everything like he did, but about certain things like self-worth and beauty and her ability to be a good parent.

She'd grown up without a dad, because her dad had left and started a new family with another woman. Derek had omitted the truth about Addison and then left Meredith to pick up the pieces by herself. She'd drowned. Ellis had died. Susan had died. Thatcher had slapped her for Susan.

Meredith had had a lot of heartache, too. Some because of him and his wrong choices. But not all of it. The bear squished between them as he pulled her tightly against him.

“You'll be a great mom,” he said, whispering against her. “Being lost doesn't equate to being bad. And you're already starting with something that Ellis never had.”

“What’s that?” she said doubtfully.

“Me,” he said, and in that moment he felt worthwhile. “I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere.”

Meredith sighed in his embrace. Breathed softly against his shirt. His open windbreaker rustled as he shifted to accommodate her. He knew she liked to listen to his heartbeat, and so he held her close and let her do what she needed. He rubbed her back.

He stared at nothing in particular, blinking, a bit dumbstruck. He was good at this. Comforting. Particularly comforting her. Really good at it. She hadn't said so, but she'd told him when she'd fallen into his embrace like she'd been waiting for it. And she wore sunglasses, too. He told her so many things that were true, and she never believed him, but they were. They were true. She was strong. He'd told her that, and she didn't believe it.

*She* told him *he* was strong. He hadn't believed it...

But... he wasn't going anywhere. He was fighting a lot of things. Stress and addiction and pain. But he was still here, still breathing, still holding her in his arms, and he wasn't going to budge no matter what the fuck Gary Clark said, no matter what else happened.

*I pick you. I choose you. I love you,* he'd said. *And I'm not moving.*

He was really good at comforting her, and... maybe... maybe, he was strong, too.

Maybe.

Gary Clark said nothing at all. Derek's breaths tightened. Maybe. Hesitant, unsure belief took hold, which was way, way better than not believing at all. Maybe strong.


Not a complete picture. Actually, it was sort of blurry. But... it was a way better self-portrait than the one he'd carried into the store. Derek Shepherd. Likes to brood unnecessarily. Has bad fashion-sense. Sucks at everything. He threw that photo into his mental garbage.

“I don't even know where to start in here,” she said, pulling him away from his musing.

“What?” he said.

Her lips curled into a grin, and her gaze was mischievous in a way that said, *Hah, I caught you!* “You were a thousand miles away just now.”
He shook his head. “I'm sorry, I just...” Had that epiphany he'd wanted. But this was her shopping trip. Her moment. About her. He took a breath and blew it out, and then he gave her an honest smile, because looking at her made him happy, and then he kissed her. “How about we just walk the aisles first and see what they have,” he suggested.

“Am I going to have to suggest no kissing to get through this?” she said.

He blinked. “What?”

She grinned. “Samantha, remember? That's what you said when we went to get Samantha. About walking the aisles.”

He winked. “It's a multipurpose strategy effective in many situations,” he said.

“Does it work in surgery?” she said.

“As a matter of fact, it does,” he replied. “If we're talking metaphorically, that is. Brains don't have aisles.”

“Good to know,” she said.

“I absolutely veto no kissing, though,” he said. He squeezed her. “I can't not kiss you like this.” He kissed her. “I just can't.”

“Okay,” she said softly.

“Okay, I can kiss you?”

“Okay, let's just... explore,” she said, rolling her eyes, and she took her first real step into the store, away from him, away from the stuffed animal rack. He echoed the movement with his own feet. Stayed beside her.

She officially left the entrance with one step, two steps, three. Four. Five. More. He mirrored her movements, surreptitiously letting her go at her own pace. She didn't seem to remember she still had the teddy bear in her hands. He didn't see any point to mentioning it. He fell into quiet support mode, which he liked, because it gave him a chance to catch up with things, himself. To take everything in. To look, wide-eyed, at their future.

The store was relatively void of people, which he supposed make sense, given that it was a work day for most people, and it was close to dinner time. The only reason he was available was because he'd come home early with Richard's blessing. He'd been unable to function after he'd left Dr. Wyatt's office. Barely able to ask for the time off. Richard had taken one look at Derek and sent him on his way. The only reason Meredith was available was because her shift had started at the crack of dawn, and the hospital was still slow with business after the shooting.

Meredith looked at cribs and bedding and diapers and teething rings and toys, and so he looked at them, too. She looked at little onesies meant for very small babies. Just like their baby would be when he or she was brand new. She stopped absentlly to stroke all the soft fabric and plush things in a store full of soft fabric and plush things. She wandered. Didn't stop for long in any particular place.

He watched her, unable to stop himself, and his attention on baby things waned somewhat. Meredith had been feeling a lot better since Dr. Charlton had prescribed Meredith some anti-nausea medication. She'd relaxed even more when Derek's mother had left a few days ago, Manhattan-bound.
Though Meredith and his mother got along, and Meredith was starting to realize she had a family on her side that didn't suck, not like Ellis and Thatcher had, he knew a true relationship would take a while for them to cultivate. Even then, he loved having seen her come this far. Loved watching her blossom.

Loved watching her in general. The way she walked. The way she bit her lip whenever she felt pensive or unsure. The way her eyes twinkled when she was happy. The way she lit up the space around her simply by being there.

Something stirred inside. Something deep within.

He loved her.

Every once in a while, that fact overwhelmed him in a good way, and nothing in his life seemed broken or wrong.

He slid behind her, body-to-body with her, and they fitted. He put his hands on her shoulders and rubbed her arms while she looked at a stroller. He pressed his nose into her loose tresses of brown-blonde hair by her right ear. He inhaled. The familiar scent of lavender filled his head. His muscles relaxed.

“You're hovering,” she said.

“No,” he murmured with a smile. “I'm breathing you in.”

Her nose scrunched adorably. She didn't look up from the price tag on the stroller. “You're hovering.”

He chuckled and pulled away, following her at a respectable, less hover-y distance as she moved to the next stroller in the aisle. More than thirty minutes of walking and looking in a daze had passed before she stopped in the bedding section to stare at a sun-colored bedding set painted with lambs and bears and giraffes. A menagerie of anthropomorphized cuteness. She ran her fingers over the soft blankets.

“Do you like it?” Derek said. His voice arrived rough. He cleared his throat.

She made a face. “God, no. It's too... cute.”

“Too cute,” he echoed. “But aren't babies, by definition, cute?”

She turned to look at him. “Cute, but... This is like cute on steroids. You're not sold on this kind of cute, are you? I don't think I can handle cute to this degree, even with nine months of conditioning.”

He grinned. “Meredith, I am many things, but decorator is not one of them. We can do whatever you want as long as the nursery is functional.”

She leaned into him with a sigh. “We'll have a nursery in the new house.”

He nodded. “We will.” He kissed her. “We planned it that way.”

“I know,” she said. “It's just... mind boggling to think about, sometimes. That I have a sort of house with a sort of nursery, an awesome husband, and a twelve-week bowling ball.” She tilted her head back and stared up at him, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. “What if I want to paint it all black?”
“The nursery?”
She nodded.

“You want a goth baby?” Derek said, raising his eyebrows.
She snorted. “Maybe, not a goth baby.”

“I wonder if Hot Topic does baby clothes,” he said. “I've never looked.”

“How on earth do you know what's in Hot Topic?” Meredith said.

“Abby went through a phase,” Derek said. “It used to be the only store where I could find acceptable Christmas gifts for her.”
Meredith frowned. “Abby...”

“Oldest niece,” he clarified.

“Right,” she said, nodding. “Right, that Abby. You take your Christmas shopping pretty seriously.”

“I'm the awesome uncle,” Derek said with a grin. “I have a reputation to uphold, you know.”
Meredith laughed, returning her attention to the lamb, bear, giraffe concoction in front of her.

“Seriously, I think... yellow,” Meredith said definitively. “I hate this bedding, but I like this yellow. How about you?”

“Yellow for the baby's room?” he said.

“Yeah. Pink is...” She made a face of disgust. “It's pink.”

“But it's kind of the traditional color for a girl,” he said.

“But it's pink, Derek. I don't do pink. And yellow works, boy or girl.”

“I thought you were sold on it being a girl.”

“It is a girl, just...” She shrugged. “Yellow works.”

“No pink, no cute. Got it,” Derek said, nodding. He kissed her. “I like yellow. It's very cheery. Like... bananas.”
She stared at him. “Bananas are cheery?”

He nodded. “Bananas are a very happy fruit,” he said. “They're shaped like a smile, aren't they?”

“You're a fruit,” she said, grinning. “A naughty fruit. And I thought you liked indigo.”

“Indigo is my favorite color, but yellow is definitely in my top five.”

She laughed. “Top five, huh?”

He kissed her. “Yes.”

“What are your other three, then?” she said, eyebrows raised.
“I like gray,” he said. “Like your eyes when it's rainy. And I like green. Spruce to be specific. And I do like pink.”

“You like pink,” Meredith said with a disbelieving snort.

He nodded. “Only certain kinds of pink,” he said. He pressed closer to her, into her space. Caught her eyes, unblinking. She backed into the shelf with a thunk, and the fuzzy blanket she'd been looking at lay behind her head, yellow and cheery and forgotten. She licked her lips. He nuzzled her hair. Kissed her temple. Then her lips. “Like here,” he murmured against her soft skin. “Or... other places.”

“Other places,” she murmured.

“Mmm,” he said. The teddy bear mashed into his right hip as she gripped his waist. The feeling of her smaller body flush with his made his breaths tighten. The small swell of her belly pressed against him, and his heart skipped. The smell of lavender intoxicated him. He hadn't felt this overwhelmed by sudden sexual desire in a long time. It hit him like a wave. Washed over him and didn't recede. He nuzzled her, stuck in high tide.

“Derek, we're in a store.”

“Talking paint colors, I know.”

“This is inappropriate,” she hissed, but there was a level of desperation in her tone that told him she wasn't really saying no. “And wrong.” More, she was trying to convince herself she should say no. She kissed him back of her own volition. “And bad.” Her tongue plunged into his mouth. French kissing. All her. “And...” She tasted so good. He let her delve as far as she could go. “You're so...”

“I love you,” he said. A moan twisted in his throat. She felt wonderful against him. Inside him. Wonderful and full of life and all for him.

“That's how you make babies!” said a small, cherubic, informative voice. “You kiss the mommy. The kiss grows in the mommy's belly, and then the mommy goes to the hopsital. They keep the babies there, and she gets one when she trades in the kiss.”

Derek winced as his and Meredith's lips snapped apart. She banged her head on the shelf. He held onto a curse with a burst of willpower that would have made even Cristina Yang kowtow to him if she'd been there. He felt his face turning red.

Meredith pressed the back of her hand to her lips as though she wanted to preserve the taste of him. She stared at him, sexy-eyed and discombobulated, like she didn't know what the hell had hit her. She swallowed. Rosy blush had spread across her skin. Down her throat. Like her skin did when they had sex.

“Really?” said the deeper, scoffing voice of a woman. “There are children here!”

“Did they make the baby, yet?” said the kid. “I don't see it anywhere.”

“Hannah, that's inappropriate!” scolded the woman.

Frustration, sexual and otherwise, licked at Derek's mind like flames. His muscles were stiff with sexual tension and... other things were just as stiff. He shifted. His jeans rustled. He didn't dare back away from Meredith with an audience, especially not such a short one that would be at waist level. He felt like he'd been caught with his hand stuck in a big, shiny cookie jar. Literally stuck, because he couldn't move without causing an even bigger scene.
He dared a glance at their audience. The little girl, who was perhaps five-years-old, looked at them with a combination of curiosity and hilarity. The girl's brown hair was tied up with a cute, pink bow. She looked like a younger version of the older, pregnant woman standing beside her. The little girl giggled. The older brunette woman did not. She glared, holding her daughter's hand.

“Um,” Meredith managed. “We're sorry.”

The older woman rolled her eyes, and she dragged her little girl away by the arm.

“Are you going to get my brother from the hospital soon?” said the little girl as they walked away.

The woman sighed. “Soon,” she said. “After I kill your father for explaining it that way.”

“You can't kill Daddy!”

“Sorry,” Derek called gruffly when he found his voice somewhere deep under a hearty pile of embarrassment, but the woman only snorted as she and her daughter disappeared around the corner. Away from scrutiny, he took a step backward, removing himself from Meredith's space. He shifted miserably. His pants felt... very small, and his body hummed with unfulfilled desire.

“Where did that come from?” Meredith said.

“Clearly a failed sex talk,” Derek grumbled, frowning. “I hope we do better.”

Meredith laughed but sobered quickly. “No, I meant...” She gestured toward him awkwardly. “Where did that come from?”

He shrugged. “It just... did.”

“You haven't done that in...” She swallowed. “Since before. Before you were shot.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. First, it'd been the injuries. He'd hurt, and he hadn't been interested in sex at all. Then, he'd been shackled into inaction by his own self-consciousness. His need for control. He'd wanted her, but he'd been too terrified to take her. Then the Paxil had leched his sexual appetite over time. He could be enticed, but he rarely wanted without at least some encouragement.

Except he'd needed no encouragement just now. He had no idea what had swept over him, but he liked it. The timing had been awful, but in those few moments, when all he'd been thinking about was kissing her because he'd really wanted to kiss her, he'd felt... normal.

Which only brought his attention to how abnormal things had been lately.

He looked at her. Sort of. But he didn't speak. He didn't know what to say.

“I know why you haven't,” she said, touching his shoulder reassuringly. Except that just made him want to kiss her again. His brain had gone topsy-turvy with the conflicting signals of heart versus logic. “I'm just trying to figure out why you did,” she continued. “As in just now. As in...” Her gaze darted below his waistline. He didn't miss the way she bit her lip, or the sudden tension in her frame like she'd become a longing, sexual tripwire. Or the way her gaze slammed upward so fast he thought she might have given herself whiplash. “As in... um,” she managed. She cleared her throat. “Yeah.”

“Do we have to analyze it?” he said uncomfortably, feeling more than a little bad that his unsolicited advances warranted such scrutiny.
She shook her head. “It?” she said, her tone breathless. Almost... dreamy.

Which was not helping his resolve to keep off of her. Not when, despite the no, no, no of the location, her body screamed yes, yes, yes at him from a bullhorn. Worse, he couldn't stop thinking about her naked. Right there in the aisle. Whatever switch the Paxil had flipped off was fucking on tonight.

“Well that,” he grumbled. He shrugged off his rain spattered windbreaker and held it in a crumpled pile in front of himself to better cover that up. “I'm calling that a lucky crap shoot.”

His words seemed to shake her from a stupor. She shook her head. “I'm sorry,” she said. She rested her palms over her navel as if the gesture comforted her. “I really didn't mean to put you on the spot.”

Still not quite willing to meet her eye-to-eye, he stared at the swell highlighted by her hands. “I think it's the way you look right now,” he said, hazarding a guess.

She frowned. “What about the way I look?”

“I like that I can see the baby,” he said. “It's been my replacement thought for so long, and now I don't even have to imagine. I can just look. And it's... I like it.” He swallowed. “I really, really like it. Pregnancy looks good on you.”

“Oh,” she said.

“Sorry,” he said with a heavy sigh. “I didn't mean to make this porny. We can keep looking around.”

She shifted. Bumped his hip playfully with hers. “Hey,” she said. She looked at him, a sly smile crossing her features. “I think not here. But I'm okay with now, now, now.”

He looked up as her meaning sank into him, into all his disappointed, thrumming sinews. “Home, then?” he said, hope encroaching on his tone.

She nodded. “Yes, but I hope you know I'm not going to let you live this down anytime soon.”

“Live what down?”

“You made shopping for baby things porny, Derek,” she said. “That's almost as bad as getting sexy in a grocery store or something.”

“I have never gotten sexy in a grocery store with you,” he said.

“Maybe, not in this universe,” she countered. “But I'm sure there's a porny Derek somewhere who has.”

He grinned sheepishly as they went to the register to buy her bear.

Let's spend the night together

His lady had a craving.

Derek stood in the kitchen in nothing but his fuzzy blue bathrobe, the one Meredith had bought for
him on their first Post-it Christmas, sated and relaxed and smiling. They'd made love, languishing in their bed for over an hour, and... it'd brought him home again. Almost like when she'd announced she was pregnant, he'd forgotten what little had been left of his bad mood. Forgotten his disease. Enjoyed the moments. Been happy in her arms. With her in his arms.

They'd dozed afterward, and as he'd hit that twilight before dreaming, he'd felt...

Replete.


He couldn't stop smiling, because he loved his wife. And he loved his baby. He was alive to love both of them, and life was good. He ached in all the right places from biceps to heart to hamstrings. Good aches. Except he was smiling at the fridge. Smiling at the open fridge, letting out all the cold air.

He shook his head and grabbed the sleeve full of fresh bacon from the shelf. He pulled the jar of mayo from the rack on the door. He tried not to grimace at it. Bacon and mayonnaise. Arterial death on bread. Wonder Bread, she'd specified. Not the wholewheat whole grain crap full of seeds we buy for you. Bacon and mayonnaise and Wonder Bread. He couldn't think of anything more disgusting in this particular moment.

But he forbore.

His lady had a craving, and he'd happily offered to fix her something while she rested upstairs. It was the first time she'd asked him for anything other than his pancakes. And, just like with the cliched pickles and ice cream of his replacement thoughts, he wanted to do right by her. She was carrying his baby. The least he could do was fix her a sandwich, no matter how appalling he found its contents.

He pulled five paper towels away from the roll and laid them on the microwave floor. Then he took four greasy strips of bacon from the sleeve and placed them in a line before he closed the door. She liked her bacon crispy. Not just a little crunch. C-r-i-s-p-y. He put three minutes on the microwave timer. He'd work from there. He hit start.

The strips began to pop and sizzle while he waited. The room filled with the scent of cooking bacon. Samantha arrived in moments. She'd been sleeping in her crate, but now her gaze held an air of carnivorous glee in it. Samantha sat down on the floor by the microwave and stared up at it.

"It's not for you," Derek said, despite the dog's wagging stump-tail.

Meredith walked through the kitchen door with thirty seconds left on the microwave timer. Her feet were bare, her hair mussed and tussled. She wore her red bathrobe, and she looked beautiful. The glow of sex and pregnancy and her general, pleased, relaxed demeanor made her radiant, and he had to kiss her again.

"Hey," he said as he cut her off on the way to the counter to follow his heady kissing impulse. He loved the way her breath caught when his lips met hers. The way her body melded against him in the space between one heartbeat and the next. The feel of her hands on his hips, squeezing. Very, very good at sex, she told him in a million ways without a single word.

"You didn't have to come downstairs," he murmured when he finally pulled away.

"I changed my mind," she said.
“No bacon?” he said.

She slipped past him toward the countertop where he’d placed the mayonnaise and picked it up. “I think I’d rather have a fluffernutter. A real one.”

He couldn't stop his look of horror as the microwave dinged. “A fluffernutter with bacon?”

She giggled. “No, silly.” She put the mayonnaise back into the refrigerator and pulled out an open jar of marshmallow paste. She'd bought it after their Lake Cushman trip, her mind newly reawakened to the possibilities of peanut butter and marshmallows, he supposed. She grinned at him. The sky outside was black, and the way her eyes caught the light in the kitchen made him sigh as his thoughts became laden with old memories.

I'm in love with you. I've been in love with you... forever.

She'd worn a lilac-colored shirt with a gray... thing underneath. Her hair had been down. The wine glasses she'd been cleaning had clinked as she'd put them in the sink. He'd stumbled all over himself, then. Stumbled with his words.

I'm a little late. I know I'm a little late...

But he'd told her how he felt.

“Just a fluffernutter,” she said, pulling him away from his mental trip. “But thank you for making the bacon, anyway.”

She pulled the Wonder Bread from the top of the fridge. The plastic bag crinkled. She walked to the dinette set with the bag, a knife, the jar of marshmallow paste, and a jar of peanut butter from the countertop, all in an awkward bundle. She plunked down in the chair and dropped everything in a pile on the place mat.

Bacon forgotten, he slid into the chair across from her and watched while she made her sandwich. Watched with his usual quiet amazement while she stuffed her face with it. He really didn't understand where she put it, or why her blood tests were always so pristine. If he were to eat like she did, he'd be overweight and minutes from a heart attack, if not already dead.

“You sure you don't want one?” she said around a full mouth, more than half the sandwich already gone.

He nodded, staring at her while he rested his chin on his hands. “I'm sure,” he said softly.

“I swear, it's better with the paste,” she said.

“You're actually advocating that it's better with fake marshmallows than with real ones?” he said.

“Mmm,” she said. She took another huge bite. “Yes.” She grinned at him. “You seem like you're feeling a lot better. You look... good.”

“I am feeling better,” he said.

She waggled her eyebrows. “When I get that feeling, I want sexual healing?”

He laughed. “Minor epiphanies. Sex. I'll take anything I can get.”

She pouted. “But you won't try a real fluffernutter. You won't even give it a chance. You're prejudiced against fake marshmallows! What if they're a magical PTSD cure?”
“I won our bet,” he said haughtily. “I don't need to try them. And I'm pretty sure fake marshmallows won't cure my PTSD.”

“You never know!” she said.

“Admit it,” he teased. “Your woman’s intuition may be suspect.”

“We're still having a girl,” she said.

“Assuming you're right, that’ll put you at a fifty percent average, which is still an F, Mere.”

“Well, you should try a real fluffernutter at least once!”

“You're changing the subject,” he said.

“And you're a frustrating ass!”

“My ass is not frustrated,” he said, grinning.

Her nose scrunched adorably. “Jerk,” she said, the word a curious amalgamation of affection and irritation.

“I just don't like marshmallows,” he countered.

“You love s'mores,” she countered back. “Those have marshmallows.”

“Okay, fine,” he said, conceding her point. “Maybe, it's the peanut butter and marshmallow combination I don't like. Either way, it's gross.”

“It's not gross,” she said. “It's the best. Thing. Ever. And you won't even try it.” She chomped on the last bite of her sandwich as if to prove her point.

He smirked. “Are we really fighting about this?”

She sniffed, though her eyes twinkled. “I'm ashamed by your close-minded marshmallow bigotry,” she said as she chewed. “Everybody should have one real fluffernutter before they die. It's a rite of passage.”

“Oh, it's a rite of passage, now, in addition to a PTSD cure?” he said, incredulous.

She nodded.

“Meredith, I think the only way I'd ever try a real fluffernutter is if I have to lick it off you,” he said.

She stopped chewing. Swallowed. Stared at him for a long, silent moment.

“What?” he said.

She reached for the marshmallow paste. Unscrewed the cap.

“Meredith, what are you doing?” he said. He'd been joking. Honestly joking. Surely, she couldn't...

She did. She dipped her index finger into the paste, and then she drew a white, sticky line on her lips.

“That's not a real fluffernutter,” he said. “That's just the paste.”
“Now, you’re mincing details?” she said.

Fabric rustled as she shrugged away her robe, leaving her sitting naked in front of him. Pregnancy had swollen her breasts. Her nipples perked in the cool air. He’d known her carnally an hour ago. All the delightful details of joining with her roared back into his head. The way she called his name. The way her hands slipped down his spine. The soft, wet, warm way she squeezed around him when he drove to her center again and again and again.

“Um...” he said. “Isn’t Lexie home? I thought...” He didn't really have thoughts.

“She and Alex are both on-call tonight,” Meredith said. “We're all alone.”

“Oh,” he said.

She dipped her fingers in the paste once more. Rubbed it in her cleavage. Over her nipples. She shifted provocatively in the chair. Her robe slipped from her hips to the hardwood floor, leaving nothing to the imagination. She drew her palms down the front of her body in a languorous accentuation of all her beautiful features. Her hands came to a stop over her womb, a subtle swell that had once been flat.

Breaths tightened in his chest as she drew a sticky line around her navel. She spread her legs as she did so. He swallowed at the view.

“I have a new craving, Derek,” she said in a singsong voice.

“Tell me more,” he said.

“You did say you'd eat me if you won.”

He swallowed. “I did.”

“Well,” she said, “you won.”

He stared. “I did, didn't I?”

She stood. Walked confidently around the table to the space in front of him, dragging the marshmallow paste jar with her. The bag of bread and the peanut butter and the knife lay forgotten on her place mat. She stood with her butt against the table, facing him, a mere twelve inches away. He looked up at her. She leaned down and forward, and she kissed him, marshmallow paste and all.

A blast of sweet sugar hit the back of his throat. She made a soft, bleating sound that decimated him. He drank her down, and the paste came away from her lips as he laved her with attention.

“Oh,” he whispered, panting. He scooped his hands underneath her thighs and pulled up. She sat on the table at his behest with a thud, naked and... He kissed her. Naked. His brain mostly stopped at naked. “Maybe, fake marshmallows do taste okay.”

Her fingers tore through his hair. “We can skip the peanut butter then,” she murmured.

“Thank you,” he said.

She arched back, putting her hands behind her for support. The peanut butter jar crashed to the ground, followed by the clatter of the knife. He didn't flinch at the unexpected racket. He was too engrossed with her. She pushed her chest at him. “Taste me,” she said.
He wandered down her throat to her cleavage and licked. Licked a long line from below the place where her ribs fused in the center to the little dip between her clavicles. He sucked each of her nipples with attentive care, removing the sticky marshmallow mess she’d left for him. She moaned. The bread bag slipped off the table and landed in a pile on the seat of the far chair. He licked her navel. Stopped to press his ear against the small swell of her belly. Their baby was in there.

*Maybe, I'm more fertile than the garden of freaking Eden, she'd said. Don't me and my hoo-hoo get any credit?*

The thought made him laugh. He looked up at her and smiled.

“This is why I feel better,” he said. “I like the world when it's only this bubble. Just us three.”

“Me, too,” she said.

“You're beautiful, Meredith,” he said, the words deep and dumbstruck. “I hope you know that.”

She bit her lip, looking at him. “You make me know it,” she said. “Do I taste good?” she said.

His breaths tightened in his chest. “Yes.”

She shifted off one hand. Dipped her fingers in the marshmallow paste. And then she cupped herself. Touched herself between the thighs. Spread her legs wide for him, giving him a glorious, glistening view of his favorite color pink.

“Taste me, then,” she said. Commanded.

He grinned. “Bossy woman.”

*You know you love it,* she said with her eyes, and he agreed with her.

She gazed at him through her eyelashes. Her gray irises sparkled at him in the light.

*I'm in love with you,* he'd said.

“I've been in love with you forever,” he murmured aloud. She lay back on the table. Put her knees up. Rested her feet on the edge of the table. Her toes curled around the edge.

He bent down, pressed his palms gently against her thighs, spreading her as wide as she could go, and he opened his gift with his tongue. The hair at her cleft was coarse, colored light honey-brown like the hair on her head when she didn't dye it. He found her favorite spot in moments. He sucked. The heady taste of marshmallows, and her, and the vague, salty remnants of him mixed in a swirl.

Her muscles tensed. She called out. A nonsensical syllable that, out of context, sounded like a moan of pain, but he knew her well enough to know it wasn't pain. At all.

He tasted her again, and she scrabbled for purchase. For his body. For anything. Her fingers tangled in his hair, and she pulled him into her. Into the warmth that defined her center. He kissed her. Worshiped the confined, slippery, wonderful space he found himself in. His insides tightened more. Every time she cried out. *Music.* That, and the thumps she made as she thrashed on the table for him. All for him. Her short, skipping breaths were drumbeats in his ears. Her words...

“Derek,” she bleated. “Derek, Derek, Derek.”

And it was what he needed to hear.
He drank her body like wine, and she screamed for him.

Good screams.

Moments passed in blissful, stretched succession, slow and fast all at once. He made sure to clean every last bit of the marshmallow from her skin. Drove her to frenzy. Until she lay on the table, legs spread, body shaking, a grimace on her face as she stared, blank and drunk on the pleasure and tension of it.

He breathed her in. The scent of her below. He loved it.

He nuzzled her there, and she twitched.

Well, do you want to stay here a while? she'd said.

I just want my wife.

Is that the top of your list, then? she'd replied with a wink.

When he lay his cheek against her inner thigh and looked up, along the length of her body, at her, he saw the small swell of their baby at her navel. Saw her breasts, perked nipples pointing at the ceiling. Saw her gaze, which had been undone by need. For a moment, awe overwhelmed him. Awe at her trust. Awe at the intimacy. He kissed his favorite pink, and she squirmed, and she moaned, and she spoke his name in a long, dark, twisty way that made his spine tingle with the need to respond to her desires.

He loved it. Loved that he could do that for her. Undo her. Build her world. Help her find euphoria.

He blew softly on her skin, and she twitched. Moaned, long and low.

“Do you like that?” he purred.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, yes.”

He sucked, and her long, low moan became a whine became a pulsing scream as he built her into the stratosphere. And then he pulled away. She flailed while he directed his attention to her thighs instead. To anything but her center. When she relaxed, he returned. He built her again. Higher. And then he let her relax. He took her high to low. High to low. Waxing, waning, like the moon, eclipsed.

You were like coming up for fresh air, he'd said, so long ago.

He lost track of the time because he was lost in the bubble that was her.

It's like I was drowning, and you saved me.

When he let her go at last, her release made her moan. She flailed. The remaining place mats went flying. She needed to hold something. Anything. He pulled her into his arms and let her twitch and pant and eventually ride back to earth. She rested in his arms, naked, half sitting on the table, half collapsed in his arms, her eyelids hanging low over glazed, sated eyes. Her fingers curled around the soft terrycloth of his bathrobe as her breathing relaxed from the endless cascade of tension.

“I think I like fluffernutters if that's your definition of a real one,” he said.

She snorted weakly against him. “Half of one,” she croaked. “That was really... real.”
“Is that what you had in mind?”

She nodded.

“Glad I could oblige,” he said, snickering. He licked his lips, finishing off the last remnants of sugar and her. Derek Shepherd. Damned awesome at sex. “You do taste very good,” he said. “But if that was only half, would that make you the fluffer? Or the nutter?”

She laughed. “There was no peanut butter. I'm definitely not the nutter.”

“There were nuts, but they were spectating,” he said with a leer.

“Yes,” she said with a snort and a gleaming gaze. You are so dirty, she said with her eyes. She slid her hands into his robe. Cupped him with her warm palm. He pressed against her hand. “Yes,” she said, “but... those were definitely not me.”

He kissed her. “Fluffer it is.”

She giggled. “Fluffer is... so...”

“Wrong but right?” he said, his voice a low purr.

“Very,” she said. She kissed him. “Very freaking wrong.”

Still, he was proud. Proud he could do that so well if nothing else. Please her. Beyond their first night together since he'd been shot, when he'd still been in too much pain to be very mobile, and they'd needed to rehearse for sex, no hint of Gary Clark's voice had ever surfaced again during intimate moments. Never made him doubt what he knew. He knew he pleased her when he put his mind to it. He more than pleased her. Finding that sort of confidence, even for such a limited thing; it was... freeing. Maybe, that was why he loved this bubble so much. Beyond the fact that he loved her, and it was fun, and it felt good. He felt like himself again when they made love. Even when the Paxil gave him trouble, he could still give her a great time, and that made him feel... like strutting and bragging.

Made him feel... whole.

Undamaged.

If you could brag about one thing, what would it be? Dr. Wyatt had said.


“What are you thinking?” she said.

He looked at her. “That I love you, and that I'm glad I'm good enough to show you that.”

She gave him a lazy, sated smile and kissed his chest through the terrycloth. “You're more than good, Derek.”

“Damned awesome?” he said.

She nodded. “Oh, yes. It's one of those many things I do love about you.”

“So, yes to sex and comforting. No to fashion-sense and brooding,” he said. “Got it.”
She laughed. And then her gaze grew more serious. She ran her fingers through his hair. “You do
know it's not just about you being good at sex for me. I hope.”

“I know,” he said. “I mean, maybe I don't understand the rest, yet, but...” He nuzzled her. “I know
you. You're not superficial. I know there's more. And I'm just... basking at the moment.”

“Basking,” she said, echoing him.

He nodded. “In my awesomeness.”

She laughed again. Petted him, her palms against the soft terrycloth over his pectorals. He
supposed he could believe her about being funny, too. Not even hesitantly. She laughed so much
when she was happy. He clearly made her happy, if nothing else, and it was hard to feel bleak
when she made lovely noises like that. Her giggle was infectious.

Derek Shepherd. Likes to brood unnecessarily. Has bad fashion-sense. Comforts Meredith really
well. Listens. Is maybe strong. Is damned awesome at sex. Is funny ha-ha, not funny strange.

Sweat had pasted loose strands of hair to her skin. He brushed one out of the way. Rested his cheek
against the top of her head and sighed. “I just wish it would stick when I walk outside,” he said.

She stroked his arm. “Wish what would stick?”

“This feeling that I'm something,” he said. “I feel like something when I'm with you.”

Maybe, it would stick a little this time. He felt... different. Ever since he'd realized she wore
sunglasses, too. He didn't expect a miracle. Didn't expect to love himself overnight or anything, but
he actually had a tiny list of things to like that didn't feel like a blatant lie. Having a real world
example of the same paint-it-black behavior in someone else helped him establish reasonable doubt
with his own self-criticisms.

“You're always something.” she said. She slipped off his lap and stood on wobbly feet, unabashed
by her nakedness. “Always.”

“You are, too, Meredith,” he said. “You're strong, and you're there for me in so many ways I can't
even quantify. I never would have made it this far without your help.” He would never be stingy
with compliments again. Not that he'd ever been stingy, but... he wanted her to know. Maybe, he
could help her take off her sunglasses, too.

Maybe, they could heal together.

She gave him a watery smile. “Ditto,” she said, and he hugged her close, refusing to let himself
argue with her no matter what kind of damning crap Mr. Clark whispered in his head. He loved
her, and now, he had a project. Helping her, too. Another empowering thing that made him feel
good. Telling her nice things because she deserved to hear them. He could do that.

Moments passed, and he didn't let her go. He held her close, terrycloth-to-skin. Breathing. Being.
He found so much peace with her about so many things. For long, stretching silence, he listened to
her breathing, and she listened to his heartbeat, and they were both content. He could listen to her
breathing for hours. A pure, simple sound that told him she was alive and safe.

His.

You're like a piece of me, she'd tried to explain. I can't call you my best friend or my person. Derek,
losing you would be like losing a limb, or...
She's your person. I'm your arm. Got it.

Meredith pressed her nose against the juncture of his throat and chin and kissed him there. He felt the wet press of her tongue. She rose to her tiptoes and kissed his lips, plunging deep. He let her in, and he purred at her invitation.

“Again?” he murmured.

“Mmm-hmm. I'm having another craving,” she said.

“What kind of craving?” he said suggestively.

She looked at him with a heady, hooded gaze, only to giggle as her attention shifted somewhere behind him. He twisted to see what— He laughed, too. Samantha still sat by the microwave. Staring forlornly at it like she expected the bacon to jump out at any moment.

Meredith frowned. “That's...”

“Sad?” Derek said.

Meredith nodded. “We can't have gratuitous, kinky, kitchen sex while our dog is suffering. It isn't fair.”

“I concur,” he said.

Meredith walked to the microwave, and grabbed the uneaten bacon from the greasy, soaked paper towels. Samantha bounced on her hind legs, whining. Meredith dropped the four crunchy pieces into Samantha's empty food bowl.

That done, though, Meredith didn't return to him immediately. He watched as she pulled a familiar jar from the cupboard and then closed the door while the dog inhaled her treat.

“What are you doing?” he said.

Meredith shrugged. “Having a craving,” she said, her tone innocent enough.

“You want me to get fat, don't you?” Derek said, frowning as she came back to him. She clutched the lapels of his bathrobe, and she kissed him. “This is going to require some gym time, but I'll do it,” he murmured against her lips. “I'll make the sacrifice.” He kissed her on the nose. “For you.”

She laughed.

“No,” she said. “This is for me.”

“The Nutella is for you,” he said stupidly.

“It's my turn,” she said. She pressed against him, Nutella jar in hand, and he backed into the table.

He smirked. “What exactly are you planning to do with that?”

“You,” she said, matching his leer with one of her own. “I thought that was obvious.”

She put the Nutella jar on the table by his hip, pressed her palms against his robe, and stroked him waist to shoulder. Then she kissed and kissed and kissed him until he saw spots. He cupped her ass with splayed hands, and on instinct, he growled and tried to spin them around.
“Nope,” she murmured against his lips. “You had your turn.”

“McBossy,” he replied.

She nipped his lower lip, a playful gleam in her eyes. “McSexHypocrite.”

“Touché!”

Her hands slid to the bow tie knot at his waist, where he'd tied the thick belt of the bathrobe he wore. She fumbled blindly with it as she plundered his mouth. She tasted of peanut butter and marshmallows, but with her tongue dueling his, he didn't mind the combination. He felt the terrycloth of his robe sliding against his shoulders and his back and then his hips. He felt cool air against his skin, and the robe pooled on the table behind him, obscuring the Nutella jar from view.

And then she pushed him. Not hard. Enough to catch his undivided attention.

“Lie back,” she commanded.

“You want me on the table?” he said.

“It's more polite to eat at the table,” she replied, and he couldn't help but chuckle.

He squeezed the edge of the table with his fingers and hoisted himself up. A brief, unhappy line of pain lanced down his sternum, but it disappeared as soon as his weight had settled on his robe instead of on his arms. The Nutella jar slid to the side. She moved in front of him. Her waist hit the table edge between his knees. He pressed his knees against her hips. She wrapped her arms around him, and she kissed him, and he kissed her.

“Lie back,” she repeated.

The robe underneath his back let him slide down the length of the table easily. He brought his feet up with him, and she climbed on top after him, coming to rest with her knees beside his hips. He blinked at the overhead light and grinned.

“How do you want me, Derek?”

He remembered lying underneath her by the roaring fire. Remembered the way she’d faux-tied his hands and his legs as a motivator to remain passive. Remembered the way that, even when he'd been helpless, she'd given him choices at every opportunity.
What she'd done for him had worked.

He lay underneath her now, confined, offered no choices at all except to lie still and be loved, and he didn't mind at all.

In fact, he rather looked forward to the possibilities.

She dipped her thumb into the Nutella jar and drew out a glob. The sticky paste slid against his skin. He watched her draw a long line down his chest, covering the ugly, twisting, pink scar of his surgery from view. She dipped down like a swan, her body lithe and arched, and she pressed her lips against the space where he'd been cut in half.

“Mmm,” he said, and his eyes closed.

She spent long, languorous moments there, laving the ugly marks with love.

“You stayed,” she said for emphasis, her voice a low murmur. She pressed her nose against the scarred dip between his pecs, and she kissed him again and again. “You stayed when it would have been easier to go, and you're the strongest person I know. You kept your promise to me.”

Mr. Clark said nothing.

Derek blinked. He was floating. His breaths squeezed into something choppy. He wiped his face with his hands.

Maybe strong.

“Are you okay?” she said.

He nodded. Grunted. “Yeah. I'm okay.”

She kissed him, and he laughed, releasing the swirl of lighter things that had pent up inside of him like a near-bursting balloon.

“Tickles?” she said.

“No,” he said. “I'm just happy. Being with you makes me very happy. You make me happy.”

She looked down at him. Ran her fingers through his hair in a way that made him want to purr. She smiled a wet, watery smile and she said, deep and shaky with feeling, “I'm really glad you're feeling better, Derek. I'm so glad.”

He put a palm against her navel, unable to resist contributing any longer. “And I'm glad you're feeling better,” he said. “And I'm glad you're here.”

She grinned at him. Dipped her thumb into the open Nutella jar and pressed a glob of spread against the space below his left nipple where the bullet had ripped into him. He'd never liked the pock mark there so much as when she pressed her tongue into it. He moaned and arched back, pressing his upper body into her kiss. He looked through hooded eyes at the upside down, nighttime world behind him.

Only to jerk in surprise at the pair of eyeballs that stared back at him with a dreamy, mocha-colored, bacon-bacon-bacon gleam.

“Our dog is staring,” he said.
“So? Just ignore it,” Meredith said. “She always stares.”

“She what?” Derek sat up so fast the table skidded on the floor. The Nutella jar sat by his hip. Meredith almost lost her balance. She grabbed his shoulders. Her nails dug into his skin, and the pain of it made him grit his teeth, but he didn't complain.

“She always stares,” Meredith said calmly.

“She does not,” Derek said.

“She does,” Meredith insisted. “She's a total voyeur.”

Derek ran his fingers through his hair, agitated, and glanced at Samantha. Her stump tail wagged, and she looked... hungry. And that was just... wrong. He felt like the Thanksgiving turkey for real.

“I'm kind of flattered you never noticed,” Meredith said.

“I... really?” Derek said as his world realigned. “She really always stares?”

“Mmm,” said Meredith with a nod. She guided him back onto the table with a light push. “Just ignore it.”

She shifted and, as if to provide emphasis, she cupped him, touching his penis for the second time since they'd started their kitchen adventures. He found himself unable to stop his eyelids from lowering, unable to stop a moan from punching loose as Meredith shifted his weight in her hands. Her skin was so warm, and she knew exactly how he liked it. Exactly what made him come undone. She pulled on him slightly, not painfully, just... enough to create the pleasing sensation he so often found himself drunk on when they had sex. His favorite thing, and she knew it.

“Okay,” he said. Barely. A soft, pleased sigh fell out of him before he could stop it. “Ignoring, now.”

She smiled. “Good,” she said. She swept upward. Ran her fingers through his pubic hair, following the trail as it tapered to a stop at his navel.

He felt bereft. “You could go back down south, you know,” he suggested hopefully. “South would like some attention.”

She leaned down. Kissed him. Laughed. “Well, I'm not done with north yet. South will have to be patient.”


She drew a circle around his nipple with her index finger, tracing the skin softly with her nail. His nipple puckered in response. He sighed.

“Is north getting better, now?” she said.

“Mmm,” he purred. “But when in doubt, Mexico is way nicer than Canada.”

She laughed.


“I love you,” he said.
When she kissed him, he lost himself in it. Lost himself in every touch. Lost himself simply listening to her breathing. When she ran her fingers through his hair, he felt the hairs shift on his scalp in a way that tingled, and he lost himself in that.

She licked a ring of Nutella from around his navel while kissing his hair.

It felt so good.

A deep groan loitered by his Adam’s apple—

Wait.

What?

His eyes snapped open. He turned his head. And there was the damned dog, tongue dangling from her mouth, eyes gleaming as if to say, Dad likes kissing a lot. I like bacon a lot. I kissed Dad. Do I get more bacon, now?

“Go away, Sam,” he said.

Samantha didn't move, and he tensed when he felt Meredith's tongue approach Mexico at a what-should-have-been-tantalizing crawl. Her fingers wrapped around him. She kissed the tip of his penis. His world went off-kilter for a moment.

When he regathered his wits, he barked, “Sam, for god's sake, shoo!”

The dog merely said, “Woof.”

It was really hard to muster any kind of authority with Meredith's tongue invading Mexico.

“Mere, really, the dog—”

Mere lifted her head. “Samantha, crate!” Samantha pouted. Meredith pointed at the dining room. “Crate! Now!”

Samantha left, her feet padding on the floor as she whined dejectedly.

Derek slumped back onto the table with a sigh. “Our dog is a voyeur,” he said. “How did I not know this?”

Meredith laughed. “I think I have a more pressing problem,” she said.

“What's more a pressing problem than the dog licking me during the Mexican invasion?” he said.

“This angle. I don't like it,” she said with a gleam in her eye. “I think I need you standing. I'm used to doing this on my knees.”

He shook his head. “On the table. Off the table. It's like sex on a seesaw,” he said.

She snorted.

He climbed off the table with another fleeting lance of pain that he barely noticed. She guided him, hands on his shoulders, to the edge, almost where he'd been sitting when he'd pleasured her earlier, but she pushed the chair aside. She pulled away his robe from the surface of the table and dropped it onto the floor, presumably to pad her knees.
“Your fluffer,” she said with a mock salute that made him laugh. “Reporting for duty.”

“Why does this feel like it could be a Julia Childs porno?” he quipped.

She giggled. “Did Julia Childs cook with Nutella?”

“No, but crepes are French,” he said. “And she cooked French food.”

“And that has to do with Nutella?”

He snorted. “Nutella goes on crepes. Even I know that. Don't you pay attention to the coffee carts at work?”

She licked her lips lasciviously. “Oh, right. I'll have to have one. Later. At work.” She stared at his body as though it were an unpainted canvas. “Now, shh. I need to concentrate. We haven't done this in a while.”

“We've never done this,” he said, staring down at her.

Her eyes widened. “We have, too! In your office that one time, we—”

“That,” he said, interrupting her, “did not involve Nutella. I would remember Nutella on the nutters, Ms. Fluffer.”

She snorted. “I didn't mean we've done that part before. God, you're dirty today.”

“Today?” he said.

“Okay, maybe, that's also one of the things I love about you,” she said. “People have this mistaken, quaint idea that you're respectable.”


She pushed him away with a sexy gleam in her eye. “Hold still,” she said.

“Only if you promise to be very thorough,” he said. “That shit is sticky.”

“Very thorough,” she agreed. Then she dropped to the ground in front of him with the Nutella jar.

He closed his eyes as the cool air laved his skin. He wasn't erect. Not even a little. Even with the kissing and the dirty jokes and her sitting on top him licking Nutella off his chest. His one dance with the spontaneous function of yore had happened in a damned store, of all the luck. He really hated the Paxil, sometimes.

“Never fear,” Meredith said playfully as if she'd read his mind. “That's why your fluffer is here.”

He laughed, at ease again. Gripped the sides of the table. Leaned his head back and sighed. He loved that she was here. Loved spending time with her, wherever that time happened to lead. Loved her.

_You know you're my best friend, right? _he'd said.

He made a soft grunt when he felt her slide back his foreskin with her fingertips. That was pleasant.
More than pleasant. But the Nutella was cold. And definitely sticky. He tried not to squirm at first while she put it on, only to realize after about twenty seconds, he’d inadvertently started pressing himself against her hand. The rubbing... That felt... nice.


“Really good?” she said.

“Mmm,” he answered. “Yes.”

He felt himself starting to fill.

He forgot about everything, though, when she kissed the head of his penis, setting nerve endings that had been sheathed on fire. Then she licked the underside of his length. He gripped the table. “Oh,” he said, and then he felt her mouth close around him. “Oh,” he said more deeply, a bark more than speech. His eyes opened to stars, and he grinned. And then the stars faded, and he frowned. “Wait.”

“Wait?” she said. He felt her mouth on him. Fought not to press into the motion.

“The dog is back. I can't have gratuitous, kinky, kitchen sex while our dog is watching. It's weird.”

Meredith turned her head. Samantha stared at them with the bacon-bacon-bacon-where's-more-bacon eyes. He cleared his throat awkwardly.

Meredith pointed at the door. “Crate!” she said. “Seriously. I need to blow your dad.”

Derek's eyes widened. “And you think I'm dirty?”

Meredith bit her lip to keep from giggling. “Crate!” she managed in a loud, firm voice despite her scarlet face and trembling limbs. “Go, now!”

Samantha slumped, like her favorite steak squeak toy had been put away, and she wandered out of the room again. Meredith turned back to him. Looked up at him with a sly smile. She rubbed her hands against his inner thighs. “Now, where were we?” she said.

“You tell me,” he said with a wink.

“How about I show you?” she said.

She dipped her head toward him. His eyelids lowered as he felt the wet slide of her mouth on his skin. When she sucked, he lost it. The table groaned against the wood floor as he pushed backward, surprised.

“Fuck,” he said. “That was...” He'd forgotten. He'd forgotten what this felt like; it'd been so long since he'd allowed her to do it. Sitting wetly sheathed inside her body felt like coming home. Felt beautiful and perfect and all sorts of euphoric, and he would never, could never, replace that feeling with anything. But it had never sucked.

He laughed.

Her mouth left him. Cool air snapped at his skin. “What's funny?” she said, looking up at him.

He glanced down. His partial erection looked a bit like a banana she'd greased up with Nutella to eat, though it was a partial erection, so the banana wasn't smiling yet. It was frowning. Kind of pointing toward the doorjamb, actually. That wasn't good. And he laughed again.
“I'm sorry,” he said. And he laughed again. “I'm sorry. My head is going weird places.”

“Weird good?” she said.

“Well, let's see,” he said. “I just thought a joke about you sucking. And now I'm comparing my own erection to fruit.”

Her eyes gleamed. She kissed his head, and he tensed as the zing of pleasure twisted through him. “What fruit?” she said. She licked.

“A sad banana.”

She giggled. “You have lots to say about bananas, today,” she said.

“What can I say?” Derek said. “It's a phallic fruit. Very vulnerable to raunchy humor.”

“Only because your dirty, dirty mind goes there,” she said. And then she shook her head. “And your fluffer is not doing a good job if your banana is sad.”

“It'll be happy in a minute if you keep doing that,” he said. Barely.

“It does look a little like a banana,” she said. “A banana covered in Nutella.”

“See!” he said, and they both laughed. And then he huffed. “Wait. A little?”

“In similarity,” she clarified, kissing him. “Not in size.”

“Okay, then,” he said, appeased.

“This is much, much more tasty than a banana, though,” she replied. And then she enveloped him once more, and a wet sound filled the air between them.

The air punched from his chest in a sharp grunt. His body wouldn't let him inhale as the sensation took him almost out of his own body. His toes curled. His lower lip quivered and his face pulled into a grimace. It felt good. It felt good. It felt— her tongue did something delightful and the air rushed back into him so quickly he felt dizzy.

“Mere,” he said. “Mere. Meredith. Mered...” He was lost in useless babble.

And then she stopped again. “I'd say the banana is very happy, now,” she said, though his ears buzzed, and it took him a while to interpret her. He glanced down, panting. That was definitely a smile. An upward, rock-solid curve that told him he was full to the brim.

She had Nutella on her lips. Her skin blushed with the promise of sex. He blinked. Once. Twice. She licked his corona. His jaw fell open, but his moan got stuck in his throat. It'd been a long, long time since he'd had this level of attention down there, and he could barely keep his thoughts straight. The only way he stayed on his feet was by keeping his knees locked.

He panted.

“Feels good?” she murmured during a tactical pause.

He nodded, panting, but he didn't have a chance to speak before she'd taken his full length into her throat to the hilt. “Holy fuck,” he managed, unable to stop himself from thrusting. Thrusting deeper. She gripped his hips to steady herself, and he fought not to get his fingers tangled in her hair. He heard the wet, slick sound of skin on skin. Sliding.
He thought he might die in the best way imaginable.

*You're like a lightning strike.*

He scrabbled for purchase. The light over the table split in two as his eyes lost focus. And then she was gone from him again, and he was cold as what she'd left behind evaporated. He couldn't find words for a moment.

She wiped her lips and looked at him with a sly smile. “Forgot I could do that?”

“My memory,” he said between short, panting breaths. “May have. Omitted it. I blame. The hypovolemic. Shock.”

“I learned in college,” she said.

“In what. The fuck. Class?” he said.

“French cooking?”

He barked with laughter, only to lose it when she kissed his head, and his thoughts dissolved all over again.

“I missed some spots, earlier,” she announced while his mind was still reeling. He shivered. She shifted. And she licked his scrotum instead.

She'd *never* done that before.

“They taught tea-bagging in French cooking, too?” he said incredulously, unable to stop the moan that punctuated the question.

She paused. “They might have taught tea-bagging.”

“Our daughter is *never* going to Dartmouth,” he said.

She giggled. “Got it all, I think.”

She gave him a kiss and a last lick for good measure. She enveloped him to the hilt once more, and he shouted. He couldn't stop himself. His insides tightened to an unbearable level, paradigmatic of torture, yet also pleasure. Pressure gathered in his center.

“Meredith,” he said, panting. “Meredith, I'm going to—” He tried to push at her despite the fireworks in his vision, but she kept slip sliding along his hard length, sucking. “Meredith, I'm going—”

And then it was too late. He pulled in a breath as though it were a riptide. He remained stuck on the precipice for an eternity moment. The world collapsed into a pinpoint and then exploded into a whorl of light, a single, brilliant star gone nova. He shouted. His muscles twitched out of control. He spilled into her. She squeezed his hips, her fingers like talons against his skin, and she drank it all. Every last drop.

When the explosion left him, he collapsed his weight against the table. His knees shook. She let him go, licking the underside of his length as she withdrew. His erection sagged and left him spent. He panted as she rose to her feet.

“Wasn't that salty?” he said, incredulous and hoarse. She hadn't done *that* before, either.
She licked her lips. “I hear salt goes with nuts.”

He grunted. Sort of a laugh. “I feel like I should make a spit or swallow joke, but my head is empty right now.”

“Literally,” she said. She leaned over him and kissed his flaccid privates.

“Not that head,” he said, snickering. “I think you're taking home the dirty prize tonight,” he said. “I can't win against that.”

She'd always been a bit more... experimental than him. He happily went along for the ride when she took him, but most of the more unusual things they'd tried were at her behest. Well, other than the glow-in-the-dark condoms, which he still found novel and funny.

_They glowed, Derek, she'd said. In the dark. They made sex look like a freaking UFO encounter._

She hummed a soft tune in her throat.

A chuckle ratcheted out of his sore throat when he realized it was the Batman theme from the horrible Biff-Pow-Thwack Adam West version that had been popular when he'd been a kid. “That song is by the Kinks, you know.”

She nodded. “So appropriate, isn't it?”

“Does this mean I should call you Fluffergirl from now on?”

Her eyes sparkled. “I fluffed, and I fluffed, and I blew your house down.”

“Now,” he said, kissing her on the lips, “you're mixing naughty stories. And double entendres.”

She sighed, leaning against the table next to him. They were both sweat-slicked and smelled of sex. She kissed his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her. Pulled her close.

“This is why I love you, Derek,” she said softly. “You're fun to be with, and you happily go along with my freak show.”

“It's not a freak show,” he said. “And you're not a freak.”

_You're the love of my life, he'd said, and I'm really looking forward to spending my future with you._

She shrugged. “Well, whatever it is, you go along with it. And you don't judge me. And I just...” She kissed him. “I just love you. Okay?”

He met her eyes. In this moment, he could believe anything. She could sell him a bridge. A fake bridge that went to Neverland. He'd buy it, no questions asked.

“I'll try to remember,” he said. “You might have to keep telling me for a while.”

“I don't mind,” she said.

He nuzzled her. “I love you, too,” he said. “Very much.” He shifted uncomfortably. “Except I think I'm still sticky.”

“Me, too,” she said. She grinned at him. “Sex in the shower, next?”

He nodded. “Good plan.”
“Bendy thing?” she said.

“If you insist,” Derek replied with a wink.

“Oh. My. God,” said Lexie, her eyes wide like saucers as she stood in the kitchen doorway.

Derek snatched for his robe from the table behind them, only to remember it was lying on the floor at their feet as a pad for Meredith’s knees. Meredith leaped in front of him, grabbing his shoulder for balance as she stumbled. He crossed his palms in front of his lower body, despite already having Meredith as a shield, but from the look on Lexie’s face, it was too late for modesty, anyway. Lexie had clearly gotten an eyeful, from the tips of his toes to the scarred mess on his chest to Meredith's little baby bump.

“Again?” Lexie said as she turned redder than Rudolph’s nose. “Seriously, again!? You'd better wash that table with Pine-Sol. And bleach. And more Pine-Sol.” She darted out of the room. “And get a freaking room!” she called through the door as it slammed. And then she was gone.

Derek glared at the door. He really, really hated that. Hated people barging in. Hated people seeing him with his shirt off since the shooting, let alone buck naked. The day they moved into their new house could not arrive soon enough.

“The kitchen is totally a room,” Meredith said at the closed door.

“I thought you said she was working tonight,” he said, his tone rueful.

Meredith bit her lip and gave him a guilty look. “She told me she was working tonight!”

He sighed. There wasn't much they could do about it, now. “It's okay,” he said. He took her palm from his shoulder and kissed her hand to prove it. She smiled.

Meredith bent to pick up his robe from the floor. “You know what else I love about you?”

“What?” he said.

“That you somehow haven't stashed her body in the woods, yet.”

He laughed hoarsely. “Batman doesn't kill people. At least not for failing to knock, anyway.”

Meredith raised her eyebrows. “Does Fluffergirl?”

He laughed again as they put on their robes and headed to the shower.
“Audrey,” Derek said as he watched a ferryboat glide across the water. The sky was lit with strands of pink and rose and mauve as the sun melted into the horizon line behind puffy walls of clouds.

Meredith shook her head and flipped the page of the book they held between them. “How about Beverly?”

They sat curled in each other’s arms on the passenger side of Meredith's Jeep—a tight fit, but a fit nonetheless. She’d parked in their spot next to the bay under a lone tree, which waved in the chilly breeze. A towel covered the drivers’ side seat, where they’d put out sandwiches, and in the back seat rested stacks and stacks of baby name books, all of which Derek had gleefully ordered.

“Beverly is pretty,” Derek said as he mulled over the name. “Beverly Grey-Shepherd.”

“Or Shepherd-Grey,” Meredith said.

“We need to flip a coin on that at some point,” he said.

Meredith nodded as she glanced at the page. Derek watched her lithe finger trace the words beneath her fingertips. “The book says Beverly is Old English for beaver stream,” she said.

“Oh.”

She snickered. “Not a big fan of beavers, Mr. Nature?”

“Hey, I like beavers,” he said. “Just not as a connotation for our daughter's name.” He flipped the page. “Do you like Caitlin?”

“Cassidy,” Meredith countered.

He frowned. “Colette?”

She laughed. “That reminds me of your Fraunch. We can't do that, or I'll giggle every time I have to say her name.” She flipped the page. “Sybil. With an S.”

Derek blinked and looked down at the book, which was still resting on one of the later C pages. He saw Cybil, with Cybill and Sybil listed as common variants. “Sybil?” he said.

Meredith nodded. “Yeah. I like Sybil. Do you?”

“I do,” Derek said, “But—”

“It just rolls off the tongue for some reason,” Meredith said. She looked down at the page. “And it means prophetess or oracle. That’s pretty neat. And it's not giant rodent-y.”

“Veto,” Derek said.

The seat cushion squeaked as she pushed back to look at him. “But you just said you liked it!”

“I do, but my last name makes it pretty silly.”

“Sybil Shepherd sounds great. It flows.”
“Yes, Meredith, and you can catch her on Moonlighting reruns.”

Meredith looked at him blankly. Another ferryboat glided past on the gray water beyond the windshield.

“The actress?” he prodded. “Cybill Shepherd? Star of Moonlighting? We can't name our daughter after a celebrity.” When she didn't respond, he sighed. “You're making me feel really old right now, Mere.”


“Only vaguely?” he said.

She gave him a small nod. “Vaguely.”

“I think you're teasing me,” Derek said.

Her eyes gleamed, and her nose crinkled like she was seriously considering laughing, but she didn't reply to his accusation. “So, I guess we're still thinking Anne for a girl?”

“Subject change,” he accused with a smirk.

“Returning to the subject,” she fired back.

He snorted. “Fine. Yes. Anne. But we have a lot of books we haven't read yet.”

“I feel like we've read thousands of names already,” she grumbled.

He pulled her tightly against him and slid his palm down her arm. The book slid off their laps to the floor with a thunk. The warmth of her body felt good in the quickly cooling car. Her closeness felt even better. He pushed his nose against her hair and kissed her once more.

“We could take a break, then,” he murmured.

“But we haven't even started looking at boys' names,” she said.

Derek nodded. “We still have more than five months.”

“We could have Dr. Charlton tell us the sex, soon,” Meredith said. “Then we'd know what to spend time on.”

Derek frowned. “I think I'd rather be surprised.”

“You would?” Meredith said.

He nodded.

“Why?” she said.

“I don't know…” He shrugged. “Just…” He looked at her. “It feels right. To let the universe surprise us. Do you not want to be surprised?”

She scrunched her nose. “When I think of surprises, I think... Alzheimer’s and secret wives and miscarriages and guns.”
“All the more reason to let this be a surprise,” Derek said.

“What makes you say that?”

He smiled. “Because whatever the outcome, it'll be a really.” He kissed her. “Great.” Kissed her again. “Surprise.” Again. “And you clearly need some faith restoration.”

She looked up at him, eyes twinkling.

“What?” he said.

She sighed against him, snuggled closer, and wrapped her left arm over his stomach. Her fingertips scrunched his shirt between them, and she kissed his chest. “It's just nice to see Mr. Optimism again,” she said.

“He really likes to be here when he can be,” Derek said softly.

“Good,” she said.

Instead of reading more names, they spent time watching the ferryboats, wrapped up in each others arms. The sun waved its final surrender to nightfall soon after. The Seattle skyline reflected like twinkling fireflies in the dark water.

The undercover police officer who'd been shot had lived, Derek had discovered when he'd returned to work for the second time. The man, named Adam Peabody, a sergeant, had needed three major surgeries and four subsequent smaller surgeries to repair the damage of four bullets. His intestinal tract and bladder were in shambles. He hadn't woken up and still wasn't breathing on his own, even weeks later.

But he'd lived.

And he had brain activity.

He just... wasn't waking up.

“So, we're still thinking about Anne for a girl, but that's not set in stone,” Derek said. “And we're stuck on boys' names. Maybe, Michael after my dad, but...” Derek sighed. The name made him balk. Remembering his dad in any capacity still felt like a raw wound, sometimes. Not always. But sometimes. “I don't know if I'm ready for that.”

Adam didn't respond. Nothing responded except quiet, steady beeping, and the rhythmic pulse of air being forcibly moved. Derek dropped his hands to his lap, and he leaned forward to watch his unconscious companion.

Maybe Adam,” Derek said, only to freeze when he thought he saw the unconscious man twitch at the sound of his name. “I like Adam,” Derek continued purposefully. Another small twitch. Derek glanced at Adam's heart monitor, but nothing had changed. “Adam Shepherd-Grey sounds good. Or Adam Grey-Shepherd.” He sighed ruefully. “We might be flipping a coin on the last name. I want her to put Grey first, and she wants to put Shepherd first, and we're kind of at a stalemate.”

Derek stopped to stare at his silent companion. He hadn't seen any additional movement after the first two twitches.

“Adam, are you awake?” Derek asked.
The man didn't respond or move. The monitors didn't change.

“Can you hear me, Adam?”

Nothing, again.

Derek rubbed his nose with his thumb and forefinger. That was it, then. He'd been doing charts for so long, he'd started to see things. He shifted. A pile of post-op charts slid off his thighs to the sofa cushion beside him. He'd offered to chart for Meredith, who'd taken him up on his offer with such a thankful look, he couldn't regret the work. He had to look over all the work her interns had done to make sure they'd followed proper procedures. Had to double check every dosage and confirm every diagnosis. Then he signed off on them for her. She handed him her new charts in the mornings, and he had them done for her by the afternoon. He selectively offered to do Dr. Bailey's, Mark's, and Richard's charting when he felt up to it, but charting for too long was exhausting, just like too much heavy reading, or too much math, or too much of anything that required intense thought. There was a reason doctors hated it, and he didn't miss having his own charting to do.

The room, other than the whir of the ventilator, was quiet. Still. Adam Peabody had visitors occasionally. His squad members visited once a week on Fridays, and his partner visited every Tuesday. Other than that, though, he didn't seem to have anyone. No kids. No significant other. No siblings. No parents. No family whatsoever. And that made Derek a little sad.

Family was what made tragedy like this the least bit tolerable. He couldn't imagine going through something like this alone. He couldn't imagine what his first few days after his surgery would have been like if Meredith hadn't been there. If his family hadn't come to keep his mind off of things.

Derek leaned back against the sofa. It creaked.

When Derek looked at Adam, Derek saw himself. Or what Meredith must have seen after the shooting. A pasty, sick man swathed in bandages, blankets, and wires. He saw jagged memories of tan-colored work boots with bloody shoelaces like spaghetti with his mind's eye. A spinning gun on the floor. A myriad of bad things. But the more Derek visited, the less visceral all the conjured images seemed. The less sickening.

Until he could be here, now, weeks later. As a friend for someone who didn't seem to have anybody.

Derek glanced at his watch. He'd been sitting here for two hours, and he was due in OR 12 in ten minutes. “Tomorrow, same time?” he said as he gathered up all the charts that had spilled off his lap and rose from the sofa.

He approached the man's bed. Gripped the railing with his free hand. Looked down.

Adam had greasy black hair that went past his shoulders and a swath of stubble. A snake tattoo wrapped around the man's arm from wrist to bicep. What once had been a muscular frame had wasted to skin and bones and not much more.

Derek remembered vaguely that when Adam had been brought in that he'd been clean-shaven. One of the most trying things about a hospital stay was feeling like you were slowly losing your humanity. The night Meredith had helped Derek take his first real shower, helped him shave and brush his teeth...

“I'll bring a razor for you tomorrow,” Derek said. “Okay?”

Adam didn't answer, not that Derek expected it.
“Oh, you found another Really Old Guy!” said a familiar voice, and Derek bristled as he looked up. Cristina bounded through the doorway with a lunch tray and sprawled across the sofa Derek had vacated moments earlier. “Dibs on the sofa,” Cristina said.

Derek glared. “He's forty-six, Cristina.”

“What's your point?” She tipped her head to the comatose man for emphasis. “That's old.”

“Don't sit in here,” he said.

Cristina pulled open a bag of chips, and the pop-hiss of an opening soda can filled the room. She crossed her legs and popped a potato chip into her mouth. “Why not?”

“It's not a room for you to sit in,” Derek said.

“You were sitting in it.”

“I'm standing.”

“The sofa cushion is warm, so you were sitting at one point,” Cristina countered.

“Because he needs company.”

Cristina raised her eyebrows. “I'm not company?”

“Not the kind he needs.”

“What kind am I?” Cristina said.

Derek glowered. “The kind who calls him Really Old Guy.”

“How about Comatose Guy?” Cristina said. “Is that better?

“Cristina—”

“Borked Guy?” she offered.

“Cristina, he was shot, okay? Just like me,” Derek snapped. “And if I was lying in a hospital somewhere on a ventilator, I'm pretty sure I'd rather not be called Borked Guy. Have a heart, for Christ's sake.”

She stared at Derek for a long, long moment, her expression unreadable. “Fine,” she said. Her gaze drifted to the chart resting in the holder at the foot of the man's bed. She leaned forward. Squinted. “I'll call him Mr. Peabody.”

“Sergeant,” he said.

She sighed. “Sergeant Peabody,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“It's a start,” he said. He glanced at his watch and turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Cristina said.

He glanced pointedly at the unwieldy bundle in his hands. “I'm done with my charting.”

“Meredith's charting.”
“Which I offered to do for her, so it's my charting,” he countered.

“Right,” she said. She popped another chip into her mouth and crunched on it. “When exactly are you going to cut again?”

“When I'm ready,” he said.

“And when is that?” she said.

“Not now.”

“Obviously,” she said. “So, when?”

“When I don't think I'll kill someone,” he said.

She took a sip of soda. “Don't you think you're just wallowing at this point?”

He frowned. “I'm not wallowing.”

“You were hiding in a hospital room with a borked guy doing somebody else's charts.”

“He's not borked, Cristina.”

“Whatever,” she said, her tone blasé. “It seems like you're wallowing to me.”

“I'm working on it.”

“Working on wallowing,” she said.

“On cutting!”

She frowned at him as she crunched on a chip and swallowed. “Just don't let it be another motorcycle... thing, okay?”

He snorted. “Because I've been looking forward to having you drag me against my will into an OR and chain me to the scalpel tray.”

“The motorcycle wasn't against your will, McDreamy!” Cristina said.

“I've asked you not to call me that,” he said, almost a growl.

She gave him a defiant glare. “I don't call you that when you're being reasonable.”

He almost snapped at her. Almost. He could hear Gary Clark telling him to lose his temper. Taunting him. Instead, Derek took a breath, and he let it out. He took another, and he let that out.

He wasn't going to let himself unleash his temper at hapless bystanders anymore, he'd decided earlier that week with Dr. Wyatt. That was one of the things he wanted to fix about himself. One of the things that had been persistently wrong, both before and post-shooting. Exacerbated by, but not caused by, PTSD. His terrible temper.

He counted to five in his head.

Usually, that was all he found he needed. The presence of mind to hold back on a comment long enough to count to five. Long enough for his common sense to catch up with the situation.

“Touché,” he said, the word soft, though he tried to inject some humor into it with what Meredith
liked to call his lady-killer wink. From Cristina's steely gaze, the lady-killer aspect of the wink was entirely lost, but he called this instance a victory, anyway.

“I'll see you tomorrow, Adam,” he added. The man on the bed seemed to perk up at the sound of his name, and Derek stared. “Did you see that?” he said to Cristina.

“I saw the dopey wink,” Cristina replied blandly. “With that sort of context, the story of you and Meredith ending up in the sack after meeting at Joe's makes even less sense.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “I think something's wrong with you,” he said, enjoying the brief flash of good humor he'd found. “You're the only woman I've met who's impervious to the wink.”

Cristina snorted and stuffed a chip in her mouth. “What about Ellis?”

“One of two,” he corrected, and he left the room smiling.

He dropped off Meredith's charts at the nursing station and stepped into the elevator moments later with a crowd of doctors, nurses, and other staff. He pressed himself into the back left corner as the elevator began to drop. So many people pressed against him made his smile melt away, and he felt almost itchy with the desire to get out of the small space, but two floors later, the elevator doors opened, bodies shifted, and all he was left with was April Kepner huddled in the opposite corner, her nose stuffed in a little spiral notebook like she was trying to hide. The doors slid shut, and the elevator continued its descent.

He swallowed. As far as he knew, she hadn't reported him to HR or to Richard or to anybody. He had no idea if she was waiting, gathering courage, or if she truly intended not to do anything about what he'd done. He'd sincerely said that he was sorry. There wasn't much else he could do. He'd made his bed. All he could do was lie in it, though not really knowing what his fate was to be, let alone knowing he had no control of it anymore, was maddening.

He glanced at Dr. Kepner out of the corner of his eye, only to discover her glancing back at him in the same, sidelong, surreptitious way. He broke his gaze immediately and stared at the floor. Eye contact meant likely conversation, and he didn't want that. He'd sincerely said he was sorry, but that didn't mean he forgave her for getting him shot. Or that he wanted anything to do with her. Or that trying to be near her didn't make his chest tighten with... something bad. Something boiling. Something he didn't want to let out.

When the elevator doors slid open on his floor, he stepped forward, unable to stop his audible sigh of relief.

“Dr. Kepner,” he said gruffly to be polite.

“Dr. Shepherd,” he heard muttered behind him in response.

And then the doors slid shut again, leaving him in the cool, refreshing open space of the hallway, and Dr. Kepner heading down to another floor. His shoulders slumped in relief, and he took a moment to breathe and relax.

He glanced at his watch. He was a little late, but not so late that he'd missed his opportunity.

But, now, he had a whole new obstacle to deal with.

The operating room.
He walked through the staff-only sliding doors into the surgical wing. Bustling staff cast incurious glances at him, just as they would any other surgeon passing through. Some of the scrub nurses seemed mildly interested in his presence, but he expected that given the events of the last few weeks. Some people bumped into him—not on purpose—and they didn't act like the collision was the Armageddon in the making. He didn't get the feel of eggshells cracking around him. Nobody tiptoed or gave him a disproportionately wide berth.

The result of such treatment was an odd dichotomy. The collisions and the close proximity to so many unknowns made him feel antsy. Uncomfortable. But the discordant thrumming of his nerves made a tolerable hum that he could hear, but to which he didn't need to listen. It stayed in the back of his awareness like the hush of an air conditioner, or individual voices in a bedlam. There was always the danger that something would tip him into fixation on that discordance, and then into panic, but he'd learned a lot of ways to keep that from happening, both preventive and reactive, and he felt better.

Better about being there than he had in a long time.

Darlene, one of the head scrub nurses waved at him as she passed, and he waved back at her. She winked at him knowingly. “Good to see you,” she said, and from warmth in her tone, the way her smile reached her eyes, she genuinely meant it.

“Dr. Shepherd,” Darlene said in her soft, soprano voice, “Is there anything I can help you with?”

He jerked his gaze away from the window in the door to OR 12, surprised at the intrusion, to look at the nurse. He’d been slinking through the surgical wing, peeking at surgeries in progress, trying to remember how to be excited about being a surgeon and saving lives, rather than full of dread. After two weeks of slinking with no interference, he’d gotten used to being pointedly ignored.

He felt his face heat. “I’m sorry. Am... am I in your way?”

She cocked her head at him like he'd spoken Greek. He wanted to melt away, but then her gaze softened. She put her hand on his shoulder. Though he knew her as a colleague, had never had a single problem with her, the unexpected touch made him tense. He couldn't help that part, but at least he didn't jump. She pulled away, but not in a scalded way that told him she was nervous about his reaction. In a slow, deliberate way that told him she was more concerned with his comfort than whether he would fall apart on her. Another subtle sign that told him he was getting better at faking normal, even if he didn't quite feel normal. A small success that made the moment less sharp.

“You're not in my way,” she said. “But you've been looking in doorways for days, now, and I can't help but think of myself when I'm shopping.”

“Shopping?” he echoed, not sure how something so disparate connected with his current situation.

She nodded. “When I can't find what I want, sometimes I need to find a little courage to ask a salesperson where something is. It's always been a quirk of mine. My daughter thinks it's silly. She always rolls her eyes at me.”

“Oh,” he said. He licked his lips and looked at the floor.

“So,” she said warmly, “can I help you with anything?”

“Well, I...” he blurted, and then the words stuck in his throat. This was ridiculous. A surgeon afraid to ask for an OR. He shuffled from foot to foot. Swallowed. “Would it be possible...?” And
the words stuck again.

Darlene waited. Didn't put words in his mouth.

“Stuttering fool,” Mr. Clark said like a snake in Derek's head, and Derek closed his eyes for a long moment. He tried to think. If Meredith, queen of verbal blunders, was having trouble saying what she wanted to say, he always waited. He never thought she was silly or stupid for it. He had plenty of patients who stuttered or suffered from some form of aphasia. He never ridiculed them for it. They were sick, and that was all.

He took a calming breath, ignored Mr. Clark, and tried again. “I’d like some OR time,” Derek said. “No pressure OR time. I need...” He shook his head. “Could I arrange that?”

Darlene's patient expression slipped into a wide, warm smile. “We've been wondering when you would ask.”

He blinked. “We?”

“The scrub nurses. We didn't want to push you, so we left you alone.”

“Oh,” he said. “I'm... okay. Well, bet— better.”

Darlene nodded. “How about I page you whenever we have an OR free, and you can slip in for a while to practice?”

He swallowed against the sudden, overwhelming lump in his throat. “That'd be really great,” he managed. “Thank you.”

He'd gotten used to the eggshells. To people avoiding him, thinking he was lit dynamite. To whispered gossip nobody thought he could hear, wondering why he'd become so soft-spoken and jittery and short-tempered, speculating why he wasn't operating. That moment with Darlene had been his first time back at Seattle Grace since the shooting where he hadn't felt like he was an experiment stuck in a fishbowl for people to gawk at.

That feeling had stuck around.

He was in the surgical wing, and he was starting to feel at home again, at least in the hallways.

A hesitant smile tugged at his lips. Crinkled his eyes. He took a soft, relieved breath.

Good to see you, Darlene had just said.

“Likewise,” he replied, the word barely audible, but spoken, nonetheless, and not a lie.

The auburn-haired scrub nurse gave him a nod as she passed.

Seattle Grace had a dozen operating rooms. Most of them got used at least once per day. He walked to the last one on the right and stared through the wire mesh window. The room beyond the doorway was dark. Devoid of people.

OR 12 wasn't the same operating room where he'd had his surgery, but it had the same layout. The same kind of bright, glaring lights. The same equipment and the same shining, sterile scalpels, all arrayed with cold, clinical precision on a metal tray by the empty table. The room had the same everything but location.

He opened the door, but only to hit the light switch. He went back out into the hallway to the scrub
room. And then he stopped. Put his hand into his pocket. He felt the crumpled-but-soft piece of cloth with his palm and pulled it loose.

His ferryboat scrub cap.

He took a short breath as he stared at it.

Something inside his chest felt... bigger.

Almost too big.

He hadn't worn this cap in over a year. Hadn't worn any cap in over five months.

His ferryboat cap had frayed in places and was beginning to fall apart at the seams from going through the washing machine one too many times. He'd tried to order another one just like it, but the pattern had been discontinued. He'd retired the cap from service, opting to save it only for very special occasions. It'd become his “lucky” cap, as Meredith had termed it.

His fingers clenched.

He needed to stop stalling. He put the cap on quickly and shoved through the door to the sinks. He grabbed a sterile mask from the dispenser, and he tied it over his face, and then he went through the long ritual of washing his hands. The sponge and the harsh soap tingled, and his breaths tightened the longer he spent washing himself. His teeth clenched as he snapped on a sterile pair of blue nitrile gloves. He shivered. His throat felt full. But he didn't hit a brick wall until he walked inside the main body of the operating room.

The bright overhead lights bore down on him like an oncoming train, and everything mushed together.

He remembered some of it. Not all of it, but some of it.

*It'll be over soon,* Meredith had whispered while he'd struggled for breath. *I love you.*

She'd held his hand, and he'd wanted to say it back, but his lips hadn't cooperated. His throat and tongue hadn't worked. He'd felt woozy and sick and cold, and he'd been there, but he hadn't been there. He'd been floating intermittently outside of his own ravaged body in a stupor.

He hadn't been in control of anything.

Derek backed into the wall with a thud and closed his eyes, shutting out the glare that always triggered upsetting memories. He breathed in. He breathed out. Rhythmically to the count of three.

He needed a replacement thought. Badly.

He needed a—

“Meredith,” Derek said jubilantly as he bounded into the backyard with Samantha bouncing at his heels. “Meredith, you have to see this.”

A half-naked deciduous tree covered sparsely with yellow and orange leaves creaked and swayed in the breeze. Derek looked with chagrin at the leaf-filled lawn. He'd need to get the leaf-blower and the rakes out of the shed, soon, but he lost that thought as his gaze found Meredith. Samantha barked happily, as if she'd sensed the way his mood brightened whenever he looked at his wife.

*Meredith lay almost flat on one of the lawn chairs outside. Their day off together was a sunny one,*
and despite the cool air, she'd gone out to soak up some of the rays. She'd stretched out under a blanket with a book, and he'd left her alone to relax. Except at this point, the book lay face down on the leafy, damp ground, and she was on her side, wiping drool away with the back of her palm.

“What?” she said as she squinted up at him.

“I'm sorry, Mere,” he said, tamping his voice to a more reasonable level. “I didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep.”

She wiped her eyes. “It's too late. I'm up. What is it?”

“You're sure?” he said, concerned, as he walked over to her. Samantha plodded behind him.

“I'm sure,” she said as she sat up. She licked her lips and sniffed. Her hair stuck up in all directions, and her cheek had a dent from the chair carved into it.

He leaned down, kissed the mark on her skin, and helped her stand. Her rumpled shirt fell back into place, framing the gentle swell of her lower body. Once she'd started showing, she'd really started showing. At fifteen weeks, she looked a bit like she'd found her bowling ball, albeit a tiny one, perhaps the kind for duckpins. He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“I think you'll like this, at least,” he said apologetically. “It might be worth the napus interruptus.”

She snorted as she rubbed her eyes again. “Napus interruptus?”

He grinned, and she rolled her eyes. Your sense of humor is unbelievably cheesy, he could hear her saying, though she didn't speak. The three of them walked inside, where she looked at him expectantly. “Well?”

He nodded. “I taught Samantha a new trick.”

“Is that what you've been doing all day?”

He nodded again. “It kept me out of your hair, didn't it?”

“Until the napus interruptus,” she replied wryly.

He grinned. “This one's for you. I taught it to her specifically with you in mind.”

Meredith raised her eyebrows. “What is it?”

He looked down at their dog, who peered at him expectantly with her mocha-colored eyes. He'd been working with her for hours today, and a little bit each day earlier that week, and it'd given him a real thrill the first time she'd done the trick perfectly. He'd had her do it three more times, just to be sure she understood the command, and she'd done it right every time.

“Ready to show Mom what you learned?” Derek said.

Samantha glanced at Meredith and then back at Derek. Her little docked tail wagged as though she were excited.

“Samantha, lights!” he said.

Samantha yapped at him and bounded for the kitchen light switch. Her claws scrabbled across the floor. She rose up on her hind legs and nudged the switch with her black nose. The overhead light in the kitchen turned on. Samantha dropped to all fours and returned to them, tongue lolling
happily out of her mouth.

“Good girl!” Derek said, and he gave her a hearty scratch. “Very good girl.”

Meredith snorted. “You taught our dog to turn on the lights?”

Samantha perked up at the sound and ran back to the switch.

“And off,” Derek said helpfully as the lights winked out and Samantha returned triumphantly to them. “For when you're tired and don't want to get up.”

Meredith didn't respond for a moment except to touch her belly. He stepped behind her and placed his palms over top of hers, and they rested together, breathing softly. His heart was pounding. He loved his wife. And he loved his dog. And he'd had a lot of fun today.

He was happy.

“Training your dog is a very healthy way to exercise control,” Dr. Wyatt had said in session earlier. “Try to do a little every day, and see if you feel even better next week.”

And so he had. And so he did.

He kissed Meredith's left temple and her ear and her neck. “So, what do you think?” he said.

Meredith chuckled. “I'm think I'm going to have to start calling the balls of illumination a codename if I don't want them to flick off.”

He grinned. “Balls?”

“Your mind is a dirty, dirty sieve,” she replied. “I said balls of illumination.”

“You like the dirty, dirty sieve,” he said.

She snorted. “And the balls. I like those, too.”

He snickered. “I probably should have picked a less ubiquitous word for the balls—”

“—Of illumination,” Meredith interjected.

He nodded. “I could try and retrain her. Maybe, lumières?”

Meredith nodded, though her eyes sparkled as she turned to face him. “Probably a good idea, Monsieur,” she said with a little smile that melted him. She leaned into him. Turned and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Still, though.” She leaned onto her tiptoes. Kissed him. “Turning on the flip-jibbits is pretty useful.”

He snickered. “Flip-jibbits? That's the first codename that comes to mind?”

She nodded. “Flip-jibbits.” She kissed him again. “Where did you learn French so fluently, anyway? I've forgotten all my high school Spanish.”

He nuzzled her. “Rain check. I have something else I'd like to turn on, first.”

“Oh, do you?” she replied.

“Yes,” he said. “Oh, yes, I do.”
“What are you doing in here?” Meredith said, pulling him abruptly to the present.

He jerked away from her, too surprised by the sudden intrusion to tamp his reaction. A panicky syllable that wasn't a word popped loose from his mouth, and his heart thudded in his ears like cymbals clashing. His limbs shook when the adrenaline hit. His elbow hit the wall when he took another nonsensical step.

“Sorry, sorry!” she said somewhere in the rush. “I thought you saw me.”

In a few seconds, his rational thought caught up, and the overwhelming crush of his flight response receded. He resisted the urge to pull his fingers through his hair to calm down. Not only was the cap there, he'd scrubbed in. Though there was no patient to worry about, this was practice, and he wanted to stay as sterile as possible. Instead of fidgeting with his hair, he started counting, breathing rhythmically like he'd taught himself.

All of ten seconds had passed by the time he was mostly back to normal, albeit sweeter, with an achy funny bone, and still breathing to the count of three. Meredith stood beside him, fingers splayed, her body well away from him in what he'd begun to call her I'm-not-a-threat pose.

In a minute, he was fine, and he stopped making himself count. He got his first good look at her. She wore her scrubs, and she'd followed his lead with a cap, mask, and gloves. He'd been so engrossed in his daydream he'd never heard her washing up in the tiny scrub room behind him. Never heard the door open. Never saw her walk into his field of view.

“All of ten seconds had passed by the time he was mostly back to normal, albeit sweeter, with an achy funny bone, and still breathing to the count of three. Meredith stood beside him, fingers splayed, her body well away from him in what he'd begun to call her I'm-not-a-threat pose.

“Good?” she said.

With the mask covering her face, all he could read were her eyes. She didn't seem concerned with what had been a minor startle, which helped. It was just a thing they'd both gotten used to—that, sometimes, things surprised him, and that, sometimes, his reaction was disproportionate.

“I'm fine, now,” he replied honestly, and her eyes softened.

She didn't ask for an explanation.

He didn't feel the need to give one. Not with her.

He cleared his throat as she dropped her hands and stepped closer. He would have wrapped his arms around her if he hadn't been trying so hard to stay sterile.

“I saw you in here from the hallway,” Meredith said. Her gaze crackled with excitement. Hope. “Are you thinking of cutting again?”

He glanced at the operating table. At the shiny tray of scalpels and clips. One of the neurosurgical dummies lay on the table, its body covered with the appropriate drapes, its head propped in the direction Derek would stand in a real surgery. Darlene had even set out the neurosurgical drill for him, along with a bunch of other specialized tools he used in various procedures.

“No,” he said softly.

Meredith didn't deflate with disappointment. She nodded. Inched closer. Her expression remained interested. Alert.

“I have a deal with one of the scrub nurses,” he added.

“To do what?”
He shrugged. “To let me be in here. She'll re-sterilize all the instruments and the equipment after I leave.”

“She must like you,” Meredith said, her tone playful.

He looked at her. “Well, you like me, don't you?”

The skin around her eyes crinkled. “Very much,” she said.

“Clearly, I'm likeable, then,” he said, smiling back at her.

He gave her a wink, and then he took a step off the wall, deeper into the room. *It'll be over soon,* he heard her say, a panicky, upset wisp of words in the back of his mind's eye, and he felt the ghost of her hand squeezing his clammy palm. *I love you.* He stopped. Clenched his right fist. Closed his eyes.

He’d gotten used to being around comrades in the surgical wing again. Almost felt at home. But here? This was the first time he'd stepped his full body into an OR since he'd been shot, and he felt like a splinter in stuck a wound, not a person coming home.

“I'm just trying to get used to this room again,” he said. “I'm... I'm not ready to cut. I'm just not.”

How could he ever hope to cut into somebody else when he couldn't get past his own body, lying near-death on the table? Not to mention when Meredith had surprised him, and he'd jumped a mile. Something like that would kill a patient under his knife.

“That's okay,” she said.

“Cristina doesn't seem to think so.”

“Well, Cristina isn't sick,” Meredith said. “And Cristina is Cristina.” She gave him a long look. “Do you want to cut again?”

“No,” he said.

“Do you think you'll ever want to cut again?” she said, the words softer.

*That was such a high,* Meredith had said years ago. *I don't know why anybody does drugs.*

He'd nodded. *Yeah,* he'd said.

They'd shared a long look, and he'd felt... complete.

“I miss what it felt like when I loved it,” he said. He looked at Meredith. “Except all I can think about right now is how I felt on the table when I had a bullet in my chest, and...” His voice fell away.

If he could get past that memory, maybe that feeling would come back. That feeling that he'd helped somebody live his or her life instead of end it. That completion. That razor moment of clarity where he was high on life, and he didn't want things like Percocet.

His eyes watered with an unexpected swell of emotion, and his throat felt suddenly thick.

“I was in the room while you were helpless,” whispered Gary Clark.

Derek's stomach lurched.
“Your heart stopped after I left,” Mr. Clark said.

The lights brightened and blurred. Derek took a slow breath. Counted to three. Let it out.

“I can't be a functional chief if I don't get used to this,” he said, clearing his throat. “The Chief of Surgery needs to be able to walk into an OR without feeling woozy.”

“You want to go back to being Chief?”

“I can't keep bumbling around the hospital like an intern forever, Mere, or the board will give up and fire me,” he said. “I need to do something more meaningful with my day than charting and fixing stubbed toes in the clinic.”

“But do you want to be Chief again?” Meredith said.

“I hate being Chief, but... I think... it's something that I need,” he said slowly.

She regarded him for a moment. “Why do you think you need it?”

“Because the hospital is a mess right now, and I got shot, and I don't want the time I was Chief to be the time I got shot and left the hospital in ruins. I want my time as Chief to have meant something. I think I need that. I need to end it on my own terms, not on Gary Clark's.”

“And you're sure you're ready for that again?” she said.

He shook his head. “No, but I can't just not try things anymore because they might break me.”

“But you can be realistic,” she said, “and doing a job you hate is really stressful.”

“I'm being realistic,” he said. He took another slow breath. Counted to three. Let it out. “And this isn't just so I can be Chief. This is so I can do a consult in here without feeling like I'm going to faint.” His hand wandered to his chest on reflex before he could stop himself. So much for sterility, but thoughts of following the rules fell away like wilting leaves as he ran his fingers along his torso. Even through his scrubs, he could feel the raised, pink scar wending down his chest. He could feel the pockmark where the bullet had pierced his skin. “And so I can get the fucking surgery to fix—”

“You don't need to fix it for me,” she said, interrupting him.

He turned to her. Swallowed around the lump in his throat. “I know that, but I need to fix it for me. I—”

He didn't have a chance to finish before she'd dropped all pretense of scrubbing in and wrapped her arms around him. He took a shallow breath that was cut with grief as she rubbed his back. He'd been doing okay, but this room brought everything back to him. Every hardship. Every ache. Every fear.

This room was the last bastion of Gary Clark's ghost.

She rose to her tiptoes and pressed her masked face against his.

Like a kiss, but not.

He listened to her breathing.

Closed his eyes.
She sank back to her feet and stood with him. Simply there. Supporting.

“I hate what he did to me,” he said, the words thick and low around the lump in his throat. His fingers clenched, and his teeth clenched, and every muscle in his body tensed. “I can't even look at myself in the mirror. I want it gone. I don't want him in our bedroom anymore, and he's always there because of...”

“I know,” she said, soft and soothing.

He shook his head. “It's so ugly, and I just can't...”

“I know.”

“I want it gone so badly, but the idea of... letting them sedate me.” He shuddered as the pent up roots of his reservations came tumbling out. He'd been stalling coming back here for so many reasons, but that was the biggest one. The lingering one. The very idea of being on that table again terrified him. “Being in here with all the lights, and everybody staring at what Mr. Clark did to me, and I'll just be...”

Helpless.

“I know,” she said, and her grip around his torso tightened.

He pressed his masked nose against the side of her head, against her hair, which she wore in a bun underneath her cap. He gave up on sterile, and he returned her embrace, because right then, in that moment, he needed it like he needed air.

His hands were shaking, and his face felt hot, and the little sardine can examination room felt smaller than it had before. He hated taking off his shirt. He'd felt like a fucking museum exhibit, but Mark had refused to do the exam, refused to even be in the room, citing conflict of interest, which Derek understood. He just didn't like it.

“So, what... what do you think?” Derek said after he'd pulled his shirt back on.

Dr. Clemens, one of Mark's attendings, a beak-nosed, younger man, smiled warmly. “I think Dr. Sloan was correct,” he said. “It should be simple enough to fix. You'd be put under conscious sedation, and the procedure would be outpatient.”

Derek shifted. The paper on the table crinkled. The metal exam table was cold, even through that, and even through his jeans. Or, maybe, his nerves were running away with him. “I wouldn't need narcotics afterward, right?” Derek said, looking at his lap.

“No,” Dr. Clemens said. “Like Dr. Sloan said. A prescription strength NSAID should take care of any discomfort afterward. The only narcotics involved would be the ones used initially to sedate you, and you'd be carefully monitored for that.”

Derek nodded. Swallowed. Looked up. “Can you do it all at once?”

Dr. Clemens frowned. “Pardon?”

“The scar from the heart surgery. Can you do that at the same time?”

Dr. Clemens's frown deepened.

“I know Mark recommended waiting a year,” Derek said. “I'm aware that I'd be going against
Dr. Clemens shifted as he clipped his pen to the lip of his pocket and put Derek's chart on the small counter by the sink. He leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms. “Can you tell me why you want to get it done prematurely?”

Derek opened his mouth. Closed it. “It's... per—” He licked his lips. “Personal.” A lump thickened in his throat. He looked at Dr. Clemens. Met his eyes. Saw the you'll-need-to-do-better-than-that expression. Knew in that moment that if he didn't offer up a better explanation, Dr. Clemens wasn't going to help. “A man shot me,” Derek said. “Every time I look in a mirror. Every time I make love to my wife. Every time I have to take my shirt off for a stranger. Even if it's usually just an eye blink before I can push it away, that man shoots me again, and I can't...” He slid off the examination table to his feet and gripped the edges of the table with white knuckles. He took a breath. “I'm a surgeon. I know what this scar is going to look like in a year, and that's not enough for me.”

Dr. Clemens stared at him.

“I know it's not recommended, but from my understanding, it's not bad, is it?” Derek said.

Dr. Clemens shook his head. “It's more invasive than is necessary if you let time heal it instead. But, no, it's not any more dangerous than if you got the same surgery in a year.” Doubt dissolved from Dr. Clemens's hazel gaze. “In fact... I could argue that it's safer and more expedient to do it all at once if you know you're still going to want the surgery no matter how much it heals in the next few months.”

Derek closed his eyes. “Please,” he said. “Please, do this for me, then. I want it all gone.”

He listened to the wall clock tick noisily in the intervening silence.

“When would you like to schedule it?” Dr. Clemens said at last.

“I've created a real catch-22 for myself, haven't I?” Derek said ruefully.

Meredith pulled back from him. Gave him an equally rueful look. “Wanting a surgery to feel better that you can't stomach receiving because you don't feel better?”

He nodded.

“You trust me?” she said.

Like that was even a question. “Yes,” he said, anyway.

“Well, I'll sit with you,” she said. “The whole time. Just like you did with me for the liver transplant. And I make a pretty mean guard dog, you know.”

He laughed despite himself. “I bet you're very tenacious in that capacity.”

“So, you don't have anything to worry about,” she said. She cocked her eyebrows at him. “Do you?”

He wiped his wet eyes with his gloved fingers. More of the not sterile, but sterile had already gone out the window. He didn't understand how she did it. Time and time again. Pulled him up from drowning. Made him feel normal.
“You just want to hear what I say while I'm sedated,” he teased.

Her mask shifted as she crinkled her nose. “Purely a side benefit or whatever.”

“Oh, purely,” he said, nodding, and then he pressed his mask against her forehead. “I love you, you know.”

“I know,” she said. “I love you, too. Nice cap, by the way.”

“I figured my first trip back to the OR in five months deserved the ferryboat cap,” he said. He gave a wry glance to the operating table. “Even if my patient is fake.”

She nodded, and even without her lips showing, he could tell she was giving him a brilliant smile. “Definitely,” she said. Then her look shifted into something more serious. “Derek...” she began hesitantly.

“Mmm?”

Her hand wandered up and down his spine. “Why don't you wait and see how Thanksgiving goes with your family next week before you make a decision about being Chief, or cutting, or getting the scar correction done, or any of this?”

“I'm miles from making plans right now,” he said. “Desensitizing myself to all of this will probably take me a while.”

“Can I help?”

He sighed. “If you have a suggestion, I'd love to hear it.”

She shifted away from him, regarding him for a long moment. “Well,” she began, and her eyes tipped up to the ceiling while she thought. When her gaze shifted down once more, she said, “You could walk me through a craniotomy.”

He frowned. “You know how to do a craniotomy in your sleep.”

She shrugged. “So?”

He stepped toward the operating table, finally bringing himself into the center of the room. He moved to the dummy's head. All of the scalpels on the tray gleamed in the bright lights. He looked at the tray skeptically. He was rusty as hell, but surely he could help her unless Dr. Weller would be using a technique that had been developed in the last year or so.

“A or B,” he said as he stared into the microscope. “Dr. Grey, A or B?”

“You got it all out?” Lexie said, amazement in her tone.

“Except for the blind cut,” he said, staring at the offending vessels. He simply couldn't tell which one fed the tumor, and Isaac's spine had been open to the air for over twenty-four hours now. Recovery would be a long journey, even if Derek managed not to paralyze this man. He resisted the urge to shake himself as tension set in so deep he hurt to the bone marrow. “Just have to pick one, and then we're good to go. A or B?”

“You're kidding,” Lexie said.

“You're stalling,” Derek countered. “Dr. Avery?”
“I don’t... like to gamble,” Avery said.

“Dr. Sloan?” Derek said.

“Oh, so you can blame it on me for the rest of your life?” Mark replied. “This is all you.”


“Are you playing eenie meanie minie mo?” Lexie said incredulously.

He laughed nervously. “Yeah.”

Lexie shook her head. “No.”

“Yeah. It’s a bad idea?” He glanced at Lexie. She looked about an inch from panicking, which didn’t make him feel any better. He glanced back at into his microscope. “Okay,” he murmured. “Okay.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. Let himself think. Let himself bask in the quiet of his own head. There was no Lexie. No Mark. No Dr. Avery. Nothing but his own ideas, floating.

One choice would save the man’s life and let him walk. The other choice would still save his life. Derek had taken Isaac that far, at least. To a life, no matter what. Derek had given this man a chance for a tomorrow and another day and a day after that. Done what no other surgeon was willing to do. Done what very few other surgeons could do.

In light of that?

Picking one or the other didn't seem so stressful or difficult.

His gut said pick the left one.

He pressed the scalpel into the left vein.

And he chose.

“Do you have any surgeries coming up with Dr. Weller that you’d like to go over, instead?” Derek said.

“Um.” Meredith thought for a moment as she approached the table. Her arm brushed his. “There's one later this week. A malignant gliobastoma.”

“Tell me about it,” he said as he picked up a ten-blade from the tray, ready to teach.
Chapter 28

“There’s a cat in your lobby!” Meredith blurted as a bundle of fur head-butted her leg like a sumo wrestler.

The woman at the front desk of the Algonquin, a blonde, leggy thing, nametag Vanessa, flashed her perfect teeth at them. “Her name is Matilda,” she said before looking back at her computer. The clackity-clack-clack of her long, manicured nails accentuated her words. “She lives here.”

“Huh,” Meredith said as she bent down to flick a gob of cream-colored hair from her pant leg and give Matilda a scratch behind the ears. “A hotel with a cat.”

“You and your husband will be staying with us for three nights, Dr. Grey?” the woman said.

“Yeah,” Meredith said. “Leaving Saturday morning.”

“One key or two?” said the woman.

Meredith glanced at Derek. “Two,” she said. She stood, and Matilda plodded out of sight.

Derek leaned against the front desk, putting what appeared to be most of his weight on his elbows. His face was buried in his palms.

He’d been jittery at the airport in Seattle, but fine. Still chatty. Still happy. Still excited to be going back to New York for the first time since he'd left it. The noise of the plane taking off had shaken the moorings of chatty and happy and excited for a few minutes, but he'd been fine when they’d reached cruising altitude. Chatty and happy had come back to roost, and he'd entertained her thoroughly for the first hour or two of their flight. He'd joked and teased and snarked and been, well, Derek-y. As the hours had dragged on, chatty had died a gradual death, but he'd diligently held onto happy until they'd landed, more than six hours after they'd taken off. Somewhere in crowded, frenetic JFK, though, happy had joined chatty and excited in a graveyard somewhere, and he hadn't said much, if anything, since then.

With his face buried, she wasn't sure if he was aware of her. “It’s me,” she whispered, just loud enough for him to hear, and she placed her hand on his back. He didn't seem tense, and his black trench coat was warm and soft. She gave him a slow, reassuring stroke.

He moved, but not in surprise, judging by how languid the motion was. His stubble rasped against his palms as he raised his head. He peeked over his fingertips at her. His face was pale, and his eyes looked slightly glassy.

“You okay?” she said.

The skin around his eyes crinkled. Even with his mouth concealed, even with chatty and happy and excited all buried alive in a graveyard somewhere, his smiles were brilliant. “I’m just tired,” he said in a low, throaty voice.

Exhausted was more like it, from the look and sound of him. She couldn't blame him, though. Traveling was tiresome business. Maybe, he hadn't been chatty or grinning the whole trip, but if she hadn't just lived through months of Derek-with-PTSD, his behavior wouldn't have said much more to her than what he'd said just now. Tired.

“How are you?” he said as he stood straight and stretched his long frame from toe tip to splayed
fingers.

She frowned. She felt tired, too. Achy everywhere. More than a little bit worried about how this whole visiting Derek's army-sized family thing would go, both from the perspective of how Derek would deal with it, and the perspective of how she would deal with it. And she had to pee. Again. Even though she'd peed at the airport. She settled on saying, “My ass is sore.”

In a lithe move that made it look like some sort of dance step, he sank out of his stretch onto the flats of his feet and wrapped his arms around her waist. His hands were warm, and his grip lowered, lower and lower still. She made a soft squeak as he pulled her to him and gave her a squeeze with his toasty palms.

“Derek!” she said, scolding but not really scolding. “Public place!”

“Is it less sore, now?” he said.

She pushed him away. He skipped back a step, thudding into the high lip of the check-in desk. The woman at the desk, still typing, seemed to be biting her lip to keep from giggling as her whole face turned two shades darker than her blush.

“Maybe, we should get you a heating pad,” Derek said.

Meredith rolled her eyes.

“No?” he said.

“Shut up,” she replied, her lips threatening to twitch into a smile.

He snorted, and he resettled against the desk as the playful sparks that had ignited died quickly to embers. His shoulders slumped, and he put his face against his palms once more. “Yes, dear,” he may have mumbled tiredly into his hands, but she couldn't quite hear. He really did seem to be running on fumes.

“All set,” said the woman at the desk. She pushed two key cards across the desk to them and grinned. “Checkout is at eleven. We hope you have a pleasant stay.”

Derek lumbered back into motion and grabbed their two roller board suitcases while Meredith took the key cards and hotel information packet, and they trundled together to the small elevator at the end of the hallway. They rode up to the seventh floor and shuffled to their room. She slid the key card into the lock while Derek leaned against the wall beside her. The light on the lock stayed red, and the lock beeped. Frowning, she flipped the key around and tried again. And again.

“I think they messed up the keys,” she said, muttering more at the key than at him. “It's a key,” she said, muttering more at the key than at him. “It's not brain surgery.”

She tried again, and the lock glared at her. Glared!
He opened his eyes and pushed away from the wall. “Maybe,” he said, taking the key gently from her hand, “you just need some artistic flair.”

Her eyebrows rose, and she snorted. “Artistic flair?” she said.

He smirked. *It comes faster when I push it*, Meredith thought wildly, because his face? Exactly like that.

He stuck the card in the lock. The light stayed red, and the lock beeped obstreperously. He frowned.

“You know; you're right,” Meredith said. “Flair is the answer.”

He sighed. Tried again. Got another beep for his trouble. Which was when his joking demeanor cracked around the edges. His forehead thumped on the door, and he sighed a deep, tired sigh that told her just how hard he was working to stay sentient right now. How hard he was working to stay his snarky, Derek-y self. His Adam's apple wobbled in his throat as he swallowed. He pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

“Oh, other key?” he said tiredly, all hints of mirth gone from his tone.

She pulled it out of her pants pocket. The key worked on the first try, and they stumbled into their shoebox-sized room. A queen-sized bed, a television, a tiny desk, and a beige-colored sofa that looked more like it was for bragging rights that a sofa could actually fit in the room, rather than for the comfort of having something to sit in, stared back at her.

“This is cute,” she said as she closed the door behind them and Derek put their suitcases on the sofa, since there wasn't much room for them on the floor. “It's basically a bed.” “And walls,” Derek said. And then he collapsed onto the bed onto his back like a falling tree. He heaved a heavy sigh that moved his whole frame. His palms rose to his face, and he scrubbed at his skin with his hands. “God, that was exhausting. I feel like...” Words failed him. He swallowed and rolled onto his stomach. “Exhausted.”

And he lay there. Not even bothering to take off his coat or his shoes or pull out the covers or anything. His feet dangled off the bed, and his head hadn't even found a pillow.

She shrugged off her white toggle coat and hung it in the closet, used the bathroom quickly because her bladder was screaming at her, and then she crawled onto the bed with him. Her body fit lengthwise with his. Though he was on his stomach, she lay on her side. Her belly had gotten a little too big for stomach sleeping to be comfortable anymore.

She rubbed his shoulder. Ran a hand down his side. “You did really great, Derek,” she said, the words soft.

“Mmm,” he said. He didn't open his eyes. “M'sorry you're sore.” His coat rustled. He moved his arm, gently squeezed her hip, and then his warm hand moved to her butt.

She snickered.

“Better?” he murmured.

“Well, it's not in public, at least,” she said.

He twitched. Almost like he might have meant to laugh, but was too worn out for it. “What time is it?” he asked, which made her want to roll her eyes, because he had a watch. It was on his wrist,
carving a dent into her hip, but he seemed unwilling to lift his arm or open his eyes to check it.

Blearily, she raised his hand to glance at the watch face. It was about 5:00 PM. They'd left on an early flight out of Seattle, and their plane had landed by 3:00, even though they'd lost three hours to time zone hopping. It'd taken them two hours to get off the plane, fight their way to the baggage claim for their luggage, get through the taxi line, and ride to the hotel. Derek's mother was expecting them around 6:30 for dinner. They had a few minutes. Not many, but a few.

“It's 5:00,” she said as she let his hand flop back to her hip.

“Oh,” he said.

She closed her eyes, simply enjoying the warm feel of him next to her. Distantly, she could hear car horns. The sounds of the living, breathing city below and around the hotel. The foggy feeling in her head lessened when she wasn't forcing herself to pay attention.

“I don't think I can deal with any more people today,” he said quietly.

“You don't want to go to your Mom's?” she said.

A long pause followed. He swallowed and shook his head. “I can't. It's just... too much.”

Tension she hadn't realized she'd been carrying uncoiled, and her muscles got a loose-spaghetti feeling that made her shaky with relief. She shifted closer to him. The bed squeaked.

“Oh, thank god,” she whispered.

She wasn't ready for an army of Shepherds. Wasn't ready to do the family thing. Not yet. Not after six plus harrowing hours of traveling with her ass stuck in a seat that was nailed to a giant, airborne tin can. Once his sisters had pulled her into a circulation-constricting, bone-crushing group hug toward the end of Derek's first hospital stay, she'd convinced herself that his family wasn't likely to disown her, but then they'd tried to convince Derek he was insane for marrying her right now, and the mixed messages from the greater Shepherd mass were a bit hard to deal with. His mother was the only one of the bunch she'd gotten remotely comfortable with, and now she would have to meet more of them. Brothers-in-law. Nieces, nephews. Hell, she was an aunt to fourteen little child-creatures she had yet to meet. And then there was still Derek to worry about, who had done so great it made her heart squeeze to think about how far he'd come in the last few months, but she knew he was worried about what his sisters would think of him—this new, quieter, jumpier Derek who needed to take “people breaks” because he lost his capacity for interaction after too much of it at once.

Derek's eyes opened to slits, and he peered at her through his eyelashes. “Thank god?”

She nodded. “I would have gone if you wanted to go, but... I'm tired, too. That was a long freaking flight.”

“It was a long freaking flight,” he echoed with a nod. He inched closer. Kissed her. “And I know you're only doing this for me.”

“Your family scares the crap out of me,” she admitted.

He brushed his fingers through her hair. “I know it does. Thank you for being here.” His voice cracked. “It means a lot to me.”

She scooted closer still. Breathed in the soft scent of his coat. She was glad for this intimacy. For
the fact that, even when he felt like he was done with the world for a while, he still thrived with her there. As much as she seemed to balance him through all the crap life liked to throw at them, she knew he balanced her. She tipped up her head and kissed his throat despite the five-o-clock rasp of stubble that had gathered as a shadow on his skin.

“We should call your mom to let her know we can't make it today.”

His body shivered against her, and he closed his eyes once more. He took a deep, quivery breath. “I know,” he said, but he didn't move.

She bit her lip. He'd said he was done with people for a while. Maybe he was more done than she'd thought. “Do you want me to do it?” she said.

“No,” he said tiredly. “I can do it. I just hate...” His face reddened. He shifted to fish in his pocket for his cell phone. He moved like his muscles were made of taffy.

“Hate what?” she prodded.

“Hate that I'm still not better,” he said. “I wanted to be better for this trip.”

She blinked. “Derek, you just dealt with two crowded airports, a noisy plane, and general chaos for over six hours. That's not better. That's amazing. It sucks that you can't see your family today, but I didn't marry Superman. I married Derek Shepherd, mild-mannered surgeon. Remember?”

“Yeah.” He wiped his face with his hands. “I know I'm doing it again. Judging myself. It's hard to stop, sometimes.”

She kissed him. “I know.”

He winked, tired though he was. “You keep me in line,” he said, and she grinned at him.

“I do,” she said.

And then he beamed at her. “I did ride a noisy plane today, didn't I?”

She nodded. “You did.”

“Thanks,” he said.

She smiled back at him. “You're welcome.”

He didn't even look at the keypad when he pulled his phone to his ear. “Call Mom,” he told it, not even bothering to dial, and it did the work for him. She listened while he told his mother he wasn't feeling up to socializing that night. His mother seemed graciously accepting of the situation and didn't give him a hard time about it. From what Meredith could hear through the phone's little speaker, the older woman took great pains to avoid expressing disappointment, just excitement for Thanksgiving the following day.

That done, Derek hung up the phone and dropped it beside his ear, not even bothering to put it back in his pocket. He still hadn't taken off his coat or his shoes, pulled his body fully onto the bed, or found a pillow. He didn't seem to want to move at all. He closed his eyes, and his breaths thickened into long, deep rasps in the short space of a few moments.

She ran her fingers through his hair. She hated that he was so tired—it spoke volumes about his overall mental fitness. At the same time, though, it was one of the most promising moments she'd
ever witnessed in his recovery, because in more than six stressful, noisy hours of public interaction, his temper hadn't snapped once, he hadn't had any panic attacks or startled badly, and he'd acted like himself. The whole. Freaking. Time. And that? Well, that was amazing.

With a pleased grin, she kicked off her shoes and curled up next to him. He had the right idea. Six hours in a plane was enough to try anybody's patience. A nap sounded like an idyllic idea to counteract the cloudy feeling in her head.

Her eyes slipped shut. She listened to the pleasant sound of him breathing next to her, slow and rhythmic and alive, and she let those quiet gusts of air carry her to her own dreams moments later.

“I bought tickets to Phantom of the Opera,” Meredith said as she plopped onto their bed with a pad and pen. She'd spent an hour at the computer downstairs. “For when we're in New York.” The mattress shook as she settled on top of the bedspread next to Derek, who was reading by dim lamplight.

“Oh?” Derek said. “What spurred that?”

He looked up from his book, which was some fat, leather bound, old thing that looked like it might be another depressing Hemingway title. She just didn't get it, not the fact that he read them, or what might appeal to him about them. Not The Sun Also Rises, not For Whom the Bell Tolls, not A Farewell to Arms, not any of them, literary classics or not. But, then, she imagined her own bookshelf in her mind's eye, and thought he might live life similarly perplexed about her own questionable literary choices.

“Everybody says we need to see a Broadway show,” she said.

“Who is everybody?” he said.

Everybody she’d said more than five words to at work that day. “Chief and Lexie and Ms. Patterson.”

Derek frowned. “Ms. Patterson is a paranoid schizophrenic.”

“Well, her delusions like Broadway, apparently.” Meredith kicked off her shoes, and they landed on the floor by the bed with loud thumps. The room glowed softly by the light of Derek's lamp. He wore a black t-shirt, blue cotton pajama pants, and fluffy white socks.

“You didn't ask Cristina?” he said.

She shrugged. “She told me to visit Columbia and Mount Sinai.”

“Why didn't you ask me?” he said.

She glanced at him. He didn't sound hurt. Just curious.

It was Saturday. She’d worked. He hadn't. He got weekends off because of his reduced schedule. That was sort of a double-edged sword, though. He needed those weekends, but he got frustrated by how little he worked. The surgical kiddie pool, he’d called his hours once when he’d lost his temper, which was funny to her, because with her pregnancy, with the aches, and the nausea, and the exhaustion, and the constant need to pee, sometimes, she would have given anything to be in a freaking kiddie pool.

Regardless, she hadn't asked him because she hadn't seen him that day. The pit had been dead.
No surgeries that she could get into had been on the boards. She’d had nothing to do, and so she’d decided to start hashing out more of the details of their trip. All she’d done until then was arrange for time off, book plane tickets, and reserve a rental car, but there was still so much more to worry about. Obviously, Thursday was already taken care of, but she’d managed to wrangle a Friday out of the Chief, too, in addition to the two days they needed for traveling.

“Well, do you not like Broadway?” she said.

“I do like Broadway.”

She scooted across the bed and curled up next to him. He wrapped his left arm over her body and held her. He smelled distantly of aftershave, and she found the familiar scent comforting. “I didn't want to stress you out with planning,” she said.

He grinned and paused to kiss her before answering. “Planning fun stuff to do with my wife isn't that stressful.”

“So, what should we do when we're in New York?”

He thought for a moment, looking up at the ceiling. “I think ferryboats trump Broadway.” He looked back at her and winked. “More ferryboats, I say.”

“We could do both,” she said.

He nodded. “True.”

She marked ferryboats on her notepad. Circled it. Underlined it for emphasis. They both liked ferryboats. She'd look up more about that later. “So, if you were going to pick a show on Broadway, which show would you pick?” she said.

He put his book on the nightstand beside the bed. “Probably Phantom, since you already bought tickets.”

She sighed. “It had the neatest poster. Okay? I have no idea.” She was trying, damn it.

“It's a romance,” he cautioned.

“So?” she said. “You're fluent in romantic. You can translate if I get lost.”

He laughed and glanced at her notepad. “So, what's next on your list?”

Meredith sighed. She’d spent almost the entire hour she'd been downstairs reading Yelp reviews of various hotels. There were literally hundreds, maybe even thousands in the five boroughs. New York was freaking huge. His mother lived in Brooklyn, and she had the address, but that hadn't been much help narrowing things down. For one, the east coast was so tightly packed it was hard to judge how long it would take to get somewhere simply by looking at the distance between two points. By west coast standards, even twenty miles was close.

“I'm not sure what hotel to pick,” she said.

“Well, you'd probably want something close to Broadway, or something close to my mother. Probably close to Broadway would be better if you want to play tourist for a day or two.”

Crap. She hadn’t even considered that. “What's close to Broadway?”

“I like the Algonquin,” he said. “I've stayed there a few times. That's what I usually recommend
“What do you like about it?”

“Well,” he said, and then he paused, thinking. “The atmosphere,” he decided. He looked at her. “It's very historic.” He squeezed her shoulder. “And they were good to me my last stay when I needed it.”

Her eyebrows rose as she looked up at him. “Your last stay?”

“Addison,” he said, just a little reluctantly. A dark shadow crossed his gaze but quickly left him. “I needed somewhere to stay when I left her, and I couldn't exactly crash at Mark's.”

She rubbed his chest. “You've never really talked to me about that.”

“Truthfully, it's a blur,” he said. “I drank a lot.”

She met his eyes. Understood the retrospective admission he hadn't spoken baldly, but had spoken all the same. He'd been dealing with his problems the same way for years. Been heading toward the precipice he'd found himself careening over only months ago when bad circumstances had stacked up in a perfect storm. She lay her ear against his chest and sighed, listening to his breathing. His heartbeat. They were such soothing sounds.

“I've been there, too,” she admitted. “It's a tempting way to try to fix things.” One she was glad she'd mostly grown out of.

He kissed the top of her head. “I do remember the $10,000 martini,” he said.

She looked up. “The what?”

“The Algonquin has a $10,000 martini called the Engagement Special,” he explained. “It comes with a pre-selected, custom cut diamond at the bottom of the glass. Somebody proposed while I was at the bar getting hammered.”

She blinked. “Ten thousand dollars. For a martini?” she said.

“The woman said yes,” he said. “It was gut-wrenching for me to watch after Addison.”

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“Don't be,” he replied. “I think it was worth it, since it all ended up getting me here, and I met you.” He smiled. “I wonder if they're still happy. I hope they are.”

She ran her hand up and down his arm. “We're happy,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. His gaze softened as he looked at her. “And in retrospect, I get it.”

“Get what?” she said.

“Spending that much on a martini.” He kissed her. “Especially as a special gift for a tequila girl I love.”

She looked up at him. “Derek?”

“Mmm?”
“Please, please, don’t you dare ever do that to me. Seriously.”

He laughed. Squeezed her shoulder. Kissed her. “I’ll try to restrain myself,” he said ominously.

She woke to the relaxing sound of the shower and an empty bed where Derek had lain.

She rolled over to squint blearily at the clock beside the bed. The room was dark, lit only by the brilliant strip of gold light at the base of the door to the bathroom. 8:00 PM glowed at her in bright red. She’d been out for almost three hours, which, on top of the time zone change, meant she was going to have a terrible time sleeping that night, and a worse time tomorrow when she was inevitably a grouchy zombie.

Wincing, she sat up. She probably should have read a book instead of closed her eyes. Anything but give in to the siren call of sleep. But the damage was done, and she would have to live with it. At least, now, she felt more refreshed, pure contrast to how she’d woken up that morning for their flight. The cloudy feeling behind her eyes was gone, and she felt ready to, if not embrace the day, what little of it was left, at least give it a reluctant handshake.

She switched on the bedside lamp. Sharp spears of light jabbed her eyes, and she squinted until her pupils adjusted. When she could see, she glanced at the bathroom door. The steady patter of water falling thickened and relaxed as Derek shifted under the spray.

This was the first real moment of peace they’d had since their alarm had gone off in the pitch-black that morning. Honestly, the first real moment of peace they’d had since Sunday, because she'd been running around like a lunatic, freaking out about this trip to meet his—cue the horror music—entire. Freaking. Family. The entire thing. Well, minus Nancy and her brood of fire-breathing, invincible dragons. At least that was eight scary monsters off the already long list of scary.

Meredith had agonized about clothes—did they match? What was fashionable in Manhattan? (Derek had been a clueless, unhelpful lump.) She'd agonized about food—should they bring anything? It was Thanksgiving. Surely, they should at least bring a freaking pie. Not that she could bake a pie. Could Derek bake a pie? Could they carry the baked pie through security? (Derek had finally convinced her not to worry about a pie.) She'd agonized about his family. She didn't want to call Abby Chloe or Cody Chase or something and be the worst aunt ever. (Derek had diligently hounded all of his sisters until he'd received up-to-date family photos in his inbox, which he'd then printed and used to make flashcards for her.) She'd agonized about logistics—had she planned everything well? Would Derek be happy with his one trip back to New York in years? (Derek had sworn he'd be happy with anything she had planned because he got to do it with her, and that he was grateful she'd taken care of the brunt of it for him.) She'd agonized about Derek. Was the plan to tell his family about his drug problem or not? She'd back him up either way, but she wanted a game plan, and— (Derek hadn't been able to answer. At all. Damn it.)

It was nice to be past all of that. Well, some of that. But the hotel room was still an oasis of calm compared to her life in the last few days. She glanced around at the impersonal furniture, absent of any clutter or anything to remind her of home or something lived in. She and Derek had never spent a night in a hotel before. She listened to the shower, and she bit her lip as she imagined him standing there, naked in the non-chaos. Before she knew it, she'd walked to the bathroom door.

She knocked hesitantly, and then she pushed open the door. The bathroom was a tiny room, barely large enough to house the small cast iron tub, sink, and toilet. The air was thick and warm with steam—Derek liked his showers just short of scalding. The shower curtain, made of thick white and black cloth, took away any potential glimpse of Derek's outline, though she could imagine it all the same, from his face to his marvelous shoulders to the scrawny lines of his legs, that, though not
that marvelous, she loved all the same.

“Hey,” he said over the roar of the shower, his voice husky. “Did you sleep well?”

“Okay,” she replied. She licked her lips as she leaned against the doorframe. “I feel a little better, now. You?”

“Better, but...” The rush of the shower filled his pause. “I'm just worn out, Mere.”

“I still think you did great,” she said.

“I rode a noisy plane, and I'm okay,” he said, and she could practically hear him beaming.

She nodded, though he couldn't see it. “You really did, Derek. It was kind of rockstar.”

“Only kind of?” he said.

She laughed.

“Doesn't Panic On Planes Or Even In Airports, Now,” he said. “It's a catchy band name.”

“Cheesy,” she countered. “I believe cheesy is the word you want.”

If he chuckled, she didn't hear it in the storm of the shower. She stood, arms folded over her chest, and rubbed her arms with her palms. A warm feeling had grown to bursting inside. Simply from talking. From laughing with him. This was what she'd wanted. This feeling. She put her hand on her belly and rubbed herself in a slow circle around her navel.

She almost laughed when she thought about it. How quickly things changed, that in the space of five years, she could go from strings of blackout-drunk, one-night stands to happily pregnant and ecstatic just to talk and joke with her husband. A man who, by her own admission, she couldn't call her best friend, or her person, though he was both, simply because he was more than that. He was hers, and that meant a lot of big things that didn't fit into words.

“Do you want to come in here?” Derek said, surprising her from her musing.

Maybe, he really could read her mind. Sometimes, she wondered. “Yeah,” she said thickly.

“Not for sex; I'm too tired,” they both said at the same time. They shared a laugh, and that moment was one she would remember for a long time. Life subtly saying, See? Things work out, sometimes, even for you.

Something squeaked, and the rhythm of the water changed. She imagined him adjusting the water temperature to something cooler. Unlike him, she preferred not to look like a lobster after a shower.

She shucked her clothes by the doorway and left them on the floor in a pile with his. Steam curled around her body, dampening her skin. She bit her lip as she glanced down at herself. Her feet were rapidly disappearing behind an expanding wall of baby. She wiggled her toes. At least she could still see those. She put her hand on her stomach.

“You're getting really big,” she told her belly button, barely audible over the water, and then she blushed. She still felt weird, talking to Baby. Derek had caught her a few times, and never once had done more than smile and leave her to her moment. But she still felt...

An absolutely maddening combination of excited and fat all at once. Excited, because she was
going to have a baby. With Derek. And Baby was getting big. And fat because, well, Baby was getting big. Which was enough, sometimes, to stuff her normal sexual self-confidence kicking and screaming into the trunk of her mental car and replace it with irritating, stupid doubt that reared its irritating, stupid head at irritating, stupid moments like this one.

She looked back at the shower curtain. They'd had plenty of sex in the last five weeks since she'd started showing, but in a bed, under blankets. She hadn't felt exposed like this.

“Meredith?” he called over the beating water.

She shook her head. This was crazy, and self-conscious, and stupid. And Derek was waiting for not-sex. She wanted not-sex. Wanted him. Badly. This hadn't seemed like a questionable idea until she'd taken off her shirt and pants.


She took a step toward the tub, climbed over the edge, and into the shower with him. He stood under the warm spray, naked, hair lathered with shampoo in a sudsy pile on top of his head. Soap and water ran down his shoulders and sluiced over his chest and abs and lower still. The occasional wayward droplet splattered her, but for the most part, she stayed dry.

“Hey,” he said, and his eyes lit up like Christmas as he peered at her. He did that guy thing, where his gaze started at her face but dipped low and lower still and paused there in testosterone-borne appraisal.

She blushed at his scrutiny, trying not to squirm or make a snarky comment like, “Yep! My breasts are still there. Or, yep! My belly button is reaching out for a handshake, and it's your bully sperm's fault.” Instead, she whispered, uncharacteristically shy, a soft, “Hi,” that barely carried, and she dropped her eyes to the ground to stare at what little she could see of her toes.

She tried to tell herself he'd gotten a good long look and didn't seem fazed. Tried to tell herself seeing the baby turned him on. He'd expressly told her so, and she'd seen the rock hard results of that in a freaking Babies 'R Us of all places.

He even said, “You look really pretty,” in a deep, reverential tone, but that didn't do much to help.

Being pregnant was, apparently, a hormonal cesspit of insecurity that was hard to shake, sometimes. Compliments and smiles and even blatant erections turned into circumstantial evidence with no smoking gun connection to whether she was attractive. The only real proof any of it offered was that her husband was smart enough not to want to upset her.

Except then he wrapped his arms around her, pulled her under the spray, and he kissed her so hard the world fell away for a moment. Water fell down around her face. Doubts fell away. Her vision went spotty. His hard, slick, warm body connected with hers in a long line from knee to groin to lips that jolted her from her thoughts and made her moan. He smelled of soap and rain. Her fingertips slid down bunching cords of muscles in his back as he plied her mouth. She forgot about feeling like a blimp. In that moment, all she knew was that she felt empty. That there was a hole inside her. Not in a bad or lonely cat lady way. The kind of way that drove one to say demanding, begging things like, “Please, please, fuck me, or I'll die,” if one were to have any sense to speak them, but she didn't.

Nothing was left in her brain when he pulled away, panting. Her insides were throbbing and tight. She felt warm and shivering and energized all at once, head to toe.
In that moment, she felt like a goddess.

Worshiped.

Derek Shepherd was very good at creating moments like that.

“It occurred to me,” he said, catching his breath, “That I was too stressed out and tired from my rockstar day to do that earlier.”

Her thoughts were still scattered like shooting stars. She blinked.

“I love you,” he added. And then he pulled her into a more low key embrace. He relaxed against her. Breathed her in. Nuzzled her like he'd done nothing but miss her deeply for that entire day. His body trembled, perhaps with tiredness, perhaps with desire. Either way, it didn't matter anymore.

“I love you, too,” she said, nerves forgotten. She squeezed his sculpted shoulders, leaned on her tiptoes, and gave him a kiss slightly less earth-shattering than the one he'd given her, though no less meaningful. “Thank you. That helped.”

He really could read her mind.

She was convinced at this point.

He grinned at her, and he tilted his head to look at her in that way he sometimes did. Like he didn't understand how he'd managed to keep her despite everything, and he found her amazing. “I'm not sure what you're talking about,” he said, his tone innocent, his face betraying nothing.

She laughed. “Yes, you do, but thank you, anyway. I really needed that.”

He gave her shrug like he still didn't know what she was getting at, though the returning twinkle in his eyes ruined the poker face effect. He reached for the bar of Ivory soap and the plush black washcloth he'd left hanging over the spigot. He lathered the cloth.

“What were you working on?” she said.

“Oh, I'm done.” He grinned. “Pruning, even. But there's still you...” He paused when he caught her staring, wide-eyed. The washcloth dripped. “What?”

She'd been too self-conscious moments ago to notice. And then she'd been kissed senseless.

Now, though?

She hadn't gotten a look at him like this in over a month. The same blankets and in-the-dark sex that had provided her some level of disguise for the blimp wasn't conducive to the full view he blessed her with now. And, boy, was this view a blessing. She swallowed as her lower body tightened, just from staring.

He looked... good. Great. No, gorgeous. No...

Her mind blanked on appropriate adjectives.

Though she knew the scars bothered him, she could hardly see them anymore, even when she searched for them. The pink line wending down his chest was buried in wispy, black and gray hair, and the bullet wound was a small pock that looked more like a birthmark than a remnant skeleton of violence. After he'd finished physical therapy, he'd started doing cardio with Samantha
and hitting the gym again with Mark to lift weights. Combined with the fact that he was eating healthily again, the results were... delectable. He'd gained back his muscle mass, and then, perhaps in his zeal to eradicate Gary Clark, gone a few steps further. His biceps had and pecs had a slight bulge to them, and even his quads and calves, which were normally sticks, had filled out a little. He didn't look anything like the frail skeleton he'd been those first six weeks. A month ago, she would have labeled him back to normal, and normal for him certainly didn't bear many complaints. Now? “Holy hell,” she blurted. She wondered what his ass looked like, and tried shamelessly to think of a surreptitious way to get him to turn around for her. Maybe, stand in profile. Anything.

He quirked his eyebrows at her. “What?”

“Look at you!” was all she could manage.

He glanced down at himself, frowning. “What about me?”

“You look...” She swallowed. “Ripped.”

“Ripped,” he said, his tone disbelieving.

She nodded. “Not like gross body builder or crazy fitness monkey. But like... really, really good.”

He snickered. “Crazy fitness monkey?”

“You know,” she said. “Like those people. With the six packs and arms the size of Popeye's and nothing better to do than spend their lives in the gym.”

“Oh, those people,” he said, his tone humoring.

“Shut up,” she said.

He rubbed his flat belly, grinning. “I guess I have no six pack.”

She stared, trying not to follow the little line of hair descending from his navel. “No, but it's a very nice one pack.”

“And I suppose I need more spinach.” He flexed his arms like a body builder, hamming it up for her.

She snorted. “No. No, you don't. You look really good, Derek.”

He stepped closer. “Really good, huh?”

She nodded. “Really good.”

The look on his face was comical. Pure preening peacock. She imagined if he had room, he would have strutted. She laughed and stepped closer, into the spray to meet him. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into a wet embrace, and he kissed her. “I think you just put a cherry on top of my rockstar day,” he said against her ear. “Thanks.”

“Mmm,” she purred as he moved his lips across her clavicle. “You're welcome. Can you do me a favor?”

“Anything,” he said.

She made a little spinny motion with her index finger. “Turn around? I want to see, damn it.”
His whole body shook with laughter she could only describe as a full-bellied guffaw. His expression danced brilliantly as he stepped back from her and turned to face the opposite wall. “I'll take male objectification for $1000, Alex,” he said, haughty cheer in his tone bouncing off the tiled walls in a happy echo.

“Whatever,” she replied. “You're loving this.”

“I might be loving this,” he admitted.

“You called it a cherry! On top of your day!”

He glanced over his shoulder at her. “My rockstar day,” he clarified. “So, how does it rate?”

The question dragged her gaze inevitably down the gentle curve of his spine to where his body cleaved apart. That was... nice. Her breaths quickened. She stepped closer. Mashed against his back. She kissed the juncture between his shoulder blades. Her lips slid on wet skin and hard muscle.

“That good, huh?” he said.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Can I turn back around, now?”

She was tempted to say no, so she could keep staring at him, and she didn't have to worry about him staring at her. “I guess.”

He laughed again as he squiggled around to face her. The look on his face was desirous as he stared at her. As if all the hot, sexy, flipping-freaking-gorgeous she saw when she looked at him, he found when he looked at her. She felt herself blushing despite herself, as all her self-consciousness came roaring back like a freight train. Damn it. Blimp sex, hell, even blimp not-sex, was slightly blush-worthy, and she was a freaking blimp.

“Hi,” he said softly once again.

She looked up. “Hey,” she said.

He nuzzled her. “I love you,” he said.

She blinked at him. Her eyes watered. “But I'm fat, and you're gorgeous,” she said before she could stop herself, which only made her want to stab herself in the throat. Meredith Grey didn't say crap like that in the bedroom. In the bedroom, Meredith Grey was the rockstar. Except this is a bathroom, a tiny voice said, and you're in the shower with Model Edition Derek, complete with biceps and one pack.

He didn't speak for a long moment.

“Stop doing that,” she grumbled.

“Doing what?” “Staring,” she said.

“But you're beautiful,” he said. “Why shouldn't I stare?”

“Because...”

She didn't have a chance to formulate a real reply before he closed the space between them.
“Come here,” he said, the words soft, and he spun her gently around. His left arm gripped her under the waist, under the bulge of their baby. He stepped them back underneath the spray, and water fell over them in a relaxing sheet. He ran the washcloth over her skin. Over her stomach and her breasts in slow, soothing motions. She couldn't help but lean her head back against his shoulder and moan. The warm, buffeting water prevented her from looking at him, so she closed her eyes and sighed instead. Under the spray, the water sounded like peals of thunder in her ears. Her body throbbed in time with each stroke of the washcloth.

“You're cheating,” she murmured as he washed her.

“I'm not cheating,” he said. “And you're not fat, Meredith.” He dragged the washcloth in a circle around her navel. “You're pregnant. This is our baby.” He paused with the washcloth just above her pubic hair. Kissed her shoulder. “This is my replacement thought. It's the best thing I could ever imagine for my life, except it's real. You made it real with me. You are beautiful. Okay?” The washcloth slipped between her legs, and he stroked her thigh to knee and then knee to toe, and then he started again with the other leg. Soft, panting breaths and heady, intoxicating warmth stripped her throat of words as he laved every cell of her body with attention. She wished he would do that... forever.

“Okay?” he repeated softly as he finished her legs and moved to her back.

The feel of his hands at her spine made her body thrum. “Okay,” she croaked, barely, as warm water fell down around her. When he pulled his fingers through her hair, lathering shampoo, she felt the soothing shift of her hair, individual strand by strand. Gravity seemed to leave her for a moment, and her body went lax. “That feels so good,” she said.

“Good,” he said, just a whisper over the roar of the water.

The world became fuzzy and not quite there. She leaned against him, hazily imagining the things they might have been doing if they both hadn't been too tired for the athletics of sex. Between that, being cradled against his rock solid body, and the steady motion of his hands as he worked conditioner through her hair, her lower body tensed, and then released into soft, pulsing flutters. The release wasn't earth shattering like it would have been if he'd been arousing her on purpose, but it was enough that a low-pitched, breathy moan expelled from her lips as her legs turned momentarily to jelly. He captured her in his arms and murmured something against her ear, but she was too relaxed to interpret words anymore.

Minutes later, she was blinking, dazed, cradled in a big fluffy towel the size of Alaska, out of the shower, and feeling so wholly loved her entire body was humming. She had no idea what that had been, but freaking hell, that had been some magic. She sat on his lap on the lid of the toilet as he dried them off.

“You,” he said, pulling her close, “are pregnant. Not fat. And I love you.”

She snuggled into the terrycloth against his chest. Her nostrils flared, and she inhaled deeply at the soft detergent scent that spoke of spring and rain. “I'm too relaxed to argue,” she said, and he laughed. “You so cheated.”

He snorted. “I did not,” he said, his voice rumbling against his breastbone.

“Did, too.”

“Not.”
“Too.”

“Too,” he echoed.

“Not,” she said reflexively. She frowned. “Wait.”

He grinned at her. “That was cheating, I admit.”

“Ass,” she said, though she didn't mean it, and he laughed again. “I like your laugh,” she murmured. She rubbed her eyes. “And I'm really not that upset. It's the stupid, stupid hormones, making me say stupid, stupid things.”

“None of it is stupid,” he said. “It's frustrating as hell when I don't feel like I'm helping, but it's not stupid.”

His grip around her tightened, and he struggled into a standing position with her. A flash of doubt stripped her bare as he carried her gracelessly into the bedroom. She wasn't that heavy. Or she was. She was a fat whale. Her horrible imagination ran away with her when he put her down on the bed like a sack of potatoes.

He growled. Actually growled, which snapped her out of her spiraling fears long enough to look at him. Frustration seemed to drip from his pores. “I swear I'm just tired, Meredith,” he said, reading her mind again. “I was nearly shot to death five months ago, you know.”

She gaped at him.

He sank onto the bed in a pale, naked heap next to her with a sigh. He gave her a helpless smile that didn't seem happy. “Well, there went all my hard bolstering-Meredith's-self-esteem work,” he said glumly. “I should have just let you walk.”

“You always try to carry me,” she said. “You not trying would have felt even worse.”

He sighed. Kissed her. “I really can't win, I guess.”

“Apparently not,” she said, and she leaned against him. Empathy made her heart squeeze. She knew all about watching somebody you loved implode and wanting to help so badly, but not knowing how. Not feeling like you could. “I'm sorry. This hormone crap sucks. Thinking I'm a fat blimp whale sucks. And crying at random sentiment sucks. I know logically I'm not a fat blimp whale, and that I'm pregnant, and even that you find that really sexy. Just... Pod Pregnant Meredith kidnaps my brain, sometimes.”

“Crying does suck,” he agreed. She supposed he had some authority on crying despite one's general disposition to avoid it. “And Pod PTSD Derek pisses me off a lot, too, so I get it. You must feel so helpless with me, sometimes.”

She blinked. Mind reader. He had to be. “I do, sometimes,” she said softly. She looked up at him. “But I hang in there, because when I hang in there, we get moments like this.”

He grinned. “Rockstar days?”

She nodded as she leaned against his shoulder. “Days where I swear you're reading my mind, for instance.” She kissed his chest. Hard muscle and soft hair greeted her lips. He stroked her hair. “And like now. I've never heard you say something like what you said earlier.”

He looked down at her, eyes hooded with confusion. “What did I say earlier?”
“That you were nearly shot to death,” she said. “Like it's just something that happened to you. Like, oh, and by the way, I got shot.”

He swallowed. “I suppose it was.”

“Just something that happened?”

He cleared his throat. Kneaded the bedspread with his hands. Like he knew how huge the answer to that question would be, and the gravity of admitting it gave him pause. Made him think hard before responding. “Yeah, I suppose it was,” he said. “It still bothers me at times, but... not right now.”

She looked at him. He seemed... fine. Honestly fine. Not angry, or drowning in terror, or ready to burst into tears. Not looking over his shoulder for the next person with a gun to come along. Just... Derek. Derek-y. Something swelled inside her. Something good. Something that felt... great, and she had another moment filled with brilliant clarity. A moment that showed her no matter what crap they had to shovel through, they would see the other side, were even seeing it now, and that maybe, just maybe, the world didn't suck so much anymore. A smile burst across her face, and she pressed against him like a wave.

He laughed and met her with a kiss. He tumbled backward onto the bed, and she landed on top of him. The wet black towel landed on top of her, draping them. Her wet hair fell down around her shoulders. She stared into his eyes. He didn't seem upset or antsy about being underneath her. From the way his eyes twinkled, that phobia had departed for a trip to Timbuktu, and he wasn't anything but in love with her. In love and loving. His one pack bunched, and he rose up onto his elbows to kiss her again. The motion made the towel slip down to the bed. He kissed her lips, the tip of her nose, and her forehead in soft, searching succession, before he lay flat.

“Meredith Grey,” he said, looking up at her, “Would you let me take you downstairs to dinner?”

He glanced down. “Preferably after we've put some clothes on?”

She blinked, surprised. “I thought you were done with people today.”

His fingerprints traced her spine. “I can deal with a short dinner.”

“Really?” she said. “We could do room service.”

“Really, Mere,” he said. He kissed her. “I feel like this rockstar day needs a rockstar ending. Besides, I had something planned, anyway, that I never called to cancel because I was too busy face-planting into the bed.”

“What is it?”

“Face-planting?” he said. “Well, you see, it's when you're so tired or klutzy that you—”

She smacked his shoulder playfully. “The thing you have planned, Derek.”

He gave her an enigmatic smile. “It's something I planned.”

“You can't just throw that out there and then not tell me,” she said.

He shrugged. “I guess we'll have to go to dinner and see what it is.”

She glowered. “You're mean.”
“And you,” he said, not taking the bait, “are gorgeous.”

“I don’t like surprises,” she said.

“I know, but you're still gorgeous,” he countered. He kissed her, and then he gently pushed her off of him. He stood and walked to his suitcase, buck naked while she sat on their damp towel. He bent over to peruse his belongings. She could have sworn he was purposefully giving her another view of his spectacular, quarter-bouncing ass, but he pulled out a pair of boxer briefs and slipped them on before she could accuse him of anything untoward.

They dressed quickly. She didn't bother drying her hair or putting on makeup or jewelry. He put on on a dark pair of pants and button-down shirt that had miraculously survived the trip without needing to be ironed. She eyeballed his level of dressiness and opted for a black, A-line, pocket, maternity dress she’d just bought. Nothing snazzy, but not casual either, and the flattering black and the way the dress flared did a lot to reduce the blimp-factor. He waited by the door for her while she pulled on her shoes, and when she met him there, he threaded his with fingers with hers. They walked back to the elevator and rode down to the lobby, hand-in-hand.

“How hungry are you?” he said. “Snack hungry? Dinner hungry?”

She stared at him suspiciously. They’d grabbed a bite at the airport. “Snack, I guess. I don't want a big dinner this late.”

“Oh, okay,” he said.

“You're really not giving me any hints?”

He grinned. “Nope.”

When the elevator doors trundled open, the sounds of piano music filtered through the air. Derek led her through the hall. The hotel had a unique look to it. Lots of dark-colored woods, and dark-colored carpeting with bold patterns.

They walked out of the lobby area, down a few short steps, and into a larger open space where a smattering of people sat here and there, spaced by many more empty tables than full ones. Meredith supposed most people who normally would be staying in a hotel right now would be with their families for Thanksgiving-related festivities, just like she and Derek would have been if Derek had been feeling better, but this was good. Empty was good. She glanced at Derek, who seemed a bit more tense outside of the hotel room, but okay. Okay was good, too.

“Welcome to the Round Table Restaurant, madame, sir. Table for two?” a deep, baritone voice said, and Meredith's gaze shifted from the empty tables to an easel board labeled Round Table. Next to it rested a small podium, and a black-haired man wearing a dark suit and white gloves smiled warmly at them.

Derek leaned close to the man and murmured something in a low, whisper tone. Meredith strained to hear, but she couldn't identify anything more than the cadence of Derek's voice as it rose and fell. The man smiled. “Ah, Dr. Shepherd,” he said, not bothering to grab menus, which piqued Meredith's interest. “Right this way, please.”

They followed the host to a candlelit table in the corner, where he pulled out a chair for Meredith and helped her to sit. Derek sat across from her. The host said some things, which Meredith didn't hear, because she was too busy wondering what the surprise would be. The host said something else about a waiter, and then he left.
She glanced across the restaurant. Well-dressed socialites dotted the room. “Where’s the bar? The one with the crazy martini?” she said.

Derek glanced at it, his expression nonchalant. “The Blue Bar is in a separate room. You can’t see it from here, but we can go there later, if you want.”

“Sure,” she said. She imagined the bar. She imagined the color blue was part of the theme, given the name. Perhaps blue with the same dark, austere lines as the rest of the hotel. She could picture him there. Years ago. Younger. Devastated. Drowning himself in single malt scotch until he couldn’t see straight.

And then she blinked. Looked at him as dread tightened in her stomach like cold lead. He wouldn’t do that, she tried to tell herself. Except Derek was romantic, and cheesy, and he would. He totally would do that, ambiguous promise or no. “You did not buy me a $10,000 engagement martini when we’re already married, I don’t do diamonds, and neither of us can drink the freaking thing,” she said. “Please, tell me you didn’t do it.”

He winked at her. “You’ll just have to wait and see, tequila girl.”

“You didn’t,” she said. She stared at him, trying to gauge his expression. He wasn’t giving anything away except the fact that he was delighted to see her squirming. “You didn’t!” He leaned forward on his elbows, rested his face in his chin, looked at her dreamily, and grinned. “You didn’t. You didn’t. No. It’s the most pointless waste of money possible!”

He shook his head. “Actually, I can think of a quite few ways to spend money that are more wasteful. I saw a diamond-crusted water bottle on e-bay the other day, for instance. And there’s always gold-plated toilets.”

“Shut up,” she snapped, which only seemed to make him more gleeful. “You didn't. This is not a good surprise, Derek. Bad surprise. Bad! Bad, Derek!”

He snickered. “I'm not Samantha, you know.”

“You're definitely not Samantha,” Meredith countered. “Samantha doesn't buy martinis with diamonds in them!”

“You're protesting quite a bit,” he said.

“Because you bought me a freaking $10,000 diamond in a glass,” she said. “I'll have a stroke trying not to lose it. And I hate rings. Seriously? Your mother's is still in the box. Why on earth would you think—”

“I think you're jumping the gun a little bit,” he said, a conspiratorial whisper.

She folded her arms and slumped in her seat with a sigh. “And I repeat, you're mean. You're a mean, mean, evil man.”

He cocked his head at her. “Your definition of mean is very odd, you know.”

Movement caught the corner of her eye, and she glanced to the right. A waiter carrying a little round tray approached. On top of the tray, a martini glass perched. The waiter headed straight. For her. Damn it. Damn it, damn it, damn it. She closed her eyes.
Air buffeted her face as the waiter breezily filled the empty space next to her. “Your order, madame,” he said, and there was a clink as something was set on the table. “Congratulations,” he added, just another twist of the knife. Then he left.

“Thanks,” she said dryly at his departing form.

And then she sat there. With her eyes closed.

“It won't bite you if you look at it,” Derek said.

“Yes, it will,” she hissed.

He laughed. He was laughing. Laughing! At her. She clenched her teeth.

“I am not romantic,” she said. “I don't do diamonds and schmaltz and cheese. I can take the occasional scavenger hunt when our almost-done house and my mostly healed husband are at the end, but, Derek, this is too much. It's just—” She opened her eyes and looked down. “Empty.” There was no sparkly diamond sitting at the bottom, and the liquid in the glass was bubbling. Like it was carbonated. Except martinis weren't carbonated.

She looked up at Derek, who was grinning. “I know you don't do diamonds,” he said. “I know you're not a ring girl. I know you'd kill me if I spent $10,000 on a martini for you. And I know neither of us can drink.” He gave her a bald look. “I know you.”

“But—” she managed.

His eyes twinkled. “It's club soda.”

“In a martini glass,” she said flatly.

He nodded. “In a martini glass.” And then he shifted in his seat and pulled a crinkling plastic package from his pocket. She watched as he opened it. “This,” he said as he pulled out the pink, jewel-shaped candy from the bag, “is the non-alcoholic Engagement Special, done on a Meredith-acceptable budget.”

It was a Ring Pop. Strawberry-flavored if she wasn't mistaken. He leaned across the table and deposited the pop next to the bubbling martini glass.

She stared at it.

“Meredith Grey,” he said softly, “Thank you for marrying me. You really are the most beautiful thing in my life.” And then he shut up. As if he sensed anything more poetic than that would get him throttled.

Her eyes pricked at his words as she looked at the pop. And then she looked up at him. “That's still really cheesy,” she said, relief making her shake. “But...” Derek was Derek. He was demonstrative, and romantic, and he always would be. He would always do cheesy things, she imagined, because that was just part of the whole Derek-y package. Her heart squeezed. He'd planned this. For her. And he'd tried to come up with something she wouldn't altogether hate while still satisfying his own need to be himself. “Thank you,” she said, and she meant it. It was cheesy and silly as hell, but she meant every word, because she loved him. Even the demonstrative, romantic cheese.

“That's not the surprise, by the way,” he said low murmur. “That was just whim.”
She wiped her eyes. “It's not?” she said. “It is?”

“No. Yes.”

“Where'd you get the Ring Pop?” she said.

“At the airport.”

“When you went to buy a magazine for the flight?”

He nodded. “Yes, then.”

He glanced up, across the room, and she followed his gaze. The waiter was coming back with another tray. She frowned. They hadn't ordered anything. Was it bread or something?

She damned near bawled when she saw what got placed in front of her—stupid, stupid hormones.

“That's the surprise,” he said. “They don't normally serve it like this. I had them make it special.”

The “it” was a single piece of New York cheesecake, doused in cut strawberries. “For Meredith” was written in looping cursive script with red-colored sauce. There were two shiny forks resting on the side of the china plate. Derek stood and pulled his chair and napkin to her side of the table.

“Want to share it with me?” he said.


He found his mother in the kitchen, taking foil off the pies she'd been cooling in the fridge. Her clipped, methodical movements made her look... upset. The sniff he heard, as if she were staving off tears, solidified the suspicions that had burgeoned since he'd watched her dish up the green beans at dinner like she'd meant to stab them and kill them, not serve them.

His mother didn’t ever cry in front of them. She always hid like this, like she thought it would be a sin for her children to think she might be less than superhuman. He didn't think she knew he heard her sniffing at night, sometimes, through the bedroom wall. She struggled with the holiday season every year, and she'd been upset last night. He knew that much, though he didn't think his sisters knew.

When he graduated in the spring, if he graduated after tanking so many grades, he and Addie had made the decision to find a place and move in together. For a test run, Addie had said with a coy smile. He thought he might marry her, soon, though he hadn't worked up the nerve yet to propose.

His heart squeezed with the thrill of that thought. Getting married. Starting his own family. Having two beautiful children like his little niece, Abby, whom he adored. On the other hand, leaving would mean his mother would be alone. He would be the last to move out.

“Ma?” he said, his voice soft, concerned. A cheerful cloud of voices, muffled by the kitchen door, bumped and collided in the air. His sisters. Addie. Kathy's husband John, and Nancy's husband Rob. Abby. A modest gathering, but one he'd looked forward to all year. “Do you need any help
His mother jerked at the sound of his voice. “Sweetheart,” she said. She looked up. She seemed fine, based only on the superficial. “No, I don’t need help,” she said in an even tone. “Why don’t you go back out with your sisters?”

Derek’s ears sharpened at the sound of Rachel’s jovial laughter floating through the doorway, followed by Abby’s excited shriek and a thump. He folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the door frame. “Abby’s starting to wriggle a bit,” he said with an amused smile. John had been trying less than successfully to keep the two-year-old girl occupied while all the adults talked. “I think she wants pie.”

“Well, I’m working on it,” his mom said, and she turned back to the counter. The foil crinkled. She’d made two huge pumpkin pies that made the whole kitchen smell like nutmeg and cinnamon. The crusts were a perfect, golden brown, with not one burned speck.

Without prodding, he pulled the whipped cream from the refrigerator and set it on the countertop beside her, along with the carton of homemade vanilla ice cream that Kathy had brought. He touched his mother’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Are you really okay, Ma?” he said. “You seem...” He swallowed. “Not okay.”

She sighed, like she’d lost her patience. “No, I’m not okay, Der.”

He blinked. A lump thickened in his throat. He didn’t like talking about this, but if she needed an understanding ear, he would make himself suffer through it. “Are you missing Dad?” he said, preparing for the knife stabs of remembering.

His mother sighed and gave him an exasperated this-is-exactly-what-I-mean look that told him nothing, because he truly had no idea what she meant. She brushed her fingers through her graying hair, agitated. Despite her displeasure with him, though, his bewildered look must have tugged at her heartstrings, because she pulled him into an embrace that made his muscles loosen and his mind drift.

“Of course I miss your father, sweetheart,” she said in a soft voice by his ear and pulled her fingers through his hair. The lump in his throat became a softball when she said, “It’s Thanksgiving. I miss him very much. I always will.”

He swallowed. “But?”

“But Amy is waiting tables at the diner right now,” she said.

He bristled in her arms, and he pulled away. Amy wasn’t there because of her own stupid choices. “So, what? She made her bed.”

“So, you four are acting like it doesn’t even matter,” Mom said. “You wouldn’t even know she’s even missing from the way you all are talking. It’s like you don’t even have another sister.”

“She should have thought of that before she started using,” he said, his tone tripping upward into self-righteous.

His mother stiffened. “Derek, I don’t want to hear it.”

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to watch somebody you love die right in front of you because of her own fucking stupidity?” he snapped.
“I don't want to hear it!” she said again. “And don't use that language in my house, young man.”

He glowered, unsure how this conversation had gone so quickly from melancholy to red hot anger, but too ruffled to analyze it. “It's her choice not to be here.”

“She chooses not to be here because you all make her feel like dirt whenever she's in the room with you,” his mother said. “That's not a real choice.”

“I'm not treating her like dirt. I'm not treating her like anything. I haven't even talked to her since her OD!” he insisted. “I told her I was done, and I meant it. I'm done, Ma. I won't be party to her machinations to kill herself.”

“That's exactly my point, Derek,” his mother said. She squeezed her fingers into tight, white-knuckled fists. “It shouldn't be this way. You shouldn't give up on your family, not when people are so easy to lose!”

Easy to lose. He ground his molars together. That was the crux of it. Easy to lose. He'd watched his dad die in front of him, and then he'd watched Amelia die as well, for no reason other than her own idiocy. The latter seemed like a pointless, sadistic punch in the face after the former. A pointless, sadistic punch that Amelia, his sister whom he loved, had perpetrated against him.

“Well, it is this way,” he said. “Your father would be so disappointed in you,” she said. “All of you!” And the words hit him like a slap. Her mouth clacked shut, and she blinked. Her eyes went misty, like she regretted saying those things the moment the awful words had leaped off her lips.

“You can thank Amy for that. Not us,” he said, his voice low and furious and wounded, and then he stalked out of the room. His sisters, who'd heard the fight through the door, converged around him in support, but he shoved through them, and stomped out the front door. He needed some fucking air.

He stood beside Meredith on the landing in front of the two-story house where he'd grown up, hands folded against his chest defensively. He could remember standing there, panting and hot because he'd been so furious, so hurt, and so convinced he'd been right, and that his mother had been wrong.

Amy hadn't started coming to Thanksgiving again until after she'd gotten through medical school, nine years later. Once she'd met Addison in more than just passing, they'd hit it off like sisters. Addison, who didn't have any real context other than the vague details she'd been told. Addison, who hadn't watched Amelia flat line right in front of her after years and years of trying to help and failing dismally.

Until Amelia had shown up in his hospital room after he'd been shot, he'd largely been aloof toward her whenever they happened to be in the same room. Cordial when addressed, but not interested in getting emotionally involved anymore. He hadn't gone to her college graduation, hadn't gone to her medical school graduation, both despite being invited. Until she'd shown up at the hospital, the last time he'd seen her had been the Christmas before he'd fled to Seattle, and they'd barely spoken more than ten words.

“We really should ring the bell,” he mumbled, but his heart wasn't in it.

Meredith flinched beside him, as though his words had startled her from her own whirling cesspit of worries. She shifted from her left foot to her right, and the floor boards of the old house creaked. Her fists balled in her pockets.
“Well, ring it, then,” she said, her voice tight, almost shrill with nerves, which only made him feel more helpless, because he couldn't bring himself to raise his finger to the bell, and because she was upset, but he didn't think he could help her much. Not when he felt this... **dreading**.

She was probably feeding off his worries like they were Wheaties, making her own nerves even worse. **These people were his family, and if he was a wreck about meeting them, of course she would be a wreck, simply by reading his fucked up signals.** He pulled his shaky arms around her, because he could do that, even if he was a worrying, hopeless, basket case.

“Worthless,” Mr. Clark said, which made Derek cringe. He tried to push the awful word out of his mind. If Meredith was in a similar situation with her own family, he'd be sympathetic, not condemning. **But that cold, hating voice was so hard to ignore when he felt like this.**

“You're not ringing it,” Meredith said.

He glanced at her. “No, at this moment, I'm hugging you.”

“Why?” she said. Like he needed a reason or something.

“Because you're hunkering in your coat like a turtle,” he said.

“And you're shaky and barely speaking!” she countered.

“Well, maybe I need it, too,” he said quietly.

“Oh,” she said. She closed her mouth and looked up at him. **She snaked her arms around his waist. He sighed as she pressed her cheek against his chest. “Are you okay?”**

“No,” he said.

He wanted Percocet. **Wanted it so badly he was aching for it, and all his joints hurt.** Percocet took all the noisy jumble in his head and made it mostly quiet, and it was hard not to want that false calm when he was this unsettled, when he was hearing Mr. Clark again, when he was dealing with so many things, new and old, all at once.

He'd slept until 1:00 PM, beyond worn out from the long plane trip, and still on Pacific Time, and he didn't feel quite right anymore. **He couldn't seem to recuperate from the deficit he'd accrued. He probably still would have been sleeping if Meredith hadn't gently woken him to ask if he wanted her to warn his family they would be late. Six hours on a noisy plane was a lot for him.** Dealing with a ton of people who didn't know how to deal with him was a lot for him. Dealing with a ton of people who didn't know how to deal with him, after six hours on a noisy plane?

“Insurmountable,” said Mr. Clark, and Derek gritted his teeth.

His mother and Amelia, he wasn't worried about, because they both already knew everything, and they were okay. **Mark, he wasn't worried about, of course. It was them. Rachel and Steve and Kathy and John. All of the kids. Nancy and Rob, too, but at least they weren't there today, which took some of the heart-crushing stress away. They were in Houston with Rob's family.**

“**Are you** okay?” he said to Meredith.

She pressed her ear against his heart and listened. “Not really.”

They sighed in unison.
Empty, parked cars lined the street bumper to bumper behind them. His mother's house was a narrow, but deep, two-story house with pristine white siding, crammed like sandwich filling between the bread of the two houses next to it on either side. Helen and Jean lived in the house on the left. He didn't know the new neighbors on the right, who'd moved in after he'd left Manhattan. The house had a small yard in front the size of shoebox, where he could remember playing catch with his father, tussling with Mark, playing cops and robbers with water pistols, juggling apples he'd stolen from the kitchen, stalking through the rain to get to his motorcycle on the night he'd crashed, any number of things. There was no driveway, which was why he'd canceled their rental car reservation before they'd left Seattle, and they'd taken a taxi instead.

The air around them was bitterly cold, and the grass in the yard had turned the color of straw for the coming winter. None of the trees had any leaves, and the whole neighborhood had turned gray and cold and barren. That was something he'd grown to adore about Seattle. The fact that, with all the evergreens and the wetness, the world stayed green and lush year-round.

“How not okay are you?” Meredith said as they stood shivering, not entirely from chill, in each other's arms.

“Seven,” he said. “You?”

“Eight,” she said. And then she shook her head. Her fingers scrunched the lapel of his coat between them, and he felt his collar pulling on his neck a little. “No, nine.”

“Nine?” he said.

“What if they don't like me?” she said. “What if I'm a horrible aunt?”

He frowned. “Meredith, they've met you already, and they liked you fine. Even Nancy came around.”

“But not the kids, or the husbands, or the lions and tigers and bears!” she said. “Plus, you were nearly dead at the time, and we weren't married in their eyes, yet. Nobody would hate on their nearly dead brother's not-permanent girlfriend.”

He blinked. “Lions, tigers, and bears?”

“Or similarly chomp-y mammals,” she said.

“You're really comparing my family to vicious carnivores?”

She gave him a look that said, Well, aren't you? He couldn't exactly refute her.

His heart filled up as he looked at her. She was beautiful. She wore a maternity version of the white toggle coat she loved. She'd discovered last week that her old one wouldn't button over her stomach anymore. She'd dragged him along on an emergency coat-shopping trip, and he'd obliged, giving her his opinion of more than twenty coats. He'd said, “You're beautiful; it's perfect,” for twenty-four out of twenty-five, which she'd gotten a little irritated with, but he'd been honest, at least. She could wear a potato sack and make it work, in his opinion. She'd ended up buying the one where his broken record “beautiful” had changed to “enchanting”. She'd wrapped the red scarf his mother had knitted for her when he'd been in the hospital around her neck. Blush from the cold had brightened her face, and she looked alive. Alive and glowing.

She was scared witless. A nine out of ten. But she was there. She was in his arms in a maternity coat. She wasn't going anywhere. And he loved her for that.
Now, there's you, and you're so strong, and I'm proud of you every day, he'd said once when he'd been feeling lost, and she'd pushed him through the day with her own tenacious strength of will. He'd meant every word he'd said about her, then. “Thank you,” he said. “For doing this for me. I mean it. I know it's hard for you. And you won't be a horrible aunt.” He kissed her. The hotel had smelled a bit like peppermint that morning, and her hair had carried the scent along with it. He breathed her in and sighed. “I think you'll be amazing.”

She relaxed in his arms. “Have you made any decisions about... what to tell them?”

His grip tightened, and he took comfort in her warmth.

He just didn't know. He was leaning toward not saying anything about the drugs. The PTSD, which they knew about already but hadn't yet experienced firsthand, was daunting enough by itself. He missed his family, but he didn't have a clue how to be mentally ill around them, and he sure as hell didn't know how to be an addict around them. Except he was both. He was both to gigantic proportions, right now, even with all the improvement.

“I don't know,” he said with a half-hearted shrug. His stomach twisted. “My sisters already think I'm crazy. I just—”

“They don't think you're crazy,” she replied. “They just don't understand what we've been going through.”

“What if I have a panic attack?” he said. “What if I jump six miles because—”

She shrugged. “Then you have a panic attack, or you jump six miles, and—”

“It's embarrassing,” he countered.

“I know, but if they think less of you for that, they're not worth it, Derek,” she insisted. “They're not.”

“They're my family.”

“That doesn't give them a blank check to be mean, judge-y freaks,” she said.

He sighed, deflating. “That doesn't mean they aren't, sometimes.”

She looked at him with sympathy. “I know.”

“They practically disowned Amelia.” He clenched his fists. “I disowned her.”

“I know,” she said. “It's hard for everybody involved when stuff like this happens. But you have a new perspective, now. Maybe, they do, too.”

He swallowed, and he looked away. He was making himself sick. He knew he needed to stop. Knowing and doing were two different things, though. All the worrisome stuff stuck and churning inside his head wouldn't cease its endless swirl.

She bumped his hip with hers. “Hey.”

“What?” he said weakly. “Whatever you decide, I'll back you up a thousand percent. Okay?” she said. “And you don't, Derek. You don't owe them anything.”

A car drove down the street behind him, something that hadn't bothered him in weeks, except today, the noise of the exhaust made his heart squeeze and his breaths tighten, and it was all he
could do not to jump out of his skin. He made an awful, soft, terrified noise that made him sound like some sort of animal. His mouth went dry, and his body shook despite his attempts to control himself.

Meredith gave him a wide bubble of space.

He thought wildly about pickles as he counted for his inhalations and exhalations. Pickles and his pregnant wife. She was pregnant, and she'd want extra crunchy pickles to eat with her strawberry ice cream. He thought about the grocery store aisle. She liked Ben & Jerry's. He'd get her something special. Strawberry Cheesecake instead of just strawberry. She loved that flavor. He couldn't fathom how it could taste good with pickles, but he would buy it. Whatever she wanted.

He saw the fog on the glass display case. Felt the cool burst of air as he pulled open the freezer. By the time he'd put the ice cream in his grocery basket, he felt better, and by the time he found the aisle with the pickles, he felt wrung out, but not panicky.

He moved back into her orbit, pressed his nose against her hair and breathed. She rubbed his back.

“I can't,” he said softly. “I can't think about telling them right now. This feeling is just going to get worse the longer we wait here.”

“For both of us,” she said.

He would try to be pleased with the mere fact that he'd made it here, no matter what happened today with his family. He would try to be pleased that he'd had a rockstar day yesterday, pleased that, seven weeks after having a crippling panic attack in an airport, he'd flown six hours across the country and conquered not one but two airports. He would try to keep the sunglasses off his face.

He pulled away from her embrace and rubbed his tired eyes. “Yeah. Let's just ring the bell.”

“I'll do it,” she said. She looked at him, eyebrows raised. “On three?”

He nodded shakily. “Sure.”

He swallowed, staring at the bell. The black paint on the molding around the door was chipping. The last time he'd seen it, there hadn't been a single crack, and now it was chipping and would need a new coat soon. It'd been that long since he'd been home. The mathematics of each year passing hadn't sunk in, really, until he saw the paint chipping. When he'd left, his newest nephew, Cody, had been a year old, and now he would be big enough to have a primer-level conversation.

Things would be so different, now.

“You're not counting,” Meredith said.

He looked at her. “I thought you would count, since you're pushing it.”

“I can't multitask when I'm this nervous,” she snapped.

He swallowed. “Ditto.”

She sighed. “I need a replacement thought.”

“You can borrow mine.”

She looked at him. “What are you thinking?”
He grinned weakly. She knew about the pickle thought, already. He used that one a lot. “It comes faster when I push it?” he joked, trying to put her at ease.

She elbowed him, rolling her eyes. “Oh, shut up,” she said, and he had the presence of mind to laugh. Just a little.

Silence stretched as they both stared at the bell.

“I freaking knew we should have brought a pie,” Meredith said.

“Why?”

“So we could eat it while we're waiting for courage.”

And that was when the door swung inward. He leaped back without sense or reason. Meredith, who'd been holding the lapel of his coat, let go, but not before the line of fabric cut him in the neck and he made a choking noise. His shoulder hit the thick post at the top of the stairs that supported the awning. Pain flared and went silent.

He caught up with the world to find his heart slamming in his chest and the words gone from his throat. His sister Kathy stood on the threshold wearing jeans and a festive red sweater that brought out her cream-colored skin. Her curly, shoulder-length hair framed her face with silver and black, and her eyes were a shock of surprised azure.

She blinked. Her lips parted. “Are you okay?” she said, her tone bewildered. “What on earth are you guys doing out here on the stoop?”

“Um,” Meredith said, flicking a concerned glance at Derek, “debating the merits of pie?”

Fuck, Derek thought as he tried to collect himself. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He'd already done something Not Normal. He hadn't even made it inside the house. He glanced at the ground. A foot. Though it had felt like a mile, he'd only jumped a foot. Maybe, it was okay.

“H...” He lost the word he wanted, and he swallowed. He didn't like calming himself down under pressure. He'd gotten so used to Mark and Meredith and, lately, everybody at the hospital being patient with him. Rachel's familiar face appeared behind Kathy's shoulder, making his audience bigger, and his distress worse. “Hi. K...” He couldn't get his tongue to work, and they were both staring at him. Pickles, he thought. Pickles, pickles, pickles. “Kathy.” He took a deep, cleansing breath, and shook the last of his jumbled, surprised neurons back into their proper places. He even managed a smile. “Rachel. Hi.”

“Hi!” said Rachel with a bright smile in return, though it didn't quite reach her eyes, which was... troublesome.

Kathy, however, grinned at him like nothing had happened. The skin around her eyes crinkled, and her body language seemed welcoming and happy and all sorts of positive things that told him to relax a bit, which he tried and failed.

“Come in, come in,” Kathy said, beckoning them with her hands. “It's freezing outside!”

His oldest sister backed away from the threshold, pushing Rachel backward with her. Rachel made an indignant noise. Meredith looked at him, her gaze a wild twist of Meredith-patented crap-it's-a-family-what-do-I-do panic.

A protective wave rippled through him. He wrapped his arm over her shoulder, gave her a shaky
squeeze, took a breath, took the lead, and stepped into the lion's den in front of her. Probably not
the best plan, given how fast he was likely to fall apart if things went wrong, but Meredith had
flown across the country to support him, and the least he could do was give her a moment to collect
herself. He felt her hands at the small of his back, clutching his coat, and if he were more relaxed,
he would have been amused at his literal conversion to human shield.

The house stank of roasting turkey and pumpkin pie and all the traditional things that would have
made his stomach rumble if he hadn't felt nauseated with worry already. He froze on the front
landing, only inches inside the house. The biting cold at his back went away as he heard the door
shut. Meredith slid out from behind him after a moment to stand by his right shoulder, and he felt
good about that, that he'd at least given her the few seconds she needed.

He'd expected noise, but there wasn't any, other than a few clinks and clanks of food preparation
coming from the kitchen. He'd expected people, but only Mark, Rachel, and Kathy stood in the
immediate vicinity. He'd expected—

“Holy crap, Derek,” Rachel said as she charged at him from the left, having wormed her way
around Kathy. She wrapped her arms around him, and she squeezed him like he was a long lost
teddy bear she'd found underneath her bed. His breaths froze in his lungs, but he made himself not
jump and not make a startled gasp with every piece of willpower he possessed.

This was what he'd expected. Getting accosted by hugs. His family had always been big on hugs.

“You look so much better!” she said, right against his ear, her voice like an icepick in his skull, and
he pushed down into his well to keep from flinching despite the horrific invasion of his personal
space. His bristled, though, unable to help himself. Her explosion of curly black and green hair
blocked his view of the living room, and with the front door at his back, he didn't have any space
whatsoever.

Pickles, pickles, pickles, pickles he thought wildly, and he knew he wasn't doing what she expected
him to do, like, say, hug her in return. Old Derek would have hugged her. New Derek stood there
like a fucking tree, barely interacting with her at all, but it was the best he could do. New Derek
still loved to hug, but not when he was already so nervous he felt sick, and not when he'd been
tackled, and definitely not when he didn't have any space.

Though he didn't tell her to back off, his body language must have spoken to spite him, because she
let him go. The hurt look on her face made him want to curl into a ball. He'd been here for thirty
seconds, and he'd already done two Not Normal things.

“They're judging you,” Mr. Clark said. “They don't like it.”

“I'm sorry,” Derek blurted. Rachel's eyes widened, and his heart sank. Three Not Normals. Forty
seconds. He felt like there was an imaginary Mr. Clark marking tallies on a blackboard.

Kathy was glaring, not at him, but at Rachel. She pulled at Rachel's t-shirt. “Give him some
space,” she said in a low hiss, which only made him feel more self-conscious.

Mark, who'd been hovering by the fireplace, well out of Derek's bubble, gave him a big grin.
“Hey, man, glad you two made it!” he said. He approached slowly and held out his hand. Derek
grasped it. Mark's palm was warm, and his grip was firm, and nothing in Mark's gaze said
anything bad about the three Not Normals, which helped, but not much.

Rachel snorted, and her antagonism wrapped around Derek like a noose. “A handshake, Mark?”
his sister said. “Did you forget your coffee this morning?”
Derek glanced at his sister and then back to Mark. Mark didn't usually shake Derek's hand, even with the PTSD, but Mark had gotten good at reading when Derek couldn't handle more than that. “We... made it,” Derek said.

The clinks and clanks coming from the kitchen stopped. “Is that them?” he heard his mother call excitedly, though the words were muffled. Something crashed. Water rushed for a second. “Is that them?”

“Yeah, Ma,” Kathy yelled back, and he flinched again. He couldn't help it. He sighed. Four Not Normals. Kathy's gaze flicked to him, and she adjusted her volume to something more reasonable. “It's them.”

“Where... is everybody?” Derek managed.

“They're all at the park,” Kathy said.

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Kathy made Steve and John take them all. Amy went, too.”

He swallowed. “Oh.”

Rachel turned to his mother as she came into the room. “See?” she said. She jabbed her thumb in Derek's direction, and he flinched at the sudden movement so close to his face. Five Not Normals. “He hates it. He wanted everybody here, just like I said he would.”

Kathy elbowed Rachel.

Mom shook her head. “Rachel, stop it,” she admonished in a quiet, gentle tone. And then she pointedly turned to Meredith. She took one look at his wife, from her cold-nipped cheeks, to her bright scarf, to the coat that bulged at her waist, and his mother's excited smile went nuclear. “Oh, Meredith. You look beautiful. Let me take your coat.”

Derek shrank against the door, now that attention had shifted away from him. His hands shook, and he stuffed them into his pockets to hide the sixth Not Normal. They weren't letting him through, and they were crowding him. His skin crawled, and his legs shivered with the desire to make him move. He wanted to move, but bolting would definitely not be normal, and he planted his fucking feet with everything he had.

“What did you expect would happen when you were a nervous wreck before you even got here?” Mr. Clark said.

Pickles. Crunchy.

“Wow, you're just glowing,” Kathy said from far away as Meredith shrugged off her coat.

Meredith froze. “Glow... wait.” She frowned. “Glowing?”

Kathy grinned. “Glowing is good.”

Rachel sighed wistfully. “Gorgeous.”

Meredith froze. “Glowing is good.”

“I'm a flashlight is gorgeous?” Meredith said.

“In this family, it sure is,” Kathy said. “We're going to expect lots of pictures, you know. Have you picked a color for the nursery, yet?”

“Yes,” Mom said as she folded Meredith's coat over her arm, “I'd like to knit something for the
“Um... yellow,” Meredith said. “Maybe.”


Meredith bit her lip. “Um... It was sort of sunshine-y.”

“It's been a few years since we had a new addition,” Kathy said. “Expect craziness.”

“And lots of presents,” Rachel added. “I just love babies. We should go onesie shopping while you're here. We've been calling and calling, but Derek says you don't have a registry, yet.”

“Derek says?” Meredith said.

Rachel paused her gushing to snap her fingers. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “We could get a cute little set of mini scrubs.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “This family needs a surgeon general's warning when it comes to kids.”

Rachel elbowed Mark. “We do not.”

“Do, too,” Mark said. “You guys are like a yapping pack of wolves.”

“It's a baby, Mark,” Kathy said.

Rachel simpered. “A tiny, tiny person!”

“It's a Shepherd family event,” Kathy said.

“And we always thought Derek wouldn't have kids, so it's even more exciting,” Rachel said.

His mother turned to Derek and held out her hand. “May I take your coat, Derek?”

He huddled against the door, unwilling to let her have his only suit of armor, flimsy though it was. His coat rustled as he hugged himself.

“Derek, are you okay?” his mother said, deep concern clutching each syllable.

“I'm... thought...” He swallowed. “I thought...” Swallowed. “More people would be here.”

Mom frowned. “We weren't sure what to do because of yesterday. We wanted you to be comfortable.”

Blush crept across his skin. “I'm sorry.”

“Nonsense,” said his mother. “Everybody understands.”

The put-off look on Rachel's face said, at the very least, she didn't get it. He struggled to focus. There were too many people too close to him and not giving him any room.

“Why don't we get away from the door?” Meredith suggested.

“They're really all...” His heart began to pound. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. He swallowed. “At the park... because of me?”

“They're at the park because they were sticking their hands in my mashed potatoes and eating my
pie crusts,” Mom said. She gave him a sympathetic look. “And we did think it might be easier for you if we filled the house to capacity gradually instead of all at once.”

“You didn't...” Thump-thump. “Need to do that.”

“Told you it was stupid,” Rachel said. She touched him again. Put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “He's totally fine. See?”

He tensed.

“Rachel...” his mother warned.

And then everything that had coiled inside like a spring burst apart. He couldn't hold any of it in anymore. He jerked back against the door, away from her. “Please, don't touch me,” he blurted before he could stop himself or try to pretend he was fine. He wasn't fine, and they weren't letting him breathe. He swallowed, and swallowed, and swallowed again. Seven and eight Not Normals, and he wasn't off the welcome mat, yet. “I... can't.”

“Seriously?” Rachel said.
Kathy grabbed Rachel's shirt and dragged her away. “She's sorry, Derek,” Kathy said.

“All I did was touch his shoulder!” Rachel said.

He pawed uselessly at the door, because he needed to move. Needed to move something. Anything to stave off the need to bolt and add a huge Not Normal number nine, not that there was much of his first impression left to salvage. “I think I need a few minutes to... to... I... I... just need a few minutes.”

“What will they think when you collapse?” Mr. Clark said.

“Der, are you okay?” Kathy said.

“No,” he managed.

He was losing it. His throat started to close. He grappled with his collar, and he made a noise that wasn't a word. He needed to get out of here. His heartbeat became a crush that he could feel. Thump-thump. Thump-THUMP. Thump-THUMP.

“Please, let me out,” he whispered pitifully, giving up on normal.

He just couldn't do it.

Everybody backed off. Immediately. The extra breathing room brought him back from the brink.

“Derek, look at me,” Meredith said calmly, and he did. He did. Thump-thump. He could look at Meredith. “Why don't you show me around? I'd love a tour,” she said. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. She turned to the blur and said, “That's okay, right?”


Thump-thump.

Meredith nodded, and then she looked back at him, her eyebrows raised. “Please, Derek, I'd really like a tour,” she said calmly, as if he weren't falling to pieces right in front of her.

“I'm going to touch you,” she said. “Okay?” He might have nodded.

And then he was being pulled. Normally an upsetting prospect, but he knew it was her doing the pulling with her tiny ineffectual fists. Knew it because everything around him had become a taffy blur of sensation he didn't want to deal with, but Meredith remained in focus. He could deal with Meredith pulling. Meredith could pull him into Hell, and he'd follow. Not that she would.

The living room melted away as Meredith dragged him underneath the arch into the dining room, where his mother had lain out the white tablecloth she'd embroidered with flowers on the table. Meredith glanced wildly around the room, taking in the sights of the heavy drapery, the chairs, the big, hulking table, and the china closet full of shiny plates and serving dishes. A carved wooden box full of silver utensils sat on the tablecloth next to a bottle of silver polish and a dirty rag. The forks had been set to the side on the tablecloth and looked resplendent. The knives and spoons were still in the box and tarnished.

A tour, he thought. Give the tour she'd asked for, he thought. But his brain wasn't working right, yet, and his mouth felt dry, and his limbs shook. He didn't think he could speak that well. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

He thought they might stop in the dining room, but Meredith glanced through the archway, back into the living room, where an irritated Rachel and a Kathy he didn't know how to gauge still stood with his Mom and Mark in a semi-circle around the space Derek and Meredith had just vacated. Still being line of sight wasn't good enough for Meredith, who'd entered flight mode with him, not that he minded. He felt sick and hot with embarrassment, and he didn't want people staring at him, either. She kept dragging him, and he followed.

She moved out of the dining room with him into a short hallway blocked on all sides by doors. Door number one, the left door, she opened to reveal the tiny downstairs bathroom, which was barely more than a sink and a toilet. She evidently didn't want to drag him into the bathroom, so she closed that door and tried door number two. She saw the kitchen ahead, and she never tried door number three. She dragged him forward, her gaze both determined and a precious mix of concerned and worried.

The kitchen was a larger room, full of oak cabinets. His mother had been working on various things on the center island, which was a mess of bowls and pans and plates and knives and spoons. The roasting turkey smell filled the room to the brim and made it hard to breathe without thinking about food. Normally, Thanksgiving turkey was a prospect that made his stomach rumble. In this case, though, he just felt sicker, and he was glad he'd seen Meredith take some Zofran that morning.

Meredith pulled them to the tiny dinette set in the breakfast nook, and she sat him down like a sack of rocks. Or, more, he may have fell that way. He brought his head down and buried his face in his hands. He heard cabinets opening and closing at random to the soft, staccato beats of her panicky, but mild cursing. “Freaking... I don't... invasive... stupid, stupid... do they own any freaking cups?” were the words he heard through the maelstrom of rushing blood in his head. And then he heard a clink, followed by a running faucet.

A crystal glass full of water appeared in front of him on the small table. He couldn't think about drinking a glass of water right now. He couldn't think about what had just happened.

“Definitely a bad first impression,” Mr. Clark said. “They judged you. You failed at a simple
Derek closed his eyes. Took a deep breath.

“Pickles, Derek,” he imagined her saying. “I need the little spears, not the circles. The crunchy ones!”

He focused on that until the house around him faded. Until he wasn't sitting at a table in a breakfast nook. Until he stood in the entryway at the market a few blocks from his and Meredith's house. The rain pattered on the pavement behind him, and he wiped the water from his face. He'd shopped there so many times, at this point, that he didn't even need to look at the aisle markers to find anything. He knew where the ice cream was, the produce, the coffee, the cereal, even the tampons, though Meredith hadn't asked him to buy those since before the shooting.

Aisle four. Condiments. Salad dressing. Soups. Boxed things like macaroni and cheese. He paused to help a woman reach a can of condensed cheddar broccoli soup from the top shelf. She smiled. Said thank you. He didn't have any trouble with things like that when he was in his head. He moved forward.

He touched a cold, glass jar of pickle spears. The fluid inside the jar sloshed. The green caught the overhead fluorescent light—

“Derek?” the real Meredith said, the word a soft, concerned question, and his imaginary place snapped away from his mind's eye. He looked at her. She'd pulled a chair beside him. Her hip almost touched his. He hadn't even heard that part, hadn't heard the legs of the chair sliding across the tiles on the floor.

They eye contact, the tacit acquiescence, was all she needed.

She leaned into him. Wrapped her arms around him. He didn't explain where he'd been in his head. With her, he never seemed to need to, anymore. She got it, anyway. He still wore his black trench coat like a suit of armor, and her hands sliding across the wool made a soft, rustling sound.

“I didn't even make it off the welcome mat,” he said miserably.

“They didn't let you off the welcome mat,” she said.

He stared at his hands. “They were just excited.”

She kissed him. “I think the same could be said for you, couldn't it?”

He shrugged as she rubbed his back. “I guess,” he said. His eyelids dipped. It was hard not to relax when she touched him like this. “Feels good.”

“Have you really been fielding rabid sister calls because we don't have a registry?” Meredith said softly. “I had no idea.”

“A few, yeah. As soon...” He sighed when her knuckles hit a tense knot underneath his shoulder blade and obliterated it. “As soon as they figured out you were pregnant.”

They'd wanted to know everything, not just about what to buy. Sex of the baby. Due date. Name. The works. April 14th, maybe Anne or Adam, he'd managed to interject into their storm of excited babbling, though not the sex, since he and Meredith wanted that to be a surprise.

Meredith sighed. “I wish I'd thought about the fact that they would see a video of the wedding
when I made that joke about The Hair.”

They'd wanted to tell his family in person. Unfortunately, they'd given burned video discs to his mother to carry back to New York with her after their wedding. Nobody had said anything blatant during the wedding like, “Meredith is pregnant!”, but Meredith had made a remark about Derek's hair being passed down through genetics that both she and Derek had forgotten about. It had taken his sisters about five minutes upon first viewing to call him and ask if said baby was hypothetical or not.

“I didn't think about it either, until they called in a tizzy,” Derek said. He looked at Meredith. Gave her a lazy, relaxed smile, because she was starting to make him melt in his seat. She punched out another muscle knot with her tiny fists, and a groan caught in his throat. “But see, Mere?” he said when he'd gathered himself. “They love you. And they're excited. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Neither do you,” she said. “They seem thrilled just to see you. They don't care if you're jumpy.”

He frowned. “I think Rachel hates me.”

“She doesn't hate you, she just doesn't get you, yet,” Meredith said. “It's hard to see somebody you love be so dramatically different.”

“Well, I can't be the person she knows anymore,” he said, frustrated.

“I know,” Meredith said, the words soft and sure, but not condemning.

The conviction in her tone brought him pause, and he stared at her. The fact that she spoke from personal experience wasn't lost on him. At all. And it struck him all over again how much she'd changed since he'd first met her. How much she'd sacrificed. She'd gotten so strong.

Fearless wasn't the right word, because he knew she got terrified. She'd been terrified today. Possibly still was. But there wasn't anything wrong with being afraid, a sentiment he and Dr. Wyatt were trying very hard to pound into his head. He'd never thought less of Meredith for being afraid. Some things in the world, like being threatened with violence, or committing to something you'd been brought up your whole life to fear, were very frightening.

Sometimes, he could convince himself that he wasn't less for feeling fear, either. Other times, he couldn't. But he'd gotten better at it. Better than before. Better at admitting he was scared shitless and either pushing through it or taking a break to try again later. People asked him if he was okay, and he could say no, sometimes, without feeling awful about it. His family seemed to make him hit the rewind-to-square-one button on that growing mentality, but he'd gotten a lot better at work, and a lot better at home with his Seattle family. With Mark and Meredith. Even Lexie and Cristina and Alex, though less so.

You're my role model, you know, he'd said at one point as he and Meredith had lain together, naked in the sheets.

Meredith had looked distinctly ruffled. Who, me?

Yes, he'd said, and then he'd kissed her.

Why? she'd said, the word a tight gasp of confusion.

You used to run, he'd said. Now, you don't. It helps me think I'm not hopeless.
You're not hopeless, she'd insisted. You're not hopeless, Derek.

I'm trying, he'd said.

She'd wrapped her arms around him. I know, she'd said.

Courageous, he decided. Courageous was the right word.

He shrugged off his coat and hung it on the back of the chair. “Thank you for doing this,” he said, because he didn't think those words could be said enough.

“Yes, I am,” she said. She smiled at him, though she fidgeted self-consciously.

They were broken from their moment by the kitchen door creaking open very slowly, as if whoever was on the other side was taking great care not to startle anybody. His mother poked her head and left shoulder into the kitchen. “May I come in for a moment?” she said in a hushed whisper. “I'm so sorry to disturb you; I just need to check on the turkey.”

“Crap,” Meredith said. “You probably need the kitchen on Thanksgiving. I wasn't thinking.”

His mother smiled as she came into the room. “It's quite all right; I needed a little break anyway.” She looked at Derek. “Rachel made your favorite kale salad, by the way.”

Derek's eyebrows rose. “Really?”

“Not a lot, since you're the only one who will eat it, but yes,” his mother said. “She worked really hard on it.”

He didn't know what to say to that. A small seed of hope burgeoned. Maybe, he was overreacting. Maybe, Rachel was, like Meredith said, just a little overwhelmed with the differences in his behavior right now.

He watched as his mother pulled on her favorite oven mitts, ones that looked like big-eyed, smiling cows. She slid open the oven door and checked the meat thermometer quickly before sliding the oven door closed again. The turkey was huge. Well over twenty pounds, if he could guess by sight alone. The skin had turned golden brown, and the smell that wafted into his nose didn't make him feel sick, now that he'd calmed down a little, and his stomach had stopped churning.

“We've missed you, sweetheart,” Mom said as she pulled off her mitts. She peered into a pot she'd left simmering on the stove, but seemed satisfied after she'd stirred it twice, and she looked back at him. “It's so good to see you home. Everybody is excited.” She beamed at him. “It was very hard to get the kids out of the house, because they didn't want to miss you.”

He puffed up and grinned. He couldn't help it. “I am the awesome uncle,” he said to Meredith, who giggled. The beautiful sound robbed him of his last coil tension, and then, at last, somewhere in the middle of all his nerves settling like fallen leaves on the wet ground, he felt home. The feeling he'd been hoping to find again all morning.

He was home with his family, new and old.

His mother winked as she left the room.

He stared at the table.

“Dad, how do you do this?” he said as he erased another line of gibberish numbers. “I don't get
it.” He'd been struggling with this stupid problem for twenty minutes. It didn't make any sense.

Dad looked up from a big stack of bills and peered across the table to the problem in Derek's textbook. He squinted. He frowned. Ran his fingers through his black hair while he thought. Then he scooted his chair closer. He put his index finger on the problem and read. Dad seemed to need to touch books to read them.

“This is dimensional analysis,” his dad said after a moment. “It's not hard, but it can be a little confusing until you get the method down.”

Derek frowned at his book. “It's stupid,” he said. “When will I ever use this?”

Dad squeezed his shoulder. “I have you do this at work all the time, you know,” Dad said. “It's actually pretty useful.”

Derek looked up. “You do? It is?”

Dad nodded. “If I have thirty boxes of nails, and they sell for seventy-five cents each, how many dollars will I make if they all sell?”

“This problem is like that?” Derek said.

“Well, what units are you starting with?” Dad prodded.

Derek reread the problem. “The guy's jogging eight miles an hour.”

“And what units do you need at the end?”

“How many centimeters he ran in forty minutes.” Dad nodded. “So, what do you think might get you from miles an hour to centimeters per minute?”

Derek took his pencil and started scribbling.

Derek blinked at the table. A sheen of wetness stretched over his gaze. He rubbed his eyes. That was the sort of math problem he could do in his sleep, now, but he'd learned it here. From his dad. In the same spot he sat in, now, thirty years later. A lump inexplicably formed in his throat.

“Kale salad is your favorite?” Meredith said gently, bumping him out of the long lost memory.

“With strawberries,” Derek said, nodding. “You might like it.”

She made a face at him. She called it her ick face. “Maybe the strawberries,” she said. “Kale is... kale.”

He shrugged. “More for me, then,” he said. He looked around the kitchen. He had so many memories in this room alone. They all danced in his head, and he felt... warm. Warm and home and all sorts of nice things. He took a deep breath. “I went off the deep end a little.”

“Unexpected stuff happens,” Meredith said.

“I need to be better at handling people who aren't quite sure how to handle me.”

She kissed him. “So, work on that later, and go enjoy your family, now?”

He touched his forehead to hers. Peppermint welled against his nose. Peppermint and whatever flowers had been in the hotel's shampoo. He hadn't read the label. “I really love you,” he said.
“I know,” she replied. Nothing could have made him happier. “Ready to go back out?”

He looked dubiously at the kitchen door. He was happy. He was so happy to be here, and he felt like he was home, finally. But it was one thing to think and feel that in the empty kitchen, or chatting one-on-one with his mother, and another entirely to go back out in front of his sisters, who he'd just panicked in front of, Rachel in particular. As if on cue, Rachel said something in the living room, and the bare sound of it, though unintelligible this far away, carried through the air. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He swallowed.

He didn't want to go back to that, yet."

You wanted a tour, didn't you," he said, "or was that just an excuse to get me out of there?"

“"I wouldn't mind a little tour," she said quietly.

He stood, and she stood with him. He grabbed her hand, and pulled her toward the other doorway. The one that went into the library instead of back to the dining room. He moved over the threshold, only to be yanked to a halt when his arm ran out of slack.

“Oh, my god, is this you?” Meredith said.

He looked back at her. “What?” he said. There weren't any photos on the wall, what—

Her fingertips ran over a set of scribbles on dirty, chipping white molding around the door. The molding had seen better days, but his mother hadn't touched it, even after all these years. Small black horizontal lines about an inch wide, starting at about two feet, ending at about five-and-a-half feet marked the white molding. Each of the many lines had a letter and a height written next to it in messy handwriting that looked a little like Derek's. D, K, R, A, N were the letters.

Meredith’s fingers had paused on the D at five feet, which was the last D marked, because Derek had been five feet tall when his dad had died.

No tiptoes, Derek. Stand flat-footed.

But, Dad—

His father had laughed. Hold still, will you?

Derek blinked at the molding. For a long moment, he didn't know what to say. Didn't have words. He swallowed at the unexpected lump in his throat. “Dad used to measure how tall we were. He marked it on the wall. Mom hated it, but she's never taken it down or painted over it.”

Meredith stared at the molding reverentially, and she lifted her hand away, as if she didn't want to smudge anything. “Do you remember any of these?” He touched the one at four-feet ten. The wood felt cold and worn under the pad of his index finger. “I really wanted to be five feet tall,” he said, “but he wouldn't let me cheat.”

She grinned. He stared at that mark. The second-to-last one. And then he pulled her gently into the library with him. His feet sank into the thick, soft carpet. The smell of books permeated the room. Shelves lined each wall except for the wall with the giant window. He grinned when he turned left. There it was. On the shelf right by the light switch. An old, old edition of Webster's dictionary, too fat to pick up with only one hand, sat on the shelf. He pulled it out to show her.

“He used this to make the marks level,” Derek said. “He sat it on top of our heads and drew the pen along the underside.”
Meredith took the book from him. Her hands sank like a rock until she got used to the weight. “I'm surprised your necks didn't break.”

“It's a heavy book,” he agreed.

She put back the dictionary on the shelf. She looked around the room, eyes brimming with curiosity. Her gaze fell on the old, hulking, tan leather chair in the corner that had seen better days. Dad's chair. The chair didn't match the décor in the room at all anymore. His mother had re-finished all the shelving with a cherry-colored stain, and she'd repainted the walls a pale, cheerful yellow that hadn't been there the last time he'd been home. But she'd always kept the chair. He imagined she would keep it until it fell apart.

“Dad read to me in here when I was little,” Derek said. He pointed to the chair. “I sat in his lap in that chair.”

Meredith wandered across the room, and he followed. She picked up a silver-framed photograph from one of the shelves, an old, black-and-white of a young boy in a white t-shirt and jeans. His hair was curly and dark, and he beamed for whoever was behind the camera. A stadium full of people staring at something else filled the space behind him. “Is this...” Meredith squinted at it, and then looked at Derek. “Is this him, or is this you?” “Me,” Derek said. “Yankees Stadium. Dad took the photo.”

Meredith put the picture down, but she stared at it for a long, silent moment.

He picked up the photo next to the one she'd been looking at. It was a photograph from earlier in the year, a family photo where they'd all dressed up. His dad stood on the left, and his mother stood on the right, and Derek and his sisters filled in the front row. Dad had his hand on Derek's shoulder. Derek didn't look nearly as happy as he had in the Stadium photo, which had been taken toward the end of the school year. His smile was forced, and his lip was busted, but scabbed.

Meredith wrapped her arms around him and peered at the picture with him. “Tell me something new about him,” she said.

_His stomach rumbled, and for a moment, he felt lightheaded. He leaned against the shelf, barely keeping his grip on the inventory clipboard. The pen he'd been holding slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor._

_He stared at the paintbrushes he'd been counting. Had he been on... row six? Or seven? He blinked at the shelf. He couldn't think straight, and the shelf seemed to shimmer. He thought about sitting down in the aisle. Sitting down seemed... nice. In fact, the floor seemed to be getting... closer._

“Derek?” his dad called from the other side of the aisle where they kept the tools like saws and hammers. “Are you almost done over there?”

_Derek swallowed as the world slowed down, and his heartbeats suddenly seemed very loud in the quiet space. “Sh... sure.” He'd tried to sound okay, but he didn't think he'd managed._

_He heard footsteps as Dad rushed into the aisle wearing a stained shop apron. “Derek?” his dad said, and then he was there, in Derek's space. The smell of cedar tickled Derek's nose. Derek wobbled on his feet as the clipboard was gently taken from his shaking hands._

_Dad felt Derek's forehead with the back of his hand, a look of deep concern on his face. “Are you feeling okay?” Dad said._
Derek blinked. Yes, he wanted to say. I'm fine. He'd almost managed. Dinner was only two hours away. Mom made meatloaf every other Monday, and it was meatloaf day. He could taste the peppers and the beef on his tongue already. He licked his lips. And then all he could think about was meatloaf. He couldn't make it for two hours. He just couldn't.

“I'm hungry,” he said woozily, and then he sat down at his father's feet because he couldn't stand up anymore. He would have fallen, instead of sat, but Dad controlled the descent.

“Hungry?” Dad said sharply. “Didn't you eat lunch?” Derek swallowed. His non-answer probably answered for him. The room kept wobbling in and out of focus. He thought he might be in the process of fainting. He didn't think he'd ever fainted. It was a new experience. He didn't like it.

“Peter, mind the register, will you?” he heard his father say, voice rumbling, though the rumble could have been the blood rushing in Derek's ears.

“Sure thing, Mr. Shepherd,” said Peter.

And then the world moved. Something tugged under his shoulders, and Derek rose to his feet, more of the something's volition than his own. The bell over the door rang. The hardware store disappeared. The cool outside air ruffled his hair.

“I'm okay, Dad,” he managed. “Really.” What he should have said earlier. What any self-respecting eleven-year-old would say.

What a wimp, he heard the kids at school say, an echo.

But his father didn't speak as he frogmarched Derek across the street to the diner. Mae, the head waitress, and Dad exchanged words that didn't make much sense. Something about, “Something quick and easy.” In a matter of blurred seconds, Derek found himself sitting in a booth on a red vinyl seat across from his father. Mae put down a bare bones garden salad drizzled with some creamy dressing, a glass of milk, and a piece of the diner's signature carrot cake in front of him.

Dad grinned at Mae. The skin around his eyes crinkled. “Thank you, Mae. You're a dear.”

Mae said something, but Derek didn't hear it. He stared at the chipped surface of the table for less than a second before he grabbed his fork and stuffed his face full of crispy lettuce and explosive cherry tomatoes. He finished the whole salad in a matter of moments and started on the carrot cake, which made his nose crinkle. He wasn't a huge fan of carrot cake, but he was so hungry, the taste didn't matter. He ate the whole sickly sweet thing, icing and all, and then he chugged the entire glass of milk Mae had left him to wash it down.

When the starving frenzy died, he realized his father was looking at him, eyes dancing with fury, mouth set in a grim line. Derek swallowed. “I'm sorry,” he said, and he looked at his lap.

“Don't apologize. You didn't do anything,” Dad said. “They took your lunch money again, didn't they.” Not exactly a question.

A lump formed in Derek's throat. They'd taken more than that. They'd taken his breakfast money, too, and he hadn't eaten since Sunday night. But he'd thought he could make it until dinner. He'd tried.

What a wimp, the kids said again. He heard them laughing.

He fiddled with one of the napkins and didn't speak. The diner was narrow and long, full of about
twenty-five red vinyl booths, with big bright windows that looked out on the busy street. A jukebox sat by the front door near the cash register. His dad took him to this place with Mark every Sunday afternoon after work for milkshakes, a happy, sharp contrast to the misery of now.

All the bruises from the day suddenly hurt a lot more. His eyes pricked. If he spoke, he’d just cry, and that would be proving them all right. Men didn’t cry. Only wimps and girls cried.

Dad shook his head. The vinyl squeaked as he shifted, and then stood, and then switched to Derek’s side of the booth. His father’s arm came down around Derek’s shoulder, and Derek felt himself pulled into a warm, tight embrace, but Dad didn’t say a thing, not one word. He sighed like he was disappointed, but he rubbed a firm, strong hand up and down Derek’s arm.

Derek closed his eyes. He hated school. He hated it so much. Ever since he’d gone to middle school. Mark was a year behind him and was still in elementary.

Mark was the one who could hit.

Not Derek.

“Will you tell me what happened?” his dad said. He squeezed Derek’s shoulder.

The lump in Derek's throat grew. He said nothing. He'd said nothing the last time, too. And the time before that. His dad hadn't said anything about it the first time when Derek refused. The second time, Dad had been a bit more persistent. This time...

“Is there someone else you'd rather talk to?” his dad prodded gently. “It's okay. It doesn't have to be me.”

If Derek told, his dad would try to intervene. Derek knew it. Dad would talk to the principal, or the kids, or the kids' parents, and then it would only get worse. Everybody would hate Derek even more, and he'd never fit in, and it would never ever stop.

Derek’s lower lip quivered. “No.”

Dad sighed and ran his hands through his dark, curly hair. His skin rasped as he wiped his face with his palm in an upset motion. Then he took a deep breath, as if he were steeling himself for something.

“Where is this happening?” Dad said.

Derek stared at the table.

His father shifted. The red vinyl seat squeaked. He wrapped both arms around Derek and squeezed before letting him go. “I promise nothing goes beyond this table, Derek. Whatever you tell me stays between us.”

“You'll tell on me,” Derek said. “They'll find out I ratted.”

“I won't tell anybody, Der. I just want to hear from you what’s going on. I promise.”

Derek's chest constricted. The diner was empty. It was too early in the afternoon for the dinner crowd, and way too late for lunch. They were alone, save for Mae, who shuffled around behind the front counter, stacking menus. The careworn woman was well out of hearing range.

“I promise,” Dad said again with quiet surety, and then he pantomimed a zipper across his lips
using his thumb and index finger.

Derek blinked, and the world blurred. “They corner me on the way to school,” he blurted. Usually, he managed to dodge them on the way there, and those were the days he got to eat. Sometimes, they terrorized him in the bathroom, too, even when they knew he had no money to give them. “And in the bathroom. I try not to go, but…” Even if he didn't drink anything in the morning, he couldn't make it past the final bell.

Dad stilled.

“Please, don't tell anybody,” Derek said into the silence.

“I won't tell anybody,” his dad said, his voice a low murmur. “But maybe we can come up with a plan.”

Derek wiped his face with the back of his hand. “A plan?”

His dad bumped shoulders with him. “A plan. What could you try to get them to stop? How would you like to solve this?”

“Me?” Derek said.

Dad nodded and gave him a soft, understanding smile. “Yes, you.”

Derek looked at the table. He'd managed to tear one of the napkins to tiny paper shreds with all his self-conscious fiddling. “I wish I could hit back like Mark,” he said.

Dad was silent for a moment. “What do you think might happen if you hit back?” he said.

“I don't know,” Derek said. He shrugged half-heartedly. Usually, when Mark hit back, everything turned into a brawl, and Mark got put in detention, but at least Mark didn't starve. “A fight.”

“What else could you do?” Dad said.

Derek gritted his teeth. “Call them jerks.”

“That's a bit like hitting them,” Dad said.

“Well, I've tried running away, and they just yank me back,” Derek said, frustrated. His fingertips hurt from grabbing at trees. No parking signs. Cars. The fence. Anything available.

“Do you know if they do this with anybody else?” Dad said.

Derek swallowed. Honestly, he felt like all those kids did was wait for him—the easy pickings shrimp. He tried to avoid them, but they always found him eventually. He'd never seen them picking on anybody else. He was alone.

“No,” he said.

“Do you know why they do this?” Dad said.

“Because I'm small,” Derek replied.

Dad shook his head. “No, it's because they're small, and that's not your fault.”

“They're huge, Dad. I can't—”
“No, I mean... they feel small. Maybe, something is wrong at home. Hurting other kids makes them feel bigger.”

“Oh,” Derek said. And then he frowned. “What would be wrong at home?”

Dad shrugged. “Sometimes, moms and dads don’t get along very well.”

Derek frowned. He couldn't imagine that. At all.

“The point is, though,” Dad said, “that they want to hurt you, and you shouldn't give them what they want.”

“But it does hurt!” Derek said. Tears renewed in earnest. He was a wimp. Just like they said. “They call me names, and they won't let me leave until I give them my money, and then I can't eat all day, or I can't go, and—”

Dad hugged him. “I know, Der. I know it hurts. And you're very brave to talk to me about this. Do you understand that I think you're very brave?”

“I don't feel brave,” Derek said.

“Well, you are,” Dad said. He ran his fingers through Derek's hair. “Those kids are the cowards, Derek. Not you. And I'm not saying you shouldn't hurt when they do these things. What they do is a hurtful thing.”

“I don’t understand.”

Dad squeezed Derek's shoulder. “Derek, do you know what a poker face is?”

“He always seemed to know how to handle everything without making me feel handled,” Derek said as he placed the picture where he'd found it on the shelf, a lone tree in a forest of pictures. He had no idea what kind of parent he would make when he couldn't even deal with a hug from his overzealous sister without flipping out.

Meredith rested her head on his shoulder. “I wish I'd had that. Maybe, I wouldn't have turned out so deeply freaky.”

“You're not freaky,” Derek said. And then he sighed. “I miss him.” He blinked, and his eyes watered. “I miss him a lot. I didn't used to think about him much. I think about him all the time, now. What he'd be like, now, if he were alive. What he'd think of me. I'm not sure he'd be pleased.”

“I think he'd be proud,” Meredith said.

“You really think so?”

“Yeah, I do,” she said. “It takes a lot of courage to get help.”

Derek nuzzled her, pressed his nose against her hair. “You realize you're talking about yourself, now, not me, right? You're more courageous than anybody I know.”

“I'm not,” she said.

“You are.” He kissed her, and a rueful laugh popped loose from his lips as he pulled away. “We're doing it again. Dr. Wyatt would slap us on the wrists and make us start journals.”
Her eyes twinkled as she stared at him. He loved her smile. “Being hopelessly negative about ourselves?” she said.

“Mmmhmm.”

“I'll stop, if you stop,” she said.

“On three?”

She nodded. “Two.”

“One,” he said.

They shared a long silence. Derek took a deep breath.

“Are you okay, now?” Meredith said.

“I'm better,” he said honestly. “You?”

“I'll live.” She glanced at the doorway. “A little more tour? Or back to your family?”

He'd calmed down. He didn't feel sick or panicky anymore. He felt no pressure when it was just him and Meredith in their own little bubble, but he couldn't stay in that bubble forever. A tiny pile of worry twisted at the thought of going back into the fray where he would be judged, but there wasn't much he could do to get rid of it, other than to get things over with.

**Do you understand that I think you're very brave?** his dad said, a distant echo.

Derek tried to hold onto that, instead of the hating words of Mr. Clark. It was hard. It was so hard. But he tried. He was less of a nervous wreck, now, and it was easier to think straight. Easier to think about good things. He wouldn't think badly of Mark, had Mark been in this position instead. He wouldn't think badly of anybody trying to come home with a new illness, mental or physical or both. He tried not to think badly of himself for having difficulties with something that was truly difficult. Something that would be difficult for **anybody**.

**You're the strongest person I know,** Meredith had said many times.

He tried to hold onto that, as well.

“I just don't get it,” he heard Rachel saying as he walked back to the living room with Meredith's small hand clutched in his. Meredith walked beside him, a bastion of support, but even then, his grip on the good things faltered when he heard Rachel's frustration bleeding from every syllable. “Crap happens to everybody, and we pick ourselves up. It's been nearly six months. Shouldn't he be less jumpy by now? He's not Derek. He's not acting like my little brother.”

Derek froze just outside the room. Closed his eyes. So much for hoping Rachel had sorted through her initial surprise. Now, she sounded like she'd had a chance for her concerns to boil over and make a mess of the stove, and she was on a tear.

“She'll judge,” said Mr. Clark, a quiet, returning whisper. “She'll judge, and she'll hate you. She hates you already.”

Meredith squeezed his hand, and Mr. Clark's voice snapped away.

“He has a mental illness, Rachel,” Kathy insisted in his defense, which, put that baldly, didn't make Derek feel much better, though it was the truth.
He did have a mental illness.

“Well, that's crap!” Rachel said. “He should be able to—”

He stepped into the room, and she shut up. Fast. Mark and his Mom and Kathy looked at him, but Rachel looked away.

“Should be able to what?” he said, the words quiet. His voice sounded shaky. He cleared his throat and steeled himself.

*Derek, do you know what a poker face is?*

Rachel's miffed expression dissolved into horror when she got a good grasp of how much he'd heard, but she stuffed her emotions behind a cold mask in seconds. She took a short breath and steeled herself, much like Derek had just tried to do. Kathy attempted to diffuse the situation by stepping between them, but that didn't stop Rachel from saying imperiously, “You should be able to handle your family touching you, Derek. Six months, and Mark doesn't clap you on the back anymore, and I can't even squeeze your shoulder or hug you?”

Meredith stiffened beside him, and calm resolve threatened to turn into something nasty. “H—”

“And how would you suggest I fix that?” Derek said, interrupting Meredith before she could leap like Wolverine to his defense, though he did appreciate her sentiment.

“Get a new shrink,” Rachel said, her tone hostile. “I don't know. Clearly whatever yours is doing isn't working.”

“Rachel, that's *enough,*” Mom said, her voice low and furious.

Kathy folded her arms and glared at Rachel. “A psychiatrist isn't a magic fix-it button, you know.”

But he ignored Kathy, and he ignored his mother. He spoke calmly, though he didn't feel calm. “I'm still me, Rache,” he said, refusing to drop eye contact with her. Refusing to be cowed. He was so sick of being cowed. His entire body hummed, and his heartbeat began to thunder in his ears. Thump-thump.

Rachel snorted and looked away.

His legs started to shake with the adrenaline of confrontation, and he resisted the urge to flee the room. He'd backed up for Gary Clark. He'd spent the last six months backing up. This was his family. *His* family. He took his nerves and funneled them into defiance.

“I remember when you graduated high school,” he said. “It was a year after Dad died, and you couldn't even get through your speech without crying. I remember when you hitchhiked back here from Cornell because you were homesick. You came home every weekend for a year before you were okay with being alone. I remember when you totaled Steve's car a few weeks after you'd met him, and I told him for you, because you were feeling so guilty, you wouldn't eat.

Rachel sniffed and folded her arms defensively. “What does any of that have to do with anything?”

“Somebody *shot* me,” he said. He pressed his hand to the pockmark underneath his left nipple. He could still feel it through his shirt. “That bullet came within a millimeter of killing me instantly. I couldn't breathe, or walk, or defend myself, and the only reason I'm standing here having a conversation with you at all is because of Meredith and her friend.” He jabbed his thumb in Meredith's direction. “*She* saved my life.”
Kathy blinked tears. “Derek,” she said, her voice torn. He hated that he'd upset them, he kept going, anyway, before he completely lost his nerve to the thunderous pounding of his heart. They needed to hear this.

“Some things really scare me,” he said, and his voice cracked. “Like loud noises, and people touching me when I'm not expecting it, because those things make me think I'm being attacked.” He felt Meredith lean into him, a soft, firm reminder that she was there with him. His wingwoman. “I'm trying to be better about all of this, I truly am, and I'm sorry I can't be the little brother you remember right now, but this isn't something I can just switch off, just like you couldn't switch off grief, or homesickness, or guilt.”

Rachel reddened.

“I have some big problems. Do you think I don't know that?” he said. “But I'm still me, Rachel. I remember when you were pregnant with Cody, and Steve was on a business trip. You went into premature labor, so I took you to the hospital, and I held your hand. That was me.”

Rachel's lower lip quivered. She started to cry, just like Kathy and his mom. Meredith was crying, too. The whole fucking room except for Mark was crying, and Derek felt like he'd just stabbed a puppy or something. His sudden courage drained like a sieve, and he felt horrible. He hadn't thought about Meredith. She didn't like hearing about the details.

*I don't want to remember you nearly dying, she'd screamed at him only a few months ago. I don't want it, Derek! Do you want to remember me in the water?*

“I need you guys to understand this because you're my family, and I really need my family,” he managed, before he lost his momentum, and then his throat felt too full to talk, and he couldn't take looking at a bunch of women who were crying because of him, particularly Meredith and his mom, so he looked at his feet instead. He felt like a giant jackass.

The front door opened, and Derek shied away. He couldn't stop himself when he was already so upset. His heart thundered, and he felt faint and sick with the need to run, but then Meredith was there, tears and all, and just having her in his field of view, clearly not panicking, helped him find enough of his center to keep from falling apart. He made himself not fall apart through sheer stubborn will. The sounds of his heart beating subsided in the rush, leaving dead silence and shame behind.

Steve stared at them all from the threshold. He was a tall, freckled man with red hair, a round face, and a ruddy complexion. He worked for Merrill Lynch as a mutual fund manager for a few hundred clients. He was a high roller, but for family gatherings like this, he relaxed. He wore jeans and a sweatshirt that were a little too big for him, and his sneakers were stained from years of trekking in the mud. “Whoa,” he said in his typical deep baritone. “What happened?”

Rachel took one look at her husband. Her lower lip quivered. She sniffed and wiped her face. And then she marched out of the room, her nose pointed toward the ceiling as if to say, *You can't cow me, either, Derek Shepherd.*

A lump formed in Derek's throat. He'd screwed up again. He knew it. He'd upset everybody. On Thanksgiving. Why did this have to be so hard? He blinked, and then the room blurred. God, damn it. He'd made everybody cry.

“This isn't how I wanted this to go,” he said, his voice thick and warbling with embarrassment. He wildly thought about places he could take his pregnant wife at the last minute on Thanksgiving. “Should I leave? I can...”
“No, you should not leave,” Mom snapped, cutting him off.

“Nobody should leave,” Kathy said as she wiped the remnant tears from her face. She took a deep breath. “Can we all just accept that this is weird for everybody? Anything like this takes some time.”

Derek rubbed the bridge of his nose. He needed to apologize. Or something. He didn't know what. “Let me go see if I can talk to her.”

“Derek,” Kathy began, “that might not be a good—”

“I have to try,” he said. “You can tell everybody at the park to come back,” he said to Steve, and then he turned to Meredith, whose eyes were red. He wanted to talk to Rachel, but not at Meredith's expense. He pressed his forehead against hers, and then he kissed her. *I'm so sorry*, he said, but didn't say.

Her gaze softened. *It's okay*, she told him in return. *I'm glad you did what you needed.*

“Will you be okay?” he said aloud.

She gave him a watery grin. “Just call me Dorothy,” she said.

“Dorothy?” Kathy said.

Meredith gave his sister a wry look. “Private joke.”

“Oh.”

“Meredith...” Derek said.

“I'm okay,” she said. She wiped her eyes with her hands, and she looked a lot better. Her eyes were bright, and she smiled genuinely. “Really. Go talk to her.” Satisfied, he gave her a nod, one last kiss, and he trudged after Rachel, who he found in the library where he and Meredith had been, talking about his father, moments before. His sister stood by the window in a bath of muted fall light. Her hands were folded over her chest, rumpling her Florence and the Machine t-shirt. She'd gotten her hair highlighted with green tips at some point since she'd visited him in the hospital. He couldn't see her face, but he heard her sniffing.

*Derek stared at the wall in his bedroom, silent. He sat on the bed, Indian-style on top of the quilt his mother had made for the bed. His baseball glove lay in his lap, clutched around an old baseball. He was sixteen, now. Dad was supposed to be there to take him to their annual game.*

*Rachel knocked softly on his open door. Her keys jingled as she shifted. “Hey,” she said. She'd dyed her hair cotton candy pink that year, and it made her head look a bit like a blob of strawberry ice cream. His mother hated the colors, but Rachel kept coming up with new ones to shock and horrify.*

*He looked at her dully, feeling too dour to tease her today. “What?” he said.*

*His fingers clenched around the old leather glove. Dad was supposed to be there, but he wasn't.*

*Rachel pulled two ticket stubs from her jeans pocket, and she gave him a watery smile. “I thought I would take you, this time.”*  

*His throat tightened. “You don't even like baseball.”*
She sat on the bed beside him. “No,” she admitted. She put her hand on his shoulder. She blinked, and tears spilled. “But I do love you.”

“Rache?” he said softly as he entered the room.

She looked at him. Her face was streaked with glistening tear tracks, and her eyes and cheeks were red. Her deep blue gaze took him in, head to toe. Her lower lip quivered, and then she turned away to stare out the window. Her shoulders shook.

His chest tightened at the sight of her. He'd done that. His fault.

“Rachel, I'm sorry,” he said as he closed the space between them and sidled hesitantly to her side. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, and though she acknowledged his presence, she didn't move closer to him, which felt weird. Of the whole family, Rachel was the biggest offender in the hug department. He swallowed against the lump in his throat. “I'm sorry I'm like this. I wish I could fix it.” He would have given anything to fix it.

She shook her head. “It's not your fault,” she said, her voice twisted with misery.

Derek blinked, surprised. “But I—”

“Mom said to give you some space,” she said. She rubbed her eyes. “I didn't want to believe her because you're...” She looked at him, and she smiled through her tears. “Well, you're you.”

“I'm sorry, Rache. I—”

“I hate guns. I hate them, Derek,” she snapped. “Dad is dead, and I can't even touch you anymore.”

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tightly against him. She squeaked in surprise, and then a hitching breath flowed out of her body. She relaxed like he'd drugged her, like this, this hug, this was all she'd wanted the whole afternoon. Maybe, it had been.

“Yes, you can touch me,” he murmured against her hair.

“But you said—”

“You lunged at me,” he said, figuring honesty was the only policy at this point. “Then, you all had me cornered by the door, and I didn't have any space. I was already a nervous wreck about making a good first impression, and I kept making more and more errors that you were noticing, and I just...” He sighed. “It was too much, and I lost it.”

“Oh, I...” She pulled back, and she looked at him with a guilty frown. She wiped her eyes. “I didn't even think of that.” She pushed back into his embrace. “I'm sorry, Derek.”

“I do like this,” he said. “I do. I just need a little warning, and I need to not feel cornered.”

“Oh,” she said, the word soft. Her lithe arms wrapped around him. She clutched his shirt, and she didn't let go.

In the distance, he heard the front door open, and a crash of voices entered the house like a stampede. He heard John's unmistakable timbre. He heard Amelia saying hi. He heard the kids. Giggles. A screech. He stiffened, and he clenched his teeth. There were fifteen people out there. All crammed into the living room like sardines, he imagined. He didn't know how he would do this, but he focused on pickles, pickles, pickles, and his tension slowly bled away.
“This is really difficult for you,” she observed.

“Yes, but I swear I’m trying as hard as I can.”

“Me, too,” she said. She sniffed, and he rubbed her back in slow, soothing circles. “I do want you here. I love you. I’ll always love you. You’re my brother. It’s just...”

He closed his eyes. “Hard?”

She nodded rapidly, but she didn’t speak for a long moment. He listened to her sniffle as she tried to collect herself, and he kept moving his back up and down her spine. “Dad used to do that when I was upset,” she said when she found her voice.

“Where do you think I learned it?”

She laughed ruefully. He liked it much better when she laughed, and it did a lot to soothe his nerves.

“Want to go back out, now?” he said.

She raised her eyebrows. “Do you?”

He looked dubiously back at the door. There was a lot of noise filtering through. Enough to make his skin crawl. But he’d left Meredith out there. He’d left Meredith alone in that crush to act out the Wizard of Oz, and, even with the nerves... he really did miss them. All of them.

“You might have to push me the last few feet,” he sort of joked.

“Should I warn you first?” Rachel said with a teasing smile. “Send a messenger pigeon?”

“Funny,” he said.

She pushed against him playfully. “I’m a funny girl,” she said. Her eyes were red, still, and it was clear she’d been upset, but she looked so much better, now. She seemed like Rachel he knew and loved and had grown up with, now that she understood she could still play with him, just... not as hard.

He let her take the lead heading back to the living room. When they hit the threshold, hit the veritable wall of noise and people, she kept going a step before she realized he’d slammed to a stop. Rachel looked back at him. Guys, look who's here! she would have said excitedly, clapping, if he’d visited last year before he’d gotten sick, because that was the kind of bubbly, effervescent person she was, and all the kids would have converged on him like a swarm of noisy ants. She didn't do that now. Didn't draw any attention to him whatsoever. She gave him an encouraging smile, and then went to sit by her husband.

Derek took a short, clipped breath. The adults and older kids had mostly taken seats in the ring of chairs his mother had put out around the big room in a circle. The younger kids were... chaos. On the floor. Everywhere. He eyeballed the empty folding chair between Abby and Meredith, who’d taken refuge next to Mark and was looking almost as wildly at the room as Derek was. At least Mark was trying to keep her occupied with what looked like a very poor excuse for conversation. But he was trying.

Meredith and Mark. His people. And Abby, whom he adored, and hadn't gotten a chance to talk to in what felt like a year, now. She’d called him a few times when he’d been in the hospital, but... hell if he could remember those conversations beyond the fact that he’d had them. He’d been too
stoned.

He used that empty seat between Abby and Meredith as a carrot on a stick. He didn't say hello, yet, to anybody. Didn't announce that he was there. He just had to make it to that seat, and then he could worry about behaving like a human being once he'd done that. Everybody was so busy chatting in small, happy groups, nobody noticed him.

A few feet from his goal, Abby caught sight of him and lit up. Abby looked more like her father John than like Kathy. She'd inherited John's dirty blond hair, which she in turn dyed platinum, and she had John's button nose, and his oval face. *Uncle Derek!* it looked like she wanted to say, but he supposed she'd either caught on to Rachel's choice for subtlety or had been forewarned by Kathy, because Abby didn't say anything.

“Hey,” Meredith said softly as he sat down.

He gave her a kiss. “Are you okay?” he murmured.

“I've just been given a detailed plan about how Mark intends to woo Lexie back,” she said.

“Woo?” he said.

Mark leaned forward to see around Meredith's shoulder. “Woo,” Mark said. “I've been reading a how-to book.”

Derek snickered. “A book on how to woo?”

“Hey, man,” Mark said, and he held up his hands. “It was conversation.”

Derek pulled Meredith into his arms, and he gave her a kiss. Thank you, he mouthed over her head.

Meredith seemed to relax in his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder. She didn't seem to want to say much, seemed happy to soak things in, tucked safely in his protective bubble. He didn't begrudge her some Derek-as-a-human-shield time.

“Abby,” he said, turning to his oldest niece.

She grinned at him. “Guess what my grade in molecular neurobiology is right now,” she said.

“Hmm,” he said. He tried to make a show of guessing, though he knew from Kathy's excited babbling on the phone that Abby was somewhere in the summa cum laude range as she neared graduation. “70%?”

Abby rolled her eyes and laughed. Kathleen had asked him to let Abby shadow him for a day when she'd been a sophomore in high school. Kathy had been trying to show her daughter what kind of career options were out there, not as anything binding, just... as helpful encouragement. Being the awesome uncle with an awesome uncle reputation to uphold, he'd let Abby put on scrubs and watch a hemispherectomy right next to the operating table, and she'd been smitten with neurosurgery ever since. She'd applied to his first alma mater, Bowdoin, early decision, and she'd gotten in without needing to apply anywhere else.

“I am really proud of you,” he said, and she brightened.

And that was when the room quieted, and he realized everybody was staring at him. They'd noticed he'd joined them. He swallowed. His muscles stiffened, and he couldn't help but sink in
his chair. Under scrutiny, he found it a lot harder to smile, but he made himself do it. He smiled over Meredith's head, and he squeezed her shoulder. He wasn't sure if he was reassuring her, or reassuring himself.

“Hi, everyone,” he said, barely, to the huge crowd.

“Sibling spat resolved?” John said with a playful grin. He and Kathy sat across the room on the piano bench like a pair of birds on a wire. Rachel made a face. “It wasn't a spat.”

“A misunderstanding,” Derek added kindly.

Mark elbowed Meredith, and she twitched in Derek's arms. “Bets on the first real fight?” Mark said.

“The first?” Meredith said as she pulled away and sat up. She looked wildly at Derek. “As in there are multiples?”

“They're not fight fights,” he assured her.

Mark shrugged. “Well, it is Thanksgiving.”

“But they're not real fights,” Derek interjected. “Don't give her ideas.” He looked at Meredith. “They're mild disagreements.”

“Like what?” Meredith said.

Mark's eyes gleamed. “Ask who likes Mayor Bloomberg and see.”

“Let's not do politics right, now, okay?” Derek said. “I already have a headache.”

Mark folded his arms. “Fine,” he said. And then he grinned. “Ask who likes Star Wars.”

“You wouldn't,” Derek said.

“Didn't you miss this?” Mark said, but before Derek could answer, Amelia was there right in front of him.

He flinched. He couldn't help it. But he collected himself quickly, and he accepted her apologetic look, giving her a wink in return. She dropped to her haunches, crouching so she was eyelevel with him.

“Hey,” she said, leaning close to whisper against his ear, giving him a little privacy from Abby. “How are you doing?”

“I've been better,” he said. And then he gave her a tiny grin. “I've also been much worse.”

Amy nodded with understanding. “I know that feeling.”

“Thanks for...” He swallowed. “Thanks for all the phone calls.”

“Any time,” she told him. She made a sweeping gesture toward the noisy room. “Have you told them?”

“No,” he said.

“Okay,” she replied, and she pantomimed a zipper closing over her lips. He blinked, momentarily
dumbfounded to see such a profound remnant of his father in the room with them, but she'd moved away to talk to Mom before he could say anything.

That was when a small body plowed into him like a wrecking ball, and Derek flinched again. Just a little. His heart sped up and then slowed down. The constant adrenaline baths were making him ache even more than he'd been aching that morning, but he steadied himself, and he managed to stuff his nerves away in a box before he reacted too badly. He looked down to see his newest nephew staring up at him with big blue eyes and wisps of explosive, curly black hair just like Rachel's. Cody held a little matchbox truck in one hand, and a car in the other, and it was clear from his “oops” expression that he'd gotten carried away.

For a moment, Derek was stunned. The tiny baby with the bright smile he'd held in his arms, only weeks before he'd left Manhattan, had gotten really big. He'd seen lots of pictures, but seeing Cody in the flesh was profoundly different. He'd watched Cody being born. Cody had been seven weeks premature, a tiny ball of wrinkles and skin and scrunched up eyes, and his entire hand hadn't been much bigger than Derek's thumbnail. He seemed to be catching up to the growth curve, finally.

“Hi, Cody,” Derek said, leaning forward.

Cody didn't seem to know what to do about this big person who knew his name, and Derek's heart twinged a little. He'd been away too long. He was the awesome uncle. For the kids who still recognized him, like Abby, he supposed. The youngest Shepherds in the crowd, like Cody and Morgan, who were here, and Mary, who was in Houston with Nancy, probably wouldn't know him as anything more than a complete stranger.

Derek held out his hand and smiled. “I'm your Uncle Derek. Do you remember me?” he said, the words gentle.

Cody didn't say anything. Didn't take Derek's hand. He stared like he'd been caught with a cookie he wasn't supposed to have. Derek could sympathize.

“I get a little nervous around new people, too,” he said.

Rachel, who'd been watching the exchange, slipped down from her chair, crawled across the bright, oriental rug, and scooted up beside her son. She rubbed Cody's shoulder.

“Cody, this is your Uncle Derek,” she said, her voice injected with cheer. “He was there when you were born. I bet you don't remember that.”

Cody shook his head, and he hid behind Rachel.

“Hi, Cody!” Derek said, and he winked at his nephew.

Cody stayed mostly hidden behind Rachel. He gripped her leg and put his cheek against her shirt. But he smiled, and Derek saw a fantastic collection of little baby teeth that hadn't been there before.

“The last time I saw you, you fit in my arms,” Derek said. Cody had been almost one when Derek had left for Seattle. “Do you remember that?”

Cody shook his head.

“I don't think you could fit anymore,” Derek said. “You look like you could be ten.”

Cody grinned, and he held up four tiny fingers.
“Four, now. Wow!” Derek said with an appropriate level of amazement. He glanced at Meredith and grinned. She looked... hesitant. Like she couldn't figure out how to enter the conversation, but she wanted to give it a try. Families scared her, but Cody was a tiny person. A lot less threatening. Her hand rested on her belly, and his throat filled up, not with bad nerves for once, but yet another astonished I'm-going-to-be-a-dad-soon thought, followed by the heart-constricting additional thought, with Meredith. He would be a dad soon with Meredith. He coughed a little to clear his throat, and wrapped his arm over Meredith's shoulder as he turned back to his young nephew. “Have you met your Aunt Meredith, yet?”

Cody shook his head. He seemed more intent on jamming his cheek into Rachel's shirt than talking to these strange adults.

Meredith grinned. “Hi, there. I'm Meredith. What's your name?”

Rachel gave Cody a little push. “Cody, say hello,” she said.

“Hello,” he said reluctantly, and Derek blinked. He remembered that voice, though when he'd left, Cody had only known a few single syllable words like ma and da.

Meredith held out her hand. “It's really nice to meet you, Cody,” she said, but Cody seemed too shy to shake on it.

“What do you have a game you like to play?” Derek said, trying to draw Cody out a little.

When Cody didn't answer, Rachel did for him. “He likes to play Candy Land,” she offered helpfully.

“Do you have a game you like to play?” Derek said, trying to draw Cody out a little.

When Cody didn't answer, Rachel did for him. “He likes to play Candy Land,” she offered helpfully.

“Do you have a game you like to play?” Derek said. And then he tossed his bait. “Do you want to play Candy Land for a few minutes? I think your grandma has that in the library.”

Cody's eyes lit up. Victory. Derek grinned. There was a reason he was the awesome uncle. And this would be both a great way to reintroduce himself in a less crowded setting, and a great way to help Meredith get her feet wet with the whole not-a-horrible-aunt thing.

“I can play, too?” said a small voice, and Derek looked to the right, surprised, but not overwhelmingly so. Morgan, Kathy's youngest, a year older than Cody, stood there, too. Her thumb was stuck in her mouth. She wore a little teal-colored dress and a tiny pair of patent black Mary Jane shoes. She'd inherited the same dirty blond hair from her father that Abby had, and her big security blanket dragged behind her in a fuzzy pile.

Derek beamed at her. Double victory. And he hadn't even been trying.

“I think that would be very fun,” he said. He squeezed Meredith's shoulder. “I have to warn you, though, your aunt is a card shark.”

Cody giggled.

“You think I'm kidding,” he said.

“What's a card shark?” Morgan asked.

“Derek, we've never played cards,” Meredith said, eyes twinkling.

“No,” he said, and he kissed her, “but you're great at stealing hearts.”
The whole room collectively groaned, and he chuckled when he caught Rachel's grimace as he pulled away.

“Okay, definitely still the same Derek,” Rachel said, rolling her eyes as he stood up.

“See?” he said. He grinned at the room, nerves momentarily forgotten, and then he went to play Candy Land with his wife, niece, and nephew.

Sometimes, being pregnant involved Meredith thinking she was a fat blimp whale. Sometimes, being pregnant made her want to cry at random intervals about things Normal Meredith wouldn't have been caught dead shedding a freaking tear over. Sometimes, being pregnant made her think porny pornstar things in what should have been sexless situations. She hadn't run into a moment where all three sometimes things happened concurrently. Until now, when the cornucopia of pregnancy-related what-the-hell-is-wrong-with-my-brain coalesced, she'd been blessed with singular bouts of weirdness.

In fact, Meredith decided, today, her head felt like a mix tape made by a drunk guy, and she kind of wanted to strangle whoever had invented hormones.

Kathy deposited a white box—a board game of some sort—in the center of the long oak table, which shone under the glow of the chandelier. She sat down with a gleam in her eye. Nobody at the table looked surprised by this development. In fact, everybody but Carolyn, who'd begged off this affair and retreated into the library for some post-dinner Grandma time with the younger kids, was sitting in a ring around the dining room table, and everybody at the table except for Derek sat with salivary looks on their faces. Kind of like a football team getting ready to go out on the field or something.

Taboo, the box said in bright gold lettering, and there was a smirking stick-figure face on the front, but that didn't help Meredith determine what sort of twisted Shepherd family ritual she was getting sucked into. She glanced at Derek, hoping for a clue, but he gave her nothing. Derek stared at the box with a singular intensity that told her he was exhausted and running on fumes, like if he didn't stare at the box, he might collapse. Pickles, pickles, pickles, she could almost hear him reciting to himself.

“What's Taboo?” Meredith said.

She'd made it through the afternoon. Through a drama free, almost pleasant dinner. Derek was still in one piece, she hadn't made a horrible faux pas that she was aware of, because with immense effort, her porny pornstar/blimp whale/sentimental mush thoughts had all stayed in her head, and the only wrong thing that had happened since Rachel and Derek had made nice was that the turkey, or whatever, wasn't sitting well in her already too full stomach. Of course now would be the look-dumb-learning-a-game-you-haven't-played-before curve ball. After all, why not now?

“You haven't played it before?” Rachel, who sat on Meredith's left, said gently.

Meredith clenched her fists. “Nope.”

Only child. Neglectful mom. Surely, Derek had given them the freaky-Meredith rundown?

But Rachel didn't go in a piteous I'm-sorry-for-your-pathetic-family direction, nor did she snark about it, instead. “No party games in college?” Rachel said, her tone only curious, not demeaning. “We played strip Taboo at mine.”
“Strip Taboo?” Mark said. “How does that even work?” And then he grinned lecherously. “I'd like to know more.”

“I'm pretty sure you can make any game into a stripping game,” Derek, who sat to her right, interjected.

Meredith glanced at him. “Seriously?” she said.

“Oh, yes,” Derek said. He dipped his head low and kissed her temple. There was a heaviness and a sluggishness to his demeanor despite his playfulness. Even so, he added with a throaty purr against her ear, “Why, is that a challenge?”

An eight letter word for sex? phantom Derek asked huskily from the dinner table in her head. A crossword puzzle lay beside him on a rumpled place mat.

Oh! Oh, she said, excited. How about copulate?

Wow, he said with a sly smile. You got that fast.

He slipped off his shirt.

Wait, so we strip for correct answers in this game? she said.

His eyelids dipped as he nodded. Mmm. Wrong ones, too.

We're going to be naked really fast.

He grinned. That's the idea.

Meredith couldn't stop the laugh that breached her careful wall, but she managed to choke it back into silence before it became more than a weird cough. She glanced at everybody. Having inappropriate discussions about stripping games at the Thanksgiving dinner table was probably not a sound plan for making good impressions. Imagining Derek getting naked on the Thanksgiving dinner table probably wasn't much better. Except nobody seemed fazed in the slightest, not the husbands, not Kathy, not Rachel. Like naughty speech was normal, and nobody had even noticed her naughty thoughts.

Well, nobody but Derek. Meredith glanced at Derek, who stared back at her through his thick eyelashes with a sly smile. He'd followed her naughty thought train all the way to hoo-hoo station. He was tired. A sliver away from hitting his limits. But, while not necessarily relaxed, not stressed, either. His visible jitters had waned. He seemed happy. Like he was enjoying himself. Being himself.

And being himself meant porny, flirty, smirky, and reading her freaking mind.

She supposed between him and the even more blatant lechery of Mark, Derek's family, or at least his siblings, given that his mother wasn't in the room, had gotten used to the liberal use of innuendo.

“Strip punch-buggies?” Derek suggested, and she laughed again, unfettered, guiltless.

“We'd get pulled over for public indecency again,” she countered.

Rachel snickered. “Again? Do we want to know?”

“Probably not,” Derek said, and everybody laughed.
Meredith leaned against Derek, and his warm arms wrapped around her. The protective bubble he offered was addictive, and yet, feeling less and less necessary as she let the last bits of Paranoid Meredith flutter away. She came from a crappy family, she didn't know how to play Taboo, and her husband was a porny, porny letch. His family didn't seem to care about any of that very much. They were actually sort of nice.

“My knowledge ends at beer pong,” she said, emboldened.

“We should totally do that one year,” Mark said.

“Shepherd family beer pong,” Derek said, his tone faux-nostalgic. He smirked, though he paused to rub his eyes. He was getting tired, and post-Thanksgiving meal coma probably wasn't helping. “I'm sure the kids would love it.”

“Oh, can we?” one of Derek's nieces said, perking up. “Can we?” Teenager. Slender. Short like Kathy. Dirty-blonde hair like John's and Abby's. Chloe, Meredith thought. Maybe. Meredith's mind blanked on the name, though, and all the pretty flashcards Derek had made for her slipped out of her memory. Worry clenched her heart in a flash and then released just as fast. His family was sort of nice, and she'd started believing Derek's repeated assertions that they wouldn't bite, even if she did get a name wrong here and there.

“Chloe...” John said, and Meredith resisted the urge to pump her fist. Chloe. She'd remembered. Point for Meredith, the potentially non-sucky aunt.

“Party-hearty girl, huh?” Rachel said.

For a moment, Meredith was too focused on her victory to realize she'd been asked a question. “Used to be,” she said. Then she glanced at Derek. Rubbed her rebelling stomach. Smiled. “But I grew out of it.”

Rachel fluffed her green hair and smiled. “Maybe, you can give me pointers. I'm still stuck in the party.”

Not an unfair assessment, Meredith decided wryly. Rachel was brash. Hot-tempered. Judgmental. Like Nancy, though a lot quicker to tame. Meredith had no idea how the woman even practiced medicine, since most patients would take one look at green hair, cry about professionalism, and walk out to find somebody who at least gave the appearance of not treating the hospital like it was a frat party. But Meredith kept her mouth shut. Family politics. She was learning. Learning, and... not completely sucking at this whole family thing.

“It's true,” Derek said, smirking like a cat still toying with the canary. “We keep hoping she'll grow up, but we've had no luck.”

“Hey,” Rachel protested.

“She is socially degenerate” Mark interjected, eyes glinting.

“Hey!” Rachel said, blushing, but she smiled. “Pot meet kettle, Mark!”

“I think that makes me more qualified to judge,” Mark countered. “Don't you?”

“Touché,” Rachel admitted. Her tone slipped into something more serious. “And I am sorry. For earlier.” She tilted her head and glanced affectionately at Derek. “You're visiting home for the first time in years. You've brought Meredith to really, finally meet us. And somehow, I made it all about me, me, me, and that's not fair to you.” She looked at Meredith. “Or to you.” She sighed,
and she pulled her fingers through her curly hair in a motion reminiscent of Derek when he was upset. “I’m not good with people.”

Derek smirked. “She’s really not.”

“Not even remotely,” Amelia added.

Kathy grinned. “I like to call her my case study in narcissism.”

Which, again, made Meredith wonder how in the hell the woman functioned as any kind of doctor. Doctors had to talk to people all the time. People they didn’t like. People they didn’t agree with. People with big problems. People with little problems. All freaking sorts of people. Maybe, she’d gone into medical research or something, instead of clinical work?

Derek leaned close to Meredith and murmured, “Think Cristina on the people-inept scale, but a lot lower on the human cactus scale.”

Meredith snorted at the comparison.

Rachel blushed to the shade of a poinsettia. “Okay, you guys. You’ve gotten your licks in. I won’t even retort.”

Maybe it was harsh to wonder how the woman functioned as a doctor, Meredith decided. Cristina functioned well as one, even if she didn’t do the people side of things that well.

Steve stood, breaking the congenial silence that followed with the squawk of his chair sliding across the hard wood flooring. He smiled brightly at everybody, and said, “Anybody want a beer before we start the game?” Silence stretched for a moment, as if it took everyone a moment to readjust to the old trajectory of the evening. Taboo. Getting ready to play.

“I’ll pass,” Derek said nonchalantly.

“Sure,” Mark said.

“You know none for me,” Amelia said.

John nodded. “One here.”

“Pregnant,” Meredith said.

“Could I?” Chloe said hopefully.

“You two can have a sip of mine,” Kathy said reasonably, “and if you don’t choke in disgust, then we’ll talk.” To which Abby and Chloe gave each other a high five.

“I’ll take one,” said Rachel.

“This game is always better with beer,” Kathy said, and Rachel nodded in agreement. They shared a giggle in tandem and looked to Derek. “Remember last time?”

All the divided attention at the table came to bear on Derek, who grinned. Nervously. Why nervously? Meredith bit her lip, unsure where this was going.

Rachel hooted with laughter, and Meredith felt Derek tense. “I still can’t believe how many dirty
word associations he can come up with.”

“It’s a talent,” Derek quipped, smiling weakly.

“A dirty talent,” Meredith grumbled.

Steve's gaze fell on Derek. “I got your favorite blonde, Der. Bought a case from the local brewery for you. Are you sure?”

“Meredith's my favorite blonde,” Derek joked in response, but the joke was half-hearted at best.

“Cute,” said Steve with a snort.

And then Meredith realized what all Derek's subtle broadcasting meant. From the cornered, helpless, tired expression on his face, he had been hoping to slip under the radar instead of having to come up with an actual excuse to beg off of a drink. Derek was—had been—a very social drinker. He was a bit of a whisky connoisseur, but he loved beer, too. That, combined with the fact that his family really seemed to want to make him comfortable for this visit, created a problem.

“I'm sure,” Derek managed to add. “No, thanks.”

“You know,” Kathy said. “I think Mom has some Glenlivet in the liquor cabinet if you'd rather have that.”

Derek shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I don't want scotch, either.”

Meredith still had no idea whether he planned to tell them about his drug problem this weekend. She thought he might have decided to leave it off the table for now, to let his sisters digest the PTSD first. Either way, he clearly didn't intend to make it a conversational topic right now.

“He won't drink anything.” Meredith said. “It's for me. Solidarity or whatever.”

Derek glanced at her, his expression momentarily flummoxed by her sudden lifeline. And then his gaze slipped into something warmer as his whole body relaxed. Thank you, his eyes seemed to say with relief, and he sighed like he'd just dodged an inquisition. Maybe, he had.

She kissed him. You're welcome.

“Wow,” Kathy said. “How many points does Derek get for that?”

“Lots,” Meredith said. She winked at Derek. “Mountains. It's a point-palooza.”

“Gold stars?” he murmured against her ear.

“Mmm,” she said, imitating his familiar purr, “Yes. A bunch.”

“Man, I wish I'd thought of that when Kathy was pregnant,” John said.

Companionable, quiet conversation filled the dining room as Steve left to grab the libations. The giggles and shrieks coming from the library expanded in the air, and Meredith thought she heard, “My turn, my turn!” from one of the littler kids. Derek didn't seem to be doing so badly with all the random noise anymore. His family had gotten conscientious about moving quickly in his vicinity or shoving things in his face or touching him unexpectedly, once they'd gotten a crash course in what he needed to feel comfortable. Thank you, he thought with relief. And the shrieking barely seemed to faze him. He was just... running out of steam.
She relaxed against him and looked up at the slope of his jaw, at the crook where his jaw became his neck. “Doing okay?” she said.

“Mmm,” he said quietly. “I'll need a break soon, but not now. I'm...” He swallowed. “I've really missed this. How about you?”

The turkey did weird things in Meredith's stomach again, and she shifted uncomfortably. She scrunched her nose. “Too much turkey. I don't think I have room for a bowling ball and a turkey in here.” And she had no idea how, even after the family had taken a break for games, she was going to manage consuming any pie later.

Derek gave her a concerned look. “You're not feeling nauseous, though?” he said, and then he splayed his palm against her belly and rubbed her in a slow, soothing circle.

She sighed. “No. Just really, really full.”

Which she thought might be worse. At least when she puked, she puked, and then it was over. She moved uncomfortably. Bubbles. That was the only way she could describe it. She was overly full, and there were bubbles moving around somewhere in the overly full, which she knew she could have avoided if she'd exercised some freaking dietary restraint, but... she'd never had the home-cooked-by-Mom Thanksgiving experience before, and it'd been delicious. And... really nice.

At which point Sentimental Meredith reared her head, and Meredith's eyes watered. Just a little. Not enough for anyone to notice. Well, except for Derek. Derek frowned at her, but she shook her head at him. She drew the line at naked phantom-Derek lying on the table. She was not going to cry over tasty Mom-turkey and having a sort of nice family. That was ridiculous. She wiped her eyes.

“I'm fine. It's just... everything was so good!” she whined.

He snickered tiredly. “Mon petit trou noir found her limits.”

She frowned. “What's that mean?”

“Oh,” he said, eyes gleaming, “nothing.”

“He called you a black hole,” Rachel interjected.

Meredith glowered. “Hey!”

“Just a little black hole,” he said cheerfully.

Steve returned with a clinking bundle of unopened beer bottles. He set them all on the table next to the Taboo box, and everybody reached for theirs. Looking at beer bottles just made her think of more bubbles, though, and she bit her lip. This was such a crap night to have stomach issues.

“I am not a black hole,” she asserted.

“You're a very cute black hole, at least,” Derek amended, and she glowered, which only seemed to delight him. She elbowed him in the ribs, and he feigned hurt with a cheerful, “Ow.”

“So...” Derek said as he rubbed his side, smirking. “Taboo before I get the stuffing knocked out of me?”

Everyone groaned at his joke. “Right, well, don't worry; it's very easy,” Rachel said, turning to
Meredith. “Do you know charades?”

“Sort of,” Meredith said.

“It's like that, but without gestures, just words,” Rachel explained. “We ignore some of the rules for the sake of simplicity. Essentially, we divide into two teams. Whoever's up gets a stack of cards. They need to get their team to guess the words on the cards without saying any part or variation or rhyme of the words, or any of the other five taboo words listed on each card. You get more points the more cards you can get your team to guess. You get a total of sixty seconds each round.”

Meredith frowned. She should have known when she'd fallen for a serial crossword puzzle cheater that she would be marrying into a family of competitive word gamers.

“Okay...” Meredith said. Maybe, she could sit this one out and just watch.

“It'll make total sense once you've seen it,” Rachel said. “So, how are we divvying the teams?”

“Captains pick?” John said.

“Names out of a hat?” Kathy said.

Derek flashed everybody a brilliant grin. “How about Team Neuro versus?”

“Am I included on Team Neuro?” Meredith said, worried.

“No,” Mark said to Derek, ignoring Meredith. “No way.”

Derek frowned. “Why not?”

“Yeah,” Amelia said, folding her arms over her chest. “What's wrong with Team Neuro?” Her chair creaked as she leaned forward.

“Because Meredith is neuro, so you'd have her, and you guys are weirdly psychic,” Mark said. “Being weirdly psychic is an unfair advantage.”

“I could just sit this one out,” Meredith offered.

“You can't,” Derek said. “Who else knows a six letter word for pinnacle without cheating?”

“Oh, come on, they can't be that good,” Rachel said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “And Steve and I on the same team would balance them out.”

“You and Steve are not weirdly psychic,” Mark said.

“We're married!” Rachel countered.

“There's married psychic, and then there's weirdly psychic,” Mark said. “Trust me. You're not like them.”

“That sounds like a bet,” Steve said, eyes gleaming.

Mark shook his head. “It's not a bet,” he said. “It's self-preservation.” Mark jabbed his thumb at Derek. “I have to work with him.”

“I won't rub it in when we win,” Derek offered.
Mark snorted. “Yes, you will.”

“I promise not to rub it in!” Derek said.

John raised his eyebrows. “Confident, aren't you?”

“Of course,” Derek said. He kissed Meredith's temple. “We're weirdly psychic.”

Meredith glanced wildly at the table. Everybody was looking at her like she was a flopping, bloody, busted fish wriggling around in the dirt, just waiting to be killed. Another thing she’d never grown up with was sibling rivalry, and the fleetness of feet on which it arrived. In her and Derek’s ongoing game of truth, where they traded stories about their earlier lives, Derek had told her lots of stories about his childhood. Stories that seemed fantastical to her, the family dynamics were so foreign to her, including one particular instance where he'd somehow, at the tender age of eight, ended up in a dress, high heels, and a sunhat, egged on by a triplet of jeering older sisters.

She glanced at her husband. This argument about teams seemed to have lit a spark. He didn't look so tired anymore. More determined. A competitive gleam had burgeoned in his gaze, flaring bright where before, there'd been only dying embers that spoke of weariness. She liked to see him happy again, but...

“Derek...” Meredith said.

He gave her an innocent look. “What?”

“Hi, pressure,” she said. “I'm Meredith. I don't even know how to play.”

“Hi, Meredith,” he said. He took her hand and shook it heartily. “Very nice to meet you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, shut up.”

Which only made him snicker. “You love me.”

She nodded. “I do,” she said, “but you're suddenly being a competitive jerk.”

A flash of worry hit her as soon as the words had left her mouth that his family might not take very kindly to her insulting him in front of them. A brief glance around the room declared her in the clear. Rachel appeared to be just shy of buying pom poms for the occasion, and Kathy had an indescribable look of glee on her face.

“I prefer to think of it as encouraging jerk,” he said, either oblivious to or in defiance of his sisters' mirth.

She frowned at him.

“Charming jerk?” he tried.

“How exactly charming,” she said.

“I think you might be lying,” he said. “I'm very charming and very encouraging.”

“And kind of a jerk,” she said.

“But a lovable one, yes?” he said.

She kept her mouth clamped shut. She refused to let him win.
He leaned in close. Inhaled the scent of her hair. His warm breath touched her skin. He kissed her. “You'll be a champ. Trust me, okay?” he said against her ear, in that soft, definitive, everything-is-fine tone that made him almost impossible not to believe.

“But what if I'm toxic, like a Typhoid Mary or something, and my team goes down in flames because I don't know the rules, yet?” she protested weakly.

“Weirdly psychic, remember?” he said in return. He gave her a playful, confident fist bump that made her heart flutter. “And as sweet as it is that you want to sabotage the team I'm not on... we've got this in the bag.” He leaned forward and pulled the Taboo box toward himself. As his final sell, he gave her one of his dreamy please looks that was hard, if not impossible, to say no to, regardless, and then he said, “We'll do a practice round; just you and me. It's easy. You'll pick it up really fast.” And you'll rock it, he added wordlessly.

She stared back at him. He'd been beyond supportive today. He'd let her hide behind him whenever she'd needed it. She'd spent most of the night observing more than participating, staying in her comfort zone. He knew how much she didn't want to make an idiot of herself. Why was he doing this to her, now?

“Oh, play, Meredith,” Kathy said with a welcoming grin. She took a sip from her beer. “You won't be any worse at it than Mark.”

“Yeah,” Mark said. “I suck, and they always let me play. Though, I still protest Team Neuro, unless I can be on it to ride your coattails to success.”

“You can't be on Team Neuro,” said Derek. “You're not neuro.”

“I don't know,” Rachel said. “Are you sure you guys don't want him?”

“Yes,” said Derek, Amelia, and Kathy in tandem.

“You guys should get a handicap,” Steve said.

“Why?” Amelia said.

Steve shrugged. “I think taking Mark should start us with five points.”

“Hey!” said Mark.

“Two points,” Derek countered.

“Four,” Steve said.

“Three,” Derek said, “and that's my final offer.”

“Done!” Steve replied.

“We're still going to win,” Derek said, and then he looked at Meredith with a pouting pleasepleasepleaseexpression that made her roll her eyes. “Right?”

Meredith sighed. She wasn't going to win. Everybody was staring. “Fine.”

Derek winked. The cardboard box moaned as its sides slid against each other when Derek opened it. He rummaged through the contents and pulled out a large stack of cards, which he then shuffled. From the larger stack, he pulled off a small set of cards, and from that small set, he grabbed the top card. He ignored the sand timer and everything else.
“Dr. Bailey is this type of surgeon,” he said.

She blinked. Well, that wasn’t that hard. “General,” she replied.

He grinned and placed the card face up on the table. The word general was listed at the top, followed by army, rank, star, Tso, and hospital, the five words he wasn’t allowed to say.

“See?” he said. “That wasn’t so bad.”

“You started easy,” she said.

He shrugged. “This is the whole game. You saw me shuffle.”

Which, well, he had a point.

“Both a compression bandage and one of five items necessary for a royal flush in poker,” he said.

Compression... elastic... Ten, jack, queen, king, “Um... ace?” Meredith said.

Derek grinned, and he put the card down so she could see it. Ace was the top word, followed by the taboo words: highest, card, tennis, serve, flying. She stared at it. Another easy one. Maybe, Derek was right, and they were all easy.

Maybe.

The chair beside Meredith squawked as Rachel stood, beer bottle clasped in her hands. She clapped, and her sparkly diamond wedding ring hit the butterscotch-colored glass. “Go Meredith!” she shouted. “Woo, woo, woo!” Like she was at a Seahawks game or something. “See, you got this.”

Mark sighed. “You’re cheering on the enemy!”

“We didn’t decide Team Neuro for sure, yet!” Rachel said.

“We agreed on a handicap,” Steve said.

“Well, what would that make the leftovers, anyway?” Rachel said.

“A plastic surgeon, a forensic pathologist, a stockbroker, a high school student, and a painter,” John said with a wry grin. He took a swig of his beer. “Sounds like a punchline.”


“Oh, that’s good,” said John.

Derek grinned at them. “Congratulations,” he said.

“What?” Rachel said.

“You guys are now officially more cheesy than me.”

“I think we have a long way to go before that happens, Der,” Steve replied.

“That sounds like a bet,” Derek said, eyes gleaming.

Derek laughed, rich and boisterous, and the sound of it made Meredith shiver. His sister had slammed the table so hard it shook, and Derek had laughed, not flinched. Meredith looked at him, amazed. This rivalry stuff seemed to have invigorated him, and he'd finally, truly relaxed. Or, well, maybe not relaxed, she decided, looking at the competitive gleam in his expression, his buzzing-with-excitement demeanor, but... he'd fixated on something that didn't involve being afraid. On purpose or accidental, he didn't even seem to realize what he'd just accomplished.

“Charlatan without a medical degree,” Derek said as he read from the next card.

Meredith frowned. “Fraud?”

He shook his head.

“Phony?” she said.

Derek shook his head again.

For a moment, her mind was blank. She couldn't get herself to think of anything except the fact that Derek had just laughed happily at a startling noise. She kind of wanted to hop out of her chair. Dance. Or hug him. Anything. Sentimental Meredith made her eyes water, but she wiped away the evidence.

“Also the noise made by a type of water fowl, such as a mallard,” Derek prodded, oblivious for once.

“Um.” She shook her head, getting herself back in gear. Later. Later, she could mention what he'd done. Mallard. Like a duck? Duck. Noise made by a duck. Charlatan... “Um, quack!”

With a sly grin, Derek placed the card on the table. The word was indeed quack. He picked up the next card.

“You drive a green one of these,” he said.

“Oh! Jeep!”

Another grin. Another card on the table.

“Meredith’s last name,” Derek said as he read the next card in the thinning stack.

“Grey!” Meredith replied.

Derek put the card down on the table. Gray was the word at the top, and it was followed by white, black, area, matter, and old.

“My last name isn't spelled like that,” she said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Derek said. “As long as you get the phonetic equivalent.”

“Huh, okay,” she said.

He flipped to the next card. “Meredith’s favorite black shoes,” he said.

“Converse!”

“No—”
“Chucks!” she corrected herself before he could add another clue. “It’s chucks!”

“Singular,” he prodded.

“Chuck!” Meredith said, and she bounced. In her seat. Bounced when he grinned. This was actually sort of fun. Derek was grinning at her infectiously. And she was bouncing, and there was shouting, and he didn’t seem to mind a bit, and that was just...

“High as a—”

“Oh! Oh, kite!” she said.

The next card with the word kite, followed by fly, wind, string, tail, and Charlie Brown, fell to the table.

“Contrary to what Meredith said that night on the cliff, she’s definitely not a stupid, lame ass—”

“Loser!” she exclaimed.

The next card fell to the table. Loser. Uncool, unpopular, unsuccessful, winner, two-time.

“Mmm,” Derek purred. “Smells like lavender.”

“Conditioner,” she said.

Derek shook his head. “You put it on before that.”

“Lotion. Soap. Shampoo!”

The card listed shampoo at the top, followed by wash, hair, suds, conditioner, and rinse.

“If, along with sharing the last piece of cheesecake, and pretending to like my taste in music, you were to actually hold a radio over your head outside my trailer, you’d be doing what?” Derek said.

“S... serenading.”

He nodded, but prodded her for a correction with, “Present simple tense.”

“Serenade,” she said.

The card fell to the table. Serenade was the word, followed by sing, outside, window, boom box, and Lloyd Dobler.

He read the next card. “I wrap my presents with paper and surgical—”

The entire table around her said in cheerful chorus, “Tape!”

Scotch, sticky, masking, duct, and red were the taboo words for that one.

Derek read the next card and grinned slyly. “Having sex with a virgin is called popping a blank.”

“Cherry!” Meredith said without hesitation to the relative silence of the table. “Wait. What? Seriously? Is that allowed in a family game?”

Everybody laughed as Derek threw the last card in the stack onto the table. Cherry was the word. The taboo clues were red, fruit, blossom, pie, and Washington. She supposed the game creators hadn’t really thought anyone would go the virgin route as a clue.
“Told you Derek gets raunchy in these,” Kathy said.

Derek kissed Meredith. “You okay?” he said.

Feeling less typhoid-y,” she replied. “That was sort of fun.”

His lips curled into a relaxed grin. “Good,” he said. “I knew you'd rock it.”

“This is how Team Neuro starts,” Mark said. “Then they start talking to each other with just their eyeballs, and it's even more disturbing.”

“Relax,” Rachel said. “This wasn't even timed.”

Mark threw up his hands in defeat. “Okay. Don't say I didn't warn you.”

Derek winked at Meredith. “So, Team Neuro versus?”

John nodded. “Team Neuro versus Punchline Posse. Let the games begin.”

Meredith watched, mystified, as everybody got up from the table and started trading seats like they were at a swap meet. John, Steve, Mark, Chloe, and Rachel sat together. Team Neuro, which apparently included Kathy in addition to Meredith, Abby, Amelia, and Derek, coalesced surrounding Meredith and Derek on either side. Beer bottles clinked and upholstery rustled as everybody re-settled.

Steve shuffled the card stacks still in the box, and John took out the sand timer and placed it mid-table.

Meredith stared, open-mouthed, as Derek stood, leaned forward, and met eyes with Steve. The two of them looked at each other, unblinking, grave, for a long march of seconds. Then, they whipped out their hands and snapped in unison, “Rock, paper, scissors, go!” while bobbing their fists with each syllable.

Derek held his palm flat on the downswing, signaling paper. Steve made what looked like a peace sign sideways, the symbol for scissors.

“Hmm, best two out of three?” Derek said.

Steve smirked. “You wish.”

Derek collapsed into his chair in a disappointed heap. He looked at Meredith. “They go first.”

“I... uh...” Meredith began, trying to hold her laughter at bay, not quite successfully, “So, I gathered.”

“What's so funny?” he said.

“You,” she said. “I had no idea you took your Taboo so seriously.”

“He takes anything that involves winning seriously,” Rachel chirped.

“You should see him when we play capture the flag,” Kathy added. “He's like a drill sergeant when it comes to jail raids.”

“Only because when I lose, I have to deal with you people talking it up for eternity,” Derek replied, smirking. His voice cracked and slipped to falsetto, “Remember the time we kicked Derek's ass at
Pictionary? Remember Charades? How about the Scrabble tournament of ’02?”

“Cute,” Kathy said.

Derek grinned in response, but didn't retort. In the quiet moments before the game where everybody settled in, he rubbed his nose with his thumb and index finger and sighed, deflating somewhat.

Meredith leaned close to him. “Are you sure you're okay?” she said.

“Really tired,” he whispered back at her. “I'll make it a few rounds.”

She brushed his forearm with her palm and squeezed it. “Okay,” she said.

“All right,” said Kathy as she shuffled the deck, dragging Meredith's attention back to the game at hand. “Here we go.” Kathy gave the card stack to John.

Derek pulled out a little notebook out of the box that, from the number of pages he flipped past, they'd been using for years. She recognized Derek's handwriting in quite a few of them. He seemed to have alternated with three or four other people with distinct styles of their own. When Derek found a new page in the book, about halfway through, he drew columns in it, and labeled them TN and TPP, and he put a three in the column for TPP.

“Ready?” Kathy said when Derek had finished, and John nodded. She reached for the sand timer and flipped it over. “Go!”

John scanned the first card wildly. “Phoenix rises from the?” he said.

“Grave,” Mark said.

“Death?” Rachel offered.

“Jean Gray?” Steve said.

John shook his head, visibly frustrated. “Cremation results in?” he said, offering another hint.

“Ashes,” Steve said.

John nodded and moved on to the next card. “Um... Two words,” he said. He clenched his teeth and made a face like he was struggling to come up with something. “My name. Um. Um. A note that ends— shit.”

He dropped the card and sighed. The card, which had Dear John at the top, was followed by letter, break up, end, romance, and ditch. Team Punchline Posse groaned collectively.

“Wait, what happened?” Meredith said.

“He said ends, which is a taboo word,” Derek said. And then his expression turned gleeful. “Which makes it our turn. Who wants to go first?”

“How about Meredith?” Rachel said from across the table.

Meredith's jaw dropped. “I...”

Derek turned to her and gave her a huge smile. “Yes,” he said. “How about Meredith?”
Meredith blinked.

“Do it,” said Kathy with a grin. “It's good for the soul.”

“Taboo is chicken soup, now?” Meredith said.

“Yep,” John said, pushing the stack of cards back across the table. “Eat up.”

Meredith stared woefully at the deck. Derek had convinced her she was decent at coming up with the answers, particularly when he was the one formulating the clues for her, but coming up with clues on her own for the entire team was an entirely different matter. “I take no responsibility if Team Neuro goes down in flames,” Meredith said.

Derek kissed her. “If we go down in flames, I take full responsibility. Clearly, it will be my failure at freakish marital telepathy.”

“Wow,” Amelia said, a teasing gleam in her eyes. “He's offering to take blame.”

Kathy giggled. “Quick! Somebody get a calendar to mark the day!”

He made a disgruntled face. “Hah. Hah.”

Meredith shook her head. If only they knew how much blame he really did take for himself. He was a guilt monger in his own head. Still... She bit her lip, staring at him. He really did seem to be going out of his way to both drag her kicking and screaming into the familial fold and protect her at the same time. Why now? she wanted to ask.

He met her eyes. Despite his outward demeanor of cheer, exhaustion gripped his expression.

He'd kept saying he needed a break soon. Now, she could almost correct him. He needed to take a break right now.

But he squeezed her shoulder. And he grinned at her. And he winked in that cocksure, classic, Derek way.

Maybe, he wanted to make sure she was comfortable doing more than hiding behind him or Mark before he slipped out, she thought. And then it all clicked. That was exactly what he was doing, that sneaky, sneaky man. He'd brought her to New York to be with his family on Thanksgiving. He didn't want to leave her to fend for herself in a situation he'd created unless she was okay with it.

She glanced at the table. Everybody was being nice. John had just flunked out in two cards, and nobody was ragging on him, other than good-natured teasing. She could do this.

“Just start the timer,” she said.

She grabbed the first card. Rachel let out a whoop and flipped the sand timer.

Meredith stared at the first set of words. Handcuffs was the word, and she couldn't say cop, lock, wrists, metal, or arrest. Amelia, Abby, Kathy, and Derek were all staring intently, waiting for her to say something. The problem with games like this, she realized immediately, was that they encouraged personal word associations, personal being the keyword, and today, her head was in a Porny Pregnant Place.

Handcuffs. Padded. In her sock drawer. In another life, before he'd been shot, he'd let her try...
them on him, except he hadn't been able to stop laughing. But she couldn't say any of that.

_Pink? Really, Mere? So not you._

_They were out of black!_

Meredith coughed. “Um. A type of restraint.”

“Zip tie,” Amelia said.

“Rope!” Kathy said.

Oh, I guess I've been bad, he'd said, trying for a sexy purr, except he'd ended in hysterics, and the handcuffs had rattled as he'd suffered paroxysms.

Her tight leather bodice had squeaked as she'd looked down at him. _This isn't quite how I imagined it._

_I'm sorry,_ he'd gasped. _I can't do this without laughing._

_Honestly, I'd call it giggling, not laughing,_ she'd replied.

His eyebrows had shot up to his hairline. _I'm not giggling._

_I'm sitting on you in tight leather, and you're giggling._

The handcuffs had rattled as he'd tried to shift underneath her. _I have no complaints about the tight leather._

_Shut up,_ she'd replied.

He'd snorted with laughter again. _Yes, Mistress Meredith._

“Could be...” Meredith said. “Porny.”

“Ropes and zip ties aren't porny?” Derek said.

“They're all pretty porny,” Mark agreed.

“No cross-table talk!” Kathy scolded.

“Duct tape,” Abby said.

“A leash!” Amelia said.

“What kind of porny is a leash?” Abby said.

“What kind of porny is duct tape?” Kathy demanded.

Abby rolled her eyes. “Mom...”

Pink, Meredith thought. Pink, not black. Wait, she couldn't say that.

“Used by law enforcement,” Meredith offered instead.

“Handcuffs,” Derek said.
She glanced at Derek briefly, wondering if he'd thought of their brief flirtation with bondage. His face remained passive. Except then he winked at her.

“I do like pink,” he murmured, too low for the rest of the table to hear.

She laughed. At least, she was tied with John, now, and her porny handcuff thoughts could be squashed. She tossed the handcuffs card on the table for all to see and read the next one to herself. Stiff was the word, followed by rigid, hard, dead, body, and drink.


Of course, her mind would randomly wander to penis and refuse to leave, as if giggly handcuff sex wasn't enough. She glanced at Derek, unable to help herself. Her gaze wandered downward. Briefly. Damn it, damn it. She was thinking about Derek's penis. Worse, Derek and his stupid freakish psychicness followed her line of thought as well as her gaze, from the sudden leer on his face. He even shifted in his seat, giving her a nice view of the way his jeans cupped— that rat bastard.

She was thinking about Derek's penis.

In the middle of a family game. At Thanksgiving. Except, Derek had talked about popping cherries, so maybe...


Rachel tipped the sand timer to the side. “What is it?”

“Before I completely stick my foot in my mouth, exactly how porny is this game allowed to get?” Meredith said.

“I think if it can go in an R-rated movie, it's okay,” Kathy said. She glanced at Chloe. “We're all mostly adults, here.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, “and we get pretty raunchy sometimes, anyway.”

“So, like, Terminator is okay, but Naughty Nurses IV isn't?” Meredith said.

Rachel laughed. “I guess that's a good description.”

“I'm dying to know what word that is,” Derek said.

“Well, we know if it was in your head, it'd be part of a porny thought,” Amelia offered.

Derek laughed. “Any word can be part of a porny thought in my head. The key here is that it's porny in Meredith's head.”

“Okay, I'm ready,” Meredith said, ignoring him. “Um.” She glanced at the card one last time. And then at Derek. Who peered back at her lecherously. Oh, whatever. “Slang for... an erection.”

“Rod,” Kathy said.

“Member,” Amelia said.

“Oh!” Abby said, bouncing in her seat. “Throbbing manhood!”

“If only they'd made a card for throbbing manhood in this family game,” Mark said, deadpan.
“It could also be a corpse,” Meredith offered weakly.

“A penis or a corpse?” Derek replied with a laugh. Meredith scowled. “You're not helping, Mr. Porny Pants.”

Which only made him laugh harder.

“Bone?” Amelia said.

Derek leered. “Stiffy.”

“Shorten it,” Meredith said.

Derek snickered.

“Shorten the word, Derek,” Meredith said.

“Stiff,” he said.

Finally. She threw the card onto the table so everybody could see and picked up the next one, only to sigh. Maybe, she had a pregnant porny pornstar mind, but this was ridiculous. “Did one of you guys stack this deck to mess with me?”

“I shuffled it six times or so,” Kathy said.

“And I shuffled it before that,” Steve chimed in. “Why?”

Meredith glowered at the card. Sack it said, followed by bag, hold, potato, plunder, tackle, as words she couldn't say, but those restrictions didn't even begin to touch where her mind leaped to. Balls, her dirty hormonal mind said. Balls, balls, balls. Derek likes it when you pull them really gently. Having sex in the sack. So. Much. Dirty. Slang.

Worse, Derek caught her gaze drifting south again. He was hanging right today. Oh, god. Stop. Stop, she told herself. Thanksgiving. Why did there have to be porny taboo cards?

“Another word for scrotum,” she said.

“Balls,” Derek said, his tone in that lower register he often reserved for the bedroom, not that anybody at the table would have known that. He was definitely on the same wavelength as her. He shifted evilly in his chair.

“Gonads,” said Kathy.

Abby rolled her eyes. “This is so wrong that I'm playing this with my mother.”

Kathy laughed.

“Nuts!” Amelia said.

“Junk,” Derek said.

“Family Jewels?” Amelia said.

“How about sack?” Abby said.

“Got it,” Meredith said, and she put the card on the table.
“It's good you're learning important things in college,” Kathy replied, peering at Abby.

Meredith looked at the next card. Seriously? Lap was the word, followed by sit, top, computer, swim, and victory as words she couldn't say. At least with her brain doing dirty word associations, the taboo words didn't create a lot of obstacles.

_Don'tcha take no chances_, she remembered as she'd danced for him, and he'd stared back at her, smitten. _Keep your eye on top._

“Umm...” she said. “Blank dance.”

“Break dance?” Kathy said.

“Flash dance?” Amelia said.

“Porny blank dance,” Meredith clarified.

“Lap,” Derek answered in a heartbeat, and Meredith moved on to the next card.

The universe was setting her up. She was convinced at this point. “Porny,” she said. “Bump and blank.”

“Grind,” Derek said before anybody had a chance to think about it, and Meredith put that card on the table.

Next up, Meredith laughed. Finally, something not porny. Though it was a bit more challenging, since she couldn't say two, male, friends, man, or crush.

“Mark and Derek have this,” she said.

“Are we still on balls?” Derek offered.

Meredith snorted. “It's a platonic relationship between guys. Combines a word for guy siblings and a love affair.”

“Oh, oh, bromance,” Amelia said.

Derek made a face. “Really, people call Mark and me a bromance?”

“Brothers and romance, smashed together,” Rachel said, grinning. “I like it.”

Mark frowned. “I don't.”

Meredith read the next card and smiled. She looked at Derek. “Batman lives there.”

“Gotham,” Derek said without pause.

_By night, they call me The Batman_, he'd told her with a throaty growl.

_You are so freaking corny_, she'd replied.

The next card made her jaw drop, and the moments ticked away. There was no way all the porny stuff and this could be a coincidence. Except the only person with enough knowledge to organize the cards like this would be Derek. Except his sister and brother-in-law had both shuffled. She tried to think of any other times he'd handled the cards and came up blank.
“Okay, seriously, Derek, did you stack this deck?” she said.

“Hey,” he replied. “You saw Kathy shuffle. Maybe, it's fate.”

“Then fate is a dirty, dirty whore,” she grumbled.

He grinned. “Oh, is it?”

Meredith sighed. “You promised to eat one if I got the conception date of the baby correct.”

“A fluffernutter,” Derek said.

“Wait,” Mark said. “How does a fluffernutter make fate a dirty, dirty whore?”

“No reason,” Meredith said.

Derek nodded. “None at all.”

“The fluffernutter was consumed at the table,” Meredith added.

“We even had a place mat,” Derek said.

Meredith nodded. “Totally couth.”

“I'm not sure I want to know about this,” Kathy said. “Mark, you'll have to live in wonder.”

“Good plan,” Meredith said. She reached for the next card.

“Wait,” Rachel said, and everybody looked at her. “I just realized. We never flipped the timer back after the time out.”

“But I was on a roll!” Meredith said. She put the card back in the unread pile since she hadn't had a chance to look at it.

“I think that whole round should still count,” Derek said. He glanced at Meredith winked. *I told you you would be good at this*, said his smirky smirk.

“I was the time keeper; it's my fault,” Rachel said. “I was too busy laughing at balls.”

“That's fine,” John said. “We'll give them the points.” Derek nodded and scribbled Team Neuro's score of eight into the appropriate column. “Team Punchline Posse has some ground to catch up.”

Meredith shifted in her chair. Derek wrapped his arm over her shoulder. She leaned against him and whuffed a heavy breath. Despite the invasion of Porny Meredith, she'd kind of kicked ass. And she was kind of having fun. *A lot of fun*, phantom Derek corrected. Okay, a lot of fun, she amended with a schmoopy sentimental smile that made her want to punch something. And she was kind of... full. The air didn't quite fit in her lungs, and all her organs felt smooshed. And somewhere, despite the compression, the stupid bubbles found enough room to take another lap. It didn't even feel like gas, really. There wasn't any pain. It just felt... *weird*.

She let her eyelashes rest low over her eyes. The light of the overhead chandelier smeared into a white-gold blur. Derek was warm. And soft. She snuggled closer against his sweater as the other team chatter-boxed, trying to figure out who would be their next clue giver. TPP couldn't figure out which would hurt them more, having Mark guess, or Mark come up with clues. Which made her snort. Poor Mark.
Steve clapped, snapping time back into place at its regular pace. “Okay, guys, let's do this.”

The room jumbled as Derek flipped the timer for them, and her headrest moved as a result. Meredith wiped her eyes and sat up. Mark picked up the first card and stared at it impassively.

“Meredith is going to be one of these in less than five months,” Mark said.

“Mother,” Rachel said.

“Mom,” Steve said.

Mark shook his head. “Say it like a baby would.”

“Ma?” said John.

“Mommy?” Chloe said.

“Like John's but more syllables,” Mark said.

“Mama!” Rachel said, and then she grinned. “Meredith's going to be a mama!”

Mark nodded and tossed the card on the table. Meredith rubbed her belly and shifted in her chair.

Mark looked at the next card.

“Um...” he rumbled, considering, and then said, “pregnant women often compare themselves to this giant aquatic mammal.”

“Mark!” Rachel snapped.

“What?” he said.

“You can't say that when Meredith is pregnant!” she said.

“But—”

“Not cool,” Rachel said. “Massively not cool.”

Meredith froze, hand on her stomach, mid-rub. “Holy crap,” she said. The bubbles coiled in her lower body. This wasn't gas. There was no way this was gas. She was full, but she didn't hurt beyond the fact of having no room left inside. *Eighteen weeks*, a little voice said. *You're at eighteen weeks. It's the right time.*

“What's the matter?” Derek said.

“See?” Rachel said. “You pissed her off.”

“Holy crap.” Meredith said. “Holy crap!” She slammed backward into her chair and stood up. Derek moved in unison with her, his eyes wide. He put his hands on her shoulders like he thought she needed steadying. Maybe, she did need it. Because... holy. Freaking. Crap.

Mark frowned. “That sounds more like an orgasm than pissy, to me.”

Meredith stood, gaping. Everybody in the room stared back at her, but they all fell away from her like white noise amidst a kaleidoscope of color. There was only her in the room. Her and Derek. And Baby. “Meredith,” Derek said, his voice creased with a hint of panic, “what's wrong?”
“Nothing's wrong,” she rushed to say. “She's moving. Baby is moving.”

“It's a girl? I knew it!” she thought she heard in the background somewhere, but her attention lay solely on Derek.

He blinked. Silence stretched. “Really?” he said.

“It's like a little butterfly or bubbles or...”

He pressed up close behind her. The scent of his cologne wafted against her nose. She leaned back against him. He pushed his arms underneath her shoulders, and she waited, pliant, as his palms came to rest high over her womb near her navel. The heat of his hands radiated through her blouse. She wrapped her hands around his wrists and moved his touch a few inches lower. How she could have mistaken this for gas was, in this moment, beyond her ability to comprehend.

“Can you feel it?” she said. The movement was so light. She could barely detect the flutters inside her body. He likely wasn't going to be able to feel them outside her body, yet. But that didn't stop her from hoping.

“Hmm,” he said, the syllable a rumble against her ear. His hands pressed against her firmly, and he waited for a stretch of moments. He shifted his hands and waited longer. “I don't think so.” His voice was thick and deep with emotion, but he didn't sound disappointed.

Meredith laughed. The bubbles moved in faint, popping line across her lower body. Like Baby had decided to turn over. Or was kicking just to say hello to Mom and Dad. “It kinda tickles. I thought it was indigestion or something. I was trying to figure out how to get out of eating the pie, but... I don't feel sick, and it doesn't hurt. It's...”

“Like a butterfly, you said,” he murmured.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“That's amazing,” he said. And then the rest of the room wasn't just white noise. It was gone, because he'd wrapped himself around her. “That's really amazing,” she heard in the crush of his body. His limbs were shaking and his words were low and torn, like he couldn't manage much else. A flash of tears in his eyes disappeared when he wiped his face.

“I think that's an automatic win for Team Neuro,” Rachel was saying as the world came back into focus.

“They win because the fetus moved?” Mark said.

Kathy snorted. “Yes. Shut up, Mark.”

“It's still kicking!” Meredith said to Derek's family. She felt freaking high.

In the moments when Meredith's head had been in the baby-is-kicking blur, his sisters had all gotten up. They hovered a few feet back from Meredith and Derek, like they wanted to collapse into a big family hug, but there was an invisible wall holding them back. Derek was a happy, glorious wreck in Meredith's arms. He'd been smashed up against his limits for the last hour, and he didn't seem to have any composure left whatsoever.

“I can't right now,” he said, and he took a few stumble-y steps back from the crowd to hover nearby. “I need a break.” But he didn't budge, yet. He hovered in the corner. Like he wasn't ready for this moment to end, even if he knew he was done with touching people right now.
His family didn't rib him. They let him get safely away. And then they collapsed around her. Congratulating. Hugging. Somebody ran to get Carolyn. Meredith's eyes watered as Sentimental Meredith took over. “I hate crying,” she snapped.

Kathy groaned. “I remember that. I do not miss it.”

“I don't usually cry!” Meredith said.

“It's pretty amazing, isn't it?” Rachel said. “I remember when Cody first gave me some kickboxing lessons.”

“I don't think I'll be able to focus on the game anymore,” Meredith said. She rubbed her eyes.

Kathy shook her head. “Oh, forget the game.”

The kids and Carolyn filled the room to bursting.

“I hear little Anne or Adam said hello?” Carolyn said.

“Yeah,” said Meredith. She blinked tears. “Still saying, actually. It's more like hi, hi, hi, hi, hi, hi, hi, hi.”

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” Carolyn said, turning to Derek, who'd shrank into the corner with the arrival of the kids.

“Oh... it's...” He swallowed. “It's good crying. Honest. I just...”

“You can close the door and lie down in my room if you want,” Carolyn suggested without pause. “I put clean sheets on the bed this morning.”

“Okay. Okay. In a min... minute.” He wiped his face and grinned brilliantly. He still looked like a disaster. Hell, his teeth were almost chattering. “I want a pic... picture, first, though.” He took a deep breath. Attempted to compose himself.

Meredith wasn't sure he'd accomplished much in that attempt. “We both look like train wrecks,” she said.

“Happy train wrecks,” he said. “And I want to save this moment.”

Somebody get the camera,” Carolyn said.

Meredith moved away from Derek's sisters, back into his orbit. She wrapped her arms around him. “This picture's going to look pretty silly,” she said with a wry, tearful grin.

“I don't care,” he said. He pressed his shaky hands over her belly. He was a trembling, tearful mess. In front of his family. And he didn't seem to care. “I want to save it. I love you.”

“I can't wait until you can feel it,” she said.

He grinned. “You're good with words. I think I have a mental picture.”

“You think I'm terrible with words,” she said.

He laughed. His eyes twinkled. She was glad that, if he was going to hit his limits, this was how he was going to do it. By being too happy. “You might not be the best at Scrabble,” he said, “but I think even your made up words are pretty functional.” He kissed her. The kids all made gross
noises. One shrieked. Even in this state, Derek didn't flinch.

The camera flash snapped with white brilliance as she leaned to kiss him in return.

“I really need to lie down,” he said when he pulled away, and the stars of the flash faded.

She grinned at him. “Go,” she said. “I'll be fine.”

“You're sure?” he said.

She nodded. “Yes. It's not that scary anymore.”

He pulled his fingers through his hair. He swallowed. “Thank you,” he said in a soft voice.

_For what?_ a normal woman in a normal couple might have asked, but she supposed she and Derek _were_ weirdly psychic, because she knew what he meant without words.

_For everything_, his expression told her.

He left the room under his own steam, not fleeing, but walking with purpose. He didn't flinch, nor did he try to hide his need for respite. His family wished him well, but didn't linger on his departure. Only Meredith saw his toothy, dumbstruck grin as he began his ascent to the second floor.

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**After**

Abby sat in the kitchen at the breakfast nook in the dark, crouched over a small piece of pumpkin pie. She dipped the tines of her fork into the soft pie and pulled a bite away, but she didn't eat it. She sniffled, and the fork sat there, balanced loosely on her index finger. Her dirty blond hair hung in disheveled strings.

“Hey,” Derek said as he pulled a chair out and sat beside her.

Abby peered at him through her bangs. She didn't say hello. The wounded look in her eyes made his heart squeeze.

“Can we talk?” he said.

Abby shrugged.

He took a deep breath. “I know you feel like I betrayed you, Abby,” he said in what he hoped was a low, soothing murmur, “but there are times in life when you get so sick or scared or sad that the only thing on your mind is how to get those feelings to go away. You don't think about the people you'll be hurting by destroying yourself. You just... want it to stop hurting. I made the wrong choice by doing what I did, but I didn't make that choice with malice. I never intended to hurt anybody.”

She put her fork down and sighed. “But you did. Just like when you left.”

He froze. He hadn't realized she'd been upset about that, too. She'd never said anything. “I did,” he said, “and I'm very sorry.”
That got him eye contact. Ice blue stared back at him. He grinned at her, hoping to elicit some mirth.

**Peekaboo!**

The thought flitted through his head, unbidden. The echo of her giggle followed it, a crackle of energy on the edge of his mind. When she'd been very little, she'd loved that game, and he'd never tired of playing it. Kathy had made fun of him.

*You'll break out in zits if you keep your hands on your face much longer,* she'd said.

He'd shrugged. *Practice makes perfect.*

*Practice for what? Is peekaboo a competitive sport?*

He'd laughed and shook his head. *For when I have my own kid.*

“I'm sorry I yelled,” Abby said, loosing him from the memory.

“It's okay,” he said. “You're allowed to be mad at me.”

She shook her head. “I'm not mad.”

He looked at her, eyebrows raised. “Oh, you're not?”

“Oh, I'm mad,” she said, reneging. Her fingers clenched. “I'm mad. I just...”

He swallowed. He wanted more than anything for her to be okay with all of this. On the flip side, though, he knew it might take some time. As much as he wanted things to be okay before he left for Seattle, he knew it wasn't realistic for him to expect them to be.

“It's okay,” he said. “Take your time with it.”

She nodded.

“I want you to call me if you want to talk about this,” Derek said. “Anytime. Day or night.”

“Oh,” she said in a small voice. And then she looked at him. Took a deep, clipped breath. “I'm sorry things got that bad for you.”

“I know,” he said. “And I'm sorry I handled it wrong.”

She peered at him. “You're mostly better, now?” she said. “Like Aunt Amy?”

“Yes,” he said. “And I see a therapist.”

“Okay,” she said.

He pulled her into his arms. Her body hitched, and she melted against him. He let her cry, despite how much he hated to hear her so upset. Knowing he was the cause of her weeping made his heart squeeze. The sound reminded him of stubbed toes when she'd been little, and boys who'd dumped her when she'd been a bit older, and when she hadn't gotten into her first choice for college, just before he'd abandoned New York.

He closed his eyes. “I'll try to come back more often. Seems like I've been a very Not Awesome Uncle in more ways than one.” Now that he knew Meredith was okay with it, and now that his life...
wasn't disintegrating around him like a lit match, getting back to the East Coast would be a little easier. Well, when Baby got a little bigger, anyway.

“I've really missed you,” Abby said. “And this.”

He smiled. “I've been told I'm an excellent hugger by reputable sources.”

“Mmm-hmm,” she murmured.

And he let the moment stretch.

**Before**

He didn't know where he was, but it smelled like his mother's favorite perfume, which kept him from tripping into abject panic upon waking. He wasn't sure what had pulled him up from dreaming. A shadow coalesced in the strip of light below the door, thickening the darkness in the room, and faint knock on the door breached the quiet.

“Sweetheart, it's Mom,” the shadow said in a muffled, familiar voice before he could get upset. “Are you awake?”

He tried to say something like, “Yeah; I'm up,” but with his face mashed into the pillow, he didn't think the words made it to his mother in any more than a garbled jumble of sound, because there was a long pause after that.

His mouth tasted gummy and parched, and his bladder was getting full, as though instead of a short nap like he'd intended, he'd been asleep for hours. His head didn't feel quite so much like melting taffy anymore. The rumble of voices and laughter rising softly through the floorboards didn't rub wrong against over-sensitized nerves. He felt more generically tired and less if-I-don't-take-a-break-soon-something-very-bad-will-happen.

“May I come in?” Mom said more softly, doubt pinching her tone.

“Mmm-hmm,” he said. Stupid. She wouldn't hear that. He rolled onto his back. He cleared his throat. “Yeah,” he called more loudly.

The door creaked open slowly. A triangular patch of light spilled into the room. His mother, a dark shadow against the brightness, stepped into the room and paused, giving him a long time to get used to the idea that she was there.


“Okay,” he said. He put his palms against his face and closed his eyes as a shield.

She flipped the switch, and he let himself adjust as she approached. The mattress sank by his hip. He lowered his hands and squinted at her. She carried a plate of pie with a shiny fork, which didn't seem right.

Dessert was supposed to be at seven-thirty. He'd set his iPhone to wake him in forty-five minutes, and it was still sitting on the nightstand beside him. He'd tipped his mother's alarm clock face down before he'd crashed because the bright red glare of the giant numbers on its face had bugged him. His mother liked the other side of the bed, what he was used to calling Meredith's side, and he couldn't reach the clock to right it without rolling, which, with his mother sitting on the quilt, would be difficult anyway.
“What time is it?” he said.

“It's almost nine,” she said.

“Nine!” he said, sitting up. He'd been asleep for three hours. More than. Without thinking, he tried to stand, but his muscles were still in slumber, and his mother had him inadvertently pinned. His body got caught in the blankets, and all he really did was flop like a land-stranded fish.

“You don't have to get up if you're still tired,” his mother said.

He shook his head. He grabbed his phone. He'd set it for seven in the morning, not seven at night. Damn it all. “I left Meredith for three—”

“She's fine,” Mom said. “The baby is still kicking. Meredith has been giggling and happy all night. It's darling.”

He swallowed, blinking. “Oh,” he said. He looked at her, now that his eyes had fully adjusted.

“You missed dessert,” his mom said, offering the plate she carried. “I thought I'd bring you some, so you can enjoy it where it's quieter.”

“That's really...” He stared at the pie. It was pecan, which was his favorite. And somebody had put a whipped cream smiley face on the plate. Once he'd explicitly laid the ground rules for them, his family had been so welcoming and supportive. He hadn't expected anything like it. A lump formed in his throat. “That's... thanks. Thank you.”

“Are you feeling better, now?”

He nodded as he took the plate, still staring at the pie. “Rachel?” he said as he poked at the whipped cream smiley with the fork. Derek... Meredith had said. My breakfast is smiling at me. Little had she known it was a Shepherd thing more than a Derek thing.

Mom grinned. “Yes.”

“No snacks in the bedroom, I thought,” he said. “Gets crumbs in the sheets.”

“I think we can make an exception today,” she said.

He glanced at her. If it was nine, that meant things would be winding down. The kids would be getting cranky from staying up so late. He and Meredith still had to get back to the hotel. He felt like he could sleep another year or two, and still not be recharged. Also, he was running out of time to tell them about... everything. He'd waffled on it all afternoon. He needed to go back downstairs. Yet, he didn't quite feel ready to deal with so many people at once.

He took a bite of the pie and closed his eyes. Perfect. Sweet and crunchy. Kathy had learned how to make them from his grandmother, and had continued the tradition since his grandmother had died.

“You were muttering earlier,” his mother said.

“Was I?” Derek said. “I'm not sure what woke me up.”

Mom nodded. “I heard it from the hallway. You sounded upset. Is there anything you want to talk about?”

“Sometimes, I don't sleep very well,” he said. “I have nightmares.”
“About what happened to you?” Mom said.

He took another bite of pie and chewed pensively. “Yes,” he said around his mouthful.

Though, truth be told, it didn't feel right to call whatever this had been a nightmare about Gary Clark. Derek remembered those vividly, and Meredith told him he yelled a lot when he was stuck in them. Yelling wasn't muttering. Yelling would have brought more than just his mother to the door.

“I used to have them every night,” he said. “It's part of why I...” He looked at his lap. “I needed help to sleep.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” she said.

He shook his head and sighed. “Not really. I don't have them very often anymore, and I don't think...” Maybe, this had been something slightly more mundane. He had one every once in a while where he failed a class in college because he'd forgotten he'd been enrolled in it, and by the time he'd remembered, it had been too late. “I don't remember having one today.”

“That's good,” she said.

He took another bite of pie. He heard Meredith's distinct, bubbly laughter in the distance, and a smile tugged at his lips. She said something he couldn't quite hear. Something about “kicked again!” like she was amazed that their baby could be so active, and a little thrill ran through him at the words.

Their baby. Alive. Well.

Meredith was happy.

A lot had gone right during this trip despite his initial nerves.

Derek put the plate with the pie on the nightstand, his father's old nightstand. There was a 5x7 picture of young Michael Shepherd sitting in a frame by the lamp that Derek hadn't paid much attention to when he'd been in the process of collapsing earlier. His father sat behind the wheel of a classic red Mustang, the same car Meredith had found him posing with when she'd gone through the pictures Derek kept in his office back at her mother's house.

_You should ask your mom_, Meredith had said when he hadn't been able to provide an explanation for the car. _I bet she'd know._

He picked up the picture, careful to keep his fingers off the smudge-free glass. His dad donned a worn leather coat and beamed for the camera. The car sat on a packed-dirt road. There were trees in the background behind the car, oak and maple and ash. An azure streak of sky overhead and an endless roll of green below gelled the picture together. Maybe, it was a park, somewhere. Or an out-of-the-way drag strip.

“When was this?” Derek said. “Meredith wanted to know, and I couldn't tell her.”

His mother peered over his shoulder at the photo. “That photo was taken about a year before we had you.”

“Why don't I remember the car, then?” Derek said.

“Your dad had to sell it before you were born.”
“Why?” Derek said.

His mother shrugged. “We needed money. You remember how tight things were.”

Derek stared at the picture. It didn't take a genius to do the math. “He sold it because you got pregnant with me, you mean.”

His mother shrugged again. “Well, yes.” She grinned at him. “But I think he thought it was a pretty good trade.”

“He looks so happy,” Derek said.

Mom smiled. “He loved that car to pieces. He was very much a country joyrider when he was younger.” Her body shifted. She paused with her hands resting in his peripheral vision for a long moment. And then she wrapped her arms around him. The warmth of her body seeped through his shirt. She kissed his cheek. The photograph fell to his lap as he relaxed. “He loved you to pieces, too.”

“I've been missing him a lot, lately,” Derek said. He closed his eyes and soaked in her embrace.

“That's understandable,” she said.

He sighed. “I don't know how I'm ever going to live up to him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he was... He was just... Dad. And he always knew how to handle everything.”

His mother chuckled. “Oh, Derek, if you only knew how lost your father was most of the time...” Her gaze tilted upward as she thought for a moment. “He dislocated your shoulder, once.”

“What?” Derek said. “I don't remember that at all.”

“It was an accident, of course. You were almost five. You insisted your closet was the way to Narnia and wouldn't come out. He lost his cool and tried to drag you out by your arm.”

Derek frowned. “I really don't remember that.”

“Oh, yes,” Mom said with a smile. “Your dad was completely beside himself. I had to drive us to the ER because he was so upset that he'd hurt you, he couldn't see straight.”

“Seriously?” Derek said, trying to picture his father as anything other than all-knowing and perfect.

His mother nodded. “Seriously. And that's just one of the things I can think of off the top of my head.”

“He always seemed so perfect on my end.”

Mom laughed. “Derek, that's what parenting is.”

“What do you mean?” Derek said.

“You'll always worry that you could do better, no matter what. In the end, though, you do the best you can do, and nine times out of ten, that's enough.”

“What about the one time out of ten where it's not?”
“What did your father used to say when you made a mistake?”

Derek rolled his eyes. “It builds character.”

Mom shrugged. “Well, there you have it.”

Derek sighed. “But how am I supposed to be a good parent? How am I supposed to care for somebody else, when I can barely deal with my own problems, right now?”

“You've been taking good care of Meredith,” Mom said.

“Meredith's different,” he muttered.

“Why do you say that?” “Because Meredith is an adult, and she knows when I need a break. A baby isn't going to know when Dad needs quiet or space.”

“I think that’s true of any baby and any parent. Look what happened with your father.”

“But—”

“And you seemed to be doing a fine job at dinner, putting things that were bothering you aside,” his mother said, steamrolling any objection he could muster. Her embrace tightened. “I don't think you're giving yourself enough credit.”

“You really think I'll do okay?” Derek said.

“I know you will,” Mom said. “I've always thought you'd make an excellent parent.”

Her certainty made her almost impossible not to believe, and he let that certainty sweep over him. Meredith kept telling him over and over that he could do this. Maybe, he really could. Maybe, he was being a worrywart.

“When I visited you in the hospital,” Mom continued, “you were acting like your life was a jigsaw puzzle that somebody had shuffled up and scattered across the room. But, now, it's like you have most of the picture back together. You just need a little help with some of the leftover pieces you haven't found the correct places for.”

And speaking of pieces he hadn't found places for...

He leaned against her shoulder with a sigh. “I think I'm going to tell them.”

“Tell what to whom?” Mom said.

“Tell my sisters about my drug problem. I've been waffling all day about it. Worrying about how they'll react is probably just as bad as them knowing is going to be. I just want to get it over with, so I can move on, and so I can keep getting better for the baby.”

“I think that's a good plan,” she said.

“How bad do you think this will be?” Derek said.

“I don't think it will be that bad,” Mom said.

“But what happened with Amy—”

“Was a one time out of ten sort of thing,” Mom said. “And I think they've all learned from it. At
least, I hope so. You did, after all.”

“I did,” he said slowly, “but—”

“You did,” his mother said, cutting him off. “No buts.”

Derek sighed. He set the picture of his dad back on the nightstand and stood reluctantly. His body ached. His head throbbed. But he needed to do this. His mother picked up the plate with the leftover pie and walked behind him down the narrow hallway. He stopped in the bathroom, and his mother went on ahead.

The stairs creaked as he descended, but the sounds were lost in the comparative din of the living room. The room glowed in a bath of soft lamplight and holiday-scented candles. Everybody was sitting in the big circle of chairs, talking in hushed voices that, due to the number of people involved, collectively didn't seem that hushed.

The adults were having some sort of conversation about tomorrow's plans, except for Amelia, who sat conspicuously silent and stiff in the corner by the old grandfather clock. Meredith mentioned *The Phantom of the Opera*, and Rachel was talking about Black Friday sales. The noise slid up Derek's spine in an unpleasant tingle of discordance, but it was more than tolerable.

Sabrina and Chloe had sprawled on the floor to play Uno. Patrick and David were lying like pretzels by Sabrina's feet, toy trucks still clutched in their hands despite their slumber. Mia sat in John's lap, her face pressed into her father's shoulder. Cody and Morgan, the youngest kids, had conked out in Steve's and... Meredith's laps, respectively. Morgan had her head tipped back against Meredith's shoulder, and her mouth had fallen open, displaying a pearly line of little baby teeth. Her frilly dress covered most of Meredith's swollen belly, and her tiny patent-leather mary-janes dangled beyond Meredith's knees. One small hand rested over Meredith's navel. Derek's heart squeezed at the scene.

“The Museum of Sex is my first stop,” Mark announced.

Rachel giggled.

“There's actually a museum for that?” Meredith said.

Mark nodded. “Yes. And my curiosity is burning. I got a Groupon deal if anyone wants to join me.”

“You got a Groupon deal,” Meredith said flatly.

“Yes,” Mark said.

“For a sex museum,” she said.

“Yep,” Mark said.

“I have to see it,” Meredith said.

“The Groupon or the museum?” he said. Meredith giggled. “The museum. We don't have plans tomorrow morning, anyway.”

“I don't know,” Mark said. “Is Derek coming?”

Rachel rolled her eyes and threw a balled up napkin at him, which he deftly dodged. “You're as
bad as Derek with the innuendo, sometimes,” she said.

“I might be sleeping,” Derek said from the stairwell. “But I'll come if I'm awake.”

Meredith spit out her drink in a curtailed, choking laugh, which miraculously didn't disturb her dozing charge. Blush crept across her cheeks, but she recovered quickly. Her eyes sparkled in the light as she beamed at him. His mother slipped back into the room and sat down next to Abby as he smiled tiredly at his wife.

*Hi*, she mouthed, and he winked back at her.

Kathy grinned at him. “Hey, sleepyhead,” his oldest sister said. “How are you feeling?”

Derek pulled his fingers through his hair. “Much better, thanks.”

“You were out forever. Are you going to be able to sleep tonight?” Rachel said with a frown.

“Yeah,” he said. “I'm sorry I wasn't here, much.” Stress, desire, and exertion had amalgamated, creating lightning rods for pain in all of his joints and a lot of his muscles. Stress over subjecting himself to fear. Desire to reduce the stress with Percocet. Exertion to keep the desire from snowballing. “I didn't intend to sleep that long. I'm really worn out.”


“Yeah,” Rachel added, “we're just thrilled you could make it.”

“Why does post-traumatic stress make you tired?” Chloe asked, looking up from her hand of cards. Sabrina craned her neck to look at him, too.

“Well,” Derek said. He blinked. They actually looked interested, particularly Chloe. He knew his sisters must have explained things briefly to the kids who were old enough to understand, but he wasn't sure how much deeper than don't-yell-near-your-uncle they'd gone. “It's not really that... but certain things like loud noises make me very anxious. It's just like being stressed out for a test at school or something. It makes me tired faster.”

“Oh,” Chloe said. “That makes sense.”

Sabrina frowned. “But why don't you like loud noises anymore?”

“I was shot,” Derek said. He knew his sisters had told them that, at least. “Guns are really loud.”

Sabrina shook her head. “Right. Duh. Sorry.”

Derek shrugged. “No reason to be sorry.”

“That really sucks,” Sabrina said. “People shouldn't have guns.”

“No, they shouldn't,” Derek said. He moved out of the stairwell and stepped over the minefield of bodies on the rug.

Mark, who seemed to have been fulfilling his role has a backup human shield in Derek's absence, and sat dutifully next to Meredith, said, “Hey, man.” He stood to give Derek the chair closest to his wife, and moved across the room to the empty piano bench. Derek took the seat gingerly, trying to avoid too much pain. He leaned across to kiss Meredith's ear, careful not to disturb his sleeping niece.
“Hey,” he said. “How are you doing?”

“I have a loaner baby,” Meredith said, tone proud, and he chuckled.

“I can see that,” he said.

“She wanted to feel the baby kick,” Meredith said. “I think she got bored when she couldn't.”

“She's up way past her bed time,” Kathy said. “That's all.”

“Yeah,” John said. He glanced at his watch. “We should really think about calling it a night. The kids are dropping like flies.”

“Wait,” Derek said before John could stand up.

John cocked his head to the side. “Hmm?”

Derek glanced at his mother, who nodded. Then he looked at Meredith, met her unblinking eyes. She knew what he meant without explanation.

*You're sure?* she said with her gaze.

*I need to,* he thought back at her.

She nodded as well. *A thousand percent. I'm here.*

She stretched out her fingers and touched his. She clasped his hand, strongly enough that his joints mashed together and the lines of his palm became the rise and fall of waves. The warmth of her skin warmed him. For a moment, he got lost in her gaze.

His commitment-phobic one-night stand, one he'd initiated simply to prove to himself that he wasn't as broken as his marriage to Addison had become, had turned into a pursuit to prove he could still pursue, had turned into a date to prove he could still date, had turned into another date because he liked her, had turned into countless mornings waking up in her bed because he really liked her, had turned into what he had finally realized was love. Somewhere between if-you-know-me-you'll-love-me in his sexy red shirt, and the moment Addison had stuck out her hand and haughtily introduced herself to Meredith, he'd fallen for her. Meredith Grey. The love of his life. His light in the dark. His very best friend. His soul mate.

He could recite the entire thing like a baseball play in slow motion, but he still couldn't explain the why or the how of it. He could only say that life, sometimes, had magic in it. Magic, and miracles, and the metaphysical.

His lips curled into a wide, goofy smile, unbidden, despite his nerves, despite everything.

“What?” she said. Morgan shifted sleepily in her arms.

“I just realized something,” he said. “That's all.”

Meredith's eyes narrowed. “What?” she said again.

He shrugged. “I feel... lucky.”

A simple statement, really, but her eyes widened like he'd told her he'd be back in the operating room tomorrow, removing somebody's malignant glioblastoma, or performing the resection of a spinal tumor, and it was his turn to cock his head and say, “What?”
“Mr. Optimism. He keeps popping up at the most unexpected moments, lately,” she replied, and a brilliant smile stretched across her face. “I like it a lot.”

He blinked, surprised by her assessment. He hadn't even noticed the onset. And, now that he thought about it, he realized Mr. Clark had been silent all afternoon. Ever since Derek had been able to lay some firm ground rules, rules they'd heard straight form his own lips, rather than rules they'd heard through the familial grapevine. Ever since he'd stood his ground despite every fiber in his body screaming at him to run away instead.

_Fight for it_, said his mental Meredith. _Fight for what you need._

Real Meredith nodded, too, as though she'd heard her counterpart speak.

“There's something I want to talk to you guys about,” Derek said, turning back to his family.

“What is it?” Steve said.

“Is something wrong?” Rachel said.

“Let's put the kids in the library,” Mom said before he could say anything, and she stood. “Chloe, would you help me, dear?”

“Oh, lord,” Kathy said, glancing at their mother and then back to him. “What is it?”

Derek frowned, watching his mother move across the floor to collect Morgan from Meredith. Meredith shook her arms like they'd fallen asleep. Steve stood with Cody draped in his arms, and Chloe began to shepherd Patrick, David, and Mia, who were all varying degrees of asleep on their feet, out of the room, amidst a chorus of grumbles and whining.

“Sorry,” Derek said. “I didn't...” Think. At all.

Stress tightened in his chest as Steve and his mother reappeared. Chloe came back into the room and sat down in a heap next to Sabrina, who'd never left. He'd prepared himself, sort of, to talk with his sisters. With his brothers-in-law. Mr. Optimism or not, it was another thing entirely to see three of his nieces still sitting there. And, actually, he wasn't sure if Kathy would even want them there. His family had been circumspect with the children regarding Amelia's issues. Abby had found out by accident when she'd been a senior in high school, and that had been a bit of a mess because she hadn't been prepared for it whatsoever.

His gaze flicked to Amelia, who'd hunkered in her chair a bit like a turtle preparing for harassment by hiding in its shell. She shook her head at him vehemently. _No_, said her gaze. _Don't even try it if you want this to go remotely well._

He tensed at that revelation. He turned back to the rest of the room. “I don't...” He cleared his throat and caught Kathy's stare directly. “I don't know if you want Sab and Chloe here for this. You might want to listen first and decide whether to tell them later.”

Sabrina pouted. “But I'm fifteen. I'm an adult!”

“It's probably just boring grownup stuff, anyway,” Chloe said, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah,” Derek said. He couldn't bring himself to laugh about it. “It's very boring.”

Kathy looked at her daughters sternly. “Why don't you two stay in the library for a bit?” she said. Not exactly as a request. Sabrina and Chloe threw their Uno cards on the ground and struggled to
their feet. Chloe began to move away, but Sabrina folded her arms over her chest and stood her ground defiantly.

"Why can't we stay, Uncle Derek?" Sabrina said, peering at him with dark, angry eyes. Chloe, on the other hand, slunk away with an expression that said, *Hey, don't drag me into this rebellion.*

He shivered at the surge of nervousness that flooded him. Even though this was his niece. Even though she was smaller than Meredith. Despite all that, this was a confrontation, and a noisy one at that.

"Because I'm not sure it's age appropriate for you, and I'm not your mom or dad, so I don't decide whether you stay or not," Derek said.

"But I'm mature!" she protested, stomping her foot.

Kathy let loose a sardonic laugh as she stood and pointed to the hallway. "Sabrina, out."

"If you want us to think you're mature, this is not the way to do it," John said, joining his wife.

Derek stood and forced himself to straighten his shoulders. "You heard your parents." He pointed in the same direction Kathy had, setting his lips in a grim line. "Out."

Sabrina gave him and Kathy and John a glare and stomped off, which made the chandelier in the dining room shake, and sort of made him feel like a jerk. He wasn't used to any of his nieces being pissed at him. He was supposed to be the Awesome Uncle, though he supposed he preferred Uncle Jerkface over Uncle Addict.

Kathy looked back at Derek. "Sorry, Der," she said. "She's discovered she has hormones since you last saw her. It's not you." And then her eyebrows rose in askance. "Abby?"

Derek swallowed. He glanced at Abby. The amazing young lady who idolized him. Abby looked back at him, confusion written all over her face. He wanted to say no, that she was too young, but she was in college. She could vote. She was an adult and could make her own choices, and she knew about Amelia already, so, there was little point in keeping her away from this revelation. "It's um... It's fine," he said. Not. Not fine. He swallowed.

Meredith stroked his fingers with her thumb, remind him she was there. *You'll always have me, no matter what your crazy family does,* she seemed to be saying, though she didn't speak. He gave her a wavering smile despite his nerves.

Rachel laughed nervously. "Okay, what is it?"

His lungs didn't seem to want to fill. He shifted nervously from foot to foot. "I'm sorry," he said breathily. "I need..."

"Take your time," Kathy said, her voice low and soothing.

Say it, he thought. Just say it. Get it done. This was what he'd wanted, right? To move on? *Fight for what you need.* He took a deep breath. He had Meredith with him. Mark and Amelia and his Mom. There was almost an equal number of sympathetic people in this room as there were unknowns, now. Abby, Rachel, Kathy, Steve, and John. Four on five. Five on five if he counted himself. When he thought of the situation in those terms, like it was a checker board with red pieces and black pieces, a fair fight, things didn't seem as intimidating.

"I'm an addict," Derek said quietly.
“To what?” Rachel said, laughing. “Lobbing bad innuendo at unsuspecting victims?”

“No, I mean I'm really an addict,” Derek said, barely able to find his voice. “After I was shot, I got addicted to my painkillers.”

“What do you mean?” Rachel said.

Derek took a deep breath, urging himself not to snap at her. This was kind of big. Of course, she wouldn't quite get it at first. “I mean that I've been sick. And Percocet made me feel better. And not a day goes by that I don't regret the choice I made to keep taking it, knowing that, but I made it. I'm an addict.”

Silence stretched. Kathy didn't look that shocked, but everybody else sure did. Steve's mouth had fallen open, and John was blinking like an idiot. Abby looked like she was trying not to cry. He hated to see her cry. He hated seeing any woman cry, but his niece, often still a child in his mind, wielded special heart-piercing swords with her tears. And then there was Rachel. Blush crept across her face, but Derek didn't think it was from embarrassment. Anger, maybe. Or... He didn't know. He tried to remind himself this was necessary. That it would be bad before it could be good. Like a wound that needed to be opened and cleaned before it could heal properly. But that didn't make it feel any less bad in the moment.

“But...” Abby said, the first to break the mind-wracking silence. She took a deep breath. Her voice was low and her syllables were stretched. His chest tightened. “You're okay, though, right?” she said.

“I'm better than I have been in a long time,” he replied.

“You're not going to jail?”

The question surprised him enough that a nervous, humorless laugh popped loose from his body. “No. No, I'm not going to jail.”

“Okay,” Abby said, nodding. She bit her lip like she didn't know what to say. “That's good. I knew someone at school who...” She swallowed, not finishing her sentence, but he could fill in the blanks.

And then her eyes darkened. She wiped her face. “How could you?” she said with belligerence that made him flinch, in part because it scared him a little, and in part because he didn't think he'd ever heard her speak in that tone of voice. The only thing he had shelved in old memories that compared was when he'd heard her fight with Kathy and John about getting a learner's permit. In that case, though, her tone had been more of a two-dimensional, pout-y, “Why are you being so unfair to me!” rather than a three-dimensional wail of betrayal, “Et tu, Brute?”

“I'm sor—” he said.

“Don't bother,” Abby replied icily.

Derek looked at the floor as his eldest niece stalked out of the room and disappeared into the kitchen. A chilly puff of air displaced by her passing hit him in the face in the midst of Kathy's repeated, “Abby? Abby!” that did no good for the situation whatsoever. Kathy didn't seem to have any idea whether to chase her daughter or to stay.

“She shouldn't have done that,” Kathy said.

“It's okay,” he added lamely, almost unable to find his voice. “It's... what I expected.”
“She's just being a stupid kid,” Mark said, a small, soothing voice of reason. “Don't take it personal, man.”

Even with the help, Derek didn't know what else to say.

For a long moment, it seemed like nobody knew what else there was to say, and he didn't miss the fact that, other than Abby, none of the “hostile” checker pieces had responded specifically to what he'd said. His eyes pricked, and his lower-lip quivered, and a big, thick lump expanded in his throat, but he didn't let any of that own him. Not right now. Not when, if he lost it, everything would get even worse. He wiped his eyes and didn't speak. He looked at Meredith for... he didn't know what. Help. Reassurance. Something. Anything.

Her eyes were filmy with unshed tears. I love you, she mouthed, and his knuckles smooshed together as she tightened her grip again.

He didn't know what else to say. What else could he say?

“So, Mom knew, and...” Rachel began slowly, her eyes and nose had scrunched in her I'm-doing-math-and-I-hate-it face. Her voice was thick and lost as she struggled through her thoughts. “Why didn't you say anything to us, Derek?”

Because he'd screwed up was his instinctive response, but his throat wouldn't work.

Meredith's hip pressed against him, reassuring him, and her fingers clenched around him, almost to the point of real pain, like she was trying to reassure herself. A wild thought flew into his head. Him telling her to push. Her reminding him she was allowed to break his hand because he'd said she could for this. And then she'd squeeze his hand a bit like that.

“He just did tell you,” Meredith said, pulling him back into the room from his musing, her tone borderline I'm-good-with-a-scalpel-don't-mess-with-me, her posture bristling. “Right now. Didn't you hear him?”

Rachel looked at Meredith. Goggled for a moment. “I mean... I meant before!”

Kathy nodded. “We could have helped you.”

“Are you guys serious?” Amelia said as she, too, rose to her feet. She rolled her eyes, and in an unexpected hailstorm of support, said, “He didn't tell you two because you're a pair of judgmental, hypocritical bitches. And if Nancy had been here, too, I doubt he'd have opened his mouth at all.”

His mother shook her head. “Amelia, language!”

“Ladies,” Steve said, “Let's all calm—”

“I will not be calm!” Rachel snapped. “Amelia, what are you even talking about?”

Derek wasn't sure if Amelia supporting him had helped or hurt things.
Amelia rolled her eyes again. “Only the fact that you ostracized me for years.”

“That was a long time ago,” Kathy said.

“It wasn't a long time ago,” Amelia said. “I still don't feel comfortable at family bonanzas like this. And the only one of you who ever even apologized to me, though it took him more than a decade to get around to it, and also a painful trip to the land of ‘me, too’, was Derek.”

Kathy and Rachel sat in stunned silence, and the moment stretched, and stretched.

“Amy,” Kathy began slowly, “that was a long time ago.”

Rachel nodded. “I thought it was done.”

“It's not done,” Amelia said. “It's never done. I'm an addict. Derek's an addict. Addiction is a problem for life. We can be almost okay, but we can never be totally better, and this family needs to take its head out of its ass about it. He didn't tell you because he was terrified of you, and I honestly can't blame him, whether he's sick or not.”

“Thanks, Amy,” Derek snapped, finding his voice. “Thanks for your help.” He put the word help in air quotes. “This is really going well.”

At least Amelia had the decency to look like she felt a little guilty about throwing her Molotov cocktail into the lit cigarette party at the gas station. Silenced stretched to the point of being unbearable. Nobody spoke. Everybody stared. Derek wanted to crawl back to his mother's queen-sized bed, pull the covers over his head, and curl up in a ball.

“How about we all sit down,” Meredith said calmly. “And then, maybe, we can talk about this like adults.”

“Yes,” Mom said, “That's a good idea. Let's all take a timeout.”

“No,” Kathy said. “Wait.” When Kathy stood, Derek squeezed his eyes shut, prepared for the worst. “Amelia's right.” Derek's eyes snapped open in time to see Kathy walk over to Amy and hold out her hand. Amy snorted and didn't take it. “I'm sorry,” Kathy pressed. “We're both sorry,” she added, gesturing at Rachel, “and we should have said something instead of assuming things were okay. We created a pretty hostile environment.” Kathy sighed as if she were disappointed. “And then we unintentionally tried to let time sweep it under the rug to avoid a difficult conversation.” She turned to Derek. “I never wanted you to feel like you couldn't tell us something. I'm sorry.”

Rachel nodded. “Amy, I had no idea you felt that way. I see too many ODs wind up on my table. I would never be as stupid, now, as I was when we were younger, now that I've seen so much. I thought it was... Well, I thought it was obvious.”

“Obvious,” Amelia scoffed. “Obvious? Obvious is I am so sorry, Amelia, for treating you like dirt.”

Rachel flinched.

Kathy straightened, as though forcing herself not to engage in a petty fight. “I want to help,” she said coolly.

“We both do!” Rachel said with a thick voice. “Both of you.”
“Both of you,” Kathy agreed. “How can we help?”

Derek kneaded his jeans with nervous hands. “It took me three months to admit I even needed help.”

“So, you and Meredith did this all by yourselves?” Kathy said incredulously.

Meredith bit her lip. “We had Mark,” she said roughly. “Mark was there.”

The tips of Mark's ears turned pink. He shrugged. “I didn't do much.”

“Don't say that,” Meredith said. “You did a lot.”

“You did,” Derek said, tension making his throat hurt. “You did so much, Mark. Thank you.”

The pink on Mark's ears spread to his cheeks. “It really wasn't a big deal.”

“When did you tell Mom?” Kathy said.

“When I visited in October,” Mom said.

“And Amy?” Rachel said.

“I had a really bad day in September,” Derek said.

“And Mark?” Rachel said.

Derek glanced curiously at Mark. Mark had... always known.

“I told him in August,” Meredith said. “I didn't know what to do when I... figured it out.”

Derek squeezed her shoulder in support.

When nobody spoke, he felt a stupid, nerve-wracking need to fill the silence.

“I was selfish,” Derek said. “Selfish, and stupid, and I let this all get heaped on Meredith and Mark, particularly Meredith. And I'm sorry for that every day. I'm sorry for—”

“Shut up, you big, dumb idiot,” Rachel snapped. She blinked tears, and her voice cracked. “And I mean that in the nicest possible way.” She waved her hand at Amelia. “C'mere, squirt.”

Amelia rolled her eyes and stood. “What?”

“You, too, Derek,” Rachel said.

“What?” Derek said dumbly.

“What?” Derek said dumbly.

“Just come here,” Rachel said, pointing at the floor in front of her feet for emphasis.

The four of them converged at the center of the room. Rachel pushed closer. “Is this okay?” she said to him, raising her arms to show clear intent.

Derek swallowed. “What? Yes...”

And all at once, he and Amelia were at the center of a bear hug so tight it was hard to breathe, not that it mattered, because his breath froze in his chest.
“I thought you would hate me, now,” Derek said thickly, still not ready to believe what had just happened.

“We could never hate you,” Kathy said against his ear. “And we never hated Amy. You never hated Amy. We were all just...”

“Really, really stupid,” Rachel said. “All of us.”

His muscles relaxed. Finally. His jaw unclenched. Tension bled out of him as though his body were a sieve, and then he was just tired. Tired. Relieved. Derek's throat tightened. The room blurred. “I'm really sor—”

“Didn't I say shut up?” Rachel said playfully.

“Let's just let it go,” Kathy said. “We're all here, now.”

Amelia snorted. “That's easy for you to say,” she said, muffled by the sibling dog pile.

Kathy sighed. “Look, we clearly all have unresolved issues. But we don't need to fix them all right now. One at a time, okay?”

“Fine,” Amelia grumbled.

“What just happened?” Steve said.

“I think they all agreed on something,” John added.

“Is that not normal?” Meredith said.

“No,” Derek said in choked up unison with his sisters. Beyond Kathy's shoulder, he saw his mother smiling.

After

“Derek,” said a soft voice. Meredith. “Derek...”

He opened his eyes to a strange blindness. Nothing but brown. A moment later, he realized this was the breakfast nook table, and he'd slumped to the point of collapse against it. Abby wasn't in his arms anymore. That's right. She'd left, and he'd put his head down for a moment... He rubbed his eyes, righted himself, and stared fuzzily up at Meredith.

“What time is it?” he said. A murmur of voices flitted through the air from the living room. It couldn't be too much later.

“Ten,” Meredith said. “Our taxi is here.”

“Oh, okay,” he said, still not quite functional. He stumbled to his feet. “Should say g'night.”

Meredith flashed a soft smile at him. “The adults are in the living room. The kids are down.” She wrapped her arms around him and stopped him from moving forward. “Hey.”

He looked at her.

“You made it,” she said.

A sleepy smile stretched across his face. “I did.”
She stared at him through her eyelashes. She sighed with content. “I think I like your family, by the way. They don't seem that mean, or judge-y, or freaky anymore.”

“I guess they've grown out of it for the most part,” Derek said.

She nodded. “People grow.” You have. I have.

Her unspoken words resonated with him. “I'm glad you're here,” he said.

“Me, too,” she said. Her lip twitched. She shifted on her feet. Put her hand on her belly. “I swear, this kid is running laps.”

He put a hand against her navel. The warmth of her skin through her shirt soothed him. “I can't wait until I can feel it, too,” he said.

“You will soon,” she said. She leaned onto her tiptoes and kissed him. “Let's go say goodbye,” she murmured against his lips.

He breathed in the soft scent of her lotion. Her hair. “Okay,” he said. And then he let her lead him home.
8:27 AM

One of the disadvantages of being a surgeon who'd been married to an OB-GYN in an earlier life was that he knew full well how to read an ultrasound. Worse, Meredith, relatively fresh from her intern year, knew full well, too, because she'd had so much recent practice. And they were both relying solely on personal willpower not to interpret the easily knowable.

“We could figure it out so easily,” Meredith said as if she'd read his mind, leaning against him, fingers clutching the manila envelope. The black-and-white photo of their baby, taken at twenty weeks, sat on top of the yellow paper, but there was a tiny neon Post-it note stuck over a revealing area of the photograph. The ultrasound tech hadn't even batted an eyelash when they'd asked for it. Meredith flicked it with her finger. “We just have to lift this up...”

Samantha barked in the distance and trotted back to them with her favorite, chewed-up, dirt-ridden tennis ball. She dropped it by the bench in front of Derek's feet. Derek reached down. The ball was soggy with drool and mud, but it didn't faze him. He threw the ball as far as he could muster, and Samantha bounded away, her feet churning up bits of grass and mud as she flew. He wiped his hand on his coat.

“Meredith,” he said. He kissed her temple. Pressed his nose against her skin. Her wool coat mushed up against his duster as she shifted in his arms. “If you want to peek, you can. It's okay. I understand. But I really want it to be a surprise for me.”

They sat in the dog park on a bench in the chill, warming each other while their dog had some fun with Queen Anne Hill's other canine residents. Meredith shook her head. “I'm not gonna peek, if you're not gonna peek. I'd feel like I was cheating or something. Besides...”

A cold winter breeze bit at his skin. “What?” he said.

She shrugged, shivering against him, and then she looked up. Met his eyes. “I kind of like the idea of a good surprise, too.”

He laughed. “Maybe, we should give all the pictures to Lexie for safe-keeping until Baby is born. Having them out of our possession might shore up our willpower.”

Meredith snorted. “Asking Lexie to keep a secret like that is like asking Samantha not to eat bacon.”

“Point,” he said, nodding. “Mark?”

Meredith rolled her eyes. “Mark's even worse. The man sucks at lying. All of our friends suck at it, actually. Can you imagine if we gave these to Richard?”

Derek couldn't help but chuckle. “Bailey?” he said. “We could give them to her.”

Meredith snickered. “After she's done gutting you for reminding her we have sex, it might work. Maybe, Alex? He knows already.”

“He knows about the sex?”

Meredith laughed. “Well, he knows about our sex. But he doesn't know about the baby's.”
Samantha barked as she brought back the ball. Derek threw it against the back chain-link fence, where it fell to the wet grass with a metal clink. His chest didn't hurt at all anymore. Not even from the whipping motion of his arm. He had to do several pushups to elicit a reminder that he'd been seriously injured. The increasing freedom from painful rebukes for exertion had helped him feel better. A lot better.

“We could have Dr. Charlton keep them on file for us,” he said.

“But then we can't take them home,” Meredith said. She placed her palm against her belly. “And I still want to be able to look at them whenever I want.”

He nodded. “Alex works, then.”

Meredith slipped the ultrasound photograph back into the manila envelope and stuck it beside her hip on the bench. She leaned against him and pressed her lips against his throat. “So,” she murmured against his skin. “Are you ready to go back tomorrow?”

He swallowed, staring across the dog park. Over three years later, he still hadn't quite gotten used to how green things stayed, even in the winter. In New York, the grass died cyclically. Here, it was still vibrant. Some of the trees had lost their leaves, but there were a lot of evergreens that kept their verdant coloring.

“I don't know,” he said, staring vacantly. All he knew was that he was out in the wide, wide open, cuddling with his wife, playing fetch with his dog. He didn't hurt, and he wasn't scared, and the days when he'd been so upset he hadn't wanted to get out of bed felt... very far away. He might not be ready, for sure, but he wasn't not ready. “I can't not try.”

She kissed him again. “Mmm, Chief Shepherd.”

He nuzzled her. “It might be worth it just for the title.”

“And free use of the conference rooms,” she said.

He laughed. Nodded. “I will admit, there are a few perks.”

“Chief?” said a deep, low voice, and Derek snapped out of his musing to find Stan, one of their orderlies, staring back at him in the bright hallway. Derek's heart throbbed at the unexpected intrusion, once, twice, and a quick pinch of adrenaline hit him like a boxer, but then he relaxed without any extra work. Stan stood with one hand clasped around the handle of a shoulder-high meal cart full of empty meal trays. He wore a festive Santa hat, which made it hard not to smile at him.

“I'm sorry?” Derek said, already recovered. Morning sunlight slanted through the windows, making passing nurses and doctors shield their eyes with clipboards, papers, anything available. Tinsel garlands strung the hallways under the windows, and he thought he smelled a hint of evergreen.

Stan frowned and swept his long black hair back behind his ear with his hand. His gold wristwatch glittered in the light as it shifted, and his Santa hat tipped perilously to the side. “Waterworks,” Stan said. “Storage room at six. Thought you'd want to know.”

Derek sighed. “Stan, I'm not a counselor,” he said. He glanced down the hallway to the storage closet across from nursing station six. “If somebody has a problem, they're welcome to come to me, but I'm not going to intrude on—”
Stan shrugged. “You might want to for this one.”

Derek swallowed. His heart squeezed. Meredith cried a lot, lately. Over the most random things. *Stupid freaking hormones,* she’d said belligerently more than once. But that excuse didn't make Derek hate the crying any less, or want to fix it any less. “Is it my wife?”

“Half right,” was all Stan said before he turned, which made no sense to Derek. How could somebody be half his wife? “Sorry,” Stan said, gesturing to the meal cart, “these trays need to be washed.” And then he left, the cart squeaking as he wheeled it toward the cafeteria.

Derek turned on his heels and walked down the hall. Deirdre, a nurse in her late fifties, sat at the nursing station desk, a station that should have boasted at least two nurses, but there was only Deirdre. She typed charts into the Seattle Grace computer system, frown lines tightening her gaze. An old radio played a tinny, quiet rendition of Jingle Bell Rock from one of the local stations, but that didn't stop Derek from hearing the sniffles on the other side of the door on the opposite wall.

“She's in there,” Deirdre said, tipping her shoulder toward the door without lifting her hands off the keyboard. Her typing clacked percussively in the air.

“She...” Derek began. He sighed. “Is this really something that needs my intervention?”

Deirdre shrugged. “I doubt we'll know until you find out.”

“Why didn't you find out?” he said.

She rolled her eyes and looked at him. “Sir, it's eight-thirty in the morning. My shift ends in thirty minutes. I've been up all night. I've already dealt with two different patients and a fellow nurse who had their own catastrophes.” She pointed at the doorway. “That's a surgeon. You're Chief of Surgery. You deal with it.”

Derek sighed. “All right, all right. I'll handle it.”

“Thanks, sir,” Deirdre said, her tone absent as she stared back at the computer screen. “You're a peach.”

Derek knocked softly at first. There was no response. He hated this. When he'd first come back after his stress leave, he'd spent a lot of time in storage closets, curled up in the corner in the dark with his back to the door, mostly recuperating from too many stimuli, but sometimes breaking down in a blubbery pile. He never would have wanted people to walk in on him. He was half tempted to walk away. No matter that Deirdre wanted him to deal with this. Or Stan. Or anybody.

But the staff was miserable. Seattle Grace was in trouble it wasn't bouncing back from. Your fault. Your fault, your fault. “Your fault,” whispered Gary Clark. Guilt slithered in Derek's stomach before he could push it away with a firm hand and a deep breath.

He took a deep breath, and he turned the knob, and into the dark closet he went. It took him a moment for his eyes to adjust. Somebody, a woman, sat in the corner on an overturned mop bucket. She wiped her eyes and looked up at him, eyes glistening. He squinted in the darkness.

“I'm sorry,” she said, and he recognized Lexie's distinctive voice, thick with grief though it was, before he could make out her face. “Do you need to get something in here?”

“No, no,” he said. He swept his hands through his hair and shifted from foot to foot. “Are you okay?” Which was a moronic question he could have kicked himself for. Asking a woman in tears if she was okay.
Lexie wiped her eyes and sniffed. “Yes,” she said, a little too quickly. “I'm fine.”

Derek grinned ruefully. “You know, I've learned not to believe Meredith when she says that, even when she's not crying.” He turned over another bucket and sat next to her.

“You don't want to hear this,” she said. “I'm sure you have stuff. Other stuff. To, you know. Do. I mean, don't you? Have stuff?”

He shrugged as he pieced together her babble. He'd been doing his circuit. The circuit he walked when he was surveying all the goings-on at Seattle Grace, checking in on all the staff, making sure there weren't any problems. It was the circuit he did every morning after he arrived and checked his e-mail. The circuit he'd walked when he'd searched for Gary Clark.

“I'm just doing my rounds,” he said. “I've got nothing urgent. Maybe, I can help.”

Tears pulsed freshly from her eyes. She made a soft sound that wasn't a word. More a squeak. The kind Meredith made when she was really upset, and Derek's heart squeezed tighter. “I broke up,” his sister-in-law said.

He blinked. “What?”

“With Alex,” she wailed. “I broke up. He said pass the salt; I said I couldn't take it anymore. In front of everybody. I just... I exploded.”

For a moment, however inappropriate, Derek found himself wilting with relief. Not at her problem, but at the fact that he'd built this up in his head as another shooting-born catastrophe, and now he'd discovered that it wasn't one. He looked woefully at the door and then back to her. Maybe, he should get Meredith, or... Meredith would be a lot better at this. This seemed like a women-commiserate-over-rocky-road-ice-cream problem that he found happening every once in a while in Meredith's kitchen. Except, Lexie's bucket moaned as she pulled it across the floor to him, and then she leaned against his shoulder, and then he was stuck in a closet comforting his sister-in-law who'd just broken up with her boyfriend.

“I'm... sorry,” he said, rubbing her back with robotic strokes, not quite sure what to say.

“I feel like such a selfish jerk,” she said, sniffling.

He paused. “Why?”

“He was shot,” she said. She rubbed her nose on the wrist of her lab coat. “Who breaks up right after...” She glared at no one in particular. “Who does that!”

“I know what it's like to feel like you have to stay,” he said slowly.

“I broke up right after he was shot,” she wailed, not listening to him, and he winced.

He pulled her close and tried to put it another way. “Lexie, it's been months since then,” he said. “If you weren't happy, you weren't happy. And it's not like you have wedding vows with the guy.”

“Well, I still feel like a jerk,” Lexie grumbled.

Derek shook his head. “Wanting to be happy doesn't make you a jerk, and staying in a situation where you're miserable doesn't do any good. Believe me, I know.”

She pulled away from him. “You're miserable with Meredith?” she said sharply.
“What? No!” He shook his head vehemently. “I was talking about my ex-wife.”

“Oh,” Lexie said, her body deflating. “I didn’t really know her.”

“I didn’t sign the divorce papers the first time,” he said. “I felt like it was my duty to try again, but I just wasn’t happy, and it only ended up hurting everybody involved, especially Meredith.”

“So, you think it’s good that I left?” Lexie said.

“A relationship should be about more than just duty,” he said. “If the only reason you can come up with for staying was that he was shot, then yes, I do.”

“Would you want Meredith to leave you if that was the only reason she’d stuck around?” Lexie said.

He rubbed her back. Found himself nodding. I like to talk to you, Meredith had said. You can make me laugh, even when I’m freaking out. He’d come far enough, felt secure enough, to treat Lexie’s hypothetical scenario as she’d meant it. You don't judge me even when I say something stupid or freaky. You make me feel loved. You get me. Purely hypothetical. “I’d never want her to stay if that was the only reason.”

Lexie sighed. Nodded. Sat quietly in his arms for a long stretch of moments. He supposed this was a shooting-born catastrophe after all, but this was... actually... a lot like helping Meredith, he decided. Which, wasn’t as far out of his depth as he’d thought he would be in here.

“You know,” she mused in the dark. “We’ve never talked like this before.”

He cocked his head and looked down at her. “Like what?”

“Like you’re my brother instead of my boss,” she said.

He smiled. “Well, we probably shouldn’t make a habit of it.” He thought about it for a moment and decided to add, “At least, not at work.”

“Probably not, but... it’s nice for now,” Lexie said.

They stayed for a while in the quiet.

10:43 AM

A fruit cup, a juice box, a plastic fork, and a bag of unsliced, unpeeled carrots fell onto the desk in front of him. Meredith stood over him, a pensive look on her face as she bit her lip.

“I figured you’d forget to eat, so I brought some stuff from home,” she said. And then she frowned. “I’m sorry it probably looks like it’s for a five-year-old or something. I don’t really cook, and the cafeteria made pizza today, which I know you won't touch with a ten-foot pole unless all the cheese is picked off, and—”

“Meredith,” he said quietly. He took the fruit cup. He gave her the best smile he could manage under the circumstances. “You haven’t needed to remind me to eat in months.”

She shifted on her feet and plopped into the chair across from him. “I know, but this is your first day back, and I thought, maybe...”

“I’d get too stressed out?” he offered.
She deflated when he seemed to both get it right away and not harbor any anger about her doubts. “Yeah. Yeah, I... Yeah.”

She glanced around the room. He’d put his pictures back on the desk in what had been Richard’s office, including two new photos, one from their wedding, and one of Meredith's ten week ultrasound, which he’d had framed. He’d put his old, beaten copy of The Sun Also Rises back into the top left-hand drawer. He’d put his favorite blue pen into the pencil cup by the computer monitor. She paused for a particularly long while on the ultrasound photograph. And then she cocked her head at him.

“So, how are you?” she said.

She didn’t mention that she’d found him sitting in the dark. Or that he’d been rubbing his temples, trying to relieve a massive headache. Or that she’d had to call his name several times before he’d realized she was there. Or the fact that it was three already, and she was right. He hadn't eaten. Hadn't even thought about eating because he was too tense to want anything. Even the fruit cup made his stomach twist.

“I'm not hungry,” he confessed, his tone a little broken, “but thank you.”

The white light drifting into the office from the promenade gave her an otherworldly, silvery look. She wore her scrubs with a white shirt underneath. Her hair hung loose around her ears and over her shoulders. He let the world pause. Drank in the sight of her. Sighed. And then he stood.

She didn’t move as he hobbled around to the other side of the desk. He hurt. From all the tension in his arms and legs and everywhere.

He pulled her into his arms. Something he’d been thinking about doing all morning, ever since they’d parted ways with a long kiss at the car in the driveway. She’d still been wearing her bathrobe, and her hair had stuck up in weird places, because her shift didn’t start until after lunch, but he hadn't cared a bit.

He breathed her in. Her scent. Her heat. He pushed his fingers into her hair. He nuzzled her.

“Hi,” she said warmly.

“I really needed this, now,” he whispered.

“I had a feeling,” she said. Her hands slid along his spine as she embraced him. “How's it going?”

“Awful,” he said in a dark, thick voice.

Since he’d come back, he’d rediscovered budget reports. Job vacancies. Seattle Grace's revenues had been sinking steadily since the shooting. The Board had placed a hiring freeze on some of the more menial positions, like janitors, administrative staff, and orderlies, in order to compensate for the shrinking budget. Turnover rates in the nursing staff had skyrocketed as the nurses inevitably got pushed outside their job descriptions to make up for the lack of support staff. Too many empty nursing positions weren't being back-filled because there weren't enough applicants to meet the losses, and the problem was only deepening. A poor nursing staff was a sign of a bleeding hospital, and interns were getting harder to woo. Everybody from janitors to management seemed to be stressed out by trying to cover for all the people who weren’t there anymore, either because they’d been killed, or because they’d understandably fled an environment dominated by fear, overwork, and unhappiness.
Before, Derek's focus had been inward, and he hadn't noticed the hospital dissolving around him. All he'd been worried about had been navigating each day successfully without a meltdown or five. Now that he was back in full capacity other than the cutting, which he refused to attempt, yet, his focus had turned outward, and he hated what he saw.

“Your fault,” Mr. Clark said.

No, Derek insisted. Not his fault. But he still felt the need to fix it, or help, or... something. The trouble was, he had no idea what that something was.

“I don't know if I can do this,” he said.

He appreciated it when she didn't say, “Then don't.” She hugged him tightly. “Can I help?” she said instead.

He sighed. “Not unless you know how to make a thousand employees with their own versions of PTSD happy again. I had no idea it was this bad.”

She looked at him. “You had your own stuff to worry about.”

“I did,” he agreed. “And, now I have everybody else's stuff, also.”

“I think I might know what would help immediately,” she said, her voice a husky whisper.

He grinned. “Oh, do you?”

“Yes,” she said with a cute nod. She rose onto her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his. He felt her fingers pulling through his hair. “This,” she murmured against his skin, and kissed him again in the dark. “And this.” Another kiss. “And... this.”

“Hey, Shepherd,” Richard said, bouncing Derek out of another daydream like a bumper car. “Thought I'd check in.”

Derek's heart thumped in his chest, and he lost his breath. Eleven days. Eleven days of this, and he couldn't focus worth a damn. Worse, it seemed like every time he drifted, someone picked that moment to sneak up on him. The startles didn't last long, and Meredith said his flinches were barely noticeable when they happened, but the constant little scares didn't help his mood or his body.

He rubbed his temples, squeezing his eyes shut. “I'm fine,” he said. He inhaled. He exhaled. “Just a headache.” When he opened his eyes, the conference room lights didn't seem so much like sharp blades anymore.

Richard nodded as he approached the big table. “It's rough coming back after such a long break.”

“I promise, it's not going to go like last time,” Derek said, thinking of before, when he'd shown up for all of a day before he'd broken and disappeared on stress leave for weeks. “I'm back for the long haul. I'm just... adjusting.”

“I know,” Richard said, looking at the budget paperwork spread in a thick, messy fan on a five-foot spread of the table.

Derek had made his way through the first few pages with a highlighter before he'd sighed and put his head down. Just looking at the pile made him want to think of other things, like Meredith. Kissing Meredith. Meredith kissing him. He wondered, sometimes, if the headaches and
exhaustion he came home with in the evenings, now, had more to do with the fact that he loathed the work, and not so much that he had a mental disorder.

Had he felt that bad in the evenings before he'd been shot? He couldn't remember. The things from before seemed so much more distant, like memories of a book he'd read a long time ago. He did remember in upsetting detail the number of times he'd been frustrated to the point of wanting to hit things. And he did remember the unsettling rift the position had punched through his marriage—something he vowed not to let happen again. Regardless, waiting for an epiphany to figure out exactly what he needed to feel “done” didn't seem to be doing much except piling on more slices of stress to his mental sandwich.

Richard pulled out a chair on the opposite side of the table. “A support system really helps you get through rough spots. I hope you realize you have a big one, now.”

Derek frowned. “A big rough spot?”

“A big support system,” Richard clarified.

“Um, thanks,” Derek said. The tips of his ears heated. “I do know.”

He looked down, and he pulled his hands through his hair. He pushed the piles of paperwork back into a foot high, neat, but now unsorted stack. He couldn't work on them right now. He just couldn't. Not when his head was splitting.

Richard leaned forward in his seat, which creaked with the weight redistribution. His gaze bored into Derek. “And I'm here if you need to talk about... anything,” Richard said.

Derek's eyes narrowed. “Anything.”

“Yes,” Richard said with a nod. “Anything.”

“I get the feeling we're talking about something specific,” Derek said.

Richard shrugged. “It's just that I'm in a unique position to know exactly what you've been going through, and I can help.”

The furrow in Derek's brow deepened. “You've had post-traumatic stress?”

“No,” Richard said.

Which made no sense. What was Richard getting at? What was there in common about this situation and Richard's, except...

Fuck.

“He knows,” Mr. Clark said, a sinister whisper.

A blade of ice slipped between Derek’s ribs. His heart inflated by two sizes. It thumped against his chest wall like it was trying to break free. He couldn't swallow. His breath slipped away in a short puff that he couldn't recuperate. His limbs shook. The room blotted.

“Derek?” Richard said, worry dropping his tone into something... almost fatherly.

How could the man be comforting when he knew what a hypocrite Derek had been? About everything? The whole fucking thing had been a replay of what had happened with Amelia from start to finish, but on fast forward, because Derek had already been through it once, and he'd been
certain of how it would go again. He'd stomped in on his high horse, and he'd judged faster than a whip cracked, and, now...

“Richard, I'm...” Derek began, breathless, but he couldn't finish. His elbows thumped as he jammed them onto the table and put his face against his palms. He breathed in. He breathed out. This wasn't a panic attack. It wasn't bad enough. But it was, by far, one of the most unpleasant buckets of adrenaline he'd had dumped on his face in weeks.

Richard said something soothing. Derek didn't hear the words. Just the tone.

A minute passed before Derek didn't feel like he would fall to pieces in the chair. Beyond that, he didn't say anything because he didn't know what to say. An apology for being a self-righteous asshole felt woefully inadequate, just like it had when he'd finally said he was sorry to Amelia. An apology for keeping his addiction a secret felt pointless and fake, because Derek hadn't intended to tell anybody else. His wife knew. His family knew. His best friend and his wife's best friends knew. His therapist knew. In his mind, nobody else needed to know.

“I'm sorry,” he said anyway, if only to force his vocal cords to do something other than fill up with an unbearable, aching lump.

“You don't need to be sorry about before,” Richard said, misunderstanding. “You took me out of the equation when I didn't have the good sense to do it myself.”

I'm an alcoholic, Richard had said. People got hurt. I took advantage of Meredith. Thank you for stepping in.

Derek stared at his lap as his face blazed red. “No, I mean...” He swallowed. It hurt. “I'm sorry I didn't... understand.”

“A lot of people don't,” Richard said, no hurt in his tone, but that didn't make Derek feel much better.

Heat crept down Derek's throat from his face. “When did you...? How...?”

“You go to Joe's with Sloan, and you've never once gotten scotch or beer since the shooting. It's always club soda or ice water.”

Derek opened his mouth, but no words came out. Richard had joined him and Mark and Owen last week for darts. Only Mark and Owen had gotten booze.

“As well,” Richard continued, “I know the look.”

Derek blinked. “What look?”

“The look you get when you're upset, and you're thinking, however briefly, about the easy fix. I see it in the mirror, a lot. I know.”

Derek's fingers clenched. His heart thumped. “I'm not going to take—”

“I know,” Richard said before Derek could finish. “I believe you. But anybody who's been where we've been gets that look occasionally. Which is why I wanted you to know I'm around. If you ever need to talk.”

Derek forced himself to keep breathing at a steady rhythm despite the fact that his head was spinning. “Does anybody else... know?” he managed.
Richard shrugged. “It wasn't my business to ask or tell.”

“Nobody's said anything,” Derek said, more blind hope than any solid certainty.

“What would you like them to say?” Richard said, raising an eyebrow.

Nothing, really. Derek had fucked up. He'd let people down. He'd hurt his wife. And Mark. He knew it. He was coming to terms with it. He didn't need the world to rub it in anymore. “I don't know,” Derek said, the words quiet. He picked at his cuticles, unwilling to look up at the man who had been his mentor for years.

An awkward silence filled the room. Richard coughed conspicuously. “Well, I just wanted to... to stop by,” he said. “See how you were holding up. And to tell you I'm here if you need an ear.”

Derek swallowed. “Thanks,” he said, though he felt more sick than thankful.

He heard Richard getting up from the chair.

“Oh, admit it,” Gary Clark said. “You know you should have told him, but you didn't, because you're a coward, and now you're going to sulk about it.”

Derek clenched his fingers. He wasn't sure if he could dismantle that criticism, even with Dr. Wyatt's exercise of trying out how scenarios felt in his head when they involved other people. He wasn't sure if he'd agree with Meredith or his mom or Mark if they'd done the same thing. Worse, a sinking feeling in his gut told him he should have told Richard, and not only because he owed the man some karma points. In the years since Derek had been in Seattle, rebuilding himself, Richard had been there. As a friend, yes. But more as a father figure. The relationship had cooled to arctic levels when Richard had fallen off the wagon, but...

This was not one of the many times where Gary Clark had lied.

Derek's lower lip quivered, but he pushed the black, awful feeling of self-loathing away. *It's okay to be afraid, Derek,* Dr. Wyatt had said. *Work with it, or push through it. It's only bad when you let it bowl you over.*

Derek took a breath. This wasn't going to happen today. He'd been afraid. He'd screwed up. He was embarrassed. That didn't mean the world had to end, or that he was unworthy of living in it. There would be no sulking.

“Richard?” he called softly before Richard could leave.

Richard put a hand on the doorway and turned. “Yes?”

He stared back at Derek silently, eyebrows raised in askance. He really wanted to help. The desire was written all over his face. He'd been offering the same thing for months, now, almost from the moment Derek had woken up in the ICU, and Derek hadn't taken him up on it except under duress. In hindsight, he decided he'd been really fucking stupid.

There was an easy way Richard could help, too. Over the months, Derek had gotten more inquisitive in his attempts to forge some peace for himself. He'd asked Meredith for her version of the shooting. He'd talked to Mark. To Bailey. Tried to sort out the fact and fiction in his head. Dr. Wyatt had gone over each minute with him again and again until he was okay saying things like, “I was shot six months ago,” or, “I'm afraid of being shot again.” He'd gotten the beginning and the middle of the shooting mostly sorted. But he'd never talked to Richard about the end.
“What happened the day I was shot?” Derek said, taking the plunge. “With Gary Clark?”

Richard frowned. “What do you mean?”

“All I ever heard was that he was dead,” Derek said to his lap. “That he died... with you there.”

Richard walked back into the room, but this time he sat in the chair next to Derek's. Derek didn't look up. He saw Richard's pant leg. His lab coat. “I talked to him,” Richard said. “He only had one bullet left. We talked about his choices, facing punishment, or finishing his revenge and killing me. He decided to shoot himself.”

“I tried,” Derek said. He stared down the barrel of his memory. “I tried to talk to him, but...”

No talking!

“Some people don't want to listen,” Richard said, pulling Derek back into the room.

Derek clenched his jaw. “But he listened to you, and not to me.”

“He thought you were dead, and he only had one bullet left,” Richard countered. “He knew law enforcement was coming. He had more reasons to listen than not by the time I ran into him.”

Derek swallowed. “I almost got him to put his gun down, but... it wasn't enough.” His chest tightened when he thought of Dr. Kepner rushing in behind him, foolish and negligent, and then nothing Derek had done to diffuse the situation had been worth a flying fuck in the end. “I wasn't enough.”

“I don't think anybody would have been enough at that point. He'd already killed people, and he had no pressing reason to stop, yet.”

“No, I...” Derek sighed and looked up. “You're a better chief than I am. You're better at dealing with... people.”

“There's a learning curve to being Chief,” Richard said. “I've just had more experience.”

“No, you're better at it,” Derek said, shaking his head. “You were meant for this job. Take the compliment, Richard.”

“Administration does take a certain kind of person,” Richard admitted.

“I'm going to step down,” Derek said. Agitated, he pulled his fingers through his hair. “I just... I need to do some things, first. For my own peace of mind. And then I'll be out of your way for good. I'm sure the Board will rehire you in a heartbeat.”

Richard leaned closer. “What things do you need to do?” he said curiously.

“I don't know what they are, yet,” Derek said with a huff of frustration. “I just know that if I walk away, now, I'll spend the rest of my life feeling like a coward and a quitter. I need... closure.”

“Hmm,” Richard said, the word a low, noncommittal thrum of bass. His fingers brushed his beard.

“I want you to have this back,” Derek said. “I do.”

Richard regarded him. For a tense moment, Derek thought Richard might be angry, might call Derek selfish, but instead, Richard nodded, his expression thoughtful more than anything else. “I'm an old man,” Richard said. “I've met my goals. I've had a good life.” And then he stood. His chair
creaked. “You'll let me know if I can help?"

Derek nodded. “I will.”

Before Richard left, he put a hand on Derek's shoulder. Squeezed. “You're a better surgeon than me.”

Derek blinked. “I am not—”

“You're the top neurosurgeon in the country,” Richard said before Derek could finish his protest. “You do some impossible stuff. General surgeons at my skill level are a dime a dozen. I'm good, but I'm not the best.” His eyes twinkled. “Just take the compliment, Derek.”

Derek grunted, a begrudging, quiet laugh. “Touché,” he said, and Richard left the conference room.

1:07 PM

He found Meredith in the skills lab, lobotomizing one of the neurosurgical dummies. She cursed a blue streak, filling the air with guttural, nasty words that belied her dainty frame. He grinned like a fool when he wondered how such a tiny woman could sound so much like a pissed off lion.

“Freaking piece of crap!” she said, almost a growl, as he set the plate down beside her. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and dropped her dummy scalpel on the tray. “I just can't get this!” And then her expression abruptly pinched with desperation when she turned toward him. Her gaze dropped. She ignored the pizza and fixated on his coffee mug. “Oh, god, give me that.”

Before he could stutter a protest, she'd snatched his steaming latte from his hand. She tipped back the bright blue “#1 Dad” mug she'd bought him as a gag gift in New York. Her throat bobbled as she chugged.

“Meredith, that's—”

“Hot!” she snapped, pulling it away from her lips. She put the cup on the table next to her mutilated fake brain. “Ish hot. Ow.” She shook her hands and panted. “Damn it. Thish ish jusht pufect.”

He gave her a wry grin. “If I say good afternoon, will you hit me?”

She glared at him and pulled the plate he'd put down for her into her lap without speaking. He'd grabbed her a piece of cheese pizza from the cafeteria line. She picked at it halfheartedly, probably because she'd just blown out all her taste buds with scalding coffee.

She sighed. “You're not gonna yell at me fuh duh cawffee?” She licked her lips and made a face, giving up on the pizza. She put the plate back on the table.

He pulled up a stool, sat down beside her, and kissed her. “Why would I yell at you for the coffee?”

“Caffeine ish bad fuh Baby.”

He laughed. “Mere, a single scalding cup of latte isn't going to hurt anything. You, on the other hand—”
“Whud about me?” she snapped.

He snickered. “Well, it seems you might kill me without it.”

She sighed, the fight bleeding out of her, and she leaned against him. He pulled her close.

“I'm sho tired,” she said. “I really tried not to have any.” Still, she took his cup and blew on the surface. The brown liquid fluttered. She sipped more cautiously.

Despite her misery, he grinned. Eating or drinking something on the “no no” list was kind of huge for her. Though it was widely accepted that a cup of coffee a day wouldn't hurt anything, she'd religiously been staying away from any quantity of anything on the list Dr. Charlton had given her. She'd gotten considerably less morbid about Baby since their first ultrasound, and now that it was kicking with regularity, she seemed to have stopped fixating on awful possibilities and started fantasizing about all the good ones.

He gestured at her neurosurgical dummy. Simply eyeballing it, he couldn't figure out what procedure she was practicing for, which... was a bad sign. Either he was getting too rusty, or she was in dire need of instruction. “Can I help?” he said.

She put the coffee mug on the table, slumped against him, and let her eyes drift closed. “Don't you have Chief-y stuff to do?”

Yes. But he'd rather be helping her. “I have a few minutes,” he said honestly. His stared at the brain on the table.

“Shut up,” she snapped before he could open his mouth about the brain. “I know ish mangled. I'm jusht tired.”

He tried to keep the smirk off his face. “Um...” He poked the brain. “What is it? Exactly?”

But she didn't answer. Her breaths evened. She'd fallen asleep in his arms. He kissed the top of her head. He would need to move in a few minutes, but those few minutes? She could have those all to herself.

“—Shepherd,” a woman said. Dr. Shepherd! Thank god; you're back. “Dr. Shepherd!”

Something flesh-colored and mushy waved in front of his face, not close enough to make him feel threatened, but close enough to make him jump reflexively as his thoughts came back into the room. He managed to hide his flinch by turning down his head and looking through his desk drawer, letting the jitters slide out through his fingertips into his pen tray. He made an intentional racket as he routed through the pens. He breathed in. Out. In. Out. He grabbed a random ballpoint pen, a red one, like he'd meant to grab a pen all long, and of course he hadn't flinched. He clicked the cap and looked at the woman standing across from him.

“—Shepherd,” a woman said. Dr. Shepherd! Thank god; you're back. “Dr. Shepherd!”

He leaned back in his chair. He tried to relax, tried to unclench all the muscles that had tightened in
her presence, but being around her set his teeth on edge, and being around her when she seemed nervous only fueled his own nervous fire. They didn't play off each other well. She seemed to know it, too. She'd either been avoiding him, or they'd somehow not run into each other more than twice since Thanksgiving due to happenstance. He was inclined to believe the former more than the latter. He couldn't think of any other staff member he'd seen less than her.

He cleared his throat. “Well, what can I do for you?” he prodded, and then he winced when her already unsure expression faltered further. He'd snapped. And he'd sounded impatient. Even to his own ears. He hadn't meant to snap or sound impatient.

Her mouth opened. Closed. “I'm...” She inhaled shortly and let it out. A loose bang fluttered as she pushed air over her lips. She reached a shaky hand to her clipboard and pulled out an envelope. “I wanted to give this to you.”

“What is it?” he said, reaching across the desk for it.

“My two-week notice.”

He blinked as his fingers closed around the envelope. The paper felt cool to the touch. Relief pinched his thoughts before anything else, and, weeks before, he would have rode it like a wave. Would have told her, So long, and thanks for all the fish. Except he couldn't, now, in good conscience, do that.

“Dr. Kepner—” he began.

“April,” she insisted, interrupting him.

He breathed in. He breathed out. Why did she have to act so familiar with him? “Dr. Kepner, you don't need to leave.”

She shook her head. “I do need to leave. I really, really do.”

He sat back in his chair and sighed. You did this to me, he'd nearly growled at her. You got me shot. Some of the tension bled away, leaving only tiredness. He swallowed, and he took another deep breath. “Dr. Kepner, I hope I've shown you that I can remain professional despite our personal differences,” he said, forcing cool when he couldn't manage warm. “Please, don't feel like you need to leave because of me. What happened before won't happen again. I promise.”

“My best friend died here,” she responded, her voice cracking on the last syllable. Her eyes reddened. Her clipboard and her little book fell to her lap as she reached up to wipe her face. “I found her body. Her head was blown to bits. I saw you get shot. I was threatened with a gun. You threatened me. I can't sleep at night. I have panic attacks. I just don't want to work here anymore. I swore to myself I'd try until the end of the year to see if it would get better. In two weeks, it will be January first, and it hasn't gotten any better. I can't do it anymore.”

He stared at her, not sure of what to say.

“You don't want me here, and I feel guilty whenever I'm in the room with you. It's just not a good environment for me. You might be able to force yourself to work with me, but I can't work with you.” Tears escaped her eyes, and sharp, wet slivers lashed her cheeks. His gut tightened as she added in a twisted whisper, “I just want to go home.”

He swallowed. Before, in the supply closet when she'd caught him falling apart, he'd gone on the offensive, and he'd been thrilled. Thrilled that he'd upset her. That he'd made her cry. He'd reveled in her tears. Reveled that he'd made her pay. That he'd gotten some justice. But watching her cry,
now... There wasn't any justice. Her tears just made him feel sick, and he couldn't imagine why he'd ever wanted them.

His throat tightened. Silence in the office stretched. Sounds from the outside, footsteps, voices, and distant Christmas carols, filtered softly through the big glass window behind him, through the closed door.

“I didn't know you were having trouble,” he said, the words quiet.

“Nobody knew I've been having trouble,” she snapped. “My friends are all dead except for Jackson, and he's... got his own problems.”

Derek sighed. This was such a fucking mess. For weeks, for months, he'd felt like an emotional dunce because everybody was okay except for him, except he’d been finding out again and again since then that nobody was okay. Cristina had enough problems that she'd forced him onto a motorcycle in hopes of getting back her person. Owen was having problems, if Cristina's vague hints meant anything. Meredith had burst apart at the seams when he'd tried to thank her for saving his life. And now he'd come back to a hospital that was the equivalent of an emotional landfill. Everybody had problems.

Derek regarded Dr. Kepner for a long moment. He didn't like her. Thinking about when he'd been shot, thinking about her role in it, still coiled something awful inside of him like a snake. He blamed her. Her and Gary Clark. He couldn't say he wanted her to stay, because he didn't.

But he didn't want her to suffer, either. He didn't wish her any ill.

And he could help her.

“I want to write you a recommendation letter,” he said. “To take with you.”

“You don't have to do that,” she said.

“Yes, I do,” he replied. “And I'm sorry, Dr. Kepner. About the thing before. I wasn't... really in my right mind. At the time. What I did to you was very wrong.”

“It was,” she said. She paused, and she considered him. Her gaze softened, and for a moment, her expression seemed too tender. Too familiar. He cleared his throat, uncomfortable. She looked like she wanted to say something else, but she didn't. She gave her head a little shake. She stood, and her chair creaked. She clutched her clipboard and her book against her chest, and she brushed her lab coat with her free hand. “I appreciate the letter.”

“You can add me as a reference, too,” he offered.

“Thank you, Dr. Shepherd,” she said with a cold formality that seemed forced to his ears.

“Good luck,” he said, and he thought that was that, because she turned to leave.

She paused at the doorway, though, and she turned. Her sudden coldness turned warm again. “Hey, have you...?” She shifted on her feet. “You've gotten help. Right?”

He nodded. “I've gotten lots of help.”

“Good,” she said. “I hope...” Her head tilted as she considered him again. The warmth in her eyes was unmistakable. She cared about him. More than she should. “I hope things get better for you,” she blurted. And then she was gone.
His tension eased, leaving ache and fatigue behind. He clutched the envelope containing her notice letter, and only then, did he let the relief sweep him away.

3:28 PM

The gray water spread out beyond the big boat in a choppy, frothing sheet below a gray glass sky. The wind broke the surface, making small waves that sloshed and slurped. A one-pitch, moaning whistle filled the air around their ears as the boat sliced the air. The hum of the motor filled what would have been silence on the bay. The air smelled of salt.

Derek inhaled deeply. The breeze ruffled his hair. When he exhaled, all his stress sloughed away, leaving only the beautiful bay, and his beautiful wife, and his awesome dog to keep him company. Samantha rolled onto her back at their feet, exposing her belly, and he reached down to give her a rub.

“This was a good idea,” Derek said.

He scooted closer to Meredith on the bench and wrapped his free arm over her shoulder. He held Samantha’s leash with the other. Pets were allowed on leash on the ferry as long as they stuck to the sundeck or the vehicle deck. The sky was gray, but the clouds were thin enough that he could see a bright ball of light behind them, hanging low on the west horizon over Bainbridge’s approaching sheet of green. Bainbridge grew and the Seattle skyline behind them shrunk.

Meredith grinned at him. The wind had nipped at her cheeks and nose, turning them bright and rosy. “Wasn’t it?” she said. “I think, in this moment, I might be awesome.”

He laughed. “More than only in this moment.”

She stretched up her arms and breathed in the cool air and made the cracking, sated noise she often made after sex. He leaned close and kissed her, brushing his cold nose against her temple. She giggled.

“Ferryboats and Bainbridge for stress relief,” she said with a sigh. “I think we should make this a weekly date.”

“He laughed. “Deal,” he said without hesitation.

He looked forward to stepping off the boat almost as much as he liked being on it. The island had a small area near the ferry landing where there were quaint shops and little restaurants. There were also places to walk along the water, and the land was green and lush and refreshing. Sometimes, it amazed him that one could find the country so close to the city. While it took him an hour to drive to his land from the hospital, Bainbridge was only twenty minutes via ferry. It was a rapid change in setting when one needed to unwind, and, at this moment, he needed to unwind, because he’d been kinked more than a slinky with stress.

Samantha yawned, flashing her big teeth and her powerful jaws. Her eyelids drooped, and her tongue lolled, pitting the deck with slippery bits of drool as she relaxed, too.

“All right, so,” Meredith said, her body warm against him as she resumed their earlier discussion. He pressed his chin against her head, listening. “I think I know what will help you.”

“Oh?” he said.

“When you get stuck because you’re upset, you need to use your sexy voice.”
“My sexy voice,” he said.

“Yeah, you know.” She turned to him. Her voice dropped low and soft and soothing, and each syllable dripped like honey from her mouth. “Like this. You talk all soothing. It's impossible to fly off the handle when you do it.”

“My...” He blinked. “Really, I talk like that?”

She punched him in the shoulder. Not hard. She met his eyes, and she gaped at him when he didn't react with feigned hurt or a laugh. “You so know you talk like that. Particularly when you want me to stop freaking out.” Confusion bit into her expression, and her nose scrunched as she peered at him. “Don’t you?”

“I...” He blinked. “Well, I'm not sure I did it consciously.”

“You can't tell me that's not at least a little bit on purpose. You know women drop like flies around it.”

“They do?” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine,” she said. “You can keep your fake-innocence about it if you must, but seriously, use it when you get all stuck in grr mode.”

He snorted. “I have a grr mode and a sexy voice?”

“Okay, now you're just teasing me,” she said.

He kissed her, and he laughed. “Maybe, a little. But, Mere, when I'm in grr mode,” he said, holding up his fingers as though they were quotation marks, “it's really hard to...”

“To what?” she prodded.

He looked at his lap. “To not bite people's heads off,” he said. “It's usually all I can do not to snap.” He sighed with frustration. “I hate this job.”

“So, pretend you're talking to me,” she said. “Maybe, you hate the job, but you love me.”

“You seriously want me mentally pasting your face onto everybody I talk to that I don't want to be talking to?” he said. It felt more than a little wrong to use her like that.

She shrugged. “If it helps, why not? It's kind of a compliment to me. Just... use the sexy voice. You officially have my permission.”

He leaned against her. Sighed. Nuzzled her temple. “Not that I'm complaining,” he said against her skin, “but when did you get to be so secure?”

“Well,” she said, “so far, I've survived secret wives, and bombs, and Alzheimer's moms, and drowning, and George dying, and drunk dads, and you getting shot, and, well, pretty much everything falling apart.”

He swallowed and pulled her close. Kissed her once. Twice.

“All that bad stuff happened,” she said. “You're still here.” She looked at him, reddening. “So...”

“I'm not going anywhere,” he said in a low murmur.
“That’s it!” she said triumphantly. “That’s the voice you need to use.” She grinned. “Whenever you’re upset and trying not to snap at people or whatever, you just have to find what you’re feeling right now, and use it.”

“I wanted you to know that I’m here,” he said, words thick with a swell of emotion. “And that it’s okay. And that I love you.”

“That’s great,” she said. “Use that. Think of that. And, actually, it’d really be best if you used my face for it, because holy crap that’d be weird if you didn’t.”

He chuckled. “I’ll try.”

He pulled her close, and she rested against him. Their coats smooshed together. The boat slowed as it entered the docking area on Bainbridge Island. Mist loitered in the air, and the smell of wet leaves and bark made him inhale. Samantha’s dog tags jingled as she stood up and looked at the shore with a bemused expression. She’d never been to Bainbridge.

“I believe you, by the way,” Meredith said.

“Hmm?” Derek replied.

She gazed at him through her eyelashes. “That’s how I got so secure. It took me a while, but I do. Believe you, I mean. About everything.”

“Oh,” he said. A lump formed in his throat. It was the first time since she’d found him naked on the floor in a mess of empty pill bottles that she’d ever said anything like that. He swallowed. “I won’t mess it up again.”

She stared at him for a long, silent moment. “I believe that, too,” she said.

“I love you,” he said.

She stole a page from his book and winked at him. “I know,” she said. She put her head back on his shoulder and watched the scenery slide by.

“Sir, are you listening, or am I wasting my time?” Pamela Springer said. Pamela sat across from him in the conference room. She wore a black pantsuit. She’d pulled back her hair into an austere, auburn ponytail. Her makeup made her features look severe, almost intimidating, which belied her high-pitched, grating voice and her small stature.

Derek blinked as the familiar jolt of adrenaline punched through him. The surprise receded as quickly as it had arrived. He gave his head a little shake, forcing himself to snap out of his encroaching thoughts. I wish I wasn’t, he wanted to say. I don’t fucking want to be here. But instead, he put Meredith in front of him, and he smiled for all he was worth. “Of course, I’m listening,” he said, offering her a smooth, soothing tone, the one Meredith had told him to use.

The trick worked, because Pamela relaxed and smiled back at him. Derek made a mental note to thank Meredith for the advice. He’d found he couldn't manage his “sexy voice” when he was too upset, but with some effort, he could find the soothing demeanor he was looking for anytime before he fell over the cliff. He stood, pushing his chair back with his thighs, and reached across the table to shake Pamela's hand. Stretching made everything ache, but he didn’t let himself wince. Friendly and collected, he told himself. Stay friendly and collected. And smile.

“I think it's a good idea,” he said. She'd suggested an amendment to Seattle Grace's pet ambassadors program that would allow people to have their own dogs visit. “But I'd like to see
some numbers about cost, first, and I want to see some hard rules about when a visit would and wouldn't be acceptable.”

Pamela nodded enthusiastically. “I'll write up a proposal for you. Thank you!”

Derek’s insides tightened at the thought of more paperwork, but he refused to let it show. He forced that smile to stay stuck to to his face. Meredith, Meredith, Meredith, he thought. “You're welcome, Ms. Springer. Just meet with my secretary to make another appointment.”

She grinned. “Will do,” she said as she gathered up her purse.

After she left, he slumped with relief. He'd fallen into a routine where friendly and collected was getting much easier to fake, but... He missed the days when he'd genuinely felt friendly and collected, when he could be soothing to a stranger he wanted nothing to do with without it being much of an act. He pulled his fingers through his hair and sighed. This just wasn't him anymore. He didn't want to meet with people to talk about policy or money. He didn't want to manage.

He wanted to slip back into what he'd been before. A surgeon. Making personal connections on a smaller, more intimate level. Helping very sick people see another tomorrow. Saving lives. He wanted that back. He missed feeling fulfilled. He missed loving his work. Beyond Gary Clark, Derek's own ambition had really shot him in the foot.

He flexed his fingers.

Too bad the idea of cutting into a living, breathing person, a person he could easily kill if he fucked up, still scared the shit out of him. On top of that, surgeons were widely recognized as holding one of the most stressful professions available. Sure, it was immensely rewarding when things went right, but things went wrong a lot, too, and there was enormous pressure to make decisions on the fly, something Derek wasn't sure he was even capable of, anymore.

With a sigh, he followed the path Pamela had taken out of the conference room, and he walked down the bright, immaculate hallways. He smiled. He said hello to everybody he passed. Inquired about their families and their days and talked about their holiday plans. But he felt like a ghost.

When he found Mark loitering by the coffee pot in the attendings' lounge near oncology, Derek shuffled to a stop. Mark bounced as he prepared himself a cup of coffee with the added help of some Coffee-Mate Irish Créme. Mark hummed an off-tune version of... something that seemed like a cross between Jingle Bells and Deck the Halls.

Derek leaned against the wall by the pot and grinned, happy, finally, to have a distraction bound by the real world, instead of one conjured in his head. “You look too chipper, considering you’re slumming for free, bad coffee.”

Mark took a sip of his steaming coffee, winced, blew on it a bit, and turned to Derek with a smile that would have put the Cheshire Cat to shame. “Lexie is open,” he said.

Derek tilted his head to the side. “Open to what?”

Mark shrugged. And then he bounced again. Actually bounced. “She's open. She's free. Tyler told Marcia told Sandy told Bob told Debbie. No Karev. She dumped him in the middle of the cafeteria over breakfast!”

Derek snickered. “I had no idea you were such a gossip.”

“Hey, I paid good money for this intel.”
“Gossip,” Derek countered.

Mark shook his head. “Intel.”

“Gossip.”

“Intel!” Mark insisted.

“Hmm,” Derek said. “So, you paid Nurse Debbie for gossip?”

“Intel,” Mark corrected. “And that's beside the point.”

“The point, which is...?”

Mark sighed. He took a cautious sip of his coffee, and then a gulp when he found the temperature to his liking. “If you were Lexie, and I asked you out, what would make you say yes?”

Derek blinked at the unexpected request for role play, and he laughed.

“No, seriously,” Mark added.

Derek shifted and grabbed a paper cup from the shelf. Meredith had taken his good mug hostage, and his backup mug was sitting on his desk in his office. He poured himself some black coffee from the pot, and then went trawling through the sugar packets and creamers next to the pot. There was nothing he liked. It all screamed fat and cholesterol and other arterial badness. He'd take his coffee black.

“Nothing would make me say yes, Mark,” Derek said after some thought. He blew on his cup. “I'm not going out with you.”

A snort of derision caught his attention, and he looked up to find Cristina standing by the doorway to the lounge, caught mid-stride in the hall. She stared at her clipboard. Her face held no expression. She looked up and met his eyes, and only then did he identify a small, ticking twitch of her lip that could have been laughter in a normal human being. “You know, you guys seriously invite it,” she said. “You invite it! It's like... you're toast, and we're the butter... or something.”

“Yeah, keep walking, Yang,” Derek said.

“Or, maybe you're the crap, and we're the flies?” Cristina said.

“Keep. Walking,” Derek said.

“Just saying,” she said. And then she continued her surge down the hall on her original course, her black ponytail bobbing behind her.

Derek sighed. “It's like she has radar.”

“You mean faulty gaydar,” Mark grumbled.

“Meredith calls it a bromance,” Derek said matter-of-factly.

“That's not much better,” Mark said.

Derek laughed. “Oh, come on. You have got to work on your security issues.”

Mark made a face as he reddened. “Have you ever considered my issue isn't that I'm being
perceived as gay, but that I'm being perceived as loving you?"

Derek smirked. “Hey, now, I'm a lovable guy!”

Mark rolled his eyes. “Shut up, and pretend you're Lexie, jackass.”

“I'm not going to pretend I'm Lexie,” Derek replied. He took a sip of his coffee.

“I need to get on this, man,” Mark said. “Somebody else could swoop in.”

Derek sighed. “Mark, she was really upset this morning.”

“Wait,” Mark said. “You knew she and Karev broke up, and you didn't tell me?”

“I haven't seen you!” Derek said. “I've been stuck in meetings and doing paperwork all day, and I'm sorry to tell you this, but I'm not Debbie.”

“It's valuable intel, man; that's all.”

Derek shook his head. “Gossip. And why don't you leave Lexie alone for a while?”

“Intel,” Mark said. “You think she won't say yes if I ask her, now?”

*Are you freaking kidding me?* Derek imagined her saying. *Seriously?* “Women like patience,”

Derek said with a definitive nod.

Mark frowned, his expression concerned. He took a swig of his coffee. “So, give her time.”

“I guess so,” Derek said, shrugging. “Yeah.”

“How much time?”

“Do I look like a dating manual to you?” Derek replied. “Doesn't your how-to-woo book explain this stuff?”

“You and Meredith worked out,” Mark said. “You must know something.”

“Yes,” Derek said with a snort. “I know miracles happen.”

Mark sighed. “Man, c'mon, I really need h—” His speech stopped short when his beeper went off. He looked like he wanted to smash the thing, but he pulled it from his waistband and looked at it despite his clenching jaw. “Fuck,” he said. “Gotta go.” He gave Derek a suspicious look. “Don't think you're getting out of this.” He tossed his coffee into the trashcan and trotted off as Derek watched.

“Call me later?” Derek yelled after him.

“Shut up, man,” Mark yelled back.

Derek laughed. Some things, it seemed, had returned to an exquisite sort of normal.

6:54 PM

*He woke in a bath of gray light with his nose pressed into her hair, and his body flush with hers. His arm draped over her hip. Her feet rested at the base of his shins. She smelled like lavender, and she'd left the scent on the sheets. On his skin. Rain pattered on the roof and plinked against the*
“Mmm,” he rumbled against her neck, and then he whispered, “Good morning.” Just in case she was still asleep.

He kept his eyes closed despite the light, and he didn’t move, not wanting to disturb her. The bed was warm, and for once, neither the dog, nor an alarm had woken them. He’d managed to coordinate their day off that week, an ability he counted as one of the few things he loved about being Chief. He didn’t abuse the privilege, but he used it now and then. Neither of them had anywhere to be or anything to do or anyone to meet that day. It was a true holiday. An island of calm in a giant, stressful mess.

Her body shifted, and she reached for the arm he’d rested on her hip. She squeezed his hand. “Mornin’,” she mumbled. “’S’warm in here. I like it.”

He grinned. “Well, we don’t have to move.” He kissed her neck. Her skin was soft. “We have all day.”

“Nuh uh,” she said. “You gotta move.”

He frowned. “Did you want me to make breakfast or something?”

She shook her head. “No.” She paused. “Well, yes, later, but...”

“But what?”

“You’re poking me in the back, and your breath smells.”

He laughed, long and loud, and it felt nice. “Sorry,” he said cheerfully, “I do tend to wake up that way, particularly when you’re in my arms.”

She shifted, and he thought if she hadn’t been pregnant, she would have rolled onto her stomach to curl under the covers. As it was, she hadn’t been sleeping on her stomach for weeks. “Halitosis and a boner,” she groused affectionately. “Yay me.”

He laughed as he crawled out from the covers and padded across the rug to the master bathroom. “I’ll fix it,” he called over his shoulder.

“Just the halitosis,” she said. “Leave the boner. I want that part for me.”

He chuckled as he stepped into the bathroom. “Yes, dear,” he said.

He brushed his teeth, used the bathroom, and splashed water on his face. In three minutes, he slid back under the covers and against her warm body. He sighed as he resettled. The sheets rustled. She grabbed his hand and pulled it to her mouth. Her lips pressed against his skin.

“Mmm,” she said, her tone more awake and hazed with sex. “Interested?”

He kissed her. A few months ago, he wouldn't have been comfortable enough to make a joke, because the Paxil made him self-conscious. This morning, the words, “When am I not interested?” slipped easily from his lips, and it didn't matter that more often than not, she had to help him get into the mood. He had the mood right now. Courtesy of waking up in a whorl of lavender-scented hair. They’d discovered the best time for him was in the morning, riding on the coattails of his last nighttime erection.
He sheathed himself like a key in a lock with the small gap between her thighs, just where they met her torso. The contact set him pleasantly askew. Her skin there was slick, and warm, and he relished the feel of her, so close, and yet so far. “Not poking, now?” he murmured.

“Better,” she said with a gasp. She ground her hips against him. “But I'm not ready yet.”

“I'll fix that,” he purred against her ear.

He squeezed her and slid his palm up the curve of her hip to her breast. Her soft skin passed like silk beneath his fingertips. She gratified him with her relaxed sigh. Her nipple perked under his thumb. Her breaths shortened. He pushed his other arm underneath her waist. His hand came to rest under her navel. He dipped low, pushing his fingers through her course hair, down between her legs, and he cupped her. Touched her. Stroked her. Her breath popped out in a long, slow moan, and her hand came to rest over his. He used the sound of her inhalations and exhalations to tell him what was right, and what was perfect. When she quivered, and when she gasped, he’d hit a jackpot.

“Good?” he said, just to be sure.

“Yes,“ she whispered, and her body twitched. “Oh.”

They made a quiet, sensual dance of it. The salt of her skin mingled with his. The rain beat on the roof like a collection of heartbeats.

He heaved a sigh and closed his eyes, imagining her body as he knew it by heart from the front. She was slender. Thin-boned. Her skin was a milky peach color, smooth, but dusted by more freckles than he could count. Her hips had a subtle curve before sloping into her long, long legs. Her belly and breasts had swollen as she grew their baby in her body. She worried sometimes about her waistline, but he tried to kiss the worries away whenever he caught them propagating. To him, she was a goddess, and he told her that with love and with words as often as he could.

The covers rustled as he shifted behind her. This position, spooning with him in the back, was perfect for letting him do all the work, and letting them both have fun at his direction. It wasn’t about control for him anymore, but finding things that were comfortable for her. In an amusing role-reversal after he’d been shot, it’d been him trying to find what worked for her, instead of her trying to find what worked for him.

He kissed her throat. A tinge of salt tickled his taste buds. Her heartbeat fluttered underneath her skin, and she turned her head to try and catch a glimpse of him as they rode a wave together. Her face had flushed with sexual heat, and her gaze had a dusky, desirous quality. Sweat dotted her brow. He kissed along her jaw, and he played her body like his harp.

When the hand he pressed between her legs felt slick with her desire, he shifted, angled himself, and he pushed into her to the hilt in one thrust. She gasped, and a choked noise fell from her lips. Her heat blitzed his senses. He’d come home.

“Okay?” he asked breathlessly.

“Yesssss,” she said in a long sigh as she squeezed around him. He couldn't suppress a moan, and their shivering exhalations mingled in a long chorus of desire.

Her body relaxed against him on the bed. He wrapped both arms around her waist, burying his fingers between her legs, adding pressure from the front as he pushed from the back, and a deep, twisting moan shuddered from her throat. She bucked against his hand, and they rocked together
in a jagged rhythm of push and pull and push and pull.

The dog yapped at them, bringing him up short as he saw mocha-colored eyes beyond Meredith's shoulder staring at them mournfully.

“I told you she always watches,” Meredith said, and he laughed against her skin. She tasted of salt and sweat and lust. She was an elixir that set his world on fire.

“Sam,” he barked. “Crate.”

The dog’s ears twitched. She licked her lips once. Flashed her sharp teeth in large yawn. And then she plodded out of the room, cowed by his command.

“You're getting better at that,” Meredith said.

“Mmm,” he purred, beginning to rock against her. He kissed her. Nipped her ear as he found his rhythm again in the drumbeats of the rain. “Well, I’m not getting a blow job right now.”

She clutched the pillow and gasped. “I guess it’s harder to think with my mouth around your— ooohhhhhhhhh.”

He laughed as she quivered in his arms. “Harder to think, you were saying?”

With her body so close to him, slickly squeezing around him, he felt dizzy with desire, and he struggled to keep this about her. He drove to the patter on the roof, meandering between relaxing and frenetic, creating a wax and wane of needing. She urged him on with a staccato beat of, “Yes, yes, yes,” for minute after minute until nothing drove either of them but a frenzy of want.

When she fell to glorious pieces in his arms, he chased after her. Her belly twitched as her body pulsed around his length. He sucked in a breath as he found his peak not long after hers. For the torturous moment before he fell from the cliff, he found euphoria. Heat. Love. He saw spots. He thought, for that moment, he might die there, and then everything released into freefall. He collapsed beside her, panting as his lower body pumped against her, well out of his control, and then all was still.

They lay together breathing, spent, slumped, and silent, body to body, skin to skin.

He rested with his nose pressed into her hair, exactly as he’d woken. His palms rested over her belly. He basked in her warmth, never wanted to move again. The rain picked up, and the patter on the roof became a steady, clamorous thunder.

He kissed her. “I love you,” he murmured.

Her body shifted, and her palms pressed against his hands. “Love you, too,” she said, her voice a wrecked whisper that told him he’d done everything right.

His eyes drifted closed. He let the warmth, the feeling of home, and her love relax him, wrap him in a cocoon he didn’t think he ever wanted to crawl out of, unless perhaps she asked for pancakes. He drifted to the liminal space between slumber and sentience, but then she moved underneath his hands. His eyes snapped open, and his encroaching dreams dissolved.

“Oh,” she gasped, like she’d been startled, too.

“What’s the matter?” he said.
Her silence was filled by the falling rain. “You felt that?” she said.

“Felt what?” he said.

“Derek,” she said in a low voice, “that wasn't me.”

For a moment, he had no idea what she meant because the afterglow seemed to have zapped his synapses. And then he felt it again. Something small, perhaps a tiny elbow or a foot, drifted underneath her skin in a curve that almost followed his bottom palm line. Almost like it sensed his hand resting there.

He swallowed. “That's...”

She nodded. “Baby, yeah.” He could feel her smile, though he couldn't see it. The covers rustled as she snuggled closer to him. “Shh. Let's see if it happens again.”

They waited quietly, her hands clasped over his. They rested, joined just over her navel. The falling rain marked passing seconds. Less than a minute later, he felt it, whatever appendage it was, move back the other way.

“Oh, my god,” he said, barely able to find words.

“Yeah,” she said. “That was my reaction the first time, too. Remember?”

“I do,” he said, a faint, shocked whisper.

The world was dropping out beneath him. “Hi,” he said, swallowing. He thought his heart might flutter out of his chest. He sucked in a breath. “Hi, Baby.”

Meredith squeezed his fingers. “That's your daddy,” she said, looking down at the swell of her belly.

The baby moved again, and he laughed as his view of the world became a hot, messy blur. “Oh, my god,” he said again. And then he couldn't stop laughing. “That's our baby.” The euphoria he'd found earlier felt like nothing compared to this, felt like a drop in the massive bucket of happy. “Baby is moving, and I can feel it.” He couldn't catch his breath.

“I guess we woke her up,” Meredith said.

He nodded. “I guess so.” His fingers curled against her body as he felt their baby move another time.

“She gets like this sometimes,” Meredith said. “Where she won't freaking hold still.”

He laughed. God it felt good to laugh like that. “Meredith, she could dance a ballet. I don't want her to stop unless it's bugging you.”

“It's not,” Meredith said. She chuckled. “So, you agree, now?”

“About what?”

“That it's a girl?” she prodded.

“Well, I can't call something that dances that well an it,” he replied. “I'll go with your gut for now.”
She grunted, rolling to face him. He helped her shift. They were fathomless gray today. Like the billowing rainclouds outside. Or a stormy sea. She grinned, touching her palms to his face, and she kissed him, scruffy stubble and all.

He pressed his nose against her forehead and breathed. In and out. In and out. The world had the heady scent of lavender. He closed his eyes, and he pressed his hands against her belly, waiting for Baby's next exuberant greeting.

He spent his morning that way, naked, warm, curled up with his wife on a rainy day in their bed. Some of the best spent hours of his life.

“Hey,” said a weak, cracking voice. “Anybody home?” A hand with a plastic wristband waved in front of his face in the dark. Adam Peabody, said the wristband in new courier type. The wrist it gripped was sharp and boney and sickly pale.

Derek flinched, but he didn't know if Adam had noticed. Adam was flying high at the moment. Derek glanced at the cloudy morphine drip by the Adam's hospital bed, gaze lingering for a long second. A twinge of wanting swept through Derek as his hearthammered from the surprise. The morphine would fix it. All the jumping. All the times his heart skipped beats. All the fear. But as he pulled air in and out of his chest, as his heart stopped slamming, as he calmed, the wanting faded, and he managed to tear his gaze away from the siren song in the intravenous line and look back at the man.

“Sorry,” Derek said, shaking his head. Adam had been asleep when Derek had sat down, and Derek had drifted. He leaned back in his chair. The thin strip of light over Adam's bed lit the room by itself, lengthening the shadows. The sun sank below the horizon early in the winter, and the cloudy sky outside the window had already darkened to the dull, misty purple of light pollution. “I'm having trouble focusing today.”

“You seemed pretty focused just now,” Adam said wheezily. His heart monitor bleeped a quiet, steady rhythm. “Just not on me.”

Derek felt his face heating before he could stop it.

“Oh-ho,” Adam said with a weak laugh. “One of those thoughts, huh.”

Derek gave the man a sheepish grin. “Truth be told, I'd much rather be with my wife than at work today.”

“So, I'm your hairy substitute wife right now?” Adam said.

Derek took a long look at Adam and laughed. The tattoo on Adam's arm, what Derek had mistaken for a snake, was actually a dragon, according to Adam. Either way, the brilliant red serpent covered the man's entire bicep and wrapped all the way down his arm to his wrist.

“What's funny?” Adam said.

“Just trying to picture Meredith with that kind of ink. I think that dragon is as big as her entire arm.” Derek rubbed his chin with his fingers as he thought about it. She did have a little cursive sprawl in black on her ankle. Carpe noctem, it said. Seize the night. She'd gotten it when she'd been in Europe with Sadie, though he couldn't pull specifics from her, not because she didn't want to tell him, but because she'd apparently been hammered and couldn't remember.

“Meredith,” Adam said, snapping Derek loose from his musing. Adam smiled weakly. “That's a pretty name.”
Derek frowned. “I've never told you her name?”

“Nope,” Adam said.

“I could have sworn I told you...” Derek said.

“I'm sure you've told me a lot of stuff,” Adam said. “But I've been out of commission for a while. Remember?” He winced and bit his lip as if to prove his point.

The man lay flat in his hospital bed, barely mobile, bundled in a sea of thermal blankets and wires. A nasal cannula hugged his pale, angular face. A forest swath of black stubble covered his face, and the only reason the fuzz wasn't a full blown beard was because Derek had been helping him shave every few days. Adam had long, stringy black hair that would probably look better once the man could get into the shower, but at the moment, he couldn't even sit up, and the long hair combined with Adam's gaunt face to ghastly effect.

He'd been awake for only a few weeks, and off his ventilator for less time than that. Derek had been the one to find him. Adam had been blinking at the ceiling in a confused, drugged haze one night when Derek had stopped by to say his usual hello. Derek couldn't imagine how he himself would have felt if he'd woken up under the same circumstances, hurt and scared and alone, unable to speak. Derek had been all of those except alone when he'd first opened his eyes, and that had been bad enough. The mere thought of it made him feel sick to his stomach.

_I know this is very scary, Dr. Shepherd, a distant voice swirled in his head. Do you want to see Dr. Grey?

“Are you in pain?” Derek asked, pushing the past away. The man's wincing concerned him.

“Just the usual,” Adam said with a smile that showed clenched teeth, and looked more like a grimace. “Nothing much helps with it. I feel like crap. Blah, blah.”

Derek leaned forward. “I'm sorry.”

“Not your fault,” Adam said. “Tell me about... your wife.”

Derek grinned. “She's a surgeon here, too. She wants to specialize in neurosurgery. She says she's dark and twisty, but I disagree,” he said easily. She perhaps wasn't bright and shiny, but she was a light to him all the same. “She's got the best smile in the world,” he continued. “She's my best friend. She's my hero. And I really love her.”

“How'd you meet?”

“I picked her up at a bar across the street from here,” Derek said. “It was supposed to be a one night stand. And it was, until I found out we worked at the same hospital, and that I was her boss.”

Adam laughed, only to cringe as his face screwed up. “Oh, that's classic,” he said breathily. “So, why are you thinking about Meredith instead of work?”

“I'm just... frustrated,” Derek said.

Adam's eyebrows rose. “About?”

“I've been on a reduced schedule,” Derek said. “I only started working full time again last week.”

“That sounds like cause for celebration, not frustration,” Adam said.
Derek gripped the bed railing by Adam's head and squeezed. Tension lanced up his arm. “I don't want to be Chief of Surgery anymore.”

“Then why are you?” Adam said.

Derek tilted his head. “I... can't quit,” he said. “Not right now.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want to fix some things before I step down,” Derek replied.

“So, fix them.”

“I don't know how,” Derek said. “I'm not even sure where to start.”

Adam snorted. “Sounds like you have a dilemma, then. And a hairy substitute wife with tats.”

Derek rolled his eyes, a breathy almost laugh pushing from his lips. “Look, can I get you anything? Magazines? A movie to watch? Ice chips? Anything?”

“The company's nice,” Adam said. “Keeps my mind off things.”

“I know the feeling. I was...” Derek said before his voice trailed away. Shot. I was shot. For some reason, he wasn't ready to say it when Adam was awake. The relative anonymity was like a drug, Derek thought. Heady. Hard to let go.

I was shot, and I was so afraid.

“Yeah?” Adam prodded.

Derek swallowed. He pressed his hand against his chest. Though he couldn't feel any of his scars through his lab coat and his shirt, he could still feel the awful, ugly bump near his clavicles at the top of what had been his sternal incision.

I was shot.

Visiting you reminds me that victims can win.

I was...

A man came into my hospital and tried to murder me.

I...

“Nothing,” Derek said, shaking his head. “Never mind.” His beeper went off shrilly in the quiet, and he reached down to look at it. WRU?-M. He couldn't stop the smile that slipped across his face as he interpreted the message. Where are you? -Meredith “That's my wife,” he said for Adam's benefit. “We have a dinner date in Bainbridge. It's a thing we've started doing.”

“Go,” Adam said, making a weak shooing motion with his hand. The end of his pulse-ox meter flapped in the air. “The real thing is definitely better than daydreaming and hairy substitutes.”

“Hey,” Derek said congenially, “the daydreaming was about the real thing.”

“Yeah,” Adam said, “a repeat. Go get your new episode.”
Derek gathered his briefcase and stood. He stretched. His body was full of aching kinks, but just
knowing Meredith was waiting for him in the lobby made most of the latent stress funnel away. He
almost skipped toward the door. Almost. But he caught himself. When he reached the threshold, he
gripped the doorframe and looked back into the room.

Adam lay in the dim light, eyes closed already. From the doorway, he looked even more pale and
gaunt than he had looked close up. He would be spending Christmas alone in the hospital, unable
to get out of bed, which made Derek's heart squeeze. Nobody deserved that.

You look small like I did...

“Hey, Adam?” Derek called softly.

Adam snuffled and squinted at him. “Yeah?” he said, the word more asleep than awake.

Derek's lips moved, but nothing came out until he tried a second time. “Are you scared?”

“Of?” Adam said.

Derek swallowed. “Guns? Being... attacked?”

Silence stretched. Adam's heart monitor bleeped softly in the dark room. “No,” Adam replied after
some consideration. “Just pissed that they got away, and that I'm stuck eating out of a sippy cup.”

Derek gazed at Adam. I know it sucks. “It'll get better,” he said. “Slowly, but it will.”

It took me six months to feel half normal.

“I know,” Adam said. “Thanks.”

“I'll see you later,” Derek said.

“Later, husband,” Adam muttered, and then his breaths evened as he fell into a needed healing
sleep.
Lexie had a mushy look on her face again. It was the third time in ten minutes that Meredith had looked up from her charts to find her half-sister staring, her head tilted slightly to the side, lower lip pouting, as if she'd just finished saying, "Aww." Except there'd been no noise, so Meredith couldn't be certain.

"You're making goo-goo eyes at me," Meredith snapped, stopping mid-pace.

Lexie's face reddened, her misty look shifting to something less schmoopy. In the world's most transparent attempt at misdirection, she looked back at her phone and started pressing buttons like she was texting somebody. The gurney she'd stretched out on squeaked as she resettled. Cristina, who hadn't even looked up, flipped a page in her book. Meredith continued pacing.

Mr. Wilson's symptoms were bizarre, and they didn't match any case Meredith had ever seen. She stared at his charts. His stats were all normal. But there was nothing normal about how he was behaving. If the MRI hadn't been clear, she would have sworn she was looking at a—

She whipped around on her heels. "What?" Meredith snapped, and Lexie blushed again. "Seriously, what is it?"

"Nothing," Lexie rushed to say.

"What's with the gooey face, then?"

"Absolutely nothing," Lexie said, too quickly to be innocent.

Meredith sighed with exasperation. "I've caught you staring four times!"

Lexie's words were a rush. "No you haven't."

"Yes, I—"

Cristina slammed her book onto the gurney. "Oh, for god's sake. You're waddling. Like the pregnant woman that you are. And Dr. McSappy thinks it's adorable or something equally gross."
Meredith looked indignantly at Cristina. “What? I am not. No way. I'm not waddling.” She took a
demonstrative step forward, but her attempt at a sexy sashay failed, and she moved a bit like a
duck instead. Not waddling, though. Definitely not— “Damn it!” she snapped when she saw Lexie
turning to goo again.

When Derek glided through the double doors, all graceful lines and unbridled sexy, she rolled her
eyes. “Do I waddle?” she asked him point blank.

He blinked as he took in the sight of her, and his features scrunched with visible affection. “Why,
hello, Dr. Grey. It's so nice to see you, too.” He circled her, his step light, and closed in for a peck
on the cheek.

She ignored him. “Do I waddle? They say I waddle.”

“I never said you waddle!” Lexie protested. She jabbed her thumb at Cristina. “She did. Why am I
getting blamed?”

“Whatever,” said Meredith. “Your eyes have a vocabulary.”

“More like a thesaurus of the barf-worthy,” Cristina said, her tone wry.

Meredith folded her arms across her aching breasts. “So, do I waddle, now?” she said again to
Derek.

Derek didn’t have a chance to respond because Mark pushed through the double doors, more
There’s a skull fracture underneath.”

Derek nodded. “Sure.”

“Hi!” Lexie chirped.

Mark blinked and looked back at her. “Hello, Little Grey,” he said, his voice calm and humoring.
And then he turned back to Derek. “Can you come look at this, now?”

They departed together. “Don't think you're escaping my question!” Meredith called after Derek
before he disappeared.

He looked over his shoulder and gave her a smirk. “I assure you, it's a very cute waddle,” he said
with a wink, and then he was gone, the double doors swishing behind him.

“Oh, screw you, Dr. McDreamy,” Meredith grumbled. “I do not.”

Lexie deflated. “Hi,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Hi? Hi? What the hell is wrong with me?”

“What isn't?” Cristina said.

“Jeez, why are you always so grouchy?” Lexie said, folding her arms across her chest in a perfect
imitation of Meredith. Cristina apparently deemed the question rhetorical and didn't respond.
Lexie sighed, her expression glum. “Damn it. Who says hi?”

Meredith frowned. “People saying hello?”

Lexie made a growling sound of frustration, something halfway between guh and augh with a little
grr thrown in. She threw her hands in the air, slammed against the swinging doors with her right
shoulder, and followed Derek's route of escape, frowning all the way.
The funny thing about this whole debacle was that she had intended not to wake Derek up.

“Damn it!” she hissed at nobody in particular when she heard the alarm console by the front door chirp.

The contents of her grocery bag toppled onto the kitchen counter as she startled. The bag of apples hit the granite with a progressive series of dull thuds, and the sparkling cider bottle clanked in protest. Sunlight streamed through the frozen window panes, making the bottle glint as it rolled to an abrupt stop when it hit the faucet. A rawhide that was supposed to be a New Year’s treat slid out of the bag and to the edge of the counter, and Samantha exploded off her haunches from the floor to grab it. Meredith didn't have a chance to rescue the hide from certain doom.

“No, no, no,” she whispered in a quiet litany as she gracelessly kneed the dog out of the way and made a waddling but frantic beeline for the front door. She'd been so fixated on tiptoeing past Derek, who'd been sleeping on the couch in the living room, that she'd forgotten to enter the freaking code. She had maybe a few seconds before—

The chirp turned into something much more high-pitched and abrasive just as she slid to a stop by the console, and Derek's cell phone began to shriek on the end table by the couch where he lay, a lump under several blankets. Then a clamorous crash tumbled out of the kitchen, and Meredith looked back to see the grocery bag fall to the floor. Samantha's head had disappeared inside, and Meredith barely had a chance to wail a baleful, “No!” before Derek's blankets had flipped back from his face, and he snapped upright. A notepad and a pen, which had been resting precariously on his stomach, fell to the floor beside the couch with a smack, and the pen rolled under the couch.

“What the hell?!” he barked, out of sorts and flailing, and Meredith had a brief, panicked moment of indecision about whether to turn the freaking alarm off, answer the phone, run to Derek, or save the honey-baked ham from the dog. The racket was paralyzing.

After a heartbeat, she shook herself back into action. The green LED display on the alarm was blinking at her accusingly. Code, code, code....

“What should our code be?” he asked, looking up from the little instruction booklet.

“I don't know,” she replied. “Not something simple like a birthday. The crooks always figure those out in the movies.”

A ghost of a smirk lit his tired, space-y features. “Oh, do they?” he said, his tone the barest, grumbling, haughty hint of the Derek she worried she might never see again.

She nodded and smiled, unwilling to let his dour mood stomp on her hope. “They do.”

His gaze tipped up in thought for a moment, and then he came back to earth with a small shrug. He punched a familiar string of numbers into the pad and hit enter, and then typed them in again to confirm.

She grinned as she slipped her arms around his waist. He tensed for a moment at the constricting contact, and then relaxed as she rested her chin against his shoulder blades. “That was the day I started at Seattle Grace,” she murmured against him.

A rumbling sort of laugh filled his torso and tickled her cheek. “I prefer to think of it as the day I met you,” he said. “It was a very good day.”

“We met the night before,” she countered despite the fact that her insides were melting. “You were in your sexy red shirt, and you took advantage!”
“I believe you took advantage in this story,” he said.

“Whatever,” she replied. “It was still the night before.”

He turned in her embrace to face her. He gave her a charming smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, but she could pretend for a minute that everything was fine when he looked at her like that, 75% of what he’d been before the shooting, and for that minute, she felt like she’d started to float. He wrapped his arms around her in return, and he put his stubbly chin against her forehead. He inhaled deeply, like he was breathing her in. He reached up with his right hand, and his snaked his fingers through her hair. “I distinctly remember you refusing to give me your name until I woke up naked on your living room floor.”

“Distinctly?” she murmured.

He kissed her. “Yes, distinctly.” And then he frowned. “I may have had a slight hangover, though.”

“So, not quite so distinctly, then?” she said.

He considered her for a moment. “Distinctly with a side of headache and a yearning for aspirin.”

She sighed. The heat of his body flush with hers relaxed her. Made her feel mushy and loose and boneless. She liked pretending things were okay, sometimes. “Okay,” she said as he nuzzled her. “I guess you win on a technicality.”

“I can live with that as long as I win,” he said.

They shared a laugh together. She ignored the fact that his sounded hollow and unconvinced of the humor, like he knew he’d been given a part to play and was trying hard, but he wasn't a great actor, and he couldn't sell it. Then the gap in conversation stretched, and the following silence curdled. Or, maybe she was just being silly and imagining things, because his moods had been so precarious, lately.

She traced lines down his pectoral as she clenched her fingers and ended up resting her fist against his healing heart. She bit her lip as they stared at the newly armed alarm. “So....”

“What?” he said, a little too glumly, and her insides tightened. She hated how fast his moods swung.

“Does it—” She cut that question off before she could finish it. She didn’t want to hear him tell her it wasn't helping. That it wouldn't help. She took a quick breath and let it out. She smiled, looking up at him through her eyelashes. “I hope it helps you.”

His gaze softened, and some of the dark edges fell away. “Yeah,” he said in a wistful tone that made it sound like they were discussing the minute possibility of purchasing a winning lottery ticket, not the simple idea of feeling safe in one’s own home. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against her forehead. “That’d be really nice.”

She jammed the code into the number pad as fast as she could, her fingers flying across the keys. The shrieking alarm stopped wailing at her, and she turned to her husband, giving up on the honey-baked ham. Derek was much more important than a honey-baked ham, which was probably half gone already, if she were to base an estimate off the horrific snarfing sounds of a carnivore delighting in dinner coming from the kitchen.

“Derek,” she began, “I'm so——” She stopped in her tracks, and her jaw fell open as he stiffly held up
an index finger at her in the universal sign for, “Give me one moment,” though it had a slightly tense edge to it. Sort of a, “Give me one moment, damn it,” she amended.

“Yeah,” Derek was saying into his phone, his voice tight. His hair was mussed, and he looked bleary-eyed, but his sharp tone didn't show any sign of his quick severance from dreaming. “No, no police. We're fine,” he said, almost a snap. Derek glanced at her, then at the alarm pad, and then he flopped back down on the couch with the phone cupped to his ear. “Yeah, just a mix-up. Thank you.”

He tossed the phone onto the coffee table where it landed with a smack and skidded into a magazine. He closed his eyes for a brief moment as he pressed his palms against his face and sighed. Then his palms dropped to his sides and clutched the cushions. He sat up with a vague grimace that spoke of effort, not of pain, and looked at her with an unreadable expression.

She bit her lip. Scratch that. She could read it all right. He was pissed off. He was pissed off, and he was trying very hard to keep a lid on it, based on the grinding of his molars.

The dog made another noise in the kitchen that made her think of lions ripping up helpless gazelles on the savannah, which, of course, she'd only seen in documentaries, but it was hard to forget a sound like that. She considered the ham a lost cause, but Derek rose to his feet and trudged into the kitchen without speaking.

She felt compelled to say, “Sorry,” into the silence.

He didn't respond as he entered the kitchen. He hissed at the dog, who didn't listen, so he escalated to a barked, harsh, “Hey! Get away from that!” And then he pressed his knee against the dog's shoulder.

When that still didn't work, Derek grabbed her collar and yanked. Samantha's feet scrabbled on the floor as she struggled to keep her purchase. Her muscles bulged. She kept her muzzle stuck in the ham as long as physically possible, and pieces of torn meat came away with her jaw as Derek managed to drag her away by force.

Derek snapped again, “No.”

The dog finally seemed to listen and hopped back a step, out of Derek's grip. She looked up at Derek with a dejected expression. He glared back at her, and she slunk out of the kitchen with a veritable raincloud of guilt hanging over her head.

Samantha's behavior in the aftermath was almost funny, and Meredith would have laughed, were it not for the tension thick in the air.

Derek bent down to pick up the ham.

There was still a lot of meat left on the thing, but there were huge chunks taken out of it, their ragged edges littered with stringy bits of fat and muscle fiber. There was no doubt it was ruined – Samantha was devastating when she wanted to get into something. Bits of foil and plastic wrapping had spread over the kitchen floor as though they were confetti blasted from a canon. Rare, unfiltered winter sunlight that belied the chill in the air streamed through the window panes, making the foil gleam.

Derek dropped the ham into the sink, still silent, and still not looking at her. He bent over to pick up the fallen apples, next.

She fidgeted as she watched him, shifting her weight from foot to foot, until she finally felt
compelled to fill the silence. “Can I help?” she said. She would have just butted in, but he'd monopolized the space where the disaster had occurred, and fighting over who picked up bruised apples seemed rather silly.

“I've got it,” he said flatly.

She grabbed the cider off the counter instead and put it into the fridge. “I hate that freaking alarm.”

He looked at her with a raised eyebrow. “You're the one who wanted it,” he said, not hiding the passive-aggressive accusation in his tone. The *snotty* passive-aggressive accusation, she thought. Derek really did know how to act piss-y.

Something inside her head snapped. She'd tried. She'd tried to get the freaking alarm turned off before it started shrieking. Before it automatically notified ADT that something was up. She'd been shopping for them to get the stupid ham and dog treats and cider and everything, because he'd said he wasn't feeling up to people today.

“For you, Derek,” she said, her voice low. “I wanted to get it for you, so you could feel safe in your own freaking home.”

“Well, it doesn't make me feel safe,” he said through gritted teeth, his tone low and throaty. He glowered. “It's just a big fucking annoyance.”

A pit hollowed out her righteous anger, and a lump formed in her throat. They hadn't really talked about this in ages. She'd just assumed, since he'd been doing better.... “You still don't feel safe at home?” she said.

He rolled his eyes. “Meredith, I feel just *fine* at home. The only reason that alarm was even armed was because I think Lexie forgot I was on the couch when she left for work.”

“Oh,” she said, relaxing as relief crashed through her like a wave. “Well, that's good... but....”

“But what?” he snapped.

“Why are you freaking *pissed* at me, then?”

He looked at her like she'd just spoken in a foreign tongue. “I'm not pissed at you...,” he said slowly.

“Well, you're acting like a piss-y jerk,” she snapped.

He blinked, and his expression softened. He breathed slowly in and out for several seconds, and Meredith realized he was doing his thing. The thing that kept him from panicking when he was feeling panicky. Except it apparently worked on temper tantrums, too.

“Meredith,” he began, his tone low and stretched and forcefully calm, “I got yanked out of a very good dream by an alarm shrieking so loud my ears are still buzzing, then I had to be coherent for a phone call asking me if I wanted the police sent out to my house, our New Year's Eve plans are in Samantha's stomach, I basically just had to choke my dog to get her to listen to me, and on top of all that I had a shitty day at work yesterday. It truly has nothing to do with you. I'm sorry if it seemed that way.”

“Oh,” she said, slightly relieved. Not relieved that he was angry. That was still bad. Her insides tightened. God, she'd gotten so used to him lashing out at her over countless months, it just felt weird when he was only a regular version of pissed.
“I’m really sorry,” Derek said again, the words stiff. He didn't make a move toward her.

“I guess I’d be a little pissed, too,” she admitted.

He swallowed, and he looked away. Out the window. Skeletons of trees danced outside in the wind. Smoke curled out of the chimney of her back neighbor. “I’ve been trying,” he said, his tone edging on frustrated.

“No, that was really good,” she said. “I just read it all wrong.”

She gave him a hopeful smile as she approached. He must have caught her movement out of the corner of his eye. He returned her smile, though it was somewhat forced. Like his eyes didn't quite mean it, yet. That was okay, though, she supposed. He was allowed to be pissed off. Just... not at her. Not when she didn't deserve it, and this time, she damned well didn’t.

She wrapped her arms around him. His body was tense, and it took him several moments to relax, but then it was like a switch had gotten flipped, and he... melted. There was really no other word for it. He melted against her, pressing his nose into her hair. His warm palm pressed against her belly, like he was reminding himself. He heaved a colossal sigh, and then it was like all his anger had been flushed away. She much preferred this gradual, quiet release to his typical snarling explosions.

“A good dream, huh?” she murmured.

“Mmm,” he rumbled. “Yes.”

She grinned. “Was I in this dream?”

“Yes,” he said, the word unabashed.

“Clothed?” she said, quirking her eyebrow suggestively.

He pulled away to peer at her. His eyes were finally smiling along with the rest of his face. “As a matter of fact, yes.”

“Oh?” she said, surprised. “What was I doing?”

“We were in the OR,” he said. “And I wasn't scared, and it was going well, and it was just... nice.”

She grinned at him. “You were dreaming about cutting again?”

“Yeah,” he said, his tone mysterious. He cocked his head to the side, and his expression grew ponderous. “Admittedly, I think it was on a very distressed, brain-damaged grapefruit, and Cristina was riding a motorcycle in circles around the table, but still...”

Meredith burst out laughing. She kissed him. His lips were cool and soft against hers, and he tasted faintly of mint, like toothpaste. “No more unusual than being chased by a can of spermicide, I guess,” she said against his skin, remembering a nightmare she'd had months ago.

He winked at her. She rested against him as he drew his fingers through her hair. “We could get rid of the alarm,” she mused, “since we both hate the damned thing, and it doesn't help you.”

“Mmm,” he said. “I don't really seem to need help on that front anymore.”

“Did it ever help?” she asked.
He snorted and looked at her ruefully. “Not really.” He shook his head, looking off into the distance. “Before, it was just... constant. That... feeling.”

“Being scared?” Meredith said.

“Yeah,” he said, swallowing. “The only thing that changed was how loud it was. In my head.”

“And it's not loud anymore?” she said.

He shrugged. “It's not anything anymore. Not when I'm at home.”

Her heart squeezed. “That's really good, Derek.” And then she blinked. Looked at him. “Hey...”

He frowned at her. “What?”

“You didn't freak out,” she said.

“Freak out about what?” he said.

“The alarm. And the phone. And the dog. Waking you up. It was all really loud, Derek. But you woke up, and you spoke coherently on the phone, and you disciplined the dog, and you didn't freak out.”

He stared at her.

“Did you feel like freaking out?” she demanded.

He thought for a minute. “No.... I was flustered. Irritated as fuck. But not freaked out.”

“Yeah, well,” Meredith said. “Newsflash, but normal people would feel like that too, given that situation.”

“I guess I just....”

“What?”

He grinned at her. “Home is....” He shrugged. “Home is home. It's okay. It's home.”

Meredith laughed. “I guess we're moving up in the world.”

He nodded as a yawn cracked his frame, and he reached up to wipe his watering eyes with his hands. This was his first day off in a week, and he'd come home completely wrecked with exhaustion the night before. He'd collapsed into bed as soon as he'd gotten home – he hadn't spoken more than five words to her before he'd crashed – and it seemed like he still hadn't quite bounced back, yet. As the weeks had passed since he'd returned to work, he'd gotten a lot better at forcing himself to deal with work and the people at work, but the strain of that, together with the fact that heart surgery patients sometimes took over a year to feel like they were back to normal, left him enervated in the evenings. He still rarely stayed up past nine or ten, and he wasn't at all chipper in the mornings. Not like he used to be. She'd even caught him hitting the snooze button several times.

“You should go back to sleep,” she suggested. He clearly needed it. “Maybe, you can go back to that dream.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and grunted. “Yeah, maybe,” he said, not even trying to come up with an excuse to stay awake. He ran his hands through his hair as he pulled out of her embrace.
“I'll get the foil later,” he said, and he padded out of the room, said foil crunching under his bare feet, before she could tell him not to worry about it.

As she grabbed the broom in the corner, she heard the cushions squeak. He sighed. Blankets rustled. She swept up the foil refuse quickly and dumped it in the trashcan. He was already asleep by the time she went into the living room. His discarded notepad still lay on the floor by the couch, forgotten. She picked it up, frowning. He was already asleep by the time she went into the living room. His discarded notepad still lay on the floor by the couch, forgotten. She picked it up, frowning. He rolled away from her, presenting his back as he pressed his face into the back cushions. His deep breathing continued, and she absently pulled the slipped blanket up to his jutting shoulder as she looked at the notepad.

He'd written a number one followed by a period, as if he'd intended to write a list, but the only item on the page was number one, which said, “Pray for a miracle.” And it had been crossed out with harsh pen strokes that left dents in the paper. There was nothing written after it. The margins had some idle scribbles and squiggles, and at the bottom of the page, he'd drawn a stick figure fishing on a dock or something.

She plopped down into the easy chair, still frowning. She'd written aborted lists like this before. Usually when she was frustrated, trying to work things out, and couldn't think of what to add, just that writing a list might help organize all the stuff tangled inside her brain like spaghetti.

“Derek, what's this?” she said before she could stop herself.

For a moment he didn't move, but she heard his breathing change. “What's what?” he muttered into the cushion.

She winced at the exhaustion dragging at his words. “Sorry. Sleep. It can wait.”

He didn't comment, and his breathing evened within moments, more testimony to his need for rest. She leaned back, breathing softly. The air still smelled of spruce and wintergreen, and she found it soothing. Baby seemed to like it too, because Meredith felt her moving, rolling over like she was turning in her sleep. Meredith smiled, placed her hands on her belly to feel, and drifted.

“Meredith,” he said, snapping her out of dreams.

She twitched under the covers and groaned. It was dark. The air was cold outside the blankets. She had no idea what time it was, but it was dark and cold, and dark and cold meant time for sleeping.

“No,” she said.

The pleasant scent of cut spruce tickled her nose. The mattress dipped beside her. He slipped under the covers with her and lay parallel to her, spooning her with his endless warmth.

“No?” he replied. “I haven't said anything, yet.” His words were soft and low like velvet against her skin. “I could be telling you I won the lottery, you know.”

She could hear him smirking. Screw the idea of smirks being a facial expression; his were noisy, and they sucked to hear when she was trying to sleep, no matter how much sexy he cranked into every syllable.

“Whatever it is, no,” she said. Especially if it was sex, she thought, which, in this tired moment, would be so far from winning the lottery, Derek's lovely attributes notwithstanding, that she couldn't even muster the will to be hypothetically excited for her future not-tired self if she were to take a rain check on any proposed sexy goodness. “I'm exhausted, and I don't have to pee for once, nor is Baby kicking like she's in a soccer match, and I'm sleeping.”
His nose pressed against her neck. “Okay,” he said without further comment or protest.

He made a small, pleasant sound deep in his throat, a murmur against her ear. He wasn’t smirking anymore. His breath ruffled her hair. His warm arms wrapped over her body. He pressed his palm against her belly. Whether Baby was kicking or not, he loved to do that. Then he sighed, and his breaths evened out along with hers.

If she’d been more awake, she might have gotten jealous about how fast he collapsed into slumber along side her when sleeping hadn’t even been his idea, but the Land of Nod took her away soon after, and she lost track of the world for a while. Until she did have to pee.

When she got up, he wasn’t in the bed anymore. After she relieved herself, she waddled back into the bedroom. The curtains had been drawn, plunging the room into darkness. She opened them, squinting in surprise at the broad daylight that greeted her. The sky above was overcast with thick, frothy gray clouds, muting the effect of daytime hitting the windowpanes, but, still. Definitely freaking day.

Her gaze snapped to the clock. 2:00 pm. She made a sound. A squeak or something. Something that said surprise in less than a word. She’d slept late. Really late. Half her day off was already gone. The dark had fooled her into thinking it was still night time.

She ran her fingers through her hair, dazed, and opened the bedroom door. The faint sound of some song she knew was a Christmas carol fluttered up the stairs. She recognized the melody and the somber chorus, and the chant-y dudes singing in what sounded like Latin, but she couldn’t place the name of the carol. Then she heard a loud thump and a grating curse in a very familiar timbre, and she froze. The last time she’d heard something like that, Derek had fallen in the shower and hurt himself, and less than twenty-four hours after that, her world had exploded when she’d found him in their bathroom with empty pill bottles rolling around on the floor.

“Derek?” she shouted. She scrambled down the stairs as any other potential thoughts played bumper cars and knocked themselves out of her head. “Are you okay?”

“Fine, Mere,” he called from the living room. The blasé distraction in his tone didn’t speak of any serious hurt, more, I-have-a-project-I’m-thinking-about, but that didn’t stop her heart from pounding.

Her socks slid along the hardwood flooring as she skidded to a halt in the archway to the living room. Derek looked up at her, and a brilliant smile scrunched up his crow’s feet around his blue, blue eyes. She could lose herself in those fathoms. All her worries slipped away on quiet, cat feet, leaving her blank as she stared back at him.

“Hi,” he said in a velvet tone that made her insides tighten.

The fireplace roared with licking flames. A seven foot Christmas tree towered in their living room, and hundreds of colored lights on strings lay spread between the living room and dining room on the floor. An open box rested by the fireplace with something shiny in it, and a cloth... thing that she vaguely recognized... hung over the lip of the box. The Christmas carol she’d heard upstairs played from the speakers in the living room, albeit very softly. From the spinning turntable and the faint crackle under the music, Derek had liberated on one his many LPs from the bookshelf by the stereo.

Derek wore an old t-shirt and some loose fitting sweat pants. None of the lights had been hung on the tree, yet, but he’d wrapped a string of lights over his shoulders and behind his neck a bit like a feather boa. The end of the string was plugged into the wall, but only half of the lights seemed to
be working, the ones hanging over his left shoulder. He held a square doodad in his hand, and he was touching it to the base of one of the tiny light bulb sockets at his right side. She didn't know the doodad's purpose.

Samantha sat by the couch, oblivious or maybe even happy about the floppy Santa hat she'd found herself wearing. She watched everything with rapt amusement. She barked at Meredith, the Santa hat jiggling as she moved.

“Sam says good morning,” Derek said.

Meredith wrinkled her nose. “Afternoon, you mean. What was the thump?”

He shrugged. “Oh, that? Banged my knee on the box.” He gestured at the box by the fireplace. “Wasn’t paying attention.”

The box, more of a trunk, really, was made of heavy slats of wood that had been painted gray. As she moved closer, she saw tinier boxes stacked inside, each full of shiny things. Wooden things. All manner of things, really. Ornaments. Old ones. She recognized the box on the top. It contained an old set of golden wire ornaments depicting the twelve days of Christmas. The first one depicted a partridge in a pear tree.

She bent over to look more closely at the contents of the box. The cloth she thought she recognized? The red corduroy fabric was folded on top of an old tree skirt made of checkered green and white fabric with red ribbing. Each checkered box on the tree skirt framed a little embroidered tree inside, but the red corduroy on top of the tree skirt was what held her attention.

A lump formed in her throat as she picked it up. The red corduroy, stiff with lack of use, was an old stocking with a boot shaped more like a pancake than a foot. Red yarn crookedly spelled, “Meredith,” on the white lip of the stocking. The whole thing looked very amateur, but that didn’t matter so much. Thatcher. Thatcher had made this for her when she’d been little. Her mother wouldn’t, so he’d sewn it himself, despite not knowing how to construct more than the crudest of hole patches. She had the vaguest memory of watching him make it. An impression, really. Nothing more. But it was one of her more pleasant childhood recollections. She brushed her thumb along the coarse fabric.

“Where’d you get this?” Meredith said. She hadn’t seen this in... forever. Not since she’d moved to Boston. She hadn’t even realized her mother had still had it when she’d died.

Derek stepped close to her. “I found the box in the attic. It looked like it had Christmas stuff in it, so I grabbed it. I wasn’t sure how much decorating you wanted to do.”

“When did you go digging around in the attic?” she said.

The ladder to the attic was a rickety, ancient thing with worn rungs and chipping paint. The ladder had to be let down through a trap door with a wooden pole... hook... thing. The whole monstrosity weighed a ton, probably more than this tree had, and the process was unwieldy enough that she refused to do it without help, for fear of the heavy ladder smashing her skull as it came down. As far as she knew, Derek was still not the best at things that involved pushing and pulling. She didn’t want to speculate about how heavy that gray wooden box was, either.

“Last weekend,” Derek said. “You were on shift. Mark helped me get the ladder down. The box has been sitting here by the fireplace all week. I’m surprised you didn’t notice it.”

“Oh,” Meredith said. She tipped her gaze to the heavy wooden box. He’d been a lot better, and
he'd been hitting the gym with Mark, but she hadn't realized he'd graduated to heavy lifting, even with help.

She bit her lip. She hadn't been home much in a conscious state. The last few weeks since they'd gotten back from New York, she'd been working and sleeping, and that was about it. Him too, really. They were both not at their peaks. Him with his stress from work, and her with Baby's shameless yet abundant mooching.

Her hand wandered to her belly. She was getting damned tired of the mooching stealing all her available energy like a Hoover in overdrive, but she figured if anybody had an excuse to mooch, it would be Baby. At least her pregnancy was over the halfway mark. She was almost done. And then she would have Baby. Which would more than make up for it.

“I'm sorry I haven't been paying attention,” she said. “I've been really tired.”

His expression softened. “I'd be a hypocrite if I complained, Meredith. And you have a much better excuse than I do.”

She absently petted the old, barely-used stocking as she frowned at him. “Not true,” she said. “Let's just call us even.”

“Deal,” Derek said after some consideration. His gaze followed her hand as she stroked the stocking, and he twitched, like he wanted to move closer and feel, too, but he didn't move. “Did you want to hang that?” he said, the words cautious. “When I saw that in the box,” he said, continuing, “I thought you might...” He swallowed, and she watched as the possible ends to that sentence flitted across his face. I thought you might like it. Might hate it. Might want it. Might want to burn it. The conflicting tumble concluded with an audible, “I don't know.”

“Do you have one?” she said, looking up at him.

“A big, ugly box that weighs more than my car?” he said.

She let loose a chuff of laughter. “A stocking, jackass.”

His eyes sparkled. “I'm sure my mother kept it somewhere,” he said. “But, no, not here.”

“Well, we're not hanging mine without yours,” she said, putting the stocking back in the box on top of the old tree skirt. “It'd look lonely.”

She watched him process that. He glanced at the stocking and then back at her, his expression unreadable. Wary but optimistic, maybe, but he slipped into a frown when the music track changed. This song sounded... happier. And also recognizable, but not something she could peg with a title. The melody in it was still kind of slow.

“The music didn't wake you up, did it?” he said, anxiety gripping his words. “I thought the volume was low enough.”

“My bladder woke me up,” she conceded. “I didn't hear the music until I came out into the hallway.”

“Oh,” he said. He stopped fidgeting, at least.

“So, you tricked me with the shades,” she added, returning to neutral territory.

He snorted. “Hey, don't look at me. They were closed when I got home from work yesterday. I
didn't touch them.”

She frowned. She vaguely remembered needing a nap yesterday. She vaguely remembered yanking the curtains closed. Vaguely. She didn't comment. She stepped over all the lights and other junk on the floor, closer to the tree. The air smelled lovely and fresh and like winter. The spruce she’d smelled earlier. She inhaled until it filled her lungs. “So, how did you...?”

“I went to the tree lot at the grocery store this morning.”

She gaped, noticing the distinct lack of Mark in that sentence. He’d been quick to offer up Mark for the attic adventure. “You dragged this thing home by yourself?”

He looked like he didn't know what to say to that. “Um....” His gaze looked almost... hopeful. “Surprise?”

And then it clicked. She blinked as she stepped into his space. He thought she’d changed her mind and was mad about the Christmas vomit.

She thought of the Christmas furor of last year, when he'd dragged home a tree much like this one, though about a foot shorter, and she'd watched him wrap his presents in surgical tape and Santa kitten paper. She hadn't complained about the tree last year, but she hadn't cheered him on when he'd brought it home, either, and the only reason for her silence on the matter had been because she liked the smell. The spruce.

She glanced at the floor. There hadn't been nearly this many lights involved last year. And he hadn't gone digging around in her attic for old ornaments. He seemed to have been happy she'd let him get the tree through the front door and hadn't gone much beyond hanging a few lights on it and perching a big star at the top.

But that had been last year, and, this year, she'd already decided, wasn't going to go like that. While they'd been at Lake Cushman, it had occurred to her that this was something she wanted to try. Having an actual Christmas. Baby deserved a Christmas where Derek wasn't sewing pathetic stockings like Thatcher's. A Christmas where Mom didn't view all the merrymaking as a big chore stealing valuable time from work. Even if Meredith didn't really get the whole Christmas spirit... thing, she didn't want to take that away from Baby before she’d even been born. She didn't want to be Ellis, and this holiday was a decent area to start attempting changes.

Meredith tipped up on her toes and kissed his chin. “I'm not upset, Derek.” She was befuddled, maybe. But not upset. She gestured at the tree and the lights and the everything. She pulled a pine needle out of his hair and flicked it away. “I meant, are you okay? From the whole lugging a large, sticky tree that's taller than you are thing?”

“Oh,” he said. “Yes. Fine.” He pressed the knuckles of his fist against his sternum and rubbed through his shirt along the line of his scar. “Ached a little afterward, but that was what the nap was for. I mean, you insisted.” He grinned at her. “Who was I to say no?”

She thought of him collapsing beside her without arguing. “You were trying to tell me about this stuff earlier.”

He winked. “Not every time I say hello to you is for sex, you know.” He put the thingy in his hand on the mantle and wrapped his arms around her. “Is this....” He squinted as he searched for words. “This is okay with you, right? I tried to keep it light. I mean I know you said you wanted to try... well... this... but I wasn't sure how much was too much.”
Her eyes widened as she glanced around. “This is light for you?”

Something in his gaze crumbled a bit. “Well, there's the tree,” he said, the words calm. He shifted from foot to foot, and a blush began to spread from his throat to his cheeks. “And the decorations for the tree. But that’s it. I swear.” Samantha barked. “Oh, and her hat.” A tiny smirk twitched at his lips despite the worried embarrassment on his face. “I couldn't resist the hat. I'm sorry.”

“This is all for the tree?” Meredith said. “There's like a thousand lights here.” She didn't even think she was exaggerating, for once.

“Well,” he said. He swallowed. “You see. If you weave in to the trunk and out to the edge on every branch instead of just wrapping the lights around the outside, it looks better. And, yes, that takes a lot of lights. We might have to buy some more if I can't get all these strands from last year working.”

She glanced around the room as the slightly-less-somber song from before ended, and a new song started playing. One with... an actual beat. The song sounded happy, and not even begrudging about it. There were trumpets, even. Synthesized ones. No words this time, though. “What's playing?”

“Mannheim Steamroller,” Derek said.

Meredith shook her head. Mannheim Steamroller? That sounded like it should be a street name for meth or something, not the name of a band.

“What song is this?”

He glanced briefly at the stereo. “Um. Hark the Herald Angels Sing. Carols are sort of a requisite for decorating, you know.”

She peered at him. “You can't decorate without them?”

“If it's not a law, it should be,” he said with a fleeting grin, and then he sighed.

“What's wrong?” she said.

He pulled his fingers through his hair. “I thought getting the tree put up might make me feel more Christmas-y, but I'm still just....” He shrugged. “Not.”

Her heart squeezed. Christmas was his holiday. He always felt Christmas-y. Like clockwork when December hit. He was supposed to be the one locking her out of the bedroom to wrap massive piles of presents with Santa kitten wrapping paper.

She hugged him, pressing against him. He melted into her embrace with little encouragement. “You're not feeling Christmas-y this year?” she said, rubbing his back.

His sigh ruffled her hair. “I'm trying, Meredith, but....”

“Not quite there?” she said.

He didn't answer her, which was an answer by itself. Instead, he stood against her, breathing, nose pressed against her hair. She understood. He'd been through the ringer this year. So had she.

“I'm glad I'm here, alive,” he said after a long moment. “And I'm glad I have you. And my dog. And Baby. I'm glad I don't hurt anymore, at least not my chest. I'm glad I don't have to work so
hard to think of good things anymore. About myself or about life in general. I'm... happy. I am. But... I'm also very tired. All the time. And I miss liking people."

She pressed her lips against his skin. “I can understand that.” She pulled her fingers through his hair. He leaned into the touch. “You’ll get there. You’re getting there. Have you gone shopping, yet? Maybe buying presents would help.”

He laughed, but the sound was hollow and had very little humor in it. “Shopping malls are kind of crowded at Christmas, Mere.”

She swallowed. Oh. Oh. Damn it.

“I’ve gotten a couple things,” he said.

But nothing like the weekend shopping marathons she’d witnessed in the years before. She could hear a hundred words unspoken in his unhappy tone.

“Online shopping?” she suggested.

Derek nodded. “That’s probably what I’m going to have to resort to.” His face pinched with a frown. “It’s not nearly as fun that way, though.”

She couldn’t think of anything to say to that. Couldn’t think of any other suggestions. He stood in her arms for a long time, not speaking. She was happy to stand there, cheek pressed against his chest, letting the moments pass. “I love you,” she said against his shirt.

“I love you, too,” he said, a soft sigh of words.

The song changed again as they stood there, sharing space and time. She liked this song. “What’s this one?” she said.

“It’s Carol of the Bells. You like it?”

“This is my favorite so far. It’s fun.”

He grunted with laughter against her hair, and his embraced relaxed as he stepped away to look at her. “The traditional version doesn’t sound like this, just so you know.”

“Well, I like this version,” she said. She stared up at him, grinning. “So, I guess you’re the Christmas expert in this family.”

“As long as you don’t call me a Nazi,” he said, matching her grin.

“I’d only do that if you breached the Izzie barrier that separates tastefully appropriate from a-Hallmark-store-exploded.”

He laughed again, and it made her insides warm to see him livening up a little at her interest.

She kissed him, stepped out of his arms, and sat on the sofa. Heat from the fireplace buffeted her, and she closed her eyes briefly, enjoying the feeling. She reached down to stroke Samantha, who leaned into Meredith’s palm. Meredith grinned. “Well,” Meredith said. “I said I wanted practice at this for Baby.” She gestured at the lights. “So, why don’t you start by explaining what the hell you’re doing?”

“Untangling,” he said, shoulders slumping as he visibly relaxed at her verdict that this amount of Christmas was okay. That still didn’t stop him from smirking some more, though. “It’s a scientific
“process.”

She laughed and pointed to the mantle. “What's the thingy for?”

He followed her gaze. “Oh, that? That's testing to see where the current is failing. It helps diagnose problems.”

“Like the fact that that strand is only half working?”

“Yes,” he said. He picked up the thing. There was an LED at the bottom she hadn't noticed. “If this lights up, there's current.”

She nodded. “Okay. Can I help?”

He tilted his head and stared at her for a long moment. His smirk stretched into an easy, pleased smile. “There are a few more strands to untangle.” He pointed to the trash bag on the floor by the sofa. She'd ignored the bag before. “You can do that while I fix this if you want,” he said, pointing to the dead string in his hands. “Just stretch them out like the rest of the ones on the floor.”

She grinned. “Okay.” And she leaned down to pick through the dusty bag of lights.

When Meredith's eyes slid open, she smiled. The tree still towered in the corner of the room, though the lights weren't plugged in at the moment. She and Derek had put the lights and ornaments on it together. Light application to a Christmas tree was apparently a science, and Derek had found a lot of glee in showing her how to do it. Where light application was a science, though, ornament arrangement was like Stephen Hawking's version of physics. She and Derek had ended up using lots of the sparkling, metallic balls from the box from the attic after dusting them off. Derek had claimed that if one used sparkly ornaments, the reflections enhanced the lightning, and had instructed her to skip the ornaments that didn't have a reflective surface. That had resulted in her leaving about half of the old ornaments in the box, and the resulting ornament coverage on the tree had more been like accents rather than a blanket.

Meredith had always assumed garlands and tinsel and other crap were a must, but all they had used were the ornaments and the lights. She wasn't sure what the tree would have looked like if they had used non-sparkly ornaments, but she did have to admit he knew his Christmas trees. The end result of Derek's instruction looked... really freaking pretty.

And the longer she'd stuck around helping him, the more gleeful he'd gotten. By the time they'd finished, other than a few miscellaneous firsts associated with Baby, she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him so happy, but his joy had been an ephemeral feeling, not a permanent alignment shift. He'd gone back to work the next day and gotten stuck in the mental slog again. Stuck in the constant war inside his head where he wanted to be away from people and stress and busywork and blah, but didn't have the luxury because of his job. Because he was trying to get better. He'd come home the next day run down again, and the day after that, even more so, and she'd felt like she was dancing a perpetual jig of two steps forward, two steps back with him as they approached Christmas.

Meredith sat at the kitchen table, rubbing her temples in slow circles as she rested her weight on her elbows. Lexie sat across from her, shoveling spoon after spoon of peppermint ice cream into her mouth. Her cheeks bulged, and she looked, well, miserable. Which made no freaking sense. And Meredith kind of wanted that ice cream. Kind of a lot. She licked her lips in time with the throb of her head.

“I really don't understand what the problem is,” Meredith said.
“I only dumped Alex a couple weeks ago,” Lexie said.

“Yeah,” Meredith said. “And?”

“After he was shot,” Lexie said.

Meredith blinked. “And?”

“During the holidays?” Lexie added, a helpless tone dragging her pitch into the upper registers.

“So, what?” Meredith said. “You weren't happy. You got out. You know who you want, now. So, go ask him?”

“Go ask him, she says,” Lexie grumbled. “Go ask him?”

“Yes,” Meredith nodded. “Go. Ask.”

“But it's rude to move on so fast!” Lexie frowned. “Isn't it?”

“I'm really not a good person to be asking about the etiquette for moving on,” Meredith said, looking down at her belly. “In fact,” Meredith said, “I think the only person worse for asking about experience with moving on would be Derek.” Who wasn't home, anyway. Their days off hadn't matched up this week, and Derek hadn't been able to fix it because Richard hadn't been able to cover for Derek today. Something about Adele and warpaths and blah blah blah.

“I've been such a jerk,” Lexie said, tone glum.

“You don't even create a blip on the radar of jerk,” Meredith said.

Lexie fidgeted. “Well, there has to be a reason Mark hasn't asked me out, yet. Right?”

“Maybe, he's waiting for you to go all Sadie Hawkins and save him the trouble,” Meredith said. She sighed. “I really don't know,” she said. “Most of my history involving relationships has been with a man who's selectively deaf about the word no. I have no experience with him not asking me out, even when I told him to stuff it. If he'd been anyone else, and I mean anyone, I would have been filing a sexual harassment complaint with HR.”

“But Mark is the king of sexual harassment. Why won't he harass me?”

Meredith snorted as Lexie turned a shade of red that would have put a beet to shame. Lexie jammed another spoonful of dripping ice cream into her mouth. Her cheeks bulged as she flogged herself with calories, and then she swallowed her misery with an audible gulp.

“I can't believe I just said that,” Lexie said. “I probably just sent the Take Back the Night campaign into the dark ages of feminism when we were still having fights about who does the berry gathering and who kills the sabretooth cats for dinner.” She dropped her spoon into her ice cream bowl. The metal hit the lip of the bowl with a clank, and then she raised her hands to her hair and yanked. “I hate men. I hate them! They're so frustrating!”

Meredith rolled her eyes, giving up on preserving Mark's privacy for the sake of everyone involved. “Lexie, he's interested.”

Lexie perked up. “Interested? How interested? How do you know?”

“Yes. A lot. Because he gave me a bullet point list over Thanksgiving about how he intends to win you back.”
“Bullet points?” Lexie said, eyebrows raising. “Thanksgiving? Really? That was before Alex and I even broke up.”

“He bought a freaking self-help book as reference material for that list,” Meredith said. “If he’s not asking, it’s probably because he hasn’t got a clue he should be asking, yet, not because he doesn’t want to.” With a groan, Meredith rose to her feet, walked to the phone, and grabbed it off its cradle. The dial tone filled the air with a vague, distant whine through the receiver. She foisted the phone at Lexie. “Just. Call. Him. Right now.”

“But he’s on shift,” Lexie said weakly.

“I don’t care,” Meredith said with a huff as she resettled and closed her eyes. “Do it, now.”

She resumed rubbing her temples. Her head was splitting her open, she thought. Too much work. Too much stress. Not enough sleep. She’d go back to bed the second she could muster up the will to stand again. Her ankles hurt. Her back hurt. Everything hurt. And she felt like a freaking walrus.

She heard the chair squeal as Lexie stood. Heard shuffling as Lexie moved around. Heard the phone being set back in its cradle, though Meredith couldn’t muster any more strength to protest. Heard a clink in front of her, and then Lexie sat back down.

When Meredith pulled her eyes open, she glanced through her eyelashes blearily at the sight in front of her. Some of the pink peppermint ice cream had been added to a small bowl, which now sat in front of her with a spoon.

“Mark can wait,” Lexie said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Meredith said.

“Right,” Lexie agreed with a snort.

Meredith sighed. “Growing a whole other person sucks sometimes.”

“Is the baby kicking?” Lexie said.

“No,” Meredith said. “But I was up like three times last night to pee, and I got no sleep, and everything hurts. And I’d kill for some wine or something.”

“You could have a glass,” Lexie said. “One glass won’t hurt anything.”

Meredith clenched her fingers briefly. “No,” she said, and then she grabbed the spoon from her ice cream bowl. There was no way in hell she was doing anything that could risk the baby, no matter how slight the chances. Barring two mornings where she had fallen off the wagon and landed roughly on her ass, much to Derek’s extremely irritating amusement, she wouldn’t even drink coffee.

She broke off a piece of the ice cream, raised the spoon, and tipped it into her mouth. A blast of peppermint hit her senses, and she moaned a little as she closed her eyes. Peppermint ice cream was almost as good as strawberry, and this was a limited flavor only available in stores around Christmas. She loved it.

“This is an okay wine substitute,” Meredith said as she swallowed the treat.

Lexie grinned at her, and for several minutes, they ate their remaining ice cream in silence. When the doorbell rang, Meredith didn’t even have a chance to think about answering the door before
Lexie was rising to her feet. “You stay,” Lexie commanded. “I’ll get it.”

“I’m not helpless,” Meredith snapped at Lexie’s retreating figure.

“I know,” Lexie said. “But I’m still helping you anyway. Deal with it.”

Meredith huffed another sigh and closed her eyes, letting her awareness of the surroundings blur. She heard the door open, heard Lexie exchange some words with whoever was there. Meredith was too tired to even care who it was, or to speculate.

“You got a package,” Lexie said when she returned. “From New York. Priority overnight?”

Meredith’s eyes snapped open. Lexie clutched a large Fed-Ex box. “Wow,” Meredith said. “It came already? I only talked to her yesterday.”

“What is it?” Lexie said, excitement gleaming in her eyes. “Something we should put under the tree?”

Meredith tore the package open with gusto. Three items slid out of the box. The first two items, both knitted and wrapped in tissue paper, looked like what she was expecting, though she had expected only one. She set those aside and looked with curiosity at the third item.

A tupperware container. Filled with... cookies. Dozens. With white icing slathered across the tops, and a praline stuck in the middle of the icing on each one. They smelled delicious. She grabbed one from the box and offered it to Lexie, and then snagged one for herself. The cookie was chewy and fell apart in her mouth. A blast of almond and sweetness hit her tongue.

“These are amazing!” Lexie mumbled, her voice distorted as she spoke with a full mouth.

Meredith glanced at the note Carolyn had written, which was taped to the top of the tupperware container, and smiled. “These,” Meredith said, “are apparently Derek’s favorite. How did I not know this?” A small index card with the recipe was taped next to Carolyn’s note. The steps didn’t seem too complicated. Maybe, she could try to make it, and then when she set the kitchen on fire, Lexie would take pity on her and help. Or, maybe, she could be smart and just draft Lexie in the first place.

“What are the other things?” Lexie said.

Meredith turned her attention to the yarn items wrapped in tissue paper. She pulled open the paper on the first one, unsticking the tape and letting the folded item unfurl, which revealed a stocking with Derek’s name knitted into the pattern at the top. The stocking was large and floppy, almost four feet from top to toe, and it was soft and red, which was almost exactly like she’d imagined Derek’s would be. Granted, she’d pictured stripes, and this was solid-colored except at the top where Derek’s name broke into the color scheme with white. Carolyn must have made this thing by hand. She was far more skilled at construction than Thatcher had been.

Meredith unfurled the second knit item, also a stocking, though this one had Mark’s name at the top, and it was green instead of red. A little sticky note was attached to the top of Mark’s, which said, “Thought you might want this one, too! – Carolyn.”

“Derek’s stocking from when he was a kid,” Meredith explained to Lexie, who was bubbling over with interest. “I called Carolyn yesterday and asked her if she still had it.”

Lexie licked her lips. “Not that I’m complaining, but you want to hang stockings? You?”
Meredith shrugged. “For Derek, yeah.”

“Really?” Lexie said.

“He's been having some trouble with Christmas this year. I just wanted to do something for him.”

Lexie frowned. “Trouble?”

Meredith nodded. “He's just a little down. I think the holiday is emphasizing to him how different he is this year. I almost get the impression that he's... well, he's lonely.”

Lexie's frown deepened. “Derek is lonely?”

Meredith sighed. “I don't think I'm explaining this well,” she said, before Lexie could enter DEFCON 1, operation Find Derek Some Friends. “He's not alone, per se. He's just...”

“Not used to having to budget his people time?” Lexie suggested.

“Yeah,” Meredith said, nodding. “Yeah, that's it exactly.” Meredith could almost see the churn of thoughts tumbling behind Lexie's eyes. “Lexie, don't tell me you're planning something.”

Lexie's lip twitched.

“Lexie, seriously,” Meredith said. “Please, don't throw some big Christmas bash that will put him on the spot. He's already not feeling that great.”

Lexie nodded. “I swear. No spot putting. No big bash. But... it'd be nice to do something.”

“Something... like what?” Meredith said, caution dripping from her tone.

“I don't know,” Lexie said, eyes gleaming as she galloped through possibilities. “I'll tell you when I figure it out. I promise to keep it low key, though.”

After daydreaming for the better part of an hour, Meredith left Derek alone in the living room to sleep, and she watched some streaming television on her laptop in their bedroom. She found she couldn't stand to watch hospital shows, since they were all ridiculously unrealistic, and after the shooting she found she had little taste for cop dramas and other violent stuff, but... she had an unrepentant addiction for Top Chef. She couldn't cook worth a damn, but it was so fun seeing what people who could cook could create under pressure with such wacky rules and time limits. She watched three episodes before she had to turn it off, because it was making her both hungry and jealous. Hungry because dinner was approaching, and jealous because she knew her hunger would no longer be satisfied by that beautiful honey-baked ham she'd bought, which now resided in Samantha's stomach. No, she was likely stuck with takeout tonight. Or something Derek could throw together with what little they had in the pantry, like a casserole.

Her attention was yanked away from her laptop when a thunderous crash exploded through the house, followed by a, “God, damn it!” She didn't think she'd ever moved through the house so quickly. The only thing that stopped her from sliding down the stairs like a bobsledder was the bulge of her womb reminding her she had a lot more to risk than just her own safety if she were to fall on her face. She slowed down to an urgent trot as she descended the steps, but sped up again as soon as she'd hit the landing.

She found him sitting at the dining room table staring into space, which... wasn't what she expected, and it drew her to a skidding halt in the archway. His notepad sat in front of him on the placemat, pen discarded off to the side. There was still only one item on the list. Pray for a miracle.
And he was so stuck in his own head he didn't seem to notice her standing there, venting panic with every heaving breath.

Her gaze darted around. He looked... fine, other than the fact that he'd disconnected himself from reality enough to not hear her come into the room. She couldn't identify what had made the crashing sound until she tiptoed forward and saw the thick, skewed book on the floor by the wall. A dim shaft of afternoon light plunged into the room from the window, and she couldn't read the title on the glossy cover until she padded over to it. *The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook.* It was one of the references Lexie had bought when she'd had her revelation that Derek wasn't necessarily dealing with things very well. She'd tried to keep them discretely in her bedroom, but apparently Derek knew about them, anyway. He had to have gone into Lexie's room and found her stash to get it, or at least asked her for it.

Her heart squeezed. Why would he need that book right now?

She made sure she was in his line of sight before she whispered, “Derek?” in a low, soothing whisper. It took another, “Derek, hey,” along with a little wave before he blinked and seemed to focus on the room again.

He didn't start at her sudden appearance, which was a good sign. His shift in demeanor was more of a slow slide from absent to perceiving. His lip twitched into a soft smile, though preoccupation gripped the other muscles in his face, preventing his mirth from reaching the crows feet hugging his eyes, and his irises didn't sparkle like they did when he really, really meant it.

“Hi,” he said, matching her soft tone.

She glanced pointedly at the book on the floor, eyebrows raised. “What happened?” she said. “You scared the crap out of me.”

He sighed, deflating. “Sorry. I lost my temper for a second.” Concern flecked in his eyes. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” she assured him. “I'm more concerned about you. What did that poor book ever do to you?”

He propped his head up on his elbows and tore his fingers through his hair. “Nothing, it....” His eyes drifted to the list he'd made. “Nothing. I was brainstorming, and I thought it might help.”

“But it didn't,” Meredith said.

He slid out of his chair to pick up the book. He smoothed out the cover, tucking the jackets back into place, and put the book back on the table next to his notepad. “Not really.”

She picked up the list he'd left on the placemat, digging her thumb into the metal spirals until she hurt. He didn't take his eyes from her. She didn't see any reproach in his gaze. Nothing to indicate this was a no no subject or that she'd grossly invaded his privacy by reading the list earlier in the day. “What exactly are you brainstorming?” she said.

He ground his molars. His temples bulged as he clenched his jaw and released it, and she bit her lip. Maybe not an invasion of privacy, but she could tell she wasn't in for a happy subject, and he seemed reluctant to explain. She put the notepad gently back on the table and stepped into him, embracing him, but he stood like a stiff, unyielding board, and gave her nothing in return.

“Talking about it could help, you know,” she said.
He stared out the window and shook his head. Not at her, he gathered. Just... whatever was stuck in his head. “I'm trying to...” His words trailed away.

“What?” she prodded.

He considered her for a long moment, like he was debating whether this was a good idea to talk about with her. Whatever this was, anyway. Curiosity was a slow burn underneath her skin.

“If it helps you to talk, I want to hear it,” she said, standing her ground. She hadn't encountered closed-like-a-clamshell Derek in a while, but over months and months of practice, she'd gotten pretty good at getting him to crack open. Persistence and patience in equal measure seemed to help a lot. She pulled him tight against her.

The moment he gave in came like a tide to a beach, slow and creeping, but unstoppable. He wrapped his arms around her. Tension slipped out of his muscles, and he sighed. He pressed his forehead against hers and breathed. In and out.

“I'm trying to figure out how to fix this mess,” he said on an exhale.

She scrunched his soft t-shirt between her fingers. “What mess? Can I help?”

He was silent for the briefest of pauses.

“I'm a big girl, Derek,” she said, one last push. “I'm fine. I can take it. Talk.”

“If things don't turn around soon, Seattle Grace Mercy West is going to bankrupt itself, and this time there's no merger to pull us out of free fall.”

She blinked. Of all the things she expected to hear, that was not one of them. “What?” she said, dumbfounded. “What do you mean?”

“I just got the year-end financial report, Meredith. If the hospital were a patient, Seattle Grace would be in the ICU on a ventilator with a priest on the way.”

Sinking. She was sinking. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I have told you, Meredith. I told you the hospital was in ruins months ago.”

Her fingers clenched. “I didn't think you meant we were on our way to bankruptcy again!”

“I didn't know we were on our way to bankruptcy again until I got the full analysis report,” he snapped. And then he inhaled, exhaled, inhaled, exhaled. He shook his head as if to knock loose his temper, and added in a much quieter voice, “I only found out about this yesterday. I'm not an accountant, Meredith; the earlier reports looked bad but not dire to me, and this is the first one where it was spelled out for me in tiny, easy-to-understand words.”

Her eyes pricked. “How long do we have?”

He shrugged. “Months, I'd guess. A year, tops, with some considerable cutbacks.”

“What's it going to look like by April?”

Baby was due in April. His hopeless expression wrecked her. She wiped her eyes as his palms came to rest on her stomach, and he kept breathing. In and out and in and out. “Meredith, I....” He took another deep breath, and looked away. His lower lip quivered. “This is all my fucking fault.”
“It's not your fault, Derek.”

He shook his head. “We almost had things under control with the merger. Then I got shot. Patients
don't want to be treated here. Nobody wants to work here. And all the stress leave for the people
we managed to keep sucked our rainy day funds dry.” He looked at her. “This is your home. This
is where we met.” He blinked. “This is where you saved me.” It's like I was drowning.... His eyes
were watery. He didn't look like he was seeing anything.

“Derek, it's not your fault,” she snapped.

He was silent for a long time, staring into space. His face was red and blotchy, and he looked about
a millimeter from bursting into tears right along with her. She wiped her eyes again, and then she
cupped his chin with her palm and forced his gaze back to her.

“No. Your. Fault.”

He sighed. “I'm doing it again, aren't I?” he said, the words glum.

She snorted. “You kind of are.”


“Right,” Meredith said.

“And I wouldn't blame you, or Mark, or anybody else in the same situation as myself.”

She nodded.

He took a long, slow breath and let it out. “But I still need to fix this,” he said, his voice cracking.
“T need....”

“Closure,” she said.

“Not just that. It's....”

“It's?”

He crumpled like he'd misplaced his thought. “I don't know what to do,” he said. The words
crushed her. His lost expression crushed her. “Meredith, I don't know what to do. What the hell
should I do?”

He was looking at her like he was flailing around in the Sound, but had spotted his life raft. Her.
And she had no idea how to respond to that.

She didn't know anything about this stuff.

She swallowed. Her legs felt watery. “I think I need a time out,” she said. “Just for a minute.”

“A time out?” he parroted.

“This is... big,” she added, the words hollow. “A big problem. Really, really... big. Supernova
grade.”

should do.”
She searched his expression for a long, aching moment. Her chest hurt. Her eyes hurt. She'd known the hospital had some problems. She'd had no idea they were plodding down a gangplank to a looming grave. She leaned up on her tiptoes, pressing against him, enveloping herself in his warmth. She snaked her fingers through his hair, clutched at him along the nape of his neck.

Silence stretched for six heartbeats. She was in free fall, and she needed a place to land. He was drowning, and he needed something solid to grab. And they both needed to hit the emotional reset button, or they'd never get through this discussion.

“You should kiss me,” she said.

“Meredith—”

She grabbed his shirt. “Kiss. Me.” The cotton scrunched between her fingers. She shifted her weight and pulled him along as she stepped backward. Her back hit the dining room table. She slid into a sitting position on the tabletop, and he filled the space between her knees with his torso.

He hovered close enough that she could feel the heat radiating off his skin. He didn't speak. The faint scent of his aftershave filled her every inhalation. She pressed her nose into the space where his jaw met his throat, opened her mouth, let his skin slip between her teeth, and she nipped him. A hint of salt tickled her tongue.

“Kiss me, Derek,” she said against his throat. Stubble rasped against her, but she didn't care. She hugged his hips with her knees. She unclenched her fist and let her palm slide down his shirt, pushing up under it. She glided to his waistband, teasing at the lip of it, and plunged underneath into heat. He made a deep sound in his throat when she touched him, halfway between a groan and a purr.

But then he batted her hand away.

“What—?” she had a chance to say before he captured her mouth with his own and drank down her question. Not a no, then. She waited not-so-patiently to see what he had in mind.

He pulled at her pants while he plundered her. She shifted to let him take them away. They fell with a thud to the carpet when he dropped them next to the table. She arched back as he did the same with her panties. Their breaths thundered in the quiet. Her nails raked him, and he made another deep sound that came from the pit of his chest. A growl, almost. Something primal.

Then he dropped to his knees, palms pressed against her inner thighs. He spread her wide with a sweep of his hands. Her skin twitched, and she moaned as he opened her like a present. Hot breaths blustered against her wet skin. He pushed himself between her thighs, lips to skin, and he kissed her until the world crumbled.

Meredith woke on Christmas morning a bit like a bear crawls out of hibernation. Not that she knew how bears coming out of hibernation acted, but she imagined there'd be growling. And snuffling. And a mountain of denial. It took her almost a minute to slap off the alarm.

8:30 am, the clock said, and the light streaming through the windows seemed to agree with the clock's assessment of the time. While not even that early, given that many of her days started at 4:00 am, it felt like she'd just gotten home and fallen into bed. She'd worked Christmas Eve until about 11:00 pm and had made it into bed around 11:45 pm, collapsing next to an already-passed-out Derek.

“Oh, my god, how is it morning already?” she muttered into her pillow. A wet spot of drool had
collected on the pillowcase under her cheek. Yuck. “How am I awake? Why?” She rolled away, but Derek followed her into a sleepy, draping spoon.

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” Derek murmured against her neck, soft breaths making her skin tingle. His voice was groggy, but his body was a long line of warmth behind her, and she could hear the vague, dream-filled smile in his words.

“Bah humbug,” she said in return, and he let loose a whuff of air that could have been a laugh, however brief. “Sorry about the alarm,” she said. “I forgot to unset it.”

The lump that was Derek didn't move. “Mmm,” he said, the syllable thick with sleep. “'S'fine.” And then he didn't say anything else, despite what had to have been at least nine hours of sleep. Despite Christmas. Despite the fact that he was erect and pressing against her, and that was normally a precursor to a lot of dirty innuendo, if nothing else.

Which made her frown. It was Christmas. She couldn't remember the last few Christmases in an eidetic sense, but she knew he should be more excited than this. She slid out of his arms. He groaned a bit in protest, but didn't speak. She bit her lip as she rolled out of bed and scrunched her bare toes in the plush carpet. She took care of her ready-to-explode bladder in the bathroom quickly before returning to find Derek still snuggled on his side under a mountain of blankets, not moving. Which was really... just not normal.

She padded to his side of the bed and sat down beside him, hip to hip with him. She put her hand on the lump at where she estimated his shoulder should be. “Hey, are you okay?” she said.

The covers rustled. She caught a dull blue eye looking at her through a wiry curtain of his kinked bed hair. “Just tired,” he said.

“Want me to put on some coffee for you?” she said, frowning.

She listened to him breathing. Silence stretched for several seconds until he muttered something multisyllabic but unintelligible. She leaned over him and kissed his forehead.

“Sleep, then,” she said, intending to leave him in peace. “Merry Christmas.”

The blankets rustled as she tried to step away. His warm palm grabbed her wrist. “Don't go,” he said in a clearer tone. “I'm up,” he added, without a hint of leer or entendre in his tone.

She stopped. Turned. When she looked, he was blinking, scrubbing at his stubbly face and bloodshot eyes with his other hand, and then he sat up. The comforter fell away from his chest, and his gaze softened.

“Hey,” she said.

His expression became... almost shy. “It's Christmas,” he said. “I can catch up on sleep ton—” And then his eyes focused on something behind her. “What's that?” he said, interrupting himself mid-sentence.

“What's what?” she said, but when she turned to follow his gaze, she saw the object of his scrutiny. A big envelope embossed with candy canes. It was taped to the inside of their door with surgical tape. It hadn't been there last night. She snorted. “Oh, lord, what cheesy scavenger hunt thing did you plan, now?”

When she turned back to him, she found him looking at her, bewildered. “That's not from me, Mere.”
She snorted again. “Uh huh.”

“Really, it’s not,” Derek said. “I didn’t plan anything. I thought I was already pushing my luck with the tree and the lights and the ‘Christmas vomit,’” he said, putting the words in squiggly air quotes with his fingers. He smiled sheepishly. “Believe it or not, I can restrain myself from further vomit. For you.”

She frowned, got up, and snatched the envelope from the door. She ripped open the envelope to find a glittery card, which she pulled out and read. She recognized the handwriting. Not Derek’s.

“Oh, she so lied,” Meredith said.

“Who lied?” Derek said, padding up behind her.

“Lexie!” Meredith said, glancing at him. Lexie hadn’t told her anything about this. Not even a tiny, tiny hint. Meredith shoved the card at him. Specks of glitter flecked onto his black shirt, getting stuck in the weave of the cotton, and more fluttered to the carpet.

“Santa humbly requests your presents in the living room,” Derek said, reading from the card. He laughed and ran a hand through his messy hair, leaving bits and pieces of glitter behind. One curl stuck up like a flag, despite his weak attempts to mow it down with his fingers. “Presents. Cute.”

“Santa seems awfully glitter-happy,” Meredith grumbled.

Derek brushed at his shirt. More glitter drifted into the air. “No need to get snippy with Santa,” he said, eyes pinching at the edges with the vague hint of a grin. “After all, it just adds to my sparkling personality.”


“You love it,” he replied, pressing closer, and she found she couldn’t argue.

He reached in front of Meredith and opened the door, bicep bunching under the sleeve of his t-shirt. The scent of coffee and cinnamon wafted against them in a warm billow of air. Derek’s nostrils flared and his eyelids drooped subtly as he leaned into it and inhaled. The soft sound of voices filtered up the stairs. She could identify male cadence and female cadence from this far away, but not the specific owners of said voices, not from such a soft murmur.

Her teeth clenched. She’d told Lexie not to put Derek on the spot, and this was pretty freaking spot-putting, Meredith thought. She grabbed Derek’s hand and squeezed.

“You don’t have to go downstairs,” she rushed to say. “I can tell them to leave.”

Curiosity painted his face despite the sleepiness still loitering there, and he stepped into the hallway, pulling her with him. “If you did that,” Derek said, “we’d never find out what Santa wants with us, now, would we?” A smile twitched at the corners of his lips. Not a brilliant one, but it was a brilliant one all the same, simply for the fact of its existence, a real curve that made him look years younger, and so much more buoyant. While he didn’t seem that excited about this spontaneous development, one that, weeks ago, would have had him refusing to leave the bedroom, he certainly seemed willing to humor it today, and that... that was just.... Tension flowed out of her as though she were a sieve.

“What about you?” he said. “You don’t have to go downstairs, either, if this is too much.”

“Too much?”
His lip twitched. “Christmas vomit.”

“Oh,” she said. “No, I’m fine. This is just the right amount of Christmas vomit.” She frowned suspiciously. “So far....”

“Good,” he said, another smile ghosting his features.

She stopped him. Kissed him. Halitosis and all, she didn’t really care at the moment. They shared a long minute with each other in the quiet hall, and then they went downstairs.

Lexie and Mark were the only ones sitting in her living room, which, Meredith relented, didn’t really constitute a “bash,” so at least Lexie had stuck to the most important part of her word.

Presents that hadn’t been there the night before were piled high under the tree. Christmas carols played softly on the stereo. Lights hung on the tree in a brilliant red, blue, green, and yellow sprawl. A fire snapped and popped in the fireplace, making the room smell of wood and heat, mingled with the scent of coffee wafting from the kitchen. Samantha, who’d stretched out beside the warmth of the fire, wore her floppy Santa hat with her own special brand of canine aplomb.

Meredith’s and Derek’s stockings hung in a close pair from the mantle. On the far right next to Derek’s stocking, hung an oversized, misshapen, badly knitted, cream-colored sock on which Meredith had written “SAMANTHA” with a blue fabric pen. Carolyn had coached her over the phone in its construction, but backseat knitting over the phone hadn’t been enough to save it from looking like it had been made by Meredith. Oh well. On the left, next to Meredith’s, hung a newer, misshapen stocking that looked a lot like Meredith’s, only it said Lexie on the lip. Lexie, happily contributing, had hung up hers shortly after Meredith had explained her reasoning for stockings in the first place. On the far end hung Mark’s big stocking, which hadn’t been there the night before. Meredith had given it to Mark to do with as he pleased. Lexie had probably gotten it back from him.

Lexie gave Meredith and Derek a look of glee as Meredith tiptoed through the archway with Derek behind her. “Merry Christmas, you guys!” Lexie exclaimed, though she kept her volume just above a whisper.

“Hey, man,” Mark added, grinning. “Meredith. Best day of the year!”

“Looking forward to it,” Meredith said, a smile twitching at her lips when she realized she wasn’t lying.

Mark was barefoot, and he wore a fuzzy blue bathrobe much like the one Meredith had gotten Derek for Christmas last year. From his dress and his stubble, he seemed to have rolled out of bed and driven straight here. Lexie wore a t-shirt and sweats, and her hair wasn’t even combed. With the casualness, and the fact that it was just close family instead of a giant crowd of longtime Christmas celebrators, well, things didn’t feel so foreign or scary. In this environment, she wouldn’t feel horrible if she mangled some heretofore unknown Christmas ritual. She made a note to thank Lexie later, not just for Derek, but for herself.

Derek relaxed beside her, apparently coming to the same conclusion she had. He smiled. A bigger one than the one he’d offered her in their bedroom. He rubbed at his sleepy eyes again. “Merry Christmas,” he replied as he sank onto the couch.

“Want some coffee?” Lexie said, before Meredith could sit next to him. “I made decaf for you, Mere.”
Meredith sighed. Her eyes still felt sticky with sleep, and having decaf sounded about as fun as having a virgin daiquiri. Tasty, but pretty much pointless. Worse, the fact that everybody else would be having the real deal was kind of like visiting a candy store and watching everybody devour delicious Godiva chocolate while she was stuck chewing sugar-free gum or something.

“Oh, have some real coffee, Meredith,” Derek said as if he’d read her mind. He winked. “It’s Christmas. Baby won’t mind one cup.”

“But—” Meredith began, but she didn’t have a chance to finish.

“Maybe we can mix them together or something,” Lexie said in a rush. “You can help me.” And then Lexie grabbed Meredith's wrist and pulled her into the kitchen without another glance.

Dim light spilled into the kitchen as rain spattered against the window panes. Rain was Seattle's version of a white Christmas, Meredith supposed. The bitter scent of coffee, subtle from the living room, became a cacophony in her nose. Her nostrils flared.

“Lexie,” Meredith snapped as they skidded to a halt in front of the bubbling coffee maker. “What the hell?”

“How’s Derek?” Lexie said. “The card took the edge off the surprise, I hope? I tried to keep this thing small. Alex volunteered to clear out, though I think that's more to do with the fact that he'd rather spend Christmas hitting his toes with a hammer than do anything with me in the same room. But anyway. So, Derek seems okay. Is he okay? He's got really big circles under his eyes.”

Meredith blinked. Perhaps Lexie had already had some coffee herself. Possibly a whole jug. Possibly spiked with some speed or something. “He’s fine, Lexie; he’s just worn out,” Meredith assured her half-sister. “If he wasn't fine, he wouldn't have come downstairs.”

“Okay, good,” Lexie said, nodding resolutely. “I’m glad.” She bit her lip and shifted from foot to foot.

Meredith rolled her eyes. “What did you drag me in here to talk about?”

“So, Mark. He’s here.”

Meredith nodded. “I noticed that, yes.”

“And it's not a date,” Lexie said. “It's for Derek. As like a brother solidarity support thing.”

“Okay...?” Meredith said, watching Lexie expectantly. Meredith folded her arms across her chest. Lexie reddened. “But I really, really want it to be a date,” she said in a pleading voice.

“For god's sake,” Meredith said, rolling her eyes again. “Just ask him, Lexie. He'll say yes. I'm telling you. It's not even a little bit iffy. Just do it.”

“Okay,” Lexie said, steeling herself. “Okay. I can do this.”

“You can,” Meredith said with a sage nod.

She pulled four mugs out of the cabinet. A double-size “I <3 NYC” mug, two random mugs Derek had picked up as swag from medical conferences in Auckland and Los Angeles, respectively, and some generic blue-colored mug with a horse on it that she couldn’t remember buying, but clearly she had, because... well... there it was. She stared longingly at the pot with regular coffee in it for
three seconds. Four. Five. She closed her eyes. Inhaled. Let her mind drift in the caffeine, caffeine, caffeine of it all. The scent was an olfactory siren song, splendiferous, tempting, and evil, and for a moment, she wavered. She leaned toward the pot with the real stuff. Caffeine. God, she missed caffeine so much.

Finally, though, with a depressed sigh, she shifted to the decaf, and filled up the horse cup for herself. She filled Derek's mug to the brim with regular. And then she pushed the remaining two mugs across the countertop to Lexie.

“Bring him coffee,” Meredith suggested. “It’s a conversation starter or something. I think.” She remembered her first legitimate date with Derek, and there had definitely been coffee involved. Honestly, it was hard not to have coffee when dining out in Seattle.

She hooked the two mugs she’d filled with her thumbs and walked back out into the living room with them, leaving Lexie behind to ponder her course of action. Derek gave her a grateful look as he clasped the giant mug, blew on it, and took a sip. “Thank you,” he said, and Meredith curled up next to him, cradling her own. “Did you pour yourself some actual coffee?”

She sighed. “No.”

He gave her a look that seemed like a strange marriage of exasperation and understanding. She hadn't realized before seeing it that those two emotions could be married. But he didn't comment to commend or condemn her choice. Instead, he wrapped his arm around her, squeezed her shoulder with a warm palm and kissed her temple.

Lexie shuffled back into the room, blush creeping across her face, reddening her ears, and plunging down her throat beyond the neckline of her t-shirt. She approached the big chair where Mark was sitting.

That was Derek's favorite chair. The one they'd had to lug upstairs to the bedroom when he hadn't been able to sleep through the night on his back. They'd lugged it back downstairs months ago.

Mark looked up at Lexie, a curious expression on his face.

“Hey, thanks,” he said to the offered cup of coffee, tone slightly surprised.

Lexie cleared her throat. Shifted from foot to foot. “So, can I sit here?” she said abruptly. “I mean, if that’s okay. Is it okay?”

Mark’s expression was unreadable. His eyebrow twitched. The chair where he was sitting was definitely only meant for one person, but that didn't mean two people didn't fit as long as they didn't mind being extra cozy with each other. Meredith had sat there curled up in a comforter with Derek any number of times, and Lexie was pretty small as well. They would fit.

“Sure....” Mark said after a pause. He put his cup on a coaster on the coffee table, next to a plate full of the cookies Derek's mother had sent. His fingers squeaked across the leather chair arms as he gripped them for leverage, and his biceps bulged as he made a move to stand up.

“No!” Lexie said. Her sudden twitch made her coffee slosh. Brown liquid dribbled out the sides of her cup, but she didn't seem to notice. “No, I mean. Can I sit here?” She swallowed. “With you?”

Mark blinked. The silence between them stretched, filled with the tinny sound of Deck the Halls playing softly from the speakers.

“Please?” Lexie added.
Without another word, Mark's face shifted glacially into a bright-eyed, toothy, Cheshire Cat grin. He raised his right arm, scooted to his left, and gestured. Lexie slid onto the chair beside him, hugged between his large body and the arm of the chair, and his arm came over her shoulder much like Derek's over Meredith's. Lexie clutched Mark's bathrobe as if her life depended on it. She rested her head on his shoulder and settled, movements hitching and awkward, but who cared about awkward? To Meredith, anything was better than seeing Lexie waffle endlessly for days.

Mark sighed the biggest, happiest sigh Meredith thought she'd ever heard, and his eyes had more glitter to them than the freaking glitter card Lexie had stuck on the inside of Meredith and Derek's bedroom door.

“So,” Mark said in a tone that said life-is-pretty-fucking-fantastic-right-now-MERRY-FUCKING-CHRISTMAS, “who gets to open the next present?”

They lay intertwined in a tangle of naked limbs and sheets and blankets. Somewhere in the hurricane, they'd shifted to the bedroom. She drew circles on his chest with her index fingers. He stared at her through his eyelashes, a rapturous expression painting his face.

The sun had long since set, and the dim, warm bath of light from the lamp reflected off his eyes in its absence. A cold winter quiet gripped the house, wrapping it in a muted blanket. All she could hear was Derek's breathing, and the occasional swish of a passing car on the wet street outside. She pressed her ear to his chest and listened through his breastbone to his heartbeat, adding a slow, percussive rhythm to what was otherwise silence, and she sighed, boneless, relaxed. Safe. The world stopped spinning when she lay like this with him. Wrong things didn't feel so wrong. And a bankrupting hospital felt like puzzle to solve, not a life-altering crisis.

Emotional reset: accomplished.

“I think you should talk to someone,” Meredith said.

“I'm talking to you,” he murmured, and his lips leaked into an easy smile. “I like talking to you. More talking, I say.”

“No,” Meredith said with a chuckle. “I mean a professional. This isn't the kind of thing you can fix by yourself, and I have... no idea. Doesn't the hospital have financial people to help with all of this?”

He sighed, and some of the mirth dripped from his face. His eyes focused, and he thought for a moment while she drew more circles, the nail of her index finger twisting through the light dusting of hair on his chest.

“All they do is tell you how to fix money problems,” he said eventually. “Leaking money is a symptom, not the disease. Budget cuts, tax law loopholes, and funding reallocations will only prolong the inevitable if we don't fix the underlying cause. The tension is so thick at work you couldn't cut it with a steak knife. Everybody is scared, Meredith. Everybody. For months, I thought it was just me, but...” He shook his head. Not just him. Not even close. “An accountant can't fix that.”

“So, we have to figure out how to help everybody not be scared,” she said.

“I can't just send the entire staff and every patient to Dr. Wyatt,” he said. “Paxil can't fix this.”

She shook her head, putting an index finger against his lips. He quieted, and he kissed her, tasted her. His tongue pressed against her skin. “I wasn't suggesting that,” she said, the words soft.
“Well, what were you suggesting?” he asked as he dropped her hand.

She sighed. “I don't know,” she said, and then she gave him an apologetic frown. “Sorry. Unhelpful. Did you try Google?”

He snorted.

“Sorry,” she said, unable to stop a loose chuckle from escaping. “Sorry, now, I'm making light.” And she shouldn't. But she laughed again, anyway. “Sorry!” She shouldn't be making light when the world was crashing down around their ears, but between massacres, secret wives, secret sisters, exploding ferryboats, appendixes bursting, liver transplants, Izzie's cancer, George's death, and now this, the whole world felt so suddenly ridiculous she couldn't breathe, and she could laugh about it, because she was in his arms, and she was safe, and she had nothing left to stifle her morbid sense of humor. “Oh, god,” she added, panting between torrents of giggles. “What's next? A plane crash?”

“With our luck, Mount Rainer will blow, and we'll be stuck in a modern Pompeii,” he said, tone wry.

Which only made her laugh harder. “God, I'm so sorry,” she said, gasping. “I really shouldn't joke, but....”

He gave her a cautious grin, though he didn't laugh with her. “It's okay,” he said. He cupped her cheek. Brushed his fingers through her hair. The warm pad of his thumb traced her cheekbone. He kissed her. “Someone has to.” His eyes were dark blue halos in the dim light. “I love you,” he added in an even softer tone, and she melted.

She rolled onto her back to stare at the ceiling, and he followed her, draping himself against her side. His left shoulder pressed into the bed. The sheet that had barely been hanging onto him slipped and crumbled to the mattress between them, leaving her with long line of naked skin from his shoulder to below his hip in her peripheral vision. He rested his left palm on her belly and pressed his lips against her cheek. She put her hand overtop his and squeezed his fingers.

“There's really no one in the hospital who could help you?” She turned her head to gaze at him. Surely, there had to be someone. Somewhere. She wracked her brain.

“There isn't really a position for 'Mass Trauma Recovery Specialist' that I know of,” he said. He smirked at her. “At least, not in the phone book. And, while I did actually Google,” he added, kissing her, “all I got were trauma centers and a bunch of stuff that's not really related to what I wanted.”

She thought for a long moment. “Maybe, Owen can help? Richard?”

He frowned. “I'd planned to talk with Richard next week, since he'll be inheriting this mess eventually, assuming we don't go under. Why Owen?”

“I don't know,” she said, shrugging. “Combat experience? Surely the army gets training on how to cope?”

He nodded slowly. “True...,” he said, and she could see the wheels behind his eyes turning, churning. Then his eyes widened a fraction.

“What are you thinking?” she said.

“Adam.”
She squinted at him. For a moment, she couldn't recall the name, but then recollection flooded into her head. “The cop with all the GSWs? Been in ICU for months?” Though she hadn't met Adam, she knew Derek liked to sit with him, knew Derek felt some sort of kinship with him. Perhaps even the beginnings of a friendship. Hell, Adam had even made it to the top of their boys' names list.

“Yeah,” Derek said. “Him. He's talking a lot more, now. I think he'll be working up to walking soon.”

“Why do you think he'd be better than Owen to help with this?”

“Remember Detective Wolff?” Derek said.

She nodded. “Sure, but what does he have to do with Adam?”

“Wolff sent me that packet,” Derek said. His gaze left her. He picked at his cuticles while he added, “The one about assault victimization that I threw out without reading. The one that helped you... figure out... what was going on with me.”

Now, she could see where he was going with this. She nodded again, encouraging him. “And, maybe, Adam has access to the same resources, and could point you in the right direction?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said, looking back at her. “Because I don't even know where to start, which is my big problem at the moment. All I need is a place to start. Something to work with. The police must have contacts.” He sighed. “I don't know. Maybe, its a stupid idea.”

She smiled. “It's worth a try.”

The silence stretched again. He pressed his nose against her hair, breathing her in. A relaxed sigh fell from her lips. She didn't ever want to move from this bed. Ever.

“Thank you, Meredith,” he whispered.

“You're welcome,” she replied, only to have her stomach interrupt their exchanged. Her offending digestive system growled and gurgled, and she remembered she hadn't eaten since... she couldn't remember. She turned red and pressed her face into the pillow, snorting with laughter. In the quiet, it almost sounded like an avalanche or something. Or maybe she was just being silly and exaggerating, but—

“So...,” he said, an amused expression sparkling on his face.

“Yes?” she murmured.

“Given that our New Year's Eve plans currently reside in our naughty dog's stomach....” he said, his voice trailing away.

She snorted. “Order a pizza?”

He blinked. Nodded. “We could do that.”

“With cheese?” she said hopefully. “And stuff that's not green on it?”


She smacked his arm playfully. “Oh, gag me,” she said, and he laughed.
“I think I could force myself to have a pizza with cheese this one time,” he said. He gave her a woeful, burdened sigh. “For you.”

“And then,” she continued, “we could watch a super sappy movie that my hormones compel me suddenly to like and cry over?”

He looked less than thrilled with that idea, but he kept smiling. “We could,” he said, conciliating.

She grinned at him. “And then, we could completely ignore the movie, and have lots and lots more sex on the couch.”

His smile brightened. “I'm liking this plan.”

She pulled him into a deep kiss. “Happy New Year, Derek.”

“I hope it's happy,” he murmured.

“It will be,” she assured him. “It has to be. It can't be anything else.”
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Wow! I'm back already! I have no idea how I managed that, but I'm not complaining. This was a true pleasure to write. So many things coming full circle. So much progress. So much NSFW! In so many places! If you need something to set the mood for this part, I admit Talking Body by Tove Lo was stuck in my head for most of this.

Thank you so much for the feedback on the last part! Please, leave me a comment if you get a chance. I'm determined to get this behemoth done regardless, but hearing from readers always helps :) A big thank you to Gladys for helping me with the logistics of a cholecystectomy. And thanks to my Twitter followers for flashback ideas! And as always, a huge thank you to my diligent betas.

3-4 more chapters to go. Hang in there, folks!

Enjoy!

For a long moment, Adam sat with his face tipped toward the sun that streamed through the blinds. A small smile carved his pale-as-chalk face. Ambulatory enough to dress himself at last, he wore a pair of black sweat pants and a white t-shirt, replacing the flimsy hospital gown he'd been sporting for as long as Derek had known him, and he'd pulled his long black hair back into a stringy, unkempt ponytail.

Derek had pushed Adam's wheelchair to the atrium so he could get out of his room for a little while. He'd been cooped up in the hospital for months, at this point. He could walk as a newborn fawn could walk. Not well, not fast, and not far. More of a stumble than a walk. Though, at least he was walking, now, despite partial paralysis in his left leg. The bullet that had torn up his intestines and bladder had ended up by his spine after it finished bouncing around and wreaking havoc. Derek found it hard to believe a little ball of cauterizing metal could be so devastating, but the pencil-eraser-sized pockmark under Derek's left nipple served as proof, and Adam had three of those pockmarks scattered across his torso, and one marring his thigh.

All things considered, the mere fact that Adam was sitting here, coherent, breathing on his own, alive, and with the prospect for an independent life and the ability to work, albeit desk-bound, after he healed enough to go home, well, that was a miracle. A real, honest-to-god miracle. And Derek didn't begrudge Adam his sunshine, despite wanting answers.

Adam sighed and looked back at Derek. He shifted in the wheelchair, which squeaked as he moved. They sat by a huge nine foot bay window that had a view out onto the cityscape and all its rolling gray and green, next to a sofa and some chairs and a table covered with magazines. "I think if you have a lot of scared people," Adam said, "you need to look at the reasons why they're scared, and fix them."

"I don't know how to do that, though," Derek said. He ran his hands through his hair. "I mean I know why I was scared, but—"

"Offering some sort of self-defense courses for free to your staff and patients who want them might
be a good place to start," Adam said.

Derek frowned. "I... don't know how that would have helped me."

"It might not have," Adam said with a shrug and a wince. "But you're trying to solve a problem with a broad spectrum of causes. There is no one solution. A lot of times, what makes people scared of a particular situation is not knowing what to do when they encounter it. So, the question becomes, would it help anyone? My guess is, yes."

"I... don't know."

Adam looked at him, eyebrows raised. "Can't hurt to try, can it?"

For a long moment, Derek didn't speak.

Adam knew Derek had been working in the hospital while Gary Clark had gotten loose and gone on his rampage. But Derek had never mentioned he'd been a victim. Something had kept stopping him whenever he'd bumped into a conversational path that might lead to a confession. Other than with Meredith and with Dr. Wyatt, he didn't talk about it. Not with anyone. Even Mark danced on eggshells when it came to discussing specific details.

Derek couldn't remember most of the aftermath. He had scraps of memory here and there. Images. Sounds. Touch. Scents. Fear. Pain. Not much solid beyond about thirty minutes in the OR where he'd grabbed onto enough sentience to talk with Meredith about dirty elevator sex. There was at least an hour after he'd been shot that was a blank, and most of the first day-and-a-half after his surgery was a blurry mess.

But he remembered the catwalk. And he remembered Gary Clark standing there with a gun. And he remembered every word that Mr. Clark had said. He remembered April running up behind him. He remembered the crack of the gun, and the way his eardrums popped when it fired. He remembered falling to the ground, deafened. He remembered April abandoning him to die, and the helpless confusion he'd felt when Mr. Clark had left him, too.

All of that, he remembered.

"It's just... I was one of the ones who was shot," Derek said, staring at the bloody memory painted in his mind's eye. "And I don't... know how that would have helped me." His eyes burned. He wiped his face. His hands trembled. "What exactly is the defense when somebody has a gun shoved in your face?"

The look in Adam's eyes shifted from curious into the horrified recognition of a fellow victim. "Derek..."

"I'm... sorry," Derek said, swallowing. "It's taken me a while just to be able to say that much. I've never felt so powerless in my life."

Adam nodded. "Tell me. If you can."

Derek recounted his experience in halting syllables and frequent full stops to get himself together. He could think about it, now, and not sink into abject panic. He could tell people he'd been shot without triggering vivid flashbacks and nightmares and hypnagogic hallucinations. He'd stepped through the events before and during and what little after he remembered with Dr. Wyatt more times than he could count in order to be able to do that much. But that didn't mean it was easy for him to recount or recall in detail. Thinking about it scared him. Seeing it in his head scared him. Everything about it still scared him. He didn't think there would ever be a point in his life where it
didn't.

He used to feel dumb about that. But Dr. Wyatt had assured him over and over again that the goal wasn't not to be scared. That he wasn't some sort of dunce for not being able to box the violence up somewhere numb and objective in his head. That the goal was to deal with the fear that was present in a healthy, non-destructive manner.

"So, he pointed a gun at you," Adam said. "You tried to diffuse the situation. You tried to humanize yourself in the shooter's eyes. You didn't make any threatening gestures. You were submissive."

"Yes. I. I think," Derek said, stuttering a bit. "I still don't remember... what I. What I said. Exactly."

His Hail Mary bid to Mr. Clark was the only thing he still couldn't remember about those few minutes, no matter how much he regressed through it all with Dr. Wyatt. He'd babbled, terrified, some stuttering, embarrassing, reflexive word dump to save his own life. He could remember his intent with the words. But the words themselves? They were just... gone.

"Derek, do you know what I usually teach students about self-defense versus firearms?" Adam said, snapping Derek's attention back to the present.

"No."

"That resisting is usually what gets you killed, and that you should try to talk the situation down wherever feasible. The simple fact of the matter is you, as an unarmed individual, versus somebody with a gun who knows how to use it, are mismatched. The only time I recommend outright resistance is if the shooter is trying to take you to another location, i.e. kidnapping you, or when you're certain that you'll die if you don't, and it sounds like until this other doctor came onto the scene, you had no reason to believe him shooting you was inevitable. A scary-as-fuck prospect, yes, but not inevitable. You did everything right," Adam said.

Derek blinked, stunned. "There really... wasn't anything? Nothing I could have done?"

"Don't you get it, Derek?" Adam said, leaning forward in his wheelchair. He winced, and then his expression flattened out again. "There were things you could do. And you did all of them like a pro. You weren't powerless. You were smart. And there's no magic jujitsu move to disarm maniacs I could teach you that would have fixed it."

Derek thought about that for a long moment. A lump formed in his throat. He'd always thought... Maybe. Maybe, if he hadn't been such a fucking coward, he wouldn't have gotten hurt. And he wouldn't be sick. And he wouldn't be burning himself out trying to get better before Meredith had the baby. Maybe. No matter how many times he'd tried to reframe that moment – he wouldn't think Mark in the same situation was a coward, or Meredith, or anyone – Derek's perception of that one wouldn't budge an inch. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

"They why suggest self-defense courses if there's no defense?" Derek said, though his voice sounded far away, and he felt a little dizzy. He leaned forward, and he pressed his face against his palms, trying to put himself back together. He breathed, and he counted. Three for every exhale. Three for every inhale. One, two, three. Breathe in. One, two, three. Breathe out.

"Because most people do think there's a magic jujitsu move," Adam said next to him, yet miles away. "The only way to fix that is through education. And not all defense is with your fists. A lot of it is with your mind," he said. Adam's palm pressed against Derek's shoulder. And then Adam added in a quieter tone, "Derek, are you okay?"
"I don’t like to talk about it," Derek said, his voice a croak against his trembling hands. He thought he might throw up.

"Understandable," Adam said.

"So... you teach self-defense?" Derek said, trying to distract himself.

"What?"

Derek raised his head. He felt... a little less shaky. "You mentioned teaching students."

"Oh, yeah," Adam said. "Daphne roped me into helping out on campus. I teach RAD classes."

Derek's eyebrows crept toward his hairline. "Daphne? RAD?"

"My partner's girlfriend," Adam said. "She teaches at Wash U. And RAD stands for rape aggression defense."

"Oh," Derek said. He looked out the window, into the sunshine. A rare moment, to have sun in January. He thought about the view on the catwalk, out into verdant green. He thought Daphne was a pretty name. He tried to picture what she might look like, but came up a blank slate.

"Doing okay?"

"Yeah," Derek said, the word rough against his throat. "Yeah, I'm good, now." He sighed. "Any other suggestions?"

"Well, I definitely recommend hiring a security consultant," Adam said.

"Our security department has doubled in size," Derek replied. "It's the only department that's seen gains since the shooting."

Adam snorted. The dragon tattoo coiling around his arm seemed to slither as he shifted in his chair again. "Derek, you're a smart guy."

"Your point?" Derek said.

"Surely, you know that throwing more bodies at a problem doesn't necessarily fix it."

Derek nodded. "True," he said reluctantly.

"A consultant can point out areas where you're weak," Adam added.

Derek looked at him. "Do you know any good ones?"

"I know lots," Adam said. "I'll get my partner to e-mail you some phone numbers."

"Thanks," Derek said.

Adam nodded. The silence stretched for a moment as Derek leaned back in his seat, and Adam relaxed, closing his eyes for a bit to bask in the sunshine. He tired easily and didn't spend more than a few hours awake at a time. Derek was surprised he'd lasted this long.

Derek glanced at his watch. He still had another thirty minutes before he had to be anywhere, and he was tired. He liked spending time with Adam. He did not like spending time with the staff in accounting. He felt his eyelids dip.
A rough squeak of leather and a groan snapped him awake. Adam’s biceps were shaking with strain as he attempted to rise from his wheelchair. Derek jumped up to steady him.

Derek could have said any number of things. Be careful. Don’t fall. But he’d been in this horrible place. Weaker than a newborn, but yearning to be mobile again, of course trying be careful, of course not trying to fall, and fantasizing about hitting the fucking people who told him to do either of those two things. Adam stood silently, breathing hard, swaying. He shuffle-stepped to the side. His slippers scraped the tile floor because he didn’t pick up his feet. Derek held Adam’s arm, and uttered not a single word to talk him out of it.

"Put your hands on the wheelchair handles," Derek said instead. "You can use it as a walker."

Adam looked at him and adjusted, though he looked like a geriatric hip patient doing it. His left foot dragged a little in particular, like his toes were stuck in mud, which was to be expected with the partial paralysis. His intravenous line got tangled as he shifted, and Derek helped him straighten it out. Derek followed as Adam shuffle-stepped out of the siting area, close enough to offer the support that might be needed, far enough away to offer the independence that was desired.

Derek frowned, thinking back. Cristina had done this to him. Followed him at about the same distance Derek was following Adam. Then she’d chased him down with a wheelchair and cowed him into it. Bullied him. He’d felt so awful after that. Powerless. Embarrassed. Hurting. Alone. Like a victim. And that was just one of many horrible memories from the first few drug-hazed days. He vowed not to ever do that to this man. Ever.

"Did you feel helpless?" Derek said, taking quarter steps to keep himself tamped to Adam’s glacial pace.

Adam stopped, panting, and looked at him. "When?"

"When you were shot."

"I don’t remember when I was shot," Adam said. He inched forward.

Derek blinked. "Nothing at all?"

Adam’s gaze shifted to some point beyond the horizon as he thought. "No," he said. "Nothing. My cover got blown. I got into a fight with the perp. I had him pinned on the ground. I heard a crack, crack, crack, crack. Then I woke up here."

"Oh," Derek said.

"Why?" Adam said, pushing the wheelchair along. His breaths were tight, and pearls of sweat dotted his forehead. He looked pasty and unwell, but he kept going. Kept pushing.

Derek swallowed. "I was terrified," he admitted. "And I did feel helpless."

Adam snorted. "Only an idiot isn't terrified of a loaded gun when it's pointed at him with intent."

Derek frowned. "But you said..." He took a breath. "You said you weren't afraid of guns. When I asked you earlier."

"I'm not," Adam said with a shrug. "I'm not afraid of knives, either. Or baseball bats. Or any number of things. But you can damned well bet I'm afraid if I'm in a fight where one is being used on me, particularly if I've got nothing."
"Oh," Derek replied.

They kept walking. They made it out of the atrium and into the long white hallway that led back to Adam's room. Equipment dotted the left side of the hall. Adam stuck to the right, where the railing remained unobstructed. Derek doubted Adam would make it more than halfway to the first nurses' station, if that. Derek could remember the first time he'd walked to the atrium from his room, unassisted by anything other than his own willpower – he'd only managed it the next to last day of his hospital stay, and he hadn't been in a coma for weeks. Meredith had been his babble-y little cheerleader. When he'd collapsed onto the sofa by the bay window, he'd been dizzy and sick and upset. His headspace had been a mess. Meredith had tried to cheer him up, but... He blinked away the bad memory.

Two chatty surgical interns bustled past, arguing about the latest episode of some show. They waved their arms about, intent on their discussion about whether Castiel was going to be the villain in the finale. Whoever that was. Whatever show. They didn't look up to say hello, didn't seem to notice they'd even passed their boss.

"You know when I did feel helpless?" Adam said. He'd made it another five feet.

Derek's eyebrows rose. "When?"

"When I woke up here," Adam said. His face crinkled as he frowned. "With that... thing on my face."

"The ventilator," Derek said. "Yeah, that's... claustrophobic. I didn't like it, either."

Adam stopped to look at him. "You, too?"

"The bullet hit me... here," Derek said, resting a palm against his left side. He could feel the pockmark through his shirt like a brand. "I needed open heart surgery. My... wife. She found me. She saved my life. I don't remember much. Impressions, really."

"Me, either," Adam said.

"Shock... takes a lot of it away," Derek said, and he was glad for that. He didn't want to remember it, anyway. He had a hard enough time with what he could recall.

Adam nodded. He made it another ten feet. And then he stopped, panting. Sweat plastered his ponytail to his neck, and his skin glistened. His t-shirt was drenched in a triangle shape descending from the collar, and around the armpits.

"Okay, I'm done," he said.

He looked back at the distance he'd come. Not even fifty feet. Similar to Derek's first few times out of his room. But that was fifty feet more than Adam had managed before. His lip twitched and he grinned, his pale face erupting in cheerful blush, and Derek couldn't help but smile with him. Adam was so similar and so different, all at the same time, and it helped. Watching him helped. Made Derek feel more empowered by proxy. Made Derek feel good about things he'd historically felt loathsome about.

"Not bad for a first try," Derek said, finding he meant it.

Old memories of his hospital stay reorganized in his head as he spoke. He'd thought himself pathetic back then, but he didn't feel pathetic looking back at himself anymore. He'd been healing. Just like any other human in a shitty situation. And he'd done so at a pace comparable to a former
Army Ranger, now police officer, of all people.

He helped Adam settle back into his wheelchair.

"Thanks," Adam said. He looked into the distance. "It's nice not being..." Alone. Adam didn't finish his sentence, but Derek could fill it in. Derek had been very lucky to have Meredith, and Mark, and his family. Adam cleared his throat. "Thanks, man."

"Sure," Derek said. He leaned forward and pushed him and Adam into motion. The wheelchair's wheels squeaked as they rubbed on the floor. Derek bit his lip as hope blossomed in his chest. "So, I really did everything right with...?"


Derek stood in front of the OR board, shifting from foot to foot. He clenched his fingers, crumpling his abused scrub cap into a sad, sweaty ball. He wasn't sure what had possessed him.

When he'd come to work that morning, when he'd kissed Meredith before her shift, he hadn't had any machinations, no stealth plans to dive headlong back into his career as a surgeon. One who actually cut. But then he'd done his rounds, and he'd walked by the board, and the sprawl of names had caught his eye in more than a cursory fashion. He'd stopped, and he'd stared for a moment, and then he'd sighed. A wistful sigh. A twinge of longing had snapped in his chest and was gone, moments later, but it'd been there. That desire. That need. He'd shrugged it off as the product of eating a bad omelet or something. He never felt like that about surgery anymore.

But then he'd passed by the board a second time later that morning, and it'd happened again. And he'd stopped. And he'd stared at all the names. He'd bitten his lip and shifted his weight from foot to foot, much like he was doing, now. But he'd felt it again. That twinge. A niggling desire.

He'd shrugged the feeling off again, but between then and now, his scrub cap had wandered into his suit pocket. He couldn't even remember going back to his office to get it, but he'd passed by the board a third time, this time, and he'd stopped. And he'd stared. And there it was – the cap – clutched in his hands, wrinkled and damp with the sweat from his palms.

People pushed back and forth in the hallway behind him, shuffling, talking, but the world dimmed to a focused pinpoint. The board. He skimmed the names of all the surgeons in operating rooms. Skimmed the names of all the procedures. He bit his lip, ambivalence making him hurt. Something inside his chest had a sudden, shocking void carved out of it, almost like he'd been shot, but this void was existential, not physical. And he really wanted to—

"Are you kidding?" Mr. Clark said. "You can't do that."

Derek shook his head.

"You'll kill someone," Mr. Clark said.

The lights overhead sharpened into glaring spears, and his throat closed, and he couldn't breathe. No. No, he couldn't. He couldn't do it. Stupid. What a stupid idea. He snapped back on his heels, yanking himself away from the board like he'd been burned, only to plow right into a solid, unyielding wall of Mark. Derek's scrub cap fell from his hands on impact.

Mark caught Derek's shoulders in a bid to keep him from falling, but released him as soon Derek had balanced himself. Mark hopped back a few inches, holding up his hands in plain view, as though he hoped to make himself look as nonthreatening as possible. The quiet scuffle took all of
four seconds.

"Sorry, man," Mark said, and Derek blinked. Swallowed. Bent to pick up his scrub cap, which had landed on the scuffed, white-tile floor.

"It's fine," Derek managed, though his voice didn't sound... quite right. A little croaky, maybe. Derek swallowed again. He cleared his throat. His heart pounded for three or four beats, and then he couldn't hear it anymore. Couldn't feel it. He clasped his fingers around his scrub cap. They didn't shake.

"You all right?" Mark said as Derek straightened up, scrub cap in tow. Mark looked at the board behind Derek, eyes narrowing, and then he glanced at the tiny bundle clutched in Derek's fist. "You looking for an empty OR?" Mark said.

"No," Derek said.

Mark frowned. "No, you're not all right, or, no, you're not looking for an empty OR?"

"I'm fine," Derek said. He took a deep, slow breath, and that was the end of it. The end of his entire threat response. Five seconds of heart palpitations, and a bit of a wheezy sound to his words for the duration. He hadn't flinched. Or yelled. Or started to shake. Or in any way devolved into a gibbering mess. "Totally fine," he added, surprised. His lip twitched. And then he smiled hesitantly. He couldn't help it. "I meant I'm not looking for an empty OR."

Mark's eyes narrowed. He wore his dark blue scrubs, untied mask flipped down over his chest from his neck a bit like a bib. From the dents on Mark's face and the flush to his cheeks, the mask had been in place until recently. Derek flicked his gaze back to the board and saw "SLOAN, M" listed next to a double mastectomy procedure that had started at 7:00 am. It was almost 11:30 am, now.

When Derek didn't elaborate, Mark frowned. "What, were you looking for a not-empty OR, then?" And then his face brightened. "Holy shit, you were."

"It..." Derek deflated. "It was a dumb idea. I don't think I'm rea—"

"Oh, hell, yes, you are," Mark said, cutting him off. He grabbed Derek's shoulders in an iron, vise-like hold, and he strong-armed Derek back to the OR board. A wall of names looked back at Derek. "Yes, you are," Mark continued. "Pick one, and go. I wish I'd known you were thinking about this. I would have dragged you into mine. Finished with flying colors, by the way. And the reconstruction will look really hot on her. Some of my best work."

"I wasn't thinking about this," Derek insisted. "I wasn't. But..."

Mark's grin spread wider. "Got the bug?"

"I..." Derek swallowed. "Yeah. A little." Mark opened his mouth, and Derek said, "Emphasis on little," to stave Mark off at the pass, but Derek's attempt at reining Mark in didn't seem to work.

"Finally," Mark said, ignoring Derek's size quantifier. "If you don't pick something right now, I've got a facial reconstruction on Thursday that you'll be helping me with."

"Mark—"

"No," Mark said. "I'm not letting you convince yourself you're not ready. It's what you do, and if you've got even the tiniest damned spark—"
Derek sighed. "But, Mark—"

"No," Mark repeated. "It's a roller coaster, man. Just get on the ride, and go."

"It's people, Mark," Derek said, the words soft. "It's lives."

Mark rolled his eyes. "You're not going to hurt anyone just by scrubbing in. Nobody's asking you to excise a stage four malignant glioblastoma and all its metastatic tumor babies. Just go, man."

Derek sighed and read the board. Nothing called to him. Dr. Weller was in 7 with a t4 meningioma. Spinal tumors were a lot more complicated and a lot more weighty than Derek was willing to deal with his first time out of the gate since... seven months. Jesus, had it been that long? Derek clenched his teeth, counting. He hadn't cut in over seven months. Closer to eight months. Dr. Nelson was in 2 with a pituitary adenoma, and that... that was... That was not something Derek wanted to touch either. A particular curse of neurosurgery was that a screw up, even a tiny one, could result in catastrophic mental and physical deficits for the patient, and Derek didn't think he could stomach worrying about that on top of everything else.

The surgeries in 1 and 4 were both six plus hour cardio procedures that required stamina Derek wasn't convinced he had anymore. The surgery in 3 was a cesarean, and there was no way in hell Derek was going to risk a baby. In 5, Richard was doing a colectomy. All the other ORs were empty, courtesy of Seattle Grace's failing popularity.

The colectomy was the only thing Derek could even see himself trying. The problem was that that procedure typically took four hours or less, and Richard had started at 8:00 am, which meant by the time Derek scrubbed in, the procedure would be done, unless there were serious complications, and Derek didn't want to be involved in a surgery with serious complications. Not yet.

Derek pulled his hands through his hair. "Mark, there's really nothing here that would be a good starter surgery for me."

A nurse approached the board, biting her lip. She was a tiny twenty-something woman, probably only recently graduated from nursing school. She glanced at Mark and Derek, a shy, wavering smile pasted on her mocha-colored face. "Excuse me, sirs," she said in a soft, smoky tone that belied her slight frame.

Mark's expression shifted. His eyes gleamed like a wolf, and his smile oozed into something predatory. Something flirtly. Something lecherous. "Why, hello there," he said. "Have we met?"

The nurse blinked. "I just started last week."

"Christine," the nurse said, putting her hand in his, and he clasped it. "Christine Chapel." Derek's eyes must have widened slightly as they shook hands, because the woman just rolled her eyes and said, "Yes, exactly like Star Trek. No, my parents weren't fans, just clueless. And, no, I'm not a fan, either."

"Christine," said Mark, ignoring her rant. "That's a pretty name."

Derek elbowed Mark again. "So, Mark, have you seen Lexie today?" Derek said through gritted teeth, forcing that smile to stay stuck on his face. "She was looking for you earlier."
Mark shut up with a cough.

The dry erase marker squeaked in the awkward silence that followed as Christine filled in a new entry for OR 8. When the nurse left, Mark made a fist and scrunched his face like he was frustrated. "Fuck, this whole monogamy thing is hard," he said with a weighted sigh.

Derek's eyes narrowed. "Look, Mark," Derek said. "Lexie is part of my family. I care about her. Please, please don't fuck this up again. If you want to play the field, play the fucking field, but do her the courtesy of cutting her loose, first, and don't expect another 'be kind, rewind' on that front. I'm amazed she did it even once."

Mark nodded. "I know." He closed his eyes. "I know." He sighed. "I really don't know how you do it sometimes."

"What?" Derek said.

"You're so..." Mark squinted at him. "Faithful."

Derek snorted. "That's not a bad word, Mark. You can say it a little less like it's lutefisk in your mouth."

"I want to be. For Little Grey. I really do."

"Then do it," Derek said. "Grow up. It's a choice. Don't blame your dick for the crappy decisions you make."

Mark's lips formed a flat line that quivered. And twitched. And bled into a smile. He laughed. Hard. "Jesus," he said. "We sound like we're on Oprah or something."

Derek frowned. "Are you saying I'm Dr. Phil?"

Mark clapped him on the back. "Nope. You just did it for me." He laughed. "Anyway," he said. He looked back at the OR board. Derek followed his gaze.

The new surgery Christine had filled in on the board could have said, "Derek, this was meant for you," and it wouldn't have been any less accurate. Laparoscopic cholecystectomy. "BAILEY, M." Starting at 11:45 am, which was – Derek glanced at his watch – just about now. A laparoscopic cholecystectomy was such a simple procedure that there'd barely be anything for an assistant to do except stand there and participate in the act of being scrubbed in. Precisely the kind of shallow pool Derek felt like he could dip his toe into without too much risk of drowning.

"Gee," Mark said, a wry grin on his face. "It's almost like the universe wants you to listen to me."

"You can't," Mr. Clark said. "You can't do it."

Derek closed his eyes. "Mark..."

"No," Mark said, grabbing Derek's wrist. He pulled Derek in the direction of OR 8. Admittedly, Derek let himself be pulled. "You need a kick in the ass. I'm kicking it. Just like you kick mine."

Derek stared at the door. He started to shake. "Mark," he said, the word breathy.

Mark opened the door and shoved Derek into the dark scrub room. The operating room beyond the window bustled with activity, though they didn't appear to have started yet. Dr. Bailey chatted with a nurse as they lowered the operating table to accommodate her slight height. Derek had never felt
such a strange dichotomy of longing and reluctance before in his life, and he ached. He *ached* with it. He rubbed his shirt along his scar line, barely noticing as his knuckles hit button after button.

A hand pressed against his throat, and Derek flinched in surprise. "Just taking your tie," Mark said, the words toned low and soothing. "Okay?"

Derek managed to nod. He watched numbly as the blue tie Meredith liked so much, the one that, she claimed, made the color of his eyes pop, slipped into Mark's grasp. Mark coiled the tie around his palm like he was equipping himself with brass knuckles or something.

"Now, put on your cap, push up your sleeves, and start scrubbing," Mark said. He folded his arms over his chest. "I'm not leaving until I see some soap bubbles."

Derek didn't move. He couldn't move. A watery, weak feeling crept into his legs, and for a brief moment, he considered sitting down, if only to prevent falling. One of the faucets dripped, and the plop, plop, plop of loose water droplets hitting the metal sink basin marked off a glacial eternity as it passed. He couldn't do this.

Mark sighed. "Look, if you freak out, you freak out. Leave, if you do. But don't not go in just because it might not work out the way you want it to. I mean it, man. If you've got the bug, *use it*."

Derek nodded uselessly.

"You're not ready for this," Mr. Clark said. "You're not."

Derek clenched his fists, and he took a shallow, shaky breath. He squeezed his eyes shut and brought his hands to his face. "Stop it," he snapped.

Mark backed off, holding his hands up as he gave Derek a wide, four foot bubble of personal space. "Deep breaths. You can do this."

"You can't do this," Mr. Clark said.

The clash jarred his ears like cymbals. Mark wasn't a liar, Derek thought. Not about stuff like this. Mark had all the guile of a watermelon. The only reasonable scenarios Derek could think of where Mark would be lying – very transparently, Derek might add – were, a, the surgery was a woman who was asking for a second date, which it wasn't, or b... That thought's tires screeched and veered into a mental pylon before Addison was much more than a blurry, redhead wisp in Derek's mind. He couldn't go there. Wouldn't go there.

Derek shook his head. Mark wasn't a liar. He wasn't. He *wasn't*. Which meant Mr. Clark was wrong. It meant...

*Anytime you hear his voice in your head, I want you to pause, and I want you to think,* he heard Dr. Wyatt say, an echo.

Pause. Think.

Derek looked at the OR and shifted indecisively from foot to foot. He could hear his heart beating now. He could hear it like wild thunder in his ears, slamming up against his eardrums. The patient was anesthetized. Bailey was already going in. This was such a short procedure, if he didn't move, now, he'd lose his chance. He'd lose it. And... He swallowed. He wanted it.

Fuck.
We were in the OR, he'd told Meredith only a month ago, and I wasn't scared, and it was going well, and it was just... nice.

He ground his teeth and marched himself to the doorway. He grabbed a disposable mask from the dispenser and covered his face. He stepped forward.

And he shoved Mr. Clark away.

Dr. Bailey looked up from the table to him, eyebrows raised askance as he came through the door, though she didn't relax her grip on the grasper handle she'd picked up. "Chief?" she said. "Is there a problem?"

He blinked against the glare of the OR lights.

The overhead lights bore down on him like a train. He lay on his back on the OR table, cold and woozy and sick, and he floated in a stupor. Her hand clutched his. He could feel it. Could feel her fingers squeezing his knuckles until the bones all jammed together. His hand shook in her grasp.

He knew she was there in a vague sense. She said things he didn't understand, and her sniffles and croaks were a kind of background snow in his ears. He couldn't breathe. He tried so hard, but his lungs wouldn't inflate, his chest felt like an elephant had crushed it, and he hurt. So, he floated.

"Hang on. Please, hang on," he heard her say. "They're setting up as fast as they can."

He shivered, watching the lights.

"How's he doing?" a man said.

"Bad," she responded, the words panicky. "And he's not talking, anymore." She pressed her palm against his face. Pulled her fingers through his sweaty hair. "Derek, can you hear me? Derek, please."

But he couldn't. Move, think, talk, breathe, wish. He couldn't any of it.

"Please, hold on for me," she said. "Please. Please, Derek."

He hurt.

"Please."

He shivered.

"Please."

He watched the lights.

"Please, don't leave me," she whispered.

And he floated.

He blinked, snapping himself out of the cloudy, amorphous memory, which was detached from anything that preceded or followed it. It was just there. In his head. A terrifying, disconnected piece of flotsam that always hijacked him the first few moments he came into an OR. Any OR. But only for moments.

That was a long time ago, he told himself. He felt fine, now. Things were okay. He was okay. He didn't hurt anymore. He wasn't trapped, dying in slow motion. He could move. He could talk. He
could breathe. He could do anything he put his mind to, including but not limited to replacing that scary thought with an imaginary pickle run for Meredith. With the image of their first sonogram. With Samantha playing fetch with him at the dog park. With anything.

He inhaled, exhaled, grabbed the pickles off his mental shelf, and pushed the memory of helplessness away.

But that didn't stop his heart from pounding.

"..." The first syllable he managed died in the air, only the barest thread of sound separating it from total silence. He closed his eyes. Took a breath. Squared his shoulders. "May I scrub in?" he said, the words a lot less authoritative than he would have liked, but...

Dr. Bailey's eyes creased.

"This is a cholecystectomy," she said slowly, and though a mask obscured her face, he could imagine her frown as it deepened.

Thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump. His heart pounded. He licked his dry lips.

"So?" he managed.

"So, does this look like it involves a brain to you?" Dr. Bailey said.

He glanced at the monitor, which showed what the laparoscope inside the patient's distended abdomen was seeing. A lot of fleshy pink. Connective tissues. Fatty deposits. The unmistakable reddish brown of a liver. Not things he often saw during surgery, but he'd been a resident way back when. Hell, he'd even done a cholecystectomy, though his had been open, not laparoscopic. The memory hung on the fringes of his recollection.

"Well, with all the squiggles and stuff, it could be a brain," he said, gesturing dismissively at the screen as he tried and almost grasped some real bravado. Almost.

Dr. Bailey snorted. "Remind me never to let you near my brain."

"Hey, I saved the father of your child," he countered.

She rolled her eyes. "A fluke, clearly."

"Seriously, though. May I?"

She blinked. "What the hell for?"

"I just thought..." Derek swallowed. Dr. Bailey was staring at him. All the scrub nurses were staring at him. His nerve leaked out like loose spinal fluid, and he lost all fluency with the English language. "I thought..." he stammered.

Dr. Bailey met him with her unblinking brown eyes, but her expression softened as she watched him struggle. "I'm the boss in here, not you," she said, gesturing at him with a gloved hand. "You get that, right?" she said, but her tone wasn't mean. More of a gentle reminder. If Derek had had any ego left to check at the door, the warning may have been useful, but Dr. Derek Shepherd, rockstar neurosurgeon, was trapped in stasis somewhere, and hell if Dr. Derek Shepherd, recent shooting victim, knew where he'd gone.

He clutched his surgical mask with a white-knuckled grip. "I just want to scrub in," he managed.
"Please."

The patient's heart monitor bleeped in the ensuing void. Derek closed his eyes to shut himself away from the staring. He was shaky enough without a dozen people watching him like a cluster of hawks eyeballing a mouse. He waited for the verdict.

"Well, get in here, you fool," Dr. Bailey said with a long suffering sigh.

Derek blinked. The heavy weight that had perched itself on his shoulders melted away. "I'll be right there," he said, and he darted back into the scrub room before Dr. Bailey could respond, tossing the disposable mask into the biohazard bin as he went.

Mark was waiting for him in the shadowed scrub room. He stood like a bouncer at the door, his beefy arms crossed over his chest, Derek's tie still tangled up in his fist. When Derek didn't speak, instead moving to the sink while he pulled off his watch, Mark animated.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Mark said with a muted clap as he struck his palms together, and then he pumped his fist with a guttural, triumphant grunt.

Derek tied his ferryboat scrub cap over his hair as he glanced down at himself. He wore his button down shirt and dark slacks and dress shoes, testament to just how spontaneous this crazy idea had been. Not his preferred clothes for surgery from a comfort perspective, but with a sterilized smock overtop, for a short procedure like this, they'd be all right. He'd played dress up in the OR any number of times for emergencies where he didn't have time to change.

Derek turned on the faucet and began to scrub methodically, and just as Mark had promised, as soon as suds started forming on Derek's skin, Mark left. The door to the hallway clicked shut. Mark raised his hand to the window to give Derek a thumbs up through the wire mesh glass. And then Mark was gone, leaving Derek alone in the silence.

By the time Derek made it back into the OR, and one of the scrub nurses had helped him put on his mask, smock, and gloves, Dr. Bailey had been working for about fifteen minutes. She glanced up at him as he came to rest on the opposite side of the table. His teeth almost chattered with stress. Nervous energy made him shiver along his spine, but he shook it off, rolling his shoulders and neck as he settled in for the remainder of the forty-five minute procedure.

He blinked down at the person on the table, and then at the heart monitor to his right, bleep, bleep, bleeping in a slow plod to fill the quiet. The patient's face and body had been obscured by a blue drape. He could identify that the patient was a woman based on how the draping was done, but all Derek could see was the pale flesh of her abdomen, inflated with carbon dioxide for the procedure, and the edges of her ribs. The three laparoscopic rods pierced her skin just over her bellybutton, in the middle of her torso, and slightly off to the side, a few inches underneath her left breast. He could see her breathe in time with the hiss click hiss click of the ventilator. She was a real, living person. Not a surgical dummy.

Shit, he was really doing this. Derek swallowed nervously, heart slamming in his ears.

"Hold this," Dr. Bailey said, barely audible over Derek's internal thunder, and before he knew it, he was holding the rod attached to the laparoscope, moving it as Dr. Bailey commanded.

For another ten minutes, the surgery proceeded in a textbook fashion, and Derek didn't speak. He guided the camera where Dr. Bailey asked for him to move it, and he watched, and he listened, and he kept breathing, in and out, in and out, right along with the patient, because he thought if he talked, or if he stopped counting to three for every inhalation, he might dissolve in a gibbering
mess. A whole rabble of butterflies had busted out a keg and were having a party in his stomach.

He was really fucking doing this.

"Damn," Dr. Bailey said, the single syllable one of disappointment.

Derek squinted at the monitor, trying to follow her unspoken thought process. Red soup rapidly filled the visual field. "That's a lot of bleeding," he said, words only slightly shivery, despite the fact that his jaw vibrated, and his limbs felt like water. He looked at Dr. Bailey. The liver, basically a giant detoxification system for the blood, was very vascular. The gallbladder, which is what they were trying to remove, was a storage compartment for the liver, and as a result, by its very nature, a cholecystectomy occurred in close quarters with the liver. Excessive bleeding was a common complication. "Too much?"

Dr. Bailey nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, it is." She sighed. "Okay, pull everything out. I need to open her up. Damn it." She glanced at the table. "Sorry, Nina."

Derek felt a twinge of sympathy for the patient as he removed the laparoscope. Outpatient surgery had just become a hospital stay, along with a much longer, much more painful recovery. But there wasn't anything that could be done about it except press onward. This just happened with some patients.

Still, a laparoscopic cholecystectomy took forty-five minutes. An open cholecystectomy took two hours, and he'd need to do a lot more than just hold a camera without speaking. He'd likely be touching things like flesh. Like tissue. Like blood. All components of a real, vulnerable, living person. Not just an inanimate rod with a camera stuck on the end.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to maintain his calm. He could do this. He could do this. He wanted to do this. Two hours was still a short procedure. And this wasn't a serious complication. Just a little bump in the road. Nothing to panic about. Nothing to get upset over. Nothing—

"Dr. Shepherd," Dr. Bailey said, and he snapped his eyes open to see a scalpel held toward him from her outstretched hand. The dull, handle end of the gleaming blade faced him. "Would you like to open?"

His throat closed. "No," he said, the word a croak, and much more vehement than he would have liked. He flinched backward. Just an inch. But he could feel eyeballs on him, pairs of them boring into the back of his neck. Somebody whispered something he couldn't hear. He tried not to imagine them laughing at him. He cleared his throat with an awkward, chuffing stutter of air. "Thank you," he managed to add in a calmer tone.

If he were an intern, he imagined Dr. Bailey might say something along the lines of, "That wasn't a request, Dr. Shepherd," in response, but she didn't do anything of the kind with him. She gave him an understanding, wordless nod, and she lowered the scalpel to the patient's abdomen.

"All right, then," she said, and she drew the knife north to south in a quick, clean stroke that split apart the patient's skin. A thin line of blood welled up where she'd cut. "Lucy," she added absently to one of the scrub nurses, "hand Dr. Shepherd a retractor, please."

Derek took the retractor. For a long moment, all he could do was stare at it in like someone had handed him a golf club at a basketball game. Jesus, he was doing this. He hadn't expected to—

"You sure you're okay being my peon?" Dr. Bailey said at his prolonged stillness, her voice gentle.
The dubiousness in her gaze wasn't lost on him. Not an iota. But he had the distinctest impression she wasn't asking about his ability to take orders instead of give them.

She was giving him an out that would save face, he realized. If he was too scared to do this. If he'd jumped into the deep end and realized he couldn't swim. He could throw an ego fit – a common tantrum among cocky, bleeding-edge surgeons — leave, and his rockstar image would be preserved.

Except he was no rockstar. Not anymore. He hadn't been on the bleeding edge of anything since he'd taken his mind-numbing job as chief. And he really, really wanted to remember how to love this.

He shook himself out of inaction, lowering the retractor, and gently spread apart Dr. Bailey's incision. The retractor shook. Not enough to impair his ability to use it, but the instability was noticeable. To him. To Bailey, certainly. Maybe, to the scrub nurses. The metal gleamed under the bright OR lights. The wet sound separating skin and muscle and adipose tissue filled the tense silence. His jaw shook like he was stuck in the freezing arctic. He clenched his teeth to make it stop, but there was nothing he could do about his hands except soldier through.

He was okay. This was okay. Everything was okay. This was kiddie pool stuff.

"Miranda, I'd happily be your peon any day of the week," he said, speaking through his teeth. He tried to inject some cheer into his tone, something to cover up the ohmygod ohmygod ohmygod knocking around in his skull like a pinball. He wasn't sure he was successful. He was staring at the open abdominal cavity of a real person, a young woman named Nina, who hadn't died the second Derek had gotten involved with anything that halfway resembled cutting, and it was—

"Any day that ends in Q, you mean," Dr. Bailey said.

"We need some suction," Derek said at the bloody mess he found underneath the incision, and a nurse responded by aspirating the area and clearing the field of view. A lake of red became recognizable organs again. Tissues. He looked up at Dr. Bailey. "That hurts. Truly. And here I thought we had a good working relationship." He managed a smile. A real one. Brief though it was.

"I'll believe it when you hold this retractor for two hours without whining," Dr. Bailey said, her tone sardonic.

Derek snorted. "I'll have you know I'm excellent at holding retractors!"

She raised her eyebrow at him. "Then why is my visual field the size of a walnut?"

"Just making it challenging," he muttered, and she chuckled.

He frowned and pulled the incision open wider, making the motion as gentle as possible. Admittedly, it'd been so long since he'd made an incision in that area that he had no recollection of what kind of elasticity or give there was, no idea what was too much and what was too little, and he'd much rather err on the side of too little. He could always add pull, but he couldn't take away an additional injury after he'd created one.

"You're fine," Dr. Bailey said as if she'd read his mind, and he relaxed a little.

And that was when he made the mistake of rolling his neck and shoulders again. His view shifted as he tilted back his head. He noticed the gallery overhead. And it was full. Jam-packed. An army of aspiring surgeons. Stuck in the dark little room overhead like sardines. This was a routine
gallbladder removal. You couldn't get more boring. None of the interns had even bothered to sign up for it. Why was...?

Fuck.

Dr. Bailey followed his gaze. Her eyes narrowed. "Somebody hit the intercom button," she snapped.

One of the scrub nurses in the cluster by the table peeled away from the pack. "It's open," he said in a deep voice after he reached the button and pressed it.

"Now, I know you all don't think my OR is here for your entertainment," Dr. Bailey said, tone sharp like a steak knife. Everybody in the gallery stared back, bug-eyed, motionless, caught red-handed. "Unless you're a first year resident with a notepad taking copious notes on how to perform this surgery, and believe me, if I see you up there, you will be performing it solo while I watch next time, so you'd better take some damned fantastic notes, get the hell out of my gallery."

For a long moment, nobody moved.

"Don't make me find someone to remove you," Dr. Bailey threatened. She glanced at Derek. "How hard can Sloan hit, anyway?"

And then everybody couldn't get out of the gallery fast enough. A massive clot of people traffic-jammed at the door, but after a lot of pushing and shoving and general chaos, the whole baby-blue-colored stampede of them filed out. Everybody except for two interns, who did appear legitimately to be taking notes. Latoya Watson was the name of the woman sitting on the left, but the name of the man on the right escaped him.

Derek blinked. "I..." he managed, and then his throat closed, and he couldn't say another word.

"They're all just happy you're back in the OR, Dr. Shepherd," said a small voice behind him. He turned. Lucy. She smiled at him, not visible behind her mask, but her eyes crinkled around the edges, and he could imagine the rest of her face. "It's big news. Don't mind them being idiots about it." A lot of the scrub nurses nodded.

Derek closed his eyes and took a long breath and blew it out, inflating his mask briefly like a bubble. His hands shook. His teeth chattered. He couldn't make them stop. The lights felt hot against his face. Maybe, he wasn't ready for this. Maybe, he'd been a fucking fool.

The overhead lights bore down on him like a train. He lay on his back on the OR table, cold and woozy and sick, and he floated in a stupor. Her hand clutched his. He—

He blinked the image away before it could take over. Before it could become so vivid that he was in it. Stuck in it.

Dr. Bailey watched him. "You good?" she said, as if he hadn't just averted some kind of mental breakdown.

"Yeah," he managed, a croak. "Yeah, I..." He cleared his throat. He took another deep breath. He blew it out. "Yeah."

"You want to scrub out?" she asked.

"No," he said, almost as vehement as he'd been when she'd asked if he wanted to open. "No, I..." He swallowed. "I want to do this. I need to. I'm okay."
"You're sure?" she said.

He nodded. The pause allowed him to gather his wits. Another deep breath. In and out. Another. Three, and he almost felt like he had at the beginning. Nervous as fuck, but... wanting. He wanted to do this. He needed to get this part of himself back. A void had carved itself out of his soul, and he needed it filled.

He needed to cut.

A breathy laugh escaped from his lips. This was more than just a bug. Way more.

"I really miss this," he admitted.

Dr. Bailey's eyes narrowed. She reached across the poor woman on the table and took the retractor from his trembling hands. The bleep, bleep, bleep of the heart monitor marked the seconds as they passed.

"Dr. Bailey," he protested, "I'm fine. I can—"

"Dr. Shepherd," Dr. Bailey said, cutting him off. "Do you remember all the steps of a cholecystectomy?"

An inkling of where she was going with this tickled him. The butterflies found a DJ for their stomach party and started dancing. His teeth started again. With the fucking chattering. "Well, I'm sure I could... muddle through. If I had to."

Dr. Bailey shrugged. She tipped her head to the side, gesturing wordlessly at the instrument tray. "What are you waiting for, then?" She waved at him with a bloody glove. "Muddle."

She pulled open the incision with the retractor she'd stolen from him, giving him a clear field of view. This was way more participation than he'd planned. He felt a bit like he'd dipped his toe in the water, only to have some cowboy gallop past with a lasso and yank him under the surf.

"Miranda, I—"

"So, how do you think you start?" Dr. Bailey said.

He looked down at his gloves. "My hands are shaking."

She glanced down at his hands, and then back to him. Her brown eyes met his, unblinking. "Not nearly enough to matter," she said.

"But—"

"Do you think I'm going to let you kill my patient?" she snapped.

Silence stretched.

He swallowed. "No."

"Then trust me," Dr. Bailey said. "And tell me how you start."

"Well, I, uh..." He stared at the abdominal cavity. The ohmygod ohmygod ohmygod started shaking around again in his skull. He tried to remember way back when he'd been a resident at Mount Sinai. Back before he'd chosen neurosurgery as his specialty. Back before the Shepherd Method and countless research articles and dozens of groundbreaking surgeries. He grabbed onto a
wisp of a memory. "L-l-lap pads. Under the liver," he said. He clenched his teeth. Stuttering. Him. God, he was a mess.

Dr. Bailey passed off her retractor to Lucy and started grabbing lap pads from the tray. Dr. Bailey packed the area for him.

"Do you think you'd like to use a retrograde or an anterograde approach?" she said.

"W-well we started laparoscopically," he replied.

"And?"

"S-so we use the anterograde method," he said. He looked to Dr. Bailey for confirmation.

She nodded at him. "And what do you think may have caused the excess bleeding?"

"I..." That, he really didn't know. This was getting into the specialized stuff he'd long since let leak out of his brain in favor of memorizing neurosurgical procedures. In fact, there was a good chance he'd never known it. "That's a little above my pay grade," he joked nervously.

"My guess would be I nicked the cystic artery," she said, but there was no reproach in her voice. This wasn't something she'd expected him to know. "How would you like to fix that?"

He licked his lips. His mouth felt like a desert. "I n-need forceps," he said.

The scrub nurse to his right passed him his desired tool. The metal was cold. Chill seeped through his glove. He clutched the forceps so hard his knuckles hurt. Fuck, he was really going to do this, wasn't he? Fuck. Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck. How had this happened? He wasn't ready for this. He couldn’t—

"Just take a deep breath," Dr. Bailey said, her tone soothing. "You're fine. The patient is fine."

"You say that, now," he said, tone breathy. He laughed at his own joke, but the laugh wasn't one of humor. Just nerves. Stress. Holyfuckhollyfuck. All venting in weird ways.

"Derek," Dr. Bailey said. "You're fine. You're doing better than a lot of residents so far. Now, put your nerves away, and get this done."

He nodded. He rolled his neck and shoulders. The two interns who'd remained were staring at him through the glass, bug-eyed and stunned and... sympathetic. He fought the urge to chuckle inappropriately again. Of course, they'd feel some solidarity. Dr. Bailey wasn't picking on him, at least. She was actually being alarmingly nice to him.

"I need to separate... the cystic duct from the artery," he said. He looked at Dr. Bailey. All she did was nod, so he went to work.

He did need forceps, but... not yet. He handed them back.

This area of the body wasn't something he was used to manipulating. Or touching. Or cutting into.

One of the first things one learned in anatomy classes is that internal human plumbing is nothing like the beautiful colored diagrams in medical textbooks. The real thing was a mess of similarly colored blobs, none of which were clearly separate entities on cursory examination, with tons of connective tissues and veins and fatty deposits and all manner of things smashed between them. In short, the inside of the human body was a Jell-O mold of organized chaos, and good luck finding
what you wanted, even if you knew what it, in theory, looked like. The liver, though. Both large
and a distinctive shade, the liver was an easy organ to find. He used that as his reference as he
fumbled around, looking for what he wanted.

He found the triangle of Calot and narrowed his focus. In the triangle was the common bile duct.
The hepatic duct. He identified the cystic duct, and the cystic artery.

Now, he needed the forceps. He picked them up again.

In his search, he found the inadvertent hole Dr. Bailey had made. A tiny laceration in the cystic
artery. Exactly as she'd speculated. Ligating the tear was a quick matter of a few stitches. Blood
stopped leaking in a few heartbeats, and the nurse who'd been periodically aspirating the area
moved away, job done. From there, he moved on from fixing complications to continuing with the
standard procedure.

"You know," Dr. Bailey said, watching as he ran his fingers along the cystic duct, pushing
gallstones back into the gallbladder before he removed it. "Considering you probably haven't done
this in, what, fifteen years? You remember this really damned well."

He laughed. Genuinely. And he felt lighter for it. "Yeah. Fifteen sounds about right."

Jackhammering heart, keg-slamming butterflies, watery limbs, and ohmygod ohmygod ohmygod
aside, a layer of adrenaline rush had snuck in somewhere along the way. The epinephrine flow
wasn't like his panic attacks, where it crashed in like a wrecking ball, devastated his equilibrium,
and receded in a quick gush, leaving him wasted, tired, and collapsing. No, this was a steady thrum
that didn't abate. A natural high.

When he dissected the gallbladder itself and removed it, the hearty round of applause he received
made him flinch in surprise. Everybody clapped. The nurses. The note-taking interns. The
anesthesiologist. Everybody. A giddy feeling rolled over him like a wave.

"Would you like to close, Dr. Shepherd?" Dr. Bailey asked as he disposed of the gallbladder in the
appropriate biohazard bin.

He found himself saying, "Yes."

Dr. Bailey's expression softened. He couldn't see her mouth through the mask, but he knew without
a doubt she was grinning at him. She squeezed him on the shoulder before she left.

"And you doubted," she said.

He snorted. "Yeah." He sighed. "Go ahead. Get it out of your system."

"You damned, stupid fool," she said, though with no bite in her tone, and then she added in a softer
tone, "Welcome back."

"Thank you," he said.

"Glad I could help," she responded.

He finished the surgery in a matter of minutes. Stitching was like riding a bike to him, and he gave
the woman a line of tiny loops along the incision that would minimize scarring. The abdomen was
unfortunately prone to scarring, so she'd have marks, even years later. But, maybe, he'd made it a
little better. After he tied things off, he leaned down to the unconscious woman, and said with a
whisper by her ear, "Nina, I know you don't know me, but... thanks. I'll stop in to say hi later."
And then he stepped back and stared with a stupid grin while the nurses took over and prepped the woman to head back to the recovery room. He didn't move for a long time. Just stood there staring. Smiled at the shiny metal operating table. Even long after the woman had been wheeled away, he didn't budge.

He fucking did it.

He fucking did it.

He glanced around. The gallery had cleared out. The scrub nurses were cleaning up, not paying attention to him. He pumped his fist while nobody was watching, and then he left, almost skipping instead of walking. He peeled off the used smock and tossed his used gear into the biohazard bin on the way out. He scrubbed out in a giddy sort of daze that had him halfway to cavorting around like a tap dancer on Broadway. A smile pasted itself across his face and would not go away.

He made it all of two steps into the hallway outside the scrub room. Meredith, who'd been leaning against the wall beside the door, arms folded over her chest, one leg bent with her foot resting on the wall, sprung into motion. Her converse sneaker squeaked down the wall as she straightened herself from leaning to standing. She raised her arms. In the corner of his eye, he had time to identify movement, and he turned his head, much too ensconced in the floating, happy feeling loitering in his brain to be startled or scared. Her smile lit up like fireworks. She let one second pass while he took in the sight of her with his gaze, two, and then she pulled him into a fierce, lavender-scented embrace.

"I... Derek!"

"Meredith!" he replied with a laugh, unable to do much else intelligent.

"Shut up!" she said, and he laughed again. She bounced. In his arms. He barely fought the urge to jump right along with her. Screw the fact that they were professional adults standing in a public hallway full of people who were his subordinates, because he felt fucking awesome. Her fingers toiled at the nape of his neck, and then she scrunched her hand. Hard. "Seriously. I'm so..." She laughed and flushed a lovely, deep shade of pink. One of his very favorite pinks. "You're so..." She clutched his shirt and kissed him. "I had no freaking idea you were going to do that today!" she eventually decided on saying.

"I didn't, either," he said.

She looked up at him, smile bleeding wider as he watched. "Hi," she said in a soft voice.

He sighed against her. "Hi," he said, the word almost a breathless wisp as he pressed his nose against her hair and inhaled, and for a long, stretching moment, all she did was hug him so hard he could barely move, or speak, or breathe. Her warmth pressed against him, adding jumper cables to the batteries of his ridiculous high. He didn't think he'd ever come down.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this good. Scratch that; he could. Exactly twice. When Meredith had told him she was pregnant. And when she'd said yes.

She touched his face with her palm. He leaned into it, breathing. His eyes watered. The world blurred. His chest filled up with feelings that were too big to contain, too big to put any sort of label on, and a lump the size of a golfball formed in his throat.

"Jesus, Mere," he said. "I can't... I'm..."

The void had filled.
He felt... whole.

"I know," she said. She blinked, eyes wet like his. "I'm so glad for you." Every syllable that fell from her lips was a thick, weighted thing.

There was just so much, and he felt so... He leaned back, looking up at the ceiling, unable to contain the lit bottle rocket in his chest, and he laughed. "Meredith Grey," he proclaimed, "I love you." The words boomed up and down the long hallway. And then he laughed again. God, he felt drunk. Or high. Or drunk and high. Or both. Except this wasn't some artificial chemical telling him to be happy or to not think. This was an unadulterated dopamine shower, like a cloudburst, and he was stuck in the pouring rain without an umbrella.

Jesus Christ.

Meredith snorted with amusement, but she didn't respond in kind. She clutched his shirt and pulled, and he followed willingly. She could take him anywhere. She could drag him off a plank with her, and he'd happily drown in her arms.

"Where are we going?" he said as they passed through the harshly lit hallway.

She didn't answer right away.

Murmuring. He could hear— He glanced up and wiped his leaking eyes to peer out of their private bubble. Into the hallway. They'd started to draw an audience. Some of the nurses at the closest station weren't even being surreptitious about their spying. One of them even had her hands on a keyboard but wasn't typing, while she stared at a monitor that wasn't on, and cradled between her cheek and her shoulder a phone she wasn't speaking into.

After a long march, Meredith managed to find them a somewhat private alcove. A dead end after a corner where the hallway met a window and a locked, facing pair of offices, doors closed and silent. She pulled him to the window. Sunlight streamed in through the windowpanes at a slant. She backed into a radiator and semi-sat on it, and then she looked up at him, rapt. The light turned her hair into spun gold.

"Tell me everything," she said. "All I heard was that you'd scrubbed into a cholecystectomy with Dr. Bailey."

And so he did. Everything. He told her about how nervous he'd been, and how Mark had pushed him, and how Miranda had pushed him, and how he'd gone in with the express goal just to watch and assist, but he'd ended up performing the whole fucking procedure by himself.

"How did that get spread around so fast, anyway?" Derek said. "I swear, from the audience, you'd think I was Bono performing live in OR 8 or something."

"You're the rockstar," she said. "You tell me."

"No, seriously," he said. "I had a crowd too big for the gallery in less than forty minutes."

"One blabbermouth," she said with a snort. "Name rhymes with Spark. May or may not have gushed to me while we were standing right next to Nurse Debbie."

He laughed. "All the guile of a watermelon. Called it."

"Huh?"
He shook his head. "Nothing. Just something I was thinking about Mark earlier."

She shrugged. "Anyway, I figured you wouldn't want me watching, so I mostly just stood out here while I bit my nails to the quick. Oh, and I paced."

He laughed, and he pressed against her. Nuzzled her. "You could have watched. I wouldn't have minded."

"You say that in hindsight, but..." She shrugged, and a frown flitted across her face. "I just didn't want you to feel any extra pressure." She showed him her ragged nails. "And this horrible disaster," she said, "is all your fault."

He took her hand in his and kissed each of her fingers in slow succession. "I'm very sorry," he said, the words solemn, and then he grinned. "You know, I can think of several ways to make this up to you."

She peered back at him, eyebrows arched in condemnation belied by the sparkle in her eyes. "The way I see it, you owe me more than several," she said. "I wrecked eight fingernails."

"Eight, hmm," he said, a purr.

"Yes," she said. "I think you owe me at least eight apologies."

He snickered. "At least eight? What is this, inflation?"

"The longer you don't apologize, the more interest you accrue, clearly," she said.

"Oh, clearly," he said, nodding. "So," he continued, "are we talking all eight apologies in a row, or may I space them out?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Well, I don't know. Can you apologize that many times at once?"

"Is that a challenge, Dr. Grey?"

She stared at him through her long eyelashes, eyes lit green like emeralds by the sunshine. A loose, stray lock of hair, one that had escaped her ponytail, hung in a little wave over her forehead. She smiled a pleased, caught-the-canary smile and purred, "I think it might be, Dr. Shepherd."

"And are you... ah..." He gave her a suggestive leer and waggled his eyebrows. "In the mood for me to apologize right now?" She was hit or miss lately, depending on how she felt, how hard the baby was kicking, whether her ankles hurt, or her back ached, or any number of other physical hardships, and he didn't want to be pushy, no matter how much his body hummed at him to do something, to act on the dizzying rush flooding his system. "Or would you like to wait?"

"Oh, this is definitely a hormones-made-me-do-it day," she said, a wry expression on her face, and he laughed. She waved her hand at him dismissively. "Please, by all means, apologize."

Silence stretched the moments between them. He regarded her. She regarded him. Distantly, he could hear sounds of life. Papers shuffling. Keyboards clacking. Sneakers squeaking. But they were distant, and Meredith... she was close. The scent of her conditioner filled his headspace. She'd pressed her hand against his chest, scrunching up his shirt over his heart, and the warmth of her fingertips bled through the cotton. A healthy blush accented her cheeks and plunged down below the neckline of her scrubs. Her breasts were full and swollen. Through her open lab coat, he could see the swell of their baby, now six months along, and all of it made him stop. Stop, and simmer, and think... wow.
Just wow.

"What are you thinking?" she said, gaze searching.

For a moment, his throat constricted, and he couldn't find his voice. All he could do was clear his throat and blink and be high. High on her and life and everything in general. "I just can't figure out how the hell I got this lucky," he said. He smiled. "Not that I'm complaining or anything."

And then he could hear his pulse again. In his ears. Not a nervous drumbeat like before but a slow, relaxed thrum as he stared. Just watching her clarified his world.

Her mouth opened and closed, like she didn't know how to respond to him, hadn't been expecting such a sweeping declaration. "I'm sorry," she said, running the words together. "It's just when you say crap like that, responding, 'I love you, too,' feels completely lame, and I don't know—"

He pressed his lips against hers, silencing her, swallowing the last mumbling, bewildered syllable in a whorl of affection. "You don't have to say anything, Meredith," he said as he pulled back. What she gave to him didn't fit into words anyway. Goosebumps rose on her arm as he traced her skin with his fingertips. He smiled at her. "I know. Really, I do."

"Oh," she said.

They hovered nose to nose, breath to breath, as the moments passed.

He allowed one glance over his shoulder to the empty hallway to confirm they still had no audience, and then he turned back. He pushed closer, gesturing what he wanted with a nudge from his knee against her thigh. She parted her legs, allowing him to into her space. Her back bumped against the window. The radiator on which she perched creaked as her weight shifted. He cupped her face, brushing the loose lock of hair out of her eyes, behind her ear, and he felt whole as her knees squeezed his hips.

"Does this count as one apology?" he said, voice a low murmur, and he dipped low to kiss her again. She invited him in, and he tasted her. Her mouth hinted of mint.

When they parted, she licked her lips. "That's a little tame for an apology," she said.

"Oh?" he said. He kissed her again. And again. Her lips. Her throat. Her temple. Back to her lips again. "How about that?"

She nipped his lower lip. "I think I need some more convinc—"

He didn't let her finish. He plunged. She made a soft sort of squeak noise as he drank her down, and the sound curled down his spine and plunged into his muscles. His body stirred. Yearned. Sparks lit inside, and he felt it building – the slow, intense burn that was desire.

He desired her.

"How about now?" he said with sly wink, and he leaned in to kiss her again, again, again.

"Mmm, yes," she said.

They traded tasting and giving, and the world fuzzed at the edges, dimmed by tunnel focus. He was having a fucking good day, and he wanted to lay with her, so much that the need made him tremble. There was an on-call room around the corn— She cupped him through his pants with her other hand, and his exhalation spiraled into a deep groan, leaving him bereft of thought. "Ooh," she
said, looking down at his groin. "We have spontaneous liftoff. We should so freaking use this."

"Oh, I intend to," he said, a purr against her ear. "One of the many..." He kissed her. "Many
benefits..." Again. "Of a cholecystectomy."

"Funny," she said. "I don't remember reading that one in the literature."

She stroked him, her thumb sliding along the seam at his crotch. His lower body tightened, and he
couldn't resist the urge, no, the need, to push into her scorching touch. Fuck. This was going to get
well beyond rated-for-public-hallway if she did more things like that. Perhaps, it already had. She
had him practically rutting. Perhaps, there was no perhaps.

She smiled slyly. "On-call room?" she whispered.

Perhaps, she could read minds.

"Yes," he said. "God, yes." Or he might burst. "I still need to apologize seven times, you know."

She laughed.

He helped her down from the radiator, grabbed her hand, and traipsed back through the throng of
the hospital in a happy daze. He vaguely heard people here and there trying to talk to him, darting
around like gnats, and he managed to murmur, "Later, okay?" to an inordinate number of people
while Meredith waddled along behind him. All of it blurred in his singular focus on the burn. The
visceral want. He wanted to make love to Meredith. Now. He wasn't used to wanting it so much
anymore. Not lately. Not that he didn't enjoy it when it happened, but he'd gotten used to her
initiating, and him catching up, eventually, given the right kind of encouragement.

He yanked open the door to the on-call room. In a stunned blink, his brain assembled the sight
before him. Sweaty skin, and manicured red fingernails raking down a broad, male back. Lexie, the
owner of the fingernails, caught herself mid-moan, mid-arch, and stilled, but Mark was too far
gone already, and Lexie could only hold on, turning beet red while Mark spasmed in the throes of
orgasm.

"Fuck, Mark!" Derek blurted, and he slammed the door closed again.

Meredith snorted. "I get the impression that was the idea. Don't you?" Then she added in a louder
tone, directed at the door, "Sorry!"

A pause followed.

"No problem," Lexie said in a woeful, muffled voice through the door. "I'll just go die, now."

Derek squeezed his eyes shut, trying to eject the pornographic image out of his head, but his retinas
were seared with it. Probably permanently. His face heated. They really needed to get some sort of
official we're-having-sex sock to hang on the doors around here. Or maybe a scrub cap of sinning.
For four seconds, silence filled the space. He counted them as they passed.

He sighed when he reached five. "Well, if Mark was going to scar my brain today, at least he did it
with Lexie," he said, resigned.

"So... supply closet, then?" Meredith said, sniggering.

He nodded, kissed her, and they walk-ran, but it turned out the supply closet wasn't meant to be,
either. "Dude," Alex said without turning to see who it was when Meredith pushed open the door,
"get your own damned closet." Alex had his back to the door and a woman tangled in a knot of limbs around him. Some nurse, Derek thought, based on the color of her scrubs, but he had no idea who from the small slices of flesh and hair and arms he could see. Derek didn't want to have any idea who. Meredith shut the door without commenting, though her face turned a bright tomato shade, and she raised her hand to her mouth to cover what Derek suspected to be another snicker.

The hunt continued.

"Oh!" Meredith said as they passed a darkened, open doorway, and she veered to the right. "In here!"

He followed her and shut door the behind him. Locked it. And grinned.

A cubical-shaped exam room, perhaps eight by eight, made garish by the overhead florescent lights, greeted them. A small metal sink and a black formica countertop covered with pamphlets hugged the left side of the room, a narrow padded table in the middle, and two chairs by a computer in the other corner. Medical posters covered the walls from about waist level to well over the height of his head. There was very little room to maneuver. But he didn't need that much.

Meredith leaned her back against the small table, clutching the padding with her fists. She bit her lip, eyes twinkling as she looked at him through her long eyelashes. He closed the distance to her in a single footstep across the tiled floor, pressed close, until nothing separated their bodies, and only molecules separated their lips. He hovered, anticipating, and then with no worries about audiences, he kissed her. Drank her. He found her hemline and pulled gently on her scrub shirt. He slipped his palm underneath, resting against warm skin, and began to wander up, up, up. He touched her left breast through her bra, circling his thumb around her nipple.

She flinched.

"Hurt?" he said, eyebrows raised. "Meredith—"

"Ache," she rushed to correct herself. "They ache. They're just... they feel really full."

"Oh," he said, frowning. "I'm sorry you're hurting."

"It's okay." She smiled, albeit the smile was thin. "We get a baby out of it."

"We do," he said, a murmur. He knew no matter how awesome having a baby at the end of this might be, she'd been getting pretty fucking sick of all the uncomfortable, agonizing parts of getting there. He marked breasts off in his head as a no fly zone today, and he stepped behind her to pull her into an embrace. He wrapped his arms low under her distended belly, and he craned over her shoulder to kiss her cheek. "Can I help at all?" he said, swaying back and forth like he was dancing with her.

"You can apologize," she said. "Take my mind off things. Preferably more than once."

She leaned her head back against his shoulder, looking up at him. Her breaths were shorter, too, and that had nothing to do with arousal. He'd noticed that starting a few weeks ago. He imagined Baby pressing on her diaphragm and her bladder and everything. She was such a tiny woman. There wasn't much room in there to begin with. And she'd been having a hard time with all of this since day one.
"You're sure?" Derek said.

She pressed her palms against his. "Yes, just be gentle."

He nodded, nuzzling her. "I can be gentle," he said. He kissed her slowly, let his lips linger against her skin. "I can be very, very gentle."

"Mmm," she purred. "I know. And I want you."

The high feeling hummed in his veins. His eyelids drooped. He pulled up her shirt over the swell of their baby and gently pushed both his hands underneath the waistline of her scrubs, into her panties. Coarse, curly hair met his fingertips. He relaxed, and for a while, all he did was sway with her, his front to her back, warm palms touching a place that, of all the men in the world, only he was allowed to go. A deep, content sigh dripped from her lips, and she melted against him.

God, he was a lucky man. For all the horrendous and bad that he'd accrued in the course of living, the good he'd managed to find in the last few years far outweighed it. True love. A family of his own. A woman he would grow old with. His soulmate. A son or daughter who would remember him long after he'd died in Meredith's arms. A repaired friendship with Mark. A renowned career. All of it pinged 10s on the Richter scale of life. He couldn't ask for more.

He pressed his middle and index fingers against her core. She inhaled a sharp breath when he touched her there, and then blew the air out in a long slow exhale that ended in a moan. He stared through his eyelashes at nothing, letting the world around them blur as he focused on her with singular intensity, massaging and rubbing in slow, meandering circles as he rocked her, operating entirely on feel, and by the sound of her choppy breathing, to judge his next move. She pressed her ear against his chest, panting against his shirt. He wondered if she could hear his heartbeat.

"That feels so nice," she said, voice low, syllables stretched into infinity, and he felt himself stir in response.

Heat rushed between his legs, but he ignored the sensation for now. He would have plenty of apologies to get one in for himself. This was about her. All her.

She slid into her orgasm a bit like the seasons changed. The leaves changed color one by one from green to vivid reds and oranges and yellows, until they were surrounded by bursts of vivid hues. She shivered against him, twitching, a moan twisting in her throat that made his lower body tense and tighten. And then her spasms waned, and she went silent. She sighed.

He pulled one hand free to stroke her face. She leaned against the touch.

"That's two," he said, a murmur against her ear.

"I get six more like that?" she said, sounding almost drunk.

He snorted. "Meredith, you can have as many as you want, whenever you want."

She didn't respond to that, just rested in his arms.

"This isn't a special occasion, you know," he said. "I love you, always."

She turned, then, to look up at him. "All the time," she said, "saying things." Her eyes watered. She wiped her face.

He winked. "That's me. I'm a chatty guy."
"I love you, too," she said softly. "I'm sorry I'm not a poet."

He kissed her. "I don't want a poet. I want you."

A knock at the door nearly jolted them out of their skins, and they jerked apart. "Hello?" someone called, a tenor male voice that sounded quite disgruntled. Another knock rattled the door. "Hello, who's in here? This shouldn't be occupied."

Derek's heart thudded in his ears, but subsided in moments. He took a cleansing breath and stepped to the door. He pulled it open to find Nurse Tyler staring at him, a dark contrast against the bright, sterile hallway. The man gaped. "Chief Shepherd." Tyler's gaze shifted to a nondescript point on the floor. "I'm sorry to... um. Sorry."

Derek filled the doorway, covering Meredith from view. Though she was clothed, she was flushed, and a bit teary, and he wanted to give her some privacy to collect herself. "Is there a problem?" he said, refusing to engage in any chat about what Tyler already knew he'd interrupted.

"I'm really sorry, sir," Nurse Tyler said. "This room is supposed to be available for an appointment in ten minutes."

"We'll be out in just a minute," Derek said, his face heating from ear to ear. He'd probably turned some wacky shade of scarlet. "We didn't know."

"It's... not a problem."

Derek leaned close to the man, mindful of the staff shuffling back and forth in the hallway beyond Tyler's back. "We didn't do anything on the table," Derek whispered right against Tyler's ear. "You don't need to sterilize it." Of all the embarrassing things to have to disclose...

"Oh," Nurse Tyler said. He cleared his throat. "Okay, well. I'll... leave... you." He didn't look like he could scramble away fast enough. His shoes squeaked as he dashed down the hallway.

Meredith waddled up behind Derek. "So," she said. "We should re-check the closets, now."

Derek snorted. "You actually want to keep going?"

She gestured at herself. "Did I mention I'm having a hormone-infused hump day? And, seriously, you could make money as a very dirty masseuse."

He couldn't help it. He burst out laughing.

"Well, you want to keep going, right?" she said, folding her arms. "I mean you haven't even gotten any, yet."

No, he definitely had not. And his groin, semi-erect just from watching his effect on Meredith, was in the agonizing process of complaining about its neglect. In vivid detail, the picture of what Meredith looked like naked, arched back on their marital bed, sweaty, coming for him, hair in wild disarray, pasted itself behind his eyelids.

Well, fuck.

"I could keep going," he said, though the words arrived strained. "For you."

Meredith stared at him for a moment. "Right," she said, the edges of her lips twitching with an expression that yearned to be a smile. "All for me."
He nodded. "Yes. Mostly."

She didn't dignify that with a response, but her eyes twinkled with sedate amusement.

They resumed their search for a room. They tried several closets. Occupied – sex. Occupied – mopping. Another on-call room. Occupied — sleep. His blooming arousal had been all but murdered and left in a bloody heap, skewered by a knife of frustration by the time they checked the conference room they'd christened the year before. Occupied – conference. Another on-call room. Occupied – sex. They were running out of places to look. And Derek thought they might perhaps be working in a brothel, not a hospital. Not that he had much room to complain, considering why he and Meredith were scurrying around, looking for a damned room.

"Seriously?" Meredith grumbled as they trudged, defeated, away from the last closet. Occupied – inventory. "I want the rest of my freakin' apologies."

They approached the elevator.

Derek sighed. "Believe me. I want to apologize." He pushed the up button and then pressed her against the wall beside the elevator and kissed her. She gripped his hips, scrunching his pants in a tight grip, which only served to make things rub in front, and that was... that was... exquisite. And awful. A moan constricted in his throat, but he tamped it to silence. Barely. He ached with frustration as he nuzzled her neck. "I think might legitimately burst if I don't," he murmured against her skin.

Her breath hitched when he ran his nose along the pulse of her throat, inhaling lavender. He felt her tremble. He wanted to devour her. The only thing stopping him was the waiting area at his back. Two people sat in chairs behind them, shifting and twitching with nerves. Waiting. Waiting for news about loved ones.

"We haven't tried your office," Meredith said.

He thought for a moment. A caution flag waved. His office. Windows. But his protests died before he could piece a coherent thought together. Her hand was a brand at his hip, and he was drunk. Drunk on her and her lavender and their baby and his surgery and everything, and if she was suggesting his office, surely she had some remedy in mind. For the windows. And he ached. He'd just kicked ass. He'd cut. And he'd succeeded. And he needed to revel in that with her without deferring his own needs. Just for a few minutes. Needed.

"Whatever," he said as the elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. "Anywhere."

They stepped into the elevator. The doors closed. The car began to rise. In moments, Meredith's expression lit up like he'd given her another kidney in a jar. A thousand kidneys in jars. She hit the stop button. The car lurched and halted.

"What?" he said, frowning.

"How about here? We could totally do it here." A suggestive smile spread across her face. She rose to her tiptoes and kissed him. "What about our rain check?"

He blinked as things went all screeching brakes in his head. Sex. In the elevator. Sex in the elevator?

"Dirty sex in the elevator," she said with a nod as if she'd read his mind. "It was on our bucket list, remember?"
"I'm not in a wheelchair after heart surgery," he said with a wink. "It's not that dirty."

She grinned. "I'm six months pregnant, and we're still in an elevator. It's pretty freaking dirty, Derek."

He laughed. If he'd been in any other state of mind but horny and desperate, he might have let reason talk him out of even trying to do this. He couldn't do quickies. Physically couldn't. Not anymore. But he wasn't in any other state of mind but horny and desperate, and she was looking at him with lusty gray eyes that stripped him bare and made him want to do things. Dirty, base things.

"I want you, now, here," she said, and he couldn't say no.

He pushed her against the elevator wall, which her back hit with a soft thud. A poster crinkled in the quiet as her shoulder dueled with the frayed edges. "Okay," he said.

He tore his fingers through her hair until his ring finger got caught on her ponytail holder. She moaned, leaning into his touch while she fumbled with his belt. He heard his zipper sliding open. She pulled at his boxers. And then she had her warm hands against skin. His skin. A shiver ran through his body from head to the tips of his toes, making him twitch. An incoherent, throaty noise escaped his lips.

"I love you," she said in a velvet tone that curled down his spine and made him feel as though he were condensing. His breaths tightened like screws in his chest, his muscles coiled like springs, and his body sang with unspent energy.

"You know I love you, too," he replied.

"Yes," she said. "I do."

She held him in her hands and wrought fire. What had flagged during their search for a room renewed. Taking charge for a moment, she pushed him against the opposite wall, where his back impacted with cold metal. His eyelids dipped, his jaw slackened, he loosed a low, vibrating hum of pleasure, and he let his head thunk against the wall while she stroked him. She held him in her palm and did all his favorite things. His thighs shivered, threatening to give out.

"Fuck, Mere," he said.

She licked her lips. "That's the idea, isn't it?"

Never fear. That's why your fluffer is here.

He laughed, pushing into her hand. When she let him go to embrace him instead, he was hard, and ready, and panting, and there were funny sparks shooting behind his eyelids. Go, go, go, his body demanded, every nerve ending, every muscle. He pulled at her scrub pants, yanked at her panties, sliding both of them down to mid-thigh in two harsh jerks. They traded places, a duel of tangled limbs.

"Turn around," he commanded, the words gruff, and she did. The pale curve of her ass greeted him, and it made him hungry. Ravenous. He stepped forward, pressing his erection against her spine, and she whined for him. But that was when he was brought up short. He frowned, trying to think past the go, go, go, go, in his head. Just for a min—

"Why'd you stop?" she said, almost a whine.

"Um," he said. He rubbed against her, and he couldn't think for a moment. Couldn't think beyond
"What's that?"

"You're short," he said.

She looked over her shoulder at him. "Kick your boots off or something."

"You're very short," he amended. "That won't fix it."

"You kick them off, and I'll stand on them."

He frowned. His boots did have a heel. Not a huge one, but... Yeah, that might work, he decided, for all that he could deal with complex math at the moment. He kicked off his shoes. She stepped on top of them, crumpling the leather ankles under the soles of her sneakers. He lost an inch; she gained a bit more than one. The height difference shrunk. Enough for him to have something to work with. He grinned.

"My wife the problem solver," he said.

"Lots of practioooh—" Her voice broke off in a moan when he reached around her and pressed his fingers against the slick, hot v where her thighs met her torso. He searched the soft, wiry hair until he found the right spot, indicated only by a hitch in her breath and his years of worshiping her body. With his other hand, he guided himself to her. She twitched when he pressed against her.

"Good?" he said, barely holding himself still.

She braced herself, palms flat against the wall, nodding. "I'm ready," she said, and she was. She was hot and wet with barely any help from him. Anticipation was a lovely tool in the absence of hands.

With a grunt, he let go, and he sheathed himself with her core. She gasped as he entered with a sort of desperation that didn't allow for gentle, and the gasp turned into a long, winding moan that rolled down his spine as he pushed forward to the hilt. Her fingers flexed, and her palms squeaked along the wall as she lost about an inch of purchase. He saw her grimace, reflected in a smear of color on the metal elevator wall. Her insides tightened around him like a lock accepting a key as she adjusted to him. Accepted him. For a moment, everything went white snow behind his eyelids, and a breathless sound tumbled from his lips. She squeezed him again with her pelvic floor, and the white snow became a cloudburst. Sparks. Fireworks.

He'd found home.

"Jesus," he said. "You feel good."

He shifted. Her eyes were shut, and she'd bit her lip. She only loosed a quiet, shivery moan in response. He toiled at her cleft with his fingers. When he withdrew and pushed in again, slowly, so she could feel every millimeter of him, she moaned again, and then he let himself find a rhythm, pumping, pushing her groin into his right hand with every thrust, but not too hard. Like the gentle rocking of a boat. He didn't want to jar her. He chased up her left arm with his left hand, until his palm came to rest over hers. He clutched her hand, hard enough that his knuckles turned white, and then he tipped his head back, eyes closed, and just... let himself feel.

Feel all of it.
Feel her slick, inviting heat sliding along his length. He smelled her skin. Her hair. He heard her hitching gasps, each with a little moan piggybacking on the end. Each bluster of vocalization told him right, right, right, you're doing it so right, and he lost himself in that. In her. Responding to all her unspoken yet very much broadcasted direction. This was what he needed.

"Harder," she urged him after a moment, apparently done with wanting gentle, and so he obliged, spearing her with everything that he had, until her directives became a litany of, "Yes, yes, yes."

In a matter of minutes, her body seized into stillness. Her breathing stopped. A moan became a long, pained whine as her lungs constricted. Her fingers curled and squeaked down the metal walls. And then she burst into contractions that would have pushed him off the cliff and wrung him dry on any normal day before the shooting. Before the Paxil. Color burst around him, and everything inside tightened with want, need, need, must. But he didn't go over that imaginary, blissful line of completion. Didn't cross the point of no return. He pushed a deep sound out his chest on a rushed exhalation, one of frustration. His teeth clenched. Meredith's orgasmic throes subsided, and she sagged bonelessly against the wall. He embraced her, holding her up until she had her legs back under her control.

He managed a lazy smile despite the incompleteness carving out his soul. The ache. "That's three," he said, a low rumble against her ear while she panted. He kissed her, and he pulled out, still engorged. Still rock solid. Still unfinished.

She laughed. "I'll let that one count double," she said, breathless. Happy. "Definitely. Mmm." She nodded. Let lose another delighted giggle. Her sheer pleasure warmed him, and his smile broadened. He was good. No. He was a fucking rockstar today. At everything. Maybe, he couldn't do quickies for himself anymore, but he could definitely give them to her, and if she loved it that much, the frustration was worth it. Her gray eyes glittered, bright with affection, and they gazed at each other for a long moment. He kissed her temple.

Her smile dimmed, though, when she glanced down. "You didn't finish."

"You know I can't," he said, dimming right along with her, now that the moment had been marred. "Not that fast."

She frowned. "You don't normally get it up that fast anymore, either. I was hoping..." She shrugged, expression helpless. "Another benefit of cholecystectomy. Or something."

He sighed. "Yeah, I know."

He wasn't unhappy by any means. He loved her, and anything with her felt amazing. Anything. And he was a fucking rockstar. But he felt dissonant. Jarred. The incompleteness made him hollow and needing, and it was hard for him to think beyond the fact that he lacked something. He liked it when they did this at home with no prospect for interruption. Where he could take his time, and he didn't feel rushed, and he didn't have to pull a hold-that-thought in the middle. Still, he managed to locate the smile he'd lost, and he grinned at her.

"Don't worry," he assured her with a wink. "My office is still waiting, after all. And I do still owe you five apologies."

She relaxed into a smile as she pulled up her scrubs. "Four. That one counted twice."

He laughed. "Four, then. Right."

Wrestling himself back into his boxers and zipping up his pants was a kind of exquisite torture that
made him want to rip them all back off and take her again until he exploded. Forget that tying up an elevator for what would probably be forty-five minutes was such a bad idea in a hospital. He sighed. The tent in his pants was pretty obvious no matter how he arranged himself, and every time he touched his erection, he only reemphasized to himself that he wasn't done, and he craved touch. Her touch. He ended up trapping himself in the waist of his pants, a heavy, thick line along his belly, pointing at his bellybutton. He tightened his belt with an unhappy grimace.

Meredith bit her lip as she watched him. "I don't think I could do that," she said.

"What?"

She shrugged. "Live with a really porny mood ring." She snickered. "A mood bone."

He snorted. "It has a mind of its own, you know. It's not really indicative of what I'm thinking."

He bent over to slide his boots on. His pants pinched around him. He resisted the urge to squirm. God, this felt awful. Just fucking awful.

She stepped closer as he straightened. Her palm slid along his back in a move she probably intended to be comforting. And it was. Just a little too much. What little enthusiasm his mood bone had lost rushed right back. He groaned, unable to stop himself from leaning into her.

"What are you thinking?" she said.

"I'm thinking I want to fuck you senseless," he said, almost a growl.

She snickered. "I'd say it's a pretty accurate bone right now, then."

"Very," he said. "Can you just..." He gestured at himself. His aroused state was pretty well hidden, pinched by his waistband as it was. "I don't know. Stand in front of it?" She'd only be an added layer of concealment. Still, he didn't want to take chances. Nothing sabotaged respect with subordinate employees like an unwanted salute.

A laugh that was a snort caught in her nose, and she flushed. "I think I can manage that. Do I look okay?"

"Beautiful," he said, gaze softening. "Always."

"I don't have sex hair?" she said.

He frowned. Disordered blond wisps stuck out from her head here and there. "It's... a little disheveled."

She winced and yanked out her ponytail holder. She combed her hair back into submission and tried again, eyebrows upturned in askance as she looked at him. He gave her a thumbs up. She stood up on her tiptoes and brushed her fingers through his own hair, straightening out whatever disarray she'd caused in their elevator tangle. Her closeness, her heat, her fingers on his scalp all sent another rush of blood to his groin, and he let out a long, slow, frustrated breath. He had a feeling his body just wasn't going to give up until it got what it wanted.

"Oops," Meredith said, offering him an apologetic grin. "Sorry."

"I think we should take an apology off my tab for pain and suffering," he said, grumbling as he shifted from foot to foot, trying to get comfortable, though it was a lost cause.
She gave him a sympathetic look. "Deal," she said.

With one last look to appraise him, she released the stop button, and the elevator started moving again. Two floors to go. A short walk. He could do this. Except as testament to how badly the universe wanted to fuck with him today, the elevator stopped on the second floor. He groaned and let his head thunk against the wall as he closed his eyes. Meredith shifted so she stood in front of him. He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed it in thanks.

Richard stepped into the elevator car, humming, oblivious, though he frowned when he absorbed the sight before him. "Derek, are you okay?" he said. "You look sick."

Derek pinched the bridge of his nose and looked up again, forcing himself to smile and nod and be friendly. "Oh, fine," he said as the elevator doors slid shut. "Just have a headache." Which wasn't a lie, really, though he didn't mean the head attached to his neck.

"Are you sure?" Richard said. "You're really flushed."

Meredith snorted with laughter and then coughed. "Sorry," she said. She cleared her throat and went silent, staring at an interesting crease in the floor tiles.

Richard's gaze shifted back and forth from Derek to Meredith and back to Derek. "Right," he said, tone suspicious. "Well. Don't forget our meeting today."

"Right, the PR guy." Derek nodded. "I'll be there."

"Good," Richard said, "see you then."

The elevator dinged, and the doors trundled open. Richard didn't budge. Meredith said, "Oh, that's our stop!" a little bit too cheerfully. "Gotta go!" She grabbed Derek's hand and dragged him from the elevator, not that it was dragging, much. They made a mad dash, raced around the corner, across the catwalk, right past Derek's secretary, and so help him, he slammed the door in the poor woman's face.

"Sorry," Derek called behind him. "My wife's not feeling well. Please, hold all my calls."

"Sure..." said Patricia, the word muffled through the door. She sounded more than a little confused. "I hope she feels better."

Meredith snickered. "Shame on you, using me as an excuse," she whispered.

"You're pregnant," he whispered back. "Fifty percent of the reason you make such a good excuse is because of me!"

"Shut up," she responded, and he snorted, but forced himself not to laugh.

The office was dark and quiet and the carpet muted the bustle of the hospital outside the door. They huddled in the corner of the office behind the door, the only place that couldn't be seen from the promenade and catwalk. The secretary had a desk right outside the door. They had very little space to maneuver that wasn't in plain sight, unless Meredith intended for them to get down on the floor, but... he looked down. That was a pretty hard surface, not very comfortable for sex, and she would have trouble both lowering herself down and getting back up again. Either way, he glanced at the door, which was no doubt not soundproof, and worse, he wasn't sure how not soundproof.

Meredith fumbled with his belt buckle and slipped her hands into his boxers, where his confined erection still waited, ready and willing, no matter how ludicrous the setting, to oblige her in any
and all apologies she desired. She looked up at him, gray eyes hooded, expression almost... lazy. And then she slipped her free hand over his mouth. Her skin was hot against his lips. "Meredith..." he said, but the word was muffled by her palm.

"Shh," she said.

"What are you—?"

"Shh," she repeated, a loud, sharp hiss, and he felt compelled to obey. His pants rustled as her arm moved. She pressed her palm against the inside of his thigh, and then she slid her finger up behind his—

He jerked when she hit the spot and a zing of pure sensation rushed through him. And then she stroked him. All along his perineum. He turned to Jell-O, and he moaned, all thought stolen from him. Her palm pressed harder against his mouth. The webbing between her thumb and index finger pushed between his lips, slightly parting his teeth, an iron line of flesh constricting his ability to speak to grunts and groans.

"You have to be quiet," she told him. She licked her lips and backed him into the wall. There was nowhere to go. None. She dominated the space, and he had no option except to obey, unless he wanted to stop playing her game. Once she saw he wasn't going anywhere, she pulled down his boxers. First just a little, until there was a line of coarse, dark hair peeking over the waistband, and then all the way. Cool air hit his skin.

She stroked him underneath like a harp. He arched back against the wall, pressing into her touch, and the world went fuzzy and sharp and colorful and dim all at once. He panted, breaths blustering from his nostrils against her index finger.

"Do you like this?" she whispered. She cupped his weight in her palm and did his favorite thing. He felt a slight tugging sensation. He nodded, closing his eyes. And then she added more softly, "You're sure this is okay?" Though she was smaller, and the idea of her legitimately restraining him unaided was laughable, a few months ago, being constricted like this would have been claustrophobic and terrifying. Having his choices taken away would have been worse, blinding to the point of sheer panic. But he could relax, now. He could enjoy the ride. He could enjoy her and everything she offered. He nodded again. His jaw lolled, and her hand slipped deeper between his lips. "Okay," she said, satisfied.

Her gaze wandered to his coat rack, which rested a few feet away, on the opposite side of the door. Mark had left the tie he'd liberated earlier in the morning dangling from one of the rungs. She took her hand from his lips. He had a chance to say, "How is this me apologizing?" But then she grabbed the tie and gagged him. She winked.

"Oh, it's not," she said. "You still owe me three." She wrapped one hand around his length and cupped him with the other. "But that can be later."

He watched her hungrily, anticipation carving a hole out of him. He bucked against her hand when she settled into a rhythm, pumping him. A low, throaty groan stuck in his esophagus like taffy. He couldn't stop it, but it was a deep, quiet rumble that he doubted anyone could hear beyond the intimate space filled by him and by her, in the quiet, in the dark. Saliva collected on the tie. He swallowed and tipped his head back as he felt his body start to wind with tension and with want.

He wanted to rip off the gag, kick himself off the wall, and fuck her on his desk. The image was running through his head on repeat, and between that and her ministrations, his hands shook, and he was so wound up he could barely breathe. She stroked him mid-perineum to base to tip, and he
bit the tie. Hard. But a groan still escaped.

When she shrugged herself out of her lab coat, threw the coat at his feet for padding, and eased herself awkwardly to her knees in front of him, he blinked, looking down at her. "Um," she said, frowning as she settled at his feet. She briefly rested a hand against her belly. "I might need some help getting up after this."

Something in his expression must have spoke for him, because she shook her head vehemently. "Oh, no. I'm going to get you off, even if I have to throw my back out to do it. Fair's fair."

He reached for the gag.

"Oh, relax, Superman," Meredith said. "I'm kidding. I'm not going to throw my back out. I'm not a damsel in distress. I'm not *that* fragile." She frowned. "I will need help getting up, though."

He snorted, nodding at her, and dropped his hands.

She put her hands on his hips. And then she took him into her mouth. He grabbed at her shoulders, blindly, flailing. And he nearly died on the spot. If it weren't for the tie, he would have shouted. As it was, he offered a muffled, strangled grunt into the quiet.

He lost track of time after that, until he was plastered with sweat, so tense with almost, almost, stubborn fucking almost, he thought he might come apart at the seams. His throat felt like it'd been stripped with a rake, and his jaw was sore from clenching. All the low-pitched, guttural sounds of need, muted by the gag, had probably stolen his voice. He was frustrated, and exhausted, and unfinished, with a hole carved out of his soul, and yet so blissed out he couldn't fucking see straight. He thought this might be one of those torturous days where he couldn't. He just couldn't get off no matter how long he tap danced in ecstasy on the fucking cliff. The Paxil did that, sometimes, and he loathed it every time he had the misfortune of experiencing it. He wondered how long Meredith would persist in trying before she, too, got frustrated. He was approaching the fine line where pleasure became agony. She kept building him up and up and up, until he thought there couldn't possibly be more up.

"Please," he begged hoarsely into the gag. "Please, just..." He couldn't speak. He couldn't find words. He had nothing left that represented thoughts. He shook himself out of it long enough to worry he was leaving bruises, and he relaxed his grip on her shoulders. But then it all slid away from him again. Language. Ideas. Sentience. "Please," he repeated, because it was the only word he had left in his vocabulary.

And then he hit it. Like a tripwire. He froze as his body wound itself up, and he hovered there on the edge, stuck, past the line in the sand that defined no return, but not falling, yet, and the seconds seemed to stretch into infinity. His heart pounded. He clutched her shoulders. His eyes lost focus. He couldn't breathe. He hovered, a prisoner in the void, stuck in that moment. Forever. And then he burst so hard he saw stars, and he thought his heart might burst right along with him. She drank him down. Everything around him became a mute and fuzzy, and he floated in languid revelation. For a long time. Just floated. Spent. Done.

Time resumed. He became vaguely aware of his back sliding down the wall. Meredith was a warm, soft bastion beside him, and he tilted in her direction. He still couldn't catch his breath. She fumbled with the tie, peeling it from his face, though it took him a moment to think sentiently enough to unclench his jaw and release it, even with her tugging on it. Even back in the grips of reality, he still floated.

"Holy fuck," he croaked when he found his words. A smile twitched at his lips. His voice sounded
a bit like somebody had sent it through a cheese grater or something, all shredded and in pieces. He swallowed, and he looked at her. His limbs felt like rubber. He didn't think he'd move for a while.

"I think we ruined your tie," Meredith said. She held it up for him. It was covered in teethmarks and spit.

He couldn't care. He didn't speak. He floated, and the room seemed far away.

Meredith frowned at him. "I really hope that meeting isn't anytime soon."

He laughed a bit like he was stoned, all bubbly and way too loud. He was floating and buzzed and it didn't feel like he had a body anymore. "Raincheck on the other apologies?" he murmured drunkenly. "I think you broke me."

She snickered as she pulled her fingers through his sweaty hair. "Okay," she said. She curled up next to him, and he wrapped her in his shaky arms as he closed his eyes. He wasn't sure what time it was. He didn't have the energy to check his watch. He'd worry about the meeting in a minute. For now, he rested, and he smiled, and he floated.

When he came out of the bathroom, straightening his tie, he was greeted by Meredith's back. She'd curled up on her side on the bed. She faced away from him, toward the window, wearing nothing but black panties and a bra. The black dress she'd intended to wear lay spread across the coverlet. She hadn't bothered to move it. A bottle of nail polish, which hadn't been there before, rested by her alarm clock and her brush. Her lamp was still on. For all intents and purposes, it looked to him like she'd put her head on the pillow, closed her eyes for a moment, and the brief respite had ended up turning into an accidental nap.

"Meredith?" he whispered, not wanting to startle her. "We need to leave soon."

For a long moment, she didn't move. Then she shrugged and pulled the blankets tighter. Her dress fell to the floor in a crumpled heap. "Can you go to this thing without me?" she said.

He frowned. She sounded wrong. More than just tired. They were supposed to meet Owen, Cristina, Mr. Jennings, and his new wife for dinner to discuss Owen's thoughts on trauma medicine training for the medical staff. That was when he heard a sniffle, and he froze. "Meredith, are you crying?"

"No," she said. The word was plaintive and tiny, and it broke his heart.

Yes. Yes, she was. He walked to her side of the bed and sat down by her hip. The mattress dipped as his weight sank into it. On this side, he could see her face, and it was a wasteland. Tear tracks glistened on her face. Her eyes were puffy and red.

He put his hand on her shoulder, squeezed, and then ran his palm down her side, stroking her warm skin. She'd been fine five minutes ago when he'd stepped into the bathroom to straighten his tie. Or, well, she'd seemed fine. Maybe, a bit more dour than usual, though he hadn't asked about it, yet. But her emotions were a constant whiplash, lately, and even on his best days, he had a hard time keeping up with her, which was frustrating, because it made him feel like damage control, rather than damage prevention. He'd much rather prevent her from being upset in the first place.

She sniffled again, and the dissonant sound made him wince. "What's wrong?" he said, a murmur.

"My toenails."

He blinked. "What?"
She struggled to sit up, and he reached to help stabilize her. "I'm fat, Derek!" she snapped, shrugging his hands away like his fingers were hot brands. And then she started wailing. "I tried to buy new shoes and it was so embarrassing and now I can't even paint my toenails and I don't want to go and I'm pissed."

"Shoes?" he said helplessly. "What? Wait, you're mad?"

"I can't buckle the straps!"

And then he had an armful of Meredith. She collapsed against him, crying, sniveling, her fingers scrunching up the dark wool of his suit jacket. His jaw clenched, and his chest ached. Watching her be upset made him hurt. He rubbed her back. "Shh," he said, lost. "Shh." He couldn't take her pregnancy away. He couldn't do it for her. The only thing he could do was be there. And, sometimes, that killed him.

"You don't have to come, Mere. Not if you don't want to," he said when she'd calmed down a little. "And you're not fat. You're—"

"If you say I'm beautiful right now, I will gut you with my ten blade."

He clamped his mouth shut. Definitely mad, then. And he knew conversational quicksand when he heard it.

She sniffled. "I wrecked your suit."

"I don't care about my suit," Derek said. "I care that you're upset." He glanced at the nightstand. Nail polish had been the culprit. He thought. Or something about shoes and straps. Or both. If he'd understood... the problem. Nonsensical though it was. He glanced at the floor. He didn't see any shoes except her sneakers. So, he grabbed the shiny bottle, which had been emblazoned with some fancy name that, as far as he could tell, meant: red. "Can I help?"

She looked up at him, and then at the bottle in his hands, and then back at him. Her eyebrows knitted. "You want to paint my toenails?"

"I want you to be happy."

"You," she said. "Derek C. Shepherd. Are offering to paint toenails."

He shrugged. "Is it harder than brain surgery?"

"Depends if you're pregnant," she said, irritation leaking into her tone.

He chose not to engage. He scooted to the side, pushing the coverlet out of the way, and pulled her right foot into his lap. She leaned back on her hands. He stroked her skin. Under the arch of her foot, pressing to avoid tickling. Her toes curled, and she sighed, slumping as she relaxed. He bent over and kissed the ball of her ankle. "Do I just paint, or...?"

"There's some stuff in the drawer," she said.

He frowned and leaned over to pull open the drawer and look. Next to a box of tampons, the harlequin-fueled bodice ripper she was currently reading, and a little bullet-shaped black vibrator she liked to use when he wasn't around (and sometimes when he was), he recognized the nail file and the clippers. The other tools, though, were a mystery. He felt like a first year intern again, tossed into the wilds of an appendectomy.
"You need to buff the nails, first," she explained, and he followed her careful direction through the mystifying stages of painting a toenail, from buffing, to clipping, to filing, to actual painting.

He painted her big toe with gentle red brush strokes, careful to avoid getting any on her skin. "Is this okay?" he said. It looked okay to him. But he didn't have the best eye for this stuff. Or any eye for this stuff.

She leaned forward, though from her toothy, snarling grimace, her stomach prevented her from giving his masterpiece the kind of inspection she wanted to give it. She bit her lip. It started to quiver. "I feel like I'm trying to identify people from an airplane," she snapped, frustrated. Tears leaked. She wiped her face. "And I hate that being mad makes me cry."

"It's okay to cry," he said. "I get it, Meredith. I do."

She wiped her face with her hands and then folded her arms. "Because you and your stupid PTSD tears are in any way similar to me growing a freaking person."

Well, yes. Though she did have the monopoly on growing another person, he thought he understood unwanted, embarrassing emotional swings, perhaps better than she did. But he didn't respond to that. She seemed determined to be pissed off.

He was on a ledge. A precarious one. He wracked his brain.

"Hold that thought," he said, and he set her foot down.

"What thought?" he said, and she glowered.

He stood up and dashed to his nightstand to grab his phone. Meredith watched him the entire way. The skin on her forehead was crinkled, and her nose had the cutest little scrunch. His lip twitched before he could stop it.

"Don't," she growled as he approached and sat down again, "smile. At me."

"I'm sorry," he rushed to say. "I'm sorry. You're just..." He wanted to say cute. She was cute when she was mad. He didn't want to get murdered, though. He sighed. There was no winning here. None. "I love you."

She folded her arms over her stomach and rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

He opened up the camera app on his phone and zoomed in on her toenail to snap a photo. He handed her the phone. She looked at the picture. "How's that?" he said.

For the first time since this started, he saw a break in the clouds on her face. "That looks... really good," she said, eyes widening as surprise blossomed in her expression. "Really... goo— where'd you learn to do that?"

He blinked at the abrupt conversation shift. And then he shrugged. "I guess I'm a natural?" he said. He couldn't stop the grin that time, but she didn't seem to mind. Didn't comment.

"Would you do the rest?" she said in a softer tone, and he felt his tension leaking out of him. He was making headway. Good. "Please?" she added, and he couldn't help but look at her for a long, stretching moment. She had such a pretty face. Such pretty gray eyes. He resisted the urge to put a palm to her cheek, lean forward, and kiss her. To kiss every freckle. Because that would definitely
get him killed at the moment. "What?" she snapped when his gaze lingered.

He sighed. "I really do think you're beautiful," he said. "I'm not just saying it because you're upset. You take my breath away all the time. I hope you know that."

She blinked. Tears pulsed. "Oh," she said. She gave him an apologetic look, but she didn't say anything else. She brushed the tears from her face and looked out the window, though it was dark outside. There wasn't much for her to look at.

He pulled her foot back into his lap and continued his work. He'd had no idea nail-painting was such an involved process when he'd offered, but wasn't about to back out, now. Not after he'd finally gotten her to calm down. He soldiered through, and he gave her an even coat of her supercalifragilistic-whatever-the-hell-it-was-called red. Painting nails was sort of like coloring books for grownups, he supposed. Staying inside the lines wasn't too hard.

By the time the polish dried, she seemed almost put back together. She wasn't sniffling anymore, and the tear tracks had evaporated in time with the polish drying. She looked up at him and said, "Fine. You win. I'll go."

"Mere," he said. "If you want to stay home, it's really okay. I'll manage. I wasn't trying to win anything."

"Then why'd you paint my nails?"

He sighed. "I just wanted you to feel better. If pretty nails does it, I'll paint your nails."

"Oh," she said.

He pressed his hand against her belly and rubbed her navel to thorax. "You're carrying our baby. I know this is rough on you, and I want to help," he said. He shrugged. "You just have to ask. Nail painting is not a service I intuitively offer."

Her lip twitched. Almost a smile. She kicked her legs over the side of the bed. He reached to help her stand. Her grip tensed, and she squeezed his hand to the point of pain as she used him for balance to lean forward and look down at her newly painted nails. He winced, but he didn't say a word. She scrunched her toes. Her smile widened when she looked back up at him and let go. He flexed his fingers to get circulation back.

"You should," Meredith said. "You're good at it."

He snorted. "Just so we're clear," he said, "if Cristina ever asks me for a pedicure, you and I will have words."

Meredith pantomimed a zipper closing over her lips. Her eyes twinkled.

He brushed off his slacks. They seemed fine. As did his shirt. He would have to change his jacket, though, because she'd gotten some spit and some tears on it, and he didn't think either would dry in time for appetizers. He changed out the charcoal-colored jacket with a quick trip to the closet. When he turned around, pulling the jacket over his shoulders, she stood in front of him, dressed. Ready to go. Black dress on. Black clutch in hand.

"You're sure?" he said.

She nodded, sneaking past him to grab her shoes. She passed over several different ones with straps and went for some open-toed pumps with low heels. He helped her balance as she stepped
"Okay," he said. He grabbed her hand and walked down the stairs with her. They pulled their coats from the hallway closet on the way out.

"Have fun!" Lexie called from somewhere in the kitchen. "I'll walk Samantha in an hour or two!" A happy bark accompanied her farewell.

"Thank you!" Derek called back.

He and Meredith passed through the front doorway and into the dark, chilly night.

"Would you go shoe shopping with me this weekend?" Meredith said as they descended the steps, hand in hand. She raised her eyebrows and looked at him. "Is that a service available by request?"

He laughed. "Well, I don't know. What would this entail?"

She shrugged. "Mostly buckling buckles for me and pretending you're having fun."

He stopped. She stopped. They stood on the sidewalk, halfway to the car. His breaths misted in the cold, wet air. Silence hugged the darkness. She gazed at him. He pushed his fingers through her hair and did what he'd wanted to do all evening since he'd found her crying. "It's a date," he murmured, and he kissed her.

When Derek came back to himself from a post-coital doze, he found Meredith, who'd managed to get up without his help after all, balancing against his desk as she bent over, trying to reach for a pen that had fallen and rolled into the middle of the floor. His limbs didn't quite want to cooperate, but he managed to rise. "Don't do that," he said. "I've got it." He bounced forward one step, remembered the window, bounced back, pulled up his pants and buckled his belt in a rush. Then he dashed to help her.

"Thanks," she said as he handed her the pen. "My center of balance is crap."

"No problem," he said.

He glanced at the clock. His meeting was in thirty minutes. He'd slept for about thirty-five. He sank into his desk chair, beset by lassitude. He didn't want to deal with a meeting in thirty minutes. He'd more than burned out his high with his copious apologizing, and after the stress of that unexpected surgery, and all the fun with Meredith, he was just.. done. He frowned, looking at Meredith as she sat down in the opposite chair. She picked up a pile off his desk, which he realized belatedly were charts. She hadn't had the charts when they'd come into the office, which meant she'd left them here...

"Have you been using my office?" he said.

She looked up. "Yes." She frowned. "Why, is that a problem?"

"No, of course not," he said. "But.. why?" She'd never done it before. Not when he wasn't in it.

She sighed. "To hide."

He frowned. "Why are you hiding?"

She rolled her eyes. "Because if another person who's not you sticks their hands on my stomach
without asking, I can't be held responsible for the homicide that follows."

He blinked. "Oh." His frowned deepened. "People really come up to you and—?"

"All. The freaking. Time."

"Even strangers?" he said.

She nodded. "All. The freaking. Time."

He made a face. He couldn't imagine that. Strangers wandering up to him and touching him without so much as a warning. He'd be a wreck. A panicking, suffering wreck. In fact, he was pretty sure there wasn't anything about being pregnant that he would have handled very well. "I'm sorry," he said.

She shrugged. "Not your fault."

They both looked up when a knock rattled his door. "I'm sorry, sir," Patricia said. "But Dr. Webber is here with a Mr. Pruitt, and he insists you have an—"

"That's fine," Derek called. He sighed. They were early. "Send them in."

Meredith stood, charts in hand. "I'll see you later, okay?" she said.

"Yes," he said. He let his expression drip into a lazy smile, and he winked. "I still owe you three."

She laughed and passed Richard on the way out. Her smile dimmed somewhat for the tall, heavyset blonde man wearing what had to be a thousand dollar Armani suit. Mr. Pruitt. She did, however, manage to keep her pleasant look from falling off entirely. Mr. Pruitt nodded to her as she passed. Derek's eyes narrowed when he noticed the man's eyes roaming... a bit too low for his tastes. But he clenched his jaw, and he bore it. This was temporary. And it was necessary. And he had great confidence that Meredith would grab, pull, and twist if things ever went beyond looking.

After discussing the Seattle Grace's dire financial situation with Richard, they'd both agreed they needed to bring in a PR consultant to help out their current PR department with the shooting fallout. Though the hospital's funds were dwindling at an alarming rate, they'd deemed this a necessary expense, and this man came highly recommended by the Dean at Virginia Tech, whom Derek had also spoken to at length over the phone. The one caveat being that Mr. Pruitt was... colorful. Or, as Meredith called him, a freaking sexist pig who deserves to die alone.

Mr. Pruitt held out a beefy hand, and Derek reached across the desk to shake it. "Mr. Pruitt," Derek said. "Tell me you have good news?"

Mr. Pruitt grinned, showing them pearly, rod-straight, too-white teeth. He and Dr. Webber took seats side by side across the desk. "Well, I have good news, and I have bad news, and I have some more good news." The chair squeaked as he settled his ample weight. "The good news is that your current PR department has done a great job establishing your brand. The public knows who you are."

"And the bad?" Richard said.

"Your public outreach sucks," Mr. Pruitt said. "It sucks. It blows. It's a horrible lay. It's no wonder nobody's coming here anymore. You're not doing anything whatsoever to woo people back."

Derek frowned. "What do you recommend?"
"Your hospital is a beautiful woman, but she's just standing there like a rock. We need to get her to flirt a bit."

Richard cleared his throat. "And how do you propose we get her to... flirt?"

"Well, now, we're back to the good news," Mr. Pruitt said, reaching into his briefcase for a sheaf of papers. He gave them a wolfish grin. "Because I have a long fucking list."
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Well, here I am, still chugging right along. Thank you to my beta readers, and to Emeline, for helping me with my French, and to Gladys, for helping me make my fictional doctors sound like they know what they're doing. Thank you also to everybody who takes the time to leave a comment. I really, truly appreciate the feedback. It makes my day. I'm a little behind on my responses right now, but I hope to catch up soon. Finally, thanks to everybody who is still hanging in there with me, even though this monstrosity has taken me five blasted years to write.

This is kind of a sedate chapter. A calm before the finale, if you will. 2-3 more chapters to go! I'm excited. Are you?

When Samantha stood and ran to the door to bark, Derek stopped rubbing Meredith's feet to look, and Meredith moaned. "No..." she said, and Derek gave her an apologetic frown. Baby kicked Meredith's bladder for what felt like the fifth time in a row, and Meredith winced. She shifted, hoping Baby would settle. Shifting usually helped.

Samantha's warning was a short one, and then she quieted, which meant the person at the door was somebody she recognized. "It's probably Mark," Lexie said, and she stood. She went to the front door, disappearing behind the wall.

"Hey, Little Grey," Mark said, muffled from the hallway, but he didn't sound pleased. The words were tight and clipped. They exchanged some tense whispers in private, and then the pair of them appeared in the archway, Lexie looking red and fidgety and worried.

"Hey," Mark said without preamble. His posture was stiff and hulking and tense, and Lexie didn't stand with him. She walked back to the chair instead. Mark looked at Derek with dark eyes. "I need to talk to you, man," he said. He took one look at Lexie and jabbed his thumb in the direction of the kitchen. "Right now." And then he disappeared down the hall without waiting for Derek to answer him.

Meredith frowned. Well, that didn't sound good. Mark sounded... almost... mad.

"This sounds... not of the good," Lexie said, a worried expression on her face.

Derek's eyebrows knitted with confusion as he gently moved Meredith's feet and stood up.

"What's that about?" Meredith said.

He shrugged and shook his head. He had no idea. He followed Mark, Samantha plodding after him.

"Please, tell me this is just a big fucking mistake," Mark said a few seconds later, loud enough to resonate through the whole house. The heated words that followed, though, were quieter, and Meredith couldn't hear beyond the sharp tone. Derek's softer, tenor response was equally harsh and equally unintelligible. Within moments, it was pretty freaking obvious there was a rapid fire
word duel happening in the kitchen. What in the hell?

Meredith grimaced as she struggled to stand up. "I'll be right back," she told Lexie. "This sounds like it needs a referee." And then she chased after Derek and Mark.

What she found was not what she expected.

They weren't at each other's throats. Derek was sitting at the kitchen table, red-faced, teeth grinding, staring at the placemat underneath his elbows like he was embarrassed about something. Samantha had her head on his lap, whining, but he wasn't paying attention to her. Mark stood over him, looming, arms folded, but he didn't look mad. Upset, yes. Worried, yes. Mad, no. His eyes were red, his face haggard, and her memory sharpened on how he'd looked right after the shooting, when he'd first found out Derek had been shot. When he'd come back to the hospital and found Derek on a ventilator. He'd looked just like that.

Neither of them told her to leave when she came into the room. "Maybe you can talk some fucking sense into him," Mark said, almost growling as he looked at her.

"What the hell is going on?" she said. She looked at Derek. "Some sense about what?"

"I reviewed the plastic surgery docket for next week," Mark said. He gestured at Derek. "He has a w-plasty for his sternotomy scar scheduled along with the scar revision for the bullet."

Meredith blinked. "So?" she said. "Isn't a w-plasty what you do to revise long hypertrophic scars?"

"Not for the chest!" Mark snapped. He turned to Derek. "Didn't Dr. Clemens explain to you that a w-plasty is only going to make it worse?"

Derek swallowed thickly, but he didn't look up. "He said there was a small chance..."

Mark sighed. "That it'll work? Yeah. A small one." He pulled out the chair next to Derek and collapsed into it. He sounded calmer, now, at least. "But we're talking like winning the lottery probabilities. You'd have a better chance of getting struck by lightning. The chest is one of the worst areas on the body for scarring. If you try to revise the scar, there's a huge chance you'll just make the it bigger. Derek, I'm telling you. Don't fucking do it. You'll be butchering yourself for no reason."

Meredith's mouth tumbled open, and she stared at Derek. She'd known about the surgery. That wasn't a surprise. They'd talked about it. He wanted the procedure done for his own peace of mind, and she'd supported it, even though she didn't think it was necessary. Next week, their days off lined up, and she would be taking him to the hospital to get it done. It was an outpatient procedure that wouldn't lay him up more than a day or two, give or take some discomfort. But she was no specialist in plastic surgery. She'd assumed he'd already talked this over with Mark. She'd assumed what he was getting done was appropriate for the wounds he'd received.

"Derek, what is he talking about?" Meredith said.

Derek had been so much better. So much better. The idea that he would intentionally and knowingly harm himself was... unreal to her. And unfathomable. Not to mention they had a baby coming in a matter of weeks. This seemed... so incongruous with all the progress he'd made.

"Derek?" she prodded, hoping he'd explain. Hoping there was a freaking explanation.

Silence stretched. Derek didn't look up. He fiddled with the placemat. Red covered his face and the back of his neck.
"I can’t wear my scrubs," he said, the words a rough whisper.

Meredith frowned. She yanked a chair out from the opposite side of the table and pulled it around to his other side, opposite Mark. She dropped heavily into the chair. Her everything ached. Everything. "What do you mean?" she said. She gave Samantha a stroke, but the dog was fixated on Derek's bad mood, and she didn't budge.

"The v-neck," Derek said. "It goes down too far, and you can see..." He pulled his fingers through his hair. His expression looked like cut glass, and he put his hands over his eyes like he didn’t want them to see.

A lump formed in her throat. She’d known the scar bothered him. She'd had no idea it bothered him this much. That he was too embarrassed to wear his normal work clothes. He was doing more and more surgeries, now, too, nothing solo, yet, but, still, scrubbing in. All the time. Something he couldn't skate through in a suit and tie, not for long procedures, which she supposed might be what had made this a pressing issue for him. Her eyes watered.

"Derek," she said, unsure of what to say. She thought back to the times she'd seen him in scrubs since the shooting. Nothing had pinged her radar of wrong, since wearing t-shirts under scrubs was something they all did when it was chilly, even her, but he'd worn a high-necked black t-shirt underneath every time.

Every. Freaking. Time.

"There’s other stuff we can do," Mark said, tearing Meredith from her recollections. He put a hand on Derek's shoulder and squeezed. "Nonsurgical stuff. Laser treatments. Those can reduce scar visibility by up to sixty percent. And the knob at the top will keep going down over time. It's already smaller."

"But... it will still be here."

"Yes. The scar will still be there," Mark said. "There's nothing magic that's going to take it away. Even a successful w-plasty would have left you with marks. C'mon, man. You know that."

Derek said nothing.

"Are you okay?" Meredith whispered. She tried to wrap her arms around him, but he shrugged her off, so she didn't press it.

"I just wanted..." he murmured.

"I know," Mark said. "I know, man."

"The scar revision for the bullet wound," Meredith said, worry encroaching. She looked over Derek's shoulder at Mark, eyebrows raised. "That will still work, won't it?"

"He’ll always have a little bit of a mark, but the fat graft should get rid of the skin crater," Mark said. "I don't have a problem with that. Just the w-plasty. Didn't Dr. Clemens tell you all this? It's sheer quackery if he didn't – I'll fire him."

"He told me," Derek said, the words quiet.

Mark looked crushed. "But you were hoping, anyway," he said. He grimaced. "Fuck!" He sighed. "Fuck, man. I'm sorry."
Meredith swallowed. Derek was like... the anti-Meredith when it came to probabilities. Meredith thought even good odds would turn against her. Derek thought even bad odds were a barrier he could break through.

"I can't wear my scrubs without a t-shirt underneath because I'm too fucking embarrassed," Derek said, the words thick and upset. "I can't change in the locker room at work. I can't take my shirt off when I'm jogging or at the gym. I can't go swimming."

Meredith blinked. She'd known he was self-conscious about it. Hell, he'd told her how much he hated it. But, for some reason, that hatred hadn't translated for her.

To her, the scar on his chest was a non-issue. It was a raised pink line, still, but his wispy chest hair covered a lot of it. There was a bit of a bump at the top of the line, a hard, raised knob just under his clavicles, a common deformity caused by the way the skin bunched at the top of a sternal incision, which, in Derek's case, had been done under less than ideal circumstances to begin with. But none of it mattered, to her. He was breathing. That mattered. Even if his chest were bald, and the scar wending between his pectorals were in plain sight, the mark wouldn't matter to her. When she looked at him, she didn't even think about it anymore. She didn't see scars. She saw Derek, whole and healed and hers.

She just needed him breathing.

"Please, don't be embarrassed," she said.

He swallowed. "Well, I am," he said, the words dark, his expression darker. "And I..." He looked at Mark. "I don't see how a botched w-plasty would make a fucking difference."

Mark regarded him for a long moment, thinking. "You think you're embarrassed, now? You'll feel worse if you get this done. I know. I see people all the time who are hoping I can fix some other surgeon's mistakes, and I have to tell them I can't. There's some magic that just can't be done. Look, man. Give the sternotomy scar a year to heal like I said. Do the laser corrections. I promise you'll like the result, and if I'm wrong, if I'm honestly wrong, I'll shut up about the w-plasty."

Derek fiddled with the placemat for a long, silent stretch of moments. His lower lip quivered. She wished she had any idea what to say to him. Anything. Anything that would make him feel better. But she had nothing.

His chair legs roared against the floor as he pushed it back and stood. He wiped his eyes. They were wet. Overflowing. "I'm going to bed," he said, and then he fled.

She watched him go, gaping. She heard him thump up the steps, and heard Samantha plodding after him. She heard a door slam. And then... silence.

"Jesus," Mark said. "I didn't want to..." The words trailed away into silence. He bunched his fists, and his temples danced as he clenched and unclenched his jaw. "Damn it."

"It's okay," Meredith said, head spinning. "I'm glad you caught it before he did something permanent."

"I'm not sure what good it did," Mark said, glowering. He put his head in his hands and huffed out a huge, depressed breath of air. "Fuck."

Meredith sighed. She was tired. She was tired, and now she was upset, and she had no idea what to do, and she was done with today. Just done with it. Baby kicked her for good measure as Meredith
struggled to get out of her chair. Mark helped. She was too tired to protest. Another kick. Baby was being really mean, today.

"You're welcome to stay," she said to Mark, and then she lumbered after Derek.

"Goodnight," Lexie called after her forlornly, and Meredith stopped on the stairs.

"Night, Lexie. Sorry to abandon you."

Lexie shrugged. "It's okay. I hope Derek feels better. I hope you feel better."

"Thanks," Meredith said.

She trudged up the rest of the steps. Derek was already in bed, curled up under a mound of covers with an armful of Samantha, whose broad black nose poked out from under the lip of the comforter. Meredith thought Derek might be asleep. He tended to collapse after emotional stress.

After using the bathroom, she eased her aching body into bed, facing Derek and the dog. She didn't have the heart to kick Samantha out of the bed, so the dog ended up sandwiched in the middle under the comforter, the middle participant in a strange threesome, but that was okay. Adding Samantha to their family had done wonders, and the dog deserved some bed snuggles occasionally. A man, a Rottweiler, and a pregnant whale walked into a bar, Meredith thought, and she snorted despite herself.

Derek wasn't sleeping. The covers shifted. He scooted closer, reaching across the dog's broad side to touch her. His hand rested under the bulge of their baby, his palm a ray of heat through her shirt. Baby tried another bladder punch, the punctuation at the end of a long litany of, "Mom! Mom! Mom! Hey, Mom! Mommmm! Yoohoo, I'm in here. MOM!" Meredith sighed with irritation. She was never going to get any sleep tonight if Baby didn't settle the hell down.

"Oh, wow," Derek said, the words a rough whisper, "Baby's going bonkers."

"She's been getting violent, lately," she replied with a sigh. "I feel like crap. I can't sleep when she's like this."

"I'm so sorry," he said. He stroked her skin. His eyes glittered in the dark. Her eyelids drooped, and she exhaled in a long, slow breath. "Can I do anything?" he added as she drifted.

"Do you know any magical hypnosis techniques that would put Baby to sleep?" She licked her lips and stared at him. "Like, are you a closet baby charmer? Is this something I have yet to learn about you?"

He snorted. "I wish."

She sighed. "Nobody ever mentioned the kicking could hurt. Everybody always made it sound so awesome," she said, grimacing. This wasn't that painful, yet. More irritating than anything else, unless Baby fixated on a particular spot. But Meredith shuddered to think of how this was going to feel in a month. "It's not awesome anymore, Derek. I object."

His free hand rested against her womb. He rubbed her belly. When a foot moved somewhere within her womb, his fingers tightened. "Hey, give Mom a break," he said, a soft murmur, the same voice he used to talk hysterical people off ledges everywhere. Baby didn't seem to want to listen, though. Not even to The Voice. He pulled her hand to him, across the dog, and he kissed her fingers. "A few more weeks. You can do it, Mere."
"Can't you just take Baby out, now?" she whined. "You're a surgeon."

He laughed, the sound a bit hollow, but a laugh nonetheless, which was what she'd been hoping for. He helped her. She helped him. It was a thing.

"Are you okay?" she said, worried.

He was quiet. Quiet for a long time. And then he sighed. "I wish I could take something."

A lump formed in her throat. "But you're not going to."

"No," he said. "But I want to."

At least he was being honest. She took his hand and squeezed it. The dog snored between them.

He'd made her the potato chip casserole thing for dinner. The only other time he'd made the dish, they'd been fighting, one of the worst fights post-shooting that they'd ever had, and she hadn't had an opportunity to try the food. Well, she had, but she'd felt sick enough from the oppressive mood in the air that the food had tasted like it was competing for Seattle's best cardboard box. Things were on an even keel, this time, though, and it had felt nice letting him take care of her when she got home.

She felt tired. Tired, and fat, and ache-y. Six weeks, she told herself. Six. Just six. She could do six. Except these last few weeks seemed to be crawling slower than a glacier.

She shoveled a forkful of cheesy bliss into her mouth and sighed as she chewed. The dish contained egg noodles, heaping globs of sharp cheddar, chicken swapped in for what should have been tuna, because she couldn't stand tuna thanks to Baby, and potato chips. He'd made it for her on a lark when she'd told him to surprise her, which made her smile. This wasn't the sort of dish he'd ever make for himself. Just her.

They sat together at the little table in the kitchen sharing the moments as they passed. The room was warm from the oven, and the tantalizing scent of the casserole filled every nook and cranny in the kitchen. Murky, drizzly black hugged the house outside the windows. Lexie had gone for a rainy, late night jog, and Samantha had been more than happy to play the role of security on the endeavor. Alex was at work, which meant Meredith and Derek had the house to themselves for a little while.

He sat across from her with an uneaten plate of salad. He pushed soggy, vinaigrette covered spring mix around with his fork. A cherry tomato fell off the plate, but he didn't seem to notice. His gaze had a bit of a thousand yard stare quality to it, and she wondered if he was seeing the plate at all. While he'd made her the casserole, he hadn't been his usual chatty self. She thought he'd said perhaps three sentences since she'd waddled through the door two hours before.

"Derek, are you okay?" she said.

For a long time, he didn't respond, just stared. A swath of stubble covered his pale face, dark circles hugged his eyes, and his shoulders slumped, making him look careworn, like he had the weight of ten worlds crushing him into the chair. She stretched out her foot and pushed her toe against his leg, sliding it up under the leg of his jeans. The soft, wiry hair on his shin slipped under her bare toe pad.

"Psst," she said.

He looked up. "I'm sorry, what?" he said, and she dropped her foot back to the floor.
"You're not eating," she replied. "You haven't eaten." She glanced at the clock. Almost 8:00 pm. "You're running out of time before you need to fast." He wasn't supposed to eat after midnight.

Derek looked at his plate, and his lip curled in what looked like disgust. "I don't..." He swallowed. "I don't want anything."

"Which brings me back to, are you okay?" she said, but he didn't have an immediate answer for her.

She didn't like the troubled look on his face. He was too pale, and his lips had stretched into a thin, flat line. A quiet tink, tink, tink-ing noise filled the silence, and she looked down to see his fork hitting the edge of the plate. He was freaking shaking. She hadn't seen this in... months. This was what panic attacks looked like on him just before he forgot how to breathe. She scooted her chair around, put her hand on his knee, and squeezed.

"Hey..." she said, worried. His threadbare jeans were soft under her fingertips as she stroked his thigh. "What's wrong? Take a deep breath."

He blinked, and his eyes got wet, but he didn't say anything. He took a wispy, breathless breath and looked away from her. He dropped the fork on the plate and raised his palms to his face.

"I can't," he said, the words a torn whisper. "I can't... I..."

"Derek," she said, almost a snap. "Derek, you need to look at me, and you need to breathe. You're fine." She squeezed his shoulder. "You're fine. You're safe."

His slip into panic land ended in three pounding heartbeats, like he'd been riding a mountain bike on a steep trail over a ravine, the front wheel had slipped into dead air, and he'd lost control for a moment, but after some wrangling, he'd managed to get back onto solid ground. He took a deep, slow breath and blew it out, and then he slumped.

"I'm okay," he croaked. "I'm fine."

She rolled her eyes. "In what universe is this okay?"

"I'm..." He swallowed thickly. "I'm fine. I just can't... think about... that." He gave her a watery smile that ended up looking ghastly because of his pallor. "Want to distract me?"

"I want you to tell me what's going on," she said. "What can't you think about?"

"Tomorrow," he said. He sighed. His hands wouldn't stop shaking. "I can't think about..."

She bit her lip. Tomorrow.

Tomorrow was his plastic surgery. He'd scratched the w-plasty from the docket, but he still wanted to get work done on the bullet wound. Dr. Clemens would be using fat taken from Derek's lower abdomen to fill up the crater the bullet had left. The bullet scar was small. Dr. Clemens would only need a dollop of fat to fill the depression, which was good, since Derek only had about that much fat to begin with. The graft wouldn't get rid of the scar, but it would make the skin more uniform and the scar a lot less noticeable. Bullet wounds were tiny things, and a lot of different procedures could be done to hide them.

"You don't have to do this, now," she said. "It's okay. If you're not ready—"

He wiped his face with his palms and peered over his fingers at her. "I do need to do this, now," he
said. "I do." His eyes squeezed shut. "I just want it over." He swallowed. "I need this over, so I can stop... thinking." He looked away. "This is the last place he's still hurting me, Meredith."

"The scar?" she said.

He looked at her. "No, I have this... memory. Every time I walk into an operating room. I'm sick, and cold, and helpless, and everything hurts. I can't breathe, and I can hear you talking to me, but I can't do anything about it. I'm looking up at the lights, and I know I'm going to die, and..."

She blinked. They'd stripped him because his clothes had been sticky and caked with blood. He'd been shivering, and April had found a blanket for him. For a while, he'd been able to talk with Meredith and joke about elevator sex. But he hadn't been able to breathe, and he'd exchanged regaling her with bad jokes for strained gasping. She'd been terrified that she'd end up watching him suffocate as his chest filled up with blood, denying his lungs the ability to inflate. He'd been conscious in the sense that his eyes had been open, but even when the anesthesiologist had been pricking him over and over and over trying to find a good vein for the intravenous line, he hadn't reacted. He'd just gasped for air, and he'd stared at the ceiling, and he'd shivered. She'd had no idea he could remember any of that. She'd had no idea he'd heard her talking to him.

A golfball sized lump formed in her throat. "You still have the phobia about the operating room?" she said.

"Yes," he admitted.

"But you've been cutting again," she said. "You scheduled your plastic surgery. I thought..."

"I can usually push it away, but it's still there," he said. He swallowed, and he looked at her. "I'm worried... that I won't be able to push it away tomorrow. Being on the table instead of over it..." He shook his head. His hands were shaking again, and she grabbed them. Held them. "It fucking scares me, Meredith," he said, looking down at their intertwined hands. "I'm scared."

Her eyes watered, and her lower lip trembled. Hearing him say that made her heart hurt. She dropped his hands and wrapped her arms around him. His whole frame shook. "I'm here. I'll be there. The whole time," She'd already talked to Dr. Clemens, and he would be letting her sit with Derek inside the OR, right by Derek's head, just like Derek had done for her when she'd had part of her liver removed for Thatcher's sake. "Mark's going to be there, too," she said. "You'll be fine. We won't let anything happen."

"I know," Derek said. He pulled back to give her a wavering smile. "Thanks."

"You really remember me talking to you?"

"Yes," he said. "I could still hear."

"Right before they put you out, you weren't looking at the ceiling. You were looking at me."

"Yes," he said.

"That was you. You remember that."

"Yes," he said.

She blinked, and a pair of tears cut slivers down her cheeks. She'd stroked his hair, she'd told him it would be over soon, and she'd told him she loved him. And he'd heard all that.
"What's wrong?" Derek said.

She sucked in a breath and wiped her eyes. "I don't know. It's just nice to know you heard me. I love you."

"I love you, too," he murmured against her skin, and he kissed her.

The world fuzzed for a moment, and she sighed, resting in his space. *Want to distract me?* he'd said. As much as she loved him, the idea of sex right now repulsed her, but she could still distract.

"What do you think of Piper?" she said.

He changed gears with her in moments, no confusion written on his face. She watched his mouth move as he sounded it out. Piper Grey-Shepherd. Piper Shepherd-Grey. "It's pretty," he said. "But it doesn't..." He gestured futilely, but couldn't come up with a word.

"Pop?" Meredith finished for him.

He shook his head. "No, definitely not. What about Isabelle?"

The name caught her by surprise. "You want to name the baby after Izzie?"

"Well," he said, pausing, "I admit I wasn't even thinking of her when I said it, but I wouldn't be against it. Why, do you want to?"

She shook her head. Izzie had... left. She'd left, just like everybody else did, and she'd never sent any letters, never sent a forwarding address. She'd cut all ties, left Alex in ruins, and the last words she'd ever said to Meredith... *It's just a place I worked, and I can do that anywhere.* Cold. Meredith shuddered as she watched that bridge burn in her head. "No. No, I don't think so. She left."

Derek nodded. "She did. Sorry, I wasn't thinking about it."

Which made some amount of sense. Izzie had been one of Derek's first dissenters, back when she'd thought Meredith was only fucking her boss to get ahead, not in the horrible process of falling in love. Derek and Izzie had never been close, even after that perceptual hurdle had been cleared. Cordial, yes. Close, no. Meredith sighed and wrapped her arms around him.

"That's okay," she said. "You have a lot on your mind. Maybe, Emma?"

He made a weird gagging nose in his throat. "God, no," he said. "Definitely not."

She frowned at him. "Is there a story, here?"

His face mottled with red. "Well..."

"Oh, there is," she said, her frown slipping away, bulldozed by delight. She scrunched a tent of his shirt between her fingers. "You have to tell me!"

He laughed. "Oh, do I?"

She nodded. "Yes. You still owe me a story."

"We're back to story swapping, now, are we?"

"We're married," she said. "I don't think the story swapping ever stops, does it?"
"Touché," he said with an easy smile. "You realize that means if I tell you, you'll owe me a story next, right?"

She looked at him through her eyelashes. "Yes."

"She was somebody I knew back in college," Derek said. "My first girlfriend."

"Ohhh," Meredith said. "Your _first_ girlfriend? How did she produce that gurgle of dread?"

He blinked. "Gurgle of dread?"

"Yes," she said, laughing. "When I first said her name, you almost gagged."

"Well, she was... a neat freak."

"Derek," Meredith said, "I hate to break this to you, but you're a neat freak."

He snorted. "I'm neat, but I'm not a freak about it."

"All I have to do to when I want you distracted is tip a lampshade somewhere in your field of view," Meredith said.

"Yes, but I don't iron our sheets, do I?" Derek said. "And I don't throw tantrums when you move my toothpaste. And when you leave stuff out, I just pick it up. I don't lecture you for twenty minutes about every infinitesimal infraction."

Meredith gaped. "She ironed sheets? The ones you sleep on?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes. And she dumped me when I put one of her shirts back in the wrong color section of her closet."

"Color section," Meredith said, eyes creasing. "Like, what, did you put a black shirt in with the yellow ones?"

He shook his head. "Oh, no. That might almost be reasonable. No, I apparently can't tell red from scarlet."

"Wow," Meredith said. What a crazy... "I don't think I can tell red from scarlet, either."

"And this," he said. He pressed his lips against her temple, kissing her. "Is why I love you."

She grinned. "What I want to know is how in the hell you ended up dating this woman in the first place."

"She asked me out out of the blue," Derek said, thinking. "Right after Bio. I'd never gotten much attention before. I didn't know her, and she was a knockout, and my brain shut down. I didn't find out about her organizational proclivities until a few dates later."

She rested her head on his shoulder, trying to imagine it. And then it struck her. He'd said this was in college. "Your first girlfriend wasn't until college?" she said. She'd lost her virginity at fourteen.

He shrugged. "I was a late bloomer, Meredith."

"When was your first time?" she said.

He was silent for a long time.
She swallowed. She couldn't imagine him waiting. He was entirely too lecherous to wait. He didn't approve of Mark's revolving door approach to women, so she could see him as a serial monogamist. But she couldn't see him waiting. Still... "Was it Addison?"

He shook his head. "No." He gave her a lop-sided smile. "No, I didn't wait that long. I was a late bloomer, not a monk. And I didn't meet Addison until medical school."

"So, when?" Meredith prodded. "I told you mine."

"It was Emma," he said, not looking at her. "There was a reason I gagged when you said her name."

"Oh, boy," Meredith said. "I take it it didn't go well?"

He snorted. "Do first times ever go well?"

She giggled. "Okay, you have a point."

"Let's just say I found out about her psychotic level of neat freakiness because of the way she cleaned up afterward."

She burst out laughing. "Oh, god, Derek."

He nodded, sharing her humor despite the stoplight red blooming all over his face and neck. "Yes. Yes, sex is messy, and I may be scarred for life."

She nuzzled him. "I don't know. You seem to have turned out okay."

"You think so?" he said.

"Yes," she said. And she sighed. "So, emphatically not Emma." She crossed the name off her mental list.

He grunted in agreement. His body was lax in her arms. He wasn't shaking anymore. Wasn't jittery. He seemed content.

"Elizabeth?" she said, thinking.

"Mmm," he said. "Maybe. Beatrice?"

"Nah." She yawned. "Charlotte?"

He laughed. "After my old dog? No, thanks."

"Oh, yeah," she said. "Forgot about Charlotte."

It felt like they talked for hours, discussed the merits of hundreds of names, swapped stories until her head got fuzzy with a need for sleep. Lexie came home and joined them at the table around 8:45 to eat some of the arterial-death-by-potato-chip. Samantha wandered off to her crate to sleep. Derek began picking at his salad around nine, long after it'd become a not-crunchy, icky mess. He only managed a few bites, but that made her feel better about his state of mind. They changed tracks and discussed boys' names around ten, but by ten-thirty, both of them were falling asleep at the table, and Lexie told them to go to bed, or else, so, they did. And by eleven, they were both sound asleep.

She found him standing naked in their bedroom by the mirror, staring at his chest with a hateful
gaze. The darkness in the room had turned his blue eyes black. He didn't look up as she stepped inside the room and closed the door behind her. Didn't speak. He pressed his fingers to his chest and traced his sternotomy scar with the tips of his fingers.

She stepped behind him, but her stomach prevented her from spooning him like she wanted to. Instead, she shifted to the side, and she wrapped an arm around his waist. She kissed his shoulder.

"Are you okay?" she said. He'd been moody. Moody and unhappy for several days. Ever since Mark had brought reality down on him like a ton of bricks.

Derek's gaze shifted, and he met her eyes in the mirror. "I was stupid to think I could just get rid of it." He said the word stupid like he meant it as a curse word. His eyes narrowed, and his lip curled with unhappiness.

She couldn't take it anymore. She stepped in front of him, blocking his view of the scar. "I know you hate it, but it doesn't make a difference to me," she said. She kissed him. Kissed the nub between his clavicles that he loathed. Kissed the entire wending line in a slow trail of lip presses down his chest. "None of this does. I love you. I desire you." She looked up at him so he could see her expression. He was buck naked, and lust came to an easy boil in her body. It wasn't hard to show him what she meant. "I think you're very sexy."

The anger in his gaze broke, finally, and he swallowed. He sniffed and wiped his eyes. "I... talked," he said, the word falling apart. He cleared his throat. "I've been talking. With Dr. Wyatt. About it."

She raised her eyebrows. "Oh?"

"I would think you looked just as beautiful as the day I met you, even if you had this scar, even if it was worse than this," he said. "And I wouldn't think less of a stranger. I'd just think he or she had... heart surgery." The words trembled, and when he blinked, his eyes seemed wet.

Meredith blinked. "She thinks you're doing the sunglasses thing with your scar?"

"No, but framing it that way helps a little," he said.

"That's good."

He looked at the mirror with a sigh. "It's a blemish, yes," he said. "But it's not grotesque. It's a story. We all have stories."

"That's a great way to look at it," she said. She kissed him.

He sighed. "I wish I believed it."

"You'll work on it," she said. "Just like you have with everything else. And I'll be here."

"Yeah," he said. Something thick stuck in his throat, and he made a deep, upset sound.

"C'mon," she said, squeezing his shoulders. "Let's try to get some sleep, okay?"

She met his eyes. He nodded. And then he followed.

When her alarm shrieked the arrival of 7:00 am, she slapped at her clock before it managed to belt out more than a syllable, and she lay quietly for a moment. Rain pattered softly against the windowpanes. Derek lay beside her, one arm draped over her hip, body pressed against her back. She could tell without looking that he wasn't asleep, just from the sound of his breathing. The hairs
on the back of her neck tingled in a way that told her she was being watched, too. She squeezed his hand. Despite him being curled up under a comforter with her, his skin felt frozen.

"How long have you been awake?" she said.

She heard him swallow. "Since three or so," he croaked. "I kept having nightmares."

Her eyes pricked. So, he'd backslid from the relaxed demeanor she'd managed to get him to before bed. She hadn't heard him suffering at all last night, hadn't noticed he wasn't sleeping when she'd gotten up to pee an hour or two ago. He hadn't had nightmares in months. He'd been great for months. His stomach rumbled in the silence. He'd had all of four bites of salad in about eighteen hours. So, he was going to be tired, thirsty, and hungry going into this surgery that already scared him so much he'd nearly had a panic attack about it, and he couldn't have any anxiolytics, because he was an addict, and giving him narcotics would be bad. This was a great freaking recipe for success.

With an awkward, cursing struggle, she managed to roll over to face him. He peered at her, smiled when she met his eyes, but didn't speak. She pressed her palm against his t-shirt. She could feel the crater of the bullet hole through the fabric.

To her, visually, the scar was a pencil-eraser-sized discolored spot with jagged edges, barely anything worth mentioning, but she had to admit it was like a bullhorn to the touch, loud and obvious. When she pressed, she could even feel the damage that had been done to his rib. The bone hadn't broken on penetration, but the bullet had nicked the edge on the way in. In fact, his rib was probably what had caused the bullet to bounce toward his heart. The plastic surgery he was getting wouldn't fix the bone, but the dip in his skin would be gone.

He put his hand over hers, stopping her exploration, and he leaned forward to kiss her forehead.

"I won't tell you that I'm fine, because I'm obviously not," he said, voice rough. "But this is something I need to have done. I need it, Meredith. I'll make myself get used to the sternotomy scar if I have to, but this?" He pressed her fingertips against him. Her ring finger sank into the crater. "He did this to me, it's easy to fix, and I don't want it there."

She swallowed. "I know."

He pushed his fingers through her hair, and her eyelids dipped. "Just help me not think about it, okay?"

"I can do that," she said, smiling. "What do you think about Max?"

"For a boy or a girl?" he said.

"Max can be for a girl?" Meredith said, frowning.

He shrugged. "Maxine."

"Oh," she said. "Well, I meant for a boy."

"I like it," he said. "Cameron?"

She winced. "No. Definite veto."

"Oh?" he said, giving her a grin, "Do tell. You owe me one."
"Cameron introduced me to tequila," she said.

"Boyfriend?" he said.

"No," she said. "More like my party coordinator. He also introduced me to gin, and cigarettes, and ecstasy, and a couple other things."

His eyebrows raised. "You've done ecstasy?"

She shrugged. "Yes." In Europe, particularly. But she'd met Cameron in high school. Her adult life had started years before most peoples' did. "But don't ask for the story, because most of it is a legitimate blackout."

"Hmm," he said.

"I told you, Derek," she said. "There's not really any dark-and-twisty you can pull on me that I haven't done, too. Or at least thought about doing."

"You were never an addict," he said.

She shook her head. "I never got the point where I physically needed something. But I wouldn't say being familiar with blackouts is a good thing."

"No," he said. "It's not." He kissed her. "Mon petit délinquant."

"What's that mean?" she said.

He grinned. "My little delinquent."

She punched him gently in the shoulder. "How do you say cocky bastard?"

"Cocky bastard," he said, laughing.

She punched him again. "In French, jackass."

"Umm," he said, thinking. "Bâtard témoignant d'une assurance exagérée. I think." And then he frowned. "No, wait. That's kinda circuitous. Maybe, bâtard arrogant."

She blinked. "That. You're that." She grinned. "Where did you learn French so fluently?"

"That," he said, kissing her, "would be a result of the depths I sunk to get girlfriend number two."

"Your second girlfriend was French?" Meredith said.

"No," he said. "From Québec. And after we broke up, Mark stole my motorcycle to chase after her for himself, and he never even paid for the gas."

Meredith snorted. "What was her name?"

"Liliane."

"Okay, then," Meredith said. "No Lily on the girls' names list, then."

"Agreed," he said.

She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. "What was Liliane like? Was she neurotic, too?"
"No," Derek said. "That relationship lasted seven months."

"Why'd you break up?"

"I transferred out of Bowdoin to go to Columbia, and we both hated the long distance thing. We tried, but it just didn't work."

Meredith glanced at the clock. 7:30. They really needed to get up. But this was nice. Just lying here and talking and... being. The covers made everything so warm. She noticed his hands had warmed up, too. She was a damned good distractor, if she did say so herself. When her second alarm went off at 7:45, though, she had to admit defeat. They had to be at the hospital in forty-five minutes, and they weren't even out of bed yet.

They both took quick showers as they traded more names back and forth. He threw on an old, threadbare pair of button-fly jeans and a t-shirt. He didn't normally go to the hospital in such slobbish clothes, but she supposed he was opting for comfort in light of the fact that he'd be getting cut into in an hour or two. He watched through his fingers as she inhaled a muffin. His stomach kept rumbling, and she felt a bit guilty, so she ended up eating the whole muffin in about five monstrous bites.

He drove them to the hospital. She'd avoided driving once she'd hit the second trimester, and stopped altogether once she'd hit the third. She'd read too many horror stories to want to risk it. Between all her friends, she'd been managing to bum rides on the days her schedule didn't line up with Derek's. Derek would be stoned and unable to drive on the way home, but Mark had offered to drive on the way back.

Though Derek got quieter the closer they got to the hospital, she managed to keep up a running dialog, until the parking lot. "What about Stewart?" Meredith said as he parked the car. Derek didn't reply. He stared through the windshield, unblinking, spacey. She reached across the parking brake with a struggling grunt and put her hand on his knee. "Derek?"

"Hmm?" he said, flinching back to life. "Sorry. What?"

"Stewart," she said.

He frowned. "That sounds... familiar."

"I don't know a Stewart," Meredith said. "Do you know a Stewart?"

He thought for a long time and eventually shrugged. "Maybe, in another life or something."

"Maybe," Meredith said. She grinned. "Or as an alternate you."

He didn't meet her smile. "Yeah," he said, the word shaky and soft as he peered at the hospital in the distance, beyond a dozen rows of parked cars. He unclipped his seatbelt, pushed the door open, and slid out of the car into the sort of drizzle.

She climbed out of the car awkwardly and followed. He stopped midway down the walk that sprawled between the hospital and the parking lot. The entrance loomed beyond them.

"Doing okay?" she said.

He glanced at her and gave her a weak grin. "I think you might have to push me."

The early March air was crisp and wet, and the sky was a dreary gray. The drizzle came in misty
spurts, now, and it had rained all night. Puddles formed everywhere in the muddy grass and in the dips in the sidewalks. She brushed her fingers through his damp hair and then clutched the lapels of his green windbreaker. He leaned close, and pressed his nose to hers. They kissed.

"You'll be fine," she assured him. "I'm here."

He didn't have much to say to that other than a shaky, "Hmm." But he did start walking under his own power again.

The new security at the hospital entrance was a bit of an annoyance, but they made it through to the admission desk for outpatient surgery with a few seconds to spare, even with a side trip to pick up freshly sterilized scrubs for Meredith. They were technically on time, and the woman at the desk gave them a thousand watt smile.

"Good morning, Dr. Shepherd," she said. She glanced at Meredith. "Hi, Dr. Grey." She glanced at Derek's attire, and then at Meredith's. "Not working today?"

Melinda was her name. Or Merry. Or something starting with an M-e- other than Meredith. Meredith couldn't put her finger on it, and the lapels of the woman's silk blouse obscured her name tag. Meredith glanced at Derek, but he'd sunk into a black hole of nerves the moment they'd passed the hospital's threshold. He swallowed, but said nothing.

"We're here for Derek," Meredith said, frowning. "You have his paperwork, right?" Mark and Lexie, though Derek didn't know about Lexie, had both agreed to run interference to keep people out of the gallery while Derek was in surgery. She wondered if the interference had extended to nosy administrative staff.

The receptionist blinked. Then she looked down at her files. She shuffled them until the folder labeled D. Shepherd sat on the top. And then looked back at Derek. "Oh, this is you! I didn't make the connection." She gave them a sheepish grin. "Well, I feel silly."

She proffered a pile of paperwork to Derek. Derek flinched backward an inch and didn't reach to take it, so Meredith grabbed it for him. She frowned at Derek. A near panic attack, nightmares, and a visible, negative reaction to another person encroaching in his personal space... all things Derek hadn't exhibited in months.

She knew he wanted to get this surgery done. She knew it, and she supported him. But she wondered, not for the first time since last night, if, perhaps, this was a catastrophically bad idea to do today.

A nurse carrying Derek's chart showed them into the outpatient wing. The nurse was one of the new hires that had been flooding the hospital with the recent employment drives Seattle Grace had been doing, courtesy of Mr. Pruitt's advice. Meredith didn't know the woman. Derek didn't seem to, either. And the nurse went through the rote steps of admission with little indication that she knew who they were.

That was good, Meredith thought. Derek would appreciate the anonymity.

"Do you need to use the restroom, Dr. Shepherd?" the nurse said. "This is your last chance for about two hours."

"No," he said, the word flat and tight as the moved down the long white hallway through a pair of double doors. "I'm good."

The room Derek was led to was more of a cubicle surrounded by a drab, pinkish-colored curtain
than an actual room. Twelve similar cubicles lined the large room around the edges, and in the middle of the room stood a nurses' station like an island. There was a hospital bed inside Derek's assigned cubicle, along with a stool, another chair, and miscellaneous medical equipment. A clean, crisply folded hospital gown rested on top of the blue thermal blanket that hugged the bed.

The nurse pulled a plastic bracelet from the sheaf of papers included with Derek's chart, and affixed it to his wrist. Derek's name was typed on the band to the left of a color-coded square indicating a sulfa-drug allergy. Derek's gaze twitched to his wrist and then twitched away, and Meredith got the worrisome impression of some little kid on a playground going, "La la la, can't hear you!" The nurse told him to change into the gown, and that she'd be back with the anesthesiologist in a few minutes.

When the nurse left, Dr. Clemens arrived to say hello before the curtains had even stopped fluttering behind her. Dr. Clemens was a younger, rotund man with a beaky nose, who Meredith stood eye-to-eye with, even without wearing heels. He had reddish-blonde hair, a round face, and a ruddy, Santa Claus complexion that made him seem permanently cheerful.

"Dr. Shepherd, Dr. Grey, good morning," Dr. Clemens said.

Derek sat on the lip of the bed and folded his arms. He gave Dr. Clemens a smile that screamed I'm-not-happy-to-be-here-can-we-hurry-this-up. "Dr. Clemens," he said in a breathy voice.

"I just wanted to see if you had any last minute questions for me," Dr. Clemens said.

Derek shook his head. "I'm good," he said, like he only had a handful of phrases he was capable of uttering, kind of like a magic eight ball. He stared at the floor.

Meredith couldn't stand it anymore, couldn't stand watching him be shaky and frail and nervous whenever she wasn't babbling his ear off with name ideas. She turned to Dr. Clemens. "Can you give him some alprazolam or something?"

Derek snapped out of his daze. "Meredith, no. I don't want to risk it. Not so soon after I quit."

"It'd just be this once," Meredith said. "You'd be supervised. Please, Derek, you're having issues today and yesterday that you haven't had in ages. I think you need it."

Dr. Clemens frowned and pulled out his stethoscope. "May I?" he said.

Derek nodded, and he stood rigidly, trembling, as Dr. Clemens pushed up Derek's shirt and listened. Dr. Clemens's frown deepened as the moments passed, and Derek's eyes got wet.

"Please, I can calm down," Derek said. "I'm fine."

"Well, I admit, this is troubling," Dr. Clemens said. "Your heart rate is elevated. And I imagine if I took your blood pressure, that would be skyrocketing." He looked at Derek apologetically. "I know you have concerns, given your history of substance abuse, but I think a small dose of alprazolam might be in your best interest." He glanced at Meredith, and then back to Derek. "I assure you, it's safe. We do this all the time."

"I'm fine," Derek snapped. "Just let me change, and I'll fix it."

Silence stretched as Dr. Clemens considered. "Okay," Dr. Clemens said, the word slow. "Well, we still have some time. I'll give you a few minutes, but if I don't see some improvement, we're going to have to have a chat."
Derek glared at Meredith as Dr. Clemens left through the curtain, an unhappy *et tu, Brute* expression on his face, but she refused to apologize for being the freaking smart one. He stripped naked, putting his windbreaker and clothes in the bin below the bed, and then he unfolded the hospital gown with tight, jerking motions. The harsh, fluorescent light in the small cubicle made his scars look far worse than they were in reality, emphasized and harsh against his pale skin. Or, maybe, she was just imagining things because of the tension and anger he was radiating like a heater. The white and blue hospital gown was awkward. The ties connected the front and back panels over his arms and shoulders and along his sides, so that the gown could be pulled down during surgery. He shrugged into the gown, fighting to get it straight, and she resisted the urge to help him. When he sat on the bed, he looked frail and awful, and his limbs were shaking. The dark circles under his eyes from his next-to-sleepless night didn't help the overall picture, either.

"I can do this, Meredith," he said, an unhappy grumble. "I can do this without drugs."

"Prove it to me," Meredith said. "And I'll shut up."

"I can't afford to backslide right now," he said. His teeth chattered with stress. "You're having the baby in—"

She pulled him into her arms. "You wouldn't backslide," she said. "We wouldn't let you."

"Damn it," he snapped. "I don't want alprazolam!"

She swallowed as he pulled away. He lay back on the bed, yanking the blanket over his bare legs and feet, and he closed his eyes. His breathing changed into the slow rhythm she'd learned to recognize. Breathe in for three. Breathe out for three.

She sighed, taking a moment to rip the plastic on the pristine package containing her clean scrubs and change while he cooled down. She put her things in the bin with Derek's junk. Then she sat down on the bed by his hip and grabbed his cold, trembling hand.

"I'm sorry," she said. She squeezed his palm. "I'm just worried about you. I love you, so I worry."

His eyelids opened partway, and he stared at her through his eyelashes. "I know. It's okay. I'm sorry I snapped." He sighed. "I'm tired."

"How can I help?" she said, stroking his thumb.

A small smile twitched at his lips. "Tell me why you vetoed Jamie. Is there a story, there?" He kept breathing. In and out and in and out.

"You'll laugh," Meredith said.

Derek's grin widened. "Well, laughing is better than panicking, isn't it?"

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. It's because he's one of my favorite characters in my favorite book series, and I can't imagine naming our son after a kilted highland warrior who I'd really like to find naked in my bathtub someday."

She was right. He laughed. It was a brilliant sound after such a tense night and such a tense morning. The sound lit up the silence around them like a bell. "Naked in your bathtub, really?" he said. And then he smirked. "I could be naked in your bathtub, later. If you'd like a substitute sans kilt."

She squeezed his hand. "I might take you up on that. Preferably after the sedatives wear off."
He snickered. "Wouldn't want me falling asleep on you, would we?"

"Wouldn't want you drowning," she countered. "That bathtub has already nearly claimed one of us."

Her mouth fell open when she realized what she'd said, but he took it in stride. Maybe, he wasn't as nervous as he looked, after all. He gave her a lazy smile. "Heaven forbid we add yet another near death experience to this family." He put the flat of his palm against her abdomen. Baby kicked, as if she could feel his hand, too. "I think we've met our quota."

Meredith stared at his hand. Family. Her eyes pricked. She really liked the sound of that. "Heaven forbid," she echoed, the words soft.

"So," he said once the silence had ripened. "I guess this means we can't name our son Wrath, either."

She laughed at him. He remembered the book she'd been reading while they'd been out on Lake Cushman. He'd been reading over her shoulder. They'd argued about one of the sex scenes and whether it was possible, which they'd later proven through experimentation that, yes, it was possible, but only because she was very freaking flexible.

"Definitely not," Meredith said. "And not Rhage, or Tohrment, or Zsadist, or Phury, either."

He snorted. "Seriously, Meredith, that series sounds awful."

"I don't read it for literary enlightenment," she replied, and he winked at her.

He was a chatty guy. She wasn't chatty, but he could come up with a conversation out of thin air, and with aplomb and little effort, he always managed to get her discussing nothing at all for minutes on end. She liked killing time with him.

You know you're my best friend, right? he'd said in the car on the way home from the hospital, what felt like an eternity ago.

She leaned down and kissed him. She was met with warmth, and she kind of wished they were still at home, in their bed, under the toasty covers.

"Okay, you two," Mark said as he pushed through the curtain, "break it up."

Meredith pulled back, brushing her lips with the back of her palm. "Hi, Mark," she said as she sat up straight.

"How's it going?" Mark said.

Derek shrugged. "It's going." His steady, even breathing continued between words.

"So, I have a serious question."

Meredith raised her eyebrows. "What is it?"

"Does a three month anniversary warrant a gift? What's the protocol? It's coming up, soon."

"I'm surprised you even remember the date," Derek said with a wry grin.

Mark rolled his eyes. "It's not hard to count three months out from Christmas, man."
"I don't think three month anniversaries are a thing," Meredith said. "Are they a thing?" She looked at Derek, who was far more romantically-oriented than she'd ever been. And then she blinked. Derek was the only man she'd ever spent three months with, come to think of it. Huh. Who'd have thunk? "If they're a thing, Derek totally forgot, so, I think he's a bad person to ask."

Derek snorted. "I'm pretty sure they're not a thing. But you could get Lexie something nice, anyway."

Mark nodded. "Like what?"

"I don't know," Derek said. "What does she like?"

Mark thought for a moment. "Sex."

Derek shared a glance with Meredith. Meredith fought not to snicker. Lexie? She liked all the gooey and romantic crap that Meredith only tolerated for Derek's sake. "Maybe," Meredith said, "you could take her out to dinner and, I don't know, talk. To find out what stuff she likes."

"Hmm," Mark said. "That's kind of good."

Derek nodded. "Sage advice," he said, lip twitching like he wanted to laugh.

The curtain rustled, and Dr. Clemens reappeared with the anesthesiologist in tow. The anesthesiologist was a willowy, quiet, black-haired man named Dr. Nguyen, who Meredith had met over the course of many surgeries. She liked him, but he was like her. Very not chatty. So, she'd never gotten to know him well. Dr. Clemens looked around at the three of them, but focused on Derek, who was smiling, and relaxed. Dr. Clemens nodded, and Dr. Nguyen pulled up a stool next to Derek's bed like a quiet wraith. Dr. Nguyen needed to set up the intravenous line, which was what they'd use to deliver sedatives once Derek was in the OR. Derek's gaze twitched to the needle as he held out his arm.

"How about Logan?" Meredith said. If she could just keep Derek distracted for a few more minutes, he'd be in the OR, and they'd be putting him under, and this would all be done. Once Derek was under, he'd be too out of it to care or worry. "Or Gabriel?"

"Oh," Mark said, "still talking names? How about Mark?"

"Meredith doesn't want to name the kid after anybody she knows," Derek said. He turned to Meredith, his attention drawn from the anesthesiologist. His expression didn't change as the needle broke skin. "I like Gabriel. That's a good one. Not Logan, though."

Meredith grinned. "Do you like Gabriel more or less than Adam?"

"More, I think," Derek said.

"Isn't Adam the cop?" Mark said. He turned to Derek. "You just said you don't want to name the kid after anybody Meredith knows."

Meredith shrugged. "Adam's not really family," she clarified.

Mark blinked. "I'm family?"

"Yes," she said. Him and Derek and Lexie and Cristina and Alex. All of them. Her family by choice. The best kind to have, she was convinced.
Before Mark could respond, Dr. Nguyen rolled his stool back, pulled off his gloves, and stood. "All set, Dr. Shepherd," he said, a low murmur. The intravenous line was done. The needle went into the back of Derek's left hand. Dr. Nguyen smiled and gave Derek a polite nod. "See you in a few minutes."

As soon as Dr. Nguyen left, the nurses came to move Derek to the OR. "I'll see you guys in a bit," Mark said. He banged his fist against the bed railing. "You'll be fine," he said to Derek. "I'll go shove people out of the gallery, now." Before he left, he turned to Meredith, and he gave her a bright smile that crinkled around his eyes just like Derek's did. "Thanks," Mark said.

She gave him a warm look as he departed. She turned back to Derek as the nurses pushed the bed out of the cubicle. She glanced down the hallway. They had a corner to turn, and then they'd be right by the doors to OR 1.

She waddled along side the bed, left hand resting on the bed railing. "Aaron?" she said. "What about that one?"

"I like Aaron, too," Derek said, looking up at the ceiling. He sounded... not as good as he had a few minutes earlier, but not panicky. Not upset, yet. "Blake?"

Meredith nodded. "Good one, but less good than Adam."

"How about Devon?" said one of the nurses.

"Or Jackson," the second chimed in.

"No, they were on the right track," the third said, shaking his head. "I vote Blake."

Derek grinned. "I think I like Gabriel the best so far."

They rounded the corner. "So," Meredith said, "we're at Gabriel or Adam for a boy?"

"Mmm," Derek said, as they wheeled him into the OR. "Maybe I'll think of something else while I'm out. I'll let you know when I wake up."

The air in the operating room was chilly, and Meredith shivered. She'd forgotten how cold they kept the operating rooms, or she would have brought an undershirt to wear under her scrubs. She looked longingly at the bin under Derek's bed, where her fleece sweatshirt resided. Not that she could use it in a sterile environment. Not that she could bend down that low without falling over and looking like an idiot. Not with Baby in the way. Oh, well. She glanced around. There was a stool set out right by the head of the operating table for her.

She didn't have to scrub in since she wouldn't be participating, just watching. She grabbed a surgical mask from the dispenser by the door and put it over her nose and mouth, watching as they had Derek shift off the bed and onto the table. He lay on his back and put his head on the rest. One of the nurses covered him up to his waist with a sterile blanket, and another put a nasal cannula over his face and clipped a pulse-ox monitor to his index finger. They rolled the bed away from the table, and Meredith sat down on the stool.

Dr. Clemens stood chatting with the anesthesiologist. Derek stared up at the lights. He swallowed. She leaned forward and pulled her fingers through his hair.

"Hey, I'm here," she said. "Right behind your head."

His gaze ticked backward, and he smiled at her. A weak smile, but a smile. "I'm good," he said. His
temples danced as he clenched and unclenched his jaw. He clutched at the thin blanket they'd given him. "But I hope they knock me out soon." He looked back at the lights, and a sound loitered in his throat. A bad, scared, upset one. But he took a deep breath and blew it out and seemed to relax again.

"I'm right here," she said again. "What about Annabelle?"

"Oh," Derek said, "we're back to girls' names?" Still okay, but a little worse.

Meredith bit her lip and glanced at Dr. Clemens, who was still chatting with Dr. Nguyen. The rest of the people in the room were still in the process of setting up, and they didn't make a habit of knocking patients out for longer than was necessary, but... a few extra minutes of twilight sedation wasn't going to make much of a difference. Twilight sedation didn't have the same risk profile as general anesthesia did. She waved at Dr. Nguyen and Dr. Clemens.

"I like Annabelle," Derek said, oblivious. "But not as much as Anne."

Dr. Clemens seemed to get what she was waving for, even without being asked, which she was thankful for. He mumbled something at Dr. Nguyen, who nodded and came to the table. "I'll start the drip," he told Meredith in a soft, reassuring voice. She sighed with relief.

"Ready, Dr. Shepherd?" Dr. Nguyen said.

"Yes," Derek said tightly. Meredith stroked his hair.

"Okay," Dr. Nguyen said, reaching for the intravenous line. "Count backward from ten."

"Ten," Derek said. "Nine. Eight." His eyes went glassy. "Seven. Six." And then his jaw went slack, and his body loosened. He'd been clutching the blanket with a white-knuckled grip, but he let go, and his fists fell to the wayside by his hips, fingers unclenching during the short fall. She could almost imagine his plug being pulled or something. "Five," he said, but the word stuck like taffy in his mouth. He blinked, the motion long and slow and disoriented. He didn't finish counting. He looked around at the people bustling around the room a bit drunkenly, but he didn't close his eyes.

"Derek, can you hear me?" she said.

"Yeah...," he replied, but he sounded out of it. Like, way out of it. Like, in the ozone out of it. For a moment, a sharp, clear memory of him stoned on Percocet slammed into her mind's eye, but she pushed it away with a deep breath. That was not the same as this. That was not even in the same realm. And by the time he woke up enough to remember things, he wouldn't remember being high.

"Are you comfortable, Dr. Shepherd?" Dr. Nguyen said, looking down at them.

Derek squinted. "Mark is in the ceiling."

Meredith followed Derek's gaze. Mark was up in the gallery, sitting in the middle seat, arms folded over his chest. His biceps bulged, and he was eyeballing Dr. Clemens like the guy was a little field mouse and Mark was the big, strapping eagle, or something. She imagined he'd be down in the operating room in less than a heartbeat if he thought Dr. Clemens wasn't doing something up to snuff, but for now, he sat still, an oppressive barrier to keep onlookers away, the only one there in the entire three rows of chairs. When Meredith tipped her head to the side, she saw a brown head of hair through the little window in the doorway to the gallery. Lexie, she guessed. Lexie had wanted to help, too, but knew Derek didn't want this to be a production, so she hadn't said anything to him.

"Yeah, Mark's playing bouncer for you, remember?" Meredith said.
"Oh," Derek said, making it more than clear that he didn't remember one bit.

Meredith glanced at Dr. Nguyen. "Can you up the dosage a little?" she said. "He didn't want to be awake."

"If I go much more, it'll depress his respiratory system too much," Dr. Nguyen said. He looked at the intravenous drip and fiddled with it. "That's the max I'll allow without switching to a full oxygen mask. He'll probably fall asleep soon."

Meredith sighed. She'd seen enough people under this kind of sedation to know it was variable. Some people fell asleep. Some people stayed awake the whole time. Some people were too chatty, like drunks. Others went into zombie mode and didn't say much at all. Derek seemed like a minor version of awake, chatty drunk. Which she wasn't sure he'd appreciate if he had the faculties to care at the moment.

He blinked slowly, like his eyelids were glued to his lower eyelashes and weren't working right. He stared up at the lights. They seemed to be a trigger for him, from what she could tell. She hoped he was okay. He seemed okay. But who knew what he was thinking in this kind of impaired state?

The nurses put a sterile drape over his legs on top of the thermal blanket they'd given him, and then they set up a vertical drape by his clavicles that extended up about two feet. Enough to block his and her view of what was going on below his neck.

"What about Daphne?" he said, slurring a little.

"Daphne?" she said. Daphne was... She blinked. Daphne was pretty. And kind of unusual. She didn't know any Daphnes, not even by distant association. Daphne Shepherd-Grey had a great ring to it. Wow. And he'd come up with that stoned. "Do you know what it means?"

He didn't answer. He stared through his eyelashes at the lights overhead, blinking like his eyelids had weights taped to them. She wanted to grab his hand, but she wasn't situated in the right spot to do that. She settled for cupping his face. She slid her hand under the nasal cannula line, careful not to dislodge it, and she stroked his cheek.

"Laurel tree," one of the nurses said, eyes crinkling as she smiled behind her mask. "Or bay tree. It's from Greek mythology."

"I like it," Meredith said. She looked at him, her thumb brushing along his stubble. "Where'd you hear that one, Derek?"

"Oh, I dunno," he said, his tone so sing-song-y weird that she almost laughed at him. Almost.

"That's helpful, Derek, thanks," she said with a snort.

His gaze drifted back to her. "I'm sedated," he said seriously. "Gimmeabreak." He blinked, and blinked, and then his eyelids didn't come up a third time. His head tipped to the left into her hand, and he was out.

"There he goes," said Dr. Nguyen. "Sometimes, it takes a few minutes."

Meredith sighed. Good. This was good. She could ask Derek about the name later. He wouldn't remember any of this. And she didn't have to worry anymore if he was scared, just too impaired to express it. He was out, face slack, breaths thick and slow, and he looked peaceful. Relaxed. She pulled her fingers through his hair again. An hour and they'd be done, and Derek would be in recovery, and this whole freaking thing would be over.
Thank. God.

Meredith had never seen this kind of fat graft being done before, and for a few moments, curiosity burned enough for her to stand up and watch over the top of the vertical drape. The nurses undid the ties and pulled away his hospital gown, exposing his chest and lower abdomen, almost to the end of his happy trail. With bright OR lighting spotlighting his chest, Meredith could understand why the sternotomy scar bugged him.

She'd passed off what she'd seen when he'd been changing into his hospital gown as fluorescent lighting playing tricks, and that had made it a little worse than what she was seeing, now, but... She swallowed. She realized she'd only ever seen the scar in the bedroom. In the shower. In places that tended not to be well lit. Here, under the bright lights, the scar was raised and pink, and while his chest hair did disguise it, some, that was like saying black was slimming. Black was slimming, but it couldn't work miracles.

She closed her eyes, trying to imagine what the scar would look like sixty percent lighter after laser treatments. Mark had said sixty percent. Mark had promised Derek would like the results. She sighed and shook her head when she couldn't come up with a clear picture. Human imagination and percentages didn't mesh well.

When Dr. Clemens started collecting fat, she had to sit down behind the drape they'd set up and stop looking. Surgery wasn't fascinating to her when she couldn't compartmentalize, and this wasn't just some random body on the gurney, this was Derek. She saw Dr. Clemens cutting into Derek. And that was something she didn't want to watch anybody do. So, she settled on stroking his hair and letting herself space out to pass the time.

"Oh, no he didn't!" Lexie said with a gasp, staring at the television.

One chef had prepared a pea puree that had gone missing. Another chef had unexpectedly included a pea puree in his dish that nobody had seen him preparing, but he swore it was his. Nobody knew what to think.

Lexie grabbed a dainty pair of popcorn kernels, and they disappeared into her mouth. She passed the bowl to the right, down the conga line of residents loitering on the beat up couch in the living room. Meredith stared down at the yellow mixing bowl they'd converted into a popcorn repository. They – or rather, Cristina – had been refilling the bowl between each episode with a trip to the microwave. Meredith was so full of kicking Baby, though, she didn't think she could eat anymore right now. Frowning, she passed the bowl to the right.

Cristina grabbed it and shoveled a hulking handful into her mouth. "This show is remarkably cutthroat," she mumbled through the gob of kernels as she chewed noisily. "I like it."

Cristina glanced to her right. Alex didn't take the bowl. He reached and grabbed like a dump truck or something. He didn't comment on the show. He was reading. Some book. But the fact that he'd sat down on the couch to join them, even with Lexie there, made Meredith smile.

"Do you think he really stole the pea puree and served it as his own?" Lexie said, wide-eyed.

Cristina shrugged. "If he did, he's my idol."

Lexie rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I suppose he would be."

Alex was listening enough to snort with amusement. He flipped a page in his book.

Cristina passed the bowl back to Meredith, balancing it on Meredith's swollen belly a bit like
they'd been granted a convenient, mid-couch table. Lexie grabbed it before Meredith could complain.

Meredith sighed, tipping her head back. The fluffy cushions supported her neck as she stared at the ceiling. She felt a tiny foot or arm or whatever like a punch, kind of like Baby was trying to pop Meredith's stomach open for a chance at some popcorn. She was freaking done with being pregnant. It had been a marvelous and novel experience for the first few months. The first time Baby had kicked, she'd been over the moon. The first time Derek had been able to feel the kicking with her, another over the moon moment. But, now, Baby was big enough that the "delightful" reminders that Meredith was growing another person felt like practice boxing matches. And after months of throwing up, and aches in places she didn't know could ache, and having her bladder shrink to the size of a walnut, and feeling like a bloated walrus, she was done. Her boobs felt like they were lying on a table all the time, and she couldn't reach her feet, and she was freaking done.

Less than two months, Meredith thought, squeezing her eyes shut. Six-ish weeks if she was lucky and Baby decided to arrive a bit early. Six-ish more weeks. Seven-ish for an on-time delivery. She could deal. She could, damn it. Except she wasn't a lucky person. Meredith Grey was not lucky. For the Meredith Grey who drowned and donated her liver and had her appendix burst and her husband almost die and had her happily-ever-after delayed by a leggy, fabulous, secret wife, Baby would come a year late. Meredith would be pregnant in elephant gestation time, and if she wasn't insane by delivery, Derek would have to take her to the hospital in a dump truck or something. She just knew it.

This would never end.

Lexie's eyes widened as she moved to pass the bowl back to Cristina. "Holy crap, was that a foot or something?"

Meredith frowned. "What?"

"Your stomach," Lexie said. "It just moved."

"Yeah," Cristina said. "Looked like an itty bitty little shark fin under your shirt."

Meredith glanced down at herself. She'd felt the kick, but hadn't been watching. She didn't have to wait long. Another one hit her insides like a drumbeat. Her shirt ruffled a little near her bellybutton like she had something crawling underneath it. "Yeah," Meredith said, glowering. She shifted. Please, please, stop, she thought. "A foot. Or an elbow. Or a leg. Or a head. I don't know. Baby's trying to run me into the ground, I think. She does this whenever I stop walking around."

"Maybe Baby likes Top Chef," Alex said.

Meredith tried to sit up straight, to lean forward, but her belly got in the way, and she ended up looking like a complete idiot. Alex seemed to get it, though. He put his book down to grab the remote from the coffee table. Top Chef flicked off in an instant, and the big flatscreen television snapped from colorful plates and dishes and overly dramatic chefs to a cool, silent black.

Meredith leaned back on the couch with a heavy sigh. "Thank you," she said, a grumble, and she closed her eyes again.

"No problem," Alex said. "You want anything from the kitchen?"

Meredith shook her head. She wanted Baby out is what she wanted. Out.

She swallowed. She wanted Baby out, except she really freaking didn't. Fear prickled, but she shut
it down with clenched fingers and a grinding jaw. She wasn't going to be Ellis. She wouldn't let herself. And even if she ended up being the crappiest mom on the planet, Derek would be a perfect dad. She'd thought that from the beginning. Baby wouldn't be alone like Meredith had been.

She sighed as her thoughts drifted to Derek.

Derek had kissed her that morning before leaving. It was her day off, which had fallen on a Wednesday, and he had to work. The sky outside had been dark, and the air had been cold. He'd helped her sit up instead of watching her struggle with it, and she'd stumbled into the bathroom to relieve herself. Derek had been gone when she'd come back out. She'd crawled into bed, snuggling under the covers, shutting out the chill in the air, and slept until noon. The rest and relaxation had been glorious, but not enough. Never enough. She always felt freaking tired.

When she'd come down stairs, her hair scraggly and her face haggard, wearing her red bathrobe over yoga pants and a wrinkled t-shirt, Lexie had been on the couch watching the news while she munched on a bowl of Froot Loops. Alex had been out in the kitchen doodling on his laptop. He and Lexie had been keeping their distance from each other, well, as best they could while living in the same house. Cristina had barged in while Meredith was still sipping hopelessly on a warm cup of pointless decaf.

Somehow, their days off had all aligned. Somehow, everybody had seemed to understand Meredith didn't want to do much of anything today except sit there and wallow without talking for a while. Somehow, the scenario had evolved into an impromptu Top Chef marathon on the couch, despite only Meredith having watched it before.

Despite the pain and suffering, that had been nice. The little gathering. Meredith couldn't remember the last time they'd all just... hung out outside of work. Derek's situation had, for the better part of four months, swallowed her life like a phagocytic amoeba. Then, when he'd finally been well enough to stand on his own two feet, Baby had gotten more and more demanding with Meredith's energy. Her desire to socialize in her free time had collapsed like a dying star, and the time outside of work she didn't spend trying to catch up on sleep got spent with a solo friend, or with Derek. Not by his designs, but because he slept in the same bed as she did, and she went on trips like the one to New York over Thanksgiving with him, and because, as her boss, he was a lot better able to engineer his own schedule to be available at convenient times than Alex, Lexie, and Cristina were. Come to think of it, she suspected that this day with all her friends miraculously off work at the same time had somehow been his doing. He did what he could with the schedules.

Baby didn't stop kicking, even in the silence, even when Meredith squirmed and shifted, trying to alleviate whatever was irritating her little passenger. Meredith sighed. "I don't think it's Top Chef. I think she just hates me today."

Alex flipped the television back on, and the pea puree drama continued.

Another elbow in the bladder made her wince. That one had kind of hurt, and it was making her feel like she needed to pee, even though she didn't. Lexie was looking at Meredith with a half-curious, half-longing expression that Meredith had seen from too many obnoxious strangers to not know what it meant. Except, at least Lexie waited for permission. At least Lexie was family. In fact, Lexie wasn't even asking, despite her looking. She seemed to get that Meredith felt like crap.

"You can touch if you want," Meredith said with a sigh.

"You're sure?" Lexie said.

"Somebody should freaking enjoy it," Meredith grumbled. "I can't right now."

"You're sure?" Lexie said.

"Somebody should freaking enjoy it," Meredith grumbled. "I can't right now."
Lexie pressed her palm flat against Meredith's t-shirt. The warmth of Lexie's hand seeped through Meredith's shirt. Baby kicked again. Lexie had never done this before, and her eyes widened. "Oh, wow, that's so..." She looked at Meredith. "It's amazing."

Alex snorted. "Come on, you've felt a baby kick before. You've worked gynie."

Lexie glared. "Yes, genius, but none of them were my future niece!"

Meredith blinked. She hadn't really thought about that before. An unexpected smile curled at her lip. If someone had asked her ten years ago where she'd be right now, she didn't think she ever could have come up with married, pregnant, and somehow in possession of a sister, and a perfect extended family.

"Could be your nephew," Cristina remarked, interrupting Meredith's thoughts.

Lexie jabbed her thumb at Meredith. "She says it's a girl. I'm working with Mother's intuition until proven otherwise."

Samantha padded into the living room, through the dining room, from the kitchen, tail wagging. Meredith glanced at her. Damn it. She needed to go out. Meredith shifted. She didn't want to get up. Everything ached, and she just wanted to sit there on the couch and watch stupid shows about cooking with her friends, and never move again.

"I'll get it," Cristina said, and she popped up from the couch without preamble, setting the popcorn down on the coffee table. Alex paused the show while Cristina led Samantha back to the kitchen. Meredith heard the back door open and shut. Cristina came back in moments, sans dog. "She looked like she wanted to play for a bit, so I left her outside," she explained as she collapsed back onto the couch, which was fine. Samantha would let them know when she wanted to come back inside.

Meredith didn't have a chance to respond, however. She heard footsteps on the front walk. Keys jingled, and then metal ground in the lock. She glanced at the clock, realizing for the first time how late it had gotten. Crap. She hadn't told Derek about this impromptu gathering. She hadn't thought they'd still be there when he got home. She craned her neck to look toward the doorway.

Derek stepped inside the house. He looked pale. The cold outside had made his cheeks blush a ruddy red. That and his black wool duster were a sharp contrast with the lack of color elsewhere. His hair was disheveled and dark circles wrapped underneath his eyes. His crow's feet pinched with strain. He dropped his keys on the table by the door and started peeling off his gloves.

"Meredith?" he called, loud enough to carry, but not loud enough to wake her up if she'd been upstairs sleeping with the door shut.

"Hey," she chirped, still startled by his entrance.

Derek's head turned toward her voice. Toward the living room. He took one look at the couch, at Lexie and Meredith and Cristina and Alex, and he froze.

Crap. She'd been hoping this might not be bad.

Meredith bit her lip, staring at Derek apologetically. She wouldn't say sorry out loud, because that would just put him on the spot, and he'd hate that even more. After spending all day at work, the last thing he usually wanted was to hang around a bunch of people. And he didn't handle social surprises so well anymore.

"Hi, Derek," Lexie said, and from the worried look on her face, she seemed to understand the
issue, too. She’d gone out of her way to understand. Ever since Derek had explained what the hell was going on back in September.

His jaw clenched. But he didn't say anything right away. He stood there in the archway, one glove on, one glove off, staring at them with an unreadable expression that made Meredith worry.

"I can go," Cristina said unexpectedly.

Meredith blinked with surprise, but then she remembered. Owen. Lexie had book smarts about what was going on, but Cristina had personal experience. Lots of it.

Derek swallowed, and he gave himself a little shake. "No, that's okay," he said, surprising Meredith even more, though his tone sounded... irritated. Derek pulled off his other glove, shrugged out of his coat, and moved to the closet, away from them. Lexie frowned, glancing at Meredith, but Meredith could only shrug mutely back at her. She had no idea what that meant.

He came back to the archway to peer at them all. For a minute, he didn't move.

Samantha whined to come in. Her claws scraped against the kitchen door. Derek twitched, the only indication he'd been startled, and he disappeared down the hall. Meredith heard him open the door, heard him say hello to the dog, and heard Samantha's rambunctious response to Dad returning, including licks and bouncing and a happy bark or two. She heard Derek's affectionate whispers, too, and that made her smile.

Everybody in the living room was staring at her with a questioning expression, dragging her out of her reverie. She shrugged. She didn't know what to tell them. He seemed fine with them here. Maybe, he didn't want to be in the room with them, but...

A few minutes later, Derek came back to the archway, Samantha leaning against his knee, tail wagging, and he looked like he was on a bit more of an even keel. Samantha trotted into the room and lay down on her favorite spot by the fireplace. His gaze traced the dog's path, but for a few moments, he didn't budge. She expected him to go upstairs after he'd surveyed the scene to his satisfaction. He tended to collapse after work, even when he wasn't beset by an unexpected social gathering.

But he surprised her.

He nodded like he'd come to a decision, and instead of retreating like she thought he would, he approached the couch. He paused once, several feet away, and he glanced at Lexie and Cristina and Alex in rapid succession, as if he were having trouble reconciling himself with his decision, but determination flooded his expression, and he overcame whatever had caused him to stop.

She looked up at him as he approached. "Hello," he said, eyes sparkling despite his earlier show of nerves, and he leaned down to kiss her. His lips pressed against hers, and she breathed him in. He tasted good. Like he'd just brushed his teeth or something. His body was tense like a tripwire, and his shoulders hunched, like he was trying to curl himself away from the people on either side of her, but he was there, and warm, and him, and she found herself relaxing despite herself.

"How are you?" he murmured against her skin. He nuzzled her throat like her mere presence sustained him. Maybe, it did.

She hadn't showered. She'd never brushed her teeth or face. Her hair was a yucky, ratty mess. She still wore the t-shirt and yoga pants that she'd slept in, though she'd tossed the bathrobe in a messy pile on the floor by the couch when she'd gotten hot. She ached everywhere, and she was a blimp.
Baby chose that moment to kick her bladder again, and she winced.

"Fine," she said, and he snorted like he knew she was lying, but he didn't press for a confession, either. He gave her shoulder a comforting squeeze and didn't bug her about it. "You're okay?" she added, her voice a bare whisper by his ear. She didn't think anybody else would hear.

He didn't really answer her. "I thought this might happen," he said instead, but he hadn't pressed her for details about her being "fine", so, she did him the same courtesy.

"The coinciding days off was you?" she said.

He shrugged. His gaze was warm, and he smiled at her, but he didn't say yes or no. He leaned by her ear again and murmured, "I told Dr. Clemens to cancel the w-plasty. You don't have to worry."

A lump formed in her throat. She used her arms to push up off the couch a few inches, and she kissed him. He gave her a wink and stood up. She expected him to leave, then, having imparted what he wanted to tell her, but he surprised her again when he strode across the floor and sank into his favorite chair, the big hulking thing he'd used to sleep in when he hadn't been able to make it through the night on his back. Though he was notably separating himself from the crowd, he was still opting to be a part of it, rather than fleeing to their bedroom. She couldn't remember the last time he'd hung around when she had a friend with her, let alone friends, plural, and her mouth fell open.

He didn't seem to notice how amazed she was. "What are you guys watching?" he said, glancing at the screen with caution. He didn't watch much anymore. Violence upset him. The news upset him. He watched documentaries on the History channel sometimes, but for the most part, he stayed away from the television, these days. She couldn't blame him.

"Top Chef," Lexie said. "It's a cooking competition."

Derek's eyebrows raised. "A cooking show?" And then he snorted. "You guys are watching a cooking show?"

"It's fun!" Lexie said.

"But none of you cook," he said.

"I cook!" Lexie protested.

He rolled his eyes. "You can cook," he amended. "But you don't."

"Dude," Alex said, "he's got you there."

"Shut up," Lexie said.

Cristina shrugged. "I just like watching them backstab each other."

Derek was laughing. He wasn't making noise about it, but his body shook, and he raised a palm to his lips to cover what she assumed was obnoxious sniggering. As he laughed, the tension in his frame seemed to seep out of him. Just a little.

"It's fun," Meredith grumbled. "I like watching what they make."

"I have to see this," he said.

"I'd get out, now, while you can," Alex said. "It's a bit addictive."
Meredith’s eyebrows shot up. “You’ve been watching?”

“It’s like when we fought over the sparkle pager, but with food,” he said.

Derek snorted and shook his head. “I have to see this,” he repeated.

Lexie grabbed the bowl of popcorn from the coffee table and walked it over to him, approaching with caution. He took the invasion into his personal space without so much as an eye twitch. “Is it buttered?” he said.

“No,” Lexie said.

“Salted?”

“Yes,” she said.

“No, thanks,” he said.

“I wish I had your willpower,” Lexie said with a sigh.

Derek laughed. “You don’t need it. You seem to have Meredith’s metabolism.”

Meredith rolled her eyes. “He called me a black hole, once.”

“Just a little one!” he responded, relaxing even more.

“Whatever.”

Lexie laughed, her expression glowing with delight. “You guys are so—”

“Say cute, and I hurt you,” Meredith replied.

Lexie bit her lip and shut up, but she didn’t look at all apologetic.

Alex un-paused the show as Lexie collapsed back onto the couch with the popcorn bowl in tow. The scandal with the pea puree continued. And that’s how Meredith ended up converting everybody, dog included, into Top Chef addicts.

“Dr. Grey,” Dr. Clemens whispered, snapping her out of it. “Dr. Grey, we’re all done.”

She blinked and squinted up at him. His eyes had crinkled, and his face had a healthy, happy blush to it. They were taking down the vertical sterile drape as she peered around. Derek had a square bandage taped underneath his left nipple, and another bandage lower on his abdomen, below his belly button and to the left. One of the nurses retied the ties on his gown. Derek still slept. She lifted her hands away from his face and stood. Her back complained, and she winced. Sitting on a stool for an hour with no lumbar support hadn’t done her any favors.

Meredith swallowed as she stretched. “So, how’d it go? I couldn’t watch.”

“Just fine,” Dr. Clemens said. “No problems.” He pointed to Derek. “The graft site will probably look a little angry for a few days, but you two should be able to see the improvement pretty quickly.” He cleared his throat and looked at her with warm eyes. “I hope it helps him.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Me, too.” She watched the nurses coordinate a one-two-three-heave and shift Derek back to the hospital bed he’d arrived in. They snapped the bed railings back into place and covered Derek with several fuzzy thermal blankets. “Really,” she said to Dr. Clemens as she
pulled off her surgical mask, "Thank you. He's wanted to get this done for months."

Dr. Clemens gave her a nod, and she followed the nurses as they moved Derek to the recovery room. With the kind of sedation he'd been under, he'd probably be there for all of fifteen minutes – his eyelids were already fluttering a bit – but any sedation required at least a little post-op monitoring. They pushed Derek's bed into an empty bay in the recovery room, right by the nurses' station. Several other beds, each holding a groggy patient, filled the row along the wall.

Patients were coming back. Slowly but surely. The hospital was hardly bustling again, but the relentless advertising campaign and community outreach drives seemed to be helping.

Meredith pulled up a real chair with a real back and sat by the head of Derek's bed. The nurse at the station, an older woman with silver hair and a kind-hearted Carolyn-ish look waved to her and walked over to check Derek's vitals. She picked up Derek's wrist and took his pulse, nodding. She gave Meredith a warm smile and said in an unworried tone, "Everything looks fine." And then she moved back to her station. The clack of a keyboard added percussion to the tinny soft rock playing from an old FM radio on the desk.

Meredith reached over the railing to pick up Derek's hand. She squeezed his fingers. He squeezed back, just a little. So, he was already kind of awake. Kind of. "Hey," she said, her voice a low whisper, "you're all done, Derek."

He twitched. "Hmm," he said, a bare, groggy exhalation of noise.

He didn't move or say anything else for a few minutes, but this wasn't at all like waking up after general anesthesia, and she didn't stress. She held his hand, and she let him sleep off the drugs. They'd be going home, soon. An hour or so, probably.

The nurse came back. "Dr. Shepherd," the woman said, tone gentle and hushed. Ruby Smith, said her name tag. "Dr. Shepherd, it's time to wake up, now," she said.

He inhaled thickly and peered at them through barely-open eyes and sticky eyelashes. "M'awake," he croaked, squinting as he shifted. The sheets rustled.

"How do you feel?" Ruby said, picking up his wrist to take his pulse again.

He didn't answer, and Ruby and Meredith shared a grin. "Derek," Meredith said, shaking him a little. "Come on, time to wake up." The squinty, grumpy, why-are-you-torturing-me-I-want-to-sleep look he gave her made her want to laugh. "Derek, come on. Talk to the nurse, so we can go home."

"How do you feel?" Ruby repeated.

"Feel?" he echoed, looking confused.

"Yes," Ruby said. "Are you sick? Do you hurt?"

He cleared his throat, pulling his hand from Meredith's grasp to rub his eyes, but he didn't open them. He breathed thickly as he tried to get some words. "'m a bit sick," he managed.

Ruby nodded. "Anything else? Are you in any pain?"

"No," he rasped.

"Do you want something for nausea?"
He thought for a too-long moment. "No. 'S jus' a 'lil."

Ruby looked at Meredith and then smiled back at Derek. "Dr. Shepherd, I'm going to have you transferred back to your room, okay?"

He didn't answer, and Meredith suspected he'd fallen asleep again. She thought back to when he'd been on the ventilator after heart surgery. He'd woken up a lot, but never for more than a few minutes at a time, and he hadn't been able to talk to her because he'd had the endotracheal tube stuck down his throat. She'd take this, this sleepy-but-talking-and-ready-to-go-home-soon Derek, over just-been-shot Derek any day of the week. She brushed her palm against his chest. The hospital gown was soft, and his skin was warm through the cotton. If she pressed in just the right place, she could feel his heartbeat. She lingered with her index finger resting on the reassuring thump-thump-thump.

He slept through the transfer back to the cubicle where they'd started. After the nurses trundled the bed back into place between the curtains, one of them fiddled with the controller and forced Derek to sit up. Derek said something unintelligible as a tray table was brought to him and put over the bed over his lap. On the table was a paper plate with two graham crackers and a little dixie cup full of water beside it.

"All right, Dr. Shepherd," the head nurse said. "When your plate and cup are empty, and you can put on your clothes without help, I'll let you go home, but not a minute sooner. Okay?"

Derek still wasn't being super coherent. "Okay," Meredith said for him. "I'll see if I can get him to work on it."

The nurse smiled. "Take your time and call me if you need anything. I'll check back in a half hour or so to see how you're doing."

Derek blinked slowly at the tray in front of him. His eyelids slowly dipped to half-mast, and his head tilted forward with gathering momentum like he was falling asleep, but he caught himself, straightened, and blinked. And then he did it again. His face and lips were pale, making the dark circles under his eyes seem almost like bruises. If he was sick like he said, this might take a little longer than Meredith had estimated, but... he fumbled with the little cup of water and took a tiny sip. That was a good sign. He put the cup down, and his head did the tip thing again.

She laughed at him. She couldn't help it. He looked ridiculous, and he obviously wasn't ready to be conscious.

Her laugh must have caught his attention. He looked at Meredith for a heartbeat. Two. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, like she'd been out of focus before. "Hi," he croaked. His eyes were cloudy, a bit unfocused, the blue of his irises dull, like he wasn't all there, but his expression was about halfway toward his usual looking-at-Meredith face, where his gaze softened, and his eyes crinkled around the edges, and his lips quirked up the sides, and she could tell he loved her without him ever opening his mouth. Head tip.

Meredith grinned at him as he caught himself. "Hi. Are you doing okay?"

He looked at her. His answer arrived after a long commune with the atmosphere. "I feel... hungover," he said, though with his thick tongue the f in feel was an fff slide that lasted too long, and hungover sounded a bit more like hun gover. Head tip.

Meredith bit her lip, watching him. "I had Dr. Nguyen knock you out," she said. "Like out out. He gave you a bit more sedative than usual. I'm sorry. Was that okay?"
"Oh," Derek said. "Sure." From his mystified tone, she wasn't sure he was receiving with any sort of coherence, yet. Head tip.

He picked up a graham cracker and worked on it, taking small bites with a grimace that told her he was tasting something about as appetizing to him as plaster. He polished off the first cracker, but made a yuck-face at the second, and reached for the dixie cup instead. He picked that up and chugged it, and he sighed.

"Can I have more?" he rasped.

"Sure," she said, grabbing the cup. "I'll be right back."

She took the cup out to the hallway, filled it at the water fountain, and waddled back to his area. He'd lost a battle with a head tip while she was gone. He'd drooped over the tray, hand on the graham cracker plate, like he'd conked out in the process of reaching for the second cracker. When she sat down and put the cup in front of him, the squawk of her chair snapped him out of his doze.

He snuffled and blinked and sat up straight again, resuming like he'd never fallen asleep. He took the cup, newly filled, and chugged it as fast as he'd chugged the first one. He hadn't had any water or food since yesterday. She imagined his mouth felt like a desert, and the dixie cup was so freaking tiny. She doubted he'd made much of a dent in his thirst.

"One more?" he said.

"Why don't you let that settle for a bit?" Meredith suggested. He'd said he was sick, and she didn't want him to throw up. For one, she didn't want him to be sick. Period. But, for two, if he vomited, they'd never get out of here. Today was their only day off this week, and this recovery period would be far more pleasant for him and for her at home, in private, where he could sleep as much as he wanted without being poked and prodded, and she could watch television or something while he did that.

"Do you remember anything?" she said.

"About?" he said. He seemed a little more awake. The head tips were spreading out a bit.

"The surgery," Meredith said. "The OR. You weren't scared, were you?"

He squinted at her. And then he frowned. "Everything after nine is fuzzy." A long vvv. A long fff.

It took Meredith a moment to figure out what he meant, but when she did, she laughed. "You made it to five, you know," she said.

He made a weird noise that probably would have been a chuckle if his throat hadn't been so dry, and he'd been more awake. "I was scared," he said, "but not after nine." Head tip. Blink. "Thanks."

"You did it for me," she said, meeting his spacey gaze with a warm look. "It's only fair." She watched as he ate the second graham cracker with about as much enthusiasm as he'd eaten the first, but at least he'd emptied the plate. One step closer to home.

"How goofy was I?" he said.

She laughed. "Really, not too bad. You fell asleep after a few minutes." She didn't think it prudent to mention he was still very much ensconced in the land of goofy.

He rested with his eyes closed for a minute. This stuff had really laid him flat. She kind of regretted
having asked Dr. Nguyen to increase the drip when Derek couldn't remember past nine anyway, but there wasn't much that could be done about it, now, except have Derek sleep it off. She stroked his hand. His fingers tightened around hers. "Feels good," he murmured without opening his eyes. His breaths were thick and even.

She let him sleep for a couple minutes. He twitched awake on his own when something loud rolled by in the hallway. Probably another patient coming back from the recovery room. The curtains around Derek's cubicle fluttered as the rumble receded into the distance.

"So, where'd you hear the name Daphne?" she said.

"What?" he said, blinking at her.

She smiled. "You suggested it during your goofy phase."

"Oh," he said. He shook his head. "I don't remember that. Umm." The umm wobbled in his throat and broke. He swallowed. He thought for a moment. "I'm really... fuzzy right now," he said. Head tip.

She squeezed his shoulder. "It's okay. We can talk about it later when you're a bit more with it. Do you think you're ready to change back into your clothes, so we can go home?" She imagined if she didn't prod him, he'd just sit there half asleep for another hour or seven.

He nodded and pushed back the covers. She helped him get the bed railing down. He pushed his knees to the edge of the bed and let his bare legs hang down. He contemplated the floor for what felt like eternity. Head tip. Then he slid off the mattress into a standing position, though he had most of his weight against the edge of the bed. Caught between his body and the mattress, the hospital gown rolled up on one side to his hip, and he stood there, exposed and blinking with a dull expression that said he wasn't aware of what his gown was doing. The curtains were closed, but a nurse might walk in at any moment, so she stood up and stepped in front of him. Just in case. She didn't want him to end up with another hospital horror story like his time at Seattle Presbyterian with pneumonia. That had been traumatic enough for a lifetime.

She put a hand on his shoulder to keep him steady. The nurse wanted him to be able to change without help, but she couldn't see the harm in assisting a little, not when he was going home with two experienced surgeons to watch him while he shook off the rest of these sedatives. After a minute against the mattress, he managed to straighten out and support his own weight. His gown fell down to his thighs.

He looked around, eyes glassy. "Where, um." He swallowed, a flummoxed look on his face. "Where are my clothes?"

She bit her lip, looking down at the bin underneath the bed. She really didn't think she could bend down to get those, and Derek was still acting a bit too drunk to try it himself. Crap. Whatever. She grabbed the bed railing with a death grip and bent at the knees to lower herself.

"What are you doing?" Derek asked, looking down at her. "I should... do that."

"No," Meredith said, wobbling. "No, you definitely should not."

Her center of balance was screwed up because of Baby, but at least she had all her mental faculties. She pawed at the bin and managed to yank it out from its little cubby without leaning forward. If she leaned forward, she suspected she'd topple. She grabbed the lip of the bin and lifted it up for him with one shaking arm. He took it and put it on the bed. She rested for a minute, and then she
used the bed railing to hoist herself upright again. Derek tried to help, but he didn't have the
wherewithal, yet, to take her weight, so, his hand under her arm was mostly just a companion in her
ascendance, not an assistant.

Still, it was the thought that counted. "Thanks," she said.

He took out his boxers first, and with one hand on her shoulder to keep his balance, he managed to
get them on by himself. He managed his threadbare jeans, too, though the fly confounded him, and
she ended up fastening all the buttons for him. Socks and shoes, he saved for later. He untied the
gown with graceless fingers and let it fall to the floor by his feet, stepping out of it with a
precarious wobble that made her reach out to steady him. He reached for his t-shirt, but then he
stopped. He looked down at himself. Saw the big square bandage with all the tape under the bulge
of his left pectoral muscle.

He scraped at it with his nails and peeled the bandage down from the top to see what was
underneath. Meredith bit her lip as he stared with half-lidded eyes. "Dr. Clemens said it wouldn't
look that great for a few days." The scar itself looked worse than it had before. The area was
inflamed, and angry red needle-sized dots covered the surface where the borrowed fat had been
injected. She found herself wincing in sympathy. "I'm sure it will be fine by next week."

He touched the red area with his thumb, wincing. "Ow," he said.

"Well, don't poke at it," Meredith said. The wound was nothing serious, and Dr. Clemens had
assured them that Derek wouldn't need more than prescription strength ibuprofen to deal with it,
but, still, it was a wound. And men were stupid sometimes. Particularly half-comatose men. But
then she noticed he was smiling. "What?"

He grabbed her hand and put her index finger on top of the wound. He winced as her skin touched
his, and she wanted to pull away, but... "No crater anymore." He was right. She could feel little
dents of broken flesh where the needle had pricked his skin, but her finger didn't sink into a big dip
anymore. The space was soft and had give, just like normal skin, despite the redness. She couldn't
feel his damaged rib underneath, either.

She smiled, looking up at him. "That's really great, Derek."

"Yeah," he said, grin widening. And then he laughed. Really laughed. The sound burgeoned in the
air, beautiful and bold and happy. And he kissed her. "All gone." The transformation in him was...

mind boggling. Years melted off his face, years she'd gotten used to in the last ten months. The

glassiness robbed his eyes of any of the usual twinkling, but she could imagine what he'd look like
sober, and it warmed her heart.

He yawned so wide his jaw cracked, but he was happy, and that made this whole thing more than
worth it.

After he felt Dr. Clemens's work to his satisfaction, he resealed the bandage against his irritated-
looking skin and took a shambling step toward the curtain. She grabbed one of the empty belt
loops on the back of his jeans and pulled him backward. He see-sawed and moved back a step,
pliant.

"What?" he said, looking back at her, still grinning.

She looked pointedly at the clothes still on the bed. "Shirt? Shoes?"

"What about them?"
She sighed. "They're not on you."

He looked down at himself, smile dripping away. "Oh."

He stared at the pile on the mattress for a moment like it was a calculus problem, and then he took a shuffle step back to the bed.

"So, how's the weather up there?" she said.

He glanced at her with an uncomprehending look that made her want to hug him. He blinked. "I know you're... teasing," he said. About what, I have no fucking clue, he didn't add, though.

"I'm sorry," she said, unable to stop smiling. "I don't mean to tease, but you're cracking me up."

He met her smile with one of his own. God, she loved that smile. He gave her an easy shrug and said, "Glad I make you happy."

She gave him that hug she'd held onto. She kissed him. "You're cracking me up, and I love you," she said. Head tip. Right in her arms. His weight increased like an avalanche, but receded just as quickly when he caught himself, and she laughed. "Jeez, I tell you I love you, and you fall asleep?"

He steadied himself on her shoulder. "Sorry," he said, dazed.

Which only made her laugh again.

"I see how it is," he grumbled when he recovered. Without any twinkle-eyed cues, she wasn't sure if he was joking or not. But then he added, "Takin' advantage."

And she laughed some more.

It was the uptime, she thought. He couldn't do the head tip micro-nap things when he was standing on his own steam. And he was screeching past the point where the cloudiness that was causing the head tips could be ignored.

"We'll be home soon, and you can crash," she assured him.

"Okay," he said.

He put on his shirt. His shoes and socks were a challenge, but he managed in the end, with lopsided, pathetic looking bows at his laces, and two head tips between his left and right shoe as he sat on the edge of the mattress.

Processing him out was a matter of signing some papers, clipping off his bracelet with some scissors, and collecting a packet of home care pamphlets from the nurse. He leaned against the nurse's station, staring dully at the counter like his head was too heavy for his neck while Meredith handled things for him. After a head tip almost made him topple, she grabbed him a wheelchair to sit in while she finished up. And that was when she knew he was in outer space, because he sank into the chair like it was his personal chariot, with not one word of protest out of his mouth, not one, "Oh, come on, Mere, I can walk." Nothing.

A three minute nap in the chair refreshed him a bit, enough that he was having semi-coherent conversations by the time she'd wheeled him into to the elevator, and then to the front walk, beside which Mark was already waiting behind the wheel of Derek's idling Cayenne.

The rain had picked up again into sheets. Everything was gray and wet and cold, but Meredith
couldn't stop grinning. Derek was hysterical, and he was happy with the results, and it was just a
double shot of pure fun. Meredith opted to sit in the back seat with him, soaking up the humor,
even though that made Mark look like a chauffeur, not a friend.

Derek slept in the car after three head tips turned with a thunk into his face pasted against the
window. It wasn't so much the head tipping that made Meredith giggle. It was the way, when
Derek blinked himself back awake, and he straightened up from his slump, that he acted like he
didn't even realize he'd fallen asleep. When Mark came around to help Derek out of the car, Derek
snapped out of his doze and grinned like he'd been grinning the whole way home and in no way
had he been caught with his cheek smooshed into funny shapes against the window.

"Did you see?" he said as Mark wrapped Derek's arm over Mark's shoulder. Derek didn't seem to
care or notice that his arm was being manipulated. "It's fixed."

"I saw from the gallery," Mark said, helping Derek wobble out of the car. "I'm glad it worked."

They walked like a pair of drunks, arm in arm, toward the door. Derek seemed fine with his own
weight. Mark's presence provided sentient steering more than anything else. Meredith suspected if
they let Derek decide where they should go, they'd end up in Mexico or something.

Samantha greeted them with enthusiasm, but seemed to understand if she jumped on her
disoriented dad that he might fall over. She settled for licking his hand and wagging her little stump
tail.

"Hi," Derek said, giving her an absent pat on the head. Her head bobbed with the impact of his
hand when she received his graceless affection. But she didn't seem to care that Dad's petting
sucked, just that he was petting her, and she made a face that reminded Meredith of a smile.

Samantha followed them up the steps.

The steps weren't the obstacle Meredith thought they might be, and Derek collapsed onto their bed
with no encouragement. He landed face down on his pillow, already asleep, body draped like the
bed had merely caught him on a trip to the floor. His feet dangled off the edge of the mattress.

"You can come up," Meredith told Samantha, and the dog jumped on the bed, shook her massive,
stocky body, and collapsed with a happy whuff along Derek's right side.

Meredith pulled off his shoes and reached under his waist to unbutton his fly. She grunted at his
dead weight, but with some exploration that not-conked Derek would have made a porny joke
about, she managed to find all five buttons and pop them open without having to roll him over.
Then she yanked off his pants with a few strong tugs. He didn't wake. Not even for that. Mark
moved Derek's feet onto the mattress.

"Jeez, this crap really wasted him," Meredith said, pulling the covers over dog and husband.

Mark grinned. "I kinda like it. He's so docile. And pose-able."

Meredith snorted. "Well, enjoy it while it lasts, then." She leaned over Derek and shook him.
"Derek? Derek, do you need anything before we go downstairs?" She pulled her fingers through
his hair. "Derek?" A bit more prodding, and he swallowed, sort of awake. She shook him a little
more. "Derek?"

"Wha?"

"Do you need anything before we go downstairs?"
"M'okay," he said thickly into the pillow. His eyes didn't open.

She leaned over and pressed her lips to his temple. "Sweet dreams, then."

"Mmm. You, too."

She shook her head, fighting not to laugh, and they left him to snooze off his impairment.

He slept six hours.

Around four-thirty, he thumped down the steps and padded into the kitchen, now awake enough to care that he was thirsty and starving, apparently. His hair stuck up in all directions like he'd plugged himself in, but his eyes seemed clear, and the brain behind his eyes seemed to be firing on all cylinders again. He greeted her and Mark with a smile that showed teeth, grabbed a bottled water from the fridge, and then went to the cabinet to grab something to eat. He moved with grace and didn't seem to be in any pain.

"Hey, man," Mark said. "Back from your trip?"

"What trip?" Derek croaked. And then he thought for a moment. He blushed. "Oh. Hah hah. Very funny."

Mark shrugged. "What?" he said. "It looked fun."

Derek unscrewed the cap on his water and chugged. And chugged. And chugged. The bottle crinkled, having been emptied in seconds, and he tossed the skeleton into the recycle bin by the counter. "If it was," Derek said, voice recovered, "I don't remember. I don't even remember coming home." He frowned and ran a hand through his wacky, sticking-up-everywhere hair. "I was in the OR, and then I woke up here with a big pile of snoring dog in my face."

Meredith snorted. "You were... uh... pretty comatose on your feet."

He made an amused sound deep in his throat. "Was I? I didn't do anything embarrassing, did I?"


"Oh, god, what?" he said.

"You tried to walk out into the hallway barefoot without your shirt on."

He blinked. "Seriously? I..." He blinked again. "I really don't remember anything."

"Best that you don't," Mark said.

For a moment, Derek looked worried, and Meredith laughed. "He's just teasing, Derek. You were fine. Funny, but fine."

"Funny, huh," he grumbled, but his eyes twinkled. And then he shrugged. "Well, I'm glad you got a laugh." He pressed his palm against his side, over where the bandage would be underneath his shirt. He swallowed. And then he looked at her. "It's all fixed," he said with a cracking, thick voice. Not cracking with upset. Just... too much feeling. "I looked before I came downstairs."

And her heart warmed all over again.

"I know," Meredith said, smiling at him. "I saw. I'm glad."
"Thanks," he said, meeting her eyes, unblinking. And then he turned to Mark. "Thanks. Seriously."

Mark smiled. "No problem."

Mark had a pile of MRI films laid out in front of him on the table like a fan of cards. He marked them up one at a time with a pen, and then shifted to his yellow steno notepad to jot notes. Rain splattered and splashed against the windowpanes, and something outside the house hit the back vinyl siding with a slap, slap, slap in the wet breeze. Meredith made a note to check that out later. When she felt like moving. Which would probably be never. The microwave hummed as Derek heated up some soup for himself, and then it dinged.

Derek sat down with his soup at the kitchen table with her and Mark. Tomato soup, it looked like, from the red color. Or something else, she thought, as she noticed little particles that looked like rice floating in the bowl. Steam wafted into the air from the dish, and her own stomach growled. She might have to make something similar for herself in a few minutes. Derek blew on his first spoonful and then slurped.

"So, do you remember Daphne, yet?" Meredith said.

"Oh, I like Daphne, if I get a vote," said Mark, not looking up from his paperwork. "Does family get a vote?" He said the word family like it was worth a zillion dollars to him, and she didn't miss the way his gaze softened.

"What?" Derek said after he swallowed, looking from Mark to Meredith.

"Daphne," she replied. "Where did you hear the name Daphne?" He frowned at her, and she rolled her eyes. "You suggested it while you were on Neptune." She looked at Mark. "And, yes, family gets a vote, but our vote trumps."

Mark grinned and nodded. "Good to know."

"I did?" Derek said, ignoring Mark. "I don't remember that."

She laughed. "And we've had this conversation before."

"I don't remember that, either," Derek said, blushing, but he winked at her and met her laugh with a chuckle of his own. "Daphne. Hmm." He ate another spoonful of soup. Rain pattered. "That's right. Adam's partner's girlfriend's name. She teaches at Wash U or something like that. I thought it was pretty when I heard it, but then I forgot all about it."

"Well, you remembered it in La La Land," Meredith said with a snicker. For once, drugs had done something good for them. "What do you think?"

"I like it," he said.

Mark gave them a thumbs up.

"More than Anne?" Meredith said. "I kinda like it more than Anne."

Derek thought for a long moment, and then he smiled an easy smile. "Yeah, I do."

"You could always make Anne the middle name," Mark suggested. "Daphne Anne Shepherd-Grey."
Meredith stared at him.

"What?" Mark said.

"Mark, that's freaking perfect!" Meredith said. She looked at Derek. "Right? It's perfect, right?"

Derek leaned forward, resting his chin on his elbows as he stared at her. His eyes sparkled. "Hmm," he purred. "Yeah. Yeah, it is."

"The initials don't form a bad word, either," Mark said. "I'd say you're golden."

"We still need a boys' name, though," Derek said. "Just in case."

"We both liked Gabriel and Adam," Meredith said. "Gabriel Adam?"

"No, no," Mark said, shaking his head with vehemence. "You can't do that. Tack on Shepherd, and it spells gas."

Meredith snorted. "Adam Gabriel?"

Mark nodded. "Much better."

"I like that, too," Derek said.

"Adam Gabriel Shepherd-Grey," Meredith said, and Derek nodded after a pause. "Adam Gabriel Shepherd-Grey, or Daphne Anne Shepherd-Grey." She leaned to kiss him. Derek met her with tomato-flavored lips. "I guess we're settled, then."

"Yes," Derek said with reverent murmur. "I guess we are."

The silence stretched for only moments.

"Hallelujah," Mark said, thumping the table with his fist so hard that Derek's bowl and spoon shook, and Meredith flinched. Mark gave them both a bright smile. "Seriously, I thought you guys would never fucking pick."
Derek wiped away a drop of sweat with the back of his palm before it dripped into his eye. He slicked back his hair, clawing the damp, curly strands out of his face. He groaned. And then he straightened out one cracking vertebra at a time, panting as he paused to let his body catch up with his current predicament. His shirt stuck to his spine and shoulder blades despite the cool air. His joints and muscles ached, and he was tired. Not just tired. Weary down to the bone marrow.

He squinted at the harsh shafts of sunlight striking the room through the windows. Samantha, who'd been doing the "grueling" work of supervising him, basked in the corner in the brightest spot, stretched out on her back with her fat paws dangling in the air, her limbs twitching, her little moans and bleats piercing the air as she dreamed. Shades, he thought, trying not to feel envious of the snoozing dog. Shades were one thing he and Meredith had not gone shopping for, yet. One thing they needed to bump to the top of the list, lest he go blind. At least, this last day in March, the room wasn't cooking, yet, even at noon.

Mountains of unopened boxes surrounded him. Shelving. His executive desk and his executive chair. A lamp. A recliner. But pretty much everything important enough to bring with him when he'd fled New York was still packed in the boxes. Awards. Framed diplomas. An assortment of articles and research projects. Photos and other old memories. All his books, from the mental exercise of Hemingway to the mental vacation of Robin Cook. The idea of sorting any of it made his head hurt. But at least his recliner, and his shelves, and his lamp, and his desk, and his big stupid chair were all in the right spots, now. All seven billion pounds of it. And if Meredith walked in, she'd see he'd done what she wanted him to do, and that he'd crossed off another item on her crazy list.

Blinking sluggishly, he let his watery, tired legs relax, and his knees unlock, and he slid to the floor with an enervated sigh. If his furniture was seven billion pounds, his body felt like ten billion.

He pressed his fingertips to the hypertrophic scar snaking along his skin underneath his damp t-shirt. His sternum didn't hurt at all, didn't even give him a hint of ache. But a little over ten months since he'd been shot, while he'd regained his physical strength, he still didn't have his former stamina back all the way, and he'd been pushing and pulling and dragging and lifting and carrying and chucking and arranging, and that was just from the move.

The day before yesterday, he'd slogged through a ten hour surgery. A meningioma. T6. A spinal tumor. He hadn't flown solo — he couldn't convince himself to cut without training wheels, yet — but he'd been the lead surgeon in the room, with Dr. Weller, the current Chief of Neurosurgery, only present in an assisting role. Well, more like co-leading than assisting. Bringing Dr. Weller along as an "assistant" was like calling Samantha a Chihuahua. Talk about the big guns. The man was a national superstar in his own right. But Dr. Weller had been going out of his way to drag Derek back into the OR as often as possible, ever since the cholecystectomy with Miranda. For consults. For assists. For anything neuro under the sun. Derek imagined Dr. Weller had seen the opportunity to get one of their best neurosurgeons back on normal rotation, and had grabbed onto it like a hyena snapping bone between his jaws. And Derek... was having fun again.

Derek closed his eyes and took a deep cleansing breath. Between that surgery, dealing with the moving van the next day, unpacking and arranging today, very little sleep either night, a few grueling hours with Dr. Wyatt, and the snowballing urge to fix... whatever the hell was wrong with Meredith, well, he was running on fumes. And something was wrong with Meredith. He just didn't know what.
She'd tolerated a few shoulder rubs and some kisses from him, back when the morning had been younger, but as the clock churned onward, she'd started to bristle whenever he came near her, and then she'd finally exiled him.

She'd moved into the dining room. The doors to the china closet had hung open. Torn open but untouched boxes full of dishes and other things, all in disarray, had surrounded the closet like soldiers in a siege, but the closet itself had shown signs of order that had never been present in Meredith's old house. She'd unpacked the wine glasses in even columns of two, not a single item out of alignment, not a single fingerprint on any glass, each glass tipped upside down to prevent dust from collecting inside them. Their fancy cloth napkins had sat in a pristine stack twelve high, all sharp edges and neatness.

She'd sat at their new dining room table with the silver spread out in front of her, and a little bottle of polish resting to her right. She'd scrubbed each utensil with a washcloth, the motions so violent her whole body had shaken as she'd worked. She'd paused to peer at the fork she'd rubbed so clean it sparkled, and her hawk-like focus had made him think she thought she was looking at impending bomb explosion, and she didn't know what color wire to cut. But then she'd gone back to scrubbing. He'd wanted to tell her that the china closet didn't fucking matter right then, albeit in a more gentle way, but she hadn't even let him get that far.

_Are you okay?_ he'd said.

And she'd said, _Stop worrying about me. We have to get it done! We have to!_ 

_Meredith,_ he'd tried to assure her. _We're fine. We'll get it done. Just brea—_

_Don't tell me to breathe!_ she'd snapped, her tone slipping into something panicky and shrill. And then she'd gritted her teeth, and she'd taken a breath and let it out, much like he did when he got upset. She'd added in a more reasonable voice, _Go fix up your office or something. That's still on the list, right? That's really important! If you take paternity leave, you're going to want somewhere to work from home._

The beauty of paternity leave was that there'd be time to fix his office _then,_ he'd thought. It didn't need to be done right the hell now. Just like the china closet didn't have to be done right the hell now, either. _Meredi—_ he'd tried to say.

But she'd given him a gentle shove. _Go away, Derek!_ she'd said. _Fix your office!_

Needless to say, he'd gotten the message.

He sighed. His head thunked against his desk, suddenly feeling too heavy for his neck. He _loved_ her. His Meredith. But she was driving him to complete fucking distraction. The level of freaking out seemed to be increasing exponentially, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to keep up if whatever this was kept getting worse. An exponential increase from "already panicking" over the course of two weeks was... 

Jesus.

Two weeks. April 13th or somewhere thereabouts. He'd been in pain, still, and they'd been having sex infrequently enough in July that they had the advantage of knowing the time of conception down to the minute, so the due date was likely to be quite accurate.

A little zing ran through him, enough to subdue the constant ping of his nerves. The _oh-god-am-I-ready, how-do-PTSD-and-fatherhood-mix, how-do-I-do-this, and I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I—_
don’t-know quieted. Just for a moment. And despite his exhaustion, his lips turned up in a quivering smile.

Two weeks.

Just two.

You'd make such a perfect dad, she’d told him when he’d been dying.

"I hope so," he said to nobody, and he let his eyes drift shut, trying to recoup enough energy, he hoped, to feel like standing up sometime before Meredith went into labor. Sometime before the next panic.

God, he hoped this was just a temporary thing. Like, maybe, somebody had spiked her decaf coffee. Or something.

He could hear everybody talking out in the main body of the house. Not the words. Just the cadences. A pulse of life. Cristina and Lexie and Alex, who were all helping to get the house in order in time for the birth. Even Owen had tagged along to offer support. The only people he couldn’t hear were Meredith and Mark. Mark wasn’t here, yet. Meredith... Maybe, she’d finally taken a damned break.

His eyelids dipped. His head tipped to the side. He listened to them murmuring. His family. And then his perception of the sunny room and the distant voices faded.

"Push on three, two, one," Owen said, "Go." And then Derek, Alex, Lexie, and Owen all lifted together. Derek’s muscles shook, and he couldn’t curtail a groan. The sofa was a massive sectional that they had to lift instead of drag to avoid scraping the hardwood floors, and even with all four of them, it was fucking heavy.

They’d left the old, worn couch in Meredith’s living room for Lexie and Alex to keep, since it was too small for the new, much larger living room. Meredith had chosen a brand new living room set last weekend on her day off to fill their new what-felt-like-endless empty space. Derek hadn’t been there to help pick it out, but if she was happy, he was happy.

That was pretty much the name of the game as they counted down to delivery day, as far as he was concerned.

Keeping her happy. Or, at least not upset.

Except she was acting progressively more irrational, and the effort required in staving the crazy seemed to be snowballing. Especially today. She was just weird today.

Derek stepped back, panting. He wiped the sweat from his brow. His eyes stung with sweat salt, and he rubbed them. The salt sting abated, but the relentless, tired ache throbbing behind them did not. He squinted to check their furniture placement. Damn it. They were a bit off. The edges of the couch didn’t line up with the geometry of the room. "I think," he said, trying to catch his breath, "one foot... back... to the left."

Everybody nodded, and the process repeated with stoic resolve. "Three, two, one," Alex counted. "Go."

When the couch landed with a thump, Lexie sighed with relief. "Please, say it’s fixed, now. Please. I can’t feel my arms."
Derek couldn't blame her. This. This was misery, and Mark-the-never-injured-weight-lifter was missing in action. No, their roster consisted only of Owen-the-formerly-shot-in-the-shoulder, Derek-the-formerly-shot-in-the-chest, Alex-the-also-formerly-shot-in-the-chest, and Lexie, who could maybe lift a big bag of dog food, but not a thousand pounds of furniture.

Derek gazed at the couch. It looked fine to him, now. The lines of the room versus the sofa didn't make his eye for neatness twitch. He looked around at the entire ensemble. They'd managed to get the sectional, Derek's giant chair, the entertainment center, the coffee table, the lamps, the big flat screen television, and all the other odds and ends arranged. It had taken over an hour just to do the one room. They still had piles and piles of untouched boxes full of books, knick knacks, DVDs, blu-rays, VHS tapes, LPs, CDs and whatever other media, but the big stuff was done. He hoped.

"Hold on," Derek said. "Time to check with the boss."

"Okay," Lexie said, the word faint and breathy, and she and Alex collapsed onto the sofa they'd just hoisted into place. Owen seemed to be the only one in half-decent shape.

Derek left them to their recuperative breather and plodded tiredly to the kitchen, where Meredith and Cristina had decided to focus their efforts. Cristina stood at one of the drawers, filling up the utensil tray with shiny forks. Meredith absently held her belly with one hand while she shuffled things around in one of the cabinets with the other. The sun lit up her hair like spun gold, and he stood for a moment, silent, watching her in profile. The moments passed, and he looked, unobstructed. He liked to look.

"I don't know how we're going to do all of this in two weeks," Meredith said. "I just don't—"

"Calm down," Cristina said without looking up from her task. "Breathe." She finished the forks and moved on to the spoons, laying them down in the tray at a rapid clink, clink, clink pace that almost sounded like some sort of percussion instrument. "Stop thinking about everything, and just worry about the box you're on."

"Did you get the utensils done?" Meredith said.

Cristina rolled her eyes. "I'm doing them, now, Mere."

"Did you clean out the utensil tray before you started that?"

Cristina stopped. Looked down. Sighed. Took a deep breath. "No."

"You really need to do that."

"Meredith!" Cristina snapped. "Nobody cares if there's a few crumbs in the tray right now. We can get to the nitty gritty later."

"Cristina... this is important."

"Fine," Cristina said with a put upon sigh. She started taking the spoons and the forks back out of the drawer. "Fine, I'll clean out the stupid tray." She looked up and glared at Meredith's back. "Is there a specific cleaning solution you'd like me to use?"

"Hello," Derek said in a careful, neutral tone as he stepped into the bright room, interrupting before this discussion could devolve into a fight. Cristina only spared him a miffed glance before returning to work. Meredith offered a real smile, though, and he smiled back at her.

With the designer's help, they'd chosen a mix of olive, white, and cream shades to paint the walls
and cabinets. Wallpaper with button-sized, bright-colored flowers on it covered the wall near the backdoor. The kitchen, den, and breakfast nook resided in one room. A large, black-granite center island separated the kitchen from the den. They had tons of space. Stainless steel appliances. Skylights and high ceilings made the room bright and airy. The den and breakfast nook parts of the room were almost wall-to-wall windows, and he could see for miles into rolling hills and endless green. He tried not to pay attention to the fact that the furniture in the den was still a disorganized, heavy mess that he'd have to be luggering around sometime soon.

He sidled behind Meredith, lining up against her back, but he didn't try to kiss her or hug her. Or anything too affectionate. He grasped her shoulders and massaged them, testing the waters. She let him do that without comment.

He frowned, looking over her shoulder at her work. She was unpacking the spices in alphabetical order. Everything was in neat, impeccable rows. In the old house, the spices had been in a haphazard jumble in the cabinet until he'd ended up loosely organizing them to prevent cooking from becoming an expedition.

He pressed into her trapezius muscles. Her fingers loosened, and she dropped the little bottle of fennel she'd picked up. She leaned her weight back into him.

"Are you okay?" Derek said, a soft murmur beside her ear as he rubbed her.

Meredith sighed. "There's so much stuff to unpack," she said. "I don't know how we're going to get all of this done."

"All the more reason to just stuff things where they go and move on," Cristina quipped. She wiped the utensil tray with a paper towel and an evil eye. He glanced at the six boxes piled up beside her near the countertop, and then shifted his gaze. Meredith had one box. Just one.

"Don't stress," Derek said. "Really. I'll sort it out later when I need to cook something."

He kissed Meredith on the cheek, and a deep moan loitered in the back of her throat. Today seemed like it might be an "affection allowed" day, which was nice. Ever since she'd hit month eight, she had days where she just didn't want him touching her. At all.

"Can you come look at the living room?" Derek said in a low tone, trying to keep her relaxed. "You can see if you like it."

Meredith nodded and turned to face him. A frown creased her features. "You're all sweaty." Her nose crinkled. "And ick."

"You mean he doesn't always smell like clouds, chocolate, and sex panther?" Cristina snarked. Meredith snorted and looked at her person. "You, be quiet." Then she turned back to Derek. "You should take a break."

Derek pulled his fingers through his damp hair. "I will, but I want to get the furniture done, first. If I stop, now, I might not be able to start again."

She nodded. "Okay. Just... don't push too much." She stepped toward the hallway. "Let's go see."

She headed back to the living room. He and Cristina tagged along behind. Alex and Lexie still lay draped across the cushions of the sectional. Owen had gone to sit out on the deck for an outdoor breather.
Meredith circled the couch and peered around at the room. "It looks... fine." She bit her lip. "Does it look fine?"

"I think so," Derek said. "That's why I'm asking you."

"Did you take Feng Shui into account?" Cristina said. "Energy flow? You wouldn't want the baby to grow up in bad juju, would you?"

Meredith blinked. "Seriously?"

Cristina rolled her eyes. "No, Meredith. I was mocking. That's what I do. I mock."

"Oh," Meredith said. Except she kept staring at the room. She folded her arms and paced, peering at the couch and the coffee table with particular concerned interest. Then she sighed, deflating. "Maybe, we should change it."

Alex groaned and rolled off the couch. "Thanks, Cristina."

"No," Lexie whined. "No, it looks great. It's got great Feng Schwoo flow."

"I'm sorry!" Meredith said. "I'm sorry, it's just... she said that, and now I can't un-see it."

"Seriously?" Cristina said. "Do you even know Feng Shui? What is there to un-see?"

"No, but it all looks wrong, now!" Meredith said. She shifted from foot to foot. Her eyes reddened. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to make you guys work so hard, but I really want it to be perfect." She inhaled. A quick, quiet little gasp. And then another. "I just don't know how we're going to get this done in time. There's so much. There's just so—"

"Shh," Derek said, interrupting her descent into panic. He stepped close to rub her shoulders again, despite the fact that, inside, he was screaming. Jesus, he hoped she didn't do this for every room. He loved her, and he wanted things to be perfect for her, and he didn't want her to panic, but... he didn't think he could do this if Mark didn't show. The idea of lifting that damned sectional again made his gut quail, and his head throb, and it looked like Lexie would drop out from exhaustion any moment. While she couldn't lift much, she did help a little.

"I'm sorry," Meredith said. "It just looks wrong, now, and—"

He took a deep breath, praying for fortitude. "We'll get it done," he said. "Just tell me where you want things, and we'll fix it."

"Oh, for crap's sake," Cristina said. She glared, and she grumbled, but she did help with the new arrangement she'd inadvertently foisted on them.

The sharp, piercing ring of his cellular phone yanked him out of sleep. His eyelids stuck. His throat had gone dry. He blinked, wiping his face, and squinted at his watch. He'd been conked out for an hour. Just long enough to make himself more tired because of how shitty being yanked out of deep slumber felt. He needed some honest-to-god sleep. In a bed. And now his kinked back and neck hurt in addition to everything else. Fuck.

He struggled to get the phone out of his jeans pocket. Between the fuzz in his head and the throbbing ache behind his eyeballs, he didn't look at caller id. Maybe, it was Mark, calling to explain why the hell he was missing out on the glorious "fun" of moving all the fucking furniture.

"Hello?" he croaked. Fuck, he sounded awful. Even to his own ears. He cleared his throat. "Hello?"
he said in a more reasonable voice.

Silence on the other end of the line. But someone was there. He could hear breathing.

Derek pulled the phone back and squinted at it, but getting his eyes to focus was useless. He rubbed his stubble-covered face and leaned back against the desk, giving up on keeping his eyelids propped up. Gravity took them down to his cheeks in nanoseconds. "Hello?" he repeated. "Who is this?"

"Um...," said a tiny, familiar voice. "Hi. Is this... is this a bad time? You sound..."

"Abby?" he said, unable to stop his jaw from toppling open. He hadn't spoken to Abby since... Thanksgiving. She'd taken the news of his addiction less than well, and they hadn't parted on the best terms. He'd thought about calling her, but after a few long talks with Dr. Wyatt about it, he'd opted to give her space. To let her come to him when she was ready, if she ever was. "Hi!" he blurted, unable to mask his surprise. "No, this isn't a bad time. It's never a bad time. You can call me any time. I was just..." He swallowed. He opted for honesty. The fact that she now perceived him as a lying bastard is what had gotten them into this... rockiness. That and the fact that he'd let himself get into this mess in the first place. "I fell asleep at my desk." Well, he thought, peering wryly at his uncomfortable back rest, next to his desk, at least.

"Oh," she said, and then she added tensely, "Why are you tired?"

He frowned. "We just moved into the new house. I've been moving lots of heavy things."

"Oh," she said again.

Silence stretched. He rubbed his eyes. "Did you want to talk about something in particular?" he said.

He sat on his metaphorical hands to keep from saying more. No matter how awkward this was, he refused to push her. PTSD had offered him a crash course in perspective about what it felt like trying to keep up with the expectations of people who thought he wasn't healing fast enough. He'd tried so hard to act normal when he'd visited his family over Thanksgiving, and failing before he'd gotten off the welcome mat, and then seeing the looks on their faces when he'd crashed and burned... Awful. He never wanted to make another person feel like that. Ever. And the fact that he'd done it to Meredith, pushing her for a commitment she couldn't offer because of the negative headspace she'd been in, well, in retrospect, even years later, that felt like shit.

"Abby?" he said, the word soft.

He gazed at the dust motes dancing in the sunlight. Samantha had moved while he'd been asleep, and he reached left to stroke her with his free hand. Abby still didn't say anything, and his mind raced. He didn't want her to hang up. If he could just... draw her out a little. Not push her. Just... encourage?

"I resected a T6 meningioma two days ago," he said. "It was... exhilarating. Being back in the OR for such a big procedure." Exhilarating. And terrifying. And fun. And if this were any other day, if they'd been on good terms, he probably would have offered to let her scrub in the next time she visited. He'd let her scrub in on various procedures back when he'd lived in Manhattan. Because he was the awesome uncle, and she had her eyes on medical school. On neurosurgery. An interest he was happy to foster.

But that would definitely be pushing. Well, bribing. Same effect. Pulling her somewhere she wasn't
necessarily ready to go. So, he kept his fucking mouth shut.

He heard her swallow. "You haven't been cutting?" she said.

"Not for a long time. I jumped into a cholecystectomy about two months ago. That was my first since before I was shot."

"Isn't that... a gallbladder removal?"

He felt a stab of pride. Not many people her age knew the technical name of the procedure. "Yes," he said. "That's right."

"What...?"

He sighed. "I didn't want to start with a neuro procedure. It'd been more than seven months since I'd done anything in the OR, and neuro procedures have a really high risk profile."

"But... why?"

She wasn't being articulate about it, but he could guess what she was driving at. She hadn't seen the worst of it. The panic attack on the welcome mat at his mother's house. She'd arrived after that. After he'd gotten his head straightened out with a timeout in the kitchen with Meredith and then a heart-to-heart with Rachel. And it occurred to him, then, that despite her being apprised of "the rules," like no touching him by surprise, no loud noises in his vicinity, maybe, she hadn't grasped how bad things had been for him.

"Abby," he said, "I've been sick. Too sick to cut. I know I looked fine on the outside, but I was ill. Something in my brain got broken. I'm still... not quite right. I might not ever be back to the way I was before." The curse of brain injuries and mental illnesses. No wounds to see, but catastrophic damage all the same.

"I know, but..." Her voice cracked. She sighed. And sniffed. And she was quiet for a long, long time.

"Abby, please talk to me," he said as he pet the dog. "Please, I'm here. I miss talking to you. I miss hearing what my favorite niece is up to." And then he clamped his mouth shut. Damn it. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He'd promised himself he wasn't going to pressure her. Except that's what he'd just done. Pressured her. He closed his eyes. He was fucking tired, and that frayed his resolve.

She laughed. Just a little. "We're all your favorite. You say that to everybody."

He smiled. "Well, sure, but it's still true." He loved all of them to bits. "It's like ice cream. You can have more than one favorite flavor. In fact, it's impossible not to. I love coffee-flavored, but I've grown rather partial to strawberry since I met Meredith, for instance."

Another small snort of laughter. A teensy one. He let the silence ripen as she rested on that happier note.

"You're my favorite uncle," she said in a soft voice, and he stilled. He didn't think she had multiples of those like he did with nieces. And he hadn't thought she still regarded him that highly.

God, he hoped he didn't fuck this up. "Tell me why you called," he said in a gentle tone. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Well, yes. Well." She sniffed again. "I'm, umm. I'm taking... abnormal psychology. This
"Okay," he said, frowning. "Did you need help on an assignment or something?" Though, why she would call him for assistance with a psych class, he didn't know, not when she had a psychiatrist for a mother. Not that he wouldn't help her. Hell, he'd break his back to help. He'd taken psych classes in college. The knowledge was still in his brain somewhere.

"No," she said. "I just..."

"Yes?" he prodded.

And then she broke. Like a dam. And everything gushed loose at once. "I was reading for an assignment. Just now. Reading. There's a section on addiction in the textbook right after the chapter I was supposed to be looking at, and I read that. And then on a whim, I looked at the index, and I noticed a chapter on post-traumatic stress. So, I read that, too. I just finished. And I wanted... to call. I don't know. I'm being stupid."

"It's not stupid to be curious, Abby," he said. "And it's not stupid to care."

"You said I could ask you questions," she said.

"Yes, I did," he said. The silence stretched, and so he added, "You can. Anything. If it's something I can answer, I will."

She sniffed. "Do you... see things?" she said, the words a bare whisper he could barely hear. "The book said... that you might see things."

He blinked. "You mean like... flashbacks? Or hallucinations?" Or both?

"Stuff where you can't tell it's not real," she clarified. She was crying. In his ear. Crying.

His heart squeezed. He hated that his situation had caused this.

Honesty, he thought, thinking. Opt for honesty.

He hadn't had a hypnagogic or hypnopompic hallucination since... November. Five months. He didn't miss those one bit. Falling asleep to Gary Clark prowling in circles around the bed. Waking up to a gun shoved in his face.

But he did still have flashbacks.

Every once in a while, on days where he was bone tired like he was now, and he had no fortitude to brace himself against triggers, something noisy would set him off, and then he would have Gary Clark pointing a gun at him, an echo of the catwalk, or he would be in the OR, dying, both images so real, so terrifying, the experience made Derek lose his wits until the memory faded moments later. But that was rare, now. Very rare. And when it happened, it only lasted a matter of seconds.

"I have flashbacks," he said. "They're mostly gone, now, but... sometimes."

"But you did," she said. "Have hallucinations."

"I did," he said.

A long pause. "What were they like?"

He swallowed. "Well, I..." His voice trailed away.
He wanted to be honest, but he also had no idea how to describe them to her, the way reality bled into the unreal like an abstract painting, and he couldn’t tell which was which, even when, logically speaking, Gary Clark with a gun, threatening Derek, growling horrible things like, *I'll splatter you like a ripe tomato*, should be a dead ringer for the not real category, given that Gary Clark was fucking dead. The disorientation of having what should be a no-brainer turn into a situation where he had no idea it wasn’t real, and he was so scared he lost control of his bladder... terrifying. Embarrassing. Indescribable. He wouldn’t wish that kind of fear on anybody except Gary Clark himself, and Derek did, still. Wish. Even though it was futile.

At least he’d gotten to the point where wishing for that wasn’t claiming his life, though. It was a small thing. Fleeting, idle thoughts on a rare day in a rare moment. That and thinking about taking Percocet. A small dollop on his plate, just like Amelia had said the wanting would end up being, if he were to give it some time.

Abby sighed. "I'm sorry," she said. "You don't have to talk about this. I'm prying."

He shook his head. "You're not prying. I'm just... not sure what to say."

"Talking about this doesn't... upset you? Does it? I didn't mean to upset you."

"Abby, I'm fine," he assured her. "I'm not glass anymore. I just..." He sighed. "Yes. Talking about that upsets me. I'd rather not."

Another long silence.

"I can try if you really need me to," he said, feeling helpless. God, he didn't want to fuck this up.

"No," she whispered. "Don't. If it's that bad, I don't want to know."

He licked his lips. "Okay," he said, the word a soft murmur. He clutched his phone until his knuckles hurt. She didn't say a word. "Do you have... other questions?" he prodded.

The phone rustled as she shook her head. Or nodded. He didn't fucking know.

"Abby?"

"I'm sorry," Abby said, grief-stricken. "I'm sorry this happened to you. And I'm sorry if... I made it worse. I'm sorry," She inhaled sharply. "I didn't read the chapter until today, and—"

"Abby," he said, interrupting her. "Abby, Abby, shh. You didn't make anything worse. And I'm okay, now. 99% of the time, I'm fine."

"But you've been sick," she said. "You've been really sick. And I basically told you to get bent for something that wasn't even your fault. Not really. I was horrible to you."

His eyes pricked. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "You weren't horrible, Abby. Really, you weren't." She was a young woman, not even the legal drinking age, who'd grown up sheltered. She hadn't been prepared for a jarring yank into full-blown adulthood, yet. And, while her reaction had hurt, he was mature enough to understand her anger, at least. "And the addiction was my fault. It was my choice to take pills, Abby. A bad choice, but entirely mine. Nothing forced me."

"But you never would have done that before," she countered. "Never. Not until you were hurt."

He sighed. It was hard to say what one would never do. A lot of nevers could become conditional sometimes, given the right kind and amount of ammunition, though he liked to hope she was right.
Watching Amelia self-destruct before his eyes despite his efforts to curtail her was a gigantic deterrent. He could still hear the whine of the heart monitor as she crashed. Right in front of him. And the fact that that could have been him, right in front of Meredith, was chilling reality.

Somebody said something in the background. A quiet, feminine hum of words over static. "Crap, my roommate's back," Abby said in a rush. "I have to go."

"That's okay," he said.

"I love you," she said, and the connection went dead before he could reply in kind.

He stared at his phone for a long time. A weight lifted, and a lump formed in his throat. Things weren't fixed with one phone call, but she'd called, and that meant the world to him. She sounded like she was coming to terms with things. With him. Sounded like she wasn't angry anymore. Hurting and full of questions, but not angry. And that was a step in the right direction.

A smile stretched across his lips, lasting for a moment before a jaw-cracking yawn drove his eyes to water. He needed real sleep. Something to recharge him. The master bedroom was still in disarray, with boxes stacked almost ceiling high in his and Meredith's big walk-in closet, but there were clean, soft sheets on the brand new mattress, new deep green ones that worked well with the ocean blue they'd painted on the walls, or so the interior designer had said. He wasn't great with colors, and neither was Meredith, so they'd let the designer do most of the work. He thought of the fluffy blankets he'd unpacked. And the new down pillows they'd bought. He and Meredith had spent last night here. He could sink. Just sink into the bed.

And, fuck. He was fantasizing about pillows. That was damned sad.

Wincing, he wobbled to his feet.

He frowned when he realized the house had gone silent. Leaving the sleeping dog behind, he padded out into the hall. His bare feet squeaked on the hardwood floors. The living room was devoid of people. Everybody, it seemed, had moved out onto the balcony to chat and eat the pizza and donuts and other bribery he and Meredith had offered for their help, a late, unhealthy lunch. Except Meredith. Where was? Hmm. More niggling. Something was wrong.

He didn't have a chance to worry much, though, or to take his much-needed nap. Someone knocked at the door, and he diverted from the living room to the foyer. Hardwood became tile, freezing against his feet. He didn't look through the peephole. He grabbed the doorknob and opened the door to greet his long absent friend-turned-brother.

"Mark," he said, the word flat. Tired. Accusing.

Mark sighed as he brushed off his muddy feet on the welcome mat and stepped over the threshold. "I'm sorry, man."

"You missed the part where we were moving all the furniture around."

Mark winced as he shrugged off his windbreaker. "Would you believe I got stuck in an elevator for four hours?"

Derek folded his arms. "No." But Mark's face was straight. The man had no guile. None. *All the guile of a watermelon. Called it. "Seriously?"*

Mark sighed. "Yeah," he said. He hung up his coat in the coat closet and then kicked off his muddy shoes. "And I left my cellphone in the car, so I couldn't call."
"It takes an hour to get here," Derek said, eyes narrowing. "You had time."

"Left my car charger at work by accident, and the phone batteries ran down while I was in the elevator, wishing I wasn't in the elevator. Perfect storm." Mark sighed. "*Mea culpa*. Do you still need help with anything?"

Derek shrugged. "There's still a metric ton of boxes to unpack," he said, glancing around as they wandered into the living room. Sunlight bathed the room like it was an over-saturated photo, and Derek squinted in the brightness. Shades. Very fucking needed. "Actually, you know what?" he said. "Why don't you take some packing paper and tape it to the windows until we can buy some real blinds or something."


"I'm just tired," Derek said. "We finished the first floor, but I might need you as second string if Meredith decides she hates the furniture arrangement again. I don't think I could lift an empty teakettle at the moment, I'm not sure Owen or Alex are much better off, and we lost Lexie on the living room re-shuffle."

Mark snorted. "Meredith doesn't strike me as the picky decorator, type."

Derek shook his head, pulling his hand through his tangled hair. "She's *not*. She's *never* cared about this stuff before. She's acting *bizarre*. We've rearranged the living room once, and every time I checked on her earlier..." He sighed. "You know I like things neat."

Mark snorted. "That's... kind of an understatement."

"I like things neat, but she's making things so neat it's enough to make me look like a fucking slob in comparison."

"Weird," Mark said, frowning.

Derek sighed. "I've been trying to calm her down, but I don't know what to do. I can't fix it if I can't figure out what the hell is causing it. Usually, there's some amount of logic to her meltdowns."

He yawned, slumping, and Mark clapped him on the back. "You should crash for a bit, man. You're not going to fix anything if you're too wasted to think straight."

Derek's stomach growled. He looked down at himself, a sheepish, tired grin spreading across his face. "I will," he said as his needs aligned in a row, one, two, three, "but I think it's lunchtime first." He hadn't allowed himself the time to be hungry before. He glanced at his watch. One-thirty, almost.

Mark followed him out onto the deck where everybody was sitting. The day was gorgeous. A sunny 58 degrees. Fluffy cumulus clouds spread across the azure sky like blobs of cotton candy, and thinner wisps of stratus clouds jagged across the sky farther above those. The breeze blew, ruffling Derek's hair as he stepped outside. Birds drifted in circles on the air currents beside the cliff. He stopped for a moment by the railing, inhaled the wet, fresh air, and grinned. The view was spectacular. He had space. Endless space. And, now, he lived here. With Meredith.

Everybody sat in a jovial, chatty ring around a glass table under an umbrella at the center of the deck. The umbrella flapped in the wind. He grabbed a powdered lemon-jelly donut from the tray on the table. He didn't care how unhealthy of a meal the confection was. The donut was there, didn't require preparation, he was tired, and he needed sugar to stay conscious, end of story. He grabbed a napkin and collapsed into one of the empty lawn chairs. The chair frame creaked under
his weight. He sighed, exhausted, and happy to be off his feet. Mark pulled out the chair next to him.

"She's going to pop, you know," Cristina said as they settled.

Lexie rolled her eyes. "Duh."

"No, I mean, now," Cristina clarified. "You have a day left. Maybe."

Derek frowned as he took his first, lemony bite and grimaced. Disgusting. Not his favorite way to fall off the health-food wagon. "What makes you say that?" he said impolitely around a sticky, lemony mouthful that stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"Yeah, she's not due for two weeks," Lexie said.

"It's the nesting behavior," Alex said. "Dead giveaway."

"Meredith isn't nesting," Lexie said while Derek chewed and inhaled and chewed and inhaled. "They just moved. Of course, she's going to want to organize things."

Cristina snorted. "She was polishing silver, earlier."

"She knows what silver polish is?" Lexie said.

"That's my point," Cristina snapped. "Everything she touches turns into a Martha Stewart project. And she's been going nonstop since the crack of dawn. I'm telling you, she's going to pop. I thought I might be wrong, but—"

"You mean you were testing her?" Derek said, incredulous. He put the remaining half-donut on the table. The sugar didn't seem to be doing much more than make him feel sick. Or maybe that was the returning ping of nerves. "With the Feng Shui bullshit. Seriously?"

Cristina shrugged. "Well, it was better than your problem-solving skills! You got told to go away because you hover and sniff hair and make a general McDreamy menace of yourself."

"I'm not a menace," Derek said, frowning. And he didn't sniff hair. Not lately, anyway. Damn it. He looked at Mark. "I'm not a menace, am I?"

Mark could only give him a helpless shrug as if to say, I wasn't here. I have no clue.

So, Derek turned to Owen. "Am I?"

Owen shook his head. "You've seemed pretty low key to me."

Cristina snorted. "Says Hoverer 2, the Apprentice."

Derek sighed. "Well, that worked out great, Cristina. Thanks for your help." He gave the word "help" the air quotes it deserved.

"I told her I was kidding!" Cristina said.

"Good work on that," Alex said with a snort.

"Yeah," Lexie grumbled. "Talk about backfiring."

"I'm sorry, okay?" Cristina snapped. "I helped with the sofa."
"Whatever," Alex said.

"Just don't... tease anymore," Derek said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Okay? You don't tease a person on a ledge, and Meredith is on one."

"Well, I know that, now," Cristina said. "And it's not a ledge. It's labor."

"But you don't understand," Lexie protested. "She can't have the baby, yet!"

"I'm pretty sure that's not up to you," Cristina said.

"But the baby shower is this weekend! She can't have the baby before the shower! I worked for hours to organize that shower!" She jabbed her thumb at Derek. "His mother is coming!"

"Speaking of which," Mark interjected, looking at Derek, "are you picking her and Rache up from the airport on Friday, or am I?"

"Oh, god," Meredith said as she stepped out on the porch with a fresh plate of donuts, and Derek rubbed his temples. "I forgot about that," she said as she put down the tray. A little gasp. "That they're coming." Another gasp. "We need to unpack the guest rooms. And the linen closet. And the bathrooms." Gasp. "I don't know how... I don't." And then she bolted back into the house.

For Christ's sake.

"Maybe, we should just stop talking altogether," Lexie said. "No noise. No sudden movements."

"See?" Cristina said. She picked up a fresh glazed. "And if that wasn't proof, she just fed us donuts. Moms feed people donuts. You seriously need to add the arranging nursery to the to do list."

"They do not need to add it to the list," Lexie protested. "The baby is not coming tonight."

"Is, too," Cristina said.

Derek closed his eyes. "I can get them from the airport," Derek said, ignoring Cristina and Lexie's sniping. And then he thought better of it. The fog in his brain made reneging an easy thing to do. "Actually, you do it." He sighed. Too much shit to do. Too many fires to put out. And this fire. He knew he should put it out. He knew he needed to go find Meredith. Find her and get her to relax. But he couldn't. Bring himself. To move.

"Hey," Mark said with a sympathetic look when Derek rubbed his face and looked up again, "at least the whole stampede isn't coming."

"Don't even fucking joke about that," Derek said.

He loved his family. Loved them. But he didn't think he could handle four sniping sisters right now. The idea of Nancy traipsing around, "helping" to organize by virtue of dictating the best places for everything like some sort of furniture Nazi when Meredith was already acting like an insane decorator was enough to make him groan. The idea of the four of them, Nancy, Rachel, Amelia, and Kathleen, all tag-teaming in the delivery room, where he imagined he'd already be a nervous fucking wreck, and knowing how much Meredith was going to need him... Jesus. No. Just no. Even without 99% cured PTSD tossed into the mix, he didn't think that was something he could handle.

"Bet you $100 she's in labor before this time tomorrow," Cristina said, snapping him out of his spiraling thoughts.
"Fine," Lexie said, glaring. "You're on."

"$200 says she's having contractions by dinnertime," Alex added. He glanced at his watch. "Six hours."

"Jesus Christ," Derek snapped, unable to take it anymore. "She's fine. She's not having the baby early. I know something is wrong, but it's not that. It can't be that." Yes, it could be, a tiny voice told him, but he shoved it away. "And stop turning my fucking life into your entertainment." God, he was tired.

"Sorry," Lexie said, reddening as she crumpled in her chair. Mark gave her shoulder a squeeze.

Derek shook his head and sighed. "No," he said, his tone weary. "No, I'm sorry. I need to lie down for a bit. I've gotten about ten hours of sleep in the last forty-eight, and if I have to push another piece of furniture, I might drop dead."

He didn't wait for a response. He knew he should chase after Meredith and try to calm her down. He knew it. But, for some reason, when he thought about that, he felt like he had weights in his shoes and his brain was shutting down. He slogged out of his chair like some sort of swamp creature and turned to leave.

Cristina stood like she intended to follow him, polishing off the last of her glazed donut as she did. He looked at her with a dull, tired, defeated gaze. "What?" he said.

"I'll get Meredith," she said. "Stop worrying about her. You, sleep. You'll need it."

"Right," said Lexie, standing up, too. "I'll work on unpacking the linen closet. But she's not going into labor tonight."

"I guess I can unpack the first guest room," Alex said. "It's arranged already, right?" He turned to Lexie. "And, yes, she so is."

"It's not," Derek said with a sigh, "but there's not much in there to move, at least."

Owen nodded. "I'll help in the first guest room, then. Might not be perfect, but we can get things passable, and we can move on to the second one if we have time."

"How about I help with the guest room furniture," Mark said. "And one of you can take my job."

"Which is?" Alex said.

"Papering the windows to keep the sun out," Mark said.

"Okay," Alex said. "Good trade to me. I'm fried." He glanced at Owen, eyebrows raised.

"I'm fine," Owen said. "The lunch break was enough for me."

"Good; we have a plan," Mark said. He pumped his fist like he was in the middle of a huddle. "One, two, three, break?"

Derek snorted in tired amusement. "Thanks, guys," he said in a thick, weary voice. "I appreciate it."

"No problem," Owen said.

"No more Feng Shui, though, please," Derek said.
Cristina shook her head. "Yeah, I'm smart. I learn in one try. No need for lectures."

He rolled his eyes at her, shaking his head as he left.

Derek trudged up the stairs and headed to the master suite, losing sentience by the second. He thought he might find Meredith hiding in here, but she wasn't. He wasn't sure what new panicked project she'd assumed as her latest whirlwind of OCD. Maybe, unpacking the den or something. Worry clenched and released. Cristina would handle it. She'd said she would.

When he shut the bedroom door behind him, blessed, muted silence filled the room, and he deflated.

He weaved across soft, plush carpet, in and out of stacks of boxes to the bathroom, which wasn't unpacked, so much as decorated with travel-sized toiletries to tide them over until they found the time to set things up how they wanted. A lone pair of towels hung on the racks, one for him, and one for Meredith.

He stripped, leaving his dirty t-shirt and jeans and socks and boxer briefs on the toilet lid in a messy heap. He was too tired to find the hamper, wherever that was in the maze of boxes. He stepped into their huge, dual-head, walk-in shower, turned on the water as hot as it would go, and then he stood there, leaning against the cold wall, too fucking exhausted to reach for his washcloth and the soap and start scrubbing. His head felt too heavy for his neck, and he found himself looking at the floor. The lines of grout between the tiles fuzzed and split, and time stretched like a rubber band.

He didn't hear Meredith come into the room. Didn't see her shadow through the marbled glass as she approached. Didn't see her pop her head into the shower to look at him.

"Derek?" she said, her voice soft.

But it was enough to make him flinch awake from his half-doze and make an awful, strangled noise of fear. His hands slipped against the wet shower wall, and he lost his balance. He stumbled. His shoulder slammed into the tile, sending a jolt of pain vibrating down his humerus. He didn't fall, but it was a close thing, and he stood there, wet, naked, heart pounding, breaths rattling in his chest, arm throbbing.

"Sorry!" she said over the drumbeats of the water. "I'm so sorry! It's just me!"

He swallowed. His hands shook. He pulled his fingers through his hair, and he looked at her. And then he looked back at the floor, panting. "S'okay," he said, the words thick. His body calmed, and he settled down over minutes. When he regained his composure, he said, "Did you need something?"

Please, say no, he prayed. He didn't think he could do anything else right now. He was running on empty, and he was about thirty minutes from being a dead car on the side of the road, useless, waiting for a tow.

"I just came to check on you," she said, and he slumped with relief.

He said, "Oh." But that was about all he could muster. At least she seemed less panicky for now. Cristina must have helped.

Meredith bit her lip, concern slipping into her expression. "You should sleep."

"I wanted to take a shower, first," he rasped. "You said I smelled."
"This looked more like a passive soaking while the wall propped you up," she said, a frown creasing her face. "Please, sleep, Derek. Stop pushing."

He couldn't argue with rightness. He turned the shower knobs. He'd hosed himself off, at least. He wouldn't be getting sweat all over the clean sheets. "Yeah," he said, the word thick and stuck in his throat like taffy. "I'm done." He needed to collapse. Needed. Like breathing.

She moved back a step to let him out of the shower. He grabbed his towel and slicked the water away. The clothes he'd left on the toilet seat were gone. He glanced at Meredith. She didn't have anything in her hands. He snorted. He really didn't understand how she could find the time to panic about everything, care about everybody, unpack everything her hands touched, and still pick up laundry. Come to think of it, since when did she pick up laundry? This had become Bizarro World, where Meredith was the one picking up clothes, and he was the one leaving them everywhere.

God, he wished he could figure out what the fuck was going on with her.

This couldn't really be nesting behavior. Could it?

Something cold slipped behind his heart and squeezed. Nerves. The brief panic she'd wrung from him by surprising him in the shower tried to encroach. He shoved it away. No. No, no, no.

She touched his shoulder, and he flinched. He'd forgotten she was still standing there. Her expression creased even more than it had been when she saw his reaction. "Derek... is something wrong?" she said.

"No," he said.

She didn't look satisfied with his answer, but she didn't say anything else.

He swallowed.

Trying to figure out what was wrong with her was worrisome enough. Trying to figure out what he would do if he was going to be a father tomorrow was worse. And trying to figure out what in the fucking hell he would do to get Meredith through that whole panic-palooza if it turned out Cristina was right... Oh-god-am-I-ready, how-do-PTSD-and-fatherhood-mix, how-do-I-do-this, and I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know started up again in a deafening, thunderous chorus. He and Meredith had both been counting on those last two weeks to prepare. The idea that they might be taken away from him... He shook his head. He couldn't think about this, now.

He just couldn't.

He didn't bother finding anything new to wear. He walked over to the bed, Meredith shadowing him the whole way, like she didn't believe he would sleep like he said he would. He dropped onto his side of the mattress with a heaving sigh that spread his ribs, and she pulled the fluffy blankets over his naked body before he could think about doing it himself. He grabbed his pillow and burrowed.

Bliss.

"Do you mind if I unpack some things in here while you sleep?" she said, her voice soft and somewhere near his ear. "I'll be quiet." She rubbed his back through the comforter.

"Hmm," he said.

"Was that a yes?" she said. "Or a no?"
"Whatever you wan'," he mumbled.

If she asked him anything after that, he couldn't say.

"I think we're ready to try stepping you off your Paxil, if that's something you're interested in," Dr. Wyatt said.

Derek blinked. The fish tank burbled in the ensuing silence. "What?" he said after an eternity.

"You've mentioned more than once that you're unhappy with the side-effects."

He clenched his teeth. "Yes, but it's better than the alternative."

"It used to be, yes," Dr. Wyatt said with a nod.

He couldn't go back to that. To the before. Could he? A picture of himself in his mind's eye formed. He used to be a man who liked sex without needing encouragement or flukes. Who could think things like, "I want to sleep with my wife. Right now." And not have it be an event that required logistical planning. But he also used to be someone who wet himself. Who couldn't get out of bed. Who kept seeing things that weren't there. How could he...

"You... you think I can be okay without it?" he said.

"We've done a lot of work," she said. She gave him a warm, soft smile. "You have a whole toolbox that you didn't before. Tools to help you cope with your anxiety in healthy ways. I think, maybe, you can."

He swallowed. "But..."

"It's just something to think about," she said with an easy shrug. "We don't have to try it right this second."

"The baby is coming in less than a month," he said.

She nodded. "And that's a very valid reason to wait. That's a stressful event, and I can understand not wanting to risk exacerbating your illness in light of that."

"How long would weaning me off take?" he said, leaning forward. The cushions squeaked as his weight shifted.

She shook her head. "It's not an exact science. There's no definitive endpoint. You might find that you can't go all the way off of it, but that at a reduced dose, you still get all the benefits, but none or fewer of the undesired side-effects."

"That would be... nice." He swallowed. "That would be..."

She wrote a prescription. "Here. I'll give this to you. It's a reduced dose. You can think about it. Talk it over with Meredith. You can try it as soon as you're ready. If you're ready. Just be aware you'll probably experience some withdrawal symptoms, and be careful not to confuse those with a return of your anxiety symptoms. I can give you a pamphlet."

He stood, because he needed some way to vent... everything. He paced. He ran his fingers through his hair. "What if I'm not okay?" he said, coming to a stop beside the fish tank. He stared at the rainbow inside. Betta fish. Neon tetras. "Without it. What if...?"

"Then we'll put you back on your current dosage, and we'll get you stable again," she said. She
The good news is that we already know for sure what does work."

He licked his lips, staring at the fish. "I don't know."

"There's no rush. Like I said. It's just something to consider. You might not be okay without it, but that's something you'll never know without trying to wean yourself off."

"Yeah," he said, swallowing thickly. "Yeah."

He woke to black, but not pitch black. Moonlight slanted in through the large windows and the sliding glass door, and stars scattered across the sky like loose confetti. For a moment, he lay there on his back, relaxed, breathing softly, enjoying the warmth and comfort. He must have slept until almost dinnertime, he thought. He glanced at the alarm clock on his nightstand, one of the few items he'd unpacked in this room, so far. 3:30 said the face of the clock.

He frowned.

3:30, and it was dark? He scrubbed his face and looked at the clock again. It still said 3:30. His growling, empty stomach confirmed his sinking suspicions, but still, he grabbed his phone off the nightstand – Meredith must have pulled it from his jeans pocket and left it there – and hit a button to light up the display. 3:30 am, the phone specified. He had a text. He pressed more buttons. "Let me know when contractions start, so I can win my bet," the text said, from a number he didn't recognize, though he could guess the sender, even just woken up. Fuck, he'd slept thirteen hours. How could... He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept thirteen hours. Hell, he couldn't remember the last time he'd had thirteen straight hours in which to sleep. Lake Cushman back in late August, maybe. Why had nobody woken him up? Come to think of it, if this was the middle of the night, why was he alone in his very comfortable bed?

"Meredith?" he said into the darkness, but nobody answered. "Sam?" he said.

Nothing.

He flipped on the lamp on his nightstand, wincing and blinking as the light speared his pupils. He flipped back the covers. The chill made him shiver. He glanced down. The duffel bag he'd put four changes of clothes in to tide him over until he unpacked everything was gone. Damn it. Where?

And then he saw the closet. His jaw opened. Closed. Opened. Meredith had been busy while his lights were out.

The ironing board stood unfolded in the middle of the floor inside the closet, and the unplugged iron and a lint brush stooped on top of the board at the widest edge. Clothes on hangers hung from the dowel rods that had been empty before. All his suits, lined up in crisp rows, loosely organized by season of wear. Shoes filled the shoe shelves. His tie rack had been loaded with ties, all pristine and wrinkle-free.

Meredith had arranged everything how he'd had it in the old house. Without fail. She'd unpacked her things as well. She'd ironed, and de-linted, and unpacked. Everything.

On a lark, he checked his dresser. He found his underwear. Socks. Jeans. Sweats. Shorts. Everything that didn't need a hanger or an iron. Also arranged exactly how he liked it, though much more crisply folded and stacked than he'd ever cared about. He grabbed a quick change of clothes – clean socks, boxer briefs, a high-necked black t-shirt, and some soft, gray sweat pants – and he yanked them on in a rush.

Curious, he checked Meredith's bureau. Also full of clothes and jewelry and other things, though he
didn't rifle through things or pry, only looked. He perused all of the boxes in the bedroom, walking past each one. Most were now empty, save for a few odds and ends.

Everything. She'd done everything, and he hadn't heard any of it. Screw sleep, he'd been unconscious.

After making a quick pit stop to relieve himself, he opened the doors to the master suite and stepped out into the dark hallway. "Meredith?" he called, loud enough for his voice to carry, but she still didn't reply. As he moved down the hallway, he peeked into rooms.

All rooms were empty of people, but one guest room looked perfect, the second looked less than perfect, but usable, even a little bag of potpourri tied with a ribbon had been unpacked on the back of the toilet in the hallway bathroom, and... he pulled on the door to the linen closet. He found towels and sheets smelling of fresh, flowery detergent, folded and stacked into every spare space. The nursery was the only room on this floor that had, so far, not been touched, and still contained a disarray of furniture and piles of unopened boxes. He imagined Lexie had put her foot down on where time would be best spent, and the nursery was not it.

He headed downstairs, clutching the dark wooden railing as he took the steps two at a time. The house seemed empty, save for soft strains of music emanating from the living room. He headed that way.

He found Meredith and Samantha sitting by the entertainment center. Meredith's iPod perched on top the stereo, a little cord trailing from the headphone jack to the stereo's input. He recognized the group playing – Lamb – as one of her favorites, some trip-hop group she'd picked up an interest for after her time in London, but he didn't know what song played. A spritzer bottle sat by Meredith's hip. She held a cloth, and she sat on the floor by an open box, knees resting on a foam pad she'd put down underneath her for support. From the box, she pulled out a record sleeve he couldn't identify from this distance and swiped the surface with the cloth. Then she stacked it on the shelf by the stereo, where about ten other records already resided. Above that shelf, piles of stacked and organized CDs.

"You don't need to do that," he said as he approached.

She sighed. She looked up at him, her expression... unhappy. "I'm pretty sure they need to be unpacked."

He bent down to kiss her and squeeze her shoulder. She let him, but she didn't lean into any of it, didn't tell him wordlessly or audibly that she liked what he was doing, so he stopped, forcing himself not to sigh with disappointment in the process. Still bristling, then. He gave Samantha a scratch behind the ears, too, to vent his need to be affectionate. Samantha had flopped on her side and snoozed behind Meredith, almost like a living back rest.

"I know," he said as he straightened and stepped away to give Meredith her space, "but I can do that later." At the very least, she didn't need to waste time dusting everything.

"Did you sleep well?" Meredith said, ignoring his assessment.

"Yes," he said. He blinked, running his fingers through his hair. His head wasn't throbbing or swimming anymore. His eyeballs didn't feel too big for his skull. His muscles felt a little sore from his previous abuse of them, but nothing too painful lingered. "I feel better than I have in days."

She nodded. "Good." She wiped off the cover of another record, glanced at the title, glanced at the records she'd already unpacked, split them apart about midway, and stuck the newly cleaned one
into the bunch. "I thought about waking you for dinner, but... you seemed like you needed sleep more than food."

He sank onto the couch. His stomach growled, but he ignored it. He could get food in a minute. "Have you gotten any sleep?" he said.

"I've taken a couple catnaps," she said, not looking up.

"Meredith—"

She sighed. "Look, don't. Please, don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't ask me if I'm okay," she said, inhaling and exhaling through her teeth like she was trying not to blow up at him. "Don't tell me what I need or don't need to be doing. Don't tell me how I should feel. I'm sick of it."

His heart sank at her words. Oh-god-am-I-ready, how-do-PTSD-and-fatherhood-mix, how-do-I-do-this, and I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know. All of it churned. He was making a fucking mess of all of this, and he felt... helpless. He didn't like this. Didn't like that he couldn't figure out what she needed or what was wrong. Didn't like that she kept getting upset, and he could do nothing about it. Didn't like that she didn't seem to want anything to do with him because of it. Didn't like that he seemed to be exacerbating... whatever it was. Fuck.

"Okay," he said, nodding.

His stomach rumbled again. He pulled his fingers through his hair and stood, and then he left her alone to do her manic unpacking. She didn't comment on his departure, just let him go, and that made him feel worse.

He headed to the kitchen to grab a cup of peach yogurt from the fridge, and a spoon from the utensil drawer. He leaned against the countertop as he nibbled on the yogurt. Samantha trotted out into the kitchen and whined at him. He stroked her fur, and then he took her to the back door to let her out. She took off into the murky darkness. He sighed as he stood by the door, waiting for her to return.

He polished off the yogurt in a few bites. When Samantha came back, he let her in through the storm door. She pushed her wet nose against his hand, and he flinched, not because she'd startled him, just from the surprise of the chilly touch. He shook his head with a snort and petted her. She gave him a deep, discerning look with her mocha-colored eyes.

"You ever feel like you're trying to learn new etiquette on the fly?" he said. "And every time you think you might get it, you commit some horrible faux pas. Like... trying to eat a steak in India or something?"

Samantha sneezed at him.

"I suppose not," Derek said, the words glum. I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know. She seemed to sense his distress. She pressed her big, stocky body against him, a bastion of support. A lump filled his throat as he stroked her with his free hand. God, damn it. He didn't want to keep fucking this up. Why was this so difficult? With a frustrated sigh, he threw out the yogurt cup and put the dirty spoon in the dishwasher after rinsing it off under the tap.

He stared at the doorway and took a deep breath. Samantha walked beside him as he ambled back
into the living room, where Meredith still sat, unpacking. What had been about ten records when he'd left had become about thirty on the shelf. Meredith glanced up at him, swiping the cloth at another record, and his heart squeezed at her wary, "What, now?" expression.

He dropped to the floor beside her. He didn't touch her or kiss her or anything, and he left a good three feet of space between them. He didn't know what was safe. Samantha flopped onto her side with a heaving sigh and closed her eyes. He reached into the box of LPs and handed Meredith a record as a peace offering. She took it, and then her gaze darted away from him. Toward the record. Her lap.

"I'm sorry if I've been a menace," he said.

"You haven't been a menace," she replied without looking at him.

He shrugged. "Making you feel suffocated, then."

"You haven't been," she said.

She stacked the record and grabbed another. And another. He watched in silence. He wanted to help. Not to take the work away from her, but to give himself something to do in the deafening silence between them, but he thought she might take that wrong. Might take it like he was trying to control her. He scooted to the wall and pulled a beat up box labeled "movies" toward himself. She hadn't been anywhere near this box. He pulled off the lid.

A pile of old DVDs and VHS tapes sat inside the box. They hadn't bought many new movies lately as streaming services had taken over the world, but they did still have somewhat of a collection, albeit downsized. He rubbed his hand along the edge of the cardboard box. Before he'd packed, he'd pulled out anything with violence and told Alex he could keep them or donate them to the library. That had included a lot of the latest wave of superhero movies, which Derek, a comic book fan in his youth, had quite enjoyed. He and Mark had seen a lot of them in the theaters over the years. But... he found he didn't have the stomach for them anymore, cartoony as they were. Explosion sounds didn't sit well with him, leaving him tense and fidgeting on the couch, though he could handle them at low volume. Gunfire, though... forget it, and even if he put the movie on mute, he could still see them. The guns. Actors playing bad people doing bad things. Those movies had become a condensed pile of triggers for him, and he just... didn't derive any enjoyment from them anymore.

Superman, both with Reeve and Routh, Spiderman with Tobey Maguire, Batman, both with Keaton and Bale, Transformers... All of that, he'd left with Alex. Most of what was left was documentaries, or Meredith's, though a couple sedate dramas had made it through the downsizing. He pulled one of the top items from the box.

The Star Wars trilogy, a set of DVDs in a special, shiny, embossed box of its own. He grimaced, but he didn't comment. He swore, Meredith had like six different copies of it. The originals. The re-release. The special edition re-release, both in letterbox and 4:3 aspect. And that was just VHS. In addition to the DVDs he'd just picked up, she had it on blu-ray also, and who knew what else. Every time George Lucas decided to fuck with it, Meredith happily threw down her hard-earned money to buy the result. It made no sense to him whatsoever.

He tried to put the DVD box on the shelf, but Meredith tensed in the corner of his eye, and the hairs on the back of his neck prickled in response. "You have to wipe that off, first," she said.

He froze and looked at her with a frown. "It's clean, Meredith."
"No, it's not," she said. "You have to wipe off the dust." She raised her rag, showing him the faint stain of dirt spreading across it. But she was wiping off old records, some of which he hadn't touched except to pack, in years.

"There's no dust on this," he said, showing her the shiny box in his hand. She pulled this box out and watched the trilogy all the fucking time. It didn't have time to collect dust. But she bit her lip. Her breaths funneled into quick gasps. He felt like he was watching a volcano about to erupt, and he rushed to say, "Okay. Okay, let me grab a rag. I'm sorry." I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know.

He glanced around wildly. His friends had been working the house over for over half a day in his dreaming absence. He wasn't sure where the clean rags had been put. He settled on the roll of paper towels that had been left on the end table by the sectional. He scooted across the floor, snatched those, and moved back to resettle by the movie box. He made a show of wiping off the box that didn't need to be wiped, but she shook her head and handed him the spritzer. He fought not to roll his eyes. He squirted some cleaner into the paper towel, wiped again, gave her a long look at the result, and set the box down on the shelf when she nodded. She seemed... okay, now.

"I'm sorry," he said into the silence, at a loss. God, he just had no idea what to do anymore. Everything was wrong, and she shrugged off his default coax-calm-hug-kiss approach like he'd changed careers from surgeon to professional cactus. He picked up another DVD from the box, wiped it top to bottom, and put it on the shelf.

The silence stretched. He must have wiped off ten more movies. She kept working through his LPs. Some of the stuff in that box, he'd had for over twenty-five years. The first record he'd ever bought with his own money, after he'd saved up his allowance for weeks, had been *Give 'em Enough Rope* by the Clash, and even that was in the box somewhere. He'd never made the jump to cassettes or any of the later media iterations, except for the bare necessity of converting records to tapes or CDs for his car and portable players and, eventually, to MP3s for his iPod. There was something about a record that just... sounded better.

He smiled, remembering when he'd moved into the old house. Meredith had boggled over the player like he'd brought home a unicorn. *They still make record players? Really?* she'd said.

"It's just... I'm not okay," Meredith said, voice wobbling.

He turned to look at her, pulled from his musing. She'd stopped unpacking and set her rag on the lid of the box she'd only half-pillaged. He didn't know how to respond without upsetting her. Why wasn't she okay? Was it the baby? But asking her for specifics, despite the runnel of worry tearing through him, seemed like... conversational suicide.

"I... noticed that," he said, trying to keep his tone neutral.

She sighed. "I know I'm acting totally insane."

"I wouldn't say... insane," he said, words cautious. "More like... a steroidal Donna Reed."

She looked at him with a blank expression. "Who's that?"

"This is one of those moments where you're making me feel like a fossil," he said.

She tried to scoot toward him, but she struggled. He took the hint, and he moved closer. When she wrapped her arms around him and kissed his shoulder, tension flowed out of him. "You're a really sexy fossil, at least," she said, nuzzling him.
"The Donna Reed Show was a 50s sitcom that was still on in reruns when I was a kid," he explained, returning her kiss with one of his own. He pressed his lips to her forehead. It felt so good to kiss her. "Donna Reed played the housewife of a doctor. She cooked and cleaned and took care of the kids and did all of the stuff you've been doing in overdrive today."

"I didn't cook!"

"You heated up pizza and served donuts," he said, grinning. "That counts for you."

"Hey!" she said with faux-offense, socking him in the arm, and he laughed as he rubbed the spot where her knuckles had impacted. He missed this. Playing. When the moment of mirth bled into silence, she sighed and put her head on his shoulder. He rubbed her back, running his palm along her spine, and she groaned like she'd been in pain before, and now he'd relieved it. "It's just..." she said, jerking as he hit a bad knot and pressed into it, "I feel like there's so much I need to do, and there's no way I'll finish it in time."

His hands slowed. He swallowed, unsure. "It's not... the end of the world if you don't." Was that safe to say? That seemed safe.

"That's the problem," she said, looking up at him. "It feels like it, and I don't know why."

He raised his eyebrows. "Like the end of the world?"

"Yeah."

"Meredith..." He sighed, and he hugged her. "I promise it won't be the end of the world."

She sniffled. "That just sounds like a platitude."

"It's not a platitude," he said. "It's the truth."

She pulled a tent of his shirt into her fingers, and she rested against him. "How in the hell can you be so sure all the time?" she said, her tone... envious. When she looked up at him, her eyes were wet, and that made his heart hurt. "In two weeks, I'm going to have one of the most painful experiences a woman can have. I'm going to have a freaking baby in two weeks, we're going to have a freaking baby, and you're all, 'Breathe, Mere!' and, 'It's okay, Mere!' and, 'Take it easy, Mere!' and, 'It's not the end of the world, Mere!' like some sort of fineness coach, like it's me having any other freakout on any other day, and life is normal and good and peachy. I feel so freaking inadequate right now. Can you loan me some of your Kool-Aid?"


"Not what?"

"Sure," he said. He dared a look back at her. "Meredith, I'm terrified right now."

Her jaw dropped for a moment before she picked it up. "But..."

"I'm terrified I won't be able to be a father and have PTSD," he said. "I'm terrified I won't be able to help you through this."

"Derek, don't say that," she said.
"You know Dr. Wyatt told me I can try weaning myself off the Paxil if I want to?"

She blinked. "What? You never said anything!"

"What would have been the point of getting your hopes up?" he said. He took a choppy breath and blew it out. He never wanted to feel like he had nine months ago. Ever. Too scared to function, angry at everything, feeling like his best friend had died, lost, and guilt-wracked, all wrapped together in a blanket of abject misery. "I'd rather take the Paxil than go back to... where I was before. Not when I worked so fucking hard to get here."

"But she doesn't think you'd go back to that, or she wouldn't have suggested you stop taking it!" Meredith protested.

"I can't," he said, shaking his head. "I can't. I promised I'd be there for you, and I will be. If I have it, you can take it. I mean that. I'm just worried that what I have won't be enough, even with the Paxil. I don't want to fuck this up." *I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know.*

She kissed him. "You're enough. No matter what."

"Yeah," he said with a derisive snort. "I'm doing such a bang up job so far. You bristle whenever I get near you, everything I say seems to be the wrong thing, and Cristina labeled me a McDreamy menace." He pulled his fingers through his hair. "I don't know what I'm doing, I'm trying, but..."

"Is that why you're worried?" she said. "Because I keep telling you to go away?"

"Some of why," he said.

She sighed. "Jeez, we're a freakin' pair."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been marinating in panic because you seemed so peachy and calm, and I felt like some sort of inept Debbie Downer in comparison. And you're marinating in panic because my avoid-y goodness translated into Derek-speak as, 'Shit, I'm fucking this up.'"

He gave her a wry snort. Her imitation of him, snapping, harsh voice and all was... a picture. "I guess that's... one way to put it."

"I am really scared, Derek," she said, relaxing against him. "But I know you'll be enough. I know it."

He shook his head, staring into space. "I'm sure you'll still be saying that if I have a panic attack in the delivery room."

She thought for a long moment. "I had a patient who gave birth back in August," she said. "Right before we went to Lake Cushman. She ended up needing a cesarean. After twenty hours of labor, she'd screamed herself hoarse, and she couldn't even lift her head off the pillow she was so tired. Her husband was such a nervous wreck he threw up in the delivery room all over the floor and fainted. But they were fine in the end." She cupped his face, and she smiled at him, peering at him through her the fringe of her eyelashes. "They were really happy. If you have a panic attack in the delivery room, yeah, it'll suck, Derek, but to steal your platitude, it's not the end of the world. We'll be happy in the end." She kissed him.

"I'm sorry in advance if I fall apart on you."
"It's not going to happen, Derek. I'm sure of it. But... apology accepted if that's what you need."

He looked down at her. "How in the hell can you be so sure?"

"I have an amazing husband who's always here, saying things," she said. Her palm felt so nice against his skin. He sighed, and he felt some more of his tension loosen. "And I know what it looks like when he's really struggling. This isn't that. He isn't a sick man who's so scared he can't get out of bed right now. He's just a normal guy worrying about something that's going to flip his life upside down or whatever."

They rested against each other, counterbalanced, for a long moment. The soft strains of music from the speakers filled the silence. "If I should die this very moment," sang the lead vocalist in a soft, whispering lilt, "I wouldn't fear, for I've never known completeness like being here." He sighed, soaking up her warmth and her confidence. Her confidence in him. She twitched, and she smiled, and she grabbed his hand to press his palm to her womb. Baby moved under her skin, strong and vital and alive.

"It'll be worth it," Meredith said like she was trying to convince herself. "All this scary crap."

"Yeah," he said. "It will be." He kissed her. "Is there anything I can do? To help you not be scared?"

"Helping me put this junk away is a nice start. I appreciate it."

"Okay," he said. They basked in each other for a few more minutes. They pressed close. Their noses touched. They kissed. And then they split apart to get back to work.

He wiped off more DVDs, losing track of the time. He filled the shelf. The VHS tapes of Ellis Grey's surgeries rested at the bottom of the box. He placed those on the next shelf up in chronological order, so Meredith would have an easier time finding what she wanted if she ever wanted to review them.

She snorted, drawing his attention away from his task.

"What?" he said, looking up.

She showed him the cover of LP she'd picked out of the box. "Really, Derek? Really?" And then she burst into gales of laughter. "This is just... I never pictured you for the type."

He blinked. Hangin' Tough. New Kids on the Block. For a brief moment, he couldn't remember where on earth he'd gotten that, or for fuck's sake, why, but then it came to him in a crushing wave of bittersweet memory. "I can explain that..."

Meredith nodded, sniggering. "I think you owe me a story."

"Amelia... had a phase when she was younger," he said, smiling as he remembered. She'd been... thirteen? He couldn't recall. Please, please, please, please, will you take me, Derek? Mom's too busy. He'd been trying to study for finals, but she'd worn him down after weeks of pestering. The group had had a concert Westbury. Mom had given him her car keys on loan, and they'd made a day of it. That had probably been one of the last times Amelia had enjoyed his company. That had been in... an April, and after the summer had passed, she'd gone to high school. She'd met the stoner crowd, and that had been all she wrote. "Before the drugs. I took her to a concert."

"And you bought a record of it?" Meredith said, eyebrows raised.
"She bought it with her allowance money and gave it to me as a thank you," Derek said. **Thank you, thank you, thank you!** she'd babbled at him. **Do you think Jordan noticed me? He's soooooocute.** "I never had the heart to toss it."

"That's kind of adorable," Meredith said. "Have you ever listened to it?"

"Um, no."

"What about at the concert?"

He shook his head. "All the screaming teenage girls nearly had my eardrums bleeding."

She turned off her iPod, reverently pulled the old record from its pristine, untouched sleeve, put it on the player, and started up the turntable. An unfamiliar pop riff filled the room. **"The right stuff,"** sang one of the New Kids. Meredith nodded to the beat for a moment and turned the volume dial, until the noise was bouncing off the walls and vibrating against his breastbone. "The right stuff."

She pressed her hands into the floor and tried to rise, only to grunt with frustration. She looked at him, biting her lip. "Can you help me up?" she said as the song proceeded out of the intro into the first verse.

He stood and offered her his hands. "Please, don't tell me you want to dance it out to this shit," he said. "I think that might be where I draw my line."

"Do you need me to get you a marker?" she said, smirking. "This is so freaking 80s!" She wiggled her shoulders along with the beat, grinning mischievously at him, and he couldn't help but meet her grin with one of his own. He refused to dance, though. Even in not-public.

"Hah. Hah," he said, though he couldn't keep the amusement from twitching at his lips.

With his help, she got her knees underneath her, but it was an awkward, unwieldy struggle. Baby had gotten so big, and Meredith was so tiny. He didn't know how she had room for everything.

Meredith had almost found upright when her hands tightened around his, and she hissed with... pain? Annoyance? He couldn't read it. Under the pressure of her grip, lightning bolts of pain snaked up his finger bones as all his knuckles smashed together. She followed inertia and his help, and she managed to straighten. She let go of him with one hand, but even upright, she clutched him with the other, so hard he thought bones might break. "Ow," he said, trying to pull away, but her grip didn't wane. "Ow. Meredith?" Her free hand went to her belly button, and she stood there, breathing, the strangest expression loitering her face.

Samantha sensed something was going on. She stood and padded over to whine at them. Still trapped by Meredith's hand, Derek shooed Samantha away with his knee.

"Is the baby kicking?" he said, frowning.

Her grip loosened. He yanked his hand from her painful clutches and shook the discomfort out of his joints. She looked up at him with gobsmacked, wide eyes. "Um," she said.

"What?" he said. "Are you okay?"

"That was Braxton-Hicks," she said with a firm nod. "Right? It had to be."

He blinked. For a moment, he couldn't think of a single intelligent thing to say. The throbbing beat of the music made his skull rattle. He reached to turn it down, and the wave of noise receded to a
background murmur as he spun the volume dial. But then he was back to staring dumbly at her. "You... had a contraction?" he managed after what felt like eternity.

"Sure as hell felt like one," she said.

"Did it hurt?"

She looked at him, a helpless expression on her face. "...sort of?"

"Well, how bad was it on a scale of one to ten?"

"Um," she said. She frowned. Samantha nudged her with her big, broad nose, and Meredith reached absently to give the dog a pat on the head. "One? Point five? It was more surprising than painful."

"Okay," he said. He pulled his fingers through his hair. He shifted from foot to foot. "Okay, um."

"Time it?"

"Yeah," he said. Oh-god-am-I-ready, how-do-PTSD-and-fatherhood-mix, how-do-I-do-this, and I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know rattled in his head like somebody banging rocks with sticks. Louder and louder and louder. His breaths funneled into gasps, and his vision went pinpoint and fuzzy. The dog whined.

"Derek!" Meredith snapped, elbowing him, which was enough to jolt him out of his spiral.

"Sorry," he said. "Sorry, um." He took a deep, slow breath, and pushed it out. He glanced at his watch. "Time it. Right." He fiddled with the buttons, trying to change his watch to stopwatch mode, but his fingers shook, and he... Beep, beep, beep. Beep. There. There, he got it. He hit the start button, and he watched the numbers climb from zero. Ten seconds passed. Twenty. Thirty.

"I'm sure it was just Braxton-Hicks," she said, hawk-eying the timer from beside him. Her hand rested on her belly. "Those are pretty common the last few weeks."

"But you've never had any before," he said.

She frowned. "No... No, I don't... think so."

He raised his eyebrows. "You don't think so?"

She sighed. "Well, the book said some women don't even notice them early on."

"This isn't early, though."

"So?"

He pulled his fingers through his hair, resisting the urge to pace. Or stare at his watch. Or just stand there and shake. "So, wouldn't you have felt some other ones?"

"Derek?" she said.

"What?" he croaked.

"You're not helping," she snapped.

He flinched, rebuffed. "Sorry," he said. I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know. "Sorry, I. Um."
She pressed against him, clutched at him. "I don't want to have it, yet. I'm supposed to have two more weeks!" Her voice was shrill, like an icepick in his ear, and her own upset fed into his.

"Meredith..."

"Derek, I don't want to have it, yet!" she snapped.

"Well," he said, taking a breath, "you might not be, so... let's just... let's just..."

"If the next word out of your mouth is relax, chill, or calm as a prefix for down, I'll hurt you," she said, glaring at him. "I'll hurt you, Derek."

He took another deep breath and blew it out. *I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know*. Another breath. He dug deep for some humor. Anything. Anything to keep him out of free fall. "What about simmer?"

She blinked. "Simmer?"

"As a prefix for down," he said. "Am I allowed to say simmer?"

She rolled her eyes, but she laughed. Just a little. "You're such a freaking asshole."

"I love you, too," he said.

He pulled her into an embrace and stuck his nose in her hair, because in that moment, he needed it. Needed her. *Needed*. The faint scent of lavender tickled the back of his throat, and he breathed, and breathed, and breathed. One, two, three. In. One, two, three. Out. She snaked her hands around him, and the feeling of her palm along his spine, warmth from her skin seeping through the cotton of his t-shirt, helped. The *I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know* faded underneath the steady thrum of his heartbeat. She pressed her ear to his chest like she liked to do when she was upset. He let her listen as long as she wanted. He carded his fingers through her soft hair, and he rocked her, falling into his default mode for handling freakouts. Coax. Calm. Hug. Kiss. The act of calming her sank into his bones and his muscles and his mind. He kissed her, and he sighed as he relaxed. He seemed to help her, too, because she melted into his arms like some sort of putty.

She pulled at his wrist, swaying a bit like she was drunk. "How long has it been?"

"Just a couple minutes," he said, showing her his watch. "Anything?"

"No."

"Okay."

"I really don't want to have it, yet," she said, but she sounded more resigned than shrill this time.

"I know," he murmured. "I know. I'm not ready, either."

Her gaze narrowed. "Boohoo for you! At least it won't freaking hurt for you," she snapped. She stepped out of his arms and rested her palms against her womb. She looked down at herself. "Please, please, don't come out yet, Baby. Please."

"It might be false labor," he said. "We shouldn't get upset, yet."

"I know," she said.

"I'm here," he said. He squeezed her shoulder.
"What are we supposed to do?" she said, looking up at him with wide eyes turned slate in the dim light.

"Well, we can't just stand here staring at each other while we panic," he said.

She gave him a desperate look. "Can't we?"

"How about..." He frowned, trying to think of something. "Oh, that show you like. The cooking one. We can watch that."

She sighed. "Our Internet isn't hooked up, yet. That was streaming."

"Oh," he said. "A movie, then? What are you in the mood for?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't really have a mood right now except for, 'crap, crap, crap, this is not happening.'"

"It might not be," he said.

He stretched for an idea, but he couldn't think of anything off the top of his head, either. He grabbed from the DVD shelf at random, not even glancing at the title. With his luck, they'd be watching *Empire Strikes Back* or some other gimmicky bullshit, but he was willing to watch the whole fucking trilogy with her if it meant they had something to do for a while. "Go sit," he said, gesturing at the sectional. He turned on the television and the player, and he turned off the turntable. He unhooked Meredith's iPod and switched the stereo's input to the correct source. He popped the DVD into the player's tray, and he looked up to find Meredith sinking into the couch cushions with a sigh. Samantha flopped to the ground by her feet with a sigh.

"Do you want something from the kitchen?" he said. "Coffee or something? I can brew up some decaf for you before we start."

She shook her head. "Water?" she said instead.

He nodded and went to nuke himself a quick mugful of caffeine. He had a feeling he would need it today. After rifling through three unfamiliar cabinets, past pots, plates, and glasses, he found the coffee mugs in the fourth, and he grabbed his favorite double-sized mug, the royal blue one that said, "I 3 NYC," on the front. He dumped some instant coffee into it, filled it with water, and stuffed it into the microwave.

As he watched the numbers count down to zero, Meredith called, "Time! How long was that?"

He glanced at his watch. "Seventeen minutes and thirty-eight seconds," he called back. He restarted the timer. After they got a feel for what was going on, he'd stop, but... "Did that one hurt more?"

"No," she replied. "But not less, either."

He walked back into the living room with his steaming mug and a glass of water for her. He sat down on the sectional next to her, wrapped his arm over her shoulder, and told Samantha she could come up. The dog happily settled on his left side and rested her head against his thigh. He stroked her fur and reached for the DVD controller to hit play.

"What are we watching?" she said.

He shrugged. "I have no idea. I just grabbed."
"Oh," she said.

"Sorry. I'm just... not much good for making decisions right this second."

She pressed her lips against his shoulder. "No, I get it. Me, either."

They watched the opening credits roll.

"Sweet Home Alabama?" Meredith said, reading the title.

Derek watched as a pair of kids ran around on a beach during a lightning storm. Lightning struck the sand, and they screamed and ran the other direction. They argued. "Lightning never strikes the same place twice," said the boy. Then Derek realized they were talking about marriage. Then they kissed. Crap. What had he picked? This seemed...

"What is this about?" Derek said, words cautious.

"I don't know," Meredith said, grimacing. "I think it's a rom-com."

Derek frowned. "You don't know? Isn't it yours?"

"No," Meredith said. "Why would I own a chick flick? I don't do chick flicks."

He shrugged. "I hate to say it, but lately, you've done chick flicks, Mere." He put his palm against her womb and grinned. "Internal influences and all."

"Romance-y drama, yes, but not this stuff," she protested. And then she sighed. "Well, okay, there was that one with Hugh Grant, but—"

"But you read this stuff all the time."

"I read romances, Derek. With graphic, rutting, wild sex." She made a face at the television like she'd sucked a lemon. "I don't read cutesy, meet-cute... cuteness. Ick."

"So, your reading material is porn for women," he said.

"Yes!"

Derek snorted. "That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Why in the hell you read those," he said. "I have the Internet. You have graphic literature."

She rolled her eyes as if to say, "Well, duh!" though she didn't open her mouth. "Izzie must have left this behind on the shelf or something," Meredith said.

They watched for a few moments. Reese Witherspoon walked down the street with a cup of coffee while pop-y top 40 music played. Derek sighed. He should have grabbed Star Wars.

Meredith snorted as Reese stepped into her apartment. Roses littered the entire space. Everywhere. Red ones. Yellow ones. It was like a florist shop had exploded. "It looks like she got attacked by one of your cheesy schemes," Meredith said.

"Hey," he said. "You love my cheesy schemes. Sometimes."
She kissed him. "I tolerate your cheesy schemes. I love you." And then her eyes widened. "Whoa. Rewind that."

"What?"

"Just... rewind it," she said.

He stepped the movie back a minute. They watched Reese discover the floral vomit in her apartment again. Reese checked her messages. A man spoke. Meredith gaped. "Holy crap. That sounds... just like you."

Derek frowned. "What? No, it doesn't."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, it does. Listen to him!"

"I don't sound like that," he said.

"Trust me," she said. "Yes, you do. That voice has your timbre and everything."

He shrugged, and they kept watching. Some sort of fashion show proceeded. Jesus Christ, what had he picked?

"Oh, my freaking god," Meredith said. She snatched the remote and jammed the pause button. She gestured at the television, waving the remote like an extension of her arm. "That's you! That's... That's you!" She peered at him, eyes narrowing. "Are you a secret movie star? Is this one of the things I haven't learned about you, yet?"

"Um," Derek said, looking at the man on the screen. He had blue eyes, dark, voluminous hair, and he wore a suit like a boss, but... "No. That's not me."

"It's so you!" she argued. She glanced to the screen, and back to him, to the screen, and back to him. "Minus the gray hair and the extra pinch to your crows' feet. He's like you with ten years subtracted or whatever. Crap, Derek, if that's not you, you have a doppelganger somewhere."

"Amnesia, Mere? Really?"

She sighed and un-paused the movie. "It's you."

"That accident was twenty years ago, not ten."

"Oh," she said. "Well, crap."

"Amnesia, Mere? Really?"

She sighed and un-paused the movie. "It's you." He watched. He supposed he saw the resemblance a little. Meredith sighed beside him, melting. "He even has your smile. You have such a great smile."

"I hope I get the girl," he said, and she elbowed him in the ribs.

"You have the girl," she said.

He grinned. "Touché." He pressed his lips to her temple.
They watched as the narrative proceeded and his doppelganger proposed to the woman in the middle of a Tiffany's somewhere in Manhattan. Meredith had become a relaxed pile of goo beside him, and she wore a misty look on her face.

"For a woman who hates chick flicks—" he started to say, but she elbowed him again.

"Shut up," Meredith said. "It doesn't count when I'm basically watching you be you."

He laughed. "Yes, dear," he said, a soft murmur. Reese and his doppelganger kissed in the back seat of a limo and talked about marriage. He let his eyelids droop, and he relaxed, not paying much attention. He enjoyed the quiet in his mind as he sat sandwiched between his dog and his wife.

"Time," Meredith said, and he raised his watch.

"Seventeen minutes five seconds," he read from the watch face, stomach sinking. "Rating?"

"Still a point five or so," she said. "They don't hurt much. It's just... like a little baby menstrual cramp that only lasts thirty seconds or so."

He nodded. One of the things that could distinguish Braxton-Hicks from actual labor was if the contractions didn't have any consistency to them. Real contractions were the body gearing up to push a baby out, not in a few weeks or days, but imminently. They didn't lessen or space themselves out more. They snowballed, until they were hard for a woman to even talk through. If the time increased or intensity decreased between one and the next, well, that was likely Braxton-Hicks. And, so far, whatever Meredith was experiencing, was progressing in a way that refused to be easily categorized. Stress coiled. He'd been hoping for an easy label, if only so they could stop wondering. He reset the timer. A few more, and they'd have a good baseline, and he could stop timing unless they got closer together or more intense.

They watched the rest of the movie, snarking back and forth at each other as he sipped on his coffee and she worked on her water. The expanse of sky beyond the windows began to brighten from black to twilight blue to faint pinks and yellows to the east. Meredith had five more contractions, no more or less painful than the first two. And all of them were about seventeen minutes apart. Like the universe knew he was trying to categorize this as real panic time or something to shake off and was giving him the finger.

When the credits rolled, Meredith said, "That's so freaking lame. She should have picked Doppelganger Derek. He's so much prettier."

He snorted. "Because being pretty is the first priority when choosing a potential husband."

"Whatever," Meredith grumbled. "It's Reese's loss."

He glanced at his watch. 6:30 am. He nudged Samantha after stroking her with his palm. "Off," he said, and she hopped down from the couch with a sneeze. She stopped to shake off, sending a small cloud of loose black fur flying everywhere while Derek stood and stretched. Meredith twitched, and her gaze shifted to the vacuum cleaner sitting by the steps as the cloud settled. "Meredith," he said, the word soft, and she looked at him. "We have a dog. There will be hair. Everywhere. I know you want it squeaky clean, but that one's a lost cause. If you stress about it, you'll drive yourself insane."

"I know; it's just..." Her fingers tightened into white-knuckled fists, and she gasped. "Time."

"I'm not timing them anymore," Derek said. "They seem pretty stuck at seventeen minutes right now."
She bit her lip. "Oh. Well, that was..."

"What?"

"A two," she said. "Maybe a... two point five. Not that bad, but I can't... really call that not ouch-y anymore."

He blinked. Tension coiled. _I don't-know-I don't-know-I don't-know_. "Oh."

Her eyes bugged, and the little panicked gasps started up again. "I don't think this is Braxton-Hicks, Derek. I..." She shifted on the sofa and grimaced. "Help me up!"

He offered her a hand, and she used him as a counterbalance to pull herself up to standing.


He pulled her into his arms and stroked her back as a lump formed in his throat. "There's time," he said, pulling his fingers through her hair. "We're okay." He kissed her. "Just breathe." He kissed her for the again. "And for the record, I'm not even on the same continent as calm, so I'm allowed to say that, and you're not an inadequate Debbie Downer. I'm talking to me, too. Okay?"

She snorted, pressing her face against his shirt. She nodded. "Okay," she said. Gasp. Gasp.

"Just breathe in," he said. He inhaled. She echoed him. One, two, three. "Out," he said, exhaling, and she copied. One, two, three. "In." One, two, three. "Out." One, two, three. The little gasps seemed to stop, then, and he didn't need to encourage her anymore. When he spoke, he used a low, soothing tone and said, "Why don't you pick a room for us to work on for a while, and I'll call Richard to book us off. Okay?"

"Okay," she said in a tiny voice.

He kissed her. It was still too early to tell if this was real or false labor, and while Dr. Charlton had told them no solids when active labor started, she'd recommended light fare prior to that, and if this was the real deal, he didn't want Meredith starving by the time it was too late to fix it. "Do you want me to make you some breakfast? Something easy. I could scramble some eggs for you."

"Okay," she said.

He nodded, squeezed her shoulder, and trudged back into the kitchen. Samantha trotted behind him as he pulled his phone from his pocket. Derek bent and plucked Samantha's empty metal bowl from the floor by the kitchen door. He frowned. The plastic tupperware they'd filled with kibble to tide them over was empty, which meant... dog food. Dog food. Where had the dog food been unpacked? He hit speed dial #9 while he searched through all the kitchen cabinets.

"Richard Webber," Richard said after picking up on the third ring, his voice almost lost in the chaotic background murmur and the unmistakable whine of the intercom.

"Hey, Richard," Derek said. He found the forty pound bag of kibble in one of the lower cabinets near the sink. He yanked. "I need..." He grunted when the bag succumbed to gravity and dropped to the floor with a thump. "I need you to cover for me today." Samantha tried to shove her nose into the big bag, but he kneed her in the shoulder blade, and she hopped back, giving him a whuff of indignation. "And I need you to find a replacement for Meredith. Her shift was supposed to start at 10:00 am."
"Sure," Richard said. "Is something wrong?"

"Well, we're not sure, yet," Derek said as he measured out four cups of kibble and dumped them into Samantha's bowl. "We think she might be in labor."

"Oh, that's wonderful news!" Richard said.

Derek sighed. "Yeah. Really great." Samantha hopped beside him, nails scrabbling on the tiled floor as he walked her bowl to the mat where her water dish sat. He put the bowl down, and Samantha attacked her food with gusto. "Look, can you not tell anyone else, yet? We're not sure, and I..." Samantha's snarfing noises filled the quiet. He pulled his fingers through his hair. He wanted some time. With his wife. Alone. If this was the real deal, he needed some quiet time to prepare before the shit hit the fan. If Meredith asked him to call her friends to come support her, he'd do it in a heartbeat, but... not until she asked. He needed... space.


"Yes," Derek said. "I'll call you back when we know." And then he hung up. He texted Dr. Charlton next. "Meredith might be in labor. We're keeping an eye on it."

In a matter of seconds, his phone beeped, and he read the response, "How far apart are her contractions?"

"About 17 minutes," he typed.

A longer pause this time. A beep. "Let me know if they get closer than ten minutes apart."

Numb, he stared at his phone until his eyes lost focus, and then he had two phones. And then he had no phones, because all he had was a slate-colored blur. The blur stretched. He hadn't expected to hear anything different. Two weeks was early but... not early enough to be considered at risk, or in need of intervention. Most OB's didn't try to stop pre-term labor after about thirty-four weeks, and Meredith was far beyond that. But...

He put his phone on the counter, leaned onto his elbows, and slumped over the countertop. God. What had been a comfortable two weeks away had become now, now, now, now in the space of hours, a persistent weight crushing in on all sides, and he didn't know... He... *Oh-god-am-I-ready, how-do-PTSD-and-fatherhood-mix, how-do-I-do-this, and I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know.* All of it thumped at his mental door, knocking and knocking and knocking. He swayed on his feet. *Oh-god-am-I-ready, how-do-PTSD-and-fatherhood-mix, how-do-I-do-this, and I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know.* His hands shook, and then the tremors spread to the rest of his body. He was on the jagged edges of the cliff before a panic attack. He knew it. *I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know.*

Fuck, he couldn't afford this. He couldn't *do* this.

He closed his eyes and breathed. In and out and in and out. He thought about the future. The part that came after this... uncertainty. *Hi, Baby,* he imagined himself saying shakily as a tiny, wrinkled new life was placed in his arms. The life he and Meredith had made. He imagined himself smiling so wide his face hurt. *Hi, Baby. It's Dad.* Big, beautiful blue eyes would stare back at him. Newborns were so tiny. So new and untouched by violence or anything wrong in the world. He envied that, sometimes. That innocence. That newness. *Hi, Baby.*

A new replacement thought for himself, he decided, wiping the wetness from his eyes. He held his mind on that thought, frozen. He would get through this, and he would be there for Meredith, just
like he'd promised, and he was okay. He was. He could do this. For her. For him. For Baby. He could.

His phone beeped. He took a deep breath, straightened, and picked it up. A text from Mark. "I'm on standby if you need me," it said, and Derek snorted. God, Richard couldn't keep a secret any better than Mark could. The two of them were a pair of guileless watermelons in a fucking watermelon patch. And, now, the whole hospital would know about Meredith in minutes.

"It's false labor," texted Lexie moments later. "It's got to be. Don't worry."

Followed by Cristina's, "Sweet. I just won money."

"Do you need us there?" Lexie added.

"No," he responded in moments, fingers flying over the keys. "Not yet. Thanks."

He put his phone back in his pocket, and he whipped up the eggs for Meredith. All of it was a blur of forced calm as he made himself breathe in and out on counts of three. Hi, Baby, he imagined himself saying as the frying pan simmered and spat somewhere in the peripheral of his awareness. It's Dad. Over and over. Hi, Baby. It's Dad. Each time, the scene in his head developed more elaborate details. What had been him and the baby alone in dark nothingness became him and the baby in the bright, noisy delivery room while Meredith panted on the bed beside him, exhausted. Doctors and nurses in scrubs churned in and out of the busy room. He sat by Meredith's hip, and he handed off their miracle to her, content to watch, open-mouthed, amazed, and stupefied, over Meredith's shoulder as mother and child bonded. She'd done the hard part, after all. Hi, Baby. It's Dad. He swallowed. I'm sorry I'm a mess. I'm trying so hard not to be. The scene repeated until he could feel Meredith's skin as their fingertips brushed. Could hear Baby gurgling. Could smell the sweat and blood of all that hard work. Hi, Baby. It's Dad.

He shook the mental picture away when he realized he was well on his way to burning the eggs. He saved them before they became inedible, though, and he didn't think Meredith knew the difference between perfect eggs and passable eggs. He bypassed salt and shook on some pepper to her taste, and then he scraped the passable eggs onto a plate. Samantha had long since finished her kibble feast by the back door and left the room, probably to find Meredith, but he wasn't sure what project Meredith had decided to tackle. Still, he had a feeling.

He found her in the nursery, sorting through the boxes stacked along the wall, and he handed her the steaming plate. "Bon appétit," he said with a flare of his hand and a wink of his eye, and she met his gaze with a hesitant smile. Better than panicking and gasping, by far, he decided.

She picked at the eggs more than ate, but at least it was something. When she set down the plate, half the bounty he'd cooked for her still a yellow blob on the surface, he snorted when he realized the eggs sort of matched the paint in the room. After some debate, they'd picked a shell-colored yellow, a unisex welcome for Baby that Meredith thought was cheerful but not an "eyesore of happy", and much less offensive than pink, if Baby did turn out to be a girl.

The next few hours passed in a slow crawl.

Meredith unpacked the smaller boxes while he tried to figure out the instructions for assembling the crib. He swore the directions were in Swahili. The diagram was nonsensical and told him to insert tabs into slots that didn't exist. The coup de grace on his construction endeavor was that he had no idea where to find his tools. He wasn't a Mr. Fix-it by any stretch of the imagination, but he had the basics, enough to keep a house running without the need to call in a specialist for every minor breakdown and loose screw. Wrenches, hammers, screwdrivers, a tiny hacksaw, and some
other things, all tucked into a bright green toolbox that had made it into the moving van, but fuck all if he knew where it'd ended up after. Worse, still, half the stuff they needed to make the nursery functional hadn't even been bought, yet. They'd been waiting to see what came their way at the baby shower. His mother had volunteered to go shopping with them after the shower to pick up the remaining odds and ends after they inventoried everything, and to get everything set up once they'd finished that.

By 10:30 am, Meredith didn't have anywhere left to put all the remaining loose items, of which there were box loads, and he had a half-assembled, off-balance, useless wooden heap that sort of resembled... a cage. A cage for bad dogs and little children. He'd made a sort of jail for their child. Wonderful. He rolled his eyes and kicked the heap, just a tap with his toe to see how stable it was. It wasn't. The wood creaked, and then the rectangle sank into a parallelogram with a wheezy sound.

"That doesn't look right," Meredith said, only to stop and bite her lip. She'd been stopping now and then to deal with a contraction, but this was... worse. Worse than the other ones. Her expression changed from frowning confusion at the parallelogram-crib into pinched discomfort. She supported her belly with one hand, her back with the other, and rocked from foot to foot like she was trying to escape pain. Her eyes brightened with suffering. "Ow. Okay, this is... ow." She kept swaying. "Ow."

He stepped over the pile of junk on the floor to grab her shoulders. He rubbed her back and whispered at her. "It's okay, Mere," he murmured. "Deep breaths. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. You're doing really great." Her choppy breathing evened out as she listened to him. "I'm right here."

Fifty seconds, and it was over, and she slumped against him. "Owwww," she moaned, her tone deep and low and wounded in a way that made his insides tight, and he hurt. He hurt watching her hurt. "They're getting worse," she said. "Like... way worse. That was like... a six."

His heart thumped in his chest, and the whine started again. I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know. But he shoved it away, and he hit the timer button on his watch. The numbers began to climb from zero. "Let's see where we're at," he said.

She rested against him, and he held her, and they waited. He rubbed her back with slow, reassuring strokes. She pushed into his touch like she was dying in a desert, and he was water, more so the lower his hands went. He found a spot between her hips, on either side of her spine, and pressed, and she moaned. He pressed harder, and she pressed back into him, until he had to lean into her to counterbalance.

"It hurts that bad already?" he said.

"Yeah," she said. "Don't stop. Please, don't stop."

"Okay," he said, and he pushed so hard his limbs shook, but if it helped her, he'd do it forever.

When the next contraction hit, he hit stop on the timer, but didn't look, yet. "It's okay," he said. "You're okay. The way she moaned made his mouth dry and his hands shake. "Deep, slow breaths." This reminded him of after the liver transplant surgery. She'd been miserable, and he'd ended up having to carry her from the bed to the bathroom to pee, because she hurt so bad she couldn't walk. She'd sat on the toilet and cried while he'd stood in the doorway with his back turned, trying futilely to give her some privacy. Fuck, that had been awful to watch and to hear. It made him feel so fucking helpless, and he hadn't even been sick back then. This was... worse. So much worse.
"I don't like these!" she said in a panicky voice, a knife to his heart that twisted and twisted and twisted.

"It's okay. It's okay. You're doing great. I'm here." A litany.

"Can you push some more?" she said. "Push my..."

He got the message. He leaned into her, like he'd been doing before, low on her back on either side of her spine. He jabbed her with his fists, leaning into it with all of his weight. One benefit of this, at least, was that she couldn't see that he was shaking, because he stood behind her. He kept murmuring in her ear, pushing into her until she relaxed and took a final long, slow breath. He relaxed and took a long, slow breath, too.

He looked at his watch. Nine minutes, thirty-eight seconds. *Fuck.*

"I really don't think this is Braxton-Hicks," she said.


A few seconds passed. "Okay, this is probably it, then," their OB replied. "Just keep watching that timer. Bring her into the hospital when you get close to five minutes apart. Congrats!"

He blinked at the text. Congrats. Jesus. This was really it. Congrats. Jesus, he...

"Derek?" Meredith said.


"Derek!" Meredith snapped, and he blinked and shook his head.

"Sorry," he said. He pulled his fingers through his hair, agitated. "Sorry, I..."

She kissed him. "It's okay. I'm okay. You're okay. We're okay. The ending is worth the scary crap in the middle, remember?"

"Yeah," he said.

He sent out a group text to his family and to Richard and to Meredith's friends. *Meredith's definitely in labor,* he typed. *We're waiting to go to the hospital. Standby.*

The frantic deluge of beeps as his phone received replies overwhelmed him. He put the phone in his pocket without looking at them. He couldn't handle his family right now when he barely had a handle on himself. They each packed duffle bags to take to the hospital when it was time to leave, and he took them out to the car and put them in the trunk. After that, though, it was a waiting game with Meredith's body dictating the pace. It'd taken her seven hours or so to get from seventeen minutes to ten minutes between contractions. He imagined they had a while, yet, before the trip to the hospital.

When he came back inside from the garage, he found her on the floor by the couch on all fours with a sofa cushion stuffed under her chest, neck, and head, rocking forward and backward. He dropped to the ground beside her and ran his hand along her spine. "Thank you," she said, muttering miserably into the pillow. And then the tension dripped out of her, and she relaxed. She turned to look at him. "Oh, my *god,* why did I sign up for this?"
"I'm sorry," he felt compelled to say. This was, after all, fifty percent his fault.

"Shut up," she told him. "I probably have like six more hours of this crap before the bad part starts." Then her eyes widened. "Derek, this isn't even the bad part."

He swallowed. That thought had not escaped him. I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know. "I know," he said. He brushed his fingers through her hair. He'd been there for Rachel the whole time when Cody had been born. Steve had been out of town on a business trip, and Rachel hadn't had anybody there with her. She'd called him, frantic, in the middle of the night, because he lived the closest to her, and so he'd gone over to help. He'd done this before. He had. It'd been a lot less stressful as a caring bystander, though. He scraped his brain for an idea. "You want to take a walk?" he said. "It might help a little."

She sniffed, and she nodded. "Yeah."

"Outside?" he said. "We could take Samantha down to the lake."

"Okay," she said.

He helped her move to the couch and went to find her shoes in their bedroom. He grabbed a hat for her, too. And one for him. He wasn't sure she'd want one, but he figured he'd offer. When he came back downstairs, Meredith was stroking Samantha, almost nose to nose with her. "The miracle of life is crap," Meredith said to the dog. "It's crap! I wish we had storks."

Derek couldn't help but snort.

Samantha licked Meredith's nose, and Meredith laughed. He helped her put on her shoes. She could barely reach her feet anymore, and that was with some serious stretching. He tied the laces for her, and then he handed her one of the baseball caps he'd grabbed. That was when the dog figured out what was going on and started galloping in circles.

"Go grab your ball!" he told her, and she looked at him manically, bouncing and leaping. "Go grab your ball!" he repeated, and she had an indecisive moment where she ran toward the front door, and then back to him, and then toward the door, and then she took off toward the kitchen. She came back with her favorite slobber-covered tennis ball and dropped it at his feet. He snatched it from the floor and then helped Meredith stand.

The day was perfect. Partially cloudy. From the damp grass, he could tell it had rained last night, but they were gifted with sunshine, now. Crepuscular rays burst through the puffy clouds, sending shafts of light into the ground like blades. A calm breeze billowed against his skin. The air was about sixty degrees, and he stopped to inhale the fresh, wet scent of grass and earth from the stoop. Miles of green and gray and blue spread out from the house in all directions. A cackling flock of water birds launched into the air from the east, the direction of the lake, and he watched them sail along the horizon and disappear out of sight behind the tree line. Meredith grinned at him when he looked back at her.

"What?" he said.

She shrugged. "You and your nature-y goodness and your space."

"I like it out here," he said. He sighed. "It's quiet."

"It suits you," she said. "I like it, too." She rested her head against his shoulder. "I'm glad we have a new house. I like our house."
"Me, too," he said, looking back at their two-story, brick home.

He swallowed. He was very much looking forward to making new memories here. A new life. He pressed his palm to Meredith's womb. A new family. For all the fear and panic in his life over this event, the endpoint of all of it hung in his mind's eye like the treasure at the end of a rainbow.

A family. With Meredith.

They were making one.

Right this moment.

She sucked in a breath and grabbed his arm, as if she'd heard his train of thought somehow. She used her other hand to support her belly. Her nails dug into his skin, and a sound of pain caught deep in the back of her throat as she exhaled, long and slow. "Shh, it's okay," he said, urging her down the steps as he rubbed her back. "You're doing great, Mere. See if walking it out helps. I'm right here."

She followed, steps a little shaky, and he slowed his pace. He wound up a good throw and sent Samantha's ball flying over the fence and into the distance. Samantha bounded after it, barking. The ball bounced and disappeared into the tall, wild grass beyond the manicured evenness of their lawn. Samantha ran through the open gate, kicking up dirt and grass bits behind her scrabbling paws, and then her stocky body disappeared into the brush. She was too short to show up over the tall stalks rustling in the wind, but he could see them mowing down in a line as she barreled through them in the direction the ball had flown.

"Tell me a story, Mere," he said, trying to distract her as they walked. The path to the lake started just beyond the fence.

"What?" she said, grimacing. She inhaled a long breath through her nose and blew it out through her mouth. "Like what?"

"Anything," he said. They reached the narrow footpath. He shut the gate behind them, closing the metal latch.

"I can't just come up with something on the spot!" she insisted, relaxing into as slump as the contraction passed. "Give me a topic?"

"Hmm," he said, thinking. A blue jay loosed an earsplitting jay jay jay from a low hanging branch nearby, and then spread its wings to drift down to the ground. It stuck its blue-crested head to the ground and came back up with something wriggling and frantic caught in its beak. "Never have I ever joined the mile high club."

She snorted. "That's no fair. You know I did that."

Samantha came back with the ball clutched between her teeth, a triumphant, happy look on her face. He took the ball from her and shifted it in his grip. Her slobber was sticky and cold against his fingertips. He threw the ball again for her, launching it back into the thick grass as far as he could send it, and brushed off his hand on his sweatpants, leaving a dirty smear behind.

"But you never told me the story," he said, watching Samantha chase her bounty.

She peered at him. "Does bad sex with a Frenchman really warrant a story?"

He grinned. "A Frenchman, huh?"
"Yes," she said. "And, seriously, plane sex is not all it's cracked up to be."

"Oh, it's not?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"Remember our elevator sex?"

"How in the hell would I forget that?" he said. Samantha came back with the ball, and he threw it again.

She shrugged. "Imagine the elevator is ten times smaller, there's TP on the floor sticking to your shoes, and it smells like pee."

"That's...," he said, "an image."

"Yes," she said with a sigh. "And after the sex in a closet that smells like pee, you have to do the walk of shame down a narrow aisle with dozens of people staring at you, and they all know exactly what you just did."

"So, I shouldn't add it to my bucket list, then," he said.

"No." She shook her head. "Just no." And then she looked at him. "You'd have to bribe me with lots more than just sex for me to even consider that."

He nodded. Grinned. "Noted."

He tossed the ball for Samantha again. The scenery slowly changed. Grass became bracken and vines and tall, leafy bushes, and the trees condensed into a thick clot forest. With the onset of spring, the deciduous trees had begun to find their leaves again. Red alder. Big leaf maple. Beaked hazelnut. Paper birch. Mixed with those, evergreens towered, perennially covered in green, sticky needles. Cedars and Douglas firs and hemlocks. The footpath wove in and out of the towering conifers. Someone had a fire burning in the distance somewhere, and the pleasant scent of woodsmoke filled the air. A chorus of birdsongs coiled around them, and he found it hard to resist stopping to inhale the wet air again. He found it hard not to feel... more alive here. He loved it here. After living in Seattle for nearly four years, he had no idea how he'd ever survived in Manhattan.

"Never have I ever had sex on the beach," she said, pulling him from his musing.

"Trust me," he said, grimacing, "you don't want to."

"Really?" she said. "It seems so..."


"Chafes," she echoed.

He nodded. "Yes."

She laughed. "Poor Little Derek." He raised an eyebrow at her, and she rolled her eyes. "Poor Above-Average Derek."

He chuckled at her expression.

Samantha trotted back to them, panting, her little stump tail wagging. The forest closed over their heads, dimming the sun, and the dirt path became a crushed, trodden layer of pine needles,
decaying leaves, and other compost. He threw the ball, and his dog sent a pair of deer leaping from the underbrush under a nearby birch tree as she chased after it. The deer pranced away into the distance, white tails flopping behind them, tiny cloven hooves flashing. They zipped into the brush. Samantha didn't seem to know whether to chase the ball or the deer. She barked, bounding after the deer, but doubled back after a few strides, and then she put her nose to the ground in search of her tennis ball.

Meredith stopped moving, biting her lip. She took a deep, slow breath and pushed it out, and then she kept moving. He rubbed her back, pushed with his fist at the spot she liked. Her shoulders were tense. Her back... tense. "The walking," she said, the words faint, "It does help a bit." Her last word trailed into an unhappy, tight moan.

"That's good," he said. "I'm glad." Their feet scuffed in the dirt and wet plant refuse. "You're doing really great, Mere."

She nodded. "Are you timing these?"

"No," he said. "Do you want me to?"

She sniffed and relaxed, and the pained pinch left her eyes. She stopped walking. Her eyes closed. "Yes," she said. "Yes, time them. I want to go as soon as..." She swallowed. "I want to go." She looked up at him. I'm scared, said her wide-eyed gaze, and I want this to be over, now. His heart squeezed. "I'm having a baby, Derek. Like right now. I'm giving birth."

He swallowed. "Yeah, you are. How are you doing?"

"I'm giving birth," she said. "I'm... it's a lot to wrap my mind around. It's... really freaking big." And then she laughed and wiped her eyes. "Crap, Derek, if you'd told me when you woke up on my floor naked with a hangover that this is where I'd be, now, I'd have laughed in your freaking face."

He snorted. "If you'd told me, when I woke up on your floor naked with a hangover, that you'd be my wife and the mother of my children, I think I'd have laughed, too."

She rose onto her tiptoes and kissed him. Her fingers squeezed the nape of his neck, ran through his hair. He sighed, sinking into her touch. "Here's to one night stands," she murmured.

"Hmm," he purred against her ear. "Cheers to that."

When he pulled away, he cupped her cheek, meeting her soft stare with his own. This close to her, above the woodsmoke, and above the wet earth, he could scent lavender, and he let it drift through his parted lips and brush the back of his throat. They shared a long moment, just looking. And then they kept walking. Samantha returned with the ball, and he launched it into the dark, wet forest.

"Never have I ever had sex with Sadie," he said as they trudged along.

She looked at him with an incredulous raise of her eyebrows, and she snorted. "You're just never going to let that go, are you?"

"Nope," he said, grinning. "Spill."

"Well, you struck out," she said, jabbing him with her elbow. "Hah! So, there."

He blinked. "Wow. Really?"
"Really, Derek," she said, rolling her eyes. "Never have I ever... TPed a house."

"I..." He sighed. "Yes."

"Ooh, got you!" she said, a pleased grin stretching across her face. "Derek the Lawful broke the law?"

"Mark made me help." He tossed Samantha's ball again.

"Whose house did you TP? Some hapless innocent?"

"Well, we were aiming for his football coach. This was back in high school. Some of the starters wanted to do it as a joke. I got dragged along and made into the lookout."

"Did you get caught?" she said.

"No," he said. "I was an excellent lookout if I do say so myself."

"Admit it," she said. "You wanted to throw up."

"I don't make a good rule breaker," he said, tone sheepish. He felt heat creep across his face when he thought of the drugs he'd abused. "At least, I didn't used to."

"What did the coach think of all this?"

He shrugged. Some sort of winged insect the size of a peanut buzzed as it zipped past his face, and an interested sparrow chirped overhead, hopping down a branch to get a closer look at its prey. "We'll never know," he said. "We got the wrong house. We drove by in the morning to survey our handiwork, and some poor elderly man none of us knew was on the stoop talking to the cops."

"Oh, my god," she said. "Really?"

"Yes," he said. He tossed Samantha's ball. "I felt awful. I wanted to confess, but then I would have had a whole football team trying to kill me, so I stayed quiet."

"Is that how they got you to go?" she said, the word go trailing into a groan. She leaned into him, her weight almost dead against him as her grip tightened and her teeth clenched and her body tensed.

He reached for his watch and started his timer, and then he wrapped his arms around her, listening to hear breath in and out and in and out, slow, but with a forceful, shaky edge that spoke of pain. "Doing great, Mere. You're doing great. How bad are these? I started the timer."

"Still sixes," she said tensely. "But... it's a lot of sixes in a row, and it... Mmm." Her fingers tightened, pulling up the skin on his forearm into her clutching fist. He clenched his jaw, but he said nothing about it. He let her ride it out, taking it out on him. If it helped... he was happy to. *You can break both, as long as you explain it to my insurance company,* he'd said when she'd asked him if she could break his hands during the birth.

"So, you wanted to fit in, and you let Mark drag you because of that?" she said, muscles loosening. She let go of his arm.

"Not one of my finer moments," he admitted. "Dad had died only a year before. I wasn't dealing with that very well."

"You were a kid," she said. "Kids do stupid stuff, even when they're not grieving."
"I suppose," he said.

She cradled her womb. "I imagine our kid will do stupid stuff, too."

"More stupid than we did?" Derek said.

Meredith snickered. "Bet you $100 that our child does something way more stupid. Baby has genes from both of us, after all, and I was essentially a juvenile delinquent."

He laughed. "I'll see that bet and raise you $50."

Trees and bracken turned into cattails and mud. The path dumped out onto the lake right near the rickety dock that had been there when he'd purchased the land. The water sloshed and slurped against the struts of the dock. Tiny waves unfurled and slapped into the mud at the edges of the lake. Pings of insects and fish hit the surface of the water from underneath. A heron glided low over the water and came to a rest in the reeds about fifty feet away. The scent of wet earth tickled his nose.

He threw Samantha's ball out onto the water, and the dog took a running leap and dove into the lake with a splash. She paddled out to where the tennis ball floated on the surface, grabbed it, and swum back to them. When she reached the edge of the water, she shook herself off, sending water droplets flying everywhere in a wet cloud. She brought the soaked ball back to him, and he palmed it.

The lake on his property wasn't huge, probably a mile or two in circumference, and the path ran around it in a loose circle. He wasn't sure he wanted to risk getting stuck out on the other side of the lake with Meredith's labor suddenly shifting into high gear, so he turned an about face instead of continuing along the side. Meredith followed his lead without comment. He tossed the ball ahead, and Samantha darted back into the woods to chase after it.

"Never have I ever... kissed Sadie?" he said.

She rolled her eyes. "I swear, you're like a dog with a freakin' bone."

"I'm merely seizing an opportunity, though I do, on occasion, have a bone," he said with a wink.

She stared at him for a long moment, an unamused expression on her face.

"What?" he said, smirking. "You left that word hanging there, just waiting for me to make a joke, daring me to, even."

"Daring you," she said, incredulous.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "Yes, that was a dare. That's what I'm calling it."

She shook her head at him, and her upper body twitched, like she'd laughed, but not loud enough for him to hear. She crumpled against him moments later, though, a breathless sound of pain spilling from her lips. "Ow, ow, ow, ow," she whined.

He swallowed, levity gone like it had been a lightning strike. He hit the button on his timer and held her, running his hand up and down her back. "Slow breaths, Mere," he coached. "In through the nose. One. Two. Three. Out through the mouth. You're doing so great."

"Yes," she said, exhalation buffeting his shirt.
He frowned. "Yes?"

"Yes, I've kissed her," she said, her tone tight. She inhaled, one, two, three, and he stroked her hair. She scrunched her hands so hard against his shirt he could hear the stretchy cotton squeaking from the friction of her skin, and she came to rest with her fingers clutching his clavicle like it was a ledge, and she was falling. "Are you happy, now?" she said, exhaling, one, two, three.

He peered at her. "Did you kiss her with tongue?"

A bark of laughter skipped loose from her lips. "Yes, I experimented," she said, and her whole body relaxed like a tide had receded. She took another deep breath and blew it out. "Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Somehow, my victory feels hollow," he said. "And underwhelming."

"Well, we all live with crushing disappointments," she said airily.

"I suppose," he said. "9:35, by the way. Still the same."

"Crap, really?" she said.

He gave her an apologetic look. "I wouldn't joke about that, Mere. I know you're scared, and that it hurts." When he was sure she had her footing, he let her go, but she didn't move away. She rested against him, weight pressing into him.

Samantha came back with her ball and dropped it at their feet, stump tail wagging. When Derek didn't move to pick it up, she sat down in the leaves and pine needles and waited, panting. "Good girl," he said. He frowned at Meredith, who still hadn't moved. "Are you okay?"

"I'm just a little tired," she said, the words soft.

Which had to be an understatement. He rubbed her back. He glanced at his watch. It was past noon. She'd been having contractions for about eight hours already, and she'd been up... who knew how long?

"We'll rest when we get back to the house," he said. He kissed her. "Less than a mile. Can you make it that far?" He wasn't sure what he would do if she said no. This trail was too narrow to drive his SUV down safely without risk of scraping the paint off the sides. He'd carry her, probably. He was worn out from yesterday, but he could handle her weight long enough to get her home.

"Yes," she said, rescuing him from having to worry more about it. "Just give me a few minutes."

"Anything," he said.

They rode through another contraction before they started moving again. More concerned with Meredith, he let Samantha carry her own ball for a while, and he walked with his arm wrapped over Meredith's shoulder. The trees swayed in the breeze. A rustle of leaves filled the air. They walked in a verdant cavern.

"Never have I ever... fallen from a tree," Meredith said, her gaze directed at the treetops overhead. He shook his head. "Nope."

"Really? Huh."

"What makes you think I fell out of a tree?" he said.
She shrugged, reaching to give Samantha a stroke. The dog trotted happily beside them. "I have no idea," Meredith said.

"Never have I ever—"

"Something not sexy," she said with a tired tone. "Please."

He frowned. "Why not?"

"Because I'm trying very hard not to think about the exhausting, bowling-ball-sized consequences right now." She looked at him. "That's the whole point of this game, right?"

He snorted. "I'm that transparent, am I?"

"Yes, but I love you anyway."

He squeezed her shoulder. "Okay," he said. "Not sexy. Hmm."

She snorted.

"What?" he said, eyebrows raised.

"It figures you'd need a time bonus for this one," she said. "You're lucky I don't have a buzzer."

The walk back to the house took another thirty minutes or so at their slower pace. He left Meredith in the living room, relaxing on the couch with a box of saltines to munch on if she wanted, and a glass of water to drink. She closed her eyes and seemed content to sit there without talking. He sat down in his hulking chair across from Meredith and took care of his phone while she rested.

His call history had exploded with missed calls and texts while he'd been busy ignoring it. His first text, one from Rachel said, "Haha. April Fools?" And her second one twenty minutes later said, "APRIL FOOLS RIGHT?" And her third text ten minutes after that said, "OMFG NOT FUNNY YOU JERK." And then four minutes after that, "I'm in the market for a new brother. Know of any?"

He snorted, realizing what the date was. "No. Real deal," he responded. "Sorry, a little busy over here."

He didn't have to wait more than a minute for, "Really?! Hospital, yet?"


"OMG OMG keep me posted! :) :)"

He snorted, shaking his head. He answered a sedate, "How's it going over there?" from Mark with the same info he'd given Rachel.

Cristina had sent, "Can you tell her to hurry up?" about twenty minutes ago.

"I wouldn't hold your breath," Derek typed in response. "This doesn't seem like it's moving anywhere fast."

A few seconds passed. "Do I have time for an aortic aneurysm dissection?"

He blinked. He didn't know offhand how long those took, but he couldn't imagine Meredith giving birth anytime in the next eight hours, and that was a big enough window for most procedures. "Sure, why not?" he typed with a shrug.
"..." was her response.

"What?" he typed.

"You're lucky I'm obligated to tolerate you," she replied.

He frowned at that for a long moment, but decided to move on.

Next up was his mother. "I'm so happy for you, sweetheart!" she'd said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," he responded.

She clearly didn't believe him, though, because she replied, "Just take a deep breath, and remember the little bundle of joy you two will get at the end of this."

He swallowed against the lump that formed in his throat. I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know. He wasn't sure what to say to that without shattering into a million pieces, so he just typed, "Thanks."

He frowned. Still fifty-seven unanswered texts. Jesus. He gave up trying to give everybody individual attention and ended up sending out another group text with a short update, only to receive another flood of cheering and congratulations and well-wishers wishing.

He set his phone down on the end table and took a deep breath and blew it out. He watched Meredith snap awake from a doze and put her hands on her belly. The look of misery on her face tore at him, and her moan made him feel like his stomach was dropping out of his body. He wasn't equipped for this, he decided. Seeing her in pain. He wasn't... The oh-god-am-I-ready, how-do-PTSD-and-fatherhood-mix, how-do-I-do-this, and I-don't-know-I-don't-know-I-don't-know banged in his skull. He tried to ignore it. He moved to her side as she drooped, and the contraction passed. He put his hand on her back.

"Do you need anything right now?" he said, a quiet murmur against her ear.

"Maybe, just sit here with me?" she said in a warbling, tiny voice.

He nodded. "Sure. Do you want to watch a movie? Or just sit?"

She rubbed her eyes. She put her head on his shoulder. "Just sit," she murmured, yawning. She fell into a doze in moments, her breaths soft and even against him, and so he stayed with her, coaching and comforting when she woke up, and offering quiet proximity when she slept.

Time crawled. She was still hovering at about 9:30 minutes for each contraction by 3:45 pm, seemingly stalled out. She'd recuperated enough energy from her dozing to not want to nap by then, so he did another random movie grab. Some documentary about the International Space Station he couldn't remember ever buying. Meredith made a face when she saw the title and looked at him with an apologetic expression.

"Can we watch the trilogy instead?" she said. "Please?"

She didn't need to specify which trilogy she meant. "The whole trilogy?" he said with a sigh.

She bit her lip. "It's just that... it's my happy place, and I'd really like to be there right now."

He kissed her temple. Hi, baby. It's Dad. He understood all about happy places. And he could live with Star Wars just this once if it meant giving her a mental break from stress like his did. "You're
very lucky I love you so much," he said, and he rose from the couch to change the movie. "Which of your thirty-two million copies would you like to watch?"

"Oh, um," she said, frowning. "Letterbox VHS." She made a face. "No, DVD." Another face. "Wait, no, blu-ray! I haven't seen the blu-ray, yet."

"You bought it, but you never watched it?" Derek said.

She shrugged. "I was saving it for a rainy day. Today is pretty freaking rainy, metaphorically speaking or whatever."

"You're not going to recite the dialog line for line while we watch, are you?" Derek said. "You're not one of those people, right?"

She snorted. "No, I'm not one of those people."

"Oh, good."

She gave him a serious look. "You're sure this is okay? If it's too explode-y for you, we don't have to."

He hadn't watched any of these since... their first release in the movie theaters. He'd caught snippets here and there, seen a few minutes as he'd walked through the room while Meredith was watching, but he'd never joined her. She'd never asked him to before, a fact for which he'd been grateful. He knew there were explosions, though. Hell, the Death Star exploded at the end of the first and the third ones. For her, though, since she'd asked on today of all days, he was willing to give it a try.

"I'm not sure, but I'll let you know," he said, opting for honesty.

She frowned at him. "Don't flog yourself through it. If it's not okay, we'll stop."

He kissed her. "I'll let you know, Meredith. I swear."

With the volume low, they made it through *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* without him having too much difficulty. Blasters didn't trigger him like guns did, and he could watch without getting too jittery. Lightsaber fights were so gimmicky and fantastical they didn't even trip his violence meter. And the space battles were okay when they were quiet, and with the volume turned down, they were. He could admit, though, when he said he hated *Star Wars*, that it wasn't the first two titles in the trilogy he thought of when he was saying that he hated it. It was the third. He loathed the third. Still, even with *Return of the Jedi*, he almost made it through. Almost.

In the last few minutes, something tripped in his brain. Just snapped. Luke was trying to escape the Death Star with a mortally wounded Darth Vader. Derek's chest tightened, and his lungs strained to give him air. Meredith snatched the remote and hit pause, looking at him with concern. He cleared his throat and gave her an apologetic look. There were only a couple minutes left. "You can watch the rest; I'll be back in a minute," he croaked before he fled into the kitchen to refill his drink and clear his head.

"Sorry I bailed," he said when he came back as the credits were rolling.

Meredith had her eyes shut, and she was straining through another contraction. She shook her head, blowing a breath out slowly through her lips. "It's okay," she said, words so faint he struggled to hear her. She inhaled, one, two, three. The sky outside the house had darkened in the course of their marathon. He flipped on the lamp and joined her on the couch. "It's... Derek." A deep, low,
rattling moan that set his teeth on edge followed when she exhaled, one, two three. Her eyes watered. "This really hurts," she said, a bare, tortured whisper that cut his heart out.

Her contractions had been getting worse as time had gone on, the space between them shrinking from 9:30ish minutes to 8:00ish minutes or so. He glanced at his watch. They'd killed another seven hours or so. She was making progress. But it was glacial. At this rate, they wouldn't be headed to the hospital until tomorrow.

"You're doing great, Mere," he murmured. "You're doing so great. I'm right here."

When she finally relaxed, he couldn't help but sigh in relief. Jesus, he was not equipped for this. For watching this. And it made him hurt to his bone marrow knowing however bad this was to watch, it was far worse to be stuck in it, experiencing it. A helpless feeling crushed him in its vise.

"Why is this taking so long?" she said, words rasping and tired. "It shouldn't take so long."

He kissed her. "It can take a while, Mere. Especially for first time mothers. This is definitely on the long side, but it's not worrisome, yet."

"Something is wrong," she said. "It has to be."

"Shh," he said. "Nothing is wrong. I promise. And I know this is hard, this is so hard, but you're doing great, and I'm here, and you'll get through this."

She nodded mutely against him. "Okay," she said. "Okay."

"How bad was that last one?" he said.

"Seven or eight," she said. She looked at him. "I just want to be done. Please, Derek, I want to be done. I want to have Baby, and I want to be done."

"I know," he said. He pulled his fingers through her hair. "I know you do." He held her, letting the moments pass. She dozed beside him until another contraction had her squeezing his shoulder hard enough to leave bruises. When it left her, she rested against him, peering at nothing through half-lidded eyes. "It's after ten, Mere. Do you want to try lying down for a bit?" He'd been up for over eighteen hours, and his head was getting fuzzy. He couldn't imagine how she felt.

"I can't sleep like this," she said, the words hoarse. "It hurts, Derek."

"I know. I know it does. But lying down in the dark so you can rest a little between them might help."

She gave him a hopeless look that slew him. "Okay," she said.

He assisted her up the stairs and helped her change into her favorite soft pajamas. He stacked up all their pillows on her side of the bed, and he held her hand, giving her something to balance with as she settled gingerly onto their new mattress. She sank back into the pillows. He lay beside her on his side, scooting close, until his body pressed into hers. He pulled the covers over them. He rubbed her shoulder to elbow in soothing strokes.

"Is this a little better?" he said.

She grabbed his hand when he wandered to her belly, pulled it over the swell of her womb to her chest, and she held it there. "A little," she said in a tiny voice.
"Okay," he said. "Let me know if I can get you anything, okay?"

"Okay," she said.

Her grip on his hand tightened to the point of pain. His knuckles mashed together, and he was pretty sure she'd cut off all circulation beyond his wrist, but he clenched his teeth, and he said nothing, just letting her ride it out.

"We can try a warm shower in a bit," he suggested when her grip relaxed again. "That might help, too."

She was silent for a long time. "Okay," she said after too long.

"I'm here, Mere," he reiterated. "I'll be here the whole time. You will get through this. You're the strongest person I know, and you're going to be fine, and I love you."

She sniffed. "Okay."

He closed his eyes, letting his thoughts space a little. God, he was tired. This was just... exhausting. This whole thing. Trying to be there for her, unwavering, while struggling to keep his own head together. And he felt like a fucking hypocrite for even thinking about this when his wife was lying next to him, struggling through the eighteenth hour of labor.

"M'right here," he mumbled. "You can do this."

Another hour passed. Another. He coached her through contraction after contraction after contraction. He remembered seeing the red, blurry face of the clock hit midnight and keep chugging past that into the early morning.

Cristina held out a squalling bundle of blankets to him. "The baby's crying," she said.

"I know," he said, wincing at the loud shriek threatening to pierce his eardrums.

They stood facing each other in a dark, frothing mist. Cristina pushed the baby at him. "You should be taking care of this."

Another shriek. His heart pounded. "I know."

"Why aren't you taking care of this?" Cristina said.

Another shriek. His throat closed, and he choked. "I can't. I can't. It's just so noisy."

Cristina rolled her eyes. "It's a baby, you moron. Of course it's noisy. Deal with it!" She pushed forward an inch, into his space.

"I'm trying," he said. "I can't..."

She sighed. "You can't do anything right, can you?"

"Cristina, please, I... Please, I can't."

"You're pathetic."

"Just give me a second," he insisted, trying to breathe. "I just need a second."

"Babies don't give you a second!" Cristina said.
And then the scene changed. The crying stopped. Cristina disappeared. And he stood on the rickety old dock at his lake. Waves lapped at the shore. The water shimmered. A flock of ducks bobbed on the surface in the distance.

"Stop flagellating yourself," said a soft, familiar voice beside him. "You'll do fine."

Derek blinked at the scene of cut leather and cedar as it swept against the back of his throat. He turned and saw himself with a straight nose. A fuller face. But still the same crow's feet and the curly, raven-brown hair. They were equal in height, now, though the man Derek remembered had been so much taller. He swallowed. His eyes burned.

"I wish you were real," Derek said.

His father stared back at him, eyes twinkling. "Who says I'm not?"

"But... you died."

His father nodded. "I know. I'm so sorry about that. I never wanted you to grow up like that."

Derek turned to look at the lake. "I don't know how to do this."

His father stepped closer, the space between them closing to inches. A warm, sure hand cupped Derek's shoulder and squeezed. "I didn't know either, you know."

Derek wiped his eyes. "What were you going to say? When you died. You told me to listen, and that it was important."

A wide, devastating grin curled his father's lips. "You're already doing it, Derek. I'm so proud of you."

"Doing what?" Derek said.

"The advice I was going to give," his father said. "Live. Love. Pursue your dreams. Find the woman who completes you. It's always magic when you meet the right one, isn't it?"

A tear jagged down Derek's face. "God, I wish you were real."

His father chuckled. "Oh, come on, now. The son I raised believes in magic."

Derek peered back at him with a flat gaze. "I don't," he said. "Not anymore."

"That's a shame." His father watched the lake for a moment. "You should wake up, now."

Derek blinked. "What?"

"It's time, Derek." His father grinned. "Don't worry. You'll do fine."

"Derek!" Meredith snapped, and he blinked awake.

"Wha?" he said, squinting muzzily at her in the darkness. She'd rolled over to face him, or... she was standing over him... or... what? Had he fallen asleep?

"Derek," she said, a tense edge to her voice. "We need to go."

"Go?" he said dumbly while his neurons launched from a cold standstill into conscious thought. "What?" He sat up and scrubbed his face. She backed up to give him some room. The dog stood
beside Meredith, whining, tail wagging.

"We need to go, Derek," Meredith said urgently, and then she seized up like an engine without oil. A horrible, pained moan that made his insides twist fell from her lips. Her eyes squeezed shut and her teeth clenched and her hands curled into tiny fists.

He snapped awake. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. 1:47 am, said the clock. When the fuck had he fallen asleep? "Meredith, Meredith. Meredith, how bad is it?"

But she couldn't even talk, not like she'd been doing before, and that was an answer by itself. She inhaled, one, two, three, and then exhaled with a rasping, pained sound, like her throat was made of razors. One, two, three.

He pushed back the covers and flipped on the lamp so he could see to find some clean clothes and his shoes. The light stabbed his eyes, and he sat there, blinking furiously, trying to get his irises to stop whining at him and behave. Meanwhile, his wife suffered.

"Hang on," he said, which felt like such a useless thing to say, but he needed to fill the silence with something.

"I'm at..." she began when she could talk again. "5:10. And these are nines."

"Okay," he said. "Um. Okay. Um." He shook his head, trying to clear it. "Okay, we're going right now. Let me just..."

As soon as his eyes managed to adjust, he scrambled to his dresser to pull out a fresh t-shirt and some jeans. His hopping, uncoordinated attempt to get himself dressed would have been funny on any other day at any other moment, but now, right this moment, he didn't think he could have mustered a laugh if someone had paid him a million dollars for one. Meredith was still in her pajamas. He raced to her bureau to grab some clothes for her, too – some gray maternity yoga pants and a red t-shirt he didn't take the time to look at beyond the color – and he helped her change into those.

He texted Dr. Charlton on the way down the steps. Meredith trudged behind him. He let Samantha out in the backyard to relieve herself, and then he counted the frustrating, long seconds he had to wait until the dog came back inside. He didn't have time to bother with a mass text, so he shot one off to Mark and then tossed his phone into the cup holder in his Cayenne. His phone lit up with a chorus of beeps as he was backing them out of the garage, but he didn't hear that so much as Meredith riding through her next contraction.

Shit, shit, shit. His brain wasn't working quite right, yet.

The next hour was a blur. When he peeled into the parking lot at Seattle Grace at 3:06 am, he barely had the engine off and the key out of the ignition before he was helping Meredith out of the car. He checked his phone. Dr. Charlton was going to meet them in OB. Okay. He mapped the route in his head. Meredith waddled behind him, struggling to keep up. He forced himself to slow down and take a breath.

Jesus. He liked to think he'd be a bit more together if he hadn't let himself fall asleep, but that was useless to worry about. He stepped into the elevator with Meredith, holding her hand. He jammed his thumb into the button for the fourth floor. The car began to rise. They passed the second floor.

Then everything stopped. The lights in the elevator snapped out. The emergency lights flickered on moments later. All was quiet for a pin drop of a moment.
Derek blinked.

"Are you freaking kidding me?" Meredith snapped into the silence.

In that moment, Derek sort of hoped god was kidding. But then Derek remembered April Fools' Day was yesterday. And all he could add to Meredith's assessment was, "Fuck."
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Hello, everybody! I'm back! Finally, we get MerDer out of the fricken elevator. I know the elevator is a rather horrible cliche, but I had a very good reason for doing it, which I'm hoping you'll be able to see as Derek's POV continues. I'm so sorry to have left this on a cliffhanger for so long. If I'd had any idea that Derek would die on the show a mere few days after I posted chapter 33, I would never have left things on such an ambiguous note. Anyway, I'm posting two chapters today. I still have an epilogue to post, so it's not quite done, yet, but at least this should give you some closure in the meantime :) I hope you guys enjoy, and thank you so much for being patient!

For a moment, they stood there in the quiet darkness, speechless. The air in the elevator car was tinged a deep crimson from the emergency lighting, and it gave the ambience a horror-movie quality. They shared a look. Meredith's eyes glistened. He could read the exhaustion, pain, and simmering panic in her expression as if he'd picked up the Journal of Neurosurgery to pass the time.

"I'm sure it's fine," he rushed to say.

He stepped forward and pressed the red alarm button to indicate there was an emergency. Silence. Nothing happened. He pressed it again. Again. The only sound to fill the elevator was the hollow, plastic-sounding click of the button being pressed.

"Shouldn't that ring when you press it?" Meredith said.

"Umm," Derek said. The stop button definitely rang, and it did seem logical for an alarm button to ring, too …. "I'm not sure," he hedged as dismay burgeoned. He pulled out the red stop button as a test. Another hollow click filled the elevator, but no familiar ring followed.

"The button not ring— ohhhhh," she said, grimacing. The sound of her pain shut down his perception of everything else. When moan her choked into silence because she was in so much agony she couldn't talk, his insides tightened with distress.

"Just breathe," he coached, squeezing her shoulders to offer support. "Breathe, Meredith. It's okay. You're doing great."

She inhaled. Exhaled. Inhaled. Exhaled. The seconds crawled like snails in molasses. When she relaxed, panting, he relaxed, too. God, he was not fucking equipped for this. He wasn't. His hands trembled as the adrenaline car that her moaning had revved up eased off its throttle.

"Derek, the button not ringing is bad," she said, continuing their conversation like it had never ceased.

"Maybe, the bell is busted, but the alarm works," he suggested. He pressed the call button, next. Nothing happened. He bent down and said, "Hello?" into the tiny speaker while holding down the button. "Hello? We're stuck in here." No response. Utter silence. A sinking feeling began to drag on his toes. He swallowed. "Mayday?"
"That's really bad, Derek," Meredith said, simmering panic creeping toward a violent boil.

"It's okay. It's okay," he countered, helplessness seeping into his tone. "Maybe, the speakers on our end are broken, but, surely, someone on the other end heard me."

Meredith glowered. "Oh. Surely. Right."

He yanked his phone out of his pocket. He had about 2.3 trillion unread text messages from everybody in his family. From all of Meredith's friends.

"I'll let Richard know we're stuck," he said.

"Great," Meredith grumbled, folding her arms over her chest. "You do that."

Except his phone didn't have reception. He tried dialing, anyway – Richard's number, Mark's number, Lexie's number – and not one of the calls connected. He swallowed as the sinking feeling expanded, and he felt like he was hollowing out. Nobody would know they were in here. Nobody would be trying to get them out. Nobody ….

"What's the problem?" Meredith said, her voice far away.

"Calls aren't going through," he said.

"What?" she snapped.

"It's okay," he said, forcing himself to speak slowly, and the room bounced back into focus like a rubber ball. "It's okay. We're still okay. Let me see your phone." She was on a different service provider. They hadn't synced things up into some sort of family plan, yet. He swallowed. They should do that, he thought manically. It seemed funny that they were married and about to be parents and didn't have some kind of family calling plan. "Maybe, yours gets reception."

"Derek, I don't have my phone," she said, the simmering panic in her tone starting to boil with violence.

He pulled his fingers through his hair. "Why don't you have your phone?"

"Because I'm having a freaking baby, and I forgot my purse in the car."

He blinked, giving her a good once over. She wore the gray maternity yoga pants and the red t-shirt he'd helped her into before they left, along with an unzipped, light coat. In this lighting, her t-shirt was the color of blood, and the pants looked pinkish. She was right, though. She did not have her purse strung over her shoulder. Fuck. Fuckity, fuck, fuck, fuck. He tried dialing again with his phone, but nothing went through. Fuck.

"Maybe, they heard us when I hit the alarm, even though it didn't make noise," he said. His heart was starting to pound.

"Or, maybe we're stuck here, alone, and nobody knows we're in here, and I'm having a freaking baby," Meredith said, echoing his spiraling thoughts.

He walked in a circle around the small space, trying to ignore the walls-are-closing-in feeling loitering in his chest and buzzing in his head. Trapped. He was trapped. He was trapped in a tiny box with his exhausted, hurting, not-quite-panicking-yet-but-dammed-close wife. His chest tightened like someone held a screwdriver to it, and his sternum was the screw.
Derek Shepherd wasn't claustrophobic. Nor was he nyctophobic. He'd never had a problem with small, dark spaces. But he did have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after being shot in the chest at close range. And he did have a problem with helplessness. A problem with no choices.

He did have a problem with feeling powerless.

And being stuck in a fucking elevator while his wife was in labor, in pain, and he couldn't do anything to fix any of it ….

Pretty fucking powerless.

"Ow," Meredith said, almost a gasp. "Ow, ow, ow, owwwww," she continued, words trailing into a long, curdling moan that made him feel like someone had clenched a fist around his heart and squeezed, and squeezed, and squeezed. The adrenaline car in his veins revved up again, and the surge made him feel sick in addition to everything else. Then her moan became a tortured croak. A hollow, rustling thud filled the quiet as she wilted against the wall of the elevator, overcome.

He should help. He should help her. He knew he should help her. But his throat constricted, and his chest hurt like he'd just had it cracked open to repair his bullet wound yesterday, and he couldn't fucking breathe. Run. Run, run, run, run, run, his body demanded. Get somewhere safe. He wasn't safe. He put a fist against his sternum and clawed at his shirt.

"Derek," he heard from somewhere far away. "Derek? Oh, no. No, no, no, no. Not now. Derek, please. Please, I need you right now. I need you to not do this!"

"I can't breathe," he hissed, barely able to make words.

He wound in tight, panicky circles around the elevator. There was nowhere to go. None. Where could he go? He had to get out.

"Derek, stop! There's nothing in here that's going to hurt you!" the far away voice said, but in that moment he was beyond hearing. Beyond comprehension.

Someone had to hop out of his way. There was nowhere to fucking go. He was going to die. He could feel it. He was going to die.

"I can't breathe." He banged into a wall, jarring his shoulder. There was nowhere to go, and he was dying. "Stop. Stop it." He coughed. "I can't breathe."

"Derek, please," the far voice begged. She was begging him.

He stopped in front of the elevator doors, pressed his fingers into the gap between them, and pawed at them, trying to get them to open. Maybe, they were caught in a place that could access the floor above or below, and they could still crawl out. Or he could crawl out, at least, and get help for Meredith. Maybe. Please. Please, please, please. The doors creaked and moaned, but wouldn't budge under his mindless assault. He scraped so hard he almost pried loose a fingernail, but the lightning bolt of pain snaking down his ring finger didn't stop him. He kept pawing. Clawing. He was going to die if he couldn't get out of this fucking coffin. His heart felt like it was going to explode. His vocal cords wouldn't work anymore. His body shook.

His vision went spotty.

"Stop," he croaked, desperate. "Stop. Please, stop."

"You're not really going to do this …," Mr. Clark said, taunting, derisive, a sneer in his tone.
"You're not seriously going to do this to Meredith, now, while she's in labor …"

Derek hadn't heard Mr. Clark in weeks, and the cold, haunting voice ground him to a startled halt like a terrified rabbit. No. No, this wasn't happening. Mr. Clark wasn't there. In the elevator. He couldn't be there. This wasn't Mr. Clark. This was just Derek with his fucking sunglasses.

"You can't be this fucking useless," Mr. Clark said with a derisive snort.

"No," Derek said. "No, no, no."

He forced himself to step back from the elevator doors, despite the fact that his body wanted him to keep clawing and fighting for survival. He closed his eyes. He couldn't help Meredith until he helped himself. Devolving into a pile of blubbering terror on the floor while she was busy having their baby was not a fucking option.


"There you go," Mr. Clark said, though the voice was shifting. Changing. From a tormenter to a cheerleader. "There you go! Use me the right way. Use me the right way, Derek. Stop —" panicking. Stop fucking panicking. Fucking stop it.

You're not really going to do this, Derek coached himself as the sunglasses fell off his face and shattered. You're not seriously going to do this to Meredith, now, while she's in labor. You can't be this fucking useless.

His body was screaming at him that something was wrong. He was scared, and he couldn't breathe, and he was going to die, and something was wrong, and run. Just run. Run, run, run.

Stop, he told himself. Fucking stop it. Stop panicking.

You can't be this fucking useless. Get a fucking hold of yourself, and stop fucking panicking.

Panicking was not an option.

Not. An option.

He inhaled for three. Exhaled for three. Inhaled for three. Exhaled for three. The vise around his chest lessened. He wasn't helpless in here. He still had choices. Fewer choices, yes, but choices, nonetheless. This wasn't the end of the world. This wasn't. And there was a perfectly reasonable chance they'd be out of this elevator in a matter of minutes, and years from now, they'd look back on this and laugh at the funny thing that happened on the way to OB.

Stop, he told himself. Stop, and replace the panic thought.

Stop, and replace—

The world fell away.

"Derek," she said, the word soft as she gripped his shoulder and shook him. "Derek, wake up."

"Hmm?" he grumbled. He blinked in the darkness. The clock on his nightstand read 3:22 a.m., and the covers were warm, and he didn't want to move. He wasn't a morning person anymore. Waking up before the sun was unconscionable. He pressed his face into his pillow. "Hmm, what is it, Mere?"

"I'm sorry to wake you," Meredith said.
He rolled onto his back and groaned. He scrubbed at his face. The skin of his palms rasped against stubble. He wasn't a morning person anymore, but Meredith was way more important. "What do you need?"

"I really want some pickles," she said.

He forced himself to sit up. He pulled his fingers through his hair. "What happened to the jar I bought you, yesterday?"

A long pause followed before she confessed in a guilty tone, "I ate those pickles. Will you buy me some more? Dill, please."

He rubbed his eyes. "Now?"

She swallowed. "Yes, now. Sorry. I really want some. Oh, and some olives. Kalamata olives. That'd be great."

"M'kay," he said, not fazed by the weird flavor combo, and he pushed back the blankets and rolled out of bed. "Anything else?"

She thought for a moment. "Maybe, some peach yogurt?"

And that was how he found himself climbing into his Cayenne at 3:34 a.m. dressed in sweat pants, a wrinkled t-shirt, and the fuzzy blue bathrobe Meredith had given him a few Christmases ago. In March, the air that early in the morning was frigid, and he flipped on the heater to full blast as soon as the car had warmed up enough. When he pulled into the parking lot at the twenty-four hour grocery store a few blocks from Meredith’s house, he sighed and rubbed his eyes again. He was going to go grocery shopping in his fucking slippers and pajamas. For dill pickles, kalamata olives, and peach yogurt.

Jesus, she had him wrapped around her finger.

But he couldn't help but smile, anyway. He was going to go grocery shopping in his fucking slippers and pajamas. or dill pickles, kalamata olives, and peach yogurt. For his pregnant wife. They would be parents, soon. In just a few weeks.

He ambled through the parking lot, underneath the snapping, buzzing fluorescent lights, slippers scraping against the wet concrete. He shuffled through the sliding doors. The warm-looking, rainbow-colored produce section greeted him. Faint music played from the speakers – some pop song he didn't recognize, but was probably top forty.

The store was an empty ghost town except for a blonde college student wearing flip flops, flannel boxers, and a purple University of Washington sweatshirt. She was picking out apples. "Granny Smith, or Golden Delicious?" she asked in a chipper tone as Derek grabbed a basket.

He shrugged. "I like Fuji."

"But those are red," she said. "I want green ones."

"Can't help, then," he said. "Sorry."

He wandered into the condiment aisle to grab the dill pickles and the kalamata olives, first, since that aisle was closest. He had a brief moment of indecision about whether to pick pitted kalamata olives or regular ones with the pits still in. In the end, he grabbed one of each, because, why not, and he didn't want to risk grabbing the wrong one and having to come back. Dill pickles … same
thing. He grabbed spears, and slices, and rounds, and whole pickles, and he put the four bottles into his basket. In the dairy aisle, he grabbed fruit-on-the-bottom, pre-mixed, and Greek peach yogurt.

When he wandered to the checkout with his bounty, the tired old baggage clerk took one look at Derek's haul and attire, and grinned. "Having a little one?" she said in an earthy voice.

Derek grinned back at her despite his exhaustion. "Yes. It's that obvious?"

"Well, no," said the clerk. "But this is your replacement thought. I'm doing what you want me to do, and you seem to want to talk about it."

"Oh," Derek said. "Yes. We're having a baby soon."

"What names have you picked?" the clerk said.

"Daphne Anne for a girl," said Derek. "Adam Gabriel for a boy."

"Fine choices."

"I'm scared I'm going to fuck this up," he said. "I really don't want to fuck this up."

"You won't," the clerk assured him. "All first-time parents think that at least once or twice, you know." The cash register dinged, and the clerk smiled. "That'll be $34.37," she said.

Derek blinked and leaned closer to look at the receipt. Jesus, imported kalamata olives were expensive. Oh, well. He ran his credit card without comment and signed his name.

"Just remember to breathe," the clerk said. "Yes, you're stuck in an elevator, but that doesn't mean you're helpless."

Derek frowned and looked back at the clerk. "Huh?"

The grocery store melted away, and he presented the bag to Meredith beside a clock that read 3:47 a.m. She dove into the olives, first. The un-pitted ones. He was glad he'd gotten both, because if he'd chosen, pitted would have won.

"Feeling better, now?" he said.

Meredith happily munched on an olive and spat out the pit. "I don't know. Are you? I could ask for more stuff if you want me to."

Derek laughed. "More? How could you possibly want more?"

"Well," she said, grinning. "I tried to tell you I wanted some apples, too. Your mental symbolism button got broken, though. I don't know why you made my college-aged figment wear a U-Dub sweatshirt."

"You want me to go back to the grocery store?" He winked. "I'll go back. For you."

She gave him a long, discerning look. "Do you need to go back? You seemed pretty freaked out when the clerk reminded you about the elevator."

"Elevator?" he said.

Meredith nodded. "Yes. You're stuck in an elevator, and I'm giving birth. Remember?"
"Oh," he said. He stretched out on the bed beside her, watching her slip another olive into her math. Reality slammed against him like a linebacker, but he held it off for a moment. "No, I don't need anything else. I'm ... better." Not cured. Not perfect. But better. Better enough. And Meredith was waiting for him to get his head on semi-straight. "Thank you, Meredith."

She kissed him with salty, olive-tasting lips. "You're welcome."

He didn't know how long he existed in his own universe, staving off the threatening crush of panic, but when he came back to himself, Meredith was clutching his forearm in a tight, painful grip that was probably bruising his ulna. He'd shaved himself into the elevator corner like he'd somehow thought he could escape through the bend in the metal. Her croaking, desperate words exploded in his ears, a rush of panic that almost bowled him back into gibbering dissolution when he soaked it up like a sponge.

"Please, don't fall apart, Derek," she warbled. "Please, don't. Not now. I know I said it would be okay for you to fall apart, and everything would be fine, and I meant it at the time – honest, I did – but I was thinking someone else would be here to pick up the slack if you had issues, and we're alone right now, and I'm having a baby. Our baby. In an elevator. I don't want to have our baby in an elevator alone. Please. Please, don't panic. I need you. I need you to be here. I need-oohhhhhhh." She curled in on herself with a half-sob, half-whimper that stabbed his heart like serrated knives. Somewhere in the process of watching him flip out, she'd forgotten her Lamaze.

He pulled away from the wall and rushed to wrap his arms around her, but she slapped him away and gestured to her back. He leaned into his right leg with all his weight and pressed his fists against her lower back between her hips. His arms shook, he pressed so hard, but if it helped ....

"It's okay, Meredith," he said. "I'm fine. I'm not panicking. I'm here. Just breathe. Remember to breathe. In through the nose. Two. Three. Out through the mouth. Two. Three."

It took her a moment, but she shifted out of abject distress as she emulated the breathing he was demonstrating for her. The contraction ended a little more than a minute later. She slumped against him. He pulled his fingers through her hair, trying to soothe her. His heart pounded.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry. I'm good, now. I'm not panicking." He felt like he'd just fought a war with a garbage disposal and lost, though. Everything ached. Everything trembled. But he'd won. He'd won, damn it, and he wasn't panicking.

Panicking wasn't an option.

"What the hell are we going to do?" she said, voice faint.

What the hell were they going to do? He shook his head, shoving that panicky thought out of his brain as fast as it had arrived. He wasn't panicking. He wasn't. He glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes. They'd been in the elevator for fifteen minutes. He'd only lost about five minutes on his trip to Stop Your Panic Attack with Pickles Land.

"I'm sure this is just a glitch," he tried to assure her – and, by extension, him – in a low, soothing tone. His hands wouldn't stop shaking.

She snorted. "A glitch. Right. Just like the bomb exploding was a glitch. Oh, and your secret wife. That was a great glitch. So was both of us nearly dying." She pushed off the wall and approached the button console to the right side of the door. She yanked and depressed the elevator's emergency stop button once, twice, again, over and over, in some futile attempt to get the elevator car to budge, until he stepped close, gently encircled her wrist with his trembling fingers, and pulled her
"Another five minutes, and we'll be out of here," he said. "I'm sure. Mark got stuck yesterday. Surely, they fixed it, and this is just a hiccup."

Her gaze shifted from the button console to his face. Then back to the button console. Then back to his face. He knew the second he got a glimpse of her expression that he'd said a wrong thing. A very wrong thing. A very, very wrong thing that he would regret. Possibly forever.

Her response was a volcanic eruption the likes of which Mt. Rainier had never seen. "Didn't he GET STUCK FOR FOUR FREAKING HOURS?"

He swallowed, cringing. A pit formed in his stomach, and the run, run, run tried to rev into full swing again. "Well—"

"FIVE MINUTES IS NOT FOUR HOURS, DEREK."

"I really want some pickles," she said.

"Meredith—"

"DOES THIS ELEVATOR LOOK FIXED TO YOU, DEREK?"

Pickles, pickles, pickles, pickles.

"Meredith—"

"DOES THIS LOOK LIKE A HICCUP, DEREK?"

He was in the condiment aisle, looking for pickles. He grabbed spears, and slices, and rounds, and whole pickles, and he put the four bottles into his basket. Rewind.

"Meredith—"

"I'D REALLY LIKE TO KNOW YOUR DEFINITION OF A FIXED GLITCH, DEREK."

In such a small, claustrophobic space, her yelling at him was loud, and jarring, and awful, each syllable like a gunshot. Her agitation was making him shake even more, and his mouth felt dry all over again. His legs felt watery. He paced, what little the elevator would let him pace. The cliff before the leap into panic was only a tiny hop away again. He dug in his figurative heels.

He grabbed the pickles off the shelf again. Rewind.

"Meredith," he said in a soft, shivery voice. "Meredith—"

"WHAT, DEREK?!"

"Please, don't yell," he begged, back-and-forth pacing coming to a stop. "I know you're upset, and I know you're in pain, and I know this really fucking sucks, but please, don't yell at me in here. Please. I … can't." His voice cut off into a croak. "I … can't handle …."


Her lower lip quivered. Her eyes watered and spilled. "I'm sorry-ohhhhh!" she whined.

He collapsed against her by rote, pressing his fists against her spine. "In through the nose," he
coached. "One, two, three. Out through the mouth."

"I'm sorry," she said faintly when the contraction ended.

"It's okay," he said. "I'm okay."

She shook her head at him. "I'm so sorry. I'm so tired. And I hurt. And I don't want to have our baby in an elevator."

She thudded against the back wall and slid into an awkward heap on the floor. He followed her down to the ground, shaking. "I know. I know you don't." He didn't, either. He so fucking didn't. He kissed her on the temple. "Please, try not to worry too much, yet. We've only been here a few minutes."

"And this could take hours," she said, tone dripping with the beginnings of another shrill shouting spree. "Right?"

He winced. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I don't want this to take hours!" she said. "I need to be done, now."

_He grabbed spears, and slices, and rounds, and whole pickles, and he put the four bottles into his basket. Rewind._

He was at a loss for what to say at this point. Nothing seemed like it would help. Everything seemed wrong. "I'm here, no matter what," he murmured.

"I didn't mean to make you have a panic attack," she said, a rough warble against his shirt.

"You didn't make me have a panic attack," he assured her. "And even if you had, I know it wouldn't have been on purpose."

"I'm sorry," she repeated in a small voice.

He tightened his embrace. "It's okay. But let's worry about you, okay? Would hitting me help? I can handle hitting. Just not screaming."

She snorted, and a brief smile graced her features. "I'd rather not, if it's all the sa—"

Her words choked into silence. She tensed against him. Her fingers closed over his shoulder and squeezed, and for all her desire not to hurt him, his whole arm felt like it had been caught by a boa constrictor. He clenched his jaw, though, and he bore it without complaint. Noise, he couldn't fucking handle, but anything else was fine, and if he had something she needed, he'd give it to her without hesitation. Hell, he'd even wrap whatever it was with a pretty bow. He just hoped he had enough to give for his offerings to make a difference.

"What are we going to do if I have to have the baby in the elevator?" she said when she relaxed out of the contraction.

"I've delivered babies before, Meredith. This isn't the end of the world. I promise."

"When?" she said.

He frowned. "When, what?"

"When have you delivered babies?"
His frown deepened. "Well, I mean, it's been a while," he confessed.

Her eyes narrowed. "Define a while," she said, putting the words "a" and "while" in air quotes.

He sighed. "It's been like fifteen years, Meredith, but—"

"So, what you're saying, is that the only worse case scenario would be if I were stuck in an elevator with a plumber."

For a moment, he was speechless, sputtering. "Well, I think if you were stuck in here alone, that would be worse than being stuck with a plumber," he said. "A drain clog is kind of like a baby in a birth canal, isn't it?"

She jabbed her elbow into his side, and he grunted, but she snorted with laughter, at least. "Remember that one time you, me, Rose, and Addison were all in this elevator, and Mark came in and laughed at us?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't."

"Really?"

"I must have blanked it from my memory."

"I wish I could blank it," she grumbled. "On a scale of one to awkward, that was mortifying."

He kissed her. "I think that wins for worst case scenario in an elevator."

They shared a collective sigh together. He wrapped his arm over her shoulder, and she leaned against him, and she rested. They both rested. He rubbed her belly in slow circles with his free hand. When the next contraction hit her, her whole body tensed. Her womb felt like a rock under his palm. She shifted in his arms, back and forth, like it could somehow vent the discomfort.

"Do you want to get up and walk?" he said. "It might help."

She shook her head, panting as her body relaxed. Sweat pearled on her brow. "No. No, I'm tired, Derek. I'm tired, and this hurts, and I want to be done."

He hugged her. "I know. I know it does. I'm here. Are you feeling like you need to push, yet?"

She shook her head again. "No," she said. "No, it just freaking hurts, Derek. These are like … beyond tens." She swallowed. "And the main part I hate about being here in the elevator is that the epidurals are in OB." She clutched at his shirt, yanking tents of it into her fists. "I want my epidural, Derek."

Definitely active labor, then.

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry. I wish I could give you one."

He hadn't been timing her contractions since they stepped into the elevator, but they felt faster than five minutes apart, at this point. He rubbed her arm, shoulder to elbow, soothing, slow. His own body felt wasted after his near brush with dissolution. He couldn't imagine how bad she felt, after twenty-four hours of contractions and even longer without any sleep. They rested. He let his eyelids drift to half-mast. Time felt like it was blurring.

"Stuck with a contaminated virologist who's been studying ebola," she said, out of the blue.
He blinked. "What?"

"Worst case scenario in an elevator," she said.

"Oh." He chuckled. "Okay, maybe that wins."

"I can always think of something worse," she said with a sigh. "And the crappy thing is that, usually, it happens."

"I'm pretty sure you won't ever get stuck in an elevator with a contaminated virologist who's been studying ebola, Mere," Derek said.

"I don't know. Given our track record, it's possi-ugh."

She didn't even moan this time. She just choked into silence as her whole body tensed, and her grip tightened, and her belly hardened like a rock again. Her breaths blustered against his neck. In through the nose, out through the mouth. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. He pulled his fingers through her hair.

"It's okay, Meredith," he murmured against her. "You're doing great. You're doing so great." She slumped against him, silent, limp, wasted. God, he felt so helpless. So helpless. Panic revved, but he forced himself to focus on her, instead. "That's good. Rest between them. It's okay. Just rest. Tell me if you start feeling like you need to push, okay?"

He hoped to fucking god that didn't happen anytime soon, though. Well, he did. For her sake. Because it meant this would be over soon. But he didn't. For his sake. Because it'd been fifteen fucking years since he'd delivered a baby, and his assurances to Meredith aside, he wasn't confident that delivering a baby was in any way like riding a bike. He thought it was pretty fucking possible to forget how to do it entirely. And it wasn't like he could call anyone to get a quick refresher course. Damn it.

He grabbed pickles off the shelf. Rewind. He grabbed pickles off the shelf.

"Why does this keep happening to me?" she whispered.

He sighed, staring at the elevator ceiling.

"What?" she said.

He shrugged. "I know you see it all as bad, Meredith, but … it helped us get here, didn't it?"

"Stuck in an elevator while I'm in labor?"


"I think we could have been here without bombs exploding, ferryboats crashing, secret wives, or mad gunmen."

"You never know."

She shook her head. "I don't get it. I really don't."

"Don't get what?"

"How in the hell you can be so optimistic. I mean, after everything." She rested her head against his shoulder. "I love that about you. That your default state of being includes so many half-full glasses
that you could fill a freaking swimming pool with them." She sighed, and she gave him a tired smile. "I'm glad you're better."

He grinned. "And I love your dark and twisty." He kissed her. "Very much."

A wheezy sound of discomfort pushed through her lips, and she tensed in his arms again. For a moment, she only rocked side to side, inhaling, exhaling, inhaling, exhaling in a slow, deliberate rhythm. Then she pushed away from him, shifting onto all fours, distended belly dipping toward the floor. She pushed forward and rocked back, pushed forward and rocked back, breathing.

"You're doing great, Meredith," he coached, feeling useless.

Absolutely fucking useless. They didn't even have pillows in here, for her. When she eased back onto her knees, tears were streaming down her face. He shrugged out of his coat and put it on the floor for her, so she'd have some padding next time she shifted forward to ride a contraction. He was so focused on her, he had no idea what made Meredith twitch with excitement, but something did.

"What was …?" Meredith said, panting. She paused to scrub at her wet eyes, like she couldn't see. She petted his coat, hands searching. His phone beeped, and she yanked it loose from his coat pocket. She swallowed. "Derek, you got a text from Mark. Just now. You got a text."

Derek snatched the phone from her hands. He tried to make a phone call. Nothing went through. "Still no reception," he said. "God, damn it."

"But you got a text! Just now," she said. "I watched it arrive." She frowned. "Don't texts require less signal to send or something?"

Shit, why hadn't he thought to try that?

"Where the hell are you guys? Are you stuck in traffic?" Mark had texted.

Derek's fingers flew over the phone's keys. "We're stuck. We're stuck in the elevator, the power is out, and the alarm button isn't working. My phone doesn't have enough reception to make calls. Help." He pressed send and held his breath. He watched the screen. Sending, the little note next to the message said. Sending. Sending. Sending. "It sent," he said.

Meredith slumped against the elevator wall. "Oh, thank god." And then she tensed. Her tears started to leak again. She shifted onto all fours. He rubbed her back.

"Maybe," she rasped as she relaxed, "even if they can't rescue us, they can send an epidural through the emergency hatch at the top of the elevator. Oh, and some water. And a bucket."

He frowned. "A bucket?"

"I kinda have to pee," she said, tone reluctant.

"Meredith, you should just go," he said. "Go, now, before you hit transition, and you can't."

"But ….."

His phone beeped, and he picked it up to look at it. "April Fools was yesterday, man," Mark said. Derek rolled his eyes. "Believe me, I fucking know," he replied and hit send.

There was hardly any delay this time when Mark replied. "Richard's on it, man. He's calling the
Derek snorted. He wasn't even fucking sure how to respond to that. Too late? Already had a panic-palooza, complete with His and Her nervous breakdowns? He turned his attention back to Meredith, who was biting her lower lip, staring at him with tears streaking down her face. Fuck.

"Derek, I'm having our baby in an elevator, and I've been up for like forty-eight hours. This is already one of the worst experiences of my freaking life. And you want to me to pee in my pants?"

"Well, would you rather have a full bladder?" he said.

"No," she said, the word tiny. Upset. And then another contraction stole her words. She rocked back and forth.

He glanced at their inventory while he rubbed her back. His coat. Her coat. The clothes on their bodies. His phone. His wallet. His keys. That was it. He'd left the luggage in the car, intending to worry about it later, after Baby was born. His coat was the kind with a fleece liner and a water-resistant shell. It was big and bulky and wouldn't work—

He grabbed his keys. He kept a tiny pocket scalpel on his keychain. He unsheathed the knife. Meredith had leaned back onto her knees and wasn't on top of his coat, for now. He scooped it up and jammed the scalpel into the fuzzy lining.

"Derek, what are you doing?" Meredith said. "That's your favorite coat!"

He shook his head at her and sawed loose a square of fleecy fabric, separating it from the water-resistant shell. He crumpled up the fleece into a big ball and handed it to Meredith. "Use that," he said. "Stuff it in your pants and go on it." That way, she wouldn't have to live in wet pants for however long they were stuck in here, on top of the fact that they were fucking stuck.

She gave him an unreadable look. "Don't tell anyone I peed in the elevator," she said.

He gave her what he hoped was an encouraging smile. "I won't tell a soul, Meredith. Your secret's safe with me." And then he pantomimed a zipper closing over his lips.

She laughed and shifted awkwardly to the other side of the elevator, away from him. He turned to give her some privacy, what little he could. She was about to go through an experience that would expose her to a lot of people she didn't know that well, and a lot of people she did know well, but probably didn't want looking at her vagina while a baby came out of it, and after all he'd been through, he could understand the need for taking whatever dignity one could find in an undignified situation.

"The repair guy will be here in forty minutes," Mark texted.

Derek sighed. "Are you fucking kidding me? My wife is IN ACTIVE LABOR. I could be a father by then!"

"I know, man. I know. But the guy lives in the boonies like you guys do. He'll be here as fast as he can."

Derek ground his molars. "Murphy is conspiring."

"We'll get you out, man. Don't worry."

Meredith shifted beside him. He turned back to face her. The soiled scrap of his coat lay in a
crumpled heap in the opposite corner of the elevator, and her yoga pants were back in place, unblemished with wetness. "They're not going to fix the elevator in time, are they?" she said.

"They'll fix it, Meredith," he said.

"No, they won't," she said, and she burst into unrestrained tears.

He wrapped his arms around her. "Shh," he soothed. "Shh, yes, they will. They'll fix it."

She stiffened, and her fingers tightened into tight, bruising fists that yanked on his shirt so hard, he thought he might lose his head in a sort of guillotine process. Death by collar constriction. He cleared his throat while he listened to her breathe. In through the nose for three. Out through the mouth for three. In through the nose for three. Out through the mouth for three. He rubbed her back and cheered her on, feeling like a useless lump while his wife did all the fucking work.

When she relaxed, he picked up his phone again. He glanced at the time. They'd been stuck in here almost fifty minutes, now. "Did you hear we're stuck in the elevator?" he typed, texting Dr. Charlton this time.

"Dr. Webber told me. I'm in the waiting room right outside OB. I'll be there the second you guys are out," Dr. Charlton replied.

"I need a quick summary on delivering a baby."

A somewhat longer pause follows. "You've delivered a baby before?"

"Years ago."

"Honestly, assuming there are no complications, the best thing you can do is let Meredith's body dictate the process, and prep your catcher's mitt."

Derek blinked. That was a bit more quick of a summary than he'd been hoping for. "I remember it being more involved than that ...."

"Yes," Dr. Charlton replied, "but before, you were a doctor, and right now, you're a dad."

"That's it, though? Catch it?" Seriously?

A very long pause this time. "Most of your work is after. Don't cut the umbilical cord. Run your fingers along the baby's nose to get the fluid out. Stimulate crying by rubbing the baby's back. Then rest the baby on Meredith's chest or belly. If the cord is long enough for the baby to reach Meredith's breasts, see if you can get it to nurse. Nursing will stimulate the uterus to contract, which will help deliver the placenta and reduce bleeding. If the cord's not long enough, don't stretch it. Cover mom and baby with your coat or your t-shirt to keep them warm. And then wait for help."

"What are you reading?" Meredith croaked.

Derek grinned at her. "Just chatting with Dr. Charlton." Which … wasn't a total lie. And there was no way in hell he was letting Meredith know he was receiving coaching on how to deliver. That would be a great way to incite her to panic, letting her know that he didn't feel like he knew what he was doing, and he really, really didn't. "She's waiting in OB for us."

Meredith tensed and rocked onto all fours again. God, he felt helpless. Catch the baby. That was seriously his fucking job. Just fucking catch it. The very idea of that made his chest constrict. No
choices. None. He rubbed her back and did everything he could to tell Meredith she was going to rock this, and everything was fine, despite the nerves making his heart pound. His sternum ached, and his jaw hurt from clenching.

When Meredith relaxed, she sighed. "Stuck in the elevator with a hungry velociraptor while Mount Rainier is exploding, and strawberry ice cream was never invented."

Derek blinked. "What?"

Meredith wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. "That's the worst scenario I can think of so far."

He snorted. "You're still churning over that?"

"It's passing the freaking time," Meredith grumbled. She gave him a tired look, and then rested her head on his shoulder again. This seemed to be her preferred system. Resting in his arms between contractions. Shifting onto all fours and rocking back and forth during. "Isn't it?"

"I suppose so," he said.

"What's the worst one you can think of?" she said.

"Funny worst?" he said. "Like with velociraptors and no strawberry ice cream? Or genuine worst?"

"I'm not trying to be funny," she said. "Velociraptors are genuinely bad."

He kissed her temple. Sweat slicked her skin at this point. Her hair, which was tied into a ponytail, was a damp skullcap. "I think my worst case scenario would be me in Manhattan, having never moved after Addison cheated, because Richard never called. I'd have been drunk, vulnerable, and good-looking in the wrong bar, and I never would have met the girl who was like coming up for fresh air. I'd be alone and unhappy and miserable, oblivious to Meredith in Seattle, who'd be stuck giving birth alone in an elevator with a hungry velociraptor, no strawberry ice cream, and a nearby exploding volcano."

Meredith was quiet for a long time, and he worried for a moment, that he'd gone too far, name-dropping Addison in his worst case scenario. Truthfully, his worst case scenario involved Gary Clark, and not a velociraptor, but … some things were a bit too real. And Gary Clark didn't deserve to be there for the birth of Daphne Anne or Adam Gabriel.

"I can think of a worse one," Meredith whispered after a moment.

He grinned. "Oh?"

"Yeah," she said. "Your scenario. Plus, what if Finn was my husband, and he was too pre-occupied wrangling the hungry velociraptor with his veterinary wiles to help me?"

He burst out laughing. "You win again, I think."

Meredith gave him a tired smile. "I can always think of something worse."

"I love your dark and twisty," he said.

"You said that already," she replied, staring up at him.

His gaze creased with affection. "It bears repeating."
Meredith nodded. She rubbed leaking tears out of her eyes. "I'm glad you came to Seattle, and you were drunk, vulnerable, and good-looking in the right spot. That really would have sucked if you hadn't been."

"Hmm," he said. "I really do think it worked out well, in the end."

They shared another tired embrace. The minutes crawled, and they shifted into an exhausted rhythm. Trading horrible giving-birth scenarios back and forth between contractions, which got closer and closer together as time slogged forward. Derek coached Meredith while she fought to keep her breathing steady during each onslaught. They were on, "What if the velociraptor ate the OB-GYN and Finn?" when they heard something in the elevator shaft shifting overhead. A groan, like metal moving, which was fucking scary, and it made Derek's innards tighten and his teeth clench, and he only barely managed to vent his unrestrained holy-shit-what-was-that exclamation into a more modest but still startled grunt. He pulled his fingers through his hair as a sudden rush of nausea overtook him, and he yanked his phone back out of his pocket.

"What's going on?" Derek texted to Richard.

"Please don't tell me we have to add the elevator crashing down three floors to our hungry velociraptor scenario," Meredith said.

"The elevator guy is here," Mark texted before Richard could reply. "Some very technical-sounding important thing needs to be replaced. He told us don't worry about the noise."

Don't worry about the noise. Derek snorted. What a fucking joke.

Derek glanced at his watch. 6:13 a.m. They'd been in this fucking elevator for three hours. "He only just got here?" he replied to Mark, fingers shaking.

There was no response, and Derek rolled his eyes. God, damn it. God, damn it. God, damn it. Meredith was a ticking time bomb. She'd been in active labor for over five hours, now. She could go into transition at any time. She was exhausted. He was exhausted.

He stood up to stretch. And pace. What little he could pace.

"Derek, are you okay?" Meredith said, a quiet rasp.

She was dehydrated. And sweaty. And tired. And uncomfortable. And all they had between them for padding were one-and-a-half coats, because he'd gutted his already for the absorbent stuffing. Fuck. He pulled his fingers through his hair. Fuckity fuck.

He grabbed pickles off the shelf. Rewind. He grabbed pickles off the shelf. Rewind. He grabbed pickles off the shelf.

Another screeching, metal groan filled the space in the air over the cramped elevator car. The sound hit his eardrums like an ice pick, yanking him out of his attempts at replacement thoughts, and his body started to shiver with a new bath of adrenaline. The constant rushing in and receding of fight-or-flight hormones was wearing him out. He was thirsty, too. And cold with nerves as his body pulled heat out of his extremities to protect his core.

"Derek?" Meredith croaked.

"I don't like the noise," he whispered, unable to stop himself from sounding weak and scared and horrible. He inhaled thickly. "I don't .... I can't."
"Derek, don't listen to that crap," Meredith said. "Don't. Listen to me. Tell me … um. Oh."

Her words choked off into silence, and he watched her features crease with agony. He slumped back to the floor to try and help her. "You're doing great, Meredith," he managed to say, despite the fact that he felt like his intestines had been replaced with writhing snakes. He rubbed her back. "You're doing so great. Better than I ever could." As she rocked back and forth on her knees, she grabbed his hand and squeezed so hard he could hear his knuckles pop. The pain in his hand was enough to make him stop thinking about the awful noise, though.

When she relaxed into a tired, spent slump, her tiny, pained, "Ow," broke his heart.

God, they needed to get out of this fucking elevator.

Another metal screech made him cringe. He closed his eyes, imagining himself grabbing the pickles. He had to do this. He had to be here. He couldn't afford to fall apart right now.

"Are you using the replacement thingy with the pickles?" Meredith said.

He grunted. "Yes." He frowned at her. "I'm so sorry."

"For what? Buying imaginary pickles for me?"

"Whenever I do that, I'm not in this elevator. I feel like I'm abandoning you or something."

She snorted. "Derek, if leaving me to go to the grocery store for a few seconds helps you avoid having a panic attack and leaving me for the duration of my labor to be a gibbering wreck, I say go to the freaking grocery story already. Buy a gross of imaginary pickles, and—" Her eyes narrow. "What?"

He shrugged. "What what?"

"You're looking at me."

"Because you're beautiful, and I love you."

"But I'm sweaty, and gross, and I peed on your coat."

"Meredith," he murmured, inching closer. He kissed her brow. "If being sweaty and gross and peeing on my coat helps you have our baby, I say to hell with my coat." He squeezed her arm. "And you're beautiful to me always."

"Yeah, right," she grumbled.

He brushed his fingers against her sweaty scalp. "You are, Meredith."

Another metal shriek filled the air overhead. Meredith moaned, panting. "Breathe, Meredith," he coached. "In through the nose. Out through the mouth." Another shriek pierced his skull, and his heart squeezed. Fuck. "Meredith?"

But she was off in her own suffering world, not listening to a word he was saying, not achieving anything but pained gasping, and the contraction kept going and going and going. The eternity ended with an exclamation of pain that made his insides curdle. Giving birth was not at all like the movies made it look. For one, women didn't typically scream their heads off at any viable target. Oh, they made noise, just … Hollywood tended to amp things up. For two, birth was messy. Really messy. Meredith had been mostly stoic about this whole thing up until now. But the sound she just
"Meredith, what's wrong?"

"Uhh," she half-groaned half-moaned when her body relaxed. Her hands were shaking when she grabbed at his shirt. Her panting blustered against him. "Derek," she rasped. Her face was soaked. "Derek." She looked ... like she didn't even know where the hell she was.

"I'm right here," he said. "Can you talk to me? How bad was that?"

But she only had about sixty seconds to catch her breath before she tensed up again, and there was nothing he could do but hold her and tell her he was there while the moments crawled. The rapid shift in pace and intensity was terrifying, given their cramped, dark locale. Given his current role in this delivery. He swallowed when he looked down, noticing for the first time in the darkness that her yoga pants were soiled through with bloody discharge and amniotic fluid at the crotch. Her water had broken at some point.

No. No, no, no, she could not be hitting transition. Not now. Not, yet.

"Oh, my god," she croaked when the contraction ended. "Oh, my god. Oh, my god." Her whole body trembled in his arms. "Oh, my god. Oh, my god."


Another metal shriek overhead.

She shook her head. "It's not fine," she said, breathless. "It's not fine. It's *not* fi-ugh."

She stiffened again, and time slowed to a crawl. Again. And all he could do was offer her assurance that he hadn't gone anywhere. He'd thought, until now, the most helpless he'd ever feel would be dying on the catwalk while Gary Clark pointed a gun.

He was wrong.

"I can't do this," she spluttered when the contraction passed. "Derek, I can't. I can't. It hurts. It hurts too much."

"Yes, you can do this," he replied, trying to keep himself sounding calm and soothing, despite the fact that he was not. Not at all. "Yes, you can. I'm right here."

"I can't," she said, crying in earnest. "I can't, I can't."

He had no idea what to do. No fucking idea. Her hitching sobs pinched into a long moan, and her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. She gasped, and she spluttered.

"Breathe, Meredith," he said. "Meredith, you have to listen to me. If you breathe, it might hurt less."

But this birth seemed like a runaway freight train at this point that she had no hope of getting a handle on, not when she was so scared and upset. She was only getting like sixty seconds to rest between two minutes of unadulterated nightmare. He'd seen births before. He'd delivered more than one baby in the course of his maturation from a med student to a neurosurgeon. But he was pretty sure, now that he had a point of comparison, that he'd never seen a birth without an epidural before, and he'd never seen someone he loved suffer like *this.*
He grabbed pickles off the shelf. Rewind. He grabbed pickles off the shelf. Rewind. He grabbed pickles off the shelf.

"Do you feel like you need to push?" he said when she relaxed again, praying for a no.

She shook her head. "There's … pressure. P-p-pressure. Here." She touched her pelvis with a shaking hand. "But ….

She shifted forward onto all fours, and then grabbed at his shoulders for leverage. She stood. "Meredith? What are you doing?" She didn't reply. Her shoes squeaked on the wet floor. She shambled forward until she hit the wall. Her distress was a hot, burning fire. "Meredith?"

Her fingers flexed, and the pads of her hands squeaked along the elevator wall. "I need to get out of here. I can't do this. I can't-ohhhhh." One hand went to her belly. She slid to her knees.

He raced to catch her. To offer her support. Anything. "You can do this, Meredith," he said, right next to her ear. "You can do this. You're so strong. You're the strongest person I know, and you can do this. Do you hear me?"

When she got a reprieve, and she had her sixty seconds to relax, he guided her back to the meager pile of coats in the other corner. Her whole body trembled, and she had a thousand-yard-stare quality to her gaze that disconcerted him. She was there, but she wasn't there.

And then her whole body tensed again.

Her whimper raked down his spine like an icy knife. He swallowed back terror, reaching for her hips. He pulled down her pants and underwear while she strained. Lying flat on the cold floor in the dark was kind of a horrible position to give birth in, but they didn't have any options in here, not ones that would let him see what was going on and be safe for Baby.

They didn't have any choices.

No choices.

None.

No. No, no, no. Panicking was not an option. He bit back on his mindless fear with a willpower he wished he'd had when Mr. Clark had cornered him on the catwalk.

He grabbed pickles off the shelf. Rewind. He grabbed pickles off the shelf. Rewind. He grabbed pickles off the shelf.

As soon as Meredith relaxed, panting, staring groggily into space, he helped her lie back onto the shredded remnants of his coat. Bloody discharge spread below her body. Fuck. Fuck, this was ….

"You're doing fine," he said. "You're doing so great, Meredith. Can you hear me? I'm here."

Anything to pierce her mental fog. Once he had her legs spread, so he had a good visual field, just in case, he leaned forward, grabbed her hand, and squeezed. He would play catcher if he had to, but there was every fucking chance they'd get rescued. Please, please, please, let them get rescued.

Another metal shriek in the air over the elevator. His heart pounded. He clamped down on an urge to bolt with all the fucking willpower he possessed.

Another contraction. He saw his hand being crushed more so than felt it, at this point.
"Meredith," he said. "Meredith, breathe." She'd arched back and her face was pointed toward the wall behind them. "Meredith, listen to me. Can you hear me?"

"Please," she croaked when the contraction passed. "Please, Derek. Make it stop. Please, make it stop."

He felt like his stomach was dropping out through his shoes. "I know it hurts," he replied, heart pounding. "I know it does. But you can do this. Do you hear me? Hang on. Just hang on. You can do it. I'm here. I'm right here with you. But you need to hang on a little longer."

The moan she squeezed out on the next contraction chilled his blood. Her whole body tensed like her skin had become stone. Tears squeezed loose from her clenched eyelids.

When she relaxed, she said, trembling, "I'm going to throw up."

"That's okay," he assured her. "That's okay if you feel sick. Be sick if you need to." But she didn't do anything except swallow repeatedly while she stared blankly at the ceiling. He squeezed her thigh to give her some reassurance. He wasn't sure how reassuring his freezing palm would be. "I'm right here."

"Derek ….

"I'm right here. I'm right here, Meredith. You're doing great." His eyes were watering. "You're doing really great, and I love you."

Time seemed to stretch, and he lost track of all of everything outside the bubble. Measurement of the passing seconds became contraction. Not contraction. Contraction. Not contraction. Meredith alternated between begging him deliriously to make it stop and not saying a fucking word, and both options nauseated him. He was sweaty, and shaking almost as badly as Meredith was. He had a wild, fleeting, crazy thought that somehow, Michael Shepherd had managed to get through this experience five times. Five fucking times. And his mother. His poor mother. Jesus Christ. Derek was not equipped for this. He just wasn't. But every time his throat threatened to close, every time a noise overhead in the elevator shaft hit him in the wrong way, every time he felt the urge to run and never stop, he'd make himself pause for a moment, and he'd buy himself some mental pickles for his mental Meredith, and he'd tell himself panicking wasn't an option. And that helped. That helped, and once he'd reassured himself, once he'd roped in his own terror, he could go back to helping Meredith.

And time crawled.

And crawled.

And crawled.

When the elevator lights snapped on, and the car began to hum as it lifted, he wilted. "Oh, thank fucking god."

"It's moving?" Meredith said, sounding … almost drunk.

"I think we're getting rescued," Derek said, too upset and overwhelmed to smile.

When the elevator doors trundled open, a team of nurses and Dr. Charlton swarmed into the elevator like ants, and their voices and bustle swept over him like a wave. He flopped against the metal wall, panting, as he watched them lift a straining Meredith onto a gurney. He felt dizzy, and
he thought if he stood up, he might fucking faint, and so he sat there in a pile with the bloody coats. The floor of the elevator was a bloody, slippery mess. His wife's blood. All over the floor. All over him.

"Derek?" Mark said. There were so many people. And it was so loud. Derek held a hand out, warding away all the people in his space, crowding him. "Derek?" Mark repeated, but the word was far across a canyon the second time, deep and echoing and distant. "Hey, give him some fucking space!"

"We got stuck in an elevator," Derek said, shock lacing every word.

"Derek, man, come on," Mark said in a quiet, encouraging voice. "Come on, breathe. This isn't over yet, and you really don't want to miss this part."

"Where's Derek?" he heard Meredith say, the volume of her voice waning as they rolled the gurney away. "Please, where's Derek?" They were taking her away. They were taking her away, and he'd promised he'd be there. The whole time. He'd promised.

_Snap out of it_, he told himself. _Snap the fuck out of it. You can't be this fucking useless._

Derek stood, shoes slipping, but Mark caught him in a strong grip and helped him step forward, away from the mess in the elevator. Someone took his hand off the slow-mo button, and time snapped back into its regular march. "I'm … I'm okay," Derek said. He didn't sound okay. Even to his own ears. But fuck that. He could be okay until Meredith had their baby, at least.

Mark's grip tightened. "I've got you, man," he said.

The gurney was down the hall already. "I promised I wouldn't leave," Derek said. "I … promised."

Mark's pace picked up. Derek felt like they were in one of those silly potato sack races where partners had their legs tied together or some fucking nonsense, but Mark managed to catch them up in seconds. Derek grabbed Meredith's hand, and Mark and the world melted away. "I'm right here," he said. "You're doing great, Meredith." She looked at him through pain-clouded eyes and didn't speak. He grinned at her. "You're doing so, so great."

"Don't push, Meredith," Dr. Charlton was saying as they rushed down the hall. "Don't push. You're almost fully dilated. Everything feels fine. The head is down. Just a few minutes, and then you can go to town. I promise."

The entourage spilled into the delivery room like the crash of a wave, and for a moment, Derek got pushed out of the way. His hand separated from Meredith's. "Someone get Dad a smock," Dr. Charlton said.

It took Derek a minute to realize Dr. Charlton meant him. He was Dad. Holy fuck. He was Dad. He was Dad. How could he be Dad? He wasn't ready to be Dad! A nurse appeared out of nowhere with a plastic pull on. Mark eclipsed Derek's view for a moment. "Mark," Derek croaked. It was the only word he could think of other than Meredith.

Mark grinned like he'd won the lottery. "This is it!" he said, and he helped Derek pull on the smock, and then gripped Derek's shoulders and pushed him toward the bed. "Don't worry, Meredith. I promise, I'm not looking." From the space-y look on Meredith's sweaty face, though, Mark was the last thought in her head, if he resided in any of her thoughts at all.

Dr. Charlton looked up from her stool. Her eyes creased as she smiled behind her surgical mask.
"Why don't you sit by Meredith's head?" she suggested to Derek.

"I'm here!" Cristina said, gasping as she crashed into the room. "I'm here, I'm here!"

"Cristina …," Derek heard Meredith say, again in that drunk-y tone that told him Meredith was having her own bout with shock.

"Alex and Lexie and Richard are pacing in the waiting room," Cristina said. "Well, Lexie and Richard are pacing. Alex is chill."

"… Okay," Meredith said.

Cristina gave Meredith a dispassionate gaze. "Do you want me out in the waiting room with them, or in here with you?"

Meredith swallowed. It took her a long, long time to formulate any kind of answer. "You don't have to watch the … ick," she said, words slurring.

"Oh, good," Cristina said. She looked at Derek and gave him a thumbs up. "You'll be much better at this part than me, anyway. Assuming you don't freak out. Are you freaking out? Do I need to be here, so you can freak out?"

Holy fuck, yes. "I'm okay," he said, tone wavering.

"Great!" Cristina said in a faux-chipper tone.

"Seriously?" he said.

She shrugged, and he gaped at her as she traipsed back out of the room. He just didn't get it. Clearly, her and Meredith's friendship was a deep, abiding thing. But hell if he would ever figure out why.

"Do you need me?" Mark said in a quiet, gentle tone.

Derek looked up at him. He swallowed. "I … I don't know." He was having as much trouble as Meredith with finding words. His whole body felt like jelly.

Without another word or protest, Mark pulled up a stool behind Derek's. Derek felt a big, warm hand squeeze his shoulder. A silent show of solidarity.

Meredith tensed and moaned. And then Dr. Charlton's gaze shifted. "Hang in there, Mom. I can give you a spinal block injection if you'd like one, but you're almost out of transition, which is the hard part, and painkillers will make pushing last longer. It's up to you."

Meredith stared at the ceiling, shaking. Sweat slicked her skin. Droplets pearled at her forehead. "Please, I want to be done, now. P-please."

Derek collapsed into the chair and gave her the brightest grin he could manage. The chair creaked as his weight distributed, but he barely heard it. "Hey, I'm here," he told her. He reached and grabbed her hand and squeezed. Nurses bustled back and forth. "You're doing so great."

She tipped her gaze toward him, but she didn't speak. He brushed her face with the back of his hand, pressing his skin to hers. She leaned into the touch.

"Meredith?" Dr. Charlton called from the foot of the bed. "Do you want a spinal block injection?"
When Meredith didn't answer, Derek leaned forward and pushed his fingers through Meredith's hair. "Meredith," he murmured. "Meredith, do you want painkillers, now? Dr. Charlton says you can have some if you want them, but she doesn't recommend it." If it were up to him, he'd be doing the injection himself, and it'd be done already, and fuck recommendation. But ….

"No," Meredith said.

He raised his eyebrows. "No? I thought you wanted an epidural."

"I want to be done," she snapped.

He held up his hands in surrender. "Okay. Okay, whatever you want."

"You're fully dilated," Dr. Charlton said. "As soon as your body tells you to start pushing, go ahead. Okay?"

"It's not telling me anything but ow," Meredith replied.

Dr. Charlton nodded. "You'll know it when you feel it. Just go with the flow."

Meredith tensed and moaned. Her grip around his hand quintupled, and he grimaced, but didn't complain. This contraction didn't have the urgency of before. Or an onslaught feel to it, at least not from Derek's perspective.

Meredith swallowed when she relaxed. She wasn't trembling anymore. "That … f-felt. Less."

"You're in the final stage," Dr. Charlton said, smiling. "Baby's getting positioned. Once your body gets everything lined up, you'll feel a pretty overruling urge to bear down. Go for it when you feel it."

"Oh," Meredith said. Her eyelids dipped, and she rested. Derek stroked her arm and glanced at his watch. 7:32 a.m. She'd been in active labor since a little after 1 a.m. Six and a half hours. And they'd been stuck in a fucking elevator for over half of it.

Dr. Charlton looked at Derek. "How are you doing, Dad?"

Except he didn't have a chance to answer. Meredith moaned, and tensed, and leaned forward, straining. Leaking tears renewed, pulsing out of her eyes, but this part didn't seem to be as bad for her. She squeezed his hand, clenched her teeth, and pushed. She flopped back onto the bed after about sixty seconds, panting.

"There you go," Dr. Charlton said. "You're doing great, Mom. Push when you feel that urge. Don't when you don't. Don't do more work than you have to."

"Okay," Meredith said in a tiny voice.

Derek brushed her forehead with his fingers, and she stared at him. "I'm right here. Let me know if I can do anything."

"Can you have … the next one?" she said. "This sucks."

He snorted, and he gave her a watery, shaky smile. "I love you. Very much."

"Please, don't take this the wrong way," Meredith said, "but right this moment, I kind of hate your guts."
He kissed her. "I think, given the circumstances, you're allowed."

"Oh," she said. "Good." And then she tensed up with a moan and pushed some more.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

This was originally intended to be part of 34, but I felt it less jarring if I just split it off into its own chapter. And don't forget, there's still an epilogue after this!

It'll really, really hurt, Derek.

I know, but it will be worth it.

Easy for you to say. You don't have to shove a bowling ball out your hoo-hoo.

It's not easy for me to say. I know giving birth isn't the same at all, but ... I understand what it's like to feel pain that you think might break you. And I don't think lightly about the idea of you hurting like that.

Oh.

I know it's scary. I do. We both want this, though. And it's not a platitude when I say it will be worth it. I mean it, Meredith. It will be worth it.

[Her]

Giving birth was a mind-and-body consuming process, and Meredith had long since lost track of the world around her. She'd pushed, and then she'd rested, and then she'd pushed, and then she'd rested. Her cheerleaders, both Derek and Mark, had long since melted into the background of her awareness, a steady murmur of, "You can do it! You're almost done!" that had stopped making sense beyond the sentiment, because she was tired, and she was hungry, and hurting, and just wanted to be done. Anything to be done. And then the cheerleading grew in a big crescendo, and she heard words like, "Crowning!" and, "One more! Just one more!" The horrible, heavy weight in her pelvis disappeared, the intense burning sensation between her legs quieted from conflagration to lit match, and a sharp cry pierced the room as Meredith collapsed against the pillow, shaking, panting, spent.

"Is it okay ...?" Meredith said, speech slurring as she caught her breath.

And then Derek was there, back solidly in the small bubble of her awareness, and she realized, at some point, he'd climbed into bed with her, his front to her back. Her pillow was Derek. He'd been there the whole freaking time, just like he'd promised.

He stroked her hair and hugged her and said, "She's perfect, Meredith. You did perfect."

"Congratulations, Mom and Dad!" Dr. Charlton said from somewhere in the fog. "It's a girl!"

The world stopped when a tiny, wet, wrinkled bundle covered in greasy white vernix was placed in Meredith's arms, only moments later. Derek's arms tightened around her as he leaned forward and
peered over her shoulder at their daughter. The baby squinted, revealing bright, dazed, crossed blue eyes that looked more than a little mystified by this new, dry environment.

"She's so tiny," Meredith croaked. "She felt bigger coming out."

Derek kissed her temple, but said nothing. He seemed … mesmerized. Meredith couldn't blame him. She laughed. She felt her lower body contract as it attempted to expel the last remnants of placenta, but it was a distant thing. An inconsequential thing. The discomfort barely registered as nurses bustled around them.

"Welcome to the world, Mini Grey," Mark said from somewhere to the right, a deep smile quivering in his tone.

"What name did you two decide on?" Dr. Charlton said.

"Daphne," Derek said, the word thick and warble-y and full of emotion. "Daphne Anne Shepherd-Grey."

Meredith nodded. "Yeah," she said. "What he said." And all of it fell away. The fact that she was tired, and thirsty, and hungry, and spent.

All of it disappeared behind a euphoric wall.

All of it had been worth it.

[Him]

There were moments. Moments where, in a split second, Derek's life had changed forever. These moments didn't happen often. But when they hit, to Derek, they felt a little like getting struck by a bolt of lightning.

This was one of those moments.

Hell, he could swear he felt a real bolt of electricity zapping in the space between his ears, and his awareness of the room seemed to waver. Only for a moment. And then he was back in the room, wrapped around Meredith, mere seconds into fatherhood.

Medical staff were everywhere, bustling through the room, but they were a distant thing, like a television running in the other room. "Derek, look at her," Meredith said, eyes wet with what Derek could only classify as unbridled joy. Something Meredith hardly ever felt. She touched Daphne's tiny, tiny nose with her index finger. "Derek, look."

"I see," he rasped.

He glanced at Mark, a dumbstruck grin stuck on his face. Mark gave him a thumbs up. "So, how's it feel to be a dad?" Mark said.

Derek looked back at Daphne. A lump formed in his throat as he peered over Meredith's shoulder, enthralled. He swallowed. He had no idea what to say. None. He had no names for any of the things he felt right now.

Daphne had raven-colored, wispy hair. She was red-faced and wrinkled, and her head was a little bit cone-shaped after being squished through the birth canal, but she was perfect. Perfect, and so, so new. Untouched by all the shitty, endless wrong in the world, like madmen with guns.
"We did this, Derek," Meredith said, a rasp. Daphne fussed and wriggled.

He shook his head. "You did it, Meredith. You did so great. I'm ..." He found himself wordless again.

Meredith turned her head to meet his eyes. Exhaustion hugged her features, but he couldn't recall a moment he'd ever seen her happier. Meredith's arms tightened around the bundle. Her mouth opened, and closed. And opened, and closed. After a moment of struggling to find words, she gave up, and she settled on tipping her forehead against his cheek.

It seemed Meredith was speechless, too.

Daphne Anne Shepherd-Grey, 18.66 inches, 5.78 pounds, had been born at 8:29 a.m., after seven and a half hours of active labor, and about twenty-eight and a half long, torturous hours since the first contraction.

It was about 11:45 a.m., now. Derek had been a dad for a bit more than three hours. He'd gotten some yogurt and some orange juice for Meredith from the cafeteria as soon as things had settled down. He'd helped her take a shower once she'd subdued starvation, because she was so tired, she'd had trouble doing it on her own. They'd dealt with Lexie, and Richard, and Alex, and Cristina all visiting in what felt like glacial succession. He'd called his mother and all his sisters to let them know that they had a new granddaughter and niece, respectively. And then Meredith had collapsed into much-needed sleep – her first real sleep in almost two days.

"Derek, are you okay, man?" Mark said from somewhere behind Derek, but he sounded a bit like he was shouting underwater or something.

Derek leaned against the wall outside Meredith's room, shaking as spots formed in his vision. He blinked. He looked at Mark. He swallowed. He'd been stressed to the point of panic attack and had pulled himself back from it. Over and over and over. He'd had to deal with a constant stream of people. Socializing. Talking. Loud noise. Activity. He hadn't slept in ... probably almost as long as Meredith hadn't eaten, by the time he'd handed her the yogurt.

And, now, his life had been irrevocably changed.

"Derek?" Mark repeated, a frown on his face as he moved closer.

Time slowed like cold molasses. Derek had a chance to say, "Oh, I'm ... I'm ... I'm f-fine," before the spots in his vision became oil slicks covering everything. "I'm a dad, now." A zap of what felt like electricity lanced through his head.

And down he went into the blackness like a sack of bricks.

A solid block of ice was pressed against his back, and someone was peeling back his eyelid with an index finger when he regained his awareness. He flinched and made a sound of distress, and the hand pulled away immediately. He pulled his knees to his chest and curled into a ball that protected his soft parts.

"Sorry!" said a soft, tense voice. "I'm sorry, Derek."

Someone sighed. "I told you, he freaks out when he wakes up with someone in his grill."

"Well, how am I supposed to figure out what's wrong with him if-"
"Little Grey, he has PTSD, and he got rammed unwillingly through a stress gauntlet today. That's what's wrong."

"But-"

Air buffeted the skin on Derek's arms, and Derek felt a presence. Looming. "Derek, man. It's just me. It's Mark."

Derek squinted at the noise. A blurry, flesh-colored shape hovered in front of him. His head was pounding, and his muscles ached, and he felt nauseated. He swallowed. "Mark?" he croaked.

The blur wouldn't resolve. "Yeah, man. I need to put my arms under your shoulders to lift you. Okay?"

The strangest sensation filled his skull. Like his brain was an overladen washrag, and somebody was squeezing out all the water. No … not quite like that. Like … he'd stuck his brain in a light socket and gotten zapped. It was disorienting, and nauseating, and awful, and this was *not* PTSD doing this. He swallowed. "My head …," he said, the words a bare rasp.

"I know. You're dehydrated. We'll get you hooked up to a banana bag as soon as we can. I'm going to lift you, okay?"

No, this wasn't dehydration. But he couldn't get himself to arrive at the kind of coherence needed to explain the problem. Arms hooked under his shoulders, and the ice at his back gave way to air. Derek was vaguely aware of being settled in a wheelchair. Small hands lifted his feet and put them on the foot rests. A bigger hand splayed against his chest to keep him upright in the chair, despite him being less than a stone's throw from dissolving back into a dead faint.

Another brain squish disoriented him, and the next time he had the presence of mind to peer through his eyelashes, he saw floor tiles rolling at a lackadaisical pace underneath his shoes. "Mark?" he said, before he let a wave of fear bowl him over.

"Yeah. It's just me and Lexie. We're moving you. Nothing to be scared of."

Derek swallowed. "Kay," he said. He was too tired, and worn out, and achey, and awful to do much more than stare and be passive as he was transferred. Every thirty seconds or so, the fist would close around his brain, and he'd get another squish feeling.

Silence stretched.

"Do you want kids?" Mark said, breaching the quiet.

"What?" Lexie bleated like a startled lamb.

"Do you think you're ever going to want kids?" Mark said.

A long pause followed. Lexie coughed. "Do you want kids?"

"Mini Grey is … really fucking cute. I could see a Mini Sloan."

Another long pause. "Mark … I'm really not ready for kids. I mean, I'm only halfway through my residency, and we just got back together, and that's really, really fast, and- Really?" Lexie replied, bewilderment dripping from her tone. "You want kids? *You?*

Another pause. "Yeah, Little Grey," he said, the words warm. "With you? Really. Why is that so
"hard to believe?"

"Because … because … because you have the emotional maturity of … like … me. And I'm very immature and in no way ready for a baby!"

"Maybe, I'm growing up," he suggested.

"Maybe," she said, though she didn't sound convinced. "Can we talk about this, later? Like … when I make attending?"

"You think there'll be that much of a later?" Mark said.

"Of course, I do," Lexie said. "I love you. Sometimes, I don't freaking know why, but I do."

"Okay," Mark said.

The wheelchair stopped, and the world blotted out as another fist squeezed inside Derek's skull. When he came back to himself, he heard a distinctive sound happening right behind his head.

"Please, get me a room first," Derek rasped. He swallowed. "My head is pounding. I feel … Weird. Awful. He couldn't describe it. "My head …"

"I know, man," Mark said. "You'll feel better when we get you hydrated."

Except that wasn't it, damn it. That wasn't the problem.

[Her]

She woke to darkness and ache and that burning feeling. Her lower body was a solid block of unhappiness. Why not, of course? She'd just pushed a bowling ball through her hoo-hoo. She was still tired, and would have drifted back to sleep, were it not for the fact that Derek wasn't in the chair beside her bed that he'd been in when she'd fallen asleep.

"Derek?" she rasped. The covers rustled as she shifted in her hospital bed.

"Derek's sleeping on the couch in Mark's office," Cristina said, and Meredith's gaze snapped to the left.

"I didn't see you," Meredith said.

Cristina shrugged.

Meredith frowned. "Why didn't he just have them bring him a cot?"

"He needed the quiet, Mere," Cristina replied with a pointed look.

"Oh," Meredith said. And then as realization sunk in, she added a weightier, "Oh." Crap. He'd been so great when she'd needed him – it'd been easy to forget he had a mental illness. A mostly healed one, yes, but she imagined he would always have bad days now and then.

She pushed back the covers and winced as she slid out of bed. The pads of her socked feet pressed against the cold tile floor as she stood. Gravity seemed more … more. She felt heavy. And tired. And slow.

For the first time, she took in the sight of her hospital room. One of the VIP single-occupant rooms. There was a small love seat and a reading chair and a dresser and a lamp. The blinds were
drawn, blocking out the sun.

She moved to open them. The late afternoon sunlight slashed into the room like a sword, and she squinted on reflex. Her pasty reflection stared back at her from the glass. Her hair had dried kinked, she had huge bags under her eyes, every muscle ached, and her bladder whined at her for some relief.

"Do I look horrid?" she said.

"Yes," Cristina said. She grabbed Meredith's red bathrobe off the hook by the door and brought it to her. "Here," Cristina said. "It's cold in here."

"Thanks," Meredith said. She pulled it over her body, and warmth replaced chill. She bit her lip as she pressed her palm against her lower body. She petted the soft terrycloth. She wasn't as big as she'd been before Daphne had decided to come out, but … she definitely had no figure back, yet. Also … she felt … empty. That was weird. After carrying around a tiny person for so long – hell, she felt like it had been years – it was weird to be alone in her own skin again. "Cristina, I just had a baby."

"Yep," Cristina said. "You really did. Thanks."

Meredith frowned. "Thanks?"

"What very few, minuscule, microscopic doubts I had left, you set me straight," Cristina said. "I never, ever want to do that. Ever."

Meredith snorted. "Glad I could help you out."

After Meredith stopped in the bathroom to relieve herself, change her maxi pad, and clean up a little, they hobbled out of the room together into the bright hallway, and distant bustle became the in-your-face go-go-go of any major hospital. Well, Meredith hobbled. Cristina walked. A team with a panting, moaning woman sprawled on a gurney trundled past. Another birth in progress. The world had continued in Meredith's oblivious, dreaming absence.

"Hey, Meredith?" Cristina said as they turned right and began the long stroll toward Mark's office.

Meredith winced as the ache in her body settled into a dull throb that waxed in time with her heartbeat. "What?" she said.

Cristina gave her a small smile. "Congratulations."

Meredith matched her smile with one of her own. "Thank you."

Cristina gave her a curt nod, and they kept moving down the hall.

Meredith found Derek sacked on his stomach on Mark's couch in the darkness. A banana bag had been hooked up via IV to the back of his hand. She flipped on Mark's desk lamp instead of the overhead light, so the light wouldn't be eye-piercing. Shadows stretched along the walls, illuminating stacks of paperwork. She crouched by the couch, ignoring the way her muscles pulled to marvel over the fact that she could crouch, again.

"Derek?" she said, the word soft. Unobtrusive.

"M'wake," he mumbled without opening his eyes.
She brushed her fingers through his hair. "How are you doing? Can you sit up?"

"No," he said.

She frowned. "No?"

"My head …"

She bit her lip. "What's wrong with your head?"

He opened his eyes enough to squint at her. And then he winced, and his focus spaced for a moment. "My brain feels like a lightning rod." He cringed and rolled his face back into the pillow. He muttered something against the soft leather. All she heard was, "Flu," and, "Sorry."

She made him roll over and felt at his forehead. He shook like he felt cold. Except … this didn't look like the flu to her. Not everything … matched. The flu didn't make a brain feel like a lightning rod. Hmm. Lightning rod. Lightning. Electricity. … Brain zaps? She remembered hearing about brain zaps before, and she was pretty sure she hadn't heard it from Derek. But … what had been the context? She wracked her brain.

She swallowed when realization hit. He might have been too out of sorts to connect the clues together, but she could connect them in seconds once they were laid out for her. Crap. She'd kind of stolen his undivided attention for the last two days or so. "Derek, when was the last time you took your Paxil?"

It took him a long time to answer, but when he did, he said in an ominous tone, "Dunno."

[Hi]

He leaned forward on the couch in the dark, sipping orange juice. He rubbed his temples. The brain squishes he'd been feeling had slowed and then stopped within an hour of Cristina coming back from his office with the spare bottle of Paxil pills he kept in his desk for overnight emergencies.

"You really think my panic attack in the elevator was from withdrawal, not PTSD?" Derek said.

Meredith hugged him after he set the cup of juice down on the side table. "I think it's very possible," she said. "I think you should try to taper off, Derek. Let's see what happens."

"But …"

"I know it's scary to you," she replied in a measured tone. "I know you don't want to go back to how you were before Dr. Wyatt stabilized you. And clearly, cold turkey is not the way to go, but I think, if I'm right about this, you really don't need it anymore." She kissed him through his shirt. "I mean … you handled everything so well."

He frowned. "I don't know if I'd call that well."

"I would," Meredith said. "I mean, you had some issues, yes, but you were able to overcome them, and now we know, not only did you not have Paxil helping you, you might have even had its sudden absence hindering you. Tapering is worth a try, Derek. I really think it is."

He looked at her. His wife in her rumpled red bathrobe. She'd just had a baby. Their baby. They were parents. Yet, there she was, being his cheerleader like nothing momentous had happened
"Forget about me for a second. How are you?" he said, eyes narrowing. "Are you feeling better?"

"I'm a little achey," she admitted, an unreadable expression on her face. "A little tired. But ... I'm a mom. And you're a dad. We're parents."

"We are," he said.

"How did that happen?" she said, gazing up at him, wonder in her eyes.

He frowned. Normally, he'd crack a joke about her shoddy sex ed. But .... We're adults, he remembered her saying, years ago. How did that happen? And how do we make it stop? "You don't regret this, do you?"

"Nope," she said, the word cautious. She bit her lip. "Why? Do you?"

He shook his head. "No." They shared a long look in the dim light. Her gaze held affection, and warmth, and said all sorts of things to him like devotion. This woman completed him. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "You're the love of my life. I don't think I'm capable of regretting it."

Her gaze softened. "Always here. Saying things." She brushed her hand against his face. "I love you, too."

They rested, sharing space together.

Meredith grinned beside him. They stood in front of a large plexiglass window in the maternity wing of the hospital. A chorus of cries filtered through the window, distant, muted.

"This always makes me feel better," Meredith said.

Derek looked up at her. "You come here a lot?"

"To look at babies?" Meredith said.

He nodded.

She grinned and looked through the plexiglass. "I used to come here with George all the time." Her grin widened. "This is the first time I've done this and been able to watch my baby, though." She leaned against Derek's side. He wrapped his arm over her shoulder and held her close. "I wish George was here to see this." She sighed. "Are you feeling better, now?"

He snorted. "Meredith, I'm not the one who just had a baby this morning. I should be asking you that."

"Honestly?" she said. She leaned into his embrace, staring down at Daphne through the glass. "I'm sure I'll be panicking tomorrow about what a horrible mother I'll be, and oh, my god, how will we do this, and crap, crap, crap, what the hell have we done? But right this moment?" She snaked her arm around Derek's waist and squeezed. "I feel perfect, and not a freaking thing in the world is wrong."

Derek swallowed, squeezing her shoulder as he leaned closer to the glass to stare. "Yeah. Me, too," he said, smiling at the revelation.
Daphne wriggled in the leftmost isolette in the front row. She wasn't crying. Just squinting at the world with a disgruntled expression like … *Gee. What is all this? I liked the warm, wet, dark place, better.*

"I think she has your eyes," Meredith said.

Derek grinned. "White newborns always have blue eyes."

"I know, but hers are …" Meredith glanced at him, gaze creasing with affection. "I think they're your blue. And I think she's got your hair, too."

"It looks more like yours to me," Derek said, peering at the wisps. Meredith's natural hair color was pretty dark. Not as dark as his, but … dark.

"Well, I *hope* you're wrong," Meredith said. "Your hair is way nicer than mine."

"It's a pain in the ass," he said. "I wouldn't wish it on anybody."

Meredith sighed. "It'd be a great opportunity for father-daughter bonding over haircare lessons."

"I can just imagine it, now," Derek said. "Our first family spa day for keratin treatments."

Meredith laughed.

A nurse Derek vaguely recognized came up to the window and waved at them. Tamika Adeboye, said her name tag. She was a dark-skinned woman with a kind face. She grinned and made a gesture. *Come around,* he thought she was indicating. That's what Meredith saw, apparently, because she stepped over to the doorway to the right of the viewing window.

Tamika poked her head through the doorway and said, "Do you want to hold her for a little?"

"Yes," Meredith said, and Tamika led them into the little side room next to the babies. There were a few rocking chairs. Mostly for nurses, but occasionally they let parents in, if a baby was too sick to be taken to its mother for long periods, or if, say, the parents were staff members.

"Wait here," Tamika said, and she slipped back into the room where the babies were kept. She came back in moments with a snuffling, wriggling, tiny bundle wrapped in a pink thermal blanket. She stepped toward Meredith.

"Derek, you sit," Meredith said.

"It's okay; I can wait until you're done," he said.

She shook her head. "You haven't had a chance, yet. I was hogging."

He snorted. "You weren't hogging, Meredith. I think you're allowed to hold and nurse the baby you just gave birth to for a little bit."

"And I love you for being so accommodating. Really, I do," she said. She gestured at the chair. "But shut up, and sit."

He rolled his eyes. "Bossy."

She grinned at him. "I know. It keeps you in line."

"Sit, Dr. Shepherd," Tamika commanded, though her smile took the weight away from her words.
Derek shook his head. "I can see when I'm outnumbered." And so he sank into the rocking chair with a sigh. Tamika leaned over him and he was given the tiny, blanket-wrapped bundle. When Tamika stepped away, and Daphne's full weight sank into his arms, he blinked. Daphne was ... barely anything. Her skull was smaller than his palm. Wispy, dark, downy hair plowed flat underneath his hand as he ran his hand over her scalp. "Oh, my god, she's so tiny," he said, cradling Daphne to his chest.

"Told you so," Meredith said, grinning.

"I believed you," Derek replied. "I ...." He put his index finger to one of the wriggling limbs in his arms. Teeny tiny fingers wrapped around his. Though he couldn't even come close to calling it eye contact, Daphne squinted in his vague direction. His chest tightened. "Oh, my god," he repeated. Words with meaning had been stripped from him.

He stared at the tiny new life that he and Meredith had made. Daphne was him. And her. Both of them. An amazing, magical combination.

Meredith sat next to him and pulled as close as their dueling rocking chairs would allow. She rested her head on his shoulder and seemed content just to watch as he got to know their creation. A replacement thought come to brilliant, overwhelming life in his arms.

*Hi, Baby. It's Dad.*

He'd been saying those words for so long in his head, for so many months, the idea that he had the opportunity to say them for real, now, bowled him over.

"Hi, Daphne," he said, a choked whisper. His vision blurred as he looked down at the newest member of his family. "It's Dad."

In this moment, the best four words in the world.
Epilogue

Hello all. It's been a long while, hasn't it? I was digging around on my hard drive, yesterday, and discovered that I had most of the work for this epilogue done already, so I dug in and finished it. In my blinding drive to complete this story and have it done, this epilogue hasn't been beta-ed by anyone except me, so any mistakes are my own. Thanks to everybody for your encouragement and kind words. Thanks for your patience. Thanks to the many beta readers I've had over the years. And thanks for coming along on this ride with me. I'm happy to finally give this story the ending I had planned from day 1. Cheers!

Between the dog, the baby, and both Meredith and Derek getting ready at the same time, the house was organized chaos. Meredith stood at her vanity with her brush, swiping it through her hair, while she watched Daphne out of the corner of her eye. Daphne was playing with some blocks in the space between the edge of the bed and the wall. She hummed various nonsensical syllables, looking engrossed as she shoved the blocks this way and that.

Meredith reached for her hair clip, only to frown when her fingers didn't find it in its usual place. She glanced across the countertop, frown deepening. "Derek, have you seen my hair thingy?"

The whir of his electric razor silenced for a moment. "The black one?" he said.

Meredith shook her head. "No, the green one."

A pause followed, and then he said, "You have a green one?"

She sighed. Typical. "Never mind."

His razor turned on again. She tried to think if she'd used the green clip recently, but couldn't recall. Whatever. She grabbed a hairband instead, not willing to spend time searching for a needle in a five-bed-room-house-sized stack.

The phone rang just as Meredith set down her brush. She glanced at the caller I.D. and picked up the receiver.

"So, we're thinking September," Lexie said without preamble when Meredith answered. "Does September work for you? For the wedding, I mean."

Meredith eyeballed Daphne, who was still playing, off in her own little toddler world, so Meredith sat on the bed in her bathrobe. The mattress squeaked as her weight settled.

"Like … this September, September, or September as in next year?" Meredith asked.

A brief pause followed. "… This September?"

"W—"

"Or next?" Lexie babbled before Meredith could even finish her sentence. "Would next be better?
Is this September too fast? Do you think we're moving too fast? I'm—“

"Lexie," Meredith snapped, silencing the babble storm.

"Yes?"

"Breathe."

Meredith heard a deep, gulping breath on the other end of the line.

"Sorry," Lexie said. "Sorry, I'm just …"

Meredith grinned. "Freaking out?"

"Hell, yeah, am I freaking out," Lexie said. "I think I actually passed freaking out a few exits ago."

"Why are you asking me?" Meredith said, shifting the phone to her other ear. "I'm not the one getting married. Isn't Mark the one whose schedule you should be concerned with?"

A pause followed, like Lexie wasn't quite sure what to say. "Well, yes, but …"

Meredith frowned. "But what?"

"Would-you-be-my-matron-of-honor?" Lexie said in a rush.

Meredith's jaw dropped a fraction of an inch, and a brief stutter of sound caught in her throat. Not an um, really, just an utterance that meant nothing.

"You don't want to?" Lexie said.

"No, no, you just surprised me," Meredith said, shaking her head. "Really, you want me to do it?"

"Well, who else would I pick?"

"I don't know," Meredith said with a shrug. "Molly?"

Meredith could practically hear the dismissive hand wave Lexie swiped the air with. "Molly and I aren't as close as you and I are," Lexie said. "And … well, I thought it would be nice. I'm positive Mark's going to ask Derek to be his best man, if he hasn't already."

Meredith blinked. "You want me to be your matron of honor because you thought it would be nice," she parroted.

"Yes," said Lexie.

A lump formed in Meredith's throat. "Sure," she said. "I'd love to."

And that's when she heard her daughter giggle in an entirely-too-mischievous way.

"Daphne!" Meredith snapped.

Daphne looked up with her big blue eyes and dropped the tube of lipstick like it'd burned her. "Uh oh?" she said in her soft, cherubic voice.

"Lexie, I gotta go," Meredith said into the phone. "I'll call you back."

"But—," Lexie had a chance to say before the call ended.
Meredith glared and stalked forward. "Um, yeah, Daphne, that's an uh oh." She bent over and snatched the lipstick up from the floor to examine it. Her favorite Nars Antique Rose. And all that was left was a caked, broken stump. It was definitely ruined. She sighed and slumped to the floor to gather up all her stuff. Compacts. Tubes. Wands. And hardly any of it was still in one piece.

Two seconds. She'd turned around for two freaking seconds while she'd been on the phone. How did Daphne do this much damage in two freaking seconds? Meredith would have to go makeup shopping again. She hated makeup shopping! She only wore it once every blue moon, when she had a work function, or when she and Derek went out someplace special.

"Damn it, Daph . . .," she said, unable to stop the tidal wave of why me? that had crashed against her.

"That curse jar we made for the preservation of our child's innocence is going to get rich quick," Derek called from the bathroom.

Meredith cringed and bit her lip. "No, it's not! You didn't hear that." She glances at Daphne and amends in a whisper, "You didn't hear it, either."

"Yes, I did," Derek said.

Meredith glared at the open doorway. "Did not."

Derek stood in profile by the mirror. His electric razor whirred as he polished off a day's growth of stubble. "Did, too."

"Did not."

"Too!"

"Not," she said. "And don't flip this around on me! You're the one with the dirty sailor mouth. Haven't you put in like $10, already?" A buck per word quickly created a money tree, apparently. They'd only started last week, when they'd discovered Daphne saying, "Cap!" over and over and over. And she didn't mean cap as in hat. Their daughter knew like ten freaking words, and one of them was already a curse. "If she picks up something really bad, it'll be from you."

"Who, me?" Derek said. "She won't pick up anything from me. I'm angelic. Never said a naughty thing in my life."

Meredith snorted. With the way he dropped f-bombs sometimes, she was just waiting for daycare to tell her Daphne had committed the word fuck to her growing lexicon. "Yeah, right," she grumbled. "No one would ever guess you'd had prior practice at staying g-rated for young ears."

"I heard that."

"Don't care."

"And I'll have you know living with impressionable ears 24/7 is way different than babysitting sisters and nieces and nephews."

"So, you admit to being the cause of our swear jar's trust fund?"

"I admit nothing," Derek said.

The whirring stopped as he turned off his razor and set it down beside the sink. The sharp scent of
an open bottle of aftershave tickled her nose as he patted his face. He turned and gave her a devastating smile, but the smile melted away when he stepped out of the master bathroom and finally got a look at the garish spectacle spread before him. His eyes widened.

"Da!" Daphne chirped.

"What—?" he had a chance to say, and then he choked like he could barely curtail his laughter. The smile was back on his face. This time, though, she kind of wanted to smack it off of him.

"Look what your daughter did to my makeup case," Meredith said.

"Look what your makeup case did to my daughter!" he countered.

She bit her lip. Given that Daphne had used lipstick like foundation and mascara like a marker, and currently looked more fiendish than the Joker, she couldn't argue much with that.

Derek raised his eyebrows. "And why is she my daughter when she makes a mess?"

"Well, she was my daughter when she painted our kitchen floor with dog food. You specifically said!"

"So, she changes ownership depending on whose stuff she destroyed?"

"I guess so!" Meredith said.

"So, how on earth did she get into that?" he said, gesturing to the makeup mess as he bent down to grab Daphne. "I thought we had a child lock on that drawer." He sat her on the vanity next to the sink and wet a washcloth under the faucet.

"Da!" Daphne repeated.

He nodded. "I know." He snickered. "Very pretty."

"Da!"

He nodded again. "I know. I think we might need to go over the 'less is more' approach before we let you fly solo with this shi—" He cleared his throat, reddening. "Stuff."

Meredith folded her arms. "Swear jar."

"I didn't swear!"

"You really wanted to," she said.

"But I didn't," he said, scrubbing Daphne's face while their daughter giggled. "It doesn't count."

"Does, too."

"Does not."

"Too."

"Not. Seriously, how did she get into this?"

"I was going to wear some today."

He paused to look at her. "Oh?"
She bit her lip. "Well, it's a special occasion, isn't it?"

His gaze softened. "I guess so. But—"

"Two seconds, Derek," Meredith said before he could ask. She dumped all the junk back into the makeup case. She'd sort it out later, when she had time. So much for special occasions. She'd have to go with her usual foundation-only approach. "I was on the phone for two seconds."

"At least she didn't put it on the wall, I guess," Derek said. He dabbed the washcloth against Daphne's nose. "Skin's a little easier to scrub." He frowned when hardly anything came off. "Or, maybe not. Do you have makeup remover?"

She sighed. "I did."

His frown deepened as he stopped scrubbing to look at her. "Past tense?"

"Smell the acetone?"

"Oh, is that what that is?"

Meredith nodded. "Yes. And it's in our carpet."

He blinked. His jaw dropped for a moment before he picked it up. "How did she do all this in two seconds?" he said slowly.

"I don't know," Meredith said, throwing up her hands. "Maybe, our child is evil."

Derek snorted. "Meredith, I hate to break it to you, but this is par for the course, and it only gets worse before it gets better."

"No, it doesn't," she said.

He gave her an apologetic look. "It does. Terrible twos are less than a year away."

"No, you're wrong."

He leaned forward and kissed her. "I'm sorry, but this? This, I do have plenty of experience with."

"Well, crap," Meredith said. And then she sighed. "I mean crud. I mean ….

"Cap!" said Daphne. "Cap, cap, cap!"

Meredith and Derek shared a sigh, silent for a moment. Crap, indeed. Kid ears were like freaking sponges. And it wasn't fair. "I'd like to pick, 'Resetting my baby's horrible vocabulary for $800,' Alex," Meredith said.

Derek snorted with amusement. But she didn't really feel like she was joking.

"Derek," she said in a soft voice.

He looked up at her. "Hmm?"

"Am I a terrible mom?"

His scrubbing motions stilled, and he peered at her for a long, long moment while Daphne babbled by his hip. From the flash of worry that crossed his face, she'd just smashed a nerve with a
hammer. Did he think she was a terrible mom and simply hadn't said anything? A lump formed in her throat. "It's just ... our fifteen-month-old daughter swears. And she escapes to paint with dog food and expensive lipstick. And ... I don't think I'm any good at this. I keep screwing up."

He looked at his hands.

"You do, don't you?" she said. "You think I'm a terrible mom."

He swallowed. "No, I don't. I think you're perfect."

"Yeah," she grumbled. "Your expression totally says, 'Meredith, you're perfect.'"

He sighed. "Meredith, I'm not worried about you. I'm worried about me."

She gaped. "But you're like ... made to be a dad or something. It's totally your jive or whatever."

"I still have ...." He paused, looking for all the world like he was trying to find a word, and all the words had taken a vacation in Timbuktu. Daphne's nonsensical babbling filled the ensuing silence. "I still have ... problems."

She frowned. "You don't have problems."

"Meredith, I do have problems."

"Once in a blue moon!" she countered.

He sighed. "I worry I'll snap at her. Or .... Once in a blue moon is all it takes."

She wrapped her arms around him. His muscles relaxed. "Derek, I understand why you're worried, but ... please, don't. You're wonderful with her."

He still had his volatile moments. He probably always would. And every once in a while, she'd find herself single-momming it for the night, because he said he couldn't handle the noise. But that was seriously only once in a while, and he'd never once allowed it to leak into his time with Daphne.

If he wasn't feeling right, he told Meredith, and he took some space — or if Meredith wasn't available, Lexie and Mark were a phone call away, or Richard, or Cristina and Owen — and life went on. And it's not like this was a one-sided thing.

She'd gotten sick with a nasty head cold a few months back, and he'd held things up on his own for over a week. He took, yes, but he gave. He gave lots.

"If everybody had to be perfect to be a parent, the human race would have gone extinct from lack of procreation eons ago," she said. "You do the best you can, and your best is plenty good enough for me."


"What?" she said.

He shrugged. "My mother told me something similar."

"Well, your mother is like the poster child for good mothers, so, clearly, this discussion is moot."

This time he laughed for real. "Only if you admit it applies to you, too."
"But—"

He raised his eyebrows. "Your best is perfect, Meredith," he said. He leaned closer and kissed her on the cheek. "The worst that will happen is she'll grow up to be just like you, which ...." He shrugged. "That's not a bad thing in my book."

She swallowed as the lump in her throat expanded. "Thanks," she said.

His gaze twinkled. "You're welcome."

"Ma!" Daphne said. "Ma, ma!"

"Now, let's see if we can get the rest of this off you before I have to leave," Derek said. He glanced at his watch, and then at Meredith, before focusing on Daphne. "Are you going to follow in the Jeep or something?"

Meredith glanced down at herself. She still wore her scarlet bathrobe. She'd been hoping to ride into work with him, but ... she didn't see any way that was going to happen, at this point. She wasn't dressed, Daphne was covered in an endless pink smear, and he had to leave in twenty minutes.

"I don't see that I have much of a choice, at this point," she said.

He frowned at that, but didn't argue. "Okay," is all he said. "But you'll be there." He sounded ... worried.

Meredith smiled, watching him scrub fruitlessly for a moment before she reached out to squeeze his shoulder. "I'll be there, Derek," she assured him. "I wouldn't miss it."

He clenched his jaw. His temples danced.

"Are you nervous?" she said.

He barked a wry laugh as if to say, Understatement of the fucking century, Meredith.

"Da!" Daphne babbled in solidarity.

All Derek said aloud, though, was, "I don't want to add to the swear jar."

"Oh, sure, now you find restraint," Meredith quipped.

If he thought her remark humorous, he didn't show it. She watched him for a few more moments, but opted not to push. She'd learned, with lots of trial and error, when he needed to be pushed, and when he needed to be left alone, and this was definitely a don't-poke-the-bear-with-a-stick moment.

"Let me get some olive oil," she said. "That should help with the makeup, I think."

"Thanks," he said. "I swear, this stuff is cement in disguise."

Way too long after Derek, Meredith stepped through the sliding doors of the hospital, pushing Daphne forward in her stroller. The bright, open space of the entryway was sunny and warm, and reception was quick to greet her with a smile. Things had changed so rapidly over the past few months.

A ream of papers slapped onto the desk in front of her, and she snapped awake. She may have
muttered something like, "Whaghmmph?" But she couldn't be sure. She blinked, and the fuzz that was Derek's office came into focus, and with it, the distant bustle of the hospital beyond the walls.

Derek peered down at her with a concerned frown. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to wake you. I thought you were just resting your eyes."

"I was resting my eyes!" Meredith said. She glanced at the thousand-page medical volume onto which she'd face-planted. In terms of pillow choices, she'd made a crappy decision. She worked at the crick in her neck. "I mean … well, okay, maybe, I wasn't. Exactly."

Daphne had only recently started to sleep through the night, and Meredith was still catching up after months of no rest. Derek was, too. She didn't think he knew how often she'd caught him dozing in random places, all over their house. Given how hard his body had been working to heal him, both physically and mentally, over the year prior to Daphne's arrival, he'd been working from a considerably larger fitness deficit than she had. She'd even caught him on the steps of their porch, leaning against the railing, hand outstretched across his knee, out cold, with Samantha peering up at him woefully, the Frisbee he'd thrown moments before, clutched between her teeth. Meredith couldn't throw stones, though. Hell, she couldn't even laugh at him, because she was too exhausted to bother. The fact that she was a resident making up a leave deficit a mile deep meant she wasn't much better off than he was.

She bit her lip and looked up at him.

"Will we ever not be tired?" she said.

He scrubbed at his eyes with the backs of his knuckles. "I hope so," he said. "I remember what getting enough sleep felt like. I sorely miss it." He gave her a tired smile. "Worth it, though, don't you think?"

She shared a grin with him. "Understatement. You're picking her up from daycare, right?"

"Yes, I've got her. And you're—"

"Picking her up tomorrow when my shift from hell finally ends? Yep."

He looked at her makeshift pillow and skimmed the page. She was reading up for a percutaneous cordotomy. Dr. Weller was due to perform it tomorrow for a young woman with stage four leukemia, and she'd nabbed the resident slot.

"Something I can help you with?" Derek said.

Meredith shook her head. "Nah," she said. "I've done this before. I was just brushing up." She reached for the ream of papers he'd dropped onto his desk. On the first page was a huge table full of numbers. There were dollar signs. But the content was, for the most part, gibberish to her. She was not a math-y person. "What's this?"

"The quarterly financial statement," he said. "We're in the black. Finally."

"In the black," she echoed. In the black. In the black. And then it sunk in. "Wait, really?"

Derek nodded. "Seattle Grace Mercy West is officially no longer a sinking ship, just … slightly capsized."

She leapt to her feet. "Does this mean—?"
He shook his head, and she sighed. "Not, yet, Meredith. I want to make sure this sticks."

"It'll stick," she said. "You do a good commercial. You're catnip for the injured." Mr. Pruitt had picked Derek and Callie to be the "faces" of Seattle Grace. Now, they were plastered on posters all over the city. Meredith couldn't even buy groceries without seeing her husband flashing his sexy grin at her.

"We put the heart back in healthcare," was the hospital's new slogan.

She thought it was rather catchy.

He snorted and wrapped his arms around her. He kissed her. "We'll see," he said.

She pulled her fingers through his hair. "How long until you're convinced?"

"Dr. Bailey to OR 8. Dr. Bailey to OR 8, please," said a nasal voice over the PA, yanking her back to the present. She shook her head and licked her lips. She had to stop daydreaming, or she'd miss Derek's moment.

"Have you seen Derek anywhere?" Meredith said as Mark trotted toward her across the bustling waiting room.

"Nope, not since this morning," Mark said. He grinned at Daphne. "Hey, Mini Grey!"

"Ma!" Daphne said.

Meredith had a diaper bag slung over her shoulder. Between lugging that and pushing the hulking stroller, she felt like a freaking pack mule. She glanced at her watch. 8:47 a.m. She'd been planning to meet up with Derek in his office, but it was too late now. Luckily, she knew exactly where he'd be at 9 a.m. "So, how did he seem?" she said.

"It's Mark," Mark said, looking at Daphne with consternation. "Say Mark."

"Ma!"

"Mark."

"Ma!"

Meredith rolled her eyes. "Mark," she said.

Mark sighed and finally shifted his attention. "What?"

"Derek," Meredith said slowly. "How. Did. He. Seem?"

"Oh."

Meredith frowned. That didn't sound good. "Oh? What does 'oh' mean?"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh as in, 'Oh, I heard you this time.'"

"Okay. Well?" she prodded.

"Well, what?"

"For crap's sake, Mark, how did he seem?"
Mark looked up at the ceiling, pondering that for a moment. "A bit like someone told him the operating room is actually a gun, and it's pointed at him."

"That bad?" she said, heart sinking.

Mark shrugged. "He's just being dramatic. He'll be fine once he gets going."

"Mark—"

"Trust me," he assured her. "You know he's a self-absorbed drama queen, sometimes."

She rolled her eyes. "Understatement." But there was a huge difference between foot-stomping drama for drama's sake and drama ejected from the horrible roller coaster of emotions constituent of a panic attack. "But, Mark, you're sure he's not having a bad day?" Derek hadn't had a bad day in months.

"It's not a bad day," Mark said. "It's not even a medium-wrong day. I promise. He's fine."

She frowned. "So, you don't think he's—"

"I don't think so," Mark said before she could finish. "Look, don't worry. I've got this. I even gave him a pep talk."

"A pep talk," Meredith parroted, tone flat.

Mark grinned and made a face. "Yep. A pep talk. And don't tell me I'm not good at pep talks. I was a quarterback, you know." Daphne giggled, and his attention shifted to her. "What, you don't believe me?"

"Ma!"

Mark rolled his eyes. "You sure you can't teach Mini Grey some Rs?"

Meredith snorted. "That's one of the last letters they learn, Mark. You'll be Ma for a while. Or maybe Mack."

"I can deal with Mack," he said. "Hey, kid, can you say Mack?"

"Ma!"

Mark sighed. "So, how is she, anyway?" He peered at Daphne, frown wrinkling his face. "She looks a bit ….

Meredith raised her eyebrows and shifted, trying to alleviate the strain on her shoulders. "Pink?"

"… Yeah," Mark said, tone cautious. He held out his hands. "I'll take her."

Meredith gratefully passed the stroller to him. "Thanks. She got into my makeup this morning. We got it off, but all that scrubbing irritated her skin a bit. She's fine." She glanced at her watch. She only had a few minutes before the procedure was scheduled to start. "Will you drop her off at daycare for me?" Meredith said. "I'm going to miss it, if I don't hurry, and—"

"Sure," Mark said, gesturing for the diaper bag. She handed that off to him, too. "Hey did Lexie give you a call about …?"

Meredith grinned. "Yes. Congratulations."
"Good," Mark said. "Just checking." And then he shoed her away. "Go!"

So, she went.

"Chief!" a resident Meredith didn't recognize called as she dashed behind a crash team. "Chief!"

Meredith followed the words, expecting to find Derek, until the moment she saw Richard standing by the OR board, looking in the direction of the call. Which meant Chief Shepherd had already morphed back into Dr. Shepherd, mild-mannered neurosurgeon. He wasn't even Head of Neurosurgery anymore. Since Dr. Weller had stepped into Derek's job when Derek had been promoted, that meant Derek had demoted himself all the way down the ladder again.

\textit{You're sure you'll be okay not being in charge anymore?} she'd asked him.

But all he'd done was shrug and smile, like the weight of the world had just melted off his shoulders. \textit{Honestly, I can't think of anything I'd like more.} He'd winked. \textit{Professionally speaking, I mean.} And then he'd kissed her and said in that soft, lilting tone of his — the one that made her melt — \textit{I'll be fine. I promise.}

She believed him, too. At least some good things had come from the shooting. It'd helped him clarify what he wanted out of his life. And that was no small thing.

"Chief?" repeated the resident as she skidded to a halt behind Richard, yanking Meredith from her musing.

"I'll be with you in a second, Dr. Summers," Richard replied while the resident caught her breath. Richard's marker squeaked on the whiteboard as he made an entry for OR 9.

Meredith's gaze made a reflexive skip to the listing for OR 7, though, where she saw SHEPHERD already penned in for 9 a.m. No intern slot was offered. She'd thought about offering to take the resident slot, but … she hadn't been able to decide if having her there would bolster him or make him freak out more easily, and she didn't want to add to the pressure, either real or imagined.

\textit{He would be fine, she told herself. Just fine. He's done this hundreds of times.}

Yeah, her id chimed in. Hundreds. Just … not in the past two years.

"Dr. Webber," Meredith said, trying to shut up her inner babble.

"Dr. Grey," Richard replied, glancing away from the board to nod at her and smile.

"I guess I missed the handoff," Meredith said, unable to stop fidgeting as nervous energy sought ways to escape. Derek hadn't said when he was going to make the announcement about him quitting as chief, just that it would happen today, sometime. Before the surgery made sense, though. That had to be a weight off.

Richard shrugged. "You didn't miss much."

"Yeah," the resident piped in with a snort. Dr. Summers. She was young. Enough to be fresh out of med school. "It was essentially, 'Hi. Here's your new boss. Thanks for sticking with me — it's been a pleasure. Bye.'” She chuckled. "His desire to flee was palpable."

Meredith frowned. "Like … he was nervous?"

Dr. Summers shook her head. "Oh, no, no, nothing like that. He had that thousand watt smile of his
going full blast. It's just pretty obvious his passion isn't in administration."

Tension flowed out of her, and Meredith slumped. She bit her lip. Okay, so … not visibly power freaking. That was good, right? That was good?

*Of course, it was good.*

Yeah right, her id said.

Crap.

---

The gallery was full of spectators, and the only reason Meredith found a seat was because Cristina had saved her one dead center in the front row. Meredith pushed past a crowded row of knees and legs and other obstructions to get to the center. Cristina sat crosslegged, a book cradled between her knee and her opposite thigh. It was a big, fat volume. Meredith couldn't identify the title from here, but on the left page there was a huge-color diagram of a bisected heart.

"Prepping?" Meredith said.

Cristina nodded, but didn't look up, as she dragged an orange highlighter across a line of text. Meredith peered over Cristina's shoulder, but before she could read a word, Cristina sighed, shut her textbook, and said, "You're not here to watch me. You're here to watch him."

"I know, but—"

"He'll be fine," Cristina said.

Meredith snorted. "That's why you're here? To spectate when he's 'fine'?"

"Yes," Cristina said. And then she sighed. "I *said* he grows on you."

"Like idiot mold. I remember."

Meredith dared a peek down into the OR. Derek wasn't there, yet, but the nurses were prepping the area. Orderlies wheeled in the patient on a gurney — a middle-aged woman named Shameeka Jones. They lined up the gurney with the table and helped the woman shift between the two.

"He's going to faint," someone whispered. "Is he a fainter?"

"No," someone else interjected. "He'll panic. He panics."

"Ten bucks says he doesn't make it past the first—"

"Fifty says he pulls the whole thing off," Meredith snapped, turning around to see who'd spoken. Three interns she didn't recognize. They recognized her, though. Right. Away.

"Dr. Grey," said the little one on the left, cowering. He had wispy brown hair and a beak nose that reminded her of a toucan. He looked like he was barely a day out of college. "We're sorry."

"Yeah, it was all in good fun," said the one on the right. "We didn't mean anything by it."

"Oh, here he comes," said a fourth spectator, before Meredith could conjure up some sort of coherent, scolding reply.

She watched as Derek entered the OR. He wore his navy blue scrubs, and his lucky ferryboat scrub
cap. His eyes crinkled as he smiled behind his surgical mask at the nurses, and then he talked while everybody set up. He didn't look nervous at all.

He glanced up at the gallery, eyes twinkling, and Meredith smiled back at him and waved.

*I love you,* he said but didn't say.

And Meredith did her best to beam the same sentiment back to him. His first solo surgery since the shooting. Just resecting a tumor. But to Ms. Jones, that meant the world.

*You can do this,* Meredith wanted to scream.

And Derek winked like he'd heard her.

"All right, folks," he said as he turned to face the operating table. "It's a beautiful day to save lives. Let's have some fun."

He picked up his scalpel and went to work, smiling the whole way through.

~finis~

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